

Dr. Michael Leo Owens Interview for the Spring 2015 issue of *e.polis*

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**Meghan McDonald (MM): Dr. Michael Leo Owens, thank you so much for coming to visit us and sitting down with me. We're really excited to have you.**

Michael Leo Owens (MLO): It's my honor, very high honor. One, the reputation of the Urban Studies Program is fantastic and two, this is also where the Urban Affairs Association's headquarters are, so as the chair of the board, it makes a lot of sense that I come pay a visit. It's not required of chairs of the board, but I think it's tremendously valuable, and also, UWM is one of the institutional members of the Urban Affairs Association as well, and so, anything I can do to assist our members, I'm almost always willing to do.

**MM: And towards the end, we'll circle back around to the UAA. First, I just wanted to get a general idea about why urban scholarship is important to you?**

MLO: For myself, I had an urban childhood, and my urban childhood, and maybe other people's urban childhoods, had some really great experiences, but also had some not so great experiences, and even as a very young child, I wondered why these negative experiences were happening to me, and those like me. So I just always had an appreciation for cities and urban life, and more importantly, an appreciation for the people who are doing things to try to transform cities and urban life into true spaces of opportunity for kids who are like me. I also think that urban scholarship is important because of the ways of the world. We now live in a majority-urbanized world, doesn't matter what continent you're on, other than Antarctica. Cities, or at least the idea of urbanized space, that sprawls, is important and more people need to pay attention to it. More importantly, not just pay attention to these urbanized spaces, but try to learn as much as they can about the forces and factors that influences the shape and size of them, but also more importantly, what happens inside of them. The ways in which people do and don't find ways to cooperate with one another, and the ways in which people do and don't come to agreement around how you understand problems in urbanized spaces and also "solutions" to some of these problems.

**MM: That sounds great. I think you put all of that really well and it's also interesting, there's so much opportunity and there's so much that being in urban, dense space offers, but at the same time, if you're not, we as a society are not careful about all those forces and the way they interplay, can also be a tough place for a lot of folks.**

MLO: Oh, cities can be, cities are and have been incredibly difficult places for an awful lot of people. That is, it's not unfortunate, because unfortunate implies that there's some degree of fortune, that there is something going on beyond our ability, so I can't say unfortunate. In some ways it's by design, the degree of misery that we have in cities and urban spaces and I think we should be very clear about that. A variety of institutions, I think, are aligned against truly having great, great, great cities all across the grid. So I think you're right to raise that point. Life

shouldn't be so hard. Whether in a city or even in a suburb, because we now we have to increasingly talk about impoverishment of some suburbs and the challenges that some people face in suburbs. Just off the top of my head, I'm thinking about the satellite city of Ferguson in Missouri and all of the unrest that's going on there. Driven again, not by fortune, but by choices that human beings have made that have created misery for some people. That also connects back to your opening question, why we should care about urban scholarship, because urban scholarship is one of the ways we'll eventually be able to improve the number and quality of opportunities for people that find themselves in miserable existences in our cities, within the United States, North America and the rest of world. So, I think that that's really important, and any urbanist that you talk to, well, I shouldn't say any, many urbanists that you talk to, if you scratch the surface of what they think they're doing, I think they'll tell you that they think they are trying to be part of a variety of solutions that could make cities more workable for a greater number of people than it is currently.

**MM: Speaking of misery by design and the need for solutions, how did your focus on decarcerated citizens develop?**

MLO: It's a long story, but not all that long. I'm a political scientist, urban politics scholar; my first book and set of research projects were around the politics of community development, in particular, public-private partnerships to address some degrees of inequality around affordable housing. I especially tried to think about the ways in which religious institutions could assist communities and governments trying to resolve some problems. So, I wasn't concerned about the prisoned people, not necessarily. However, I have a sister, and my sister is a deputy warden and chief psychiatrist in a federal penitentiary. The federal penitentiary had an open house to celebrate, sadly, the addition of a new set of cellblocks. So, I was asked if I wanted to go to the open house, and I got a tour of the facility and one thing I noticed on at least the cellblock they took me to, there was lots of silence even though there were all these incarcerated men and they were watching television. I had a very simple question, I asked the guard/tour guide, "Who decides what they watch on television?" and the guard responded by just blinking at me, and they had this sort of curious look on their face and he said, well they do. And I said "what do you mean, they do?" and he said "well, you know, they, sure, they have representatives." I had this wacky idea, "oh, maybe I'll pursue a project on the democracy of prisons and these representatives, and the ways in which we're all prisoners of democracy". I left the correctional institution super excited and I would tell everyone what I was going to be focusing on, and even though it wasn't directly an offshoot of what I was studying, I was just fascinated by what I was observing.

I then was invited to the Annie Casey Foundation, which has been one of the philanthropies that, for a long time has seriously considered the question of the challenges for people released from prison, and then what happens to their families and kids and a variety of other things. So, I was invited to an event that was around the question of religious organizations and social welfare policy, which connected to my first book and set of projects, but it was specifically focused on ex-prisoner reentry. So I said, "yeah, sure, I'll go." I was seated at a dinner table with some formerly incarcerated people and they asked me, "what do you do, what are you studying?" and I thought, this is my chance to really sound smart. So I started telling them about my project of prisoners of democracy and how even in prison, we could consider our authoritarian space to still

have some degree of democracy and they all started laughing in response. I just sort of said, "well, what's so funny?" and they explained to me how I didn't know what I was talking about, in far more colorful terms than what I just said. They had a good laugh at my expense and they schooled me to say, "No, no, no there are no representatives, its gang leadership, that's what the signs were". But then they said to me, they said, "if you really are concerned though about this idea of prisoners in democracy, then you need to pay attention to what happens to us when we leave prison, that's what you need to focus on". I took that very seriously.

I began to just read; this would have been around the time when we were in the first electoral campaign of George Bush when we were hearing about Florida and the ways in which Florida was disenfranchising formerly incarcerated people and its consequences. In fact, were on the ground, especially for community of color in urbanized spaces. I decided very seriously that I was going to try to better understand the politics of mass incarceration around the question, yes, what does happen to a person and the communities that they come from and return to when a person is released from prison. So that's how I started to focus on what I now refer to as "decarcerated" citizens. I have found it to be a very fascinating line of inquiry, questioning, and answers. I find it more interesting than some of the other stuff I've done and am currently doing. A long winded answer, but it's the only way I could really answer your question and do it justice as to how I came to start focusing on decarcerated citizens.

**MM: That's nice, and I really appreciate your verbiage because the focus is, these are citizens, these are American citizens, who, one aspect of their multifaceted character happens to be the experience of being incarcerated.**

MLO: And also, I mean just the termage we use, it took me a while to use the term decarcerated citizen, and that's mainly because I have, at this point, interviewed an awful lot, either face to face interviews or focus groups with formerly incarcerated people and one of my questions always was, "what do you want to be called?" So when you asked me, when we first met today, "what do you want to be called?" I never really think about that question. But for a lot of people who have been incarcerated a good number of them have thought about the question. There are those who oppose "convict", who oppose "ex-convict", there are those who oppose "ex-offender". Actually in some contexts there are certain institutions that still refer to people who are no longer incarcerated as "offenders", this is the language of department of corrections for example in the United States. Then, just sort of being exposed to more formerly incarcerated people, I began to acquire a true appreciation that one should be mindful of what other people want to be called. But then also, once you try to come up a phrase or a term that is most accurate, and I do think that decarcerated citizen is the most accurate term to use for folks, because, as you pointed out, they still are citizens, even when they are incarcerated, they're citizens. We might not like to think about that, but they are. The challenges that they face because of their former citizenship, you can refer to it even as a felonious citizenship, because they have the felony conviction, means that their life is very different from other people's lives. There are those who would say, "well yeah, they're different and it should be because they were convicted of a felony." Well, that's debatable, and the degree to which decarcerated citizens should face, in some ways, perpetual punishment is really problematic from my perspective.

**MM: So, at this point, we've got millions and millions of citizens and denizens, or residents of the United States who are wrapped up in the criminal justice system. Some of them are still able to access education and training while they are inside, and I feel like a lot of these people point to that, but I'm wondering if those who do experience that are able to actually, effectively, use that experience and training to secure a better quality of life, or jobs, or housing once they're released and I'm wondering if you could talk about that a little.**

MLO: So, I think it is true that across the United States there are correctional institutions that provide inmates with a certain modicum of education or educational opportunities. Not like what it used to be, in the United States, but you could still find it. However, it isn't necessarily true that all of those opportunities on the inside are available to *everyone* on the inside. We know that that's not necessarily true. I had a former student of mine at Emory University, who rightly unbeknownst to me had been in prison for about three years in the state of Georgia. I only learned that he had been in prison because he told me he had been in prison. He was trying to-- even though he had been out for a few years and ended up at Emory-- was really still trying to get a hold on a better life for himself. But I remember having a conversation, I asked him about when he was inside, what it was like, and opportunities. Very clear, he said, "you know, in some ways it's almost like honors programs at universities. There are certain levels and qualities of programming for certain types of people who are incarcerated". I just wanted to be clear about that, these opportunities aren't for everyone.

The other thing I would say is that in some ways some of the opportunities that are available are sort of silly opportunities. So, for example, barbering, cosmetology are very important programs that prepare people for the outside. Well, but the reality is that in many states however, formerly incarcerated people are prohibited from requiring certifications that allow them to get licenses to be barbers or cosmetologists, so it's sort of like, what exactly are we preparing them for when they are released. The other thing we know too, is even when there are opportunities provided, how people are perceived on the outside is what's going to really matter, in addition to whatever skills you have. How people perceive that gap on your resume is going to mean an awful lot with regards to whether or not you'll ever be able to get a job. So, I'm not poo-pooing educational programming inside prisons, what I would say is that we need more of it, we probably need to think more seriously about the types of educational opportunities we provide to people, ones that are more in line with what they are able to acquire on the outside.

But then, it still raises the question, what about the outside and the worlds that people find themselves in? The labor markets when they come outside of prison. We also have to still do a whole lot more to convince employers and create incentives for employers to hire people who have criminal convictions and records of incarceration. There's also too, the logical argument that some people say, why do you want us to focus so much on people who have broken the laws, but you could be talking about urban areas where, there are so many people in urban areas who have not broken laws and been imprisoned who can't get jobs. [They] don't have necessarily the best bridges to high quality educational experiences. Why do you want us to make investments in these other people? I can completely understand that argument, but if we believe that safety is important, it's probably likely that the ones who, "are doing right but just not getting ahead" will continue to do right, which isn't necessarily true for some people who "did

wrong" and so it makes sense to actually make slightly more of an investment in them, to just sort of connect them.

I think the other thing we could argue too, is that for some people who have been convicted of crimes and sent to prisons, that in some ways, maybe they weren't as habilitated as some other people, even within the same urban context. To me, that raises the question of inequality, that there was some earlier inequality that had gone unaddressed. So, we can't keep allowing for those inequalities to exist. If we do, we're just going to continue to have the problem we have of recidivism.

**MM: Right on. So before I switch gears, I want to think about the reentry programs and different ways that, as citizens are able to leave incarceration and navigate that space of being paroled or going through probation. What do the efforts outside of prison, either how do they prepare with, if there is any preparatory stuff inside the prison, and also, lots of these folks are returning to neighborhoods that don't have a lot of resources, don't have a community that's habilitated in meaningful ways. So I'm just wondering about that terrain.**

MLO: So, those who have heard me speak before on the question and the challenges of reentry know that I always make a distinction between reentry and reintegration. I think that is very important, as one criminologist says, "reentry is something that is just going to happen, because people are released, and so they reenter and that's sort of it". The challenge for us is reintegration. Some of those people who reenter will negatively reintegrate back into society and some of those people will positively reintegrate back into society and we need to be doing things and using, I think, the language of reintegration.

Also, I would say, for some people it's not even reintegration, its integration. Because if they had been integrated in the first place, they might not have ended up where they were. So this speaks to an earlier point about some folks having been habilitated and others not having been habilitated, right. Just sort of acquiring a certain set of skills and competencies that allow them to perhaps make better choices, so that's one thing: reentry versus reintegration.

Reintegration is important too, because if we talk about the language of reintegration, we also then recognize that it's within our power and ability to shape the experiences that that person has on the ground. I like to think that one way to foster positive reintegration is to focus on the ABCs, to really get those forms of *assistance* right that we provide to people. To get the types of *benefits* and the structure of benefits right, and then the C which I think is most important, is we need to use the word *compassion* and really think about trying to see ourselves and how we could actually help people. Another C we would use too, back to another point, is citizenship. Just remind ourselves these aren't aliens in any way, shape, or form. These are in fact, our own. Whether we want to acknowledge them or not, they are our own. They are our brothers and our sisters, and our mothers and fathers, and aunts and uncles; they are ours. And I think thinking about the ABCs, that's a better way to focus our conversation.

Another thing to focus our attention to is, for a long time, there was a disconnect, a sort of programming going on inside prisons then things happening on the outside. But now we're in a

time when departments of corrections themselves understand the need for there to be more of a bridge between the inside and the outside. Where departments of corrections have been making investments that foster serious consideration of at least getting inmates that are going to be released, to start thinking about what are you going to try to do when you get out. Where do you think you might live? What sort of job could you imagine yourself trying to acquire and all those sorts of things and just getting people to train their minds to focus on the day that they are going to be released, what then will they in fact try to do? In some places this has meant that departments of corrections have actually partnered with a variety of nonprofit organizations to come in and provide casework to inmates for their release and I think that that's really important so that organizations get a better sense of who the people are that will be returning to their communities, as well as being able to think and be more proactive about what that return might look like. Part of the challenge though, as any nonprofit organization focused on the imprisoned will tell you, is money. Again, it goes back to my earlier point that people will say, "why should we invest in that type of nonprofit organization when there are all these other nonprofit organizations that we could be investing in, people who are perceived as more high-quality or higher value to society?" so that becomes very tricky. The fact that most nonprofit organizations that are working on questions of reentry and reintegration don't have their own employment pools that they can create and jobs that they can provide makes it very difficult. I have interviewed folks who were very clear about what their early weeks, months, years were like after being released. When, given the realities of their limited skill sets, limited work experiences, the ease at which they could fall back into addiction or addictions, who I think, rationally made choices to return to the sort of behavior that got them into prison in the first place. But they were seriously questioning, "but what else was I to do?" So I think it's really hard. It is really interesting that we are, at this time when lots of people are talking about prisons, mass incarceration, and departments of corrections are arguably attempting to reform themselves, where they don't see recidivism as a good thing. They would prefer that people not return, although I don't get the sense that departments of corrections, those folks are trying to really work themselves out of a job, per se. But there is the idea that they do hope that people, once they have been released, they will not return. Probably just because there will be new bodies coming in. But also, there is an appreciation for how much is spent on corrections versus other things, which has lots of state level policy makers questioning how we go about doing things, and so that's partly why we see more of this appreciation. We've got to do things better on the inside, but while you're doing it on the inside, you need to have connections already to people and groups on the outside, so that they are sort of one of the same. So the release and transition is a lot smoother and clearer for people. I'm thankful that we have these sorts of public conversations now. Whether it will ultimately lead to us decriminalizing, I don't know if that is true or not, I wish it would, but for now, at least recognize the challenges and try to be very serious about it.

This would include, now, arguably a non-partisan issue, because we can look around the country and look at states that have republican majorities in their legislatures and republican governors and they're speaking on these issues. They are thinking hard about these questions. As someone right described themselves, they're "right on crime," is how they are thinking about it. Although, in some ways of course, they're just sort of late to the party. There are folks on the left who have long been thinking about these questions and issues, but for some reason, curiously, more easier

for the right to lift this up as one of their issues, since they were the ones believed to be toughest on crime.

**MM: Yeah, I think about economics and interest convergences and that sort of stuff. Okay, Let's talk about felony disenfranchisement. So, there's wide variability between state laws and how that disenfranchisement plays out, and also the types of convictions that warrant this extra punishment. So what is the significance or purpose of this variability?**

MLO: Felony disenfranchisement is important, but I think we need to think more broadly, it's not just spelling disenfranchisement, right. It is a fuller set of ways in which we have public policies deliberately intended to limit the liberty of citizens with felony convictions, and more and more, I don't use incarceration because it's very narrow. Incarceration means that we're only focusing on people on the inside, so that's one thing, and when I think about disenfranchisement, I always think there are other ways in which we're hindering citizenship. So I like to use the word "imprisonment", just generally speaking, because imprisonment does not only mean that one is physically contained someplace, excluded from the rest of society and controlled by the state, imprisonment also means bounded and limited mobility and liberty. If we have that as our frame of reference, then we talk about denying the right to vote and maybe other forms of political rights. But then we also start thinking about social rights, the variety of benefits and opportunities that we make available in society to limit vulnerability and precariousness so people can have good lives. So, I think about the ways in which we restrict access to, in some states, TANF and food stamps for drug felony, and even in some other states, like my state of Georgia, it goes beyond drug felony, if you get convicted of a major felony crime, you also don't have access to these benefits.

I think it also means we have to pay attention to the ways in which we exclude people from other sets of benefits. So we think about the restrictions that some public housing authorities have, on who can and who can't live inside their units, which would include, not only the person with the criminal record, but the family itself, if that person is returning. Reentry and they try to move back in with mama, well mama can't live there anymore. So in some ways, imprisonment not only applies to the person with a criminal conviction, it begins to spread out and capture a whole bunch of other people as well.

I think we also pay attention to the ways in which our policies further diminish the ability of formerly incarcerated people to be fully engaged in civil society and in the public square. So the policies that hinder the ability of formerly incarcerated people to serve on juries, for example, or to run for office, a variety of things. To possess a firearm, the ways in which, again, we say that a record will hinder you from having a certain certification that might allow you to be better off. Not being able to vote is an important issue to raise, but it's just a part of all these other things, and in some ways I think felony disenfranchisement is actually less important than these, still important, just less important than these other things that are more about the everyday experience of limited opportunity that people face.

But to your specific question about the variation, and why some places really seem to be opposed to allowing people to vote, well the first thing I would say is, it is true that one, that we have variation and there still are some places where if you have a felony conviction it is very difficult

to ever get your rights restored, unless you get pardoned from the governor, which is very, very unlikely. But we also need to acknowledge though, that the trend over the decades has actually been for states to reinstate, to return the right to vote to people. So that's at least a positive thing that we can focus on.

The other thing I'd say about felony disenfranchisement, is that not only is the specific target group disenfranchised, so people with felony conviction, although, if you read the rules of the state, which you always have to do, it might be that, you might have a felony conviction but you are allowed to vote. But you have heard this message, popular culture, once a felon, always a felon and therefore you can't vote, which isn't true. So you're disenfranchised through ignorance in that case, so that's something you want to put on the table, and the ways in which you can reduce that could be very serious.

The variation, of course, if we look at some of the empirical studies that are attempting to identify correlates of why some states are more restrictive of voting rights than others, there is still the question of what the racial composition of the state looks like, there is the reality of what the partisan makeup of the legislature looks like. Just sort of basic things so it comes down to the longstanding issues and intentions in the United States of race and partisanship, as well as ideology of course, mattering as well, but those are the big things that matter and account for why we see the variation that we see. But again, at least we are beginning to point to states that are making deliberate choices for the restoration of people's rights. It might not necessarily be upon release, but would be upon, right now, most states, if they were to restrict voting rights, they only restrict them during the period of incarceration, probation, or parole. Which, if you actually talk to regular people on the street, what they think would be a decent amount of time or space for limiting voting rights, that's exactly what the average American adult is. So, in some ways our policies match up with what the people want.

**MM: Right, but also the ignorance plays a role. So, a lot of these folks are in this space of marginality and then you have partisan or ideologically driven programs like hyping up voter fraud, and you've got the billboards, and black and brown neighborhoods that are scaring people. So, the level of stigmatization in the interlocking systems that keep these populations marginalized, operating under the hidden curriculum of punishment perhaps. I was wondering how, so you've written some on how organizations that are either community based organizations or organizations that have been founded by decarcerated individuals, I'm wondering how the different types of organizations connect with and find individuals that have or are imprisoned in some manner to foster the process of activism and organizing and such.**

MLO: Trying to pay more and more attention to what we can simply call decarceration CBOs. These are community organizations that deliberately exist for the purpose of assisting formerly incarcerated people, compared to some other community-based organizations where the formerly incarcerated person is just another one of the type of clients that could come walking through their door. Many of these organizations, the decarceration CBOs, make a very deliberate attempt to be known by departments of corrections as existing to assist and partner with DOCs when people are released, so that's one way how they have a sort of natural connection.



The other way in which they go about assisting people, they see themselves as not just being there for the decarcerated individual, they're there for the families of the decarcerated. So they're working with families to help them secure public benefits that are their right of citizenship. They are conducting varieties of programs and direct services in communities that experience the greatest rates of return by decarcerated citizen. So, they have a public presence in the places where you're most likely to find people that have criminal records and imprisonment experiences. There are not enough of these organizations, again, because the general type of CBO is the one where they are providing just services, and formerly incarcerated people may or may not be in the mix. That actually disadvantages the formerly incarcerated person, again, because this thing that we keep returning to of "why do I help the formerly incarcerated person versus all these other people that haven't been to prison." I think that that also gets in the way, as is another reason too, why you do need decarceration CBOs to exist and to truly exist for the purpose of serving that particular group. So I'd say those are the main ways which they go about identifying clients and how clients find out about them and then word of mouth, but it has to be good word of mouth because there are a lot of, typical or traditional community based organizations, who actually have a very bad reputation among formerly incarcerated people for how they had treated them when they came seeking assistance.

The decarceration CBOs sometimes have an advantage in that many of the people who have founded those organizations have been imprisoned themselves or at least are smart enough to have case workers who have been one time in prison or members of their board of directors that have been in prison or people that just have a true appreciation for the experience of imprisonment. Again, being incarcerated and all of the challenges the people face on the outside and what the consequences are for people's families and communities. I think that that also has made a difference. I think decarceration CBOs, those that also lift up the idea of citizenship and rights, that they stand out above any other sort of decarceration CBO, because they recognize that if you can sort of solved the persons citizenship situation it might make it more likely that you can begin to address more seriously the other challenges that they face in their life, because it's all connected.

**MM: So you kind of talked about the perceptions of legitimacy and I was going to ask about funding but the frame of the neoliberal, you know there are limited funds and who's deserving of them, I guess there's going to be an ethical battle.**

MLO: it will always be a battle, for sure, but the only reason it's less of a battle for now is because, again, you have states and departments of corrections trying to figure out how to reduce recidivism rates and you have legislatures that are putting pressures on DOCs to bring down their expenses and costs. Cost of continuing to, in essence, have correctional control because you control people correctionally on the inside but we also do it on the outside as well. I think, only for those reasons now do we see the possibility for decarceration CBOs to acquire money, contracts, grants and those sorts of things, they'll always be the sorts of organizations that receive the less. Very few philanthropies are really rushing to give grants to such organizations, which is a shame.

**MM: So you talked a little bit about it today and you've written about developing the capacity of the community as a whole and not just focusing on individual citizens. Do you**

**want to talk a little bit about why? Or is it kind of a given because we know, for instance, here in Milwaukee a report came out last year that pinpointed one zip code in particular that hemorrhages citizens to the system. So this is of course where they return, where there are high rates of joblessness, its deindustrialized, poverty, residential segregation. So, the community needs habilitation as a whole.**

MLO: So everything we've been talking about is community development, we've just been focusing on the specific slice of it. Of course, a reason to focus on the broader idea of community development, and it's not disconnected from the conversation we've having, is that the imprisoned come from families, and they live in communities. Probably, many urbanists believe that if you can figure out a way to make the right sort of investments in communities where you have the greatest numbers going into the system of incarceration, if you make the right investments, you'll have less of that. So you'll have less individuals going into the system, and you'll have fewer individuals affected by it, even though they have not been in the system themselves.

So you think about kids, in particular, but at the end of the day though, we're still talking about the long standing cleavages and trenches created by race and created by class in the United States, and it's sad because right then, it really does create this zero sum perspective for some people. Again, "why would you want to help bad Milo when there's good Milo's all around," and that really shouldn't be the question. The question is, "why aren't these communities better off in the first place"? There will always be people committing crimes regardless of the racial group or the class status, we know this. One face I'll show this afternoon is Martha Stewart; she's a prime example of what I'm talking about. But we can work very seriously to try to reduce the number of people who are engaged in criminal activity. Particularly the number of people who feel that their only, or best option is, as one of my favorite rappers, Biggy Smalls says, "the ski mask way;" robbing someone on the street corner or what have you, home invasions and the like. But it is, I don't know, I'm somewhat of a pessimist, I normally don't like to say this publically, but I am somewhat of a pessimist because we've been at this for a really long time trying to wrestle with questions of "what would be good public policy" only to see a lot of those proposals go nowhere, or to get a start but to be completely under invested in; or to have, putting theory on the ground in terms of practice, it just falls apart because programs weren't designed the way they really should have been. Although, that then speaks back to theory, which means we probably had the theory wrong. All I can say is every day, I'm one of those urbanists that gets up and looks at the world and I like to think that the scholarship I produce can somehow help people try to create a world where we do make more investments in community development, broadly understood. That's what we are pursuing, the idea of trying to foster greater quality of true opportunity for people, and that we're very serious about trying to create equitable outcomes in the world as well. Not just sort of leave it up to fortune, whether someone is really able to transfer the skills and competencies they have into a good life.

I used to do a lot of writing and study around community development corporations. I think that they still have a purpose for sure, but in some ways we now look back on the work of some of them that were well intentioned, and some of us would conclude, myself included in that group, that a lot of community development though, paved the way for more problems. At least the that way we went about it, and the way in which we structured funding and a variety of other things

and choices that were made that led now to gentrification in some spaces. It was like wow, who would have ever thought that we would make all these investments in poor places and now we're looking at who are the real beneficiaries, people who aren't poor. So, that's sort of curious. Then there are those political scientists in particular, I'm kind of in this camp, who would say that too often our community development has been, as we were doing community development there wasn't much going on around political mobilization. So, you had all this great investment in community development that actually resulted in ridiculous amounts of political demobilization of people. And we still haven't figure out how to really meld the political with the development even though development is always political, for some reason we don't really bring the two together, so that is very problematic.

**MM: This morning I finished Derrick Bell's *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, and the epilogue is beyond despair. So you're staring at something that, he argues is permanent, we still have to keep pushing.**

MLO: and that's hard! Because it's just so much easier to cool out and just throw up your hands, and think the world is what the world is, I'm just one little person. I used to have my own little good life, and that's it. Of course a lot of people do that.

**MM: Or to be satisfied with "I'm pushing for affirmative action at my workplace".**

MLO: Exactly, doing things on the margins, but the margins, that's just not going to help. And the case of this specific group of decarcerated citizens tinkering around the edges, that's not what's needed at all. I would also make the distinction too, people always say, "you're willing to help some of the worst people", and I said "that's not really true, I'm willing to help people that have done terrible things in life, but who now want to do different things." I'm for full support of any formerly incarcerated person who is trying to positively reintegrate back into society. And I recognize that that is not necessarily every person being released from prison or jails, so I'm always very clear about that, because to invest in them, is a waste of money on, "the bad people," so to speak. But, I do believe there are far more good people who just found themselves in bad situations and made bad choices, or the best choice that they could make given the circumstance, that it's worth my time to help them.

**MM: So bringing our conversation back to UWM and the academic community, as a student, I'd be remiss if I didn't ask for your advice. We've got folks who are either interested in these issues, or outraged by these issues, what would you recommend as either a research or action item? Thinking about, between the current state of imprisonment or the ideological push or the pain and the stigma. So obviously, your background in political science and CBCs and that sort of stuff, but have you identified other avenues, research that you think sounds cool or you think is important but you're not necessarily going to pick it up.**

MLO: To this specific issue of imprisonment, and partly because I'm influenced by the organization I volunteer with, Forever Family, which helps children of the imprisoned, I think that's an important angle for people to pay attention to. More scholars and doing more work around what are the effects on children having incarcerated parents. From my perspective, I'm

very much interested in what the political effects are in terms of political behavior added to, and actions, and as young people get older, are they less likely to be engaged in civic life in the political system? I think would be very important. I also think it would be important to better understand the multigenerational effects. Too often, we're either going to focus on the adult, we're going to focus on the children, not recognizing that some of the children actually come from, or just the latest generation of a family that has had multiple incarceration experiences up to that point, that is something worthy of more attention. I also think, what ever happened to the prisoner's rights movement in the United States? How come we don't see anything like what we saw in the 60s and early 70s, and what that has also meant for what we think about incarcerating people?

I think too, that there should be a little bit more focus, and these are for the folks in religious studies and schools of theology, those that have this idea of public theology-- of what if anything more could religious institutions be doing to try to speak to the problems of mass imprisonment in the United States? I firmly believe that for most people who generally don't think about these questions, it will require either that someone very close to them goes to prison or that institutions that they identify as having some sort of moral guidance for them, speak to an issue. I would like to see more of an understanding of what might be challenging, or hindering more religious institutions from taking this up as an issue for them to be engaged with. For those that are already engaged, what sort of tripped in their minds to say, "this is what we should be doing," and even the challenges that they face in trying to advance concern around these questions. Those are some things just off the top of my head that come to my mind.

Then, trying to better understand, when we do see states adopting more inclusive or rehabilitative policies towards the formerly imprisoned, and even in some cases the imprisoned, and what are the factors that really drive that as a means of trying to then craft messages that perhaps will have or gain some traction in states that aren't doing that, I think would be important as well. I am thankful that we are seeing more and more scholars really interacting with decarceration CBOs and just other entities around questions of mass imprisonment in the United States, I think that's only for the better, I think it will make our scholarship better. As is the case with myself and the formerly incarcerated people at the dinner table that laughed at me and completely influenced by research agenda, but I also think that there is the potential for us scholars to really provide some basic information to organizations that might help them do things a little bit differently, but that's always our hope as scholars.

**MM: Speaking of which, I looked at the UAA's mission statement, which is nice. So as a professional organization, how do you see it as an effective counter to (inaudible) critique of academic research?**

MLO: Well in the case of the Urban Affairs Association, the one thing that always comes to my mind is that we have scholars as members and members as scholars who are not stuck behind the walls of the academy. Most of our members are fully engaged scholars. Engaged in a variety of university-community partnerships. Creating university- community partnerships. Our members are not only academics; they are serving and volunteering with organizations on the ground that are doing really important work. Also, the Urban Affairs Association, while most of its members are scholars, not all of our members are scholars. We have a good number of practitioners who

also are members and participate in the association. Ours is an association that also recognizes activist scholarship, truly engaged scholarship, and we've given away an award annually in the host city for our conference. We take it very seriously and we try to acknowledge those members who really are making attempts through scholarship and other means to manifest the mission of the Urban Affairs Association which part of that mission is to attempt to make investments that lead to a more just world. I think that many of our members are actually doing. I am very proud to be a member of the association and honored to be one of its leaders.