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Oral History: Interview with David Cobb

Taylor Rae Powert

Humboldt State University, trp28@humboldt.edu

David Cobb

davidkcobb@gmail.com

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09:33:46 Good morning, David. Good morning Taylor How are you, I'm great. How are you today. I'm good, thank you.

09:33:56 I do want to start off by asking for consent to record, you can totally say no, it is being transcribed. So the recording would just be for my purposes, if that's not something you're comfortable with that's totally fine.

09:34:09 I consent. Okay, awesome. Thank you. I will be also sending you a release form, so that we can use this interview today. I'll probably be sending that later this afternoon, if that's all right with you.

09:34:22 Yes.

09:34:25 before I get started I want to make sure we are creating a comfortable, safe space so I just want to start off by asking, How are you doing? what have you been up to?

09:34:45 Well, mostly I've been focused on helping to build Discover Humboldt, which is an indigenous lead community land trust.

09:34:55 Yeah, we're still dealing with our Covid response and our food team are like all of our programs are continuing but that's what's taking most of my time these days which is pretty exciting.

09:35:05 That's awesome. It sounds like a great way to be using your time. Thank you.

09:35:11 Um, I also want to ask, what is your role in the local food pantry.

09:35:30 Well I'm the executive director of cooperation Humboldt operates, according to program areas.

09:35:25 And in each program area there is a project so our program areas are food, housing, economic democracy care and wellness art and culture.

09:35:36 That's all of the website right.

09:35:38 Each of those program areas have individual projects under them so under food. There's the

09:35:49 public fruit trees the little free pantries.

09:35:53 The mini gardens the educational offerings The, the Community Food Guide. So, the little free pantry is a project of that.

09:36:02 And each of those program areas operate according to circles of autonomous but connected work. So I serve as a connector from the food team to the board of directors.

09:36:18 That's awesome. Sounds like you guys have got your hands full Ah, yes.

09:36:23 All right, just for the record I do need to state that today is Monday June 28 2021 at roughly 9:34 am.

09:36:36 So I want to start off by just kind of describing the functions of the little free pantry.

09:36:44 Okay, so they exist as a place to share food, so that folks who want to give can do so without any need for your accuracy paperwork, etc. And folks can take without any need to prove a need, no bureaucracy paperwork what we're trying to do is add to the

09:37:12 existing ecosystem for food delivery but probably more importantly, I should have even started with cooperation humble foundational belief around food is that access to nutritious organic

culturally appropriate food is and should be treated as a human
09:37:33 right, and not dependent on wealth or income.

09:37:38 So, the little free pantry, as all of our other projects are
part of an effort to shift, how we think about and treat food to
ultimately create a vibrant food forest where food is freely available
to all that is so awesome and truly admirable.

09:37:59 I ground applause to all of you. That's fantastic. I love to
hear that.

09:38:05 How would you say the organization has adapted to the Covid
pandemic? has there been changes, is there any notable experiences
that you would like to mention?

09:38:18 Sure. So I think that it's important to realize, I mean, here
we are almost a year and a half out, but when the Shelter in Place
Order first came in. It is worth remembering that nobody knew what to
do, not citizens, frankly not government, local state

09:38:36 or federal.

09:38:38 The emergency first responders, they were not trained or
prepared at all for a pandemic response.

09:38:47 And so, in those early stages, what we did was basically as
community organizers organized our community. And we created a system
quickly to allow folks who were sheltering in place, and we're.

09:39:07 And we're that way they could stay home.

09:39:10 Even if they were slightly ill, they could decrease their
social contact with others if they needed we were, we were giving them
the opportunity to practice, you know, proper hygiene and sanitation.

09:39:22 And with that we understood that people's lives were being
disrupted. So what we did was to create basically a mutual aid
network.

09:39:33 We created material support for those who were in need. So we
created a process for if you had needs. Let us know and then we also
organized, and that was in both English and Spanish.

09:39:52 And we created a place where folks who were in a position to
offer help could do so so running errands delivering supplies to those
folks who were self isolating.

09:40:04 We also in the early stages for the first several months
literally were making DIY hand sanitizer and cleaning supplies. We had
an entire system that was up around making facemasks we mobilized, a
group of people to just be available on call for those

09:40:25 struggling with isolation.

09:40:27 We also, big picture wise, created what ended up becoming
known as the Humboldt community Covid response coalition, which was
about 30 different organization so in the original stage, the covert
response became almost all that we did for the

09:40:51 first several months so like all of our program areas through
down and remember, we have built a pretty impressive infrastructure
and organization here.

09:41:02 So we were able to act more nimbly than a lot of the other
groups, both government and non government. So, yeah. And what I'll do
is drop into the chat here is on the website how we talk about now how
we talked about about the time that was front and

09:41:22 center and it was, you know, almost all we did.

09:41:28 And I'll also see if I can find a link for you to the.

09:41:33 It may not be up anymore because the Humboldt community Covid response coalition doesn't really exist anymore.

09:41:43 Right. And is that because of the longevity of the pandemic or because we're starting to see vaccines and whatnot.

09:41:53 Both, I mean, the reality is that

09:41:57 the, you know, that the, the need for that coalition was like, Okay, how do we actually coordinate with one another. And over time, individual groups found their footing, and were able to,

09:42:17 to, to continue sort of on their own.

09:42:20 And let me see if I can find you. Yeah. So,

09:42:28 here is a from June of 2020. Here is a media hit on it for you. And we'll see if I can continue if you're able if I'm able to find you anything.

09:42:42 I again I don't even know if that site is still active.

09:42:52 Yeah, no worries. I can also do some digging I appreciate you sending those links as well, that's super helpful.

09:43:00 Oh yeah, here we go.

09:43:02 Here's the WordPress site is still up again it's just not not really very active but it gives you a sense, it's a historic well as a historian it's a.

09:43:11 It is a historical point in time, if you will. Hmm, that's great. Thank you, I appreciate those resources so much, I think those will be really beneficial in the research I'm trying to conduct.

09:43:26 Um, do you have any notable challenges that the organization or you witnessed community members facing that were maybe exacerbated during the pandemic or just something that strictly came out of it?

09:43:43 Well, it's a good question. What I would say is, for for us.

09:43:52 The, the, the pandemic. Simply exposed the profound inequities of corporate capitalism and how our society operates. So, we already know, of course, that the data is very clear that people of color were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.

09:44:14 We of course, We know that houseless folks were particularly hit hard.

09:44:20 We know that poor folks and immigrants were particularly hit hard so the most vulnerable members of our population who were already treated unfairly, and in equitably that simply exacerbated it.

09:44:36 That's why if you take a look at our community coalition. When you take a look at like who is participating. What you'll see is that we we reached out to those organizations who worked with those populations and who were self organized constituencies

09:44:54 in order to ask what do you need, how can we help.

09:44:58 I would agree yes, that already vulnerable communities were definitely the hardest ones hit and I think those come with a lot of, for the lack of a better word, flaws in our society, but you guys are doing

09:45:14 a great job to try to combat these inequities. And I commend all of the work you and these organizations have done to help the people in the really just awesome on your behalf.

09:45:27 Is there any specific story or event that you think really summarizes or highlighted the issues you were faced during the pandemic. Well, I mean, I can tell you this, that there are many anecdotes, one that is worth lifting up is that, in fact, Michelle
09:45:52 Vassal and I were talking about this Michelle Vassal is, she's the tribal administrator for the Weott tribe. Okay. And that is, in effect, the CEO of the entire tribe, and the early stages, we were desperately trying to find toilet paper.

09:46:11 Hand Sanitizer, and just bought food for folks, and so me as the executive director of this organization and her were at the labor temple which is where the cooperation Humboldt is, in Fortuna.

09:46:27 I live in Eureka, and we were, we were trying to figure things out and we met a, a Cisco distribution truck we had, Rick collectively raise enough money to make a really big purchase of all these things, and we were in the parking lot, literally, subdividing
09:46:45 the things right so this will go to the folks dealing with the house those people, this will go to the tribe, this will go to Eureka this will go to Arcata, This will go to etc, etc.

09:46:56 Right. So we had.

09:46:58 I mean it was just, it was, it was funny to see, you know, the, the, the tribal administrator and the executive director of an organization literally doing triage on a distribution that was focused on toilet paper and foodstuffs, it was so that, and

09:47:19 we often both agree that it was in that,

09:47:26 in that moment of Covid.

09:47:28 We already had good relationships but they forged a much deeper relationship together, and we often say that these days we are moving at the speed of trust.

09:47:45 As we have such a deeper level of trust now that, and that literally created the opportunity for the Discover Humboldt and the indigenous lead community land trust to focus on affordable housing restoration ecology jobs and other cooperative economic venture

09:48:02 so it was one of those like examples of by doing intense work together and seeing each other, under profound stress and seeing how each organization was like throwing down to help not only its own members but also the larger community and seeing the larger

09:48:23 we, the big we if you will.

09:48:26 They both of us want to, to deepen that relationship.

09:48:31 That's fantastic. I, I love to see you know when hard times come about and community members really come together that sense of community is so strong and it really should be there from the get go, but often is non.

09:48:48 But do you think that these experiences have everlasting effects on these organizations?

09:48:57 Oh, there's no doubt I mean again like I said, I think that the the individual relationships were strengthened. Also, at least for Cooperation Humboldt, I can say with clarity that our commitment to protect repair

09:49:18 and transform right like in other words we didn't want to quote return to normal. Because normal was white supremacist, it was

capitalist it was settler colonists, it was hetero patriarchal it was power over dominated.

09:49:33 So what we did was made a commitment, that we need to rebuild better.

09:49:43 And that means addressing, not only things like the pandemic but the climate crisis, it's not coming It's here and getting worse.

09:49:53 The wildfires to address the profound failures of late stage capitalism.

09:50:01 To to recreate our entire political economy at the local level.

09:50:07 Now do you think that was something that would of came about without the existence of the pandemic or were, you know, perspectives shifted due to the global circumstances?

09:50:22 What I would say is that we were already at Cooperation Humboldt, we already had the mindset that the ecological collapse, and late stage capitalism we're creating a political crisis, because the political system couldn't handle it, right, like,

09:50:39 we believed that even before the pandemic we were in a historic conjuncture right. The idea that there comes a time when inherent contradictions or tensions cause massive disruptions and shifts right there's different ways of looking

09:50:56 at history. We believe that we were in already a conjuncture, the pandemic simply exacerbated it exposed it. So the work that we were already doing it really is that the crisis became an opportunity that we tried to act on.

09:51:15 I think he couldn't have said that better I wouldn't have found a better way to use it I think that was a really great depiction of, you know, addressing the already standing issues in our community and how they have been, you know, impacted by these

09:51:34 global circumstances. And really I just want to know, within your experiences within the community and working with community members, were there are people who be as we discussed that there will be vulnerable members of society but were there any

09:51:53 specific stories that you would like to share or, you know, personal instances between citizens and the organization that you feel would benefit from being documented?

09:52:11 So it's a great question. Taylor and what I would say is that I would be, I would not be the best one to identify them because I was staying at 3000 square foot, like level right.

09:52:28 What I will do is if you write me an email with that question I will get you in touch with Oscar or Sabrina Miller and Caroline Griffith because what we did was sub divide by Arcata, Bayside, Eureka, or Fortuna, like, and we had a whole system in

09:52:48 place, and those. And in fact, by the way. Another thing that happened. Cooperation Humboldt, I told you about our program areas because of Covid, and then the wildfires that happened thereafter we literally created an entire new program area called disaster

09:53:05 response and community resilience and Oscar and Sabrina are the CO coordinators of that program. Right. So, like I think I would strongly recommend that you interview, those two and also Caroline

Griffith about their experiences because they were really
09:53:23 more hands on. Awesome. I'm definitely gonna make note of
that real quick. Thank you so much you're doing more than I could have
ever asked and you're going to be a great contribution to this
project. Seem like your'e just a great contribution
09:53:38 to the community itself.
09:53:45 Is there anything else you want to highlight or that I
haven't address that you would like to bring the light?
09:53:53 Um, you know, I think that we've addressed it but I do really
want to underscore that for us, the pandemic simply exacerbated a, an
exposed more clearly what was there for everyone to see which is that
the ecological and economic crises were creating
09:54:16 a political crisis that's why fascism is emerging in this
country, and as a historian, I do want to like push that like at
because I think a lot of folks
09:54:28 like we were saying that if you use all your historical
skills and I will tell you Taylor, you'll hear me and Cooperation
Humboldt both warning about rising fascism before.
09:54:44 Right.
09:54:45 If you just look at the patterns, it was there to be seen.
09:54:52 To me now,
09:54:54 It is so painfully obvious that at this point, you have to be
intentionally avoiding the obvious conclusion. And yet there are still
people who are pretending like it's not as bad as it is.
09:55:09 And so I guess that's the point that I really want to make
here, you know, and I like this has been a great conversation, and
you've been incredibly kind gracious and complimentary and so thank
you for all those things.
09:55:25 What I'm trying to say is, this is that fucking crisis like
fascism is literally emerging in this country. And if, like, I
genuinely believe that the world that we're going to be living in 10
to 20 years from now
09:55:40 is literally not the same system, like, the system, as we
have experienced it, our political economy is collapsing the
neoliberal center cannot hold.
09:55:55 We are either going to have some version of eco socialism or
some version of fascism.
09:56:02 And, you know, maybe I'm wrong, but I what I want to conclude
with is that we are operating under that premise, it's like Rosa
Luxemburg famously said it's either socialism.
09:56:15 What did she say, or barbarism. Those are resurrected Burke
said socialism or barbarism, we now say eco socialism or fascism, like
that's, that's the like there's there's an eye for some people, that
seems extreme or it seems hyperbolic, but I and we
09:56:37 sincerely and genuinely believe that. So we're, we are doing
everything in our power to try to ensure that the shift is towards a
peaceful, just ecological sustainable and economically fair and
democratic society, but it's not certain.
09:57:00 Yes, I was gonna bounce off that ask do you think that is
possible.

09:57:06 Oh, I certainly think it's possible. Taylor I would encourage you and us in this conversation to just take a step back from the tapestry and look at the big picture.

09:57:40 Big picture goes okay historically, the big arc is humans evolved 100,000 years ago, we were hunter gatherer gardeners right not just hunter gatherers, but there was also some gardening going on, but he was in the same relationship with, with the

09:58:00 ecosystem and other plants, animals by yada.

09:58:03 We were in right relationship.

09:58:05 The first big shift is towards what some call totalitarian agriculture, where you live early go to war against all the rest of life, to say, Oh, this is ours and ours only that, that development, then again I think that there are other ways

09:58:27 to do civilization, but that's the way that the kind of Western concept of of the how to do civilization which is I think profoundly problematic. Yeah.

09:58:42 And then it swept the world and displaced it, you know. And look I descend from people who are indigenous to Scotland and Ireland, who were living in a different way on the planet, it was, you know, first enrollment and then the enclosure

09:58:55 movement. The English that actually changed that and that includes your movement was another quantitative shift that became a qualitative shift right.

09:59:10 So, that is the beginning of the enclosure movement and the disrupting of people, all and it happens all across the world, where you begin to see the beginning of mercantilism that then morphs into industrialism and to capitalism and then late stage capitalism

09:59:31 and that last bit remember that the last time fascism emerged was during the 1930s, which was when the world basically was shifting from an agrarian society to an industrial society.

09:59:47 And remember that fascist have a worldview that says there is the we and the death. Right and the we is hyper nationalistic and they only take care of themselves and the state Uber Alice and you are part of the state.

10:00:03 Right. That's why these USA cancer so problematic, because there's a hyperbolic like a hyper nationalism, that sort of contorts that the political economic system they have a worldview and a political economic system to support it, fascism emerged because

10:00:24 things were shifting and people didn't exactly understand what their place was and so forth.

10:00:29 Taylor, we're in a another system so it's not just the ecological collapse, which is existential in and of itself. Yeah, but the economic system of late stage capitalism is imploding, not simply because it's destroying the planet, which is existential.

10:00:48 But even if there was just another planet to somehow, like, you know, Ilan musk and his insanity of going to Mars right, even though with another planet to mine.

10:00:59 Capitalism is coming to an end because capitalism is an economic system is literally derived from extracting the surplus value of the labor of workers, like that's how the profit motive works you

can modify the natural world.

10:01:17 You treat labor, like there's the five characteristics of capitalism and, yeah, see that there's a there's a link on the site where we described that.

10:01:25 All I'm saying is, with robotics, automation technology, whether you call it the information age or like whatever this new era age is. It's disrupting the economy, robotics automation technology, but number of jobs are just not there.

10:01:51 Absolutely.

10:01:53 And, and I don't see enough people talking about it.

10:02:03 I you know I really agree. I think that you pointed out a lot of good points and I think it's super awesome that you work with tribal members and organizations because I think, people as a whole, have a lot to learn from indigenous communities and ways

10:02:19 of life, and you know they were here, long before the idea of industrialization or any of that and they did have that balanced relationship with the earth and with of living and living beings and things around them and much more sustainable ways of life.

10:02:37 And, unfortunately, a lot of at least American, Native American history has been purposely erased, or, you know, we can go back to the genocide and the boarding schools and all of them and all those things to try to erase their ways of life and maybe

10:02:55 it's because whatever reason but I think it's definitely having a detrimental effect on how society and the government sees nature as commodity. Before we get too off track, I there anything you want to highlight?

10:03:58 Okay. Well, I hope that you will lift up to the extent that you can the Cooperation Humboldt call or warning, that we were already in a conjuncture the pandemic simply exacerbated it.

10:04:18 Yeah, so thanks for that. I will be in contact with you to send you that form and I'll reach out to the people that you had recommended for me and see if I can conduct some interviews with them as well.