

**Interview Records of Nick Psarakis
Completed for the Black Lives Matter Oral History
Project**



**Nick Psarakis was interviewed By Eli Baastiansten
11/17-11/20/2023**

Website:

www.blmohp.sewanee.edu

Contact information:

blmohp@gmail.com

Prepared by Andrew Quinonez

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Abstract - Nick Psarakis

Narrator: Nick Psarakis

Interviewer: Eli Bastiaansen

Date: Part 1: 17 November 2023 and Part 2: 20 November 2023

Location: The narrator was located in Colorado Springs, Colorado while the interviewer was located in Sewanee, Tennessee. The interview took place over Microsoft Teams with the audio recorded using "Voice Memos."

Total Length: 111 Minutes; Part 1: 34 minutes Part 2: 77 minutes

Born in an old colonial town in New Milford, Connecticut, Nick Psarakis attended Colorado College for his undergraduate degree and the University of Colorado Boulder for a graduate degree in American History. Psarakis is currently in his 29th year of public school teaching in Academy District 20 in Colorado Springs, Colorado. One of Psarakis' first contacts with the Black Lives Matter movement came while teaching about Ferguson, Missouri, the city where Michael Brown was killed, in an AP Human Geography course. The city of Ferguson offered Psarakis the opportunity to teach as well as read more about the legacy of redlining and white flight in the evolving residential patterns in suburban America. Additionally, Psarkis spoke about the initial design for a Black History course as prompted by the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement and the death of John Lewis. In designing the curriculum for the course, Psarakis initially relied on John Hope Franklin's textbook, "From Slavery to Freedom" which led to later controversies with the Colorado Springs Board of Education who questioned the textbook and its potentially divisive language. Psarakis had initially planned to title the course, "The African-American Experience," but was forced to change the class name to "Black

History” due to push back from district administration. Additionally, throughout the interview, Psarakis emphasized the idea that history does not occur in a vacuum. In other words, as a teacher, Psarakis attempts to draw connections between time periods in order to highlight the fact that the modern political and social landscape has its origins in history. For example, he describes how Former President Trump’s use of the phrase “Law and Order” is a deliberate reference to Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew who began using this term in 1968 as a code word to white voters. Psarakis discusses how the Black Lives Matter movement encouraged him to further educate himself on Black history. Lastly, Psarakis includes personal narratives to help articulate how, despite initial district pushback over the Black History class and criticisms of Republican presidents in the late 20th century, politics has always been deeply embedded in education. Psarakis claims that it is his role as a teacher to educate his students and provide them with an understanding of history in which they can use to analyze current events; it is through the learning of history that individuals are able to hold on to and give meaning to the past. This interview is part of the Black Lives Matter Oral History Project (BLMOHR) to document reactions, opinions, and interpretations of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Field Notes – Nick Psarakis

Narrator: Nick Psarakis

Interviewer: Eli Bastiaansen

Date: 17 November 2023 and 20 November 2023

Location: The narrator was located in McLean, Virginia while the interviewer was located in Sewanee, Tennessee.

Narrator: Nick Psarakis, born in New Milford, Connecticut, moved to Colorado in 1988 to attend Colorado College. Psarakis is currently in his 29th year of public school teaching in Academy School District 20 in Colorado Springs, Colorado. In 2020, after the death of John Lewis, Psarakis started a Black History course which has evolved in recent years to address the African-American experience from the origins of slavery to the Black Power movement and the legacy of the Civil Rights movement in the modern day. Psarakis has family members who live in Oklahoma and have been tasked with reckoning with the Tulsa Race Riots of 1921.

Additionally, Martin Luther King Jr. presented the Baccalaureate speech to Psarakis' mother, a history teacher, who was also able to collect a signed version of John Lewis' memoir, "Walking with the Wind." The legacy of both John Lewis and Martin Luther King Jr. have influenced the curriculum of Psarakis' class on Black History.

Interviewer: Born and raised in Colorado Springs, Colorado, Eli Bastiaansen is a current student at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee planning on majoring in English and American Studies. Eli Bastiaansen has tutored in the Grundy County Jail in Altamont, Tennessee

and worked with students at Richard Hardy Memorial School and South Pittsburg High School as a member of the Bonner Leader Program.

Description of the Interview:

This interview was conducted over the phone with Eli Bastiaansen located in Sewanee, Tennessee and Nick Psarakis in Colorado Springs, Colorado. The first interview lasted about 34 minutes and the second interview lasted approximately 77 minutes. Psarakis discussed the curriculum of his Black History course, the Board of Education's reactions to the class and to Psarakis' desire to use John Hope Franklin's textbook, "From Slavery to Freedom" which is critical of Republican Presidents including Ronald Reagan. Additionally, Psarakis articulates the impact of the Black Lives Matter Movement on the course and his understanding of Black history. Lastly, Psarakis, recognizes the role of the pandemic on the Black Lives Matter movement as well as the need for student agitation and protests led by the youth in order for movements to survive and inspire positive change. Psarakis relied on personal narratives to express his opinions on the Black Lives Matter movement and the evolution of his class on Black history.

Notes:

The narrator took a small ten second break to close the door at around minute five.

The interview took place over Microsoft Teams with only the audio being recorded using the app "Voice Memos." A door can be heard between minutes 31 and 33, and the narrator's cat, "Teddy" interrupts the interview at minute 78 and 79. Microsoft Teams froze between minute 80

and minute 81 of the interview. The narrator appeared relaxed and spoke enthusiastically about the Black History Class, benefiting from the familiar environment of his office.

Key Terms:

Echo-Chambers: Echo chambers use social media and the news cycle to circulate and amplify preexisting beliefs within an insulated system independent from opposing opinions and perspectives, often leading to confirmation bias.

John Lewis: An American civil rights leader and politician, John Lewis was the chair of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and a 1965 march in Selma, Alabama that helped to catalyze the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

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Eli Bastiaansen ([00:00:01](#)):

This is Eli Bastiaansen from Sewanee, the University of the South. It is Friday the 17th of November, and the current time is 11:00 AM and I am with Nick Psarakis.

Nick Psarakis ([00:00:17](#)):

Okay. Yes. And that's me, Nick Psarakis. I'm a social studies teacher at Rampart High School in Colorado Springs, Colorado. And it's the same day, November 17th, 2023. It's 10:00 AM here though. A little different time.

Eli Bastiaansen ([00:00:33](#)):

Thank you so much Mr. Nick Psarakis for being here. And I guess just to start, if you could talk a little bit about where you are currently from or where you're from, and then where you live currently

Nick Psarakis ([00:00:47](#)):

I am a 53 year old male who was born in New Milford, Connecticut. I grew up in Northwestern Connecticut, an old colonial town. And I've lived in Colorado since 1988 when I started college and am in my 29th year of public school teaching in Academy School District 20 in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Eli Bastiaansen ([00:01:12](#)):

Thank you. And you said colonial community on the East coast. How does that differ from where you live now in Colorado?

Nick Psarakis ([00:01:24](#)):

So I grew up in a little town called Kent, Connecticut that was settled by kind of the second wave of Puritan settlers in Connecticut. So the initial wave of Puritans to Massachusetts. And then in the 1640s or fifties I believe there was Reverend Hooker and his gang came down into the Connecticut River Valley. And then in the early 1700s, communities of settlers were sent out into the western hills of Connecticut to settle in River Valleys, and most of them were named after little towns in England. So that's where the name Kent comes from. And so it was founded in 1741 and has about 3000 people today. That's about its height of population back when it was kind of a subsistence dairy farming community back in the 1800s; population probably shrunk down to about probably under 2000, maybe in the early 20th century because of people moving west.

([00:02:38](#)):

But it's still a little town with its own K through eight elementary school and a couple of private boarding schools both affiliated with the Episcopal church like the University of the South is. And yeah, just a nice kind of colonial heritage Appalachian Trail runs right through the town, which is kind of nice. It's famous

for its nice leaves in the fall. And I guess apropos of our topic today has the only African-American population in that town has always been either students and a few teachers at the private boarding schools. So it is a town that's remained pretty homogenous ethnically, and I myself do not descend from those religious settlers, but rather from Greek immigrants who came to Connecticut in the early

20th century.

Eli Bastiaansen ([00:03:42](#)):

And I guess, how did you end up moving to Colorado? You said for school, what drew you to Colorado?

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Nick Psarakis ([00:03:49](#)):

So I came to college at Colorado College here in Colorado Springs in 1988. One of my high school teachers at the public school that I went, the regional public school that I went to in northwestern Connecticut, he had been a Colorado College grad. And so I kind of heard about it a little bit and both my parents were teachers and so we took a lot of summer vacations out to the west and I just was ready for something a little different than the small New England college scene where most of my classmates seemed to be going off to so little change of scenery as they were.

Eli Bastiaansen ([00:04:29](#)):

And then you said now your teacher at the public school in Colorado Springs. What drew you to that occupation and what was your journey from college to now being a teacher?

Nick Psarakis ([00:04:42](#)):

Well, so I was a history major in college and did graduate work in American history at Boulder and kind of knew that I wanted to be a high school teacher for a long time. So like I said, both my parents were public school teachers, so it's a bit in my DNA and when you look for a teaching job, you kind of take what you can get where you get hired and that's where it ended up. So

Eli Bastiaansen ([00:05:11](#)):

Yeah. Very nice.

Nick Psarakis ([00:05:12](#)):

I'm going to pause just for a second, close the door.

Eli Bastiaansen ([00:05:23](#)):

And then I guess, yeah, just to transition a little bit more into directly talking about the Black Lives Matter movement, how did you first encounter the movement? Do you think you could describe where you were when you heard the news and then just your initial reactions to the news?

Nick Psarakis ([00:05:41](#)):

Sure. So I, as a longtime US history teacher, I've obviously always been interested in figuring out ways to make sure we're giving US history, the fullest treatment of groups of people who've been parts of American history. I got to confess though that black history was not for a long time originally anything

that had a lot of central interest for me. Interestingly, BLM first came up when I was teaching human geography, and I was looking this up this morning and it was, in fact back in, it was 2014 when the Ferguson, Missouri racial unrest happened. There was a killing of a young black man, and Ferguson was in the news. I don't know if technically if that's a few years before BLM started, I don't know what people note as the specific date, but I remember in geography I'd always when we got into the 20th century, we always taught about redlining and white flight and, you know, the changing composition of urban areas here in America.

[\(00:07:10\)](#):

And the Ferguson circumstances offered a really nice example, I think a complex example for my students of some towns in suburban Missouri whose racial compositions had changed differently, and that this violence and the concerns about law enforcement were a product of that like demographic,

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those residential patterns of various demographics. And so I remember asking my students to use some to look at some newspaper articles about Ferguson because initially when it came out it was very much just pitched as a police brutality kind of issue. And from a geographical perspective, it was interesting to look at it as a consequence of half-a-century, three fourths of a century of changing residential patterns in suburban America. And that prompted some questions about residential patterns here in Colorado Springs that we would learn in that human geography class. And so that was kind of my first, again, I got to confess, I can't put a date on when did BLM start, but that was really the first one. And then the second moment, that is the reason for this class that I assume you're going to be asking about a little bit later, this black history class that we teach here at Rampart is that in 2020, so this is now, I know a few years after BLM started, but in 2020, John Lewis, the great civil rights activist and American congressman died, and this was right.

[\(00:09:02\)](#):

George Floyd was murdered that summer and it was like the peak of the pandemic and just it was in the middle of all this real disorder and anxiety and everything in our country. And so it was our principal of our high school, Mr. Alvarez, who actually came in and talked to me in August of 2020. He is like, Hey, Nick, what do you think about offering a black history class since John Lewis died? And we were doing a little bit of math and realizing that probably none of our kids had parents who had direct knowledge of the civil rights movement. That was something that I've been teaching since 1995. And when I first started teaching, I had a lot of students whose parents were Vietnam veterans, and now it's like, you remember we did this in class, I asked, what's your connection to Vietnam? And some people say, oh, my grandfather was in or something.

[\(00:10:01\)](#):

So I've seen this whole demographic wave of students and it was really the principal and I kind of deciding that because we were far enough away from this civil rights history that we both as Gen Xers, I was born in 1970, and so I don't have any personal experience of it, but it's been a real important subject for US history teachers, obviously for a long time. And so we thought that a black history class would be a nice way to help kids put some historical perspective on these current events. So it was a

little, I guess just a little peripheral to BLM. I know that's your main interest here, but that's kind of where that class comes from.

Eli Bastiaansen ([00:10:48](#)):

Yeah. Do you think you could talk a little bit about the class curriculum and how that was designed and what the primary goal or focus was? Could you talk about the historical context and how to develop that to frame BLM?

Nick Psarakis ([00:11:03](#)):

Sure. So, yea, we, originally the mission was to create a one semester history elective class. And so I just started reading, I mean, as a US history guy, I've had a fair amount of books already on obviously the history of slavery and some civil rights books as well. But I got John Hope Franklin's book from "Slavery to Freedom", which is the standard old, the traditional African-American history book that he first wrote, I think in the late forties it first came out. And so I got that book and read it and began raiding the bibliography. And so I ended up crafting a class that at least initially when it was written up, went from, let's see, Africa, African civilization, pre slave trade, slave trade, antebellum plantation slavery, unit one, I think I got up to the Civil War. And then I think the second unit, so again, very history focused, the second unit from Civil War to 1940, I think I called that unit "segregation and freedom". So it was kind of

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about the legal segregation that replaced the slave system and then the pushback. And then a third unit, this was originally designed, was intended to be like 1940. I thought World War II was a nice kind of beginning point for the Civil Rights Era because of FDR's desegregation of the wartime industries. And Philip Randolph was beginning to get active. And then I had intended to go through the traditional civil rights movement and then have a fourth unit that was going to be civil rights to the present.

([00:13:20](#)):

So this is now fall of 2020. I'm kind of designing this thing, thinking that I could get four units in and really intending to spend that fourth unit to go from kind of your class to do kind of a Black Power to BLM with units on the place and perception of black culture in American pop culture today and athletics and all the issues regarding black athletes. And then touch on all these modern, yeah, the segregation, the kind of post, post-industrial city, and what's happened with urban decay and things like that. And what ended up happening, I know this is going to be a little disappointing for your purposes here, but once I taught it, and I've taught the class four semesters over two separate years, and I'm going to teach my fifth semester of it next spring. I don't have a class in it this fall, but I ended up not being able to get to the fourth unit. And so what I did is I turned the third unit into civil rights and its modern impact. And so we do the traditional civil rights movement, all the 1950s protests, the 1960s, all the laws and the legal advancement, do a serious look at black power so everybody can understand what that is.

([00:14:54](#)):

And then I usually finish with a kind of modern issues topics activity, which I have to confess, I have not been able to put a BLM topic in there because I just have not been able to get kids fully enough into the

eighties and nineties because having lived through the eighties and nineties, I remember a fair amount of the racial issues that came up during the Reagan administration and Bill Clinton, and who, was it Maya Angelou's comment about him being the first black president, how he interacted. And shamefully, I haven't taught Barack Obama either, and I really wish I had an additional month to do that. So it's really a pretty traditional history class.

[\(00:15:44\)](#):

We were kind of kicking around nomenclature for this. We actually were going to originally call it the African-American Experience, and there was some pushback by district administration. I don't know if you were going to ask me about the politics of this a little bit later, but feel free to encourage or cut me off here with this. But they thought that that was a little, I don't know, in their words, provocative or something. This is right about when, this is now winter of 2020-21, and a lot of the political, all the critical race theory scare and all that stuff, which is still going on now, which I'm happy to talk more about later if you have some questions about that. But that was going on. And so we felt a little bit of pressure. I can say in retrospect, this would be what, three years ago when we were kind of getting this finalized and approved, we were feeling some pressure to make sure everybody understood this was a very conventional history class and that we weren't trying to lead kids into any provocative, divisive topics or anything in the early 21st century. And I don't say again, my excuse for not having gotten to these more modern topics is just the confines, the constraints of a high school semester. Not so much that I've shied away from that because if anything, I would welcome some hostile inquiry, shall we say. It would be kind of fun to defend what we're doing. And certainly the kids are very interested in all that. So I don't know. I need to think some more maybe about trimming some things, but I felt like the historical grounding was so important in Africa.

[\(00:17:48\)](#):

So yeah, so John Lewis. And I guess the other thing I'll say is as far as origins just from, well, you are interviewing me, so I'll talk about me for a minute here. So the other two connections that I have to this

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process is that, so my mother, who I mentioned is a retired social studies teacher. She spent two years in the Peace Corps in Cameroon in Sub-Saharan Africa there teaching at a girl's school. And our home is full of stuff she brought back from Cameroon. And so Africa stuff was all around, and I kind of took it for granted. And my godparents were Peace Corps volunteers in Kenya. And so I have a lot of memory as a kid of having my mom would make Cameroon curry and things like that. And not that I was that interested in that history yet, but it was just one of these things that made it a little easier to kind of ease into putting a class like this together.

[\(00:18:51\)](#):

And then the other thing is that my mother, she, let's see, she was BA 1962, and then she went and got her master's degree from a little, well, it was a college now a little university called Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut. And at the commencement in 1964, Martin Luther King was the speaker at her commencement. And this has kind of been a story in our family like, oh, Martin Luther King spoke at my graduation. So I mean, it was kind of cool, but I never really asked her about it. And as you'll find out

when you graduate, you'll be so excited on graduation day, you'll pay no attention to whoever the speaker is. It might be Joe Biden, and you'll not even pay attention 'cause you'll be so excited about graduation. And so what I did when I was putting this class together is that I contacted Wesleyan's University Library and I was like, Hey, I told him, I'm like, I'm putting this class together.

[\(00:19:56\)](#):

My mother's an alum. She's told me for years that Martin Luther King spoke at her graduation, but she remembers nothing. Do you all have a transcript of the speech or something? And sure enough special collections, they had the speech. And so I've got a copy of the speech. It was a Baccalaureate speech back in the day. I mean, you're kind of at a churchy school. And so it was literally it was like a sermon. It was not just a graduates go out and work hard and don't give up on your dreams kind of thing. But it was a sermon about race, but also about poverty as well. I'm sure you know like King was very much interested in poverty. And in the mid sixties, his thinking was starting to move beyond just legal segregation to think about poverty. And then also a few years later, of course, he got very interested in speaking out against the Vietnam War, and that was not yet a thing when he spoke to my mom's class, but it was part of the speech.

[\(00:21:03\)](#):

So then, so this is Eli. I'm sure you're discovering this, how history like spins out like a web. And so then I get this thing and I'm talking to my mom more about it, and she lets drop. She goes, oh yeah. And did you know that Martin Luther King, when he was a teenager, he used to come up to Connecticut in the summer and work in the tobacco farms? Connecticut River Valley was for a long time, and still today to an extent, they grew the tobacco that's used for the wrappers of cigars. There's something about, I don't know them being a little different or anything, but anyway, so these never plantation slavery or anything there. But King actually came up, I think when he was maybe after his first year of college. And so he lived in this little town called Simsbury in central Connecticut where other relatives of mine happen to live and went to church at a congregational church that my relatives happened to go to.

[\(00:22:02\)](#):

Not that they were there at the same time, but what's happened in Connecticut in recent years is they've kind of become "re-aware" of the fact that King has this connection to the state. He went to Boston University for his doctorate, and so this little town of Simsbury, they have a little Martin Luther King monument now. And so I went and checked that out last year and took some pictures of, they found some diary excerpts of him and everything. And so it's like I kind of feel like I found myself at this inadvertently or unexpectedly at the center of a bunch of like connections here that they obviously had

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not been made when I was younger, but I kind of had to wait until I was a little older and was a little more aware. And it's kind of a collection of fortunate circumstances that here I find myself trying to make this black history class a little bit better, and probably if I really do make it better, it needs to be more tightly connected to some current events like BLM. So

Eli Bastiaansen ([00:23:05](#)):

I guess with all these stories and connections and talks with family members and stuff, how has your understanding of black history sort of evolved as you've learned more and read more? And then do you think you could also speak about the evolution of the class as a result of more research and more events that are happening?

Nick Psarakis ([00:23:26](#)):

Yeah, that's a good question. Well, I will say, so, you know this personally, but just for your records here, I also, I'm a longtime teacher of the US History Survey at the high school level, and I feel like I did a decent job teaching slavery and segregation, but what teaching this black history class has allowed me to do is to really uncover the, and I don't mean this to sound at all like a cliché because it's very kind of, I don't know "old crowd" language or whatever about this, but the agency of people who were caught up in the system of slavery has been a way, something that has enriched my regular US teaching. I read a book "Bounds of Their Habitation", I think is the title, which is about the pre-Civil War Civil rights movement, which was just a fascinating look at how the various varieties of abolitionism also were working on improving lives of free blacks who lived all across the country, of course, in the years before the Civil War.

([00:24:50](#)):

And so, you know, it's helped me kind of deepen my teaching of that era. I'll jump around a little bit. Still Antebellum. I mean, I have a former professor at CC of Brazilian history, and so I, I've spent a couple of afternoons with him talking about slavery in Brazil. And so the comparative slavery has become a very interesting thing for me, Brazil, American South and the Caribbean. There's a couple books that I've come across about slavery in the Caribbean and the 16, 17 hundreds "Dang it" something, the Haitian Revolution. I mean, I didn't know anything about the Haitian Revolution and talk about an empowering thing to teach teenagers, but especially African-American teenagers, that there were revolts that succeeded, even though all the ones in what became the United States all failed, you know, and were brutally put down that history of resistance, which really, I mean the way I teach it to kids is that the resistance, Nat Turner and Denmark Vessey and all those other revolts in the early, late 17, early 18 hundreds, they literally inspired the abolition movement.

([00:26:18](#)):

The abolition movement was not just some devout white people in the north who decided that slavery was awful, but that it was something that black people were pushing by resisting the bounds of their habitation as that book title showed. So there's that thing. And then other readings, I mean, I'm old enough that unlike my younger colleagues, I don't go right to the internet right away for researches. I'm very kind of book focused. And so other books, I mean, I've learned a lot about the race riots that got started during reconstruction and lasted into the 1920s. My other family connection, this may be a little off topic, but is that I, well, I think I put this down on one of your forms that I have. My mother's family is from Oklahoma, and my grandfather was in Tulsa when the Tulsa Race Riot happened in 1921, and I never got to ask him about that, but Tulsa, and we still have family there, but like Tulsa has been reckoning with this violence really for about 20 years now.

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[\(00:27:28\)](#):

And I go there every couple of years and we have a cousin there, and it's been fascinating to talk to her about how that's been evolving. Tulsa's kind of reckoning with that, went to the museum two summers ago, and so I never used to teach about the race riots or Red Summer in my US history classes. And now I do, and I can because I know about this stuff. And then it's also kind of forced me being a teacher, I have summer off, which is a wonderful pleasure, and I am not the jet off to some exotic place, but rather I drive a lot across the country. And I drive back to see my mother in Connecticut. And so I, I've been stopping at historic sites for a while now, and the civil rights museum in Memphis, I went to the memorial to slain civil rights workers in Montgomery at the Southern Poverty Law Center last summer.

[\(00:28:36\)](#):

I stopped in Kansas City, which has this great musical and athletic heritage, also, the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum is there. I went Indianapolis. There's this amazing place in north Indianapolis, which was the historically black part of town where Robert Kennedy in 1968 during the presidential campaign, when he found out the night or the day that Martin Luther King was killed that afternoon, Kennedy was giving a speech to in the black part of Indianapolis. And when he arrived, the mayor said, you don't want to go up there because they're all angry. And he went up there and off the cuff, he gave a speech, this wonderful, very healing speech. And Indianapolis, they have a little monument there. And I stopped there last summer and found the spot. There's a little historic marker, of course, found the speech on YouTube. You could never do this before. But I sat there and listened to Bobby Kennedy talk about Martin Luther King, right where he gave that talk on April 4th, 1968.

[\(00:29:42\)](#):

And so it's like just making this kind of commitment to teach a class like this has really kind of motivated me, motivated me to just, I feel there's something to be gained by like actually going to a place and kind of feeling what happened there. And certainly I've had that experience like in Tulsa at the corner of Greenwood and Archer Streets in Tulsa is right where the church was burned down, and all those white guys from South Tulsa were coming in and just shooting at black people. And those black veterans were like, no, we're not going to take this anymore. And they all went and got their World War I carbides and started firing back. And you can stand right there on that street and the train tracks are still there that separated the white and black parts of Tulsa. And I find a lot of value in that. And so all of that stuff, not only academically prepared me for the black history class, but it's really deepened my instruction of US history. So it's been a real good kind of, I don't know, synchronicity or something.

Eli Bastiaansen [\(00:30:55\)](#):

Yeah, I guess, is there anything you particularly want to mention or to conclude as you said

Nick Psarakis [\(00:31:06\)](#):

For today, umm, well, look here, I'm going to say something to try to inspire you even further. And that is, this is one of the ways that I, as a teacher hang on to the pleasures and stimulation of being a college student. And that is learning new things and helping it enrich what you're doing in life at that moment. And so I had a very good college experience. I love my history classes as it sounds like you do as well. And it's just been a good experience for me to kind of reinvigorate my understanding of US history. And I hope I haven't been going on too much about these little stories, but these stories like this are the ways that we hook students and Oh, okay. And I'm going to bring it around one more time. Circle up one other thing, and that is John Lewis. Remember I told you about John Lewis and his death being the catalyst for Mr.

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[\(00:32:22\)](#):

Alvar and I getting this started. So the other, here's this web again. So John Lewis, when he finished his last, what turned out to be his last book, "Walking With the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement", he came to the little library in my hometown and spoke to a hundred or so folks in the community hall, which included my mother. And my mother got his book and got him to sign it. And so on the first day of class when I start my class every year, and I tell them a much abbreviated version of what I've just told you about John Lewis and how he's kind of the patron saint of this class, I hold the book up and I show them, I said, this is the book that I've read. And I open it up and I said, here's his signature right here. And like this is kind of, it's like a talisman, you know, for us that it's how we hold on to the past and how people who have died are still with us and still their lives are giving meaning to what we do. So I'll look forward to telling you more about any of that stuff that if you need more details.

Eli Bastiaansen [\(00:33:34\)](#):

This is Eli Bastiaansen from Sewanee, the University of the South. It is currently 10:05 AM and the date is Monday the 20th of November. And I'm with Mr. Nick Psarakis,

Nick Psarakis [\(00:33:48\)](#):

And that's me, Nick Psarakis. I'm in Rocky Mountain Time here at 9:06 AM on November 20th, 2023. This is part two of I guess two of our interview about BLM and other current events. And I'm sitting in my home in Colorado Springs, Colorado right now.

Eli Bastiaansen [\(00:34:10\)](#):

Thank you, Mr. Psarakis for being here. And as we finished the previous interview, we were talking a little bit about the importance of education and understanding the history. Do you think you could speak a little bit about the district's reactions to your black history class as well as I guess just primarily the reactions to that class?

Nick Psarakis [\(00:34:33\)](#):

Sure. So a couple things. I think I mentioned in the earlier session that there was a little disagreement about the naming of the class that we had initially floated this, well, the tentative name of it when we had put it together was called the African-American Experience. And being somebody from Generation X, I was there when Afro-American got renamed to African Afro-American and Black got renamed to African-American. And so it's been a little interesting in now the 21st century watching the nomenclature swing back to using the word black instead of, well at times instead of African-American, I guess I must confess, I'm not quite sure if there are rules about that and how that's used, but the assistant superintendent that we were working with of curriculum thought that phrase African-American experience might be misconstrued as being too much about somebody might think we were just doing like modern day cultural history or cultural studies or something.

[\(00:35:55\)](#):

And so. Whereas I had initially intended it to be something that would encompass the experience of people of African descent from the first commercial encounters with Europeans to the present. And so we just said, well, how about black history? And they're like, okay, I don't know if it was the fact that the word history was in it or what, but the Colorado State history standards, they use African-American throughout. But it is interesting, and maybe you can help me out a little bit to understand why BLM specifically chose the word black. I mean, it's obviously, it's monosyllabic and it has a nice acronym and

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everything, but I don't know. So anyway, we just said, okay, how about black history? And that seemed to kind of get us over that hurdle and then we put it together. And part of putting new high school course proposals together is this kind of wink, wink, nudge, nudge like dance with the state standards.

[\(00:37:09\)](#):

And you kind of list the standards and the state history standards and social studies standards, they're rather vague and they can be put to all sorts of uses, both honorable and intended to obfuscate, I guess. And not that I would pursue the latter, but I felt that, you know, as I talked to you last time, I was building this class off of stuff I had read, not because there aren't any black history standards right in the state. They're just these general United States history standards, which for that matter, you're ready for this in high school, do not even include anything before reconstruction anymore. That's the direction that the state of Colorado gives is like start US history at reconstruction and go on. And I've just always been very frustrated by like how are you supposed to teach reconstruction if you don't teach the Civil War and the sectional crisis and the origins of slavery?

[\(00:38:06\)](#):

And I've been going back and forth with colleagues of mine in the department, and I guess personally when I teach AP US history, I'm absolved of that issue because I do have to teach the whole sweep from Bering Landbridge and Columbus to the present. But anyway, so we get this thing packaged and it looks pretty innocuous, and I put a list of all the books that I had consulted, some of which are behind me here, others I brought my pile here if we need to talk about it anymore, like the John Lewis thing. But it's interesting that, so we had a very sympathetic board at that time. I'm going to just say, so district 20, you probably know has a five person board. And at the time there were four people on the board, a former district administrator, a former air academy high school teacher, and two newly elected board members who were very pro-public education kind of recognize the moment that our country needed to, we kind of needed to step up with some new offerings for kids and everything.

[\(00:39:14\)](#):

And then another new member who was kind of conservative leaning and you know that term that conservatives are starting to throw around that term "woke" that has been kind of redefined as like everything bad about teaching race relations that I imagine is going on in education right now. I'm putting words in the mouth of a kind of conservative person. He had not started using that term yet, and that had not yet kind of come into the lexicon of public education the way it would after Covid, and maybe we'll talk about kind of Covid and if I could borrow an academic term, the intersectionality of

covid and anti-vaxxers and then all this like political stuff that started swirling together in the fall of 2020 and then into the spring and summer of 2021. But like, so this term woke was not being used at all by anybody, but what one of these board members did when I, we presented this class is he chose to read.

[\(00:40:27\)](#):

He prefaces by saying, I love this class and I think this is a great thing that we're going to teach this class. I don't have any objections. But he then proceeded to read the district's controversial issues policy into the record of the board meeting. And then he followed that up by saying, he said, Mr. Psarakis, I don't want have any, and he wasn't saying this, I'm kind of exaggerating the tone here, but he said, like I don't want to have any parents calling me complaining about political agendas in this class. And I mean, this is a guy, he had no idea what kind of teacher I was, but I interpreted this remark as he seemed to me to be just assuming that the very nature of the subject matter was inherently controversial, and I didn't engage with him at all. I tried to make a little joke about it.

[\(00:41:22\)](#):

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I said, well, you know, the social studies classroom, we do controversial issues every day. I said, it's part of our DNA and I kind of shrug you how I make a little joke out of it and everything. And a couple of the other board members chuckled, and then we moved on. But in retrospect, I mean, I have not been able to forget that comment because, and God forgive me if I ever feel the need to bring it up in public, if somebody is complaining about all the politics in education, because it just seemed to me so indicative of this assumption that some people have apparently that certain subjects are inherently controversial and that you need to either avoid 'em or be so careful about them. But you know, I mean you were in my class like, okay, communism, like yes, I had to teach communism. You want to help me teach the Russia revolution in a different way?

[\(00:42:23\)](#):

So yeah, we had to expose kids to communism, is that any more or less controversial than like Martin Luther King, you know, or Frederick Douglass? And same thing with all our studies of the dictators. We drill down pretty deep into what the conditions that created fascism and all that. And so I think it's just this kind of fundamental misunderstanding that a lot of people have in our society about how you go about teaching about and then learning about history that somehow exposing kids to things that somebody might view as controversial is somehow running some risk with our students and putting them at intellectual jeopardy or something. So there was that. And then the second interesting thing, so then the board is like, oh, yeah, five, oh, they just voted for the class. And they're like, great, and we're really excited. And they always say these perfunctory things like, oh, Mr. Psarakis, I'd love to come sit in on your class. I'm like, sure, come. None of 'em ever have. But it's all part of kind of the politics of a board of education. But then the second interesting thing that happens is, so we get the thing approved, and I think I'm just going to say this was like December of 2020.

[\(00:43:41\)](#):

There's two people in the board meeting. The board is spread around the board. I don't know if you've

ever been down there in that board of ed room, but they had moved the dais everywhere and everybody was sitting in corners, so we were socially distanced, and I was pulling my mask down and talking to the microphone kind of sheepishly. And so then we move into the spring and it's social studies textbook adoption cycle, which happens every, like I don't know, six or seven years. And I decided to put John Hope Franklin's "From Slavery to Freedom", that book I was telling you about last time, which is the traditional mainstream, I don't know, 15th edition, whatever. It's longtime like standard African American history book that college classes use.

[\(00:44:40\)](#):

And so I inserted it in the textbook adoption process, even though I knew that the people who were the kids who were going to be in my class, it wasn't going to be a book that I was going to hand out and have them read for homework, kind of like we did with our books in our class. It is just an elective class. It doesn't have a lot of homework, everything. So I put the book in and it turns out by the, I think it's May, so now we're at May of '21, and it comes the date for the social studies, all the people who had worked on the textbook review, which included me because I was the department chair and these other folks to come to the board meeting and kind of be paraded in front of the board, and you know, "Thank you for your work.

[\(00:45:31\)](#):

Oh, we love all this stuff". And "Oh, thank you so much for your support." You kind of show up and kiss the ring a little bit and tell 'em how grateful you are to be in District 20 and all this stuff. And so I find out it was like noon of that day that the board member who had read the controversial issues policy to me in the winter that he had some, quote, questions about the Franklin textbook. And so I went to Mr.

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Alvarez and I was like, I need to know what these questions are because I'm not going to show up to the board meeting naked and be standing up there in the podium. And he starts opening up the book and, okay, on page such and such, it says this, what do you have to say about that? Or you really think our kids, I wasn't going to do that.

[\(00:46:22\)](#):

And so Mr. Alvarez got ahold of somebody down in learning services, and they actually got a list of the questions that he had. And what he had apparently done, from what I could understand is he had opened the book and he had read the chapter, the 1980s chapter on the Reagan presidency and the 1990s chapter on the Bush and Clinton presidencies. And he had picked out some phrases that were objectionable. Like for example, one of the first ones was the author as he was narrating the Reagan administration, the Reagan presidency. He said that something, I'm going to make this up, but it was something to the effect of Reagan lost the confidence of many African-Americans after he fired such and such. I don't know if you've come to study any of this, but the Civil Rights Commission that Dwight Eisenhower created in 1957 or eight, I think after Little Rock that had, it was kind of a ceremonial thing, but you would always put some civil rights leaders on it, and they would come out with reports and everything.

[\(00:47:33\)](#):

And when Reagan got into office in 1981, I think he fired everybody on that committee. And then he deliberately put a white attorney who had been very outspoken against the civil rights movement since the 1960s, put him on this commission, and there was this huge outcry about this. And black voters, ever since Johnson, the Civil Rights Act, they've been voting like, I don't know, 94% or something for Democrats. And that just cemented their antipathy to Ronald Reagan in the early eighties. And he asked me about this. He's like, how could they say something like this about Reagan? And so in an abbreviated version of what I just told you, I said, well, Reagan, one of the first things he did when he got into office is he cleaned out the Civil Rights Commission, which was supposed to be, had historically been a very ceremonial thing. And so I said, it's no secret that black voters overwhelmingly voted democratic through the 1980s.

[\(00:48:31\)](#):

And I said, I think the book is just trying to explain this. And so he went on to another one, and it was something about why are they saying all these nice things about Jesse Jackson? And I said, well, Jesse Jackson, in fact, was the, you know he was the leading democratic contender for the presidential nomination in 1988 for a while. And he in fact, he ran for president in 1984 also. And I said, there was a lot of energy around the, so, okay. And so we moved on to the next one, and I saw what he was doing is that he had picked a bunch of things out of these two chapters. And I still don't know to this day whether there is some like list somewhere of liberal textbooks that if you're a board member or a parent in a district, maybe you've learned a little bit about how textbooks in Texas work.

[\(00:49:23\)](#):

There's a state textbook commission, and every single book is combed over meticulously for any objectionable, divisive language. And I don't know if that's where he got this, but anyway, but this went on for about 10 minutes, and then he finally, and he said, he made some comment about the 1988 election, which was Dukakis and Bush, and that was the infamous Willie Horton Ad who was that black convict in Massachusetts who had been furloughed by Dukakis and then went and murdered somebody out on it down in Maryland or something. And Lee Atwater, George Bush's campaign director made this into a huge thing. And they put Willie, excuse me, they renamed this black convict whose name was William Horton, and they called him Willie in these ads, which was not his name, but you recognize that

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as this typical kind of historic infantilizing of black males, right? By calling 'em Nikki or Joey, something like, you give him a boy's name, it dates back to slavery, of course.

[\(00:50:30\)](#):

And so this ad, he said, well, I don't know if this is regarding the Willie Horton ad or anything. And he just kept going with this stuff. And I finally said, I said, look, I've been teaching out of district approved US history textbooks since 1995. And I said, if the criteria is we can't have any book that's critical of presidents, I don't know where we're going to get a book to read if that's the criteria is we can't criticize American presidents. What I was thinking in my head and didn't say was clearly this, we can't have any books that criticize modern Republican presidents, was really what he was saying. Because then he went on to say some things. It was like, well, why are they saying all this nice stuff about Bill Clinton? We all

know what Bill Clinton did in the nineties, and I didn't even touch that one.

[\(00:51:22\)](#):

At that point. The superintendent, Mr. Gregory stepped in and said something nice about my teaching and one of the other board members, but I really was surprised by just this whole dynamic of how this man felt that there was this, it was almost performative that he felt like he, in his position, given whoever he felt his constituents were, he had to say in some way that he was opposed to this kind of like class. And since now he knew me a little bit because of our earlier interactions that now he had to, well start picking out my book, and I mean, Frank, well, this isn't between you and me because this is getting recorded for posterity, but like Eli, you well know that there are so few kids who actually read textbooks anymore, and so few teachers that even assign textbooks that the idea that some kid is going to get radicalized by something, some line about Ronald Reagan was just ludicrous to me.

[\(00:52:21\)](#):

And nevermind, as I told you the other day, I'm frustrated. I can't even get to modern events anyway. I just barely get through Black Power as it is. But I really think that there's this, I guess the bottom line, I've been blabbing on about this for long enough, but the bottom line about this is there's this like generation of adults right now for whom new subjects in school and new ways of looking at old subjects are for some reason scary to them, and yet they don't really know why. And what they do is their reactions to these new curricula are essentially, they're based on what they think they remember about how they went to school, how school was back in the, whatever it was, the seventies, the eighties. I mean, I was in school in the eighties. I know what things were like. I mean, my teachers just talked at us most of the time.

[\(00:53:17\)](#):

My history teachers, we didn't have any conversations back and forth, and we just read our book and we came in and the guy talked at us, and then we took a multiple choice test at the end. And yeah, I mean, I got interested in history that way, and I had some inherent interests as well. But it's this dreamed past that we all, well, that some people imagine our country once was, and that we think our country's losing something by moving on from that. And yet our own understanding of the past is not accurate. And that's all I could come up with about his thing. But the bottom line for me again, is it's the controversial issues remark, and then it's this extremely mainstream book the way we are just so uncomfortable with kids learning about that, that we choose to go cherry pick some things out of it and then say, well, I'm not going to vote no against this, but I just want to express my displeasure about these 10 things. And it was a very interesting, it wasn't hostile, but it was just a very interesting kind of view into what I think the mind of people who are outside of education and not historians, not that we have a monopoly on doing history because it's something obviously all Americans need to know about, but it, it's just a weird

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kind of view into his brain about that. So anyway, sorry. Do you have any follow-up questions about that?

Eli Bastiaansen ([00:54:51](#)):

Yeah, I guess you mentioned or discussed a lot about the different generation's reactions to either Black Lives Matter or education. Do you think you could talk a bit more just about the generational aspect of it with, as you mentioned, Gen X and stuff? And then also do you think that education has always been political and has this political element, and then why has that sort of increased in recent years, especially like you said, with Covid and the pandemic and even critical race theory becoming this almost flash word?

Nick Psarakis ([00:55:26](#)):

Yeah. Well, let's see. Boy, you just asked me a couple things there. So I'm, first thing I'm going to say is, so here I am. So I was in high school in the mid eighties from '84 to '88, and some of my older teachers, a few of them had been World War II vets. How about that? And then a number of them had started their teaching careers in the sixties. So they were young teachers in the sixties who told us stories about like regular walkouts by students in the 1960s. This is in my little regional high school back in Connecticut. I remember a couple of them saying, oh yeah, I remember they would start in 1969. They'd start reading the draft numbers over the PA system. Can you imagine that being a senior in high school? And then he said, yeah, we regular walkouts by kids. They would just decide at 10:00 AM everybody would stand up and walk out of the school and they'd protest the war or free speech or something.

([00:56:34](#)):

And then I get to college in 1988 and here at CC, I have teachers who started their teaching careers in the 1950s. You'd open up, so they were in their, they were upper thirties, you know, years of teaching at that point in the eighties. And these were people who were in their sixties, a number of whom had been World War II vets, I mean combat vets. I had one guy who had hit the beach at Anzio in Italy in 1944, and he was my constitutional law professor, and he was like this diehard pacifist, he hated war and the military and all this stuff. And so he had started his teaching career in the 1950s, and, you know, you'd go look in the, I worked in the library. And so you'd go look in the yearbooks and there was Dr. Hockman with his buzz cut and his suit coat and tie and everything in the fifties.

([00:57:30](#)):

And then he would tell us stories. This is again, in the eighties, about 20 years earlier in the sixties, how like classes here at CC, they would meet during the day or they would gather for dinner at night or something, and talk would always come to politics. And it was, of course, the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War and poverty were the big things. And he said, you know what we would do, this is one of my history teachers. He said what we would do at the end of our dinner if we had dinner in the evening or something, we'd all get in a circle, hold hands and sing, "We Shall Overcome." And so I'm going to push back on your question a little bit when you say kids today are more politically active. When I heard that kind of stuff from my high school and my college professors back in the eighties and nineties, I was like, oh my gosh, my generation, we didn't do any of that stuff.

([00:58:22](#)):

I don't remember any walkout, any protest, anything when I was in high school in the eighties or in college. And so you may remember, was it in your class when your group had the gun violence walk out when you got up? And I'm totally serious about this, Eli. That's the first time in my teaching career, and that was what year 27 or something in my teaching that any kids walked out over anything. And so what

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my opinion of the history of that kind of student activism is that like your generation is just starting to get back to the protest dynamic that the baby boomers were doing back in the 1960s, and that the remainder of the boomers in the seventies and then my, the Gen Xers, and then even the millennials, I don't remember the millennials doing anything the nineties or the early two thousands. And it's really only now the, are you Gen Z?

[\(00:59:26\)](#):

Is that what you are, I guess?

Eli Bastiaansen [\(00:59:27\)](#):

I think so.

Nick Psarakis [\(00:59:27\)](#):

I guess so, yeah. So it's only now, what are you now three generations beyond the boomers or four, whatever the count is, we're only partially getting back to what was even done in the 1960s. And so I would reject the contention that today is more "protesty" than previous generations because there's been kind of this lull for 30, 40 years, and then we're only starting to get back to what was going on in the sixties. Okay. I feel like I've only answered the first part of that question. You just asked, what were the other items, or do you have a follow up on that?

Eli Bastiaansen [\(01:00:07\)](#):

Well, I think the main part of the next question was just about those sort of flash words in education, like critical race theory and just how that has affected you as a history teacher or just the development of the textbook, the discussions in class that you're allowed to, or even just the news that you hear online about this happening around the country.

Nick Psarakis [\(01:00:29\)](#):

Yeah, yeah. Well, so regarding these hot button words that get kind of thrown around, you know, here I am in my 29th year of teaching, and I've watched a number of iterations of that happened. In the nineties, there was pushback against character education. It was this weird thing where in the early nineties, public schools were like, oh, we need to teach kids more about character ed. And then conservatives assumed that character education was liberal education, not true old religious values kind of education. So there's all this misunderstanding or maybe deliberate misperceptions of things in the early two thousands. I remember watching, you know, science was the victim of this for a while with the whole intelligent design versus Darwinian evolution. That whole debate, that's a whole nother pot of things for some science teacher to explain. But science education has gone through this multiple times with how we teach evolution. Oh, another one, here's another one is when I started teaching in district 20, in 1995, there, the big crisis was the sex education curriculum.

[\(01:01:51\)](#):

And so the folks, the angry people were going to board meetings in the nineties were the ones who were yelling about why teaching sex ed to sixth and seventh graders was totally inappropriate and how

parents should be responsible for that and blah, blah, blah. So I've kind of watched that come and go, the character ed, the Darwin Intelligent design stuff, the sex ed, and then somewhere, I'm not going to get all my dates correct, but like somewhere in the early 2010s, the AP US history curriculum was revised, I'm going to say 2014 maybe. And there was a big push against that. There were a couple of conservative governors around the country who stood up, kind of like Ron DeSantis has recently done

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about that AP African-American Studies class and stood up and said, no, no, no, AP US history is now polluting our kids' minds. And they would come out with these lists of, look in the old class, George Washington was listed 10 times, and now he's only mentioned twice.

[\(01:03:01\)](#):

And that was somehow proof that AP US history become unpatriotic. And in fact, Jefferson County up to the north of us, which is the west kind of west suburbs of Denver, Littleton, Golden, Wheat Ridge, Arvada and all that stuff, they had a superintendent who announced he was going to cancel AP US history because it was too liberal. And you know who pushed back on that? The students, and you were probably in elementary school when this happened, but there were kids with banners out on overpasses over C-470 up in Denver, like "Save our History Classes." And that was really the beginning of what I'm going to call the school board wars that we find ourselves in still, which is the angry groups of parents mobilize at crucial elections. They get a new slate of board members elected, they fire the superintendent, they start going after curriculum, and then there's the backlash from the other group of folks two years later.

[\(01:04:07\)](#):

And then they get their group in and then they get rid of that superintendent, and it just goes on and on. And that's happened in Douglas County. I'm sorry, it's happened in Jefferson County that I just told you about, happened in Douglas County in 2015-16, and is still going on. And then, I don't know, you've been out town, but Woodland Park is going through that right now. There was this conservative movement there. They got a couple board members with these five member boards like we have in District 20. It's really easy. As soon as you get ahold of three people, you flip the board. And I think that happened in Woodland Park and they fired a superintendent. They brought in a new one. The guy brought in a right wing civics curriculum that had been put together by some, I don't know, some organization somewhere. And now District 20 is dealing with this.

[\(01:05:01\)](#):

So just two weeks ago, you know, we, our board went 5-0, then one resigned, and we're going to get a new one appointed by the existing four, well the two incumbent, the two existing members and the two newly elected, and they're going to pick somebody and probably District 20 is going to go off on this, also, down this path of just real like, well, we're in power. We're going to do everything we can right now. So jam our agenda through, and then it just becomes a big food fight. And so. Yeah. Here, I have lost your question again. So like the politics, well, okay, here it is. So I've watched a number of these hot button issues kind of come and go, and I've kind of come to the conclusion that umm, it's, it is these kinds of issues that certain parts of the political spectrum use mobilize their voters and mobilize what is essentially an undereducated electorate.

[\(01:06:05\)](#):

And I mean that not in just their entire education, but just they're under education about the system of public education and actually what we do and what teaching involves. And you know it's happening when there are words like indoctrination and brainwashing start getting thrown around that people just know nothing about what actually goes on in public education and as if your generation would actually let us do that to you. You're the ones who you all like getting exposed to provocative ideas and weighing, is it this or is it that? What's the explanation for this and why do you think this person behaved this way? And you all in that history class two years ago, you just would've tuned me out and just gone and plunged into your cell phones if I had tried to like, okay, kids today, I'm going to tell you the real story about this and talk for 90 minutes. Like you just can't.

[\(01:07:02\)](#):

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You can't teach this generation of students in that way and you all are very perceptive and see right through or would see right through any kind of indoctrination from whatever side of the political spectrum. And so I guess for me, it's fortunate that I've seen enough of these things come and go because it leads me to be a little, maybe patient, maybe more than I need to be with this most recent thing about critical race theory and woke agendas and all this stuff. I mean, I see it for what it is, and that's the latest way to motivate voters who vote on their emotions, not really on true understanding of things. However, it does raise the issue of, at our core, we teachers, we want what's best for our kids. And I would feel really bad if these next couple of years are kind of wasted with adults fighting over really fundamentally irrelevant things. And meanwhile, kids just get more and more sucked into online work and back into kind of rote learning that doesn't involve real Socratic exchange between teachers and students because teachers are too scared to broach these subjects in a responsible way. Okay. I'll pause there and let you force me to recalibrate or follow up on things.

Eli Bastiaansen [\(01:08:40\)](#):

Yeah,

Nick Psarakis [\(01:08:41\)](#):

I'm sorry.

Eli Bastiaansen [\(01:08:42\)](#):

No. Do you think that social media has in any way contributed to either the lack of total research and knowledge about a topic as well as just the change in sort of protests? You talked about people used to protest more in person and stuff and now how has social media changed that at all in your opinion?

Nick Psarakis [\(01:09:06\)](#):

I don't know. I mean, you'd be the one to talk about the kids. I'm not on social media, so I am not sure exactly how that's affecting people. I can tell you that I know there are a lot of social media platforms

that the two sides, as it were in our district are kind of battling it out and talking amongst themselves and really I think serving as like echo chambers. There have been some, during this most recent board election cycle, there were some long series of posts from various social media sources that were somehow, I don't know if this is like espionage or something, but somebody somewhere got ahold of these chat rooms discussions and dumped them to the point where they got written about in newspapers and some of the stuff that was being said about or by folks who are really concerned, think that they're concerned about the woke stuff and the CRT.

[\(01:10:23\)](#):

And the other issue, of course is LGBT kids and bathrooms. There's been this narrative that they're going to be, well, if we don't tell kids what bathroom they have to use, they're going to be, the, you know, boys are going to go into girls' bathrooms and assault, sexually assault girls. And there's been that kind of fear-mongering going on. And so from what I've read of stuff that appears on these chat rooms that again, that I don't frequent, but that I, just have been released. I'm just astonished the kind of language that people use and just the emotional level of like anger and real dehumanization of other people. I mean, there was one comment in what is the Discord? I didn't know about Discord? Is that some chat something or other?

Eli Bastiaansen [\(01:11:21\)](#):

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Yeah.

Nick Psarakis [\(01:11:21\)](#):

Okay. You can. Whatever. So I. Somebody got ahold of this Discord chat chain or I don't know what it's called, but there was a comment in there when they happened to be on the issue of bathrooms and non-gender bathrooms and all this stuff.

[\(01:11:40\)](#):

And there was some comment about teachers being friendly to "those kids" should be, quote, "chained to the back of cars and dragged around" and like the people felt okay to say stuff like that. I mean, thankfully they're not saying stuff like that in public yet. Yet right? But that they're saying that kind of stuff online and that, I guess to your question, that just cannot help. But here, I'm going to say something really politically here, but when we have a person running for president who is now starting to refer to political opponents as "vermin", you understand why people at the local level feel it's okay to talk about each other in this way, nevermind that school boards are non-partisan by law, at least here in Colorado. And that people, uh, we should just do something really radical and keep kids' best interest in mind instead of this our side and your side and all this kind of very divisive commentary.

[\(01:12:44\)](#):

So yeah, I guess my short answer is yes, I think that social media is just really, I don't know, you can speak to what it's doing to the kids, but from what I've seen with adults, it's really poisoned like local politics because everybody has felt the license to talk about each other at a local level, the way people

at the national level are now talking about and to each other. And everybody feels like they have the right to be their own talk radio host and podcaster and to talk the way all these radio folks talk. So.

Eli Bastiaansen ([01:13:23](#)):

Yeah. I think it was interesting.

Nick Psarakis ([01:13:24](#)):

Yeah, it's a problem.

Eli Bastiaansen ([01:13:25](#)):

Yeah. I think it's interesting that you made the connection to political leaders and the use of certain like specific words that almost reference back to the 20th century, even current or previous presidents who have mentioned "law and order" as these references to, what are your thoughts on that, especially with Black Lives Matter and their, I guess, reforms or attempted reforms in education and criminal justice?

Nick Psarakis ([01:13:57](#)):

Well, so in my class, I love explaining to kids that there's some language and some ideas that are in modern politics that conclusively have their roots in 1950-60 Civil Rights Movement. And one being that phrase Law and Order, which incontrovertibly Richard Nixon started using that in 1968 as a code word to white voters, historians of his campaign. They know that he had this thing called, he called his southern strategy, which was this like subtle appeal to white voters about elect me because I know you've been unhappy with all the civil rights progress and his deliberate conflation of civil rights with all the urban violence that was spiking in the 1960s. And so Law and Order very deliberately was used by Nixon and Spiro Agnew, his vice president, who was even more radical as a deliberate appeal to white

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voters. And I feel obligated as a history teacher to tell kids in my classes like, okay, when you hear this phrase Law and Order, this is the first person to have used this.

([01:15:18](#)):

And this was his context. It was very deliberately meant to, we need to stop all those dark-skinned people from being so violent. It's similar to in our class, when we got to the 1930s and I told you all the antisemitic isolationists who were opposed to Franklin Roosevelt and were kind of German sympathizers they used, they called their movement "America First." And it's just undeniable. That's the first time that was used in American history. And then here we were a couple of years ago with a president who was very deliberately using that phrase, I don't know if I suspect he doesn't even know where I'm talking about Donald Trump here, of course, doesn't even know where that phrase comes from historically. But that very deliberately was used to appeal to Americans who were anxious about change and foreign relations and all that stuff. And so I feel like, modern US history, World War II to the present offers some really good opportunities to help kids understand that what they're hearing about politics today and like the language that politicians are using, nothing is new.

[\(01:16:32\)](#):

It all comes out of this era. And then furthermore, other examples that I just love being a high school teacher because I can talk to kids about this stuff. Other examples are the extent to which the civil rights movement for a while was smeared as being communist. And so that conflation of the Cold War and anti-communism with the civil rights movement. And then of course the other element there that resonates with kids today, your generation who are so politically interested. And I should have said a few minutes ago that I do recognize that your generation, I think way more politically involved and active than any other of the two generations that I've taught from the nineties and the early two thousands, just very conventional kids. And you all much more, I think because I suspect because of social media, much more kind of attuned to modern day politics.

[\(01:17:30\)](#):

But the fourth example is the politics surrounding gay people. And the undeniable fact that in the early fifties, part of the Red Scare was driving homosexuals out of government positions, and that that was used to get them out of jobs. And then it was also part of that first wave of book banning that happened during the Red Scare where all those, the way you would go after a librarian in a small town, which happened all over the country, librarians, many of whom happened to be unmarried single women right, is you would complain about some magazine or book that was in there, in the library that was supposedly communist or like in the little town where my mother grew up in northwestern, excuse me, northeastern Oklahoma. You'd complain that the librarian was checking books out to black kids and that those kids didn't need to be reading. This is still segregated school system, but then the whispers about the sexuality of the, pardon, this cat here, the whispers about the sexuality, the librarian would start also, and that would be part of that. And so this is Teddy named after Teddy Roosevelt. So anyway, he's excessively friendly and curious, and so like I feel comfortable to tell kids about that. The book banning thing is happening in our district right now. They're going after some LGBT literature that's in some of our libraries and everybody's all up in arm like, oh my gosh, we've never banned books before or anything. And I said, well, actually, we went through that in the 1950s.

[\(01:19:33\)](#):

And so again, in a little way that makes me feel kind of comfortable. I'm sorry.

Eli Bastiaansen [\(01:19:39\)](#):

No worries.

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Nick Psarakis [\(01:19:45\)](#):

And oh my gosh, I lost the question again. Help me, Eli.

Eli Bastiaansen [\(01:19:53\)](#):

Anyway, it was a good spot to transition even to,

Nick Psarakis [\(01:19:56\)](#):

Okay, thank you. Sorry.

Eli Bastiaansen ([01:19:58](#)):

No worries.

Nick Psarakis ([01:19:58](#)):

I probably went off on that too much,

Eli Bastiaansen ([01:20:02](#)):

I talked a little bit with others, but do you think that there's any sort of intersectionality between L-G-B T-Q Rights and Black Lives Matter? Yeah.

Nick Psarakis ([01:20:17](#)):

Oh, absolutely. Because like Stonewall in '69, was that when Stonewall was like the, oh, oh, you frozen, does that mean I frozen too or

Eli Bastiaansen ([01:20:31](#)):

It's working for me.

Nick Psarakis ([01:20:35](#)):

We're okay. Okay, good. So I mean, that's something that I feel comfortable to tell my kids both in the black history and in AP US history is that the Civil Rights Movement that got started in the sixties, the methods of peaceful protest and simultaneous push for legislative action "cat out of here" were adopted by these other movements. And so, what in the seventies was called the Gay Rights Movement, and here maybe you know, in Colorado, the front range was a real hub of what was called Chicano activism at the time as well. And so that's been interesting to get to learn a little bit about. You know, Metro State in Denver, and I forget what the Pueblo School was called. It was called Pueblo State College for a while and then became University of Southern. Anyway, up and down the front range. There were a lot of pretty activists Hispanics as well that saw themselves fitting into that model that the civil rights movement had put together.

([01:21:56](#)):

And then you got to tell kids when you're teaching the civil rights movement that Martin Luther King, he was accused of being a communist. The FBI wire tapped him, they uncovered, he had a couple of gay advisors who started getting harassed because of their supposed sexuality and that all. So what we now call intersectionality, I don't know what they called that at the time, but absolutely that was going on. And I think high school kids deserve to hear about that kind of stuff because none of these movements happen in a vacuum. I mean, I think I probably, when you all walked out about gun violence, I probably

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said, yeah, good for you, but please don't think for a minute that you're the first ones to come up with

this idea. Because students have been doing this for a long time. And that's I think what students should be doing. It's thinking about the world they they're growing into and whether it conforms to their values or not, and what they can do to change that. So yeah, I am trying to think some other examples from the history class. Yeah, I mean, I don't hesitate to tell kids that certain figures were, you know, had sexualities that did not conform to what were understood as norms at that time. Some of the early blues, the female blues performers, for example, in the 1920s, we do a couple lessons on music, which I really enjoy. And there was all sorts of interesting countercultural stuff swirling around there. The Harlem Renaissance, of course, and James Baldwin, we get to read a little bit of him when we get to the fifties, and I feel like kids deserve to learn about that stuff.

Eli Bastiaansen ([01:23:58](#)):

Like how you talk about music and art in your class, could you also relate it to Black Lives Matter, just the role of music in black culture?

Nick Psarakis ([01:24:09](#)):

I could, yeah, if I could get to the 21st century, absolutely. I had a great contact with a professor at Colorado College who I didn't have when I was there, but have been able to connect with who's a, she's or was in the English department, but considers herself a folklorist with special interest in African American culture. And she got me connected to this historian of African-American music who I think was at Indiana, University of Indiana for a long time, who wrote this big book, it's almost like an encyclopedia, I think just called African-American Music. And the more modern chapters, absolutely on hip hop I've read, I have not gotten to a point where I feel comfortable to fully teach them to kids because again, the repeat the problem that I keep begging forgiveness for, and that's just the timing of my class and not being able to get to the present.

([01:25:26](#)):

But I found that teaching modern culture to teenagers, you teenagers always feel like you have an intense sense of ownership over it and the right to fully explain and interpret it. And it's kind of hard to sometimes crack through that and explain where some of these more modern cultural movements actually have historic roots. And so I've enjoyed, well, for example, I have a lesson on 1960s soul music, and I frame it as the soundtrack to the Black Power Movement. And we also read some poems from the Black Arts Poetry Movement of the sixties. And when we were doing that, I try to ask the kids to tell me if there are examples in modern day music and culture that they hear some resonance with some of that sixties stuff. And inevitably they'll bring up stuff that I've never heard of before. And I've never been somebody who's been really up on popular music either. So it's kind of some self consciousness of my own, but I think just asking kids to articulate, "Hey, do you know of something today that relates back to some of this stuff that we're listening to?"

([01:27:08](#)):

And that helps kids start to recognize that, again, nothing happens in a vacuum. And it's all rooted in, rooted in history in some way. So yeah, I mean, if I had a year, I would absolutely feel very obligated in a serious way to learn a lot more about more modern music. But this Indiana professor who wrote this African-American music book, she actually has an interactive timeline that she's put together, I think with maybe Smithsonian Folkways music. And kids can go in and it's a big tree of black music in American history, and you can go in and click on things and it'll play noteworthy examples of various types of music. And it's just fascinating. And yet again, in a one semester high school elective class, it

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gets to be too much. And I think if I was a better teacher, a little more creative, I might have kids do maybe a project on that or something, but I'm working on it. So thank you for the reminder that I need to get going on that.

Eli Bastiaansen ([01:28:21](#)):

How do you see the future of your class and how it will continue to evolve moving forward? Do you think it has the potential to grow or maybe one day District 20 and Rampart will have an AP African American class?

Nick Psarakis ([01:28:38](#)):

Well, so as far as I know, there are no other high schools. Well, I know there are no other high schools in District 20 that teach the class. I think Air Academy does, they have an ethnic studies class or something. And I got ahold of that curriculum, and this teacher was just doing a bunch of projects with kids, and there wasn't a narrative that he was kind of tying it all to. When I was putting this together three years ago, there were no D-11 schools that had black history. Since I started teaching, I have been aware that Mesa Ridge High School down in Widefield District down south, they started the African-American Studies AP class, which interestingly, after the spat over that with Florida last year, college board, I haven't even been able to get ahold of the curriculum on college board. And I'm an AP teacher and you can't even find it on their website yet, which is a whole nother issue. I don't know if they're, don't know what they're doing. Anyway, I know the principal down there, so I got a copy of the curriculum, and it's surprisingly close to what I do. Obviously it's supposed to be taught over an entire year, but it is, it's a history class. And I think that over time, it would be a great thing if kids express the desire to take the class or a similar class. I think that schools would be kind of pushed into offering it.

([01:30:30](#)):

I don't feel like, I don't know at Rampart, I mean, my years may be numbered there just given my age. And right now there's not another person in the building who really, who is a logical person to take the class. I mean, it's not like hundreds and hundreds of kids have signed up for it. But it's been interesting, the mix of kids that I've gotten in there, 10th, 11th, and 12th graders typically. So I think Rampart right now is maybe 15% of our population is African-American. And typically about a third of the kids in my class will be black, but this being 2023 and not like 1980 kids who identify as black maybe everything from an adopted immigrant kid from Ethiopia, child of Haitian immigrants, Puerto Rican, native Spanish speaking, mixed, Puerto Rico is such an amazing mix. So then all the mixed ethnicity kids that you know are part of your generation, I mean America, I think for eight or ten years now, a majority of babies being born have been non-white.

([01:31:56](#)):

And so it's just the demographics are moving. And then there've been a number of kids who don't identify as black, who run the whole range from kids who just want to take one of my classes again to kids I've never seen before, but are kind of interested in social justice issues and start to see some

resonance with our class and the issues that they're interested in. And so it's been a really stimulating mix of kids and a different group it seems every semester. I mean, I've taught five iterations of the class. I'm about to do my sixth this spring, as I think I explained to you the other day. And every time it's a different kind of group of kids and you kind of have to figure out what are they going to be interested in and how to nudge the curriculum here or there. So.

Eli Bastiaansen ([01:32:56](#)):

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Thank you.

Nick Psarakis ([01:32:57](#)):

Does that help?

Eli Bastiaansen ([01:32:57](#)):

Yeah. Just to return quickly back to Black Lives Matter, do you think that the movement and the message was ultimately successful? And do you think it's even still going on? Does the movement still have a future? Sorry I know that's sort of a loaded question.

Nick Psarakis ([01:33:19](#)):

Yeah. I think I would feel more confident answering that question after next year's presidential election. Yeah, I don't know. And I feel sheepish saying anything with you who've been studying it all semester. You obviously know more about it than I do, but just as somebody just who reads the newspaper and looks at kind of mainstream online news sources, New York Times and CNN, things like that, I'm going to say that it seems like the movement's moment has passed as a movement. But that this, this concern about police misconduct is one that remains. And I think if there's a clear, it just seems from my little perspective perch of the world at the moment that just some more focus on good community policing and some thoughtful training of police officers. I would ascribe that to BLM just given that I've seen the whole thing evolve during my adult years. But yeah, as far as a preview, I really don't know.

([01:34:47](#)):

School safety, I guess our little window into that world that I'm part of, we are still committed to having officers in schools. We didn't get rid of 'em like Denver did two years ago, largely because of student protests by the way. You know the Denver kids DPS had been much more active than the Colorado Springs kids, and not just District 20, even the city district. But Denver brought the cops back to the high schools after that shooting at Denver East. When was that? Last spring?

Eli Bastiaansen ([01:35:25](#)):

I think so.

Nick Psarakis ([01:35:26](#)):

Or something, and so. So I don't know. I don't know. But I think principals are more aware of how the school resource officers are perceived by students. Mr. Alvarez, again, this is just an anecdote, but he told me a couple of years ago that he had a run-in with school security because one of, now, this is not the school resource officer, which is the cop, but rather the school security folks.

[\(01:36:07\)](#):

You remember the difference between those? He said. He told me that apparently one of the security guards had quote, pulled out his gun on a black kid in the bathroom because the kid was not obeying him. And that he had to have a long conversation with the school security about how we treat kids and how we handle these disagreements. And that's in a pretty tamed school. Rampart. I have no idea what's going on in other schools that may have bigger discipline problems, but I think it's just, it's a small window into this larger issue that America has been wrestling with for decades. And that's how our attitudes towards policing are very much wrapped up into our racial attitudes and stereotypes about

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people and poverty and all this stuff. But yeah, I guess I would say in terms of moving the dialogue forward, it seems at this point things, it has been progress.

[\(01:37:12\)](#):

But all grassroots movements, I mean, they have to be, the energy of the followers have to be maintained. It's not just the leaders, but it's the followers also. And that's a story. I mean, when I teach the civil rights movement to the kids in the Black History class, I really try to emphasize that we have this image of the civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King, but the civil rights movement was actually a movement of people that had a few leaders, often whom leaders that got raised up out of the people. And for that matter, a lot of that actually got started in the 1940s with teenagers, you know, protesting segregated movie theaters and restaurants and things like that. There were high school kids that did it. And when that energy dissipated, there's no leader in the world who can lead a movement of people who don't have any energy. And so I think that's what Black Lives Matter is probably going to face just like every other grassroots movement has in our country's history.

Eli Bastiaansen [\(01:38:17\)](#):

And even with the college sit-ins, it takes the people and the students especially who have that voice to step up.

Nick Psarakis [\(01:38:25\)](#):

Yeah, absolutely.

Eli Bastiaansen [\(01:38:28\)](#):

Yeah. I guess thank you so much for this time. Is there anything else you would like to add? Anything you'd like to mention or include?

Nick Psarakis ([01:38:38](#)):

No. You've asked some very good questions, Eli, and very comprehensive. I just, again, I hope I didn't go off on, do you have to transcribe all this stuff typed, or is it just in existence

Eli Bastiaansen ([01:38:50](#)):

We have like an AI to help us.

Nick Psarakis ([01:38:52](#)):

Oh, okay. Good. And then you get to proofread it or something?

Eli Bastiaansen ([01:38:56](#)):

Exactly.

Nick Psarakis ([01:38:56](#)):

Okay, good. Well, I hope I haven't gummed up the AI transcriber too much with all that, but. No, yeah, I am happy that my shoulder was tapped to be summoned. It's here I am, pick me moment. And like I said the other day, I really feel like it's enriched my regular history teaching. And I think the value I'm finding in it is going to be a significant factor in how much longer I decide to teach too. Because I'm here in my 29th year options start opening up in year 30. And yet this is really all I've done in my life, and I feel like

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I'm still getting a little better at it every year. And it's almost become a bit of a responsibility now. And so, yeah, it would be wonderful if I could find a way to maybe diffuse it a little bit.

([01:40:04](#)):

I wish I had a colleague who was really excited. I had initially hoped to do it as a team taught class. And actually, I had approached Mrs. Tucker. She and I had talked a lot about teaching it together. She had other career aspirations in administration. But I thought that the best scenario at some point might've been a co-taught class with two different people, meaning either two different genders, two different ethnicities, or people from two different departments. And I think that could have been really rich, and I regret not having that opportunity apparently. But we'll see what the kids want over the next couple of years and see where it goes. So yeah.

Eli Bastiaansen ([01:41:04](#)):

Well, thank you again, Mr. Psarakis, for being here.

Nick Psarakis ([01:41:07](#)):

Yeah, you're welcome.

Eli Bastiaansen ([01:41:08](#)):

And for your insight

Nick Psarakis ([01:41:09](#)):

Oh, it was a pleasure.

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