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Speaker key:

SM: Sarah McConnell, producer and host

AS: Audio Sample

MS: Mike Signer

EM: Elliot Majerczyk

DR: Daniel Rothbart

HS: Howard Sanborn

CM: Carol McCormick

Transcript:

00:00:00

SM [music] From Virginia Humanities, this is With Good Reason. Today, we're introducing a new podcast created after armed white supremacists descended on Charlottesville, Virginia to protest removal of confederate statues.

AS [chanting]

It's no accident that the car ramming took place. It's domestic terror.

Very fine people on both sides. You had people in that group—excuse me, excuse me—I saw the same pictures as you did.

I've never seen so much hatred in the eyes of my fellow human beings in my life.

We have overcome a lot in our democracy. We've overcome McCarthyism, we've overcome segregation, and we're gonna overcome this.

And I think we're having a huge debate right now around what's the difference between free speech and hate speech.

[singing]

SM I'm Sarah McConnell, and today on With Good Reason, we present Overcoming Extremism, a new podcast from the Anti-Defamation League. The host is former Charlottesville mayor, Mike Signer, and the producer is Elliot Majerczyk. Mike, in the sound collage we just heard, there are hundreds of mostly young men carrying tiki torches and chanting anti-Jewish Nazi slogans like "Jews will not replace us." I've never heard such a thing on U.S. soil. Were you shocked when you first heard it?

MS Yes. It was horrifying. I mean, keep in mind, I'm a Jewish elected official. I wrote a doctoral dissertation on how democracies can collapse at the hand of demagogues, and I sort of cut my teeth as a college student on what happened in Germany with the rise of the Nazi regime. So, to see even a glimmer of this happening here was my worst nightmare.

SM This was a small college town that prides itself on its university, a couple hours from D.C. Why were neo-Nazis chanting anti-Jewish slogans like "Jews will not replace us" or "Blood and soil" here? And why were they chanting at all?

MS One reason is because Charlottesville, for a college town of 50,000 people, has an outside spotlight on it. And many more national stories than you would think a city with this size would have. We have Monticello which is the home of Thomas Jefferson, we have the University of Virginia, we're one of the major wedding destinations in the country. All of that means that, when things happen here, or when people want to grab the spotlight here, like these white nationalists, several of whom had graduated from the University of Virginia, they were gonna come here to make a stand and get a lot of attention.

SM Had you experienced this kind of anti-Semitism before?

MS So, what a lot of people don't know is the year 2017, that culminated in the Unite the Right rally was actually more like a 3-act play, because there were 2 prior white nationalist invasions in the city that happened earlier in the year. In May, a noted white nationalist leader named Richard Spencer, who graduated from UVA, who had earlier done a rally after President Trump's winning of the presidential election, where people were doing sort of sieg heil salutes at a Washington hotel about Donald Trump. He came here in May with about 100 people using tiki torches at the base of the statue to the

confederate general Robert E. Lee which brought about all this. The city council had voted to relocate this statue outside of the city.

SM I forgot about that. People were shocked that there should be tiki torches reminiscent of Nazis.

MS Well, I, as the city's mayor, was also shocked. And I did a statement very quickly which said this is reminiscent of the Ku Klux Klan. And we had declared ourselves a welcoming city to immigrants and refugees, and I said we're a welcoming city, but such hatred is not welcome here. And talked about the visual displays of terror and what this was like. And that was followed by a visit by a Ku Klux Klan to Charlottesville in July where you had violent conflicts between counter-protesters and police. It was really a messy, awful situation. And it intensified the collision between all these forces, but it put anti-Semitism, I mean these KKK members had blatantly anti-Semitic signs and racist signs right in public the whole time that they were here. And it was awful.

SM Elliot, the anti-Semitism so blatantly and frighteningly on display in August of 2017, did that shock you as well?

00:05:04

EM Obviously, everybody could not help but be shocked. But if I was going to be very honest about it, I'm not that surprised. I mean, if one was to follow what was happening in Europe and these neo-Nazis are in contact with European white supremacists and racists. It was just an American version of what is happening around the world. And being a child, my mother is a Holocaust survivor who survived the Warsaw ghetto. My antenna has always been very high for any sort of overt or covert expression of anti-Semitism. And, as a matter of fact, after August 17th, I was on the phone with my mother who said, after watching the events in Charlottesville, she hadn't slept for 2, 3 nights because she could not believe that roughly 75 years after her liberation from the Nazis, she would see Nazis in the street shouting anti-Semitic slogans that just brought her back to 1939 in Poland.

SM Mike, what motivated you to create this podcast?

MS After these events in 2017, especially the Unite the Right rally where a car was weaponized and somebody died, 19 people were horribly injured, there were beatings of minority populations, fights in the street, I felt bereft for a while. My faith in democracy's ability to handle this horrible virus that was emerging of violent white nationalist extremism and domestic terrorism, my faith was shaken. I come from a kind of a tradition and government that I believe that even tragedy offers opportunity. That agony can lead to growth. And so as I thought about what to do from this, I wanted to create something

out of the destruction and try and generate learning from what happened in Charlottesville, and that was the root of this podcast.

SM So, this podcast series is called Overcoming Extremism, and the goal is what?

MS The goal is to have candid conversations with leaders who have themselves been on the frontlines with extremism and plumb their experience for lessons and insights.

SM Name one of them that really struck you personally.

MS My conversation with the former mayor of Berkeley, Jesse Adageen, was particularly riveting for me. Really was very candid about his experience—the things he tried, the things he didn't try, the attacks that he came under, the limits that he was pushed to, and it all generated incredible insight, I think, for other cities seeking to learn from Berkeley's experience, which had white nationalist events in 2017. He had to figure out how to interact with both the far left and the far right, they had to figure out how to prevent implements that could be used as weapons from being brought into both, he had to figure out how to apply the 1st amendment in various challenging ways like we did too. It's very hard to balance public safety and freedom of speech because the court decisions tend to privilege freedom of speech so much more than public safety. So it was remarkable how similar the experiences were.

SM You open the series with a man who had been embedded with being alt-right white nationalists who were so violent in Charlottesville.

MS There was a guy named Vegas Talund who was a journalist, and who wrote a book about the rise of white nationalism in the country, and he has developed this practice of embedding with these groups, and gaining their trust and reporting on them. And they willingly do this. So he was there with one of the groups and he recounted to us how violent they were. I mean, he told us a story about this horrible fight that developed in one place where a guy's eye was almost popped out of its socket, and just the violence that these groups—how violent the people are. But then he talked about another very powerful lesson which was how much community they get from these groups. And how much solidarity they derive almost by being these outcasts, and by having these toxic, awful ideas about Jews and about blacks.

EM I found it very interesting that he spoke about the dangers of normalization for anybody who works in the media, and so he was hanging out with these guys. You know, they were talking about video games, and Dungeons and Dragons, and sports, and he was saying, "I'm going to ask them about anti-Semitism and Jews." And he gets the usual garbage, and it's kind of like a wake up call from him. They don't have horns, they don't have tails, they're wearing Lacoste shirts and Docker pants. They seemed very normal.

And that's the danger. The danger that these Nazis and alt-right come across as normal, clean cut Americans.

SM Elliot, we're about to play an episode that features a woman who was suing the white nationalists. Tell me about her and what makes her lawsuit so unique?

00:10:24

EM Amy Spetelnik, along with 2 other women lawyers, are a part of a group called Integrity First for America. And they're representing several plaintiffs from Charlottesville who were physically injured by the Nazis. And they're suing these Nazis for monetary damages. Their aim is to almost bankrupt them and garnish their wages. And it's interesting that everytime I speak to somebody about this, they don't know about it, and they say, "what an amazing idea! That's the way to get these guys. They're gonna go underground to just get them where it hurts, bankrupt them, that's what they're really afraid of."

SM Let's listen now to that episode.

AS [music] Welcoming back to Overcoming Extremism. I'm Mike Signer. I was the mayor of Charlottesville, Virginia during the Unite the Right rally in August 2017. I'm talking to Amy Spetelnik who was the executive director of Integrity First for America. Amy, thanks for being with us.

Thanks so much for having me. Integrity First for America is a civil rights non-profit. And our mission is to take on those who threaten the principles of our democracy including our commitments to civil rights and equal justice in this country. And it was very clear that what happened in Charlottesville directly intersected with the values and the mission of IFA, and that those who were responsible for what happened needed to be held accountable. And so IFA, in collaboration with our legal team, which includes Roberta Caplain, Karen Dunn, and a number of other brilliant lawyers, partnered with our plaintiffs in this case, and moved this lawsuit forward.

Well let's get right to that. What is that case? What's the litigation?

So, 10 Charlottesville community members who were injured in the violence have brought a lawsuit against 2 neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and hate groups who were responsible. Many people, when they think of Charlottesville, assume that the violence was spontaneous, that it just sort of happened in the midst of this Unite the Right rally. But the facts and the evidence make clear that it was actually planned long in advance. That the leaders of this white nationalist movement, for months in advance on a chat platform called Discord, which is typically used by video gamers, talked about everything from what to wear, what to bring for lunch, which weapons to carry, whether they would

crack skulls, and whether they could claim self-defense if they could drive cars into protestors, which is of course exactly what happened. This lawsuit seeks to hold accountable the 2 dozen individuals and groups who organized, planned, and executed that violence. It argues that there was a conspiracy to commit racially motivated violence. It uses a statute that was first passed nearly 150 years ago during the Reconstructionist era called the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871, meant to protect recently freed slaves when it was first passed, but it has been used a number of times since, to protect against these exact types of racially motivated conspiracies. [music].

We're exploring how the institutions of democracy can best deal with extremism. One of those institutions is the legal system, specifically in this case, civil lawsuits seeking money damages. I wanted to understand from Amy just what goes into such a lawsuit, especially when there are 10 plaintiffs and 2 dozen defendants. How does it work? Here's what she said.

So, litigation like this in normal circumstances would still be quite resource-intensive and time consuming. But litigation like this against 2 dozen neo-Nazis white supremacists and hate groups has that plus a whole other level of craziness that comes on top of it. So, when the violence happened in Charlottesville, every American looked on with disgust, with fear, with concern. And it was very clear something needed to be done. There would certainly be individual cases against James Fields, and, as we saw, against a handful of others for their various roles in the violence. But what we learned in the days after Unite the Right was that this conspiracy had been planned by a larger coalition of leaders and groups, and that everything that happened was intended to happen, that it was specifically this violent conspiracy. So our legal team immediately went down to Charlottesville in the weeks after, met with potential plaintiffs who had been injured in the violence. It was very clear that these people's rights were violated, that it was intentional and meticulous and long-planned. By October of 2017, this case was filed. Of course, the defendants haven't been too thrilled that they're being sued. They filed a motion to dismiss, trying to block the case, trying to argue that their 1st amendment rights, their 2nd amendment rights, and many other rights are being violated by it. And in a really clear and important decision, the court ruled last summer in 2018 that the 1st amendment does not protect against conspiracies to commit violence. The 2nd amendment doesn't protect against what they did in Charlottesville. And that the case can move forward in full. We expect trial next year in mid to late 2020, and that moment, when we put the leaders of this white nationalist movement on the stand during a 3 to 4 week jury trial in Charlottesville, a block away from heather hierway, and hold them accountable for what they did in 2017, and show the country just how deep and meticulous this conspiracy was, that will be a moment that will be incredibly powerful, and really force a public conversation on this crisis of violent extremism that I think we so desperately need. [music]

It turns out, the planning for the violence of the Unite the Right rally was happening in a closed forum on Discord, which is a gaming platform. I wanted to ask Amy some questions about this. First, how did they get the conversations from a private password protected chatroom on Discord? Second, what can we do about this problem of people planning violence using these sorts of social media platforms.

So, to start with the easiest question first, which is how we got a hold of the chats. First in the aftermath of Unite the Right, a white hat hacking collective known as Unicorn Riot, and we don't know much about them, but they released these chats in the weeks after Unite the Right, and so very early on after the violence, these chats came out and it was clear, this level of detail that went into the planning. We were able to subpoena these chats as well as a ton of other evidence that the defendants have not been particularly forthcoming with, but we've won court orders requiring them to turn over their phones, computers, social media and email accounts, and we're in the midst of making sure they do so. Some have, and in other cases, we've had to ask the court to sanction the defendants to make sure that they actually hand these pieces of evidence over, and actually, we won our first real monetary sanctions against the defendants, which, against 3 defendants specifically, which is an important step forward. But how, you know, this question of how do we actually grapple with the fact that conspiracies like these are happening behind closed doors, quote-on-quote, and what is the role of tech companies in this crisis? And I think it's very clear that the current system is not working, that in many places, sites like Discord, 4chan, Hchan, Gab, Telegram right now especially are becoming hotbeds for extremism, and not just for terms of service, but also actual violent conspiracies that go well beyond simple hate speech.

Amy, I was just sickened to read some of the discussion that is in the litigation, that's in the federal judge's decision about car attacks, especially after the car attack that killed Heather Hyer. You know, one of the quotes was, "nothing makes us more proud at the KKK than we see white patriots such as James Field Jr. taking his car, running over 9 communist anti-fascists, killing 1," there's another tweeted, "communists have killed 94 million, looks like it was payback time." This is all after this happened. It's just, it's just horrifying to read. It must be an example for you of what you're up against, what you're dealing with and why you're doing this.

Yeah, so this brings me to an important point I guess which is when Unite the Right happened, it was clear that the intention was violence, and that is what happened. But they then celebrated that violence afterwards, exactly as you just described. And ever since, they have been continuing to promote and incite violence, not just as it relates to what happened in Charlottesville but actually against our plaintiffs and our legal team. And the amount of violent threats that our team is getting on a near daily basis from our defendants or their followers and supporters is stunning. It's why IFA has to be raising money for security costs, frankly. And it speaks to the fact that what happened in Charlottesville was intended to really be this flashpoint in this rise of white nationalist

violence. [music]. What our case seeks to do is it seeks large monetary judgements against the defendants, and that is important because they should be held accountable for what they did. James Fields was sentenced to life imprisonment a few months ago, and that is important, but there were 2 dozen other people who planned and executed this violence, and they have not been brought to justice yet. And so this suit is the only one at this stage, moving forward, that seeks to do that. By bankrupting and disrupting infrastructure that's at the center of this movement. And the defendants in our suit really are at the center of this much larger white nationalist movement. It can have ripple effects well beyond that specific case. So, for example, the Pittsburgh shooter talked on Gab with some of the Charlottesville leaders in the weeks leading up to killing 11 people [inaudible] last fall. The Christ church shooter painted onto his gun a symbol known as the fasc-tag which was first promoted and popularized by Matthew Hynboch, another one of our defendants. And so, these individuals and groups that we're taking on through this lawsuit are of course responsible for Charlottesville, but their role in this broader movement, this broader extremist movement, is also very clear. And by bankrupting and dismantling them through these large judgements, we have the possibility of really putting a significant dent in the movement and sending a clear message to any other individuals or groups who might try to do the same thing. That, if you do this, we will take you on, we will take you to court, and we will bankrupt you.

And so this mechanism of civil damages, of bankrupting, these were set up in the original statutes, these were set up in the 1870s to attack the KKK?

Yeah, the KKK Act is really one of the few mechanisms that exist to protect against private conduct that violates people's civil rights. So much of our civil rights law is targeted at government conduct, the government needs to make sure that people are treated with equality and justice. But there are not a ton of mechanisms in place for private plaintiffs to fight back when their civil rights are violated by other private citizens. So, the KKK Act is one of those few statutes. It's physically meant to take on and award monetary judgments in cases like this, when individuals conspire to undermine people's civil rights. In the aftermath of the Civil War, the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments had been ratified, but the Ku Klux Klan was doing everything in its power to make sure that recently freed slaves couldn't actually access those rights. And it was a reign of terror. And, so, the Reconstructionist congress passed a series of laws that were meant to give both government and, in this case, private citizens, the ability to fight back. [music]

The law is an essential element of democracy. But, the fact is, lawsuits can take a really long time. Given Amy's personal commitment to this cause, I wanted to understand how she was dealing just how long and drawn out all those discovery requests and damages hearings and motions for summary judgments can be. How do you achieve patience in the face of injustice?

I would say a few things. I think, one, the suit has had immediate tangible impacts on this violent movement. So, Richard Spencer, one of our defendants, specifically talked about how he feels like he can't go about business as usual because of this suit. The deterrent effect is really important. There are a number of defendants and their followers who have seen the potential financial ramifications of the lawsuit, and have actually tempered some of their rhetoric and actions as a result it appears. The second piece is, it is certainly a slow-moving case. There is no denying that. And it's even slower-moving because some of the defendants have gone to extraordinary lengths to try to block evidence. For example, one claimed his phone fell in the toilet. But I will say that at every turn, every time we've gone to the court seeking a court order, making sure that the evidence was being turned over, we have won incredibly important decisions making sure that the defendants fulfill their obligations and that this continues to move forward. And the fact that there's expected to be trial in mid- to late-2020, particularly in 2020 when we are having a national conversation on so many issues, that trial will be especially powerful.

Amy Spetelnik, I want to ask you a question we ask all of our guests on this podcast. Are you an optimist or a pessimist about our democracy's ability to address and overcome these threats which are coming from within.

By nature of what I do for a living, I have to be an optimist. But an optimist with a number of caveats. So, you know, the idea of bringing a case like this is a fundamentally optimistic one. It says that the people who were harmed in this violence, the people whose rights were undermined, have recourse. And they can use our justice system to get that recourse. That we are going to trial and that these defendants will be held accountable for their actions. And that, in many ways, is a fundamentally optimistic premise. That you can utilize our justice system, that you can utilize the rights that were meant to protect you. I do think that there are a number of caveats to that and I think the most important one is that being optimistic requires being proactive. That if we were just going to sit there and let justice take its course in the aftermath of the violence, there would be no reason for optimism. Because we know that right now, the federal government isn't investing where they should on this issue, we know that these organizations and individuals have continued to proliferate on social media, and so it's worth being optimistic. But it takes a level of being proactive for that optimism to be seen through. For us to actually see the results takes us being proactive as well. And that's frankly what integrity first for America work is about, that's what this case is about, and that is what our plaintiffs are doing in channeling this moment into this fundamentally optimistic idea that our justice system and our laws are meant to protect us.

Well, Amy, I want to thank you for taking the time to share with us everything about this lawsuit and for your work, for your work on protecting our democracy.

Thanks so much for having me. [music].

00:27:30

SM Overcoming Extremism is supported by the Anti-Defamation League. The show is hosted by Mike Slgner, and produced by Elliot Majerzik. [music]. Welcome back to With Good Reason at Virginia Humanities. I'm Sarah McConnell. Picture this: a group of strangers, some are sworn enemies, living together in a remote Italian village. It sounds a little like a reality TV show, right? But it's actually a peace-building program. It brings together students from conflict-zones all over the world. Daniel Rothbart is a professor of conflict analysis and resolution at George Mason University. He says, the program hopes to answer a deeply human question: what does it take to develop sympathy for our worst enemies? Daniel, you're involved with an experimental program in a city in Italy, to see if people who think of themselves as enemies can acquire sympathetic understanding of one another. Tell me a little bit more about what's involved?

DR Well, the Peace Education Center is a 2 year program where young people from conflict countries come and live with each other. They learn, they experience, they have relationships. Some of them are caring and supportive. Sometimes they get into disagreements, and this is an experiment to see how these young people who come to this Peace Education Center to see how they change their understanding of the so-called enemy.

SM Are they coming together with others from their same area who they don't care for?

DR Yes, they'll come into the program and some of them will actually be living with people who are part of the so-called enemy group. And this is obviously a big emotional challenge for them, because they know that they have to get along with everybody, but they also, in many cases, have such strong negative emotions, and possibly hatred, for people in the so-called enemy group. And they might be looking at the other student who supports the enemy. So this is a huge challenge. And this is intentionally made for people to confront their hatred.

SM Give me a couple of examples of such pairs of students who must grapple with one another.

DR Well, I've interviewed 15 students. One Israeli Jew and another is an Israeli Palestinian. Another pair is, one is from the Republic of Georgia and another is from Russia. One student experienced the death of her brother while she was there. The student was in Rodney. She learned that her brother was killed by the enemy group, and in the same class that she was in was a member of that enemy group. So, this student, from what I was told, felt great bitterness to the militants who killed her brother. And, from there, she had to cope with the other student who represents the enemy camp.

SM And so, what is the theory behind this 2-year immersion approach? And how is it different from other efforts at conflict resolution that bring sides together to get to know one another's humanity?

DR Wars are created by intense, negative emotions. And these negative emotions leads to fabrications. It's like, made up ideas about what the enemy is. That the enemy is there to kill us, that the enemy is going to do all of these horrible things. And, in almost all cases of contemporary war, these notions about the enemy are delusional. They're made up. And at the same time, while they're demonizing the enemy, the enemy is the devil and so on, they're glorifying themselves. The purpose of this Peace Education Program in Italy is to break that kind of psychic barrier to understanding and to feel sympathy for the enemy.

SM And that compassion would occur, theoretically, as part of what? What would cause that during two years of emotion?

DR Living through a culture of sharing experiences. And this is something that is so critical that the students are sharing their pain, they're sharing their suffering, eating together, and they're sharing themselves. They're experiencing a change of who they are.

SM What have you seen in terms of conflicts that have arisen and boiled over and efforts to resolve traditional conflicts?

DR I'm interviewing a group of young people 3 times over a period of 3 years. So, I was assuming that this program is immediately going to make everyone very loving and compassionate, and what I'm finding so far is there's all different reactions. Many of them are in fact showing compassion about their so-called enemy group, but some are still quite bitter. Some of the people I'm interviewing really have a strong sense of bitterness, especially against the militants. And what I'm finding with many of them, is there's a huge difference between their feeling about the militant enemies and their feeling about the civilians in the enemy group. Some of them said, for example, they feel badly for the civilians who joined Boko Haram in Nigeria. And we all know that Boko Haram is committing atrocities against civilians. And some of the students I interviewed said that they feel very bad of what the militants are doing but they feel sorry for the children who are joining that group. Boko Haram engages in a horrible practice of recruiting children, so the people I'm interviewing, they've expressed great sympathy and sorrow for the suffering of these children who do become militants themselves.

00:35:04

SM Is this approach to peace-building among these young people different than you find traditionally in the field?

DR Yes, I mean the traditional idea of peace-building, of course, is you get the leaders of a country sitting down, negotiating, and signing a peace treaty. But, unfortunately, about half of the peace treaties in the world are broken within 5 years, approximately. What's unusual about this particular experiment—it's the only program in the world that has people from conflict countries living together for 2 years. But a huge problem in our field is the follow-through. It's the, what happens when everyone goes home and goes back to their respective camps as it were. So these young people become ambassadors for peace. That when they go back home, they become, themselves, agents for inducing compassion. Many of them do work in the field of peace-building.

SM Have you been surprised by any of what you've learned so far in your study?

DR I'm surprised that so many of them are experiencing and sensing sympathy for the other. In some cases, the people I interviewed basically even have compassion for the combatants on the other side. That, to me, is surprising. I mean, the idea that you feel sorry for the killers who easily you could use the word 'murderers' of people who are in their group, this really is impressive.

SM Over the course of your career in studying and implementing peace efforts, do you find that you've become more cynical or more hopeful about the human proclivity toward one another?

DR Oh, I'm very optimistic. You know, people think that being optimistic is other-worldly, that it has nothing to do with the reality of war. And that's exactly the wrong perspective. In fact, the pattern, the trend of warfare around the world shows that people are getting more peaceful. I mean, the old idea of wars involving one nation against another nation—that's extremely rare now. The old pattern of violence that causes tremendous suffering of many people, from a global scale in the past few decades, has become less severe. [music].

SM Daniel Rothbart is professor of conflict analysis and resolution in the Jimmy and Roslin Carter School for Peace and Conflict Resolution at George Mason University. Coming up next, this many lands in the middle of the umbrella protests. When Howard Sanborn arrived in Hong Kong last semester to teach about democracies in the west, he quickly found his students were engaged in their own fight for democracy as part of the umbrella movement raged all around him. Howard Sanborn in the professor of international studies at Virginia Military Institute. Howard, you went to Hong Kong last fall on a Fulbright to teach a course called Democracies in the West. I bet you didn't expect to see a violent struggle over democracy unfold right before your eyes.

HS That's true, and by the time I was leaving in August, the debate over the extradition bill was in full boil. And, even then, I didn't really expect, by the time I landed, and getting

into teaching my classes, to see a lot of the things that I studied and researched and published about, full-on displayed in front of me.

SM And help us understand the bigger picture. Hong Kong is a former British colony taken over by the People's Republic of China when?

HS This was in 1997. So, the British had held Hong Kong as a colony, but agreed to hand the colony back over to China in the 1980s. A lease on the territory would expire in 1997 and the United Kingdom would just simply hand back the entire territory to Hong Kong, and so the Chinese government and the British government agreed to basically install some form of self-governance for the city that would allow Hong Kong to rule itself for about 50 years or so, after the hand-over in 1997. Initially, the thought was that Hong Kong would maintain that high degree of autonomy, but, starting really in the early part of the 21st century, there have been these pushes from the People's Republic of China, the Beijing government, to, I think, further solidify the connection between Beijing and Hong Kong.

00:40:31

SM So, what were the roots of the Hong Kong protest that was ongoing when you arrived? What set it off?

HS There was a case where a Hong Kong man had allegedly murdered his girlfriend in Taiwan, but fled back to Hong Kong. And so the Hong Kong government saw this as a loophole where people could potentially commit crimes in different parts of what the People's Republic of China considers China. And get away with it by fleeing to Hong Kong. So the Hong Kong government proposed a bill to make it easier for people charged with crimes in Hong Kong by Beijing or by, on the mainland, to be extradited back to the mainland.

SM Why was that upsetting to the locals?

HS A lot of people felt that this could be an excuse for people on the mainland who saw challenges and issues of freedom of speech as threats to the regime in Beijing. And so they saw the ability for the governments on the mainland to be able to bring charges against people in Hong Kong, and they would be extradited from Hong Kong to the mainland as a very crucial existential threat to democracy and freedoms in the city.

SM Why was it called an umbrella movement? Why did they use umbrellas as they marched?

HS Well, that's a great question. I noticed this, when the umbrella movement started, people were carrying umbrellas as protection. They were getting projectiles fired at them by the

police, and so they would open their umbrellas up to protect themselves from debris and such, you know, and help them navigate through tear gas and what they couldn't see. And so it very inadvertently became this strong symbol of freedom in the city.

SM It seems like the umbrella movement is mostly very young people and primarily students. Is that right?

HS Yes, but the leaders themselves, some of whom are in jail right now, were professors and older people, professionals, who were helping organize this. But the movement today, people generally consider leader-less.

SM So, you were supposed to teach an entire semester last fall at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and yet the protests also came there.

HS Yeah, very quickly, I had to see calls from the protestors for classroom boycotts, and so I'd have a lecture hall that was supposed to have 50 students and maybe I'd have 10. Or, when there was an ordinance passed by the chief executive to ban face masks, students started showing up as a protest in my classroom in facemasks, you know, in solidarity with one another. And so I could see this bubble up. Nevermind that when I'd walk from my flat on campus to the classroom and to my office, I would see graffiti and protest art all over the place. So, yeah, democracy just organically emerged in front of me as I was living my life on campus.

SM They were invoking a lot of American democracy images as part of their protests. Did you see some of that?

HS Oh, certainly, yeah, I would see American flags in addition to British flags but a lot of American flags, and these pleas for the American government and America itself for help. And I think that reflected 2 very important things. First, that America is a very powerful country, and a lot of these protestors saw America as a way to counter the Chinese state that they felt was a threat. But also, what America represents in this very aspirational way to even Americans itself, freedom and equality, you know, accountability, fairness, and I think people were using American flags and American imagery as a way to unify and connect to these values and norms.

SM Where were you living at the time, and were you ever in danger?

HS Um, I was living right on the Chinese University campus so it's got a 13 story high rise and, eventually, I had to leave my flat just for the sake of having access to getting off campus at some point. But I never felt physically in danger, no.

SM What did you take with you when you left? Did you leave in a hurry?

HS Well, yeah, I had packed a bag if I had to leave in a moment. My fear was, if the protests came to campus, that we would be locked in. So, it sounds more Jason Bourne or Indiana Jones than what it really was. I got to the front of the campus and the protestors were there. They had really worked to block off this massive, sprawling campus. I mean the campus was very very big. And there are many entrances to it. So the protestors, they grabbed everything that they could. They were grabbing barricades, they had parked buses that were, you know, part of the university transit system...

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SM Why were they blocking the campus? Who were they trying to keep out?

HS The police and the protestors had gotten into a very violent, physical clash where there was molotov cocktails thrown, the police had thrown in pepper spray and pepper gas and had doused students, and so the students were trying to hold the police off from coming onto campus. And so that's what precipitated me leaving, you know, after a few days of this, I wasn't able to leave and I took the opportunity as soon as I could to hitch a ride with some friends. So, when they got me to the front, the protestors had been there for a few days checking, you know, folks as they came in and out of the campus. And to prevent any sort of large incursion from a police force. They had dug up sidewalks, and laid these down, pieces down as obstacles, they grabbed like fences and barricades that were university property, and laid that out as a way to make it very difficult to come into campus.

SM Did you feel awkward as an American? Did you feel like you had a target on your back?

HS Not really, no. I think precisely because I stood out, probably because they recognized me as a professor on campus, the issue with me was just getting out. I think there were other people who were trying to come onto campus who might have been of Chinese descent who people were suspicious of. The protestors might have seen them as potential, you know, problems.

SM Do you now worry about what's going to happen next for Hong Kong and for the protestors?

HS I do. It's hard not to be pessimistic if your hope is that Hong Kong is going to maintain its place as this very vibrant, very active citizenry. Cause China has really tried to maintain deeper control over its territories, I think there's a pessimism there, that part of the reason the protests have become so passionate and people have really leaned into this democratic narrative is because this may be the only chance they get to have that sort of space for democracy and freedom. Because they're fearful that it won't be there in the long-term, particularly as we head towards that 50 year mark where Hong Kong is no longer guaranteed autonomy from the state.

SM When is the 50 years up?

HS 2047.

SM Right.

HS So when I saw that Wuhan, which is 700 miles away from Hong Kong, was, all these reports of this virus emerging, coming out, I didn't think I was going to be returning because I figured it was only a matter of time before it spread to Hong Kong. And I think the city did a very good job in trying to prevent and limit the expansion of that virus into the city. One of the things that I think guided the attention that they gave to the virus in their preparations was the fact that Hong Kong was really hardly hit by SARS back in 2003. And so, if you go around Hong Kong now, there's already sort of an infrastructure in place where there's hand sanitizing stations all over the place, and people are very sensitive to these potential viruses. And so, when, there was word of this virus emerging out of Wuhan, relatively close to the city, I think people already felt the impetus to do something very quickly. So the city started quarantining people coming into the city, as they tested folks, and I think people on the ground, when they were told to distance themselves from one another, did that very quickly because they knew how bad it could get.

SM How are you and your wife doing? I know you're expecting your first child together. Do you have concerns?

HS You know, you have these newfound fears of what you know, what you don't know, and how it's going to affect this new being that you've helped produce. You know, we're practicing social distancing here with my wife and my step-kids and, you know, are just waiting this out. But there's always those worries of what's to come and what you don't know about. But I think we've been very fortunate to be sensible and have some guidance now to know what to do in the situation to lessen its effects on people, particularly older folks.

SM Well, Howard Sanborn, good luck to you, and many thanks for sharing your insights on With Good Reason.

HS Oh, no worries. Thank you.

SM Howard Sanborn is a professor of international studies and political science at Virginia Military Institute. With Good Reason listeners, we want to hear from you. What are you doing to cope with the times? What's working for you? Record a voice memo and email it to us. [wgr@virginiahumanities.org](mailto:wgr@virginiahumanities.org). We just heard from Carol McCormick and we'll share a little of what she said to us.

CM My name is Carol McCormick. I am the head of youth services at Matthews Memorial Library in Matthews, Virginia. And, normally, we have 6 story times a week at 2 different nursery schools and head start, and then our own library program. But, we can't do that now, so we have taken to social media. And we're doing our storytime online. And you can access it through [matthewslibrary.org](http://matthewslibrary.org) and then the rest of the time, we're reading and cooking and playing my ukulele which my kids gave me for Christmas, and I don't know, a lot of talking and laughing and visiting with our kids on FaceTime. And so, anyway, that's what we're doing.

SM Major support for With Good Reason is provided by the law firm of McGuireWoods and by the University of Virginia Health System, a national cancer institute designated cancer center, researching and developing the treatments of tomorrow, [UVAhealth.com](http://UVAhealth.com). With Good Reason is produced in Charlottesville by Virginia Humanities. Our production team is Allison Quantz, Matt Darroch, Allison Byrne, Lauren Francis, and Jamal Millner. Some of the music is by Blue Dot Sessions. For the podcast, go to [withgoodreasonradio.org](http://withgoodreasonradio.org). I'm Sarah McConnell. Thanks for listening. [music]