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**Zondervan, Quinton, Oral history interview conducted by Lina Raciukaitis, June 22, 2018;
Caribbean Heritage in Cambridge Oral History Project; Cambridge Historical Society**



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Oral History Interview with Quinton Zondervan

Caribbean Heritage in Cambridge Oral History Project

Interview conducted by Lina Raciukaitis on June 22, 2018

at Workbar, Cambridge, MA

Lina Raciukaitis: My name is Lina Raciukaitis and this is an oral history recorded as part of the Cambridge Historical Society Caribbean Oral History Project. Today is Friday, June 22nd, 2018. It is 10 AM and I am at the Workbar in Cambridge, Massachusetts with Quinton Zondervan. Quinton, do you consent to being recorded for this interview?

Quinton Zondervan: Yes, I do.

LR: So I'm going to start with some questions about your early life history. First, what is your full name?

QZ: Quinton Ives Zondervan

LR: And where were you born?

QZ: I was born in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

LR: What year were you born?

QZ: 1970.

LR: And where did you grow up?

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QZ: I grew up in Suriname, in South America, which was a Dutch colony at the time. So I was born in 1970, my parents were students in the Netherlands, and then they moved back to Suriname in 1973 when I was two years old, and I spent the rest of my childhood there until I was fifteen and came to the United States.

LR: What was your neighborhood like growing up, in Suriname?

QZ: It was very nice. The street we lived on was actually a dirt road but it was very well maintained and we would drive on it all the time. Most of the houses had pretty large yards and lots of trees, and fruit trees, and plants. My dad was always planting stuff and we had lots of animals, dogs, cats, rabbits, goats, birds (laughs). So it was very rich and colorful and alive.

LR: Did you help out with any of the caring for the animals and the plans?

QZ: I had no choice, yes (laughter). But I learned a lot about how to care for animals and plants and how to grow things. We had a lot of other kids in the neighborhood and so we would play together and hang out and learn from each other and teach each other things, and we would play soccer in the street, that was our favorite game, was soccer, and if we didn't have a soccer ball we would use a tennis ball. Just anything would do. And we would ride bikes a lot, just roam around town and explore and discover.

LR: Was it close to a sort of hub of activity like a town center, or was your neighborhood sort of further away?

QZ: I was – I grew up in a, kind of a suburb of the capital city. So you could think of it kind of like Cambridge in relation to Boston almost. And the city center was, it was about a twenty minute bus ride. We would often walk actually, it would take us about forty minutes to an hour to the city center. My – both of my parents worked in the center of the city and so sometimes during the summer when we were out of school we would just walk to visit with them at their office and then roam around and enjoy the city center.

LR: And what were your parents' names?

QZ: My father's name is Roy Zondervan, and my mother's name was Joyce Zondervan. Her original maiden name was Kappel. She passed away in 1997.

LR: And what did they do for work in the city center?

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QZ: So, my dad has probably had the most different careers of anybody I've ever met in my life. But when I was visiting him he was kind of a store manager for this large department store in the city, and my mom worked for my grandfather who ran an insurance agency and so she was the office manager for one of his insurance agencies.

LR: Did you visit the department store that your dad worked at a lot?

QZ: Yeah, we loved it. Because they would sell everything from refrigerators to cars to motorcycles, his company was the official dealership for Mazda and Suzuki and so of course as a young boy I was fascinated with the Suzuki motorcycles that were in the showroom. And we particularly appreciated the fact that they had air conditioning at their offices (laughs) and so after a long walk in the tropical sun, we would duck in there and cool off.

LR: And were your parents both from Suriname?

QZ: Yes, my mom was born in Curaçao, which is another Dutch colony, it's still part of the Netherlands. It's a small island off the coast of Venezuela. But my grandfather was working there at the time, but he moved back to Suriname and so she grew up there. And my dad's family as well we trace back most of my European ancestry to my great-great-great-great- grandparents or even their parents. We do have slave ancestry in the family and then also Native South American ancestry as well.

LR: Did your family always sort of know about the ancestry or was – was there sort of a moment when your family decided to look into sort of the past?

QZ: Yeah, it was always there in the stories that we were told. One of my grandmothers is Jewish and so we always knew about that and there's always one or two family members who are more fastidiously tracking the lineage and so I would often meet with them, especially when I was – when I became an adult and I was really interested in where are we from, who are we. There's a lot of diversity in my family, we all look very different (laughs), and so it's always fascinating to me to piece that together and figure out where these different lineages came from and how they all mix together to produce me and my brother and sisters.

LR: So you had siblings?

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QZ: Yeah I have a younger brother and two younger sisters.

LR: Was your family, sort of more extended family, living in Suriname in that same area that you were?

QZ: Both of my grandparents lived out – so both sets of grandparents – lived outside of the city. My mother's parents lived about an hour away down then, well, up the river. So Paramaribo, the capital city, is on the Suriname River and they lived a little bit further up river. My grandfather was very wealthy and so he had bought a lot of property on the river and built a very nice house and we loved to visit there. He had a very large property so we could just run around and explore and play and we would meet all of our cousins there. My mother's sister, one of her sisters and her younger brother, both lived in Suriname as well and so they would often join us there and we would all hang out together as a family and even beyond them, further removed cousins. And then my father's parents lived even further away in a different district which is like a different county and he was the county commissioner there for many years and so he had settled down there. And he had quite a large property as well. He grew a lot of fruit trees, papayas, and citrus, and we used to love visiting there and similar - my dad's siblings and their children would come and we would all hang around there. So we were often going to one of the grandparents homes for the weekend to congregate.

LR: And what were the family gatherings like when everyone sort of got together?

QZ: So on my mom's side they would play this Chinese game called Mahjong, with the bricks. And as kids we were just fascinated by this game and our parents would get really into it and sometimes they would bet a little money and it would get quite passionate (laughs). And I always remember the sound because they would mix the bricks in between rounds and the sound of the bricks clacking together. There would be drinking and eating but it was almost always very festive and fun. And as kids we were – we had a lot of freedom to just run around the property and explore and we would play in the dirt, or we'd catch little animals, or play house and pretend we were running households. And the food of course was amazing because among the family members there was always one or two amazing cooks who would prepare the meals, and sometimes we would – my grandparents would make coconut ice cream in one of those old machines where you put the ice blocks and the salt and then it would just sit there and grind for an hour and we would just be waiting with our cups for the ice cream to be ready. There was always amazing amounts of fresh fruit that we would just pick off the trees and peel and eat on the spot, lots of cold drinks with ice and lots of sugar to keep you going. But it was always fun and as kids, especially as we got older, we would try to listen into the adult conversations and learn more about

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how our parents and their cohort lived and what their life was all about, because we were, as kids, always anticipating becoming adults ourselves and figuring that out.

LR: Was there anyone who had a big influence on you growing up?

QZ: There are quite a few. My – on my mom's side, she has one sister who moved to the Netherlands but her other sister Rita was always the life of the party, she was very outgoing, very funny. She would be in plays and she was just very warm and fun. And so I really looked up to her and still will keep in very good contact with her. And then her younger brother, he was fifteen years younger than my mother so he was almost fifteen years older than me so he was kind of in between as a generation, and so I really looked up to him and learned a lot from him. He would make remote control boats out of wood and I was just fascinated by that and always wanted to do it with him and learn how to do it and later on as a teenager when we moved to the United States, we actually, I actually lived with him for a while because he was studying at the University of South Florida which is how my family decided to go to St. Petersburg, Florida, because he was there. And so I learned from him how to make these radio controlled boats and he was a rally car driver and so we just thought he was amazing and always wanted to learn from him what he was doing.

LR: And where did you go to school growing up?

QZ: So I went to public elementary school, well I went to a private elementary school for one year and that was actually the property adjoined to our backyard, but the principal of that school was quite the personality and she didn't get along with my dad very well so after one year he decided this wasn't working out so he sent me to the public school. And then we have a kind of middle school that's seven, eight, and ninth grade I think. And then we have a high school which goes past what is the high school in the U.S. So I was in that middle school and then after the third year of that middle school, I think it was a four year middle school, yeah it was seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth equivalent. And after the, well the equivalent of the ninth grade, I left and came to the U.S.

LR: Did you have a favorite subject?

QZ: Math. I was just fascinated by math, I was really good at it, and just really loved doing those math problems and figuring out, they were like little puzzles to me. I also loved art, I was really good at drawing and so I really enjoyed drawing a lot of the natural scenery I would see around me, the trees and the animals and the people. So I vividly remember those two subjects a lot.

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LR: Can you tell me a little bit about the transition moving to Florida.

QZ: Yeah. It was quite abrupt. We had a dictatorship that started when I was ten years old and it really impacted our country quite severely and my dad decided five years into that that he wanted to leave. But because I was doing really well in school he wanted my transition to be as smooth as possible, and so he sent me ahead before the rest of the family to come into the tenth grade in high school. And so I moved to live with my uncle, who was at USF at the time, and my grandfather had bought a yacht which was in the marina in St. Petersburg, and he didn't want to bring it to Suriname because he didn't want the dictator to mess with it, so my uncle was living on the yacht with his wife and his young baby daughter at the time. And so I got to live on this yacht which was amazing, but also very incongruous to my new friends in the high school because they didn't understand this, they're like, "Wait you're from this poor third world country but you're living on a yacht? How does this work? You must be drug dealers or something", so it was always interesting to try to explain to them that no, really we're from a third world country but we have cars, and we have houses, and we have boats and it was hard for people to imagine what that was like. I had learned to understand English very well because we had to take English as a language course from the sixth grade onward. I also when I was young had a nanny from Guyana which was next door and they speak English there as the official language. And then we had a lot of American television programming and there were no subtitles so I learned how to speak English from *JJ* and *Good Times* and *Three's Company* and all these American sitcoms that were very popular in Suriname. So I could understand it almost perfectly when I came here, but I didn't have a lot of practice speaking it, and so the local kids would make a lot of fun of my accent because I had a pretty heavy Dutch accent when I came. And so one of the few sounds that we don't have in the Dutch language is "the" the T-H. And so, we only have "tuh" or "duh" and so I didn't know how to make that sound and they made incessant fun of me for that so I would literally stand in front of the mirror and put my tongue between my teeth and go "the" "the" "the" until I could finally say it. But even now it's a little bit awkward for me, it doesn't come as natural as the other sounds because I learned it very deliberately later in my language development days. So, and then the other thing is that I was very smart and so the kids knew that and they could see that and so they always wanted to copy the answers from me and help them with their homework and they would make fun of me because I was a nerd but at the same time they always wanted to learn from me and get the answers so they could do well on their test. So I used that as a kind of currency to make friends and to get some protection. It was not a violent high school or anything, but it was – there were sometimes fights between kids and I remember one time, I'd made friends with some of the football players and would help them with their homework and one time a fight broke out and one of my friends was in the fight and so I was kind of, "Am I supposed to jump in here?" and all of a sudden one of the football players

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grabbed me from behind and literally just moved me out of the way, like “You’re not part of this, we need your brain intact!” So it was interesting to try to figure out those dynamics. The school was thirty percent Black students and as soon as I arrived, they would come to me and ask me, are you Black or are you White? And I didn’t even know how to answer that question. There were – it was divided, but it wasn’t necessarily in a bad way, it was just that there were two separate cultures and that they would interact, but you had to belong to one or the other and I never did, I was always part of both and that was always strange to people because they couldn’t quite figure it out. So if I was with the White kids then they’re like, “Oh so are you the Black guy hanging out with the White kids, or are you trying to be White,” and then if I’m with the Black kids, they’re like, “Ok so you’re Black but then why are you – ” So it was very confusing but in the end I made friends with lots of different people and I’m still friends with all of them today and I think as we became adults that sort of faded into the background, which is really great to see, and now we’re I think a very different society even now, thirty years later.

LR: When they asked you that, did it sort of catch you off guard and make you – did you ever come up with an answer to give?

QZ: I think later in life I would just say that I’m everybody and I would just explain to them my ethnic background which is very complicated and very rich and in Suriname we definitely had distinct ethnic groups, there’s about thirty percent of the population is very clearly African, direct descendants from slaves. We have about thirty percent of the population is from India because after they abolished slavery they brought in East Indian contract workers. And then we have small minority populations of European, Indonesian, Chinese, Lebanese, and still some surviving Native South American people as well. But then there’s also a small but prominent population of people like me who are just mixed. And so growing up, all of that was normal, and so we would never be surprised by somebody looking different from how we looked or from how other people looked that was all just normal, there’s just lots of different kinds of people and we all live together in one country. And so even though there would sometimes be some racial animosity or racial segregation in the sense that some of the political parties would be based on race, and things like that, so it wasn’t some magical kumbaya, but it was at the same time it was just part of the background and there wasn’t one dominant race. The European people were a small minority and then most of the contention if there was any was really between the Africans and the East Indians because they were sort of equal in size and so it was always a little bit of a competition between them. But it was never this sort of feeling that we were oppressed or that we were limited in where we could end up because of our race, for anyone, and the first president of the country was of mixed race background, right, and so my grandfather was a government official, my dad’s father, was the county commissioner. And so growing up

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I always had this sense that this is just normal, this is how we all are and I could grow up to be the president of the country, and it would just be normal. And so when I came here - and we had learned in school of our own history, and slavery, and European conquest, and being a Dutch colony. I was five years old when we became an independent country and so I still remember that moment when we became our own country, and so there was definitely that sense that we were oppressed by this faraway country but then once we were our own country, that was all gone in our minds, not in reality of course. And so, growing up I had a very different sense of what it meant to be a person of color than when I came here and it's like oh, now all of a sudden we're a minority and we are historically oppressed. And so of course I share some of that history, but at the same time I didn't grow up here, I didn't grow up under that level of oppression and so it was definitely challenging for me to reconcile that in my own mind and figure out how to be a true ally to people of color in the U.S. and at the same time to not pretend that I'm speaking for them or that I am them because I do come from a different background.

LR: Yeah, it must've been strange that transition and then people asking you like, identify! Like, identify with this group or this group. There wasn't any in between.

QZ: Yeah, it is very strange, and in my own family, my mother's very light skinned, we have a lot of German and Dutch and Scottish background, my dad's side we have the Dutch name, Zondervan, so there's - growing up my younger brother was born blond and blue-eyed and so to me it was, it wasn't this sort of absolute separation. It was very much just a gradual difference between different people, and I sort of had this intuitive sense of how that could be possible. And for people here it was much more of an anomaly. And so when my brother joined me at the high school, in my second year there, people couldn't believe that he was my actual brother, they would say like, "Wait, you have the same parents?" And we're like, "Yes, we have the same parents." It was just very unusual for them, whereas it was completely normal for me.

LR: And so your parents and the rest of your family, they came a year after?

QZ: No, it was about three months later.

LR: Oh, Ok.

QZ: And how was their transition when they moved?

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LR: Well it was very challenging for them. My dad had gotten me a Student Visa which is why I was able to come ahead of time but he came on a work visa which, the job opportunity that was attached to that fell away immediately, and so all of a sudden he was here illegally with the family. And then he applied for asylum but it took eight years to resolve that in court and watching what's going on in Washington today, we wouldn't have been allowed to stay here if that – if we had come under the same circumstances today that we did thirty-some years ago. So, during those eight years, for most of that time, he was not allowed to work and we still had to feed our family somehow and so he started a landscaping business and my mom was – would clean people's houses or churches and so I watched my parents from, going from a relatively prosperous middle class lifestyle in Suriname where they were managers, to just struggling to get by. And of course we were expected to help out and so my brother and I would work in my dad's landscaping company and were mowing the lawn - ironically, we got this contract to mow the Coast Guard base in St. Petersburg, so here we are, immigrants who are still trying to get our situation resolved but we're mowing the lawn for the Coast Guard. And we were adopted by the local Lutheran church and they - my parents were Dutch Reformed and so they looked for the closest thing, which was the Lutheran church - and they were just wonderful people who really supported our family and helped us out a lot. And finally in 1993, we went to court in Miami, and the Dutch - I mean the judge, gave us all the - well, gave my family all a Green Card. I had already gotten a Green Card through the lottery system and that was a fun story too because 1993 I was already here studying at MIT and so I went back to Miami for the court hearing as a witness and testified on behalf of my family and then I came back and two weeks later I got a letter from the INS it was called at the time, Immigration and Naturalization Services, that I would be deported because I had failed to show up at my trial because I was listed as a defendant because I was a minor when my dad came, and they just didn't cross reference that I already had legal status. So I contacted our lawyer in Miami and she took care of it, but it was an interesting lesson for me in how our government works or sometimes doesn't.

LR: When did you start MIT?

QZ: 1992. So I went through high school in St. Petersburg and then my dream during those three years as I became aware of the university system was to study at MIT because I was really into programming computers and I was - we didn't have the internet at the time, my kids don't understand how that's possible - and so I was just so hungry for knowledge, I would order these encyclopedias and they would send a new one every month and it was all about science and how stars work and how the universe works and I was just fascinated by all the science and technology and I knew that MIT was the place to study that stuff and so that's where I wanted to be. And when it came time to apply for college, my family was still struggling with their immigration status and so

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we just didn't have the money and I couldn't apply for federal financial aid in 1988 because I was still on a Student Visa. And the local college, Eckerd College, this small liberal arts college in St. Petersburg, offered me a full tuition scholarship based on my academic performance in high school. So that was my only option so I was like, "Sure, I'll go there," and so I ended up just absolutely loving it, it was just a fabulous experience and it's so funny because the scholarship paid for five courses every semester but you, generally speaking, only needed four to graduate. And so I would take five courses every semester and all the fellow students were like, "Why are you doing that! You could just take four courses and you'd be fine!" And I was like, "But it's paid for! I can learn more stuff!" So when it came time to apply for graduate school, and it was clear to me that I was going to go on and get a PhD and become a professor somewhere, and so I applied to MIT and was admitted. So that's what brought me to Cambridge.

LR: What was it like moving to Cambridge?

QZ: It was very disorienting. It was the first time that I was really moving away from my family. Of course coming to the U.S. I was separated from them for a little bit but I was with my uncle. And then because the college was so near our house I lived at home the whole time and would just commute to the college. And so this was the first time that I was really living on my own, I had two roommates, one of them was a college classmate from Eckerd College and so I did have that connection but other than that it was very isolating, and just the way people live here is very different from the South and from the Tropics where I grew up. Even in Florida it's much more outdoors, it's warm most of the year and so people are out and about and so you say hi to your neighbors and they're out mowing the lawn or doing something and so there's a lot more opportunity to connect with people. But here, we're all boxed in and for most, for half the year we're like, I'm not coming outside (laughs). And so I just was not used to that and it really affected me. And the winter as well, I wasn't used to that, the cold and less sunlight and so that really starting affecting my mood and my ability to function, and so I really had to find the solution. I remember looking at a map of Boston - we had printed maps, I actually bought a printed map - and I was just looking for a green space and I saw this big green area on the map and said, "I'm gonna go there." And I figured out, turned out that was the Arnold Arboretum. And I figured out I could get there by train so I took the subway and just spent the entire day just walking around among the trees because I just needed to be in a more natural environment. The other thing that I did was I figured out how to snowboard. I can't ski because I have an issue with my hip but I was able to snowboard and so I learned how to do that so I would have something fun to look forward to in the winter and that really helped me through. And then I made some new friends at MIT and that really helped as well. And then a year later I ended up meeting my future wife and that made it all good (laughs).

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LR: What were the people like when you first got here? Your fellow students or professors.

QZ: At MIT?

LR: Yeah.

QZ: To me they were very intimidating. It was the first time in my life that I didn't feel like I was the smartest person in the room (laughs). So that was intimidating and then most of us who are attracted to MIT are not the social butterfly type, and so that makes it really hard to socialize with your fellow students - because when I left MIT I ended up joining Lotus Software which is here in Cambridge, and I remember the first day I came home from work and my wife said, "You're so much happier, like what's going on?" And I said - and I didn't realize it until she said it - I said, "Just this morning waiting for the elevator, somebody else came up and they're like 'Oh, how you doing, oh it's a nice day' and we just chatted for ten seconds," but that would never happen at MIT - if you're waiting for the elevator you're trying to stand as far apart as from each other as possible and not say anything to each other. So I did find it challenging to sort of break into that culture and also because I didn't grow up here and I didn't fully feel like I was part of that and so it took me some time to get oriented and get connected. I mean, I met amazing wonderful people who are still lifelong friends so, there's nothing - I'm not saying anything bad about them, it's just it was harder to connect with fellow students I think than perhaps at other places just because of the concentration of severe introverts is just higher. But of course we would bond around science and technology and so that would be our ice breaker, that's how we would get into conversations and get to know each other.

LR: What was your major?

QZ: It was computer science, so that's in the electrical engineering department but I was focused on programming computers, programming languages, databases, and so very much the software, which was still very much kind of a new field at the time. MIT's a very old and esteemed institution and it started in civil engineering, and so computer science was still this sort of weird new thing that people didn't fully understand what that even was all about. But even within that field we had subfields of computer theory and computer systems and artificial intelligence, and so there was a lot of different topics that people were studying and so it was always interesting to exchange ideas and thoughts with them and it was intellectually very enriching.

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LR: And what did you do around Cambridge?

QZ: So, I lived in Somerville for two years near Porter Square, so that was almost in Cambridge. And then in Arlington for one year, and then after I got married I lived with my wife at East Gate in Kendall Square for four years. So we would enjoy going out to different restaurants, certainly enjoyed the river and some of the parks along the river, but we spent a lot of time studying (laughs) so, we didn't spend a lot of time out and about in Cambridge until later.

LR: After you finished the degree?

QZ: After I graduated, yeah.

LR: And you said you - did you start Lotus right after you finished school?

QZ: Yeah I ended up getting a Masters in 1995 and then continuing towards the PhD for another year because we have a Masters requirement so you have to do a masters before you get a PhD but after that additional year, I became disillusioned with the process and I think part of it - part of my challenge was that I didn't go to an engineering undergraduate college because again, because of my circumstances I ended up where I ended up and I love my liberal arts degree and I learned a lot of computer science and math at Eckerd, but compared to my peers who went to engineering colleges, I was definitely at a disadvantage in terms of some of the background knowledge. So that became clear as I was trying to advance, that I would have to do a lot of make-up work and as it was, I saw a lot of my peers easily spend a decade of their lives getting a PhD at MIT and some of that was because of how challenging the program is but some of it too is because they loved it, it's like, they were happy spending ten years of their life just being at MIT getting a degree. But I was getting restless and really wanted to be out in the world and doing other things. And so I took this summer job at Lotus through a colleague at MIT who had gotten his PhD and was working there in the research division and so he said, "Oh, you know, come do a summer internship with us," and I just loved it, and so I decided to stay there for a while and that while became forever. So I never went back to get the PhD but I loved working in the industry and then also started working in Cambridge in the non-profit realm. The sort of parallel track for me was that when I was at Eckerd I met a fellow student who became my best friend in life and he actually lives here now in Belmont, we still spend a lot of time together. But he was a biochemistry student and so he explained to me global warming and climate change and the environmental devastation that we're perpetrating on the world and as a freshman it just blew my mind and having come from the tropics where life is just abundant, I just couldn't imagine losing

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that and so I became really active on campus organizing the student body to take action. We created the student environmental organization, we started the campus recycling program, and I'm proud to say that both of those programs still exist today at Eckerd College. But that part of me was also there when I came to MIT and I had to put it aside for a while because the program was too intense, but once I stepped out of that, I went right back to it and in 2008 I signed up to join the Climate Protection Action Committee which advises the City of Cambridge government on climate change policy and that was kind of my foray back into environmental activism, and from there I ended up rescuing a non-profit that's called Green Cambridge and rebuilt that and then co-founded another non-profit called the Climate Action Business Association. So those have always been two parallel careers, one was in software and technology and helped pay the bills and then the other one was in environmental activism to try to prevent the world from being destroyed (laughs).

LR: It's important work.

QZ: Yeah.

LR: What are some of the things that you worked on in those nonprofits?

QZ: So in Green Cambridge when I joined they were going out of business and so I reconstituted the Board and we looked at what is - what are some programs that we can create to really connect with our community, and as it happened I had just bought rain barrels through the City of Cambridge because we have a discount program and my dad was a handyman type of guy and so when I was growing up, he always made me help him with stuff and so I learned how to use the tools and got pretty handy with it myself, so I bought four rain barrels and installed one on each corner of the house but as I did that I realized, this is not a trivial thing to do. I'm comfortable doing it because I've done some similar things before but there might be a lot of homeowners who buy the rain barrels with all the intentions of installing it, but you have to cut your downspout and divert the water to the rain barrel and that's not an easy thing to do so I decided to offer to the City that I would volunteer to help people install their rain barrels if they - if the City could put a notice with the rain barrels so that people could contact me to do that through Green Cambridge. And that program grew to about fifty installations today that we do every year. And we have volunteers and I train them how to do it and we go around the whole city and help people install their rain barrels and it's turned out to be a great way for us to connect with people and help them with their own efforts to be more sustainable and also connect them with the organization and the other work we do. The other thing I started was a solar discount program. It was started by my friend Jocelyn Tager in Watertown, and when I met her after the first year that she ran the program there I said, "Oh, we gotta

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have this in Cambridge” and so we brought it to Cambridge, it’s called Neighborhood Solar and last year we did it in five communities: Watertown, Cambridge, Somerville, Belmont, and Arlington. So that’s been a very successful program. And then last year we hired our first Executive Director, Steven Nutter and I had installed a rain barrel for my friends Heather and Mark in East Cambridge the year before and noticed that they had a large backyard that was covered in weeds and so I asked them, “What do you exactly plan to water with this rain barrel because you’re growing a lot of weeds back here.” And they said they actually had had a tenant farmer and that had ended and they were looking for somebody to grow food on their property because they thought that was a really great opportunity so, I agreed but I couldn’t find anybody who would do that and then when I hired Steven and told him about it, his eyes just lit up and the next thing you know, we created an entire farm back there. It’s called the Hurley Street Neighborhood Farm and this is our second year and it’s just been fantastic. And it’s a communal farm and so we don’t have assigned plots, everybody just comes and works on it and then people take home the harvest and we start harvesting spinach in March, this winter we built a greenhouse, we have a rainwater collection system that collects a thousand gallons of water off the roof and it’s just been fabulous. We organize student educational events there, we just created a new program with Julie Croston called the Wildlife Puppetry Project that she’s been running in Cambridge for many years that’s now part of Green Cambridge and she does drawings with children and families and just uses that space as a way to connect them with nature, so it’s just been a fabulous experience to be able to help make that happen.

LR: Do you feel like that work helped you get to know Cambridge more?

QZ: Absolutely. Absolutely, I still meet people on the street who say, “Oh yeah, you installed the rain barrel!” So it was a great way to get to know people and understand both the appetite for sustainability and the challenges that people face. It is hard, it’s not easy being green, as Kermit says, and it’s true, and in the City it is challenging because there’s just all these structural ways in which we’re not sustainable and it’s not easy for individual homeowners to somehow fix that. So, to be able to create specific programs for them like the rain barrel program and the solar program or the farm is really rewarding because it creates opportunities for people to really engage with sustainability in their city.

LR: And like you said, you see people’s willingness to want to participate in these programs which is great.

QZ: Absolutely, I mean most people we talk to want to do more but again it’s challenging for them to integrate that into their lives often. And then we use that energy to do advocacy too, right? And so as people bring issues to us and as we have those conversations we begin to understand where some of the pain points are and where

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we can begin to influence some of the policies. And so before I ran for office, I worked on many different policy areas including net zero where we convinced the city to have a program where we're going to take our building emissions to zero over the next twenty-five years and that was a very ambitious goal for us to set and initially we were told, "Oh no, that's impossible that's way too hard," but through advocacy and conversation and amazing work by our staff and the consultants that they brought in, we were in fact able to put together a plan that we're now executing that's going to significantly reduce our emissions towards zero. We also did a lot of advocacy around trees and formed the new citizen's advocacy group around that, which now as recently as last week they organized a rally where we brought people together to advocate for tree canopy. During the drought years, 2016, 2017 we saw a lot of tree deaths and a lot of people stepped up and carried buckets of water to the tree wells to try to keep the trees alive so, there's a lot of energy in our city with people wanting to help out and I see my job as trying to harness that and guide it in the most successful ways that I can.

LR: I've noticed signs for trees around the city, like signs placed at trees or to adopt a tree.

QZ: Right exactly yeah, the City's creating these different programs and I - before I was elected - did a lot of work in partnership with the City and now of course I represent the City and we do amazing work, but it's of course never enough and so we're always trying to do more, and part of the challenge too is to help people understand what we are doing and then to advocate for the things that we're not yet doing so that we can add those to our program and it's always a challenging conversation. Even this morning I was at the groundbreaking for the new kayak boat lounge at Magazine Beach and it's a fabulous project that we're doing upgrading Magazine Beach, and yesterday I put in a policy that was saying "Hey, could you fix the bike path in front," and so I feel like I'm always - and I think it's part of me too because I'm an engineer - I'm always looking for what's the problem that needs to be fixed. And there is that danger that you sort of overlook all the good things that are happening and so that's part of what I also need to do is communicate to people: look we are doing a lot of great stuff, and yes there's still some areas where we need to do better, and just carrying that conversation forward.

LR: And shout out to the compost program - I think that's really great. I actually live in Somerville so I - but I am so close to Cambridge - so I see the bins all around and I'm a little jealous.

QZ: Right, you'll get it soon I'm sure! (laughter)

LR: Yeah I think it's really great that that's happening in Cambridge. Yeah, could you tell me a little bit about how you decided to run for City Council?

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QZ: Yeah, so as I said I'd been very active in the community for a long time and through that work interacted a lot with City staff, with City counselors, the net zero activism I did with Mike Connolly who went on to become our state rep - and as I said, my grandfather was in government service when I was a child and so it all felt very natural to me that maybe I should end up in government, but my wife is faculty at Harvard and she has a very busy career as well so - and we're raising two children in Cambridge, and so we made this agreement very early on that I wouldn't run for office until the kids were in college and that we had very carefully scheduled arrangements for making sure that one of us was with the children every evening, and that we wouldn't keep them out of time with us. And then in 2016 Trump got elected (laughs). And my wife had a chat with our daughter who's eighteen years old, she just graduated from high school a couple weeks ago, and they decided that it was time (laughs). So that was sort of the final barrier removed, and so that opened the gate. And then it was an unusual election year too because three city councilors announced that they would not seek re-election including Nadeem Mazen who had become a good friend of mine. And so that was kind of golden opportunity, that doesn't happen very often and the incumbents usually get re-elected, so when that opportunity appears then it was a good moment to try.

LR: How long is the campaigning process?

QZ: For me it was almost a year. I worked very closely with Nadeem and followed a lot of his advice which was to canvas early and often. And so I started meeting with voters in March and just tried to talk to as many people as possible and meet as many people as possible. I had pretty good name recognition because of my work but there's still that vast majority of people that never heard of me so it's really important to just get to know people and get your name out there. And then as we came closer to the election itself of course it became more and more intense and transitioned into the more traditional door knocking and fundraising activities. But I would just work it into my schedule and I was fortunate that I didn't have another job other than my non-profit volunteering at that time so I was able to really invest in it.

LR: And could you talk a little bit about some of your issues that you ran on?

QZ: Absolutely. So I definitely ran on sustainability, that was to be expected. But I also ran on sustainable transportation and particularly bicycle safety and expansion of bicycle infrastructure in our City, and then social justice. And I've always had that sense of injustice, even growing up in Suriname and my family was quite well off but there was a lot of poverty and I could see that and understand that there was a structural unfairness

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there that perpetuated that poverty. And then the dictatorship was interesting too because there was the revolution and we were going to lift up the poor people and in the end the dictator ended up enriching himself as they almost always do. But there was an element of truth in what he said and did to try to lift up the poor and he ultimately got elected president of Suriname so that was always with me that we are not being fair and that I was lucky and able to do well but there's a lot of people who get left behind. And of course in Cambridge, it's really stark and again as with sustainability we provide tremendous services to people and our education system in Cambridge doesn't get the credit it deserves because we have a lot of students who come from challenging backgrounds and they get a world class education. And yet, we still have a lot of inequality in our city and have to do a lot more to rectify that. So I definitely ran on that issue and it really came to a head around housing because as you probably are aware, our housing costs just keep going up and up and up and that displaces people and it disproportionately displaces people of color in Cambridge in particular. So finding a way to counteract that, and in particular it was challenging because the dominant narrative is: well we're building lots of affordable housing, we have the most progressive affordable housing production policies in the state. And that is true. But it doesn't, unfortunately, really address the underlying issue of displacement and inequality enough. And because of the way it's financed and structured in my opinion it makes the problem worse at the same time because if we're building a building with one hundred units and twenty of those units are affordable, and so you're artificially depressing the amount of rent that can be collected for those units, then undoubtedly we're artificially inflating the remaining eighty to make up the difference. And so in some ways yes, we're doing good by providing these affordable units but at the same time we're driving up the rents even faster in my assessment. So it was and still is very challenging to have that conversation because that narrative is so dominant and the tendency is very strong to say, "Well we're doing great stuff so what are you complaining about?" And it's like well, we're not solving the problem yet. So, I mean I've only been in office six months but already I've put forward some policy ideas and initiatives to try and address the housing inequality and inequality in general in our City.

LR: What do you see as a possible solution for the housing?

QZ: Well there's no simple one size fits all solution but I think one area that's undervalued is that we have a lot of existing affordable housing that's informal. We have a lot of particularly small property landlords that provide housing at rates that are below what they could be charging, and yet that's not really recognized and that's not financially rewarded, and that's a lost opportunity. There's also an opportunity by creating some incentives for that kind of activity to enhance it and to have even more people provide housing without paying a financial penalty for doing that. So I'm really trying to explore that space and figure out what are some structural

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incentives that we can create so that people who own a house and want to rent it out can benefit from renting it out to lower income families. So that's one part of the puzzle. Another part is jobs and job opportunities. We have a tremendously dynamic economy in Cambridge and we have world class companies that want to have their headquarters here but those jobs are primarily not for people in our neighborhoods. And so we have to address that somehow and create more pathways for people to join that economy and to benefit from it and to grow with it. And that's challenging, I'm a software entrepreneur myself and so I know how beneficial that path can be but it's not available to everybody. Not everybody is interested or talented in that particular way to take full advantage of it and so we have to come up with lots of different ways for people to participate in the economy and to be successful. There's this man who lives down the street from my house coincidentally but I first met him when I joined Lotus and he works in the mail room. And to this day, twenty years later I see him walking by my house carrying his lunch box going to the mailroom and he lives with his family down the street and it's a good job, it has good benefits and he's happy and we just want to have lots of different jobs like that that people can take advantage of. And unfortunately our economy is moving in the exact opposite direction, it's trying to eliminate as many jobs as possible to automate, to outsource, to subcontract, and so we have to find effective strategies to counteract that, to create more local co-ops and local companies and support local businesses that are more invested in our community and when businesses do come into our community to extract real commitments from them to provide employment opportunities and to provide a living wage. Those are now becoming standard parts of my vocabulary whenever a business or developer wants to create a business here or commercial building those are two of my first questions, well I have three: What are you doing about sustainability? How many jobs are you creating? And, can you guarantee a living wage? And so I don't pretend that we can just magically solve the problem but I think if we pay close attention to the underlying issues and we're really intentional about that then we can start to make headway, when what we really suffer from is not so benign neglect, that we celebrate the big success stories - and we should - but we sort of neglect the failures, and if we keep doing that we'll end up fundamentally changing what Cambridge is all about. And one of the reasons that I decided to settle here and what I love so much about Cambridge is that diversity. There are lots of different communities. There's the African American communities, the Caribbean communities, Hispanic communities, the old-time Irish and Italian and Portuguese immigrant communities, there's just this really rich diversity and culture here and that in a way reminds me of Suriname and how I grew up. And so I really want to see that continue and to do that we have to be really intentional about economic inequality and creating opportunities for people.

LR: Do you think your cultural background has shaped your politics?

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QZ: Without a doubt. It's hard to say exactly how sometimes but - and it's certainly not as simple as, everybody from Suriname is a progressive, or everybody from the Caribbean - it's just not that simple. We have conservatives too and everything in between, but I do feel like the way I grew up was very communal. We were a family and we were a community and a country that was really trying to come together despite our differences and despite ultimately a very challenging history - and that's true for every country on earth, and it's true for the United States, and so that community feeling I think is really important and we're actively eroding that in the U.S. because we're so rich that we can afford to do that. And again I'm not saying that it's wrong, I mean, I moved here and people move to new places and take advantage of new opportunities and it's all great but at the same time you do want to work hard on creating and preserving a sense of community and place and having a sense of belonging here, and that's hard work, and people with money can just swoop in and say, "Oh I own this apartment complex now and nobody can live here!" And that's not good if it becomes the predominant way in our city.

LR: And I was also thinking about the recent earthquake in Puerto Rico and if that affected your thoughts about climate and thinking about who is affected most by larger natural disasters.

QZ: Right, you mean the hurricane.

LR: Yeah, sorry.

QZ: Yeah, the volcanoes are on our minds (laughter). Yeah I mean I was in Paris in 2015 as an observer to the climate negotiations, and I was - I joined in with some of the protests by the LDCs? - you know, they have all these terms in the UN but these are the "least developed nations" and island nations, and our chant was "one point five to survive" and that means limiting warming to one point five degrees Celsius and we're already halfway there. And the initial goal of the negotiations was to limit it to two degrees Celsius and what these countries and us as advocates were saying is that's not good enough. Yes, the United States will survive but these island nations won't survive. Suriname won't survive if we allow that much warming, that much disruption to the climate. I was born below sea level, the Dutch for many years held back the water but even they can't stop what we are doing. So that awareness has always been with me and moving to Florida and experiencing hurricanes over there, again very hyper aware of how dangerous that is, and how disruptive it is. So, certainly Puerto Rico wasn't necessarily an "ah-ha" moment for me but it was certainly a very powerful and tragic reminder of what we're up against. In 1985 after I had just recently moved to St. Petersburg, I remember reading the *St. Petersburg Times* and they had this two page spread on what would happen if a hurricane hit

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New Orleans. And they predicted lots of mayhem and disaster, and they said the city's just not ready, and so much of it is below sea level, and the levees and this and that. And twenty years later, we have Hurricane Katrina. So, that's the real tragedy of climate change - is that we know what's going to happen and we know what we have to do to prevent it and to avoid it and to protect ourselves against it, and we're just not doing it. It's again this sort of not so benign neglect, and there are really powerful interests that are actively resisting the changes that we need. So it's both a matter of waking people up and jarring them out of that complacency, and building real political power because we have to ultimately counteract these other forces that are saying, "Yeah, we're okay with you all drowning." And that's really tough, and they have a lot of money and a lot of power and we have to build power to resist them.

LR: Have you noticed that same feeling in Cambridge? A little bit through your environmental work in Cambridge sort of locally?

QZ: Absolutely. There's this perpetual challenge in that work where the people who are going to be most affected are not part of the conversation. And one of the things that we were able to do with all of our programs is to find ways to extend them to those communities. So with the rain barrel program it's a discount program to buy the rain barrel through the City, but you're still paying eighty dollars for a rain barrel. There's lots of families that can't afford that. And so one of the things that we did was we figured out how to make our own rain barrels. And so we get the barrels donated and we raise money to buy some of the parts and then we have a volunteer workshop to actually convert the barrels into rain barrels. With the solar program, it's fifteen to twenty thousand dollars to buy a solar array for your house. Again, lots of people can't afford to do that. So I was able to create a community solar program where we get investors to put solar on a building and then we can sell some of that power to people in the community at a discount. So they're getting renewable energy and a discount on their electricity bill. And with the farm, we're able to invite people from all different backgrounds to join us and to participate and nobody has to pay an entry fee at the door. And so, those are all really important ways to include people in that conversation and in that activity because in the communities that are the most marginalized, they're already feeling isolated and so then if we come in with environmentalism that says we're going to sell solar panels and sell electric cars, and sell rain barrels, that's like - that doesn't feel like it's for them either. And so we have to be again really intentional in our language and in our programming to make sure that we're including everybody, and that's - it's really hard work and it doesn't come natural to people, because - even for me - because I, again I'm an engineer and I look at the whole system and I say, "Oh, we got to get a hundred percent of our power from renewable energy so we got to get rid of all these coal fired power plants and put solar panels and wind turbines everywhere." But that conversation's happening over here and then

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meanwhile the people who are affected by all this, they're not even sometimes aware of what's being talked about and how it might impact them. So I try really hard to be intentional about that - to make sure that we're always bringing people into the conversation, and that we're doing it in a way that's accessible to them. When I first joined Green Cambridge we had a monthly meeting, and everybody's invited but most people can't come. And as we expanded our programming, people said, "We should have more meetings, meetings about trees, and meetings about energy and meetings about this - " I said that's all fine, that's all great, we do need to have those meetings but we need to define participation beyond coming to our meeting. We need to create volunteer opportunities where you can join us in our activities, we need to create the farm and invite people to that, so they're not going to a meeting, they're going to a farm. And they're being asked to work, but they're also getting food in return. So just trying to find different ways that people can participate and that they can, through those connections because ultimately it's all about those relationships, they can inform our work and make it more authentic and more connected to what their needs are, so that ultimately we can best protect them and everybody.

LR: And in your shift to local politics, did you find anything unexpected?

QZ: (laughs) There's new challenges that - they're not necessarily unexpected, but they're still new to me in that I didn't have to deal with them before, or quite in that way. One of the biggest challenges that I've encountered so far is that I need to represent a much larger group of people now, and even with a small non-profit, there can be lots of disagreements, and you still have to hold together the group and move forward in some kind of unison. But when you're representing thousands of citizens, people can have very opposed opinions, and so, "Yes, we should do this," "No, we absolutely should never do it" and you know, "If you vote yes, I'll never vote for you again," "If you vote no, I'll never vote for you again," it's like [*exasperated noise*]! So I think that's probably the biggest challenge so far that I've had to deal with - to figure out how to carry that conversation and say I am listening to both sides and I understand many of the things that both sides are contributing to the conversation. Ultimately we have to move forward this way or that way, and I can't make everybody happy but I still have to represent everybody, and so carrying that is new to me.

LR: And have you noticed Cambridge change since you first started living here?

QZ: Well it's - the demographics are definitely changing. We are adding a lot of wealthy, mostly white, residents, and we are losing a lot of poorer residents and a lot of people of color and African American community members. And those trends are only intensifying. You know, part of what's happened I think just over the last

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twenty years is that globally we've really opened up our financial systems. And so even as a kid I remember having Swiss bank accounts was this legendary thing, and now the money just flows all over the globe. And so what happens is that people from all over the world are buying property here, they're land banking, they're buying property as an investment to sell it again a few years later at a profit. And that's not conducive to our community, right? And people who want to settle here and buy a home here and raise a family here - we can't compete with that kind of money. And so that's the sort of downside of globalization, is that all of a sudden, there's this market of seven billion people and any of them can decide tomorrow that they want to own a condo in Cambridge and they don't care how much it costs. So, I think that dynamic is really fundamental, and it's not unique to Cambridge obviously, by any means, we're seeing that in all of our major cities in the U.S. And so, how to respond to that and how to deal with that is very challenging, and there is a contingent in our City that says, "Well, obviously since lots of people want to live here we should build lots of houses for them," and there is a logic to that but at the same time there's no recognition that that demand is infinite. And so, you can build as many houses as you want, and we have built a lot of housing in Cambridge, and people don't always recognize that, but it doesn't counteract this demographic shift, because that new housing is primarily expensive luxury housing that gets bought by newcomers with lots of money, and the existing properties also go up in value, and so that drives out a lot of the longer term residents who've been here a long time who just can't keep up financially with those pressures. And so ultimately it becomes, "A rising tide sinks all the boats," is the alternative saying, and that's what we're experiencing. So I think that probably, along with the physical actually rising tide of sea level, those are the two big challenges that we're facing.

LR: And ideally, where do you see Cambridge twenty years from now?

QZ: So, we are a world leader in many respects, and what I would like to see is for that to continue. Imagine if we come up with a successful formula for economic growth and development in our city that advantages everybody and that brings everybody along in that prosperity. That would be amazing, like unheard of, that's never happened in the history of the human race, right? And then if we're able to do that without further damaging the environment, right? So can we actually have a growing and thriving city and actively reduce our pollution to zero and reduce our waste to zero - and reduce our car use and have eighty percent of the road space be occupied by pedestrians and bikes instead of cars, and having a world class public transit system. And then last but not least, can we successfully protect ourselves against the changing climate because even if we're spectacularly successful in our efforts to reduce our emissions, we're still - we have built in enormous amounts of climate change. And so that sea level is going to rise, and the storms are going to intensify and so can we find ways to protect ourselves against that? Can we reverse our tree canopy loss and actually increase our tree

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canopy? Can we adapt to the flooding and live with it instead of being overrun by it? So it's that proverbial saying, that every crisis is also an opportunity. The crisis is there and we can't make it go away, it's going to happen - it is happening - but it's also an opportunity to solve some of these problems and then be an example for other cities and towns and countries to be able to also do the same thing. When we started advocating for net zero in Cambridge in 2013, a lot of people said, "Well so what if you do that in Cambridge, Cambridge's emissions are this tiny percentage of the world right? Or even the United States." And we acknowledge that and we said, "But if we can do it here, then other people can do it as well." And just five years later we have active movements in Lexington, in Concord, in Boston, to emulate what we did. And they're able to take a lot of the work that we did, the consultants that we paid for, all of those work products, all of those documents are public records that are available on our City website. And so these other towns and communities can literally download those documents and say, "Okay, well how do we do the same thing but adapt it to our community." And so they're able to directly leverage what we've done here. And I think we have similar opportunities in terms of economic inequality and climate resilience, and ongoing ecological restoration and recovery.

LR: And I'm also wondering how or if you've noticed the Caribbean community change in Cambridge.

QZ: I think they're like all cultures, struggling to keep their culture alive, to keep it present. I think every immigrant community wrestles with that because you want your kids to feel fully American and not feel like they're foreigners. But at the same time you want them to know their roots and their cultural heritage and to be able to enjoy it and celebrate it. And I think in Cambridge we have a very rich Caribbean cultural tradition but it's very diffuse and kind of in the background a lot, and when we bring it into the foreground, we struggle. The Cambridge Carnival is probably one of the more prominent cultural events that celebrates our heritage and every year there's some gun violence associated with that, and then people say, "Well, maybe we shouldn't even have this, it's too dangerous." And so there are these threats that could ultimately push it even further into the background and even hide it completely until it disappears. And so I think on the positive side I've seen more cohesion and more organizing of people of Caribbean heritage to bring their culture forward and to celebrate it and to share it with the rest of the community and I think ultimately that's what we have to do, is institutionalize it so that it's celebrated and shared and for generations to come people can learn about it and enjoy it. We have a very rich, and colorful, and celebratory, and positive culture in the Caribbean and I think it's very much needed in our time. I listen to a lot of reggae and I find it very inspiring and uplifting whenever I'm feeling down, and I listen to Bob Marley and it's just always hopeful and looking to the future and acknowledging the pain and the challenges but always saying, we will overcome, and I think that's an important message to share and keep alive.

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LR: And so we're slowly wrapping up. I was wondering if there's anything else that's been on your mind that we haven't addressed that you'd like to add.

QZ: I think just building a little bit more on the cultural diversity in the Caribbean, I think that's a real treasure as well, and somehow bringing that forward more, is really important. In Suriname, in the capital city Paramaribo, we have one block where we have a Jewish synagogue next to a Muslim mosque next to a Hindu temple next to a Catholic church. They're all four on corners of the square. And I don't know if it's unique but it's certainly unusual - and they're all friends, and they're all related. When I first took my wife to Suriname to visit - and she's from India - and India has had a long history of struggle between Muslims and Hindus as the two predominant religions there, and as we drive into the countryside, we would see these smaller Hindu temples next to a Muslim mosque, and she just was really surprised by that and I said, "Well, when the people came from India, they were majority Hindu but there were also some Muslims. And the moment they set foot in Suriname of course they had way more in common with each other than with anybody else there. And so they became one community with two religions and so logically they just built their temples and mosques right next to each other. And you see this all over the countryside because they came as contract workers to work on the plantations and so they became farmers and so they're predominantly living in the countryside now." So translating that message, that very hopeful message that we really can come together as people from all different parts of the world and form cohesive communities, and that in some ways we actually do that quite easily, it's quite natural for humans to do that. It's only when it's actively resisted that we fail. But if you bring people together and you say, "You know what, you don't have any choice - you'll figure how to live together or we go extinct," then we figure it out. So I think that's an important lesson in the Caribbean. I mean, the U.S. is also a melting pot but it's, I think, structurally very different because ultimately the European traditions ended up dominating here, and the other cultures are more marginalized, whereas throughout the Caribbean there's more equal mixes of different people and it's not always dominated by the European tradition. Sometimes it is, sometimes it's not, and again all of those countries with their different mixtures are all coming together as the Caribbean community and working together. So, I think that's a really nice example and model that we could really benefit from in the U.S. then, to look towards that and say it can be done, it is being done, we're already living it in the Caribbean and we can live it here too.

LR: Okay - well thank you so much for participating.

QZ: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

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