

Transcription: Jamilla Richmond

CT: Okay, we'll start the recording. Today is November 10th, 2021. This is an interview for the Custodians and Janitors in Colorado Oral History Project funded by an Archie Green Fellowship from the Library of Congress. As part of the project, we are interviewing people employed in the janitorial field to record their stories, document their skills and knowledge, and better understand their important role in our communities. The recording and transcript will become a permanent part of the collection at the Library of Congress. I am Cynthia Torres and today I am speaking with Jamilla-

JR: Richmond.

CT: Richmond. We are recording at the Boulder Public Library. The time is approximately 9 am or a little after. For the record do you give us permission to record your story?

JR: Yes.

CT: Could you tell us your name and your year you were born?

JR: My name is Jamilla and I was born in 1984.

CT: And we'll start with our questions. And again this might seem a little redundant, but if you would tell me your name and your age and when you started working in the janitorial field.

JR: My name is Jamilla and I am 37 and I started my business last year in February.

CT: And how long have you been working--or excuse me, sorry--well, why don't we start with-- give me a little bit of overview about your janitorial business.

JR: I own a full spectrum janitorial business. We perform residential, commercial, and vacation rental services. And that pretty much sums it up [laughs].

CT: Wonderful. Tell me a little bit about your early life and family. Where were you born and how did you end up in Colorado?

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JR: I was born in New York and I arrived in Colorado about three years ago now actually. I came here for opportunities. It's a good place to own a business.

CT: Wonderful. And your family?

JR: My family. I have a daughter and that's all I have with me now. She's eight.

CT: Nice. Who was the person or people who inspires you to be your best?

JR: My ancestors, my daughter, myself.

CT: How did you come to be a janitorial business owner?

JR: Shortly after arriving here, I ended up having an embolism, a pulmonary embolism, and so I was bedridden for two months and at the time I was a licensed esthetician and I'm still technically a licensed esthetician. I perform--I'm a holistic esthetician by the way. But I had a pulmonary embolism, and for two months I wasn't allowed to work. When you are a single parent, that can be catastrophic financially so I wanted to develop a business that didn't rely necessarily on what I could physically do, and so I started the business with the model of having staff. So that's basically...

CT: Tell me a story from your early experience working as a business owner?

JR: I've owned several businesses throughout my life. I will say though, however, this business and the other one with the esthetics are the two businesses that were adults. I knew how to run a business in some ways. I didn't know how to be a business. So this is the first time that I've actually had the understanding and the competency and the fluency to actually do what we do in a way that supports sustainability for my staff, which is good, it's really important.

CT: Have they always been janitorial businesses?

JR: No.

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CT: Okay.

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JR: No, like I said I'm a licensed esthetician, I'm a massage therapist, I'm a postpartum doula, basically all around. I work in the realm of wellness and self-care, and so previously my businesses surrounded supporting mothers in their postpartum time and just helping women to fall in love with themselves because so often we are inundated with things that talk us out of that.

CT: Indeed. Tell me a story about one of your most challenging or -memorable days working as a janitorial business owner.

JR: I can't really speak to one of my most challenging days per se. I think that we have--we've had several days where it's a little harder and it depends on what--the circumstances vary. I think one of our biggest obstacles and also opportunities is talking through what it means to be a janitor, what it means to be a maid, what it means to have that experience of potentially- my staff come from lower-income elements and they come from employers, previous employers who paid them somewhere between \$12 to \$14 dollars an hour, and they're working long arduous hours, and the primary- the primary demographic of my staff are mothers. I don't have anyone that is working for me that has less than three children, and so taking into consideration making \$12.00 an hour in a city such as Boulder where rents are \$3000.00, if not more, with three children, and potentially by yourself is--you know, I have some single mothers and things. It's a very unfortunately predatory environment for the working people and so my challenge and opportunity has been to redefine the industry in a way that uplifts my staff as opposed to exploiting and taking advantage of them, and changing the paradigm of what people think. My

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biggest, biggest, biggest obstacle is interacting with people who are in one way or another invested in certain populations containing to be disenfranchised and disempowered.

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CT: So when you have the conversation of what it means to be a janitor or a cleaner, what does that conversation sound like with customers?

JR: For me, it doesn't mean making \$12.00 an hour. I'm not gonna ask someone to leave their kids and to step into other people's home, especially now in the time of COVID, but even before, because I did this before. I'm not going to ask someone to leave their family for \$12.00 an hour. I'm not gonna ask someone to work a 10 hour day. I'm not going to do that. We're talking about humanity of people and their ability to spend time with their children, to spend time with their partners if they have one, to spend time with themselves, to love themselves, to be able to afford to feed their children and pay their rent, and things of that nature. So it looks like me having very firm boundaries and saying what we will not do, and that sometimes means that we don't--that we have certain clients that don't patronize us and that's something that I'm okay with, because I don't think that every client is our client.

09:04

CT: Thank you. On a lighter note, do you have any funny or strange work experience moments that you'd like to share?

JR: Funny work experience. I mean not really. Not really. I can't think of anything.

CT: Okay, thank you. What about COVID has been the most challenging for you as a business owner and how has it impacted you and your family and/or your staff?

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JR: I think the hardest thing about COVID is that it has illuminated the disparities and the rigidity in our culture, and by our culture I mean the culture of the United States. Like I said, there are people who are very, very invested in disenfranchising others. They may not say that, but they do that in practice. And so yes, that's I think that's been the hardest thing and the impact on my family is challenging. I'm also a single parent and I'm a Black woman, and being a part of the demographic that is perceived as being valued less as worth- less as- and simultaneously advocating for communities to have more is a very precarious place.

11:10

CT: How has having a service-based industry during COVID--I would imagine that there were some economic impacts, but what about expectations of your customers versus you know what they expect from your staff. Has that changed at all during COVID, or should it have changed?

JR: No, I think that COVID has made people more aware of certain things. However, in my experience--like I said this is--I've owned previous businesses, but also I was a licensed esthetician. I'm from New York, so after 9/11 happened, I was a part of one of the classes that got called--or not called--but that signed up to do hazmat training. And so I've always had a higher expectation for what clean is. And then being in the industry of esthetics it's not quite the medical field but you're interacting with pus and blood, things of that nature and you're real close proximity to your clients, and you're also shifting out. You've got a new client every hour, every hour and a half, so I've always had very high expectations for cleaning and so that tran- translated inherently into my business model. So when clients were asking for certain things, these were things we were already doing just because of my experience.

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CT: Did you have a heightened awareness, or a heightened fear at all, you know, during COVID?

JR: No.

CT: About your exposure to any--

JR: No I don't panic. [laughs]

CT: Okay.

JR: I don't panic, I prepare.

CT: What are your interests outside of work?

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JR: I travel. I love to travel. I love to cook. I love to dance. I sing opera. I love interacting with people from different cultures and I love international films, and just different ways of showing up in the world. I find it all to be incredibly beautiful and intriguing, and so, so important and valuable.

CT: What is the biggest challenge, or what aspect of your work are you most proud of?

JR: I'm most proud of the way that my staff are treated by me and the expectations that I set for how they are treated by my clients. I'm also--because my staff are treated well by me, it's a reciprocal relationship and they're treated well by the clients. The clients are treated very well too, so it's a beautiful ecosystem.

CT: Are your client's homeowners or businesses?

JR: All of the above. [laughs] So like I said earlier we do full-spectrum services, residential, commercial, and vacation rentals. A lot of our clients have a business and/or have a vacation rental, and we work with property managers and we work with parents and such, so we do have all of the above.

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CT: What is the biggest challenge of your job?

JR: Biggest challenge of my job is talking people out of wanting to marginalize others. That's the biggest challenge.

CT: I'm glad you're doing that. What is the biggest challenge you have overcome in your own life?

15:15

JR: Talking myself out of marginalizing myself. I think when you come from certain demographics and certain groups, you are told that you are less deserving, less valuable, that you have to work three times as hard, that you have to give, give, give, give, give, give, give, give, and give, and then when you're sick and you're dead, there is no thank you. So I've had to--and what is the value of a thank you after you've given everything that you've had and then some? But that's my challenge or that was my challenge with talking--with having constant conversations with myself about my words and my contribution and my value and what my child deserves and her value.

CT: Has that come about over time or have you had--

JR: Absolutely. Absolutely. It's like peeling an onion, right? You have one conversation with yourself and it's not over. I think people think that healing is this linear or binary process where you do one thing and then you're done. And this is not the truth. Your whole life is about a journey of learning and exploring yourself, redefining your boundaries, understanding yourself and others and metabolizing that in a way that is productive. And so this is healing. You find

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one obstacle and that may be a more obvious thing because it's superficial, and you work through that, and then the next layer of work comes in and then the next layer, and yes, it's constant.

CT: Are you able to or do you have the intention of translating that understanding about yourself to your workers, to your staff?

17:27

JR: I do. I do. The way that I work with my staff is very unique. I consider us to be a community and a family, and we support each other and uplift each other, and I show up with my skills and every single one of us has different skills. And so creating an environment. I said ecosystem earlier intentionally because for me, owning a business is not about being a dictator, it's not about giving instruction and then executing. It's about developing a community in which all of us show up with who we are, and we contribute our unique skills and learn from each other.

CT: It's quite the [inaudible]. Tell me about a time when you needed to have courage.

JR: Every day [laughs]. I need to have courage every day. Yes, every day.

CT: What are you most proud of related to what you have created in your life?

JR: I'm proud of myself. I'm proud that I have created a personhood that does not seek to give more than they take or take more than they give. That is raising an exceptional human. I love



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her, and if I ever needed a test or a barometer on who I am as a person, I look at my child and I think, oh, shoot [laughs]. I'm not--I'm doing pretty good, I don't suck. You know, I say that a lot. I don't suck. I try not to suck. Yeah.

CT: What is something about yourself that might surprise others?

19:49

JR: I think people are surprised with how deeply I care, and how passionate and relentless I am in that care, because I think that oftentimes we can make the humanity of others conditional based off of whether or not what they're doing or saying is something that is agreeable to us. And I believe that that is a very dangerous thing. So I care about people. I care about their humanity and this, I don't think that I have the right, the place, or the authority to attempt to strip anyone of that, and so I do the best that I can every day to- to support and uphold that in others, whatever that means for them and to honor people whether I agree with them or not. To respect them whether I agree with them or not, and to protect people in the best way that I can.

CT: What do you wish people you work around or the world out there knew about your staff?

JR: I wish they knew how extraordinary my staff are. How resilient. How bold. How thoughtful...they're just incredible people. Their families are incredible and I wish the world knew that about them and I wish the world would see that in everyone, not just my staff but in each other everywhere they walk, every face they see as they walk down the street, or driving

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their cars. I wish they saw people as whole beings, and as people who are deserving of respect, and dignity, and safety, and security. Yeah.

CT: Thank you. Before we started recording the interview you expressed some concerns about what it's like to give your story and having it archived for other people to use. Could you go back and talk about some of those concerns?

23:06

JR: Absolutely. I think there's a danger of a single story absolutely and I think that it is incredibly important and necessary that you hear as many stories, as many voices, as many experiences and ideas as possible, as often as possible. But I also think that when you are looking at populations that have been historically or presently marginalized and disenfranchised, locked out of opportunities, locked out of different means through which they can build for their children and their parents or whatever it is you're---Like being a Black woman and being a single mother. I don't just carry the responsibility of developing something that sustains myself. I carry the responsibility of developing something that sustains my child and the responsibility of ownership of a business that employs people who are also often times coming from the same scenarios with different voices, different cultures, different ethnicities, right. I carry the responsibility of uplifting people, not just myself. And so I think that there is a responsibility that if you're to use our voices, if you're to use our traumas, our experiences, our joys, our inspiration, that the community, the people, of which you are taking are compensated, are respected, are included. I think this country has a relationship like I said with disenfranchising and marginalizing people, and I don't think that the Library of Congress is exempt from that. I think that if my voice can be used to produce profit for someone else who

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is likely going to be someone who comes from a place of means and resources that I don't have. I think that there's a responsibility there for you to do better, and for you to give back and not just in a "I'm going to do this so that my conscience is clear way." But give back in a way that develops equity and sustainability for the communities, and for the people.

26:39

CT: Thank you for sharing that. When we look at one of the reasons that I wanted to do this interview or do this particular project with Archie Green Custodians and Janitors in Colorado was because I wanted to help give a voice to people who are unseen. Do you have any ideas or any suggestions for the way these particular occupational fields could change to help un-marginalize people who have been unseen for so long?

27:19

JR: I think you have to understand your demographic and I think that when you're working in the service industry in general, you have to look at this--and perhaps you don't feel like you have to--but I do; I feel like we have to look at this in a way of do we believe in slavery or not? I'm gonna be plain: do we believe in slavery or not? And if your answer is "no," then why are you entertaining business practices, and methods, and rules, and laws, and ways of being in this place that uphold slavery? Making \$12.00 an hour is not sustainable. Making Colorado if you're a tipped employee, you only have to make \$8.00 an hour. Making \$8.00 an hour is not sustainable. We have an incredible issue with homelessness, with mental health, with substance abuse and these are all symptoms. Symptoms of our collective investment in slavery. There's no reason that companies can make millions or billions of dollars and pay their staff pennies. Does that mean you're going to make less as a business owner? Yes, I make less, but

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you know what? I feel good about that. My staff go out every single day and they risk their health. They take time from their husbands, from their children, they take time from themselves to work for me, and I feel like that deserves respect and compensation, and I feel like it deserves to be respected and compensated in a way that does not further the divide and the access to wealth and the capacity to develop wealth, to develop healthy families, to build healthy homes, and to feel good about who you are. I don't want my staff at the end of the day feeling tired and exhausted, so tired and exhausted that they don't have time to read their children a bedtime story. I'm not doing my job. I'm not serving my community if I believe and act in that way. And so I designed my business in a way that ensures that my staff go to work happy, they leave work happy, they leave work restored, and they can pay their bills. They can spend time with their children, they can spend time with themselves. I think that's important, and I think that it's time that we re-define what businesses look like. I hope that answers your question.

[laughs]

31:05

CT: It does. Thank you so much. We're also done with all of our questions, but I want to make sure that in our discussion that if there's anything else that you would like to talk about related to work or your business, or maybe some advice to people building their business about what kinds of practices work to help build the life you want for your workers. If that's anything you'd like to share or is there anything you'd like to add to your interview, or your story?

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JR: I'd like to say that what happens in the janitorial industry, the custodial industry, the maid industry whatever you want to call it, is not unique. As I said I was a licensed--I am, not was--I am a licensed esthetician. This is happening in the esthetics industry, even worse actually because in Colorado there are employers who don't pay you by the hour, they pay you by the service and so you'll go into a company you'll get a booking, one booking, two bookings whatever it is, because your schedule changes every single day, and you're expected to go in and make \$12.00 sometimes. And that's it and that business owner will tell you, "Oh, well, the tips will even this out for you." It's not up to the client. If the client is spending \$200.00 on a service, and the employee is only making 12 of that, that's unethical. It's immoral and you're asking people to make exceptions for their lives, for their safety, for their children. If you're making \$12.00 dollars and that's it, and childcare is what, \$25.00 an hour in Colorado, can you afford a licensed childcare professional, can you afford a childcare professional who is safe for your child, that knows healthy practices for interacting, for food and these things. Can you afford that? Can you afford to pay your rent with \$12.00 an hour, can you afford to put gas in your car for \$12.00 an hour, or buy your child their winter clothes, their boots? You can't. It's impossible. This problem that we have with our investment in slavery is pervasive throughout the service industry. It's pervasive and then we have--we wonder why people quit, why they don't want to work for \$12.00 an hour, why there's so much turnover with these jobs, why people are unhappy, why they have mental breaks. I think we're not looking at things from a bigger picture. And I think if we have to look at that and think about the ripples in the ocean because what we're doing is not sustainable, and it's not sustainable not just in custodial industry, but in every other service industry that's going on. People should not have to rely on

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tips to be able to support their families because tips are not guaranteed. They're not. And that shouldn't be the make-or-break to whether or not someone can feed their child or make sure that they're safe while they're working. How many children are being abused and mistreated by people who don't love children, don't care, don't understand how to properly care for them, but they're also forced into a predicament where this is all they can do. We have to create opportunities, more opportunities, instead of obstacles. Our society, our communities will be healthier for it. And that's all I have to say about that.

[laughs]

36:06 CT: Thank you so much, Jamilla. I'm going to conclude the interview if there's anything.

JR: No.

CT: Okay, wonderful.