

Kelly Smith Interviewed by Jonah Smith
October 23, 2020
Indiana

JS: My name is Jonah Carter Smith, and I am interviewing my mom Kelly Smith in the basement where we live in Indiana on the 23rd of October. Do you give me permission to record and distribute this oral history, please?

Kelly Smith: I do.

JS: Can you tell me what your name, age, occupation, racial identity, gender identity, and sexual orientation are?

KS: Sure. My name is Kelly, K E L L Y Smith. I am, what am I? I'm fifty-three. My occupation is- I am a national organizer with the Poor People's Campaign, a national call for moral revival, and I'm also a member of the national Poor People's Campaign, faith staff. I am White. I identify as female and I am straight.

JS: Where are you from?

KS: I'm actually from Indiana where we are right now. I grew up in the house that we are staying at the moment.

JS: Can you tell me the story of how you and your family ended up in New York in the first place?

KS: Sure, So I am 13 years younger than my oldest brother, but he and I are really close, and a lot alike, and he moved to New York, oh my gosh, when I was probably 11 or 12 and he loved it and I came to visit for the first time when I was 13 and I was terrified of New York City for about the first hour. And then I fell in love with it and I just loved it. And so after graduating from college and having one job, that I didn't really like very much, in my early twenties, I moved to New York City, but I would live here for six months and get it out of my system. And I have been here since 1992, I think, in New York City. So I love it.

JS: As you can tell by our location change. Covid has been kind of a big impact on us this year. How would you say that the pandemic has changed your life?

KS: That's a great question. Coronavirus, man, I mean, it has changed all of our lives so incredibly much. We came to Indiana, you know, because of a really tragic reason, and that is because of my mom having a stroke that we don't think was coronavirus related, but we don't, I guess we can't say for sure, because now they're saying some strokes were, but we've certainly stayed here a lot longer because of the Coronavirus. We've just been able to work and be more comfortable here. So I would say that is one major way that it has changed is just that we have stayed in another city for probably longer than we would have.

JS: What's it like to be in this home away from home so often?

KS: It's weird. I mean, I worked remotely before, but I do think it's odd to be home all the time, and to do our work all day from home to have you going to school from home? To you know, obviously going out is very limited. We tend to just do errands that are really necessary. So, it's definitely been a big adjustment to be home so much.

JS: With that big adjustment, do you think it's impacted you mentally or emotionally?

KS: I think it did. It was really scary at the beginning. And so it was just really, really stressful until we kind of got into a routine and I felt more comfortable and knew we could take precautions. I think it's hard to be away from friends. It's hard to be away from our church community. It's hard to be away from my sort of activist community and to only be talking to people online. I just recently did a three-day conference that we always do in person, and I love those people and I only get to see them at like conferences and things a few times a year. And so it was hard to not be with them, and I think that takes an emotional toll. But all in all, you know, we're hanging in there.

JS: Is that how it's impacted you socially? To communicate with others to online more, or does it go deeper than that?

KS: It's a good question. Yeah. I think mostly just that it's really changed how we interact with each other and I miss going out to dinner with friends, I miss, you know, having lunch with folks after church. So it's definitely impacted me socially too.

JS: And it has impacted your family how?

KS: Well, I think that really all the ways it's impacted me, you know, being your mom, your whole school life and things has changed. So that's a definite adjustment for you. We're all sort of working and going to school from the same place, which is a little weird, , you know, our family. Fortunately, we're seeing a little bit of our family here in Indiana because we had to see them from the very beginning when my mom was sick and before she died. And so since they're socially distancing and we're socially distancing, we get together, it's safe for us to get together. So you know, it's impacted everybody, but I think we're okay.

JS: Have you learned anything about yourself or just the family in general since the beginning of this crisis or is like nothing new?

KS: No, I mean, I think that we're more resilient than maybe I gave us credit for. I think we've learned to be flexible and to adapt. I think that we are actually all getting along much better than I thought we would. Being in close quarters all the time and you know, all of us had managed to keep our jobs, which has really been helpful. My brother recently retired, your uncle, but he was able to work. And so we didn't have that extra sort of, you know, what am I trying to say that extra pressure of having lost our jobs? And so we were able to kind of keep those daily things going. So I think I've just learned that we're flexible and we're resilient.

JS: Okay. What would you say is the hardest part of the pandemic for you? Is it just not being able to communicate?

KS: Yeah, I mean, I think that that is part of it. Well, you know, what I think is actually the hardest part definitely is? I think the uncertainty, it's so hard to know how to play it. It's hard to know that for my work. It's hard to know when we'll be able to do in-person gatherings again, it's hard to know. It's just constantly adapting and constantly changing. I think for us personally, I just, don't like to not know what tomorrow's going to bring. And I think the pandemic puts you in a state of sort of not knowing what, you know, next week's going to look like or next month, for us in particular, because we are able to work from here. And because we have a lot more space here than we do in our tiny little apartment in New York city. We've stayed longer, but that uncertainty of not knowing if things are going to get worse in New York city, if it's going to be harder to return to New York when we should go back, I think that's really, I think that was what the question was.

JS: The Fear of the unknown pretty much?

KS: Fear of the unknown and just, it's kind of dated, you know, day to day or week to week uncertainty, I think has been hard.

JS: Okay. So you said you work in a group that mostly organizes protests because of that, has COVID makes things more difficult in that regard? OR is it well, it can't be easier.

KS: Yeah, I mean, protests are just one piece of what they do, but I think it's definitely made organizing more difficult, I think for all like sort of social justice organizers to have to quickly and to adapt. And folks don't always have access to Wi-Fi and relying on WIFI and doing everything via zoom. And there's also something very energizing about being in person and going to rallies and getting out of the street. And so doing that much less, I think has been, you know, has been hard.

JS: Okay. So we've gone over socially, we've gone over mentally, has the Coronavirus impacted you economically?

KS: I've been really, really lucky in that. I had a job up through June, but it was only scheduled to go through June anyway and it stopped. But then in August I got another role with the campaign and so I've been able to work. I actually may say some things have been cheaper because one we're living in Indiana where groceries and things are cheaper. And two, you know, we don't go to movies, we don't eat out as much. We're not spending money like we did before. Well, yes. And you're an introvert, So we also just, you know, but we didn't take a vacation this year, so, you know, we saved money. But I really feel for families that are being, you know, harshly impacted economically,

JS: Would you say there is anything good to come out of this pandemic for you?

KS: I think the most positive thing is one: I think getting to spend time with you and, your uncle, my brother, because we quarantined together. I think seeing our sister and brother-in-law, getting to spend more time with them. I think it just helps you, I think it has helped adjust my priorities and realize what really, I mean, I think I knew what was important before, but I think it's reemphasized that. I think it's also kind of affected in some ways, in a positive way, how I look at the world.

JS: Okay. Speaking of priorities, I know you're going to have views on this. What do you think the nation and the world should learn from the pandemic?

KS: Oh my gosh. I think what we need to learn first and foremost is one how interrelated we are, how connected we are to one another and in how what one person does good impacts another. I also think that what we should learn is that we are only as strong as our most vulnerable people. So for instance, all of these people that we now call essential workers that we used to cut up the little, you know, the people who worked at our grocery stores, the people we took for granted, the people who delivered our food. And we now know, you know, we've recognized how essential they are, but we also know how reliant on folks we are. And if one person gets sick, it can impact a whole lot of people. And so I really hope that this nation learns that we are so interconnected and we can only be strong if all of us are strong, we could only be healthy if all of us are healthy. And I think that's something the world can learn as well, but I think that US really needs to learn that.

JS: You can only be healthy if all of us are healthy, that's actually a good segue into the next topic. I want to bring up over everything that's going on this year. So I want you to imagine if I wasn't your incredibly good looking kid, can you explain to me all these anti-racist protests? What caused them in the first place?

KS: Sure, but should we do that in part two?

JS: Yes. I believe we should.

JS: Okay, so the segue again. Can you explain to me what caused these anti-racist protests to begin with this year?

KS: So, yeah, I mean, I think one thing that we miss in these anti-racist protests is that we think they are based on one event. So, we know what sparked the majority of them were George Floyd's horrible murder. Eight minutes and 46 seconds on camera for all of us to see. But I think what we sometimes fail to realize is this is a culmination that there are a lot of things that have happened that have resulted in that being sort of the straw that broke the camel's back, so to speak.

JS: A buildup of events that led to this, right?

KS: Exactly. So there have been a number of events that have happened, and the problem is that it never gets addressed. It never gets dealt with, and so what really sparked it is that we have this blatant, like police officer looking at the camera, people are yelling, "You're killing him!" and he keeps his knee on the neck of a black man and kills him just on camera.

KS: I mean, it gives me chills to even say that, but literally we witnessed someone's murder on TV and then things just don't happen very fast with the police. He should have been arrested immediately. I mean, we see this things like this time and time again, and things don't change. So this was about that. This was about the economic disparities in communities of color. This was about the healthcare disparities in communities of color, but it culminated in this really brutal, violent act that just was sort of the spark that lit the things.

JS: So here's a question, have these uprisings across the country change how you think about your own identity and your own place in society at all?

KS: Well, I don't know. I mean, I've been involved in this work for a while. I think I am constantly learning and I'm constantly being reminded that I can't be quiet about these things. I'm constantly, I was reminded, I think because of these uprisings, how long this work is and how hard this work is and how much Black people in particular in the United States have to put up with, and how many times do they have to go through this and things don't change and just the sort of emotional and physical, and stress-related toll that takes on people. So yeah, I mean, I think that, you know, does that answer the question?

JS: No, no you're fine, actually here's a question. Speaking as a New Yorker do you think there's a reason why NYC became an epicenter of these protests?

KS: I do think there's a reason. One is, well, one thing I will say is, I guess I question whether it is completely, maybe it's one of the epicenters. I don't know if I think it's the epicenter this time. And I only say that because I think that the ongoing protest in Portland, the protest in Minneapolis, I think sometimes New York city, we kind of like to think we're the center of the world.

JS: I personally thought it was Louisiana myself.

KS: Yeah, I mean, Louisiana, I mean, there were just so many places. So I think that we don't give enough credit to how much organizing went around the country, but I will say this, I think in New York city, we have seen the history. So we saw, you know, starting with the murder of Abner Louima, the gunning down by police of Sean Bell, the horrible things that happened to Khalif Browder that in being put in Rikers for being suspected of stealing a backpack and being in Rikers for two years and then killing himself. So, we have this history in New York city. We also went through years and years and years of horrible policing practices like stop and frisk. So, New York City has seen this and has been protesting this for a long time. Eric Garner, I was involved in the Eric Garner protests, was a very similar case to a choke hold and you know, all of that to what ended up happening to George Floyd. And then at the same time around the country, we're seeing things like Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Sandra Blain, Walter Scott. I mean, there's just, unfortunately you can go on and on and on, and so all of those things happened and then you had Brianna Taylor, George Floyd, Elijah McLean. Yeah, it just keeps going. So I think that New York having come off the heels of Eric Garner in particular and seeing really no justice in that case. I think made it sort of ignite, but I say that in a positive way, not in a negative way, its response to what it's all in George Floyd hit close to home in a lot of ways.

JS: You said you've taken place in protests before. Do you have any stories you're willing to share about encounters you've had with racism or the police or experiencing seeing racism?

KS: Sure. I have privilege as a white person. I have privilege as a small white female, I have not experienced a lot at the hands of police, but I've witnessed it and I have, certainly raising a black child. I have seen it, I've experienced it in the sense of the way that we have had to have the talk, which means something different for parents of Black children and Brown children. And that is

the talk about how you deal with police. I've seen it happen to friends. So, I can't really say that I've experienced it, although I've seen friends, even white friends roughed up by police in prison.

JS: Wait, have you learned about an experience like someone close to you?

KS: Yeah. I mean, I definitely have had friends who have been kind of roughed up by police. I've also had, I mean, here's, here's one example. I had a friend and a colleague that I worked with, and this is more on the stop and frisk lines, but he recounted to me in about a 20 minute conversation, six different times to me, horrifying life traumatizing experiences of being stopped by police. When he was completely innocent, and in most of them found out he did not even look like the person that they were looking for. Two different times he was put into squad cars, and he was walking home from his job, and several of them, he had uniforms from the job he was working and to see this lovely grown man, express this pain to me and talk to me about his experiences.

KS: Literally a week ago I had a friend share that her son who's your age was driving and got pulled over by the police, and he texted her as the police was heading to this car and was like terrified. And it ended up being fine and nothing happened, but that is the kind of sustained trauma that people have to go through. And so I've heard a lot of those stories. I have been honored to have people be with me and share stories with me. I've been in zoom rooms where people have cried about what's happening in their communities. So, I haven't personally experienced a lot of it, but I've heard a lot of it.

JS: Have these past few months changed how you personally think about the police and racism in the U.S.?

KS: You know, yes and no. I mean, I think because of the work I do and the work that I've done for quite a while, I knew a lot of this. I think maybe it has heightened how ridiculously blatant I think it is, how overt, how unabashed, how bold it is. I think it's also what it may be we're going to talk about this more, but I don't know. But also with the pandemic and seeing how Black and Brown people are disproportionately dying from the pandemic and understanding how all of these things are interconnected, that realization just continues has continued to hit home or in the last few months, because the pandemic complicates things and it's also impacting people of color just like police brutality and police group violence does at hugely disproportionate numbers.

JS: I want to focus on the responses for a quick bit. So the first question I have to ask is, there have been people wanting the cops to either get defunded or abolished altogether. Where do you stand on that?

KS: That's, you know, that is a tricky question because I don't think people really understand what either one of them means. And I don't always understand because it kind of means different things when different people say it. But both of those, almost everyone who is advocating for the abolishment of police or the defunding of police, doesn't mean that police departments go away entirely.

JS: More so it just replaces something that actually works? Or something to that extent.

KS: Exactly, so let's look at for a second at defunding. Defunding means in many cases, cutting way back on their budget. So in like LA I think, the police budget is more than 50% of the entire city budget. So we have resources that should be going into education, into healthcare, into housing, into infrastructure. More than 50% of the budget just goes to the police department, and this is true in cities and communities all across the country. So, we are not doing a good job of how we're spending our money. And so if more if more money was put into programs, into infrastructure and to business loans and to healthcare and all the things that build up a community. They shouldn't be going into the police department. The abolish the police is I think really a very similar movement and, and there are times I definitely am in agreement with it. The police department, as we know it, and this is only something I learned in the last year or two really started, and I'm going to forget the term, but it was with these, like slave marshals, or it was basically our modern day police department.

JS: Started as slave patrols, you'd know this, I made a paper on it.

KS: Patrol, that's the word I was looking for I couldn't think of the term. So slave patrol, and that is the origins of our police department. And I think until we come to terms with that and realize we need a complete overhaul of that system, then you know, there's just not going to be justice.

JS: Speaking of which, how do you think, what do you think about the cop's response to all of this again?

KS: Well, you know, I think it's problematic when we are too general and we lump everyone into the same category. However, I think that so much of what has ended up being the violence that we have seen it protests have been police generated violence. So if you show up in tanks, if you show up in armor, if you show up armed to the Hill, you are much more likely to elicit that kind of response from others. When you treat people the way the police have been treated, we have example after example, after example where the violence was actually at the hands of the police trying to squelch the protest. And there's been reports that have come out and studies that have been done that, you know, like 93% of the protests have been peaceful. And the 7% that haven't been haven't even necessarily been because the protests were violent. It's because either the police were violent or fringe groups were violent or white supremacist groups intervene like proud boys. And, you know, the different ones we're seeing show up at these protests. So this characterization of like protests being violent really, really bothers me.

JS: Speaking of which, and it's going to go, this can go hand in hand. What do you think about the local national government's response to the protest and what do you think about the media response?

KS: How long do we have?

JS: How many hours have you got?

KS: So the national protests, I mean, the national response to the protest has been horrific. If we're talking about our national government level, the rhetoric, the focus on loss of property versus loss of life, the focus on calling out protestors and saying that they're anti-American and, and it's racist rhetoric all over again. I mean, it's just rhetoric that engenders more violence, that engenders more separation that makes racist, white people, all the more racist. That makes our

suburbs feel like that our cities are a threat. That's been one of the most disheartening things, you know, even when New York city is repeatedly depicted as, what was it described as? Like a helpful or no, it was, oh, I can't remember, attorney general BARR said something. I mean, just across the line at, of our administration, the way they depicted these cities and depicted the protestors when they've been so beautiful and multi-racial, and multi-generational, and millions of people have participated first usurpation protest. This is an unprecedented, the level of people that we've seen come out together in the streets.

KS: And so to then see it depicted in our national response to be this way, the state's response have been very wide, Then I have to mention this sending in like armed force, even when cities have not asked for them. So sending them into Portland and Seattle and other cities when those cities did not want them, when those cities were peaceful. And then they send in the armed forces and it made things worse. I think the States have handled it very differently. Some States have handled it better than others. So it's been disheartening to see when it's been handled badly.

JS: Ok, I've got 2 last questions.

KS: Oh, do you want me to say the media though, too? You know, I don't know. I think it depends on the media you're watching. I think some media has been pretty good about covering it in a way that shows, you know, the beauty of the protest and the power of the protest. I think some media has been terrible at it. I think some media is really focused on the loss of property and the vandalism. Which often is not even at the hands of the protestors, like other people who've filtrated protests. And so, I think that that's really disappointing when that happens.

JS: Okay. So I've got two last questions. The first one is how would you like to see this movement resolved?

KS: Well, we need justice you know? I need to not worry about you being stopped by a police officer. I need to not worry about loved ones and friends and community members being victimized by police, being brutalized by police. We need a justice system that is just for everyone. We need comprehensive police reform, comprehensive. I think we need to significantly defund the police, and I think we in many instances need to start over with police and into a different way, but if nothing else, we need to see justice in cases. We needed to see justice in Brianna Taylor. We need to see justice in George Floyd. We need to see justice, and people have to know that, you know, not to use this phrase glibly, but that Black Lives Matter and why that phrase is important and what it really means. And we just need to come together as a country.

JS: Last thing. Is there anything else about the anti-racist uprising you'd like to share and any last words?

KS: No, just that. I think they're beautiful and I think they're important. I think it's ridiculously sad that they are necessary, but I think they are. I think they're patriotic. I think you can love your country and want it to be better. I think you can love your country and recognize the racist roots of which it was founded. There is so much history that we are never taught. There is so much history I was never taught in school.

JS: Except for Columbus, that's the only one.

KS: Well, thankfully your schools have done a little bit better, but there are so many things. You know, the massacre of Black Wall street, the, the Greensboro massacre. Oh my gosh. I could just go on and on. There are so many things that we were never taught in school, so, and recognizing those things does not make me hate my country. It makes me want my country to be better and to know it can be better, and that it can only be better when it's fair and just for everyone. And so, I will continue protesting. I haven't done as much of it since we have been in Indiana, and with the pandemic, but we will continue to take to the streets and we will continue to fight for this.

JS: Thank you for this great interview.

KS: Thank you.