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THE FINAL STRAW RADIO - AIRED ON OCT 31, 2021

Asheville Survival Program is an autonomous mutual aid network formed in early 2020 at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in so-called Asheville, NC. They are building mutual aid with oppressed communities, promoting solidarity and sharing outside the bounds of State structure through their streetside camping gear, food and solidarity distro and their “Until We’re All Free” Store, holding a distribution space open a few days a week walk-up visits and delivering groceries through a network of drivers.

Bursts with Fern and Ducky, two members of ASP affiliated with the Free Store, about the history of the group, challenges its faced, challenging charity dynamics and working to reach outside of subculture and across racial and cultural lines.

You can reach ASP on:

Instagram at @AvlSurvival

facebook via @ASPDonate

more links, including how to donate: <https://linktr.ee/avlsurvival>

Email: ashevillesurvivalprogram@gmail.com.

Fern: Hi, my name is Fern. I use they/them pronouns and I'm part of Asheville Survival Program.

Ducky: And I'm Ducky. I use they/them pronouns, also part of Asheville Survival Program.

TFSR: So, I'm very excited to talk to y'all about ASP, or Asheville Survival Program, being that y'all are longtime participants in it. I was involved in ASP for about five months at the beginning with my participation tapering off after a while, so I'm excited to hear about what's been going on. Thanks for finding the time to chat! Would folks mind giving an overview of ASP, how the project developed, where the name comes from, and how you've seen its scope change as time has passed?

Ducky: I'll start and then Fern, you tag in if I forget something or if I say something incorrectly. So Asheville Survival Program was co-created at the beginning of the pandemic, like April 2020, primarily by a group of self identified anarchists who were hoping to start a mutual aid project and do disaster relief in the wake of social services shutting down at the onset of the pandemic. The name Asheville Survival Program takes its inspiration from the Black Panther Party's survival programs, which were one of the arms of the Black Panther Party's project, basically, helping people meet survival needs as part of the political goals of that project.

Interestingly enough, I think both Fern and I got involved right as folks that had kind of bottom-lined the creation of the project were stepping back because of burnout. So, we entered the project at this unusual transition time. But at this point, the shape of the project has remained fairly consistent for the past eight months or so at least, where we have a group that does a streetside distro, which Fern and I are not super directly involved with. But then there's also a location called the Free Store, it's full name as the Until We're All Free Store where we distro free groceries. We'll do free grocery deliveries and kind of just exist as an aid space in opposition to State power in Asheville.

Fern: One thing I'll add is that there are a number of kind of auxiliary working groups that feed into supporting these two central projects. So, for example, we have a working group of folks who drive the grocery deliveries that we have. We have a working group that cooks big, hot meals for our street side food distribution every week. And so there's a lot of overlap between all the different groups and subgroups.

TFSR: That's really awesome.

What does the ASP operation look like a year and a half after its inception? You mentioned that you both kind of came in at a time when people who had initiated it were stepping back due to burnout or having to take

on other stuff going on in their lives. But are there any folks that are still around who have been there since the beginning? And who is involved? Like is it folks from political subcultures, faith inspired folks, or folks from the community that you mostly operate the Until We're All Free Store In?

Ducky: Okay, I'll go again, Fern nodded at me and I was like "okay". So I guess, in terms of the way the day to day operations of the project have shifted is kind of operating around this idea of trying to do smaller things really well. This idea of under promising and over delivering. When the store itself initially opened, it was closed to the public, but staffed seven days a week. We are now only staffed like three days a week and only open to the public two of those days. And that just reflects the our capacity to staff the store and the physical resources we can actually fit in the space. It's not a huge space. It gets real full by the time we have enough stuff to distro for a weekend. We're here now and there is just mountains of boxes all around us.

Fern: We're literally just sitting under a stack of cornflake boxes 8 high, that's just tipping precariously over us. Yeah, which you know, great! Happy to have all those cornflakes, but.... (laughs)

TFSR: Make sure the Fire Marshal isn't hearing this right now.

Ducky: They're six inches off the ground, so it's fine (laughs). That's all that matters.

So there's that component of it. So, day to day operations, we are distro-ing resources, talking to people, building relationships, cultivating connection. In terms of who's actually involved in decision making of the project? It's a pretty small group of people that are consistently involved in that. There are a lot of different factors at play there. I would say ultimately, the vast majority of people involved are just folks coming from political subcultures, namely, the leftist, anarchist scene in Asheville. Which also means that ultimately, 90% of the people involved are white folks as well, which is just like also the reality of being in Asheville... which is just like such an aggressively white place. Did I answer that whole question? I got a little lost in the sauce.

TFSR: Yeah, I kind of extended out the the question a bit. Yeah, no, that makes sense. Like the majority of people, at least where the Free Store is situated, there's a large Black community in the area, there's also public housing in the area. Is there anything you can share about how it's felt? Has the project tried inviting folks? And how has that looked? Or has it just been an instance where folks who are working there have just been building relationships with the folks that come up and get the resources and you all also take the resources?

Fern: I guess, I want to think that we are trending toward greater involvement from the community that we are situated in. And since I've been involved with the project, which is coming up on just about a year now, I have definitely seen a small but measurable change in the level of participation. I think a lot of that has to do with the fact that we are, like Ducky said, a predominantly white group coming into an area that is predominantly people of color. There is just inherently a lot of distrust, and especially coming in to a space where none of us actually live, you know, for the most part, it just takes time to start building those relationships. At the end of the day, something that we've been talking about a lot is we can try as hard as we want to as a collective to build trust... but in reality, it comes down to individuals showing up enough to build actual relationships with actual people, and not our community building relationships with another community, or the community that we are, occupying space in.

TFSR: How does ASP relate to NGOs or nonprofits or charities? If ASP is not incorporated and doesn't have an official status are there challenges of getting access to resources from those sectors that do? Or have relationships been built that allow y'all to work together with those sorts of groups? Are there tensions there? I know y'all we're sharing space with Steady Collective a harm reduction collective, which is really awesome. And we've had on the show a couple times.

Fern: Yeah, I can speak a little bit that, because it has been a process of procuring all of the resources that we are able to distribute in the Free Store and through other aspects of the project. For quite some time we have been receiving a lot of the food that we distribute through one of the larger food banks in the Asheville area. They explicitly only partner with nonprofits and we are not in any way a nonprofit. So we started out with having a very under-the-table relationship with a nonprofit that other members of the organization of our collective were involved with, and then sort of using that as a way to start getting some of those resources. But it was all very, you know... no paper trail to the best of our abilities. But over time, I don't know if it's necessarily trust rather than... for example, this food bank has realized what is happening and has decided that they're okay with it.

Now we are coming to them as Asheville Survival Program and not this other nonprofit that we were working through. There are elements where we do have to sort of comply to these standards that nonprofits have, for a variety of reasons. For example, we have to store all of our food properly, and there is some degree of keeping up on that. And that's all well and good, I would hope that we will be storing our food in a way that is safe for people. But there is this sort of fear of nonprofit creep into our non-nonprofit organization.

Ducky: I can say more. So as a collective that has a strong commitment to organizing against the State, outside of the bounds of the State, the idea of incorporating as a nonprofit is pretty controversial within the collective, especially for the idea of incorporating the collective as a whole. I think when we've seriously talked about trying to incorporate it has been less because of a need to gain access to material resources, because we found ways to build relationships with either nonprofits or people in nonprofits more often that allow us to gain access to resources that normally we would not be available to us as a loose collective of individuals.

The conversation around becoming a nonprofit has come up multiple times and we still have settled on not doing for managing our finances. Just because trying to figure out how to manage finances as this non-legal entity using the currency of the State has felt complicated at times. At this point in time, I don't think we're seriously considering incorporating. But when it has come up in a real way, it's actually been like "how do we cover each other's butts when handling money? Is incorporating as a nonprofit the best way to do that?" And so far the answer has been "No."

TFSR: There was a discussion when I was engaging with the collective... There were these unwieldy meetings of like 40 people on signal, it was just everyone talking over each other's I don't know how decisions got made. But there was discussion and there was pushback from a couple different sides about the idea of using the space and using the service as an opportunity to share political content. When I would package up food boxes, frequently I would put in copies of "Know Your Rights" information or harm reduction pamphlets, or sometimes "fuck the Cops" type things, nothing that was too political, necessarily, a lot of it was just about critically starting conversations around "civil liberties issues". But there was a big push against us having a political education component to the food distribution, which was the thing that the original Black Panther Party had done with their breakfast programs and with their clinics and other outreach, survival programs that they had done.

Does ASP or does the Free Store actually engage with any sort of this? Or is there much discourse or comfort or discomfort levels? It could be creepy if it feels like you have to listen to our screed in order to get the food or you have to believe what we believe in order to get your Pine Glow or whatever?

Ducky: Yeah, this is something that, especially this current iteration of the Free Store's working group is really in dialogue around a lot. Fern and I talk about this all the time. Ultimately, I think, because we're named after the Black Panther survival programs, if we're going to honor that tradition and acknowledge it in a real way, some aspect of the work we need to be doing is having an explicit political agenda to the work we're doing. And

that doesn't mean being like the only way people can access resources is by listening to our spiel.

But something that we've run into consistently... And this is something I thought to mention earlier in the interview, but many of the folks involved in running the store at this point, perhaps all of us have not actually been radicalized for that long, have only been involved in this kind of organizing, more or less, since the pandemic began. And so many of us just don't have a lot of experience articulating our beliefs to other people. So when people ask us why we're here, because people are genuinely curious... They're like "Wow, these dirty punk kids are kind of always here giving up Pine Glow and shit... I hope I can say that?"

TFSR: Yeah, I'm gonna edit it. Yeah.

Ducky: Great. When a lot of us speak to this experience when we're asked that question, and just like "Oh, you know, we're here, because we care about people" and giving false answers, essentially, because we don't have comfort around talking about the ideology that drives this work, which is primarily that we believe that the State and those in power actively benefit from the oppression of everyone who doesn't have that level of power and access to resources. And so by distro-ing resources, we are committing to these values of challenging State oppression and the hoarding of resources by those in power.

Fern: Yeah. And something that I have only recently been able to really put into words for myself, but it speaks to kind of that discomfort of this sort of basic unwillingness to discuss the politics that are determining whether or not we're showing up or not, is that, I think it's in many ways, pretty detrimental to the work that we're trying to do to keep these political conversations separate. Because it's not genuine, and I think many of the people that we're interacting with in the community where the Free Store physically is, have great familiarity with the lack of support they received from the State and are mad about it, and have reactions to it and have lots of much more lived experience than many of the folks who are involved in ASP as a collective. Us just beating around the bush and trying to be wary of folks in a sense... Because we don't want to start anything. There's always a chance that you might say the wrong thing to the wrong person and they disagree with you for whatever reason.

But in general, we're all on the same page about a lot of this stuff, and it really is just a matter of what language we're using to talk about it and what kind of framework we're using to approach it. I am definitely in the camp that thinks that we should be doing more explicitly political stuff, not even necessarily political education, because as Ducky said, so many of us are still in relatively early stages of our own political education that it doesn't really feel fair to be like, "Yeah, this is what you should think, person." But there's so much to be learned just by having these conversations over and over again, with as many people as possible.

And so I think as a collective, there is starting to be a shift toward being more comfortable being more explicitly political.

Ducky: I think also that, once again, there's this reality too, that Fern was already speaking to that many of the people that are collaborating with us to get their survival needs met by coming to the store to just get some stuff that they need agree with many of the values that we already hold is like an anti-authoritarian, anti-State, blah, blah, blah, anti-capitalist collective, abolitionists collective. But the words we use to describe our values are just basically jargon. And so I think that ultimately is where we also have to do work as a collective. One people can understand ideas. Not to be like, "Oh, if we use this jargon, people won't get it." But to be like "we kind of already agree. You probably have already heard this phrase before, too. But this is what we mean when we say it."

So like an example of one idea that we've had about trying to make the space more political, and also, at the same time, make it look nicer, because being able to shop someplace for groceries that you need at a grocery store that looks nice is also a really nice thing. Putting big posters up in the windows with different statements on them. One idea that we've been circulating right now is trying to find a really good compact definition of what abolitionism is and just put that in huge letters on one of our big storefront windows. Because abolition is the crux of why we're doing this work. Because if you abolish prisons, you abolish police. Part of that work also involves dismantling the whole system of oppression. And so that's why we're here is because we want the systems of oppression to come to an end.

TFSR: Well, yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And it feels like to not engage with folks politically as if people don't have opinions and as if their lived experiences and opinions aren't worth hearing, or as if y'all's perspectives wouldn't withstand healthy trustful dialogue. . . . As was stated early on, building trust with the community, building these relationships and it's based on people showing up and being real. If you're just like "oh, I don't know, I'm just here, because, you know, it feels nice." Just kind of avoiding using words that might touch someone off, or challenge them, or playing kid gloves with grown people, instead of engaging them in mutual political organizing, that seems like kind of the difference there.

I feel like I participated in stifling the conversation a bit at the time, when we were discussing it earlier on. But I think a part of my initial response was that I don't want this to feel like a church kitchen where you have to hear a sermon in order to get food.

Fern: I mean, there is a balance. And to me, I think that be being political, and especially being politically anti-statist is really a huge part of the difference between mutual aid and charity models. And because charity has so much of that baggage of denying access based on certain factors, based

on sobriety, based on whether or not you're willing to be proselytize to, and so many other things. In the way that we're trying to distribute things and in the way that we're trying to approach this project as a whole. We really want to say no to people as little as we physically can. When we're out of something. It's like, "yeah, we don't have any more of that. But let me put an order in and you can get it next week." Not asking any questions, not assuming that people don't know what they need or what they want.

I don't think that adding on a component of like, "Hey, we're gonna put some stuff up in our windows, we're gonna hands and stuff out." That doesn't stop people. They can still get everything that they were getting. And maybe we can start sparking more of those conversations in both directions. Maybe we'll find more common ground with people. Maybe we'll get a ton of pushback and that will also be equally as informative and equally as worthwhile, in my opinion. Mutual Aid is about relationship building and relationship building is arguing with your family arguing with your friends and growing through that.

TFSR: So the next question that I had in here was: Have you been able to develop relationships for sourcing the distributable goods that don't rely on commerce, like local farmers giving up surplus because they want the food to end up in good hands?

Ducky: I think, ultimately, most of our sourcing, and why again, part of why we haven't had to incorporate to collect resources, is we have relationships with people that work for nonprofits in town that end up with surplus. We end up distro-ing that surplus. Folks will be like, "We actually can't distro this. Can y'all distro because we know that you are in a location where it'll get to people who need it."

Inconsistently we'll have folks in the community provide resources to us and share them like clothes or something that we often have and those are all just like things that people drop off. And I would say that's the most consistent resource that we're able to redistribute that is coming from totally autonomous, non-NGO nonprofit locations.

Fern: Although, the one one thing I'll tack on to that is perhaps Asheville as a whole has sort of a willingness to share information about windfalls. And I think there is an especially a lot of motivation and energy devoted within the collective to taking advantage of those windfalls. For example, a certain food producer that was formerly based out of Asheville, but as leaving due to some....

TFSR: Because they are shitty bosses?! I'm just guessing...

Fern: Because they are shitty bosses!!! You know, someone who knows, someone who works at the Free Store was like, "Hey, I'm clearing out their entire production space. Do you want a ton of industrial cookware? and hotel service ware?" and I was like, "Oh, I'm already out running errands

in North Asheville, I can show up there in half an hour!” And we just got hundreds and hundreds of dollars worth of equipment for nothing! Just because we know someone who knows someone, which is just a testament to the power of community and the power of having the mindset of “I have all this stuff sitting here laying around, that’s just going to either get donated to a nonprofit or get thrown away... maybe I should try to have something else happened to it.”

I think that is a sort of a cultural shift. So many random people just show up at the Free Store, like, “Hey, uhh, I like saw an Instagram post about you. Here’s all this random stuff I have. I’m moving and I didn’t want to bring it to Habitat for Humanity or whoever.” Great, it’s gonna go out the door today, instead of getting shipped around the country and you know, then half of that will end up in the landfill anyway.

TFSR: So, circling back to the the mutual aid versus charity thing. Can you talk about your concept of mutual aid? I’m sure everyone’s got a slightly different answer and in the collective and in all the groups. But just how you feel your work is different from charity? How has it been to try to challenge the dynamic of charity? And how do you think that you all have done?

Ducky: I’ll start with an answer on that one. I wanted to reiterate this at the beginning and I forgot to. We’re all such baby radicals in this working group at this point. All these ideas that we have are just coming from this huge tradition of primarily BIPOC folks that have built these ideas up. So, I’m just gonna say a bunch of stuff. But at some point in this interview, wanted to say that. That all of these things are just straight up, stolen, stole them all.

But anyway, I think for me, there are two primary aspects that define or rather differentiate mutual aid from charity. One of those is something that Fern already spoke to, which is tearing down this barrier of separation between people who seek aid and give aid. Getting to a point where there is no tangible difference in the way we’re working and organizing and being in community with each other that creates a hierarchy on the basis of need. In terms of like, “these are the people that help people and these are the people that get helped.” Getting to a point where resources and care... because we have real authentic, caring relationships with each other are distributed in a way that doesn’t have this weird dichotomy to it. So that’s one part of it.

And then the other part for me is this idea that mutual aid should be doing work that challenges the systems of oppression that create the need for that work. We mostly do survival work as a collective collaborating with people to support their survival needs. If we want to continue to call ourself a mutual aid project and be honest when we say it, I think the next step in this collective development is thinking about ways that we can be explicit in challenging the systems of oppression that create the need for the project in the first place. We’re working on that first thing for sure.

I think we are doing good work and building relationships with who people trust us, because we've been around for almost two full years. And we still show up, and I think folks are used to people showing up for a couple months and then disappearing. But that second part where we actually challenge the systems that create the need for the work we do. I don't see us doing that very much as a collective, at least not yet.

Fern: Yeah, I feel like I have something to add to that. Um, maybe just that I think calling ourselves a survival program is accurate bearing in mind that the sort of theory behind the survival program model, as perpetuated by the Black Panther Party. Which was like... it is impossible for people to engage in political work if their basic needs are not met. And we're still in a time of active crisis. And there's still an immense amount, working against anyone finding any sort of stability during this, in general, and also with these compounded crises that we're experiencing. And we've got to get to a place where we have real trusting relationships with people and those people that we are in relationship with are not struggling to survive. We can start having those conversations about the more political aspect of the project. But in terms of the energy that we're expending on the work that we're doing, I think, ultimately, like Ducky said, we're still in kind of stage one. Because there's a lot of needs that aren't getting that in our community.

Ducky: There's another member of our collective who says this a lot. I'm not sure where this phrase originates from that maybe it's an original of theirs. But it's "all the work we do has to move at the speed of trust." I really like when this person says that because it's a good reminder that while it can be frustrating to be like, "Man, we're just doing charity work. Dang!" But also, recognizing that moment that the reason why we're in this model, where we are essentially doing charity work with some anarchist slogans plastered over it is because it takes time to build the kind of connection and trust in a community such that we as individuals are also part of that community before we can do the real work of mutual aid, which is changing things in a real way.

TFSR: Yeah, I guess it's important, bringing it back to the Panther naming of it, "Survival programs Pending Revolution." That's the full name of it. And it sounds like the work that you're doing right now is trying to lay the groundwork for being able to have capacity for revolutionary relationships with other folks.

Ducky: And with each other! I think something that I've been learning by being part of this collective is the necessity of relying on your friends and comrades to support you and give care when you need it. White supremacy teaches us that that's not the case. We live in a highly individualistic society that teaches you to not reach out to others when you need help, stigmatizes it.

TFSR: So there's one of the oft-pointed-to anarchist adjacent or anarchist projects of support that echoes the work that ASP does. I guess both between street side and and the Free Store to some degree is Food Not Bombs and Food Not Bombs has gotten a very bad rap over the years for doing what some people have said... doing charity, but without the resources of what other institutions do. Like there's a soup kitchen down the street that maybe can more efficiently produce meals for people and fill that gap that the system is leaving. But the saving grace of the Food Not Bombs model is that it is a DIY self organized attempt, that is inherently politicized by its name, attempt at providing meals building companionship and and collaboration between folks as well as filling a need that people have. Oftentimes there's that political component, like when I used to participate with a Food Not Bombs on the West Coast I'd bring a stack of zines and a table and have them there for people to pick up if they wanted to or if they wanted to have a chat about the content.

But a critique of not doing the thing well is.. is heard in some times. People throw together stuff that they're willing to eat maybe tastes good for them, but maybe isn't that enticing for other folks who are coming to it. And it sounds like some of the work that you all have been doing in the space has been trying to make it more appealing to folks. The Bread and Roses idea. Like, if we're going to provide a thing for people, providing beautiful things that are healthy and that are enjoyable, as a sign of mutual respect, as opposed to the often dark and dank ways that folks have to navigate the charity system in a way that demeans them and makes them feel small and makes them feel like they're getting a handout.

I guess it's not really so much of a question. But I wonder if you could talk about the importance of mutual aid work, taking care that the food that's on the shelf is not over date, taking care that it's the kind of stuff that you would want to eat? That you're actually showing love by providing this stuff. Sorry, that was rambley, but it was kind of off the cuff. Do you have any thoughts on that? Or should we just skip?

Fern: Yeah, I think I do have some thoughts about that. That is something that we definitely have talked about at various times there. What I'm thinking of when you ask that is... right when I first started getting involved in the Free Store, specifically around this time last year it was this period of transition that Ducky talked about. I think a lot of that knowledge got lost in transmission somewhere. That was something that as we started opening up the store a little bit more and having folks come up to the window and be able to place orders or just tell us what they would like to have. I think there was sort of a period of unconsciousness where we're like, "Oh, we have all this stuff that we need a distro and people don't

necessarily know what's here, let's just put it outside!" And boxes of food were going on the ground.

There was this conversation that we had that really stands out to me. Basically, to your point. What the hell! It's already so difficult to get food when you don't have money. Don't make people stooped over for it! Put it on a table, make it look presentable, go through and it take out anything that looks even a little bit off. Even though I come from, in my college years doing a lot of dumpster diving and not really caring, like "This food is fine! Like, it looks weird, but it's fine!" And me as someone with a lot of class and race privilege... that was my reaction to my upbringing. "Oh, we're so wasteful as a society." But that's not going to be other people's reactions who come from different backgrounds than I do. Because they would much rather just have food that is tasty and fresh, and looks as good as it would if they were getting it from a grocery store.

Definitely coming into this project I wouldn't have really thought of it. And it wasn't until we started having those very explicit conversations about this sort of presentation aspect. It says a lot about what we're trying to do. Are we throwing shit in boxes outside on the sidewalk? Or are we placing it and like taking care to make sure it's actually high quality stuff. We throw away more stuff than, I would if it was just going to my house for me to eat because I'm like, "Whatever, it's just food!" but there's so much societal baggage about who gets to eat what. And I think it's very important to keep in mind because it's so easy just to want to distro everything because it's all technically good. But it comes with a lot of other stuff attached.

Ducky: I think another part to that too, over time, because Fern myself and some other people that are pretty involved in the store at various points have been here every day that the stores opened at various times and just been here talking to people. So, over time I think we do a good job of eventually shifting to getting more of the things that people specifically request. Like an example is there is this sweet guy who comes by all the time was always like, "do y'all have ramen?" and we never stopped ramen, but we were able to start spending more money on food so now I always buy ramen. People love ramen! Another thing that people often would ask for is juice packets, flavor packets, or Kool Aid. And so now we buy Kool Aid, because we don't ever get it for free. So we can give that out to folks as well.

And the way we have cleaning supplies because no one can buy cleaning supplies with their fucking EBT. So people are like "I need bleach. I need pine Glow. I need dish soap. I need trash bags. I need toilet tissue." And folks also always ask for paper towels, which we don't have, but I think we're gonna start buying them because everybody always wants paper towels and folks really appreciate it when they know that if they give us feedback, we eventually are like, "Okay, we're going to make it happen." So that this thing that everyone is requesting we can get so that it can be distro-ed out.

Fern: Yeah. And kind of related to that, this thought came up for me when you were asking the initial question, in terms of thinking about what the difference between mutual aid and charity is. I think, it's that factor of immediacy. I think about if ASP had tried to start itself as a nonprofit at the beginning of the pandemic, we still wouldn't be a nonprofit, we wouldn't be here doing anything. And it's only because there was obviously this conscious decision to pursue a mutual aid model, a survival program model of just getting up and making it happen. And that also allows us so much more flexibility, like Ducky was saying. We can much more easily respond to people's needs when it's just like, "Okay, there's lots of people asking for this one thing. Let's just have a brief chat in our group text." And then it just happens, as opposed to having to get approval from your boss, or the board of a nonprofit. It's just you can just actually respond to people's needs in an efficient manner.

TFSR: So the food deliveries are still happening. That all gets processed based on orders in the space, right?

Fern and Ducky: Yes. yeah.

TFSR: And who are you trying to serve with that part? Roughly how many people participate in that element of ASP? And how many boxes of food? and these like big boxes generally, but how many boxes of food do you all distribute?

Ducky: I'm gonna answer the first part of that first, which is how does the delivery packing boxes even work? How did how do we self organize to do that. For a long time what we were doing is we would be taking orders of the door, we were taking orders via this hotline, we were compiling all this information digitally. And then while we had the door open, so that people could also shop at the window, we were also trying to pack all these orders. It was always total chaos being on shift it was too much work.

TFSR: Yes!

Ducky: We recently shifted in the past month which I think has been a super big and important shift. What we actually did is we closed our hotline, because we weren't able to keep it consistently staffed. So when people would call, it would be a month before they would get an order back to them. So now we just take orders of the door, but the way we pack orders is we have a shift that is closed. The doors are closed. We got curtains drawn. So it's hard to tell whether or not we're here and we just pack all the orders for the week on that day. And then on Saturday and Sunday, when we're open to the public, all we have to do is hang out at the door grab things for people, and coordinate with the delivery drivers who are coming by to pick up these orders that are already packed. So, it creates

space on our shifts to actually just hang out and spend time with people instead of frantically trying to complete all these contradictory tasks all at once. Do you want to speak to numbers? Or if you have more to say about that?

Fern: Yeah, totally, that is such a huge shift. I took a few months off during the summer for a job I was working. And up until that point, I had been working probably two shifts a week for several months. And I love doing it and it felt important and rewarding, but also just so exhausting. And I never felt like I had as much time as I wanted to actually just chat with people and be outside the space. For now, because of COVID, the space is very small with poor ventilation. We're not for the most part, letting folks in unless they're helping out in some capacity or another. So it can be this very transactional, "here I am behind this little counter, I'm taking your order" customer service mode all the time.

Which obviously has to happen. We still want to get stuff out to people in an organized fashion. If you had a lull in the folks coming to the door, it was like, "Okay, now I have to like pack orders!" And you couldn't ever find a moment to just go chill with the people who are hanging out outside. We're in a little strip mall with a couple of other businesses that are very busy. And so there's always people around and always people to talk to you who want to talk to you.

It definitely has been really nice. In terms of numbers, I would say it varies anywhere between like 30 to like 7 boxes a week. And a lot of stuff, people are just coming to the door and getting a box when they're standing there... but in terms of orders that are placed ahead of time. It does vary but it is consistently maybe 20 households a week.

Ducky: I think it might be more than that. I think on a busy day anywhere between 30 and 50 people will come to the store.

Fern: Yeah, coming to get smaller amounts of stuff.

Ducky: In terms of boxes. I think like 20 households a week is about right. And then adding that to the number of people that just come by and shop, it ends up being a much larger number of people that is harder to quantify. We can count the number of deliveries we do. But there's no real way to keep track, at least, that we've tried of how many people come by the door and get stuff.

TFSR: Initially when ASP started up, there were a lot of misunderstandings about virus transmission. Also ROAR in Madison County as another mutual aid community organizing project, Rural Organizing and Resilience, sort of copied off of the ASP model. They were doing the deliveries for people that thought that they might be have a higher possibility of transmission of the disease. And so we would let a food box sit on the shelf with the packaged goods for three days and go through a quarantine period, and sort of get

moved from one part of the space into the other wrapped up in two plastic bags.

On delivery, we could rip open the outer bag, and they could come and grab the inner bag and take that inside. It was pretty well thought out for what we thought was going on. But who gets the food deliveries these days? Is there any presumption about transmission? Or is it just kind of anyone that asks? Like they might have mobility issues, they might have health concerns, or they just might not have enough time in their day and this will really help them out?

Ducky: Yeah, I mean, the double bag method of deliveries... I started in ASP as a delivery driver right as right as we transitioned out of that. And I think ultimately, we just gave up on even asking people if they wanted us to decontaminate their food. Because people would be like, "do you want us to deliver it soon or in three days to a week?" And people were like, "Right now, please." What's interesting is I don't actually really think that since we dropped the hotline, the people that we were delivering to haven't shifted that much. Almost all of our deliveries anyway were just going up to people who mostly live at the public housing complex right up the hill from where the store is.

But for me, at this point, I think the focus of this aspect of the project, the Free Store, is just becoming a more real part of the community of this neighborhood. And so for me, when we take orders at the door for folks that live around here, that's for folks that can't carry like a 40 pound box to their house, don't want to carry a 40 pound box to their house, or are placing orders for their neighbors who are not able to leave the house right now. And for me that just reflects less of being able to actually offer realistically prioritizing people that can't leave the house because of the pandemic because we don't have a good way to stay in touch with those folks. So we can't really say we're offering that but just prioritizing folks that we have relationship with who state needs, and we're like, "Let's collaborate to get those needs met." Does that feel accurate Fern?

TFSR: How has the project fared in terms of resisting burnout, having an ongoing institutional memory and challenging informal hierarchies within ASP that sort of naturally develop in scenes and in communities?

Fern: Yeah, I mean, burnout is definitely something we talk about a lot. I don't know whether talking about how burnout is real, helps us avoid burnout in any tangible way. But you know, there is something to be said for just at least having it sort of constantly on the table. I think we are as a whole, really good at filling in for folks when they feel the need to take a step back for whatever reason. And speaking to the sort of immediacy of mutual aid, nothing that we're doing is so complicated or so specialized that somebody else with very little introduction to it can't just step in and start doing it.

Like when we don't have enough drivers we just put out a post on Instagram saying, "Hey, do you want to drive grocery deliveries?" and get a whole influx of new people. Which is great. I think having a willingness to reach out, as long as the the people that are coming in are agreeing to our points of unity. That is a good way to do it in some ways and not in others. Like you mentioned in the question of institutional memory, there's not a lot of good resources for having that body of information be available. Right when I started with the Free Store, we were still calling ourselves DÉCON, because we were decontaminating people's groceries. It was this very hilarious shift where we hadn't really been doing that for months, but we were still called DECON. I guess that's an example of institutional memory.

I'm not sure if anyone who has joined the Free Store since we started calling ourselves the Until We're All Free Store, have that understanding of where we started. But one thing that maybe will help this effort of having some continuity is we have started creating much more intentional space for having monthly collective wide meetings, which we've only just begun. Hopefully, they will continue in perpetuity where people who have been involved for many different lengths of time in the project can all come together and share experiences and talk about issues that we're facing now and hopefully also talk about the history of the project. But I do think that institutional memory is something that needs to be built because it is really important to understand why we're doing things the way we're doing them now.

Ducky: Yeah, I can talk about hierarchy, I guess.

Fern: Yeah, you should talk about hierarchy. [laughs]

Ducky: I'm gonna try not to be too controversial, because I know others from the collective are gonna listen to this. I think, as a product of a desire to keep each other safe, in realm of organizing that has primarily been digital. And in fact, at one point, what Fern said about meetings is really interesting, because for a while we just stopped having meetings that were like open to anyone. Shit was just getting decided in signal loops. So, I think a big a big part of trying to challenge hierarchy has been creating more meetings, essentially, where it's really clear that anyone who wants to participate in those meetings is welcome to. So that's a part of it.

But I think something that exists within the collective is just trying to figure out how to include people in decision making without just excluding them. I think something that ends up happening is folks that bottom line a lot of different parts of the project end up accruing a lot of social capital. I say this as someone that has, at various points accrued a lot of social capital. Which just creates this weird hierarchy of people that feel empowered to make decisions autonomously and just do shit. And then a bunch of people who are like, "this person just is making decisions all the time. but I don't understand how they're making decisions. Who they're consulting with about them? How this even works?"

I think something that is important for us to be working on as a collective is making it really clear that once you kind of get the sense of what we're doing, you're really empowered to make a lot of autonomous decisions, and check in with other people about the stuff you want to do especially if it's going to affect a lot of people. But if you're just going to create work for yourself, but it doesn't create work for anyone else, you go ahead and do it. I think that's where we are successful in our informal way of making decisions. That was kind of an inarticulate mumbly...

Fern: No, I think it made sense. One thing that I'll add to that is, from my own thinking about this issue, is I think that a lot of people who are coming to this project, maybe also similarly, like myself, and like Ducky, are "baby radicals" is we've had a lot of experience maybe volunteering or otherwise being involved but it's with nonprofits. And usually working with a nonprofit there are very explicit roles and expectations that you have to meet. And that's just not something that we have other than follow through on the things that you volunteer yourself to do. And to not make life harder for anyone else.

It can be hard to sort of make the shift to make people feel empowered. Because A Yeah, like Ducky mentioned, the social dynamics of the collective are such that not everyone feels like they're quite in-group enough to feel like they have the right or the authority to make decisions. And also that I think people are not used to being empowered to make those decisions.... we're used to bosses.

Ducky: What's interesting about that and something I've been thinking about a lot is, I think Fern and I definitely are somewhere in this in-group crowd. And a big part of that is because when we got involved in the Free Store, it was in this transition period, where the people that have been bottom-lining it for months, at various points kind of all had to step back really quickly. And so those of us who got involved all of a sudden had to learn how to do this thing and there was no one left to tell us how to do it, because everyone had left. And there was no documentation anywhere. So I think some of us have come into this project and have strong opinions about how it runs now. Like I'm very opinionated. But we have this empowerment to just make autonomous decisions because we had this experience being involved in the collective when it was like low key in shambles and there was no one left to tell us how to do anything. So we just had to figure it out.

TFSR: Yeah, that's a really important approach. And that's cool if that's a continuing dynamic that the new folks are being introduced to. Yeah, "just don't create more work for other people. But if you want to do this thing, go for it." That's pretty cool.

Fern: Can I add one more thing about informal hierarchies while we're on the topic. I would say a huge disadvantage for us in doing the kind of work that we're trying to do is that we operate very, very dependent on

technology. Having access to a smartphone, having access to internet, having access to a computer, are all things that if you are going to be reliably involved in decision making in the project, just because of how it has sort of happened, and combined with starting this project, in the space of the pandemic, where it was very hard to be around other people in any capacity for quite a long time. We defaulted to these online, extremely online modes of communication that are just bottom-line, not accessible to a lot of the people that we're trying to build community with.

I'm personally of the opinion that if we are actually going to be doing what could be called mutual aid in the future, we will have to go virtually offline. I don't think any of our... I don't want to sound like an an-prim or something. But, just the reality of a person who doesn't have a smartphone or reliable access to the internet... "How you sign up for shifts at the Free Store is by going on to this Google Doc and coordinating via signal loop with these other random people." It's just not gonna work. And so I think something that I really want for the collective is to take a really critical look at how we came to have the systems that we have, and how can we radically undermine them in order to make ourselves accessible in a meaningful

Ducky: THAT!

TFSR: There's another element, in some activist communities, how some people accrue social capital, which relates to access to resources. Sometimes. You'll see this kind of thing in school board meetings, the people that have the time and can get their kids childcare or whatever, in some cases, can show up to these things and get hyper-involved. And sometimes in activist scenes, the people who show up most consistently, and for meetings to make decisions are people who have the ability to not work a wage job and don't have to worry about rent so much, too.

That's not me saying anything about ASP in particular, but something that I've noticed. Like of my own privilege, I can get by working a job four days a week, and I'll make rent and I have some extra spending money and some food and whatever. But I also don't have kids, I don't have any relatives that I'm taking care of that would require medical bills getting covered, I don't have medical bills that need to get covered...

Ducky: That reflects the reality at the very least of the way the hierarchy that is present in the Free Store working group exists. I mean, because I worked at a lotion factory four days a week for a while and was here the three other days of the week. And then I quit that job at the beginning of the summer, because I'd saved some money while working and got my last stimulus check. And I've just now started thinking about going back to work, like I'm starting November 2nd. But because of that, it means I have a ton of time. So I'm at all these meetings. I'm in all the signal loops. I'm at the store all the time, but it's because I have this additional resource

and privilege privilege around time that I can choose to do with what I want. I think that's the reality of the situation as well.

TFSR: Well, so are y'all looking for ASP to grow? And if so how? How can folks just show up and find where the store is? We haven't talked about the location very specifically. And find out when a meeting is and show up to meeting? What you seeing in the future of the project?

Ducky: I think what I'm looking for and looking towards is continuing to do the work. I don't imagine us trying to expand the work we're doing and doing more work. I just imagined us trying to do the work we already do as a collective and doing it better, while making it more political. Getting really good at running this Free Store, continuing to cultivate these real relationships that I have now with folks in the neighborhood. But in terms of getting involved, the basic prerequisite for being involved, and being able to come to like these ASP collective-wide meetings is we have this document, which just our Points Of Unity document that we have new folks read through. And we're like, "Do you agree to abide by these while doing the work of ASP?" And people were like, "Yeah" usually.

I've not ever had anyone be like "I'm not gonna abide by these." But basically, just reading through these, and these are... I'm pretty sure these points of unity are basically just lifted from Mutual Aid Disaster Relief (MADR). They just got incorporated into our project at the beginning of the pandemic. If you want, I can send you a link and you can hyperlink the points of unity in this episode's notes too.

TFSR: For folks who are going to be listening, though, could you kind of go over the general values of them? Or it's okay if you don't want to, if you don't have it memorized...

Fern: We have a very abbreviated version, a concise version.

Ducky: I'm not gonna rattle them off. But I think the ones that are really important are ones that have already come up in this conversation. There are more of them, obviously. And it's super complicated, or nuanced rather. But one of our points of unity is that we, as a collective, strive to dismantle the barriers between people who give and receive aid. Another point of unity is that we do our work with the end goal of ending all systems of oppression. One of our points of unity is that we're opposed to all forms of bigotry. One of them is that we don't work with the State or call the cops.

What Fern was alluding to is, so when folks just stopped by the store casually and don't want to read like a full page long document, we have like three bullet point version, and it's pretty straightforward.

Fern: Yeah, "No bigotry of any kind." "Fuck 12" or for radio friendly "Don't call the cops. Screw the cops."

Ducky: And what is our third one?

Fern: You gonna go look, it's on the board. We're in the store. We just heard the chair sound.

TFSR: It's FUCK 12 again! [Laughs]

Fern: We love drug users. "We do not shame drug users for using drugs." That's the other one.

Ducky: So at the store when folks just want to stop by and drop in. We're like, "Yeah, you're welcome to drop drop in, do you care to agree to these three things when you're working with us in the store?" I don't know the best way for folks that are just listening in to be in touch with us. You could DM us on Instagram?

Fern: That's kind of true, because you'll get somebody who could have a phone conversation with you about our points of unity and about the project as a whole.

Ducky: It probably be me.

Fern: It would probably be Ducky...

Ducky: Or like one of the two other people that do that.

Fern: Yeah. That's another talk about burnout. That's something that we're looking to expand... the number of people doing the on-boarding.

TFSR: I mean, that seems like an awesome thing that someone could do if they weren't able to share space with people or had mobility issues or that's their jam!

Ducky: I mean, we have someone that doesn't live in town now. Who lives in Philadelphia but is really committed to the project. I miss them a lot.

TFSR: I miss that person. I hope they're listening.

Ducky: Yeah, we miss you. Come back! Well, don't, you like being in Philly more! But keep onboarding people. Thanks. But yeah, I mean, that person doesn't live here anymore, but really cares about this project. And so one of the ways that they contribute, one of many ways that they contribute still is by being one of the people that will introduce people to the project and help them get connected to different parts of it.

TFSR: The Instagram is basically the public face besides the store. If people are on that app they can reach out.

Ducky: We also have an email address. People can email the email address if they're interested and involved or have questions, or if they want to troll us? I'll talk to you after this call and maybe check in with other members of the collective and maybe we can give folks that option to contact us that way as well. So that if they don't have Instagram, they can still get in touch with us. It's AshevilleSurvivalProgram@gmail.com

TFSR: Is there any thing that I didn't ask about that y'all wanted to share about?

Ducky: I mean, I will say, we always need more people. So if you're listening and you're in the Greater Western North Carolina area, and you're interested in this kind of work, come check it out. We're all learning. None of us know how to do this. We all figuring it out as we go. So having more people that are excited and aren't super flaky, love everybody, but half of us are total flakes myself included half the time. Maybe cut that out. It's fine. If you're flaky. You do what you need. It's up to your spoons and capacity. Flake as much as you want, Dandruff is cool! We just always need more people.

It's a lot of hard work. But ultimately, I would say that ASP is a huge part of my life at this point because it really is meaningful work that is important. And I have built really profound relationships that have further radicalized me and helped clarify my vision and my politic in ways that have been kind of incredible. So, the last thing is come check us out. Get involved, if you want.

Fern: Yeah, doing mutual aid is better than staring into the void.

Ducky: True that.

TFSR: That's what's going up on the window.

Ducky: I mean, it's basically our mirror in the bathroom. I think our mirror in the bathroom has "You look so good doing mutual aid. You look great doing mutual aid."

TFSR: I would imagine that if someone's in another city, and they're listening to this, and they've been thinking about starting a mutual aid project, or they work with one. And they wanted to get a hold of y'all to swap stories or talk about ways of doing stuff that the Instagram and possibly email would be a pretty good way to do that, too, huh?

Ducky: Yeah, there's not really a phone number that we can call. I'm going to try really hard to get consent.

Fern: Let's have audio of us saying, Yeah, that sounds like a good idea.

Ducky: Please contact us so we can swap ideas. Cool.

TFSR: If you get consent, then I'll put the email in the show notes and announce it also. And if you don't, then I will cut all the references to it.

Thank you so much, Fern and Ducky for having this conversation and again, making the time to chat for the work that y'all do.

Ducky: Yeah, thank you Bursts really appreciate it.

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