

[00:00:00] **Nick Hylla:** Hey everybody, this is Nick. Before we dive into this episode, do us a big favor and click subscribe in your podcast player or on YouTube by doing so you will be alerted every time we post a new episode. And if you feel so inspired, you could also thumbs up or comment, to get us more engagement. I also want to remind everybody that the Fair is back

[00:00:22] June 24th to the 26th at the MREA campus and Custer, Wisconsin, we have a beautiful campus. There'll be thousands of the nicest people that you would ever hope to meet here. And we promise the weather will be beautiful. For information or to buy tickets, go to theenergyfair.org. That's theenergyfair.org. We hope to see you there.

[00:00:50] This episode of the rise up podcast features Shimekia Nichols, the Executive Director of Soulardarity, an environmental nonprofit in Highland Park, Michigan, that was formed as a direct response to the community's energy concerns. Nick spoke with Shimekia about Soulardarity's work in their community and why they aren't asking for donations, but for other communities to adopt their practices for change. Shimekia will be delivering a keynote address at the Main Stage of the 31st annual Energy Fair on Friday, June 24th.

[00:01:18] Get your tickets now at theenergyfair.org/tickets.

[00:01:22] **Nick Hylla:** It is our pleasure today to talk with Shimekia Nichols, she's the executive director of Soulardarity and Highland Park, Michigan. Shimekia, How you doing today?

[00:01:33] **Shimekia Nichols:** I'm doing good. Feeling powerful.

[00:01:34] **Nick Hylla:** Great! Shimekia your history—the history of Soulardarity—is very much tied to the history of Highland Park, Michigan. So maybe to get started, you could just set us up here.

[00:01:45] Where is Highland Park, and give us a brief history of what's happened.

[00:01:50] **Shimekia Nichols:** Yeah, so there's two Highland Parks, here in the United States, we're the Highland Park in Michigan. It's a small, three square mile city that's housed in the very heart of Detroit, Michigan. Of course, probably more, talked about a whole lot more.

[00:02:03] But, we're a robust, very small city, that is known for, a number of things such as, having the auto industry kind of blossom and bloom from here,

having tons and tons of trees and, being a catalyst for black auto workers and industry workers and a home for generational wealth and self-determination.

[00:02:26] And so we continue on with that legacy through Soulardarity but, in the interim, a number of other things have happened here. Not only were there the Detroit Riots that impacted the city of Highland Park and white flight. But there was...

[00:02:38] **Nick Hylla:** --What, what year was that? How long ago was that?

[00:02:40] **Shimekia Nichols:** Ah, you asked me a question and it means I have to tap into my history side of my brain and I don't have it in front of me, but, I know that they were, like 1970s.

[00:02:51] So I want to say 76, but I'm guessing. Absolutely guessing. But with that, just years later, Highland Park was under emergency management, which means that someone from outside comes in and manages your city, and has authority over your government and your municipality there.

[00:03:10] And that was for a number of years. But what also was very important was that the street lights here and a part of Soulardarity's origin story is, the residential street lights were repossessed. And there were over a thousand of them. They were only on residential blocks and it was due to a debt that was owed by the city.

[00:03:27] And so a number of things made that experience unique. One, I had never heard of a utility, especially a monopoly utility, for this region of Michigan, repossessing streetlights from a city, in order to cover debt. It was also interesting that the amount of money spent to repossess those lights almost matched the debt, which was very interesting as well.

[00:03:50] But what was most offensive I think to the residents, especially in the moment when they looked outside their homes and saw the trucks are pulling up to pull the lights out of the ground... It was just a question of like, where was the democracy? Where was the community, announcement or involvement or decision-making?

[00:04:05] And so that's where Soulardarity grew. So that repossession happened back in 2011 and Soulardarity officially became a non-profit in 2012. But almost immediately folks started galvanizing and trying to figure out, not only what could be done, but who was accountable. Why residents who are

already paying over 30% of their income to utility bills were being penalized for a decision made at that level with, again, without being included.

[00:04:33] So that's the history of Highland Park and also Soulardarity, just to kind of, a continuity of a disenfranchisement of the people here. And Soulardarity represents that only the physical light that we try to bring back to the city through community owned solar, but also a more social justice and racial justice and equity in terms of bringing light to the people and empowerment.

[00:04:57] **Nick Hylla:** Yeah, that's really tragic. And, I would say also a unique circumstance where a for-profit corporate utility who enjoys a monopoly over its rate pairs, repossess the streetlights from a defaulting municipality but that repossession hurts all of the residents most and so you, obviously, most of the residents, the Highland Park were affected, you begin to organize.

[00:05:29] So how did Soulardarity form then? Did you start to engage with local municipal officials with the DTE? And, and what did you do?

[00:05:38] **Shimekia Nichols:** Well, Soulardarity started out, was just a couple of folks coming together and talking about solutions. And there were a few folks that had come from out of the city and out of the state who began having conversations with Highland Parkers that have been living here for decades who have raised their families that have worked in businesses around here, and who were appalled.

[00:05:59] And so, Soulardarity started as just, a small idea of, trying to just bring the people back into politics and profits decision-making and I would say, from 10 years ago, cause this is our 10 year anniversary, which we're celebrating our 10 year anniversary this year,

[00:06:18] we've grown tremendously. And so just from that small group of community leaders coming into, we have nearly 200 members at this point and, our reach has not only influenced local politics, it also helped us to win a rate case interventions against our utility monopoly.

[00:06:37] We've also participated in Michigan public service commission hearings, and we've definitely rattled at their door a number of times, just asking for accountability. And now, Highland Park is actually a part of Communities Leap, which is what, we have federal eyes on what it is that we're trying to do.

[00:06:53] And, and where we're trying to go in terms of clean energy and a lot of folks, especially who don't live in communities like I grew up in, Southwest Detroit, zip code 48217, and it's one of the most polluted zip codes ever. And when we have folks that are outside of communities like this, there tends to be a lens or an opinion or perspective that all it takes is just, showing up to these meetings and hearings and signing petitions and and doing that.

[00:07:23] And that's not always true, and I think that one of the few things that doesn't really get taken into consideration is that we talk about self-determination in Soulardarity quite often. And we talk about energy democracy in this organization often because it's a part of a bigger process of a just transition to clean energy.

[00:07:42] It's not just so much having the technical infrastructure or the professional industry growth. It's about bringing folks that are experiencing these issues firsthand every day where it's a crisis for them every day and looking at what solutions that they're coming up with and implementing those solutions in a way that includes them.

[00:08:02] And so that is one of the other ways that Soulardarity not only connects to the issue, but it also connects to just kind of the global movement towards renewables and the way that we're looking at becoming a sustainable country and a sustainable world.

[00:08:18] **Nick Hylla:** Shimekia, you speak to these issues so well, it's obvious because of your lived experience in Highland Park and where you grew up in Detroit and that the general concept of if we're remaking the energy system, in a technological way, this gives us an opportunity to remake it economically and remake it socially.

[00:08:39] And that idea of a just energy transition, restorative justice, environmental justice, social justice, and your story and Highland Park is incredibly inspiring. And so maybe, in some of that personal aspect, you've been involved at Soulardarity for some time. Please talk about how you got involved and how you've been working with the organization and what you do now?

[00:09:02] **Shimekia Nichols:** Yeah, thank you. So first of all, I just also thank you for the opportunity, acknowledge how honored I am to be a part of this podcast, to be involved and included in the work that MREA's been doing. They've been a phenomenal ally to Soulardarity and, as I noted, I haven't been in ED for a long time, but I've worn many hats in Soulardarity.

[00:09:22] And even before Soulardarity, I grew up in a community of racial and social justice activists. I attended one of the first African centered institutions in Michigan, Aisha Shule/Dubois Preparatory Academy School, and that gave me place-based education in order to be able to address the issues that I saw at my community, through academia.

[00:09:42] And, so that's kinda like where my roots come from. But in terms of coming into Soulardarity, I just had my first baby. I got two sons. One is getting going on 10, which celebrates the ten-year anniversary of Soulardarity. And the other is, just turned five, which kind of marks in Soulardarity for me when I became just really involved and actually, and hired on as staff.

[00:10:05] And so, 10 years ago I bought my first home. I was having my first child. And, I was trying to survive and I wanted to do the best that I could to do so. And when I would, whenever I would go to DTE Energy, which is our energy monopoly here, in Southeast Michigan, I never really got satisfactory answers.

[00:10:23] When I asked, well, why is my bill so high? And I'm like turning everything off and I'm, I'm doing my best to try to save energy. And when the representatives didn't have answers, I started looking elsewhere cause I realized that their aim wasn't to educate the community and it wasn't to save us money or save us, or show us how to best use our resources.

[00:10:41] Their aim was what they are. They are private, public facing, but a private institution that is geared towards making profit for their stakeholders. Which blew my mind actually. They're not a part of our state infrastructure and they are not a part of a federal infrastructure where this is like a, almost a guaranteed human right.

[00:11:01] They're a for-profit company bottom line. And so as I was just trying to understand my bill and understand how to keep my lights on and why I kept getting a shut off notice every other month, even though I knew that I made enough money to cover all my expenses. And I knew that I was working really hard to try to make more money, to do fun things with my newborn.

[00:11:19] I got very frustrated and so I went to a company called RCI, which stands for a Right of Cooperative Industries, which ironically is one of the only solar firms that's in Highland Park, Michigan; black-owned. And, we're actually working with them this year to install 10 solar street lights. That's in a celebration for our 10 year anniversary and I'll touch more on it, probably a little bit later.

[00:11:42] But I went to them asking questions and what they said was that they weren't necessarily an advocacy organization and that I should reach out to Jackson Koepfel the founding director of Soulardarity and ask those same questions. And so I did, and Jackson's a firecracker, especially for energy democracy.

[00:11:59] He's left a really tremendous legacy for Soulardarity that I stepped into when he decided to resign and step down as ED. And so, I came into this work just as a rate payer and a consumer. And as I learned more, I became more involved in Soulardarity. I became more involved in understanding the mission and why it was very important.

[00:12:19] I think that the city could have, a long time ago, definitely over 10 years ago, restored light. Just slap some lights up wooden poles even though there's accidents that are happening to take the poles out, even though you energy use is really high, not only for the residents, but also for cities like Highland Park.

[00:12:37] They could have done that, but I think that what we've been trying to work on in Soulardarity is being more intentional about, long lasting and like, generational, progression towards clean energy. Not just what's good for me in my pocket right now, but also what's good for my children. Like I said, I have a five-year-old and I have a ten-year-old and, one of the things that's important to me as a director is to make sure that I'm setting an example of sustainable growth and progress.

[00:13:03] That includes the people above profit. And that ensures that we're not only trying to save ourselves in this climate crisis, but that we're also trying to make sure that we're saving others as well. Meaning others that aren't even on the planet right now. And so, that's been my motivator. I feel like I'm deviating a little bit from the original question.

[00:13:24] So I'm gonna pause there and let you either ask a new one or ask a follow-up.

[00:13:29] We'll be right back with this episode of the rise up podcast. But first we'd like to take a moment to thank a few of our early bird Career Fairs sponsors. The North American Board of Certified Energy Practitioners. NABCEP offers certifications and credentials for skilled professionals, specialists, and those new to working in the photovoltaics, solar heating and small wind industries, NABCEP.org. And K2 Systems. Dedicated to realizing the worldwide power generation from solar energy with you. K2Systems.com.

[00:14:00] We would also like to remind you that volunteers get into The Energy Fair. Learn more about volunteering and to sign up head to theenergyfair.org/volunteer. And now back to the Rise Up Podcast.

[00:14:11]

[00:14:13] **Nick Hylla:** That was wonderful and what I was thinking, as you're talking, is for most of us, electricity is magic. You don't think about it, just expect that it will be there and your community found itself in the very real circumstance where it wasn't there.

[00:14:29] And it was because of decisions well out of your control. And your story, as you're talking, I'm hearing you say, "I just kept asking and I kept pursuing, and I kept trying to find the truth in this matter". And through that, in your community, you started to organize and you've won some very hard fought battles and you're still fighting.

[00:14:50] I think that as a story, that more and more people will be relating to and more being inspired by. In that kind of vein of thinking, what are some of the things that Soulardarity has done that has really been kind of, like, inspirational to you or inspirational to other people in Highland Park neighboring areas.

[00:15:10] **Shimekia Nichols:** Yeah, thank you for asking that question. Because it, whenever I speak to groups, I can speak to the wins, which may kind of water down to successes of leadership. But I think what's important and unique about Soulardarity as we speak to the wins that were done by and for the people.

[00:15:27] So we have a number of different publications. We did something called the Blueprint for Energy Democracy, and that was where we went into the community. We held four caucuses. We invited community to ask and answer questions about how do we get to a clean, renewable energy that makes us feel good?

[00:15:45] And that's inclusive of all these other branches of oppression that we're experiencing. Because, when we talk about clean energy, it's not just a monopoly utility, that's like this overseer and our adversary, there's intersections that are happening as well.

[00:16:00] There's wealth building opportunities that are not being met. There are job opportunities that are not being met. And just when you look at the

career, demographics of, of solar and clean energy, BIPOC, folks are not a big portion of that. When you're creating sustainable development in a neighborhood that usually welcomes gentrification, not necessarily an upliftment of the people who are living there, they're usually forced out after that.

[00:16:24] Yeah, and so the Blueprint For Energy Democracy, or BFED, is a document that we lean really hard on in terms of, governing the direction in which we're going in and always gives us a north star, which, is again, was derived from, getting just straight up answers over dinner from Highland Parkers who lived in his neighborhood and Detroiters, who've outside seen Detroit politics influence Highland Park. We also have worked with the union of concerned scientists, and we created an energy sovereignty analysis using a tool called Homer, and a number of these different things that are like on our website, or you could just Google them.

[00:17:02] But these again are things that set Souldarity apart from just being a nonprofit organization that stands outside of DTE with homemade signs saying that this is an injustice. We actually try to create tangible wins, on behalf of the people because we are extracting their energy, their time, their experience, and we're showcasing and highlighting it to the whole country and saying that Highland Park could definitely be a model example for energy democracy, energy resilience, and energy sovereignty. Just if we are allowed the chance and we're allowed the space and breathing room to figure it out. And also if we're allowed to have the support of resources without them being extracted as well.

[00:17:44] So, that's just a couple of things, but we have, and those are just like one program area. We also have several other program areas. And one of which is highlighted right here behind me. I don't know which way to turn on a camera because it's reversed a little bit. But Grow Solar Highland Park Detroit is a really new program that we did with MREA.

[00:18:03] And it's, in conjunction with another program called, the Rise Up Solar Training Course. So we partnered with MREA. We were able to provide an eight week course. I was actually in the first test dummy round of this. So, I know firsthand, just like, not only how intense that this would have been if I went through any other entity or program.

[00:18:24] But there was just so much support from MREA. There was so much support that Souldarity tried to give participants, in trying to complete the course so that they can apply for NABCEP credentials, which again, puts you in

a pathway for either, solar careers or solar jobs. And then, the folks that went through that program also did an onsite demonstration, where they got to job shadow a little bit.

[00:18:47] And then we also had some of those same folks come back and participate in this Grow Solar Highland Park bulk purchase program, which allows -- our aimless 35 homes -- and it allowed folks to be able to go solar.

[00:18:59] I don't know if most folks know the demographics of Highland Park, but the household income levels are pretty low. And so we know folks couldn't normally afford these types of courses. It probably wasn't even on their radar and they were available that anyone was offering them.

[00:19:14] And so we took folks, not only recruited them for the program, but we also allowed them to be able to become interns for this program here right behind me and also a couple of other community solar installs. So right now we are at the end of our first phase of the boat purchase program.

[00:19:33] And what we're trying to do at this point is do more market research in assessment and analysis. Because again, when you're talking about a community that either normally doesn't have access or education about a thing that would help improve their lives, but also that they're living in a crisis just trying to survive the thing that is the problem.

[00:19:55] It's just really hard to get them in a mentality of leadership, to take control and find solutions for that. However, the act of survival alone is the solution too and so we have black clubs that are looking for ways to put up lights. We have churches that are petitioning us and asking us to be able to put up lights.

[00:20:16] We have business associations that are also asking, you know, to be able to improve safety around the storefronts. So we have all these different people that know what the solution is. Soulardarity is trying to be a catalyst for bringing a solution forward. Of course not through dictatorship of what we think the solution should be...

[00:20:33] But by uplifting, what's already been done and what's already being done in order to keep people safe. And again, just MREA has just been a really supportive partner, and really intuitive in terms of the ability to be flexible and grow. Because Highland Park in Detroit is very unique, in the Midwest, if anyone is visiting here you'll know what I'm talking about. And so I think that that was just really important. And I think that, the shared alignment of, moving

at the pace of people and not at the pace of planning, programming and profit, was the catalyst for the successes that we've seen through this program here.

[00:21:08] **Nick Hylla:** Yeah I appreciate the recognition, we're late to the game in Highland Park, but I want you to know we're just getting started and, we're really excited and ...

[00:21:17] **Shimekia Nichols:** That's ok, you got to start from somewhere.

[00:21:19] **Nick Hylla:** And, we've been, working on, clean energy issues for like 32 years, but I have to say, when I saw your Blueprint For Energy Democracy, which we'll link to this, podcast, energy democracy, sustainability, and self-determination is just really succinct and impressive.

[00:21:37] Accountable government, healthy homes, jobs and careers, equitable development and sustainable infrastructure. And it really is very potent and it comes from real experience. And I think it's a testament to the work and the vision. And I want to just focus on what you said, the act of survival is really the solution. This idea of transitioning from a destructive tension to like a creative tension where you're actually doing something claiming your own energy rights and energy authority. And I think, for us, we have some experience. We've for the past five or six years, we've been working with communities that are struggling, economically, been to D-Town Farm in Detroit. And, they had some solar panels donated, so did some workshops there. Brought a bunch of people here for training. And so we have a sense of the acute degree and scale of the problem, but also the opportunity, especially when it comes to, like, empowerment and careers and jobs.

[00:22:41] And, part of it is making sure that the benefit of those jobs are realized locally. And that's the hard part, because it takes state policy and it takes investment. But you, you all sure seem, well situated, to take advantage of that. So I guess looking to the future, and this comes, this question comes from Peter, from our team who's been working with you and I wanted to recognize him and Greta...

[00:23:03] **Shimekia Nichols:** Shout out to Peter, who I got an opportunity to work with this past year.

[00:23:08] Yeah. Yeah.

[00:23:10] **Nick Hylla:** But he wanted to just ask you, what's your vision over the next five years when you think, when you sit there now and you see the challenges that you face and the opportunity, like what are you excited about?

[00:23:20] **Shimekia Nichols:** In terms of Soulardarity and in terms of building our relationship with MREA, we spent a lot of time doing the groundwork, we've we spent a lot of time, earning each other's trust, which is really, really important, in this work, specifically with organizations.

[00:23:34] But I think that is something that needs to carry over into, the more corporate level kind of institutions that govern our industry in this work. I would say that it depends on which angle you want to come from. And I think that what makes following community really special was that you get these various pathways to go, especially over a five-year period. So we've seen some uptick, in terms of, federal, to things that we have been stating in communities for a very, very long time.

[00:24:05] Environmental justice is not new to the black community, it's just a term that's been coined more recently or used or heard more recently. But it derived from, again, the survival of the people who have, quite often, always been a part of neighborhoods where there's air pollution and there's water pollution.

[00:24:24] And we still remain victims. And I say victims, not in a disempowering way, but just to really drive home that these are not problems that we're imposing on ourselves, to be honest. And so again, over the next five years, there's political pathways of political organizing that needs to be done.

[00:24:43] We need to have the ear of our legislators, we need to make sure that it is important, at the state level and at the regional level, in order to be able to galvanize federal resources or solicit them, but also to ensure that there's accountability for local governments to enforce some of the things that neighborhoods are saying, because we live in America and there is kind of this weird...

[00:25:05] I don't even know what to call it. Whatever culture you want to call it, of just mistrust, between residents and politicians and varying levels of government, whether they trust one another or not. And, always at the end of it, capitalism plays a role in all of that until we begin to look for just transitions solutions and pathways, it's not going to work.

[00:25:28] No matter how ambitious we are. No matter how much money we have to throw at a problem, no matter if you wanted to separate the haves from the half, not to just let that they have nots fall off... None of it's gonna work. Until we begin to work together, until this becomes an issue that we all see the need and desire to solve.

[00:25:46] And the benefits of solving it. One of the things that I always say is that by solving a solution for BIPOC communities means that we all get an opportunity for liberation, you know? And, just thinking back to the, when recycling became big, I was a kid at that time, but I remember when we had this whole really big push for recycling and that didn't come from black communities, I didn't come from BIPOC communities.

[00:26:09] We didn't have enough to need to recycle to be honest. But it came from wealthy communities needing to be a little bit more intentional about the way that they were discarding their trash, in a way that they were creating an abundance of trash over less wealthy communities.

[00:26:25] And so, to me, this is not a situation that's any different, much any different. I would say that, if we're going to do political organizing, the way to connect that to BIPOC communities is to also do relational organizing. Like you have to be in tune with the people.

[00:26:40] And that doesn't mean sending a person that looks like that group of people, to come and use terms that are not a part of their culture and not a part of their livelihood and not a part of their logic and reasoning and style of communication. It means you have to have folks from that community grown for leadership, and given the resources to be able to engage their community in ways that take it to the next level.

[00:27:03] And so that's kind of been our approach here at Soulardarity. We're a bottom up organization. We're a member led organization, meaning, I can have all the ideas as an ED I want to, and I do have lots of ideas cause I grew up here. But what I do is I humbly take my direction from members, especially elders, that are part of our membership.

[00:27:24] And I listened to their experiences and I listened to their stories and I listened to what's been tried before, before I even think about trying to suggest anything to them. And to me, that's the heart of self-determination. So I think that if we have, not only self-determination as a pathway, the political organizing, the relational organizing, the deep canvassing, elements going on as a nonprofit.

[00:27:47] I think that more leaders will understand that the goal is to create a leadership ideology amongst the people more so than to become a leader themselves, and to stand before people and tell them where we're going to go.

[00:28:01] **Nick Hylla:** There's a lot of wisdom there, this idea of empowerment and leadership development because, the first part of what we see do and are you really successful at is the local organizing and empowerment, which allows us to participate and to be good allies and to provide service that we will provide benefit because of this community organizing that you've been doing and a lot of trust and vision that people have. This idea that you're on this path to a better place and open to opportunities and to development and, in face of all of the historical and current odds that are stacked up against communities.

[00:28:43] And so I guess, to build off of that you've had 10 years with Soulardarity. I'm sure you've been in a lot of meetings, a lot of planning sessions. This is happening all over the country to maybe a lesser degree of success. And so I'm wondering if you could share a bit, some of the lessons that you've learned, or some advice or some inspiration to other groups that are out there working to organize locally.

[00:29:07] **Shimekia Nichols:** Yeah so, one of the most important lessons that I learned came from MEJC, which stands for Michigan Environmental Justice Coalition. And they were one of many and several organizations I could actually rattle down a whole shout out list because it's been, it's been a lot of folks that we've worked with and partnered with, but MEJC stands out to me. Not only as leaders in terms of like bringing Soulardarity on board with, like, a momentum with other organizations that were vision, and mission aligned, some of which were just as small as us and some were a little bit bigger.

[00:29:42] But we all came with just like fire and passion, in a, a shared vision of necessarily bringing people along is to me, again, it kind of leans on like we're guiding where we're going. But instead I think that what they showed was that, there are tools, there are principles, there are activities that we can do together to heal the harms that have been done to us.

[00:30:04] And, amongst ourselves that will help get us to the next level. That, there has to be trust in. We may not have all the solutions just because we intentionally want to have the solutions, that, we may have to come back to the table several times before we get there. And that's okay.

[00:30:22] I mean, we are dealing with a very urgent, climate crisis scenario. When you think about it from a perspective of, we're saying we want to save the

planet, but in reality, we want to save ourselves. We want to save our children and we want to, so like, let's, let's keep that real. And let's keep that in context of the pace in which we work and we could move with a sense of urgency without leaving folks behind.

[00:30:44] MEJC has also shown that, the work is hard, and sometimes it's not immediately rewarding. When you're aiming to do the thing that is right for the people, the satisfaction comes from you, knowing that you've given it your all, and you knowing that you were doing it from a sense of, selflessness, that the situation warrants and deserves that and that people in these communities, it's definitely not for a pat on the back or your name and a newspaper or to get a photo op or any of the things that a lot of I've seen a lot of organizations aim for, is for those nights where I'm sitting up reading through documents and I get a member, he'll call me and say, "I have this idea.

[00:31:29] Because we were in the meeting, I didn't get a chance to say it and I'm inspired. And I think that we can do this. So let me here, let me tell you my plan." Like those are, to me, the rewarding moments, because it says to me that I'm doing my job in a way that doesn't leave me beyond reproach and that people feel welcome and comfortable with engaging in this process of how we're going to get to a solution.

[00:31:53] And to me, that's some of the most important elements of our work. But yeah, shout out to MEJC. MREA has definitely, again, like the platforms and the tools and the opportunities to really uplift the work that MEJC has kind of, in a big sister, big brother kind of way, been like, no, you're ready for this.

[00:32:12] And we're like, no, we're not ready. Like, no, you're ready for this. You're definitely ready. And so I was just, collaborations like that are just so special and important. And, they're not the most popular. You don't hear about them in the news all the time and you don't hear about them hear about them, like, in barbershops and beauty supplies and things like that. But that exists, and that are for the people. And I think that through platforms like this, we're helping to get the word out. So that folks who've only been experiencing a hardship and not some of the beautiful wins that we're making get an opportunity to be a part of that.

[00:32:42] **Nick Hylla:** That's really well said. This idea of energy democracy, precursor to that is energy literacy and a precursor to that is interest and like you said, and we've had the privilege of working with groups like yours and like Walnut Way in North Milwaukee and Renewable Energy Partners in the city of Minneapolis and North Minneapolis.

[00:33:04] And then NAACP and Evansville. And it's kind of the same story everywhere is that when you develop the local leadership that can inspire and that can do so, like you said, from the heart and with the aim of kind of this, one person at a time mentality... That's what we've seen, create the real opportunity to actually engage in and to provide services that we provide, which isn't really a community organized as much as we'd love to be doing that.

[00:33:34] That's not really, that's not, that's not our role. And so, the way that you talk about it, I think, is very real and learned and very appreciated.

[00:33:42] **Shimekia Nichols:** I think we gave, I think we gave Peter and Marta and a Taylor and folks who worked in this Grow Solar Highland Park program with us, a run for their money and front row seat of what organizing, specifically in Detroit and Highland Park, looks like.

[00:33:57] But, I think it was beautiful. I think that we were able to have a really tremendous program, although we did not meet our goal of 35 homes, we're so much more inspired and ambitious to hit that goal again this year. And we still have the support of our funders. We still have a supportive community.

[00:34:16] There were a couple of things we need to figure out, but, again, I think it's like the hot and cold water coming together to make it warm and palatable for the community. And in a way that MREA, shows up at the table and also, with like the fierceness, and the, we, we not back down.

[00:34:32] And we know what our community needs and wants. Cause they've told us a thousand times we see it every day. It was so well received by MREA that it was just a perfect combination of again, something that can be sustainable and something that could be, just much more long-term than a lot of the bandaid solutions that I've been hearing out here

[00:34:51] **Nick Hylla:** Yeah. Let's, let's, let's dive into that a little bit with some of the specifics. I'll kind of lay out the program. And then when I want to tee up to you is some of the ways do you think that, that we can make this real and long-lasting. So what we try to do is pair these education and market development efforts with training.

[00:35:10] Because this idea of making a real on the ground, that's one of our board members, Denise Abdul-Rahman from the NAACP that's just that kind of make it real on the ground. That's part of it being inspiring and like making it real and making it attainable. The challenge obviously is, like I said before, and like you said, energy isn't necessarily, if there's a priority list, it might not be in

the top five, maybe it's in the top five, maybe it's number five, maybe there's other priorities, even though it underwrites everything, there's just greater priorities to deal with, but it really is wrapped into housing.

[00:35:49] It's wrapped into work and enjoyments, wrapped into lights, free streets. It's really wrapped in there. And so how, how do you make that real. And how do you, how do you take those steps to independence, which is really solar energy in your community, community solar, solar in your home, long term energy bill reduction, reduce energy poverty.

[00:36:11] And so the Grow Solar Program is about education and it's about adoption. There are real barriers to households to access that. And there are many steps maybe that people need to go through before that's even a good idea. So even right-sizing that expectation. So in your program, in particular, you have Soulardarity, you kind of laid a few funding streams together to try to make this more accessible.

[00:36:35] Because the challenge, obviously with any sort of energy investment, that's not from the utility, if it's your own, it's, you're pretty much buying all of those energy savings upfront. So if you were to put in new windows, they're going to pay themselves off over time.

[00:36:51] Or if you're going to put a rooftop source system on, it's going to pay itself off over time, but you have to have that investment upfront. And so, Shimekia, would you just kind of talk to us about how some of the things that were offered through Soulardarity and their program to try to help be more inclusive to all interested parties?

[00:37:09] **Shimekia Nichols:** Yes, yes I can. And I just want to, again, just, I always try to name names. It's just the way I was raised, I guess, but I wanna name the Koepfels, for providing an opportunity to give us a generous donation and to create a program through Clean Energy Credit Union. One of the things that we realized was that, specifically in Highland Park, we have a lot of renters and then we have, the, most of the remaining folks are on fixed income.

[00:37:36] And it was just a small little fraction of homeowners that are able to just go solar and, to be quite honest, a lot of them are new to Highland Park and doesn't necessarily match the demographic that had preexisted at Highland Park. For what that is. And so when we were trying to run this program, we realized that there was a number of things that were obstacles.

[00:37:56] Most people don't have the upfront money to go from crisis of my utility bill has been high for generations. I mean, I guess I can't, I can't speak to where everyone else is from, but where I'm from, my mother, basically every other month, to even up to this day, now that she doesn't even have children live with her, is basically living like bill to bill, scared that she might get one bill that's super astronomical because of whatever reasons they tell her that it's that way.

[00:38:25] I remember my grandmother struggling. I remember there being times where our lights were shut off and it wasn't because no one was working hard. It was because simply the billing cycle wasn't supportive of working families. And so rewinding all the way back to, who deserves solar, who gets solar, I guess is what the, with the country, and what the globe is, is trying to figure out and the answer is everyone does.

[00:38:49] And, through the Koepfels, through Brian Donovan, who was our lead on the MREA Grow Solar Program, when we first kicked it off. Came up with tools, financial tools, to be able to make solar accessible. And, like I said, we did that through having a loan loss reserve pot of money with Clean Energy Credit Union.

[00:39:11] So if a person did take out a loan for solar, which, not a lot. Not as much as most people may think. But trying to pull it just straight out of your pocket, it could be overwhelming and it can definitely impact a number of different things. So we thought we would come up with this, with this program.

[00:39:27] And, the goal was to put \$75,000 towards anyone who may need some support while they're trying to make their loan payments. To ensure that these loans do not go in their credit report, that'd be, doesn't become extractive, to the community in which you're trying to serve and also supporting them.

[00:39:46] We know we have folks that are on fixed incomes and so they didn't qualify for the federal tax credit of 26%, which has been going down, as we get closer and closer to the end of exhausting those funds. An elder who's 80, who has a home that's a hundred years old and a boiler heating the home with gaps in the windows and a faulty roof can not go solar, as much as it would help. They can't, there's a process of energy efficiency and weatherization that has to happen first. And most of the loans that you get to improve your home don't cover those costs.

[00:40:19] They only cover the purchase of equipment such as solar panels and battery backups and things like that. So in our game, our goal of trying to make

solar more accessible, there were a number of different supports that we attempted to put in place. So not only do we have the training, we also have the partnership with Clean Energy Credit Union.

[00:40:40] And, at this point we're getting ready to do a weatherization pilot to show the cost savings. Through our organization, our sister organization, kind of our baby actually, Polar Bear Sustainable Energy Co-op, or Polar Bears, we call it. And, we get ready to do this pilot, as a way to just demonstrate the necessity for weatherization in our communities and how it should never have been left off of the menu when we talked about trying to go green, over the past five years. And how important it is to low to moderate income families.

[00:41:12] **Nick Hylla:** The idea of inclusive financing is a daunting challenge from a community level. I think what you know or should know is that from your work, from the community out, there is a large network of people and organizations working top-down. One thing that happened during COVID is that most people who were paying attention realized that there's this magic money tree, right?

[00:41:40] The Fed can just backstop Wall Street for \$10 trillion, three federal budgets, and somehow that doesn't trickle down to communities, you know? And so this concept of inclusive and where we put our investments, these are choices. They always have been choices, and it's about making better choices and choices that's a rising tide that lifts all boats. And I think that that is outside of kind of you referred to before this cultural, the Culture War, these cultural differences, or the way that we're divided, there is a real opportunity. And listening to you talk and working with you all just makes me know it even more.

[00:42:23] And so, I think there is real opportunity. That's not to say that we'll get there soon. But I think as you see in Highland Park, sometimes the wins come quicker than you could ever imagine. And it's about the effort. So, I guess Shimekia, I want to say if you're listening and you've been inspired by Shimekia, you can see her in person.

[00:42:46] At the Energy Fair in Central Wisconsin on June 25th. We're super excited to have you here and to have you share your story. And so, make sure you make it!

[00:42:57] **Shimekia Nichols:** I'm so excited! Yes, I'm so excited. And not only am I coming but I'm bringing along one of our staff persons, who replaced Brian, who works so hard.

[00:43:06] But, we have our Grow Solar Highland Park Program Manager has come along. It's his first Soulardarity trip. And he finally gets an opportunity to meet Peter and Marta and Taylor and the entire team. We get an opportunity to see, headquarters and just see, like the faces of the folks that have been supporting our work, which is so important.

[00:43:28] I also want to take a moment and shout out I'm in a, I did this, not at my home, which would have included my children running around in the background and a number of other things happen and people cutting their grass and stuff, but, Detroit is Different Podcast, is allowing me to use their studio for this space and they've also been helping us out.

[00:43:46] They came on board a few months ago to promote the Grow Solar Highland Park Program. And again, it's not just us. It's not just me. It's not just our staff. There's a web of folks that are interested in supporting this work and we're always happy and excited and, interested in connecting with folks just across the country, that want to help to move us all forward.

[00:44:08] Because like I said, the liberation and the lack of oppression that happens in BIPOC communities equals a liberation and just a transition to a new world for all of us. And so, we're happy to do this work on behalf of the most impacted people, but on behalf of everyone, that's going to be impacted in the long run.

[00:44:27] **Nick Hylla:** That's excellent. I'm going to steal a page from your playbook and recognize the MREA members, the hundreds of them that donate. I just looked yesterday for the RiseUp Scholarship Program that funds all of the training at Soulardarity, the average donation was under a hundred dollars and it came from hundreds and hundreds of people that have paid for this.

[00:44:51] So, I can guarantee they're excited to meet you Shimekia.

[00:44:56] **Shimekia Nichols:** That's awesome! If I could sneak one more staff person along with me, both, our operations manager took the course this year and she has a wonderful testimony about the impact that it had on her life in terms of just understanding, a system that, again, we don't get taught these things in school.

[00:45:13] Like, we understand the way "this is how you light a light bulb" has nothing to do with like the power structure, all the other things that come along with the way that...

[00:45:21] **Nick Hylla:** You're learning that the hard way aren't you?

[00:45:23] **Shimekia Nichols:** Yes, we had no idea! The rabbit hole went so deep about how electricity gets to our homes and what that means and what we're giving up, in order to get that reliability and that service and for us here, we get rolling blackouts.

[00:45:36] So lack there of reliability. But yeah, I just want to say, I appreciate your Nick. I think this is a great time for us to meet one another and spend some time just talking about our work. And, I'm excited to see everyone when I touch down in Wisconsin. I'm from Detroit, so we, like, party, we like, lay back, and just mad informal, so if you want to. Yes. Yes. Excellent.

[00:46:02] **Nick Hylla:** Well, thank you so much for sharing your time on a Saturday with us Shimekia. I know you have your children there and I'm sure they're ready to run around outside and tear it up. So...

[00:46:11] **Shimekia Nichols:** I mean, I'm in a soundproof room so I have no idea what they're doing! No, no. I have somebody outside with them.

[00:46:18] **Nick Hylla:** Well, thank you so much. And we'll see you in just over a month.

[00:46:22] **Shimekia Nichols:** Peace everybody!

[00:46:24] **Nick Hylla:** Thank you!

[00:46:24] Thanks again for joining us today. Make sure you subscribe. Leave us a review and for more info on the energy fair. Go to theenergyfair.org. That's theenergyfair.org. And we will see you there.

[00:46:39] Outro