Andy Mager

Full Transcript

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Interviewer

I'll start off the questions by asking you for a brief bio. How would you want to be introduced to people on the street or a broad audience of people who might come to the Circle and use the app?

Andy Mager

Okay, so my name is Andy Mager and I came to Syracuse at the end of 1981, as a young adult, and have lived in the greater Syracuse area most of the time since then. I'm a community organizer, someone who believes deeply in social justice and peace, and about the importance of our relationship to the natural world. So I have worked closely with folks from the Onondaga Nation for much of the time that I've lived in the Syracuse area. As a young person, I remember reading a book in high school American history called *Bury my Heart at Wounded Knee*, which tells the story of the destruction of the Native peoples in the west of the United States, the upper midwest. I was horrified by that history, which I hadn't particularly been aware of up until that point. But I felt that it was very much in the distant past. It wasn't till I came to Syracuse and understood that there were Onondaga people here, that the Onondaga Nation existed not far from Syracuse, and that there were ways now that I could be part of working to redress those terrible crimes that had been committed by our country. That has really motivated me since then, to be part of helping, helping my neighbors, the immigrant people who have come to this country, to this continent, understand the history, the rich history, that was here before Columbus got lost thinking he was on his way to India and stumbled upon this continent. And to recognize that we owe a debt to the people who lived here, whose lives we decimated, whose cultures we sought to destroy. Fortunately we have not been successful in doing that, so our Onondaga

neighbors are still here. They still want to try to work with us as collaborators, as neighbors, and I hope we can step up and do that.

Interviewer

Thank you very much. I appreciate that. To start very open-endedly about the monument itself, what are your thoughts about the Syracuse Columbus monument?

Andy Mager

Columbus Circle has been an important site for a variety of events and activities. I have participated in dozens of vigils and demonstrations and protests there, mostly not focused on Columbus, but rather because it was a central community gathering place. So the annual Hiroshima procession ended with a vigil at Columbus Circle for many, many years. I attended a vigil the year after I got here to remember and honor the people who were massacred in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in southern Lebanon, at Columbus Circle. So it's always been something that I've known of, that I've spent time there. And it's always troubled me that Christopher Columbus was lifted up in that way. Around that time, I read a book called *The People's History of the United States* by Howard Zinn, which was my first specific teachings about Columbus as really a brutal person who sought to enslave the Arawak people who he encountered in the Caribbean. So with that knowledge, the idea of him being exalted as someone we should honor and lift up in a central part of our city was very saddening to me.

I'm Jewish, but grew up connected to many Italian people. When I was in high school, I got funding from the Knights of Columbus to go to a workshop in Washington DC. So I have always, really, I think, understood that Italians also were people who were discriminated against, as were Jews. So in my mind, this idea that opposing lifting up and honoring Columbus is somehow anti-Italian has never made sense to me. And I think it's sad that it's come to represent that. The other thing I would say is that my wife grew up on the Northside of Syracuse in an Italian American family that has been here for several generations. Her family had a small grocery store, her grandmother had a larger grocery store, so

I'm personally connected to the traditional Italian American community here in Syracuse. And I know that neither my wife nor her – well, I'm not so certain about her sibling, but certainly her nieces and nephews – don't have any love of Columbus or desire to see this statue remain in the city. Her parents passed away before the statue became a real flashpoint of controversy. So I'm not sure what their take would have been.

Interviewer

Thank you very much. And to at least a significant extent, I think you've answered some of my next question, which was: What histories does the monument site or Columbus Circle represent to you? Is there anything you'd like to add on that topic?

Andy Mager

First, the idea that Columbus discovered America – from the time I learned of Indigenous peoples, it's just been so offensive. And I recently noticed on Facebook that [someone] had posted on the Neighbors of the Onondaga Nation Facebook page, in response to a photo of several of us holding a banner that said "Columbus didn't discover anything. There were thousands of Native nations already here." They posted something about how – I don't think they used the word "stupid," but how ignorant we were, that that's not what the word "discover" means. And so I opened up my dictionary and that's exactly what it means, "discover" means finding something that people weren't aware of otherwise. And the Europeans weren't aware of it, but it's so insulting and condescending to the people who were here. And, it simply erases them as being human beings, as being people who have a place in the world. So that, to me, is deeply offensive. And the more I've grown to learn about and understand the ongoing history that began with the landing of Columbus in the Caribbean, of Europeans seeking to kill, dispossess, dehumanize the wide, diverse range of Indigenous peoples who've lived here. Knowing some of those people, learning from them and calling them friends, I feel deep pain at that erasure. Having Columbus lifted up as one of the highest points in the city, in a

central location, feels to me to be scraping those raw wounds of people I care about. And so I'm very, very happy that that statue will be coming down.

Interviewer

What other histories or stories, including present-day stories, would you want people who come to the downtown circle to learn about or to be exposed to?

Andy Mager

I think the stories of the city, which, in my mind, start with the Onondaga presence, and including the founding of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy on the shores of Onondaga Lake. Many people know a little bit of that history, some none. But I would certainly like to see that highlighted, to teach people about how much our country borrowed from Haudenosaunee ways in terms of the creation of democracy in the United States, and the fact that we borrowed selectively and left out very important elements like the role of women as major decision makers.

So we borrowed elements; we borrowed ideas of representation. The Great Law of Peace, which is the guiding principle of Haudenosaunee participatory democracy, very clearly impacted the United States. Benjamin Franklin's first plan in 1754, the Albany Plan of Union, called the upper house of the legislature the Grand Council, the exact name for the Council of the representatives of the five original Haudenosaunee nations. It's very clear that Franklin and other colonial leaders interacted on a regular basis with Haudenosaunee leaders and learned from them in terms of diplomacy. And there's a particular meeting that took place, I think, in Lancaster, New York, where one of the Haudenosaunee chiefs specifically called on the colonists to unite and talked about how the Haudenosaunee nations were separate peoples who united and formed a Confederacy, and now we're a mighty Confederacy of people. So clearly, the roots of U.S. democracy are not primarily, and certainly not exclusively, found in Greece, but are much closer to home. People should learn about and understand that, and I think Columbus Circle would be a great place to teach that history. I also think it would be wonderful to

then add to that, as more recent peoples have come to the region, as various Germans and Irish and Italians and the more recent waves of immigrants, many who came here as refugees, fleeing from devastating conditions in their homelands. So I think that celebration of the broad diversity of this community, building on the foundation that the Onondaga and Haudenosaunee provided, would be a beautiful tribute to what the city seeks to be.

Interviewer

Absolutely. Thank you very much. You mentioned your personal history a little bit, but how does your personal history or your family history shape your feelings about Columbus Circle and the monument and their meanings?

Andy Mager

As a Jew, I was aware from a very young age of the Holocaust, of the centuries of anti-Semitism which preceded the Holocaust. And now the decades of anti-Semitism which have followed it, including rising anti-Semitism both in this country as well as other parts of the world more recently. And I was taught, and I very much internalized the idea, that the way for any group of people, Jews or anyone else, to combat hatred and oppression is not just to try to protect ourselves, but to recognize that that sort of behavior, which is found throughout human history, needs to be opposed in a comprehensive, universal way. I have a responsibility to speak up for Jews who are being discriminated against or oppressed, but I equally have a responsibility to speak up in support and solidarity with Black people, with women, with LGBTQ people, with anyone who's targeted for discrimination or oppression. So that is the foundation that I bring into these discussions.

Interviewer

Thank you very much. How do you think we should think and talk about that site and the histories behind it in ways that can decrease the polarization that's going on right now and address its complexities?

Andy Mager

I was part of one of the dialogue groups created by the city. Although there were a handful of Italian Americans in it, none of them were folks who insist that Columbus is the only potential Italian American to lift up and honor. So they were folks who heard and understood the pain of our Native brothers and sisters and agreed that Columbus shouldn't be honored here. I can't say I've had a lot of successful conversations with folks who want to retain Columbus. I think that as much as possible for people to speak in their own voices, based on their own experiences, I think that that's very powerful and useful. Someone can argue about what's right and wrong. It's a stretch for them to argue that my experience, my feelings, are wrong, or the experiences and feelings of Onondaga people who might pass by that monument and see it as an assault on their very being. So I think that's important.

I also think it's important to note that people's understanding is shifting, that it has been shifting, and my hope is that with steps like removing the monument it will continue to shift and there will be fewer people who want to hold on to antiquated understandings of history. I'm a Jew, who wants to look critically at the history of my people. There are many Jews who want to defend what Israel does, no matter how violent or oppressive. And I think it's important for any of us to be willing to look at our individual behavior and actions, as well as the groups that we're part of, to look at it critically and with an open mind, and be willing to say that mistakes have been made, that crimes were committed, if that's the case. Then we need to figure out how we move forward collectively, based on the values that we claim. This country claims to believe in equality and justice and fairness. And those are beautiful ideals. But I think we need to look at the history of this country and recognize that while they have always been cited as ideals, they have never been fully brought to life. That's the ongoing challenge that we face as a people: how do we make them real, assuming we believe in them. Unfortunately, I think that many people, including some of the founders in this country, didn't believe in them, and that, in fact, some of those elements of the Constitution were really a form of gaslighting.

Interviewer

Thank you very much. What do you think would be ideal next steps for the site, once the statue is removed, that are inclusive of all of the communities involved?

Andy Mager

Broadly what the mayor's office has proposed, trying to gather a diverse group of people, as they did, to make recommendations on removing the monument or leaving it in place. I think that would be great. I think it would be wonderful to then put out some initial ideas and sketches of what that might look like, and offer a period of time for the general public to give feedback and share additional ideas. It's important that the process not just be window dressing, but where there actually is openness to additions, revisions, changes in what a smaller group of people comes up with. While I work with a variety of organizations that use consensus decision making to make decisions, our country doesn't do that at any level. And so to assume that we'll be able to reach complete agreement on the decision to remove the statute, and then the decision of what to replace it with, is not practical, and it's not going to happen. But if we have a process that seeks to let people know that their voices are being heard, and where they actually are being heard. Most public input gathering in this community, and across the country, is really bogus, is a sham to allow government officials to do what they deem best. And so I think it's hard to create such input processes that help people to really feel heard, and to then help people buy into it, even if they don't feel that all of their input or vision ends up in the final product.

Interviewer

That makes a lot of sense. Thank you. That covers my official questions. Is there anything you'd like to speak to or anything you'd like to add that we haven't covered?

Andy Mager

I'd like to make an appeal to my Italian American brothers and sisters and non-binary siblings, that change is hard, that looking at what our parents, our grandparents, our ancestors did is difficult. But I think one can honor the intent of one's family and ancestors to fight against the oppression that Italian Americans experienced, to honor the ways that they gathered funds to build this monument, thinking that that was the best way to do it, eighty years ago or whatever it was. And also to recognize it's not the best thing now. That now we can move forward and that if our community is to prosper, to do so in a way that includes everyone, we need to find ways to do that. And lifting up someone like Christopher Columbus is not going to help us move forward in 2020.

Interviewer

Thank you very much.

Andy Mager

You're welcome.

Interviewer

I actually have one more question, if you don't mind, but it's not part of my standard list. I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit more about NOON. I understand that the organization works as allies of the Onondaga Nation and that it's been working for two or three decades, is that right? But I'd love to hear a little bit more about it.

Andy Mager

Sure. NOON built on work that a number of people had been involved in over a variety of decades before NOON was created. There was a long relationship between the Syracuse Peace Council and people at Onondaga. Shortly after I came to Syracuse at the end of 1981, Dennis Banks, who was an

American Indian Movement leader, came and sought sanctuary at the Onondaga Nation and in New York State. He had been accused of crimes related to the Wounded Knee takeover, and didn't believe that he could get a fair trial in South Dakota were he to go back there. He legitimately believed he could be killed in the process or imprisoned for the rest of his life. So he had been granted sanctuary in the state of California under Governor Jerry Brown, during his first term in the late 70s, early 80s. So Dennis came here, and I was part of efforts working with people at Onondaga to try and get Mario Cuomo to grant sanctuary to Dennis here in New York State. That gave me an opportunity to work with people in Onondaga, and others who had worked in various other capacities as well.

Fast forward to the late 1990s, when land claims had been filed in federal court by the Oneida, to the east of Syracuse, and the Cayuga to the west of Syracuse, and public responses to both of those court actions in those communities were full of hostility, misunderstandings of history, and racism against Native peoples. A group of us in Syracuse got together, knowing that at some point, the Onondaga Nation would likely go to court on the very same historic and legal grounds as the Oneida and Cayuga had. And we believed, because the Onondaga had been here continuously since before Europeans arrived here, because they had sought to be good neighbors, and because we also believed that there was a little more of a progressive sensibility here in the Syracuse area than in some of the outlying areas, we thought that there could be a very different result when they went to court. Rather than people fighting the court case and saying, "This is wrong, these people are trying to steal our land," that instead the public could rise up and say, "Yes, their land was taken illegally. We owe a debt. Let's work together to figure out how to make amends for that, how to seek justice together."

So we began, first, educating ourselves more, and then slowly reaching out and seeking to educate people in the community. We've published a variety of materials. We have organized educational events, provided speakers to rotary clubs and community organizations, faith communities, schools, etc. And most often our model for educational work is for someone from NOON to go along with someone from the Onondaga Nation, to speak together and to share our individual perspectives. And much of

the time, people are much more interested in hearing from Onondaga people about their culture, about their history, about their experiences. But we think it's very important for folks in the broader community to know that there are people who are working in solidarity with Onondaga, who believe that our people, our community here in Central New York, our state, New York, our nation, owe a debt, and should be working to redress that in some way.

Interviewer

Thanks a lot. It helps me to get a better understanding of how NOON works and the very, very important work that it does.

And so thank you, thank you for the time you've taken and for the insights that you've offered and the perspectives that you've offered here.

Biography

My name is Andy Mager and I came to Syracuse at the end of 1981 as a young adult, and have lived in the greater Syracuse area most of the time since then. I'm a community organizer, someone who believes deeply in social justice and peace, and about the importance of our relationship to the natural world. I have worked closely with folks from the Onondaga Nation for much of the time that I've lived in the Syracuse area.