

Denver Homeless Out Loud

An interview with Ray Lyall

Ray Lyall answers the phone and does almost anything else at Denver Homeless Out Loud, a nonprofit organization that works with and for people who are homeless. He spoke by phone with Western Friend on October 12, 2017. The following text contains edited excerpts from a transcript of that interview. To read the full transcript, see: [GIVE URL HERE](#). To learn more about Denver Homeless Out Loud, see: denverhomelessoutloud.org.

Western Friend: OK. Are you still there? Did I warn you that I am recording you?

Ray Lyall: You did.

WF: Good. All right, so how's your community with the storm and all?

RL: We managed to weather through it. It's actually really nice out here right now in Denver. It was just a weird storm and there was a lot of water that flooded everything out, blew the power out.

WF: Is it a community or housing area that is new in that you haven't been through stormy weather before?

RL: Actually it started on July 24th, when we started building a bunch of tiny homes. I am sure you've seen tiny homes before. They are all over California; they are all over Oregon.

WF: So is this their first snow?

RL: Yea, that was their first snow, and it kind of got everything wet, blew the power out.

WF: Right. So are you one of the responsible parties that gets it set up so it does better next time?

RL: The way it works is that it is a community run by itself, so that everybody who lives in the village takes responsibility.

WF: That sounds excellent. What's the name of this village?

RL: It's the Beloved Community Village.

WF: Brilliant. How many tiny homes are there?

RL: Only eleven so far. We would like to see that get a little bigger, but right now there's eleven and fifteen people who live there.

WF: And is it like the city has approved this to be there? How's that working?

RL: This is basically the only city-approved village in the United States. Most community villages are squatted. There's a lot of squatting with tents and stuff. We went through the long process of going to the city and saying, "We'd like a little village." It took a lot of effort on the zoning part.

WF: And how many little houses are you zoned to put up?

RL: Right now, it's eleven, but we would like to turn it into about twenty-five. We'd like to do it everywhere in the city. Denver is pretty big. We'd like to see them all over the city and all over the metro area.

WF: And you've got people on the city council who are supporting you in that?

RL: Yeah, actually, we do. The mayor says he supports us, but I don't really believe that. Our mayor is kind of . . . well, he's a politician.

WF: Funny thing.

RL: I'm trying not to cuss because I could say a lot about him, but I'd rather not.

WF: Right. How big is your city council? How many people are on the council?

RL: There's eleven on the council, and then there's the mayor.

WF: Wow, that's a bunch of people to try to steer your way. Because I assume the city council has to have the final thumbs up on this.

RL: Actually, no. Our government is set up so that the mayor gets the final decision. The city council can say whatever they want and the mayor can go, "Nah, I don't think so."

WF: Interesting. So I could see how you would have something to say about the mayor.

RL: Yeah, he's not really homeless-friendly.

WF: Uh huh. So where is the Beloved Community? I don't really know Denver. Somehow, I assume it would be set up near the train tracks. . .

RL: Yeah, it is close to the light rail, outside of the actual downtown – *just* outside of downtown – in what they call the RiNo district. ["River North Art District"]

WF: So is this village a project of Denver Homeless Out Loud?

RL: Absolutely. We've been doing this for five years now. We've been building tiny homes. Ten of us actually got arrested for putting up tiny homes in a park one day.

WF: When was that?

RL: We're actually coming up on a two-year anniversary, October 24th, 2015. We went and set up eight tiny homes in a park, which land owned by Denver Housing Authority, which makes it public land, funded by the federal government. We thought we were OK to do this, since the land was paid for by taxpayer money, and we put up eight tiny homes, and they came out with 110 cops. I know this specifically. There were 110 cops. We were ten people staying in tiny homes, and they took us all to jail and destroyed the tiny homes.

WF: Wow . . . So in other cities where people have tiny home villages . . . ? You said Denver is the only place where it's authorized. How's that work? What kind of land are people setting those villages on? And I'm assuming they are mostly in villages. Maybe they are just one by one?

RL: No, they're actually villages. There's JDD village in Portland, Oregon. There is Square One, which has two villages in Seattle. They've been approved now, but at one point, they just came out and just set them up and said, "We are not moving." There's one in Madison, there are a couple in Texas. Upstate New York, they are putting tiny home villages in. They are actually a really catchy thing, and they are working really well.

WF: So you've been living in yours for how long?

RL: We've been working on this for about five years, and it's only been recently we got involved with a bunch of other people who were just tired of the way things are going, and they said, "Let's do this." It cost us about \$120,000 to put these in. There are only eleven of them, but they have a capacity to house up to twenty-two people. \$120,000 for twenty-two people isn't really bad. . . . So this has been since July, and I have only been staying there for a week and a half.

WF: OK. Well, I'll get to my list of questions. Would you start by telling me about Denver Homeless Out Loud – its history and what it does?

RL: All right. So five years ago, in 2012 in March, the city decided to pass what they call "the urban camping ban." We call it the "urban survival ban," because they're not just banning *camping*, which is fun right? So they passed this law, this ordinance.

And then a lot of people decided it wasn't a good ban and they wanted to fight against it. A lot of the folks from Occupy Denver got involved. Most of them are gone now. Actually, all of them are gone now. And then Teresa Howard and a couple other people got involved and tried to fight the law. And it didn't work out so well. So now we're just an advocacy group trying to stop the harassment of homeless folks, because we see it all over the place. We

also have our own newspaper; we put out a newspaper written for, by, and about homeless folks. We are working on a "right to rest" bill. We have been doing that in conjunction with WRAP. We are the only group in Denver that is affiliated with them.

WF: "WRAP," what does that stand for?

RL: Western Regional Advocacy Project. They've been doing the same thing we've been doing. They've been running this homeless bill of rights for three years, I believe. Paul Boden is one of the heroes of their housing work. In conjunction with them, we are working with California, Oregon, and Colorado. I believe Washington might jump on board, too, but I'm not really sure yet.

WF: And this is to get a statewide homeless bills of rights?

RL: Yeah, yeah.

WF: What ended up happening with that ordinance, the survival ban?

RL: Yea, what we are trying to do . . . They are not going to eliminate it; they are not going to stop. But we might be able to rewrite it. So we are trying to rewrite it in a fairer way. What the survival ban says is nobody can sleep outside with anything under them or over them. So it's perfectly legal to sleep outside in a t-shirt and shorts when it's 16 degrees outside. That doesn't make a whole lot of sense.

WF: It would let people who have great big houses sleep on their porches.

RL: Yeah, and they say this isn't about homelessness. It's about everybody. Well guess what? Everybody doesn't decide to sleep under a tree when it's 16 degrees below zero. Most of us that do sleep, have to, it's survival.

Most people don't want to use the shelters, the shelters are terrible. I've seen some others in other parts of the country that are beautiful. But here, they are more like kennels.

WF: Wow. And is there even enough capacity? If it's 16 below, if people just really need to get shelter, is there even enough room for everyone?

RL: They say there is, but there isn't. There are about three thousand people living outside, and they can house about a thousand. That's almost four thousand people.

WF: So how do the people living outside stay warm in the winter?

RL: Well, Homeless Out Loud goes around collecting tents and sleeping bags and jackets and stuff like that, and we just pass them out. So we're not the greatest friend of the city. We set up tents. We've had anywhere from three to forty-five tents set up in some places when the snow is four feet deep. We've had cops come up and tell us, "You have to tear

your tents down." We just go, "No, we're not going to," and most of the time, somebody gets arrested, or they take our tent, they take our sleeping bags, they take our blankets.

WF: Wow. So you must have a lot of people that die of exposure every winter?

RL: 188 last year. That's maybe five people less than the year before that. That's my gig. I can't stand it, this thing about, "Well, this person died being outside, but if he was in a shelter, he wouldn't have died." That's crap, that's a lie. People are going to die, that one person may not die, but another one would have.

WF: Because you don't have enough capacity in the shelters for everyone?

RL: Yeah. They'll tell you there is plenty of room for people to go into the shelters. But the fact of the matter is, you have to sleep on top of one another on a floor with a little mat – and I mean a *little* mat, a mat that is one inch thick. And if there was a fire in the building, people would die, trying to get out. And there are bed bugs. I call them, "infected kennels." That's what they are. There are bed bugs; there are colds. People don't understand they should cover their mouth when they cough, they just cough and sneeze all over the place. And that's not just a homeless issue, that's a people issue. I don't want to say "all homeless people are slobs so they don't cover their mouths." I've been to plenty of privileged white folks' events where they cough and don't cover their mouth.

WF: Oh yeah, I've caught myself being guilty of that. I don't always remember; I know I don't.

RL: Yea, it's a thing, you know. Everything I talk about is something that happens inside apartment buildings, too, you know. So in the shelters, we have alcoholics, we have drug addicts, we have mental issues. The way I try to explain it a lot is like this: There is a mom who is taking her Percocet and insulting her child in some way, and the dad is sitting there drinking his whiskey and is tired of listening to all this crap, so he gets up and beats his kid.

WF: And this happens in this room that's crammed with dozens of people.

RL: Hundreds of people! Not dozens of people, but hundreds of people.

WF: In the county I live in, there is an old armory building that they use in the winter as a shelter, a warming shelter to sleep. . . How many shelters are there in Denver?

RL: There are two large shelters, and they have what they call the emergency shelter. Which they decided, it wasn't an emergency anymore, so they keep it open all year long. The reason they keep it open all year long is that there are way too many homeless folks living here.

WF: Right. So those big buildings, are they warehouses, or how are they physically?

RL: The emergency shelter is a big warehouse. The other two shelters were built a hundred years ago, 1900, and they keep using them. There are all kinds of nice houses built up around them now, all kinds of apartments around them. Now those people who live in those apartments are screaming and yelling about the shelters. I always say: If you don't want to listen to loud noises, don't move next to an airport.

WF: (Laughs) Right. Gosh, it's crazy seeing things change like that. . . So how did you get involved with Denver Homeless Out Loud yourself?

RL: Big story, I'll keep it as short as I can. When I became homeless, it was from a really bad business deal. I used to work in construction. I was making a lot of money and somebody kind of burned me, took a lot of money from me, so I ended up losing everything that I had. And then I became homeless. I'm fairly old and nobody wanted to hire an old guy.

WF: Yeah, I'm about to turn 60, and I was unemployed for a stretch there recently, and it's brutal.

RL: Yeah, and I'm right behind you. . . Anyway, I turned back to doing everything that made me a typical homeless guy. I went to drugs and alcohol; I was doing the whole nine yards. And then I found a magazine from Denver Homeless Out Loud. I read it, and on the back of it said, "Hey, you could be a writer, come down and tell us your story." So I did that, and then I figured out that I was not a very good writer. So I got involved with everything else they did. They accepted me. They said, "We don't care that you're a heroin addict, we don't care you're a drug addict, we don't care that you're an alcoholic. Come on in and join the organization." So I did, and I quit doing heroin.

WF: About when was that?

RL: That was in 2013.

WF: OK.

RL: So I quit everything else, because I found something that I could bond with. So I don't do drugs anymore. I drink a beer every now and again, but that's about it.

WF: They saved your life really.

RL: That's how I usually put it, yes. And I'm a loudmouth, so they kind of liked that, because I'm the guy that yells at city council. I walk into city hall, and most of those people turn around and walk away.

WF: (Laughs.) So do you have some job title or something there?

RL: Pardon?

WF: I mean . . . Do you have an official role, a job, with Denver Homeless Out Loud? Is there like a director or something?

RL: Yeah, well, here's the thing: We do consensus; we don't do titles. We don't do: "You're the president, or "You're the chair." Most of what we do, we just go, "If you've got a good idea, go and do it. Working will help you."

One of the newest things we are doing is, we are buying lockers off of Craigslist, and we're putting them around the city. We're finding businesses who will say, "Yeah, you can do this." Then that makes it on private property, and the city can't say anything about it. So homeless folks are getting a place to put their stuff.

WF: That's brilliant. What kinds of businesses are supporting that?

RL: Sexy Pizza was the first one that decided to do it. The guy's name is Kayvan Khalatbari, and he's running for mayor in the next election. He's a good guy; he's an entrepreneur; he's got business all over town. But anyways, he decided that lockers was a cool idea, and now a bunch of other businesses are jumping on board.

WF: Mainly a lot of little retail places? Like pizza places?

RL: I'm not sure I understand what you're getting at. There's no beef over the lockers.

WF: No, no. I'm just curious, because to me, for an entrepreneur, that is a bold move. People are so afraid of homelessness – people who aren't homeless, I mean.

RL: Kayvan has actually come out on the street with me and slept on the ground.

WF: So for companies or businesses to let you put lockers there, that's awesome of those businesses. I'm just curious about what kind of businesses.

RL: There's a coffee shop that's working with us and there's another group called Group Fourteen that does engineering. Maybe they just want to get their name in the paper, I don't know. It doesn't matter to me as long as they are letting us put lockers up.

WF: So, Judy Danielson is the person who put me in touch with you. Do you know her?

RL: No, she just called me out of the blue. She may have been in one of our meetings or something and thought it was a good idea. We have thirty or forty people who come into our meetings sometimes. I don't get to meet everybody.

WF: Right. So are you one of the main people in the office there? Answering the phones?

RL: I don't like to say I'm a *main* person. I'm really not that busy. I've got time to do what I have to do. I'm 58 years old. I decided that once I got involved with Denver Homeless Out Loud and once I got arrested with them (and I've been arrested a hundred times at least for

other things), I decided that this was a good thing. I was getting arrested for a good thing. Then I went: "I'm just going to do this. This is what I am going to do."

So now I work with Denver Homeless Out Loud, and the Laboratory for Combatting Human Trafficking, and something called the Village Exchange, which is working with refugees and immigrants. So I've pretty much decided to not ever work again. I mean, I work all the time, I probably work ninety hours a week. But I don't get paid for hardly any of it. I do work for a laundry truck. We developed this laundry truck where we just have washers. There's one in San Francisco, there's one in Seattle, and we've built one here. I get paid for that; I get \$70 a week to do that.

WF: So you can eat.

RL: Well . . . in Denver, there are a lot of people who hold up signs that say, "Hungry and homeless," but if you are hungry in Denver, you are either lazy or a liar, because there's food everywhere.

WF: But still you need a little cash to do stuff.

RL: Yeah the \$70 is usually spent on a couple of beers now and again and a cigarette, whatever. Thankfully, I work for it, so I can do whatever I want with it.

WF: Right, right. So I know Judy because I know Eric Wright, who is another person you might have met. And I know them because of them being part of the Quaker meeting there in Denver. Have you had any contact with the Quaker meeting?

RL: That subject for me . . . for the Beloved Community Village, the Mennonites have helped us most.

WF: The Quakers not so much.

RL: I think . . . You all are lacking. Sorry, I just . . .

WF: Yeah, I think there are a lot of us that would agree with you.

RL: We go to churches; we do presentations; we ask them for help. We're not asking them for money; we're asking them for help. Whatever they can do. I think that if I were Jesus, I would be kicking over tables. I'm personally not . . . there are plenty of people in our group who are die-hard Jesus fans. I'm a Jesus fan, but I'm not a religion fan. "Religious" people are lacking in a big way. I think they talk a lot of great – now I'm going to rant – they talk a lot of great stuff, but do very little. And I was a Baptist preacher for ten years. I walked away from that because I had heroin addicts in my church, and the congregation said, "What are those people doing here?"

WF: Which people? Who were those people?

RL: The congregation came in – well, there were six of them that came into my office – and said, "We don't like those heroin addicts here." I was like, "What the hell? You don't get this?"

WF: Yeah . . . So do you see the Quakers as being especially a problem in this regard?

RL: No, no. I personally think that all religions are great, are awesome. Everybody needs to believe in something. Everybody needs something to hang on to. I personally just don't . . . If someone comes to me and says, "Let's go to this church and do a presentation," I'm usually like, "Ahh, that's going to be a waste of time."

WF: Got it.

RL: I don't do it. I personally don't do it.

WF: So how did the Mennonites turn out to be actually walking their talk?

RL: Well, we sort of cornered this guy Cole, who we knew from some other stuff. He worked at what is called the Same Cafe. This is a place where you can eat and do a little bit of work, they'll feed you for free. We kind of cornered him and another guy named Vernon, who is the pastor of his church, and they said, "Yeah, this is a great idea."

WF: So they are already doing the work. With the Same Cafe.

RL: Yeah, they've been doing it for a while.

WF: Got it. Do you see in any of your human-trafficking work or your work with immigrants, are church people doing anything worthwhile in those efforts?

RL: No! As a matter of fact, they are not. I'm going to be honest. Here's the thing: There are over four hundred churches in this city. If each one of those four hundred churches put four tiny homes on their property – they all own property; it's legal for them to do that – we could solve the homeless issue in this city. But they don't want to do that. "Oh, well, there's a stigma . . ." Homeless are all drunks, we are all alcoholics, we are all drug addicts, or we're crazy."

WF: Well I know, in my own faith community in my town, I am guilty for being part of my congregation's . . . Our city decided they were going to outlaw people sleeping in their cars. So our congregation decided we were going to let people in a couple cars sleep in our parking lot. But first we held a community meeting with our neighbors, and the neighbors just went ballistic. And we didn't have the strength to defy them. I'm not excusing it. I'm just saying that I'm one of the guilty people. It's hard to get people to step up and be part of a conflict.

RL: I don't think it's that hard. What I think the case is: You have to stand up. You have to say, "Well, this is our property, and I don't really care what you think."

WF: Right.

RL: But we are afraid to do that. And I understand that, we don't want to cause upset for everybody. But at some point, you are going to have to start upsetting people. The whole civil rights movement didn't happen because, "Oh well, we are just going to make everybody happy." No. They upset people. People died because of that. People were beaten because of that. Martin Luther King said: if you are not going to take a bullet, you don't believe in it. I'm ready for that. That's just where Denver Homeless Out Loud stands. I'm ready to do whatever has to be done. *Whatever* has to be done. And I don't see Jesus going, "You know, you guys are great; here's some more money." He beat people; he beat people. He beat the religious people. He said, "You know this isn't right." And that's the same thing we have to do. We have to stand up and say, "This is wrong. What you are doing today is wrong. These are people." I'm sorry, that's just my rant.

WF: No, no. It's brilliant. It's exactly what I want to share with folks. We need to wrap our heads and hearts around exactly that message. Exactly that.

RL: And it's difficult. People don't want to hear that. I upset a lot of people. I put Jesus in the whole thing, and people go [sarcastically], "Aww, that's cool."

If you're a religious organization, you know about the Bible, and you know who Jesus is or Buddha or the Dalai Lama. Come on you guys, we get the love thing. We *say* it all the time, but nobody *does* it. Once it starts costing us a little bit, we get upset and say, "Ugh, we got to go on our way." It's upsetting to me.

WF: I had a whole bunch of questions on my list that were sort of dancing around this, but I think I'm not going to bother with them exactly. But you must think about, why are things like this? How can we have a country or a city or whatever that lets so many people just be thrown aside or excluded or ostracized or whatever?

RL: Personally, I'm not a capitalist. I've given up on that. I don't believe in capitalism. I think it's slavery. I've become too much an anarchist. I don't mean the anarchists that are breaking windows, cause those aren't anarchists. It's a peaceful thing, it just means we are all out for each other. That's the whole thing. That's the kind of thing we are trying to do with tiny home villages. We are trying to communicate that we don't need somebody hovering over us, trying to take care of us. We can do it ourselves. We have volunteers that come in. As a matter of fact, I just left the little yurt that I was sitting in, and somebody is working on it right now. We have volunteers coming in, and we all help each other. We have a little garden going on.

You know, I don't think we are ever going to get to the point we need to get to with capitalism. Because capitalism *forces* us, it forces us to go work. We have to make a dollar. I have lived five years without making a dollar. I just started making that \$70 a week last month.

WF: And yet you work. Nobody's forcing you, but you work a lot.

RL: Yes. I work eighty, ninety hours a week. But it's not for me, you see, it's for somebody else. That's how we are going to get to where we need to go. When we stop looking at ourselves, when we stop looking at that big screen TV. "No, we need a bigger screen TV! Oh I need a better car" Well, that's garbage. I get all over my town faster than the rapid transit does, faster than any bus does, on a bike. And what they push is: We got to get into the transit. It's ridiculous. The things they are telling us are ridiculous. I have issues with the whole . . . well, everything. I don't watch TV. I think I've sworn off TV for about twelve years now because I was tired of listening to the same message. The commercials say, "Buy this," but you'll bleed out the eyes if you do. So yeah, I don't know.

WF: Are there a lot of empty buildings in the Denver metro area? I know there was a thing after the financial collapse of 2008, where there were big housing developments that nobody was living in, and I think some people squatted some of them. I'm just curious about whether that happens in your area, and what you think about that.

RL: There are tons of buildings in Denver – houses, apartments – that are completely nice, and they are owned by the Denver Housing Authority, which is funded by – I'm going to go back to the federal government – they are funded by, HUD, Housing and Urban Development. But these people, they want to keep them off the market, because the longer they can keep them, the more money they can make off of them. The urban land conservancy here in Denver, who owns a lot of property, has been helping us find property we can use. But the problem with that is, it is a business, it is a business entity. It's not funded by anybody. What they do is, they find property, hold it, and then sell it to developers. So what they are doing for us, the Urban Land Conservancy, is if this property is not going to be built for another year, they say we can have it for six months. Because our zoning tells us we have to move every 180 days.

WF: So while they are waiting to sell these properties, they let you use them for six months?

RL: Yes, and that's the deal. We'd like to see them all over the city, it's a possible solution, not a permanent solution, but it is a solution. And what we would like is for religious folks, because they own property all over the city, to let us use those properties, too.

WF: OK, so the city, with federal funds . . . There are actually a lot of publicly owned properties that are empty, but you can't get access to them . . . Then there are also some private developers willing to give you access to land on a very short term basis, and you are

frustrated that the churches won't step up, because those would be places where you could set up in a more permanent way. Is that right?

RL: Yeah, absolutely. And don't think I'm bashing churches. I love churches. I just don't think they are doing enough.

WF: Oh, yeah. You know, when you were saying that thing about Jesus turning over tables and beating people . . . And the prophets in the old testament, that's what they were about, saying, "You guys are not listening to God."

RL: We have lost touch with reality. Capitalism has turned everybody into, "Oh, it's all about me." We are not taking care of other people. We are not doing the job. There's a south African religion, or actually, it's a philosophy, called Ubuntu, and it means human kindness, which is, which touches base with what Beloved Community Village is all about. If you were to meet the fifteen people who are living in this village, you would be like, "Oh, my god, these people are so kind. They do everything for anybody they can. And they are all homeless." Which says a lot about what we are doing. And some of them have gotten jobs since they moved in. Before, they were just homeless people, wandering around. Now, in two months, twelve of them have gotten jobs and have gone off to work.

WF: Wow, that's great. And when you were saying humanity has touch with reality – I'm so interested about that. Could you say more about it?

RL: Well, no, I don't think humanity's lost touch with reality. Capitalism has lost touch with reality. All we do is: Go to work. Go to sleep. Get up. Go to work. Go to sleep. Get up. You said you were 60?

WF: Yeah

RL: You remember when you were a kid. You knew everybody in the neighborhood. Your mom knew everyone. Go borrow a cup of sugar. Remember that? Now we live on top of one another. Just keep piling up, higher and higher. And you live in Palo Alto. I'm very familiar with Palo Alto. 101 used to run through there and they used to call it Blood Alley. I haven't been to Palo Alto in thirty years, but I'm sure there are towering apartments. And nobody knows who anyone is. Even in houses, you don't know your nextdoor neighbor. There's no connection anymore. We just believe we have to get up and go to work and then go to sleep. And that's crazy. Because that's not life, that's not living, that's working.

So, we have created this ability to look at "work" and call it "life." We have to do that because of capitalism. We have to have money. Everybody has to have money. Everyone has to work.

WF: So what do you call the people?

RL: Slaves. Pretty much. It has gotten ridiculous. And unless we do something really radical, it's not going to change. We are just going to sit here say, "Well, the government will take care of it." We need to evolve.

WF: What kind of radical visions do you have? Do you talk about it in your village there?

RL: We don't. It is a completely personal thing for me. As far as radical movement . . . I think everybody should stop driving cars. Right now. Today. If everybody didn't drive cars, today, you would hurt the government. The government will have to stop and realize, "What the hell are we going to do? We are killing people in third-world countries for gasoline." That's what's it for. It's not for anything else. We're killing people in Palestine. And everybody goes, "We are not doing that. It's somebody else." No. It's us. All you have to do is read the papers. It's pretty plain. We fund these people, and you know, it's ridiculous. We spend more on war than we spend on taking care of the people who live here. Who live in the Appalachians for Christ-sake. People are dying all over the world, and we are doing it; we are funding it. When did that become the commodity? When did war become a commodity? But it is now.

The people who make your washing machines buy into that. The people who make your TVs buy into it. The people who make your microwaves buy into it. And I'm sorry, that's really probably too heavy for a bunch of Quakers (laughs).

WF: But, it's real. Maybe it's not a conversation with folks with Homeless Out Loud, but how do you picture it different? Well, people are not driving cars, I guess . . . How do you picture it getting . . . ?

RL: Well, look. You are a Quaker for Christ's sake, and you are asking me this (laughs). One of the easiest things to do is to build stuff for yourself, take care of yourself. Grow some chickens. Raise some pigs. Do everything for yourself. When you have – this is the Ubuntu philosophy that I was talking about earlier – this village over here makes bread, and the village over there by the lake, they fish. Now the fishers? They have way too many fish. And the bread bakers have way too much bread. Let's share. So the fish go over to the bread. The bread goes over to the fish. We make fish sandwiches. Everybody is happy.

WF: (Laughs) Right.

RL: It is pretty simple.

WF: So the difference between sharing and trading? Or selling?

RL: If we eliminate the dollar, then we can call it trading. If we don't eliminate the dollar, it's still buying, and people have to do that in order to survive.

WF: Do you think trading and sharing are different?

RL: No, it depends on how you use the word trading. On Wall street, they use “trading” with a whole different meaning. Anywhere we have a dollar attached to something, it tends to screw things up, because everyone wants the bigger dollar. We have 1% of the world making more money than the other 99%. That's insane.

WF: There are people in the 1%, the people in the suburban neighborhoods or in the churches that are sort of fearful and scared. And then you've got the 99% of humanity getting screwed and suffering. And working hard and building everything and keeping everything going. And doing all the work. I think people don't always see each other as human. I think that's part of what is wrong.

RL: And that's absolutely what is wrong. I am pretty white. I don't know if you are. I'm pretty white, and white people are the cause of that. I caused that. It has become, we turned everything into: “We need to be better than somebody else.” No we don't. In all reality, a long, long-ass time ago, African Americans – the darker people – ran the world. The people of color ran the world. And we changed that somehow. I don't know if it started in England. I don't really know the history. But I do know we decided to crap on everyone else who is a person of color. It's us. It's us. We have become divided in this world -- well, I'm white, or I'm African American, or I'm Asian. No, you are not. You are human.

WF: So do you feel – I would like it for it to be true and it might not be – that in your Beloved Community Village or in your bigger work with Homeless Out Loud that you are working with people of different racial groups, and there is among that community . . . there's more of a possibility of recognition of commonality?

RL: There are four black folks here, three transgender here. When we built the village, we said, “Please come here.” To handicapped people, “Please come here if your situation is an issue for you in the shelters.” The biggest issues that people are having with the shelters are: having a pet, being transgender, having a disability, and pretty much if you are a person of color.

We shit on people of color in this city. Which is funny, because our mayor is an African American. But, he's one of those people who just bought into the system. He does not believe in any of the real histories. Anyway, that's the whole thing. We have handicapped folks in Beloved Community Village, everyone.

WF: How did you all manage to achieve that?

RL: For the Village, we decided we were going to pick the first five people to live there. Well, actually, we said five, but we ended up picking six because a couple came to the meeting, which we were not expecting. And then we said, “You six get to pick the rest of the folks.” We gave them some guidelines, not rules. We said, “Look, these are the people having the hardest time in shelters. These are the people you need to look out for.” We weren't looking

for people like me. I'm just an old white guy. I do fine out there. I have been in the dirt for five or six years. So, I do fine out here. We weren't looking for people who do fine out there. We were looking for people who were having a hard time. And they did a great job. There are fifteen people living here, doing great.

WF: And that guy who has a pizza place, who lets you have lockers there. He's different from the mayor in that he has some authority, some capital or whatever, and still for whatever reason, he can see across this divide, that social level "different from," and it seems he's able to see the humanness across that. . . What makes him different?

RL: He's for compassion. He actually has three pizzas stores and also does a lot with marijuana. He had a lot to with getting it legalized. All that stuff. He's a good guy. He has compassion. He gets it. Not a lot of people get it. There are people who get it, and go, "Yeah, that's a real cool story." But, if you aren't doing something about it . . . It always comes down to that part. Oh, you can say, "I love you." Matter in fact, when I meet religious people and they go, "I love you," I say, "You have to." They have too. But, people who say, "I love you," and don't have anything other than "I love you," they don't get it.

WF: So if I really got it, I would be doing something.

RL: You can't defy love. When you look at a homeless person, say "I love you" and then not feed them or not do something else for them, or not just homeless, anyone in poverty. When you look at somebody, whether you are in poverty or not, if you think you get it and you say you love someone, you have to do something. You have to.

I know people who don't have a penny who do stuff for other people all the time. They that don't have a penny, but they go out of their way to do stuff.

WF: Well, like you. You do stuff. You do a lot of stuff. How did you get so full of love? I mean, not in the "I love you" way. But for real.

RL: I grew up in poverty. I grew up being poor. I grew up in a neighborhood in east LA. I saw a lot of crap happen there. And I moved up to hills near Palo Alto into a little town called Hollister, right outside of Salinas.

I got involved in religion because I was highly involved in drugs and I needed to get out of that. I got involved in religion. I turned into a Baptist preacher somehow. Then like I said earlier, after some years, I turned my back on religion, and I went to work and didn't even care anymore. I have this thing where I say, "God hates me, so I hate him back." It's just a joke; it is not a serious thing. But religious people go, "Oh, my God!" . . . Then when I became homeless . . . I am too old to work anymore. Nobody is going to hire me. The only thing I know how to do is construction, and my body is not up to that anymore. So, I decided I was going to help people

When I was a drug addict, I was a really good drug addict. I put myself 100% into stuff. That is just the person I am. I just try to do everything I do at 100%. So that means – and it sounds egotistical – that people see my jacket and they go, “There's RL.” People know who I am. They invite me to do a lot of stuff. And I go, “I'm down. Let's do it.”

WF: And the other stuff being?

RL: Human trafficking and the refugee thing. It all involves homelessness. Homeless folks get trafficked a lot. Whether they know it or not. Most people think human trafficking means I grab some Asian person and take them to the United States. Yeah, that's not human trafficking; that's called smuggling.

I just . . . I want to help people. That's all there is. I'd rather care. That's all I can say. I'd rather care. I'd rather give a shit. I'd rather care about somebody than hate them for something they're not or some stupid idea I have. If you are a drug addict, it does not mean I have to hate you. You are still a human being.

WF: So this is maybe a dumb question . . . You were at that point of “God hates me” . . .

RL: No, no. “God hates me, so I hate him back.” Big difference. I don't just hate God. I just hate him back.

WF: Yeah, I hear that. So there was a point where you kind of had a turn around, I guess, or a corner, where you decided, “I am just going to help people.” Was that a *moment*, or did it just slid into your life kind of unnoticed or . . . ?

RL: I would go to Homeless Out Loud. I would go to their meetings all the time. I would be drunk. I would have bottles in my pocket. I would be shooting up heroin and going to the meeting. I would smoke meth and go into the meeting, and nobody would say, “You're a real wreck. You can't be here.” They just went, “What are your ideas?” And I went, “Oh, I'm valuable. Somebody actually cares about what I think.” And I thought maybe I should stop drinking when I go to the meetings. Or maybe I won't smoke as much crack. And that's what happened. I saw people who actually gave a shit about people. And this is what I have been trying to do forever. I mean, I've been trying to care about people forever. This is easy. And I got sober. And that's what I do now.

WF: Wow, that's great. Are any of those people from when you first showed up still there?

RL: Oh yeah, yeah! Most of them are. There are seven people who started this group. And they are still doing it.

WF: How many core people are there now?

RL: The people who wake up every morning and do stuff – is three. And there is another handful – when we need something, they are there. They'll come out and do whatever they

need to do. Then there are probably thirty to forty people who show up every Wednesday. Well, almost every Wednesday. Every Wednesday we have a general meeting. And we have meetings all the freaking time.

WF: Yeah, that's anarchy for you.

RL: Yeah, it's kind of annoying. I'd rather be doing stuff.

WF: I just went on your website. I think I had trouble before. It's a great looking website.

RL: Yeah, I do that. Thanks. Except I don't do anything that has to do with paying for anything. I don't deal with money because I'm not a capitalist. People give me money, and I give it to somebody else. I don't want money. I don't like it. It's terrible. The love of it is the root of all evil, you know. I don't deal with money. I love it when someone gives it to our organization. I just personally don't want it. I'm not the anarchist who just pretends to be an anarchist. I really believe in everything that anarchism is.

WF: Well, it's important for those of us who are not as solid in our vision to have people like you who *are* solid, like guides stars or whatever.

RL: That's flattering, but I don't want this to be about ego, either.

WF: I mean that though, not in a way . . . I don't mean to be flattering you. . . There are lots of people who have their own star, like constellations in the sky, there are lots of stars. But, you were saying, that people see your jacket and they recognize you and they have a belief you can help. You don't want to be proud, but you are very clear. You have had that gift, that blessing, that whatever . . .

RL: I can be an asshole – go on and say it.

WF: You had the good fortune of coming into a place that saved you. You have been saved. And I don't mean that like “the second coming.”

RL: I am in total agreement. If it wasn't for Homeless Out Loud, I would be dead. I would be somewhere dead.

WF: And that's a real thing. And you are very clear about that. I'm so grateful that you are willing to share that experience with me. And I can share it with other people in my community. And you are being out loud about it in Denver.

RL: Yeah. At least I never have been too shy.

WF: So, were there other questions I didn't ask that I should have?

RL: If you are alright with it, I'm alright with it.

WF: But, I don't want to leave anything behind, if there is something else. Or if you have ideas later, you can just e-mail me.

RL: Yeah, in the middle of the night, I probably will go, "Damn it, I need to call *Western Friend*."

WF: Exactly. And you will get my machine. But I will call you back.

RL: I'm happy that you let me go where I went. I thought it was going to be more of a really formal interview.

WF: No, I, want to change things. And I am a coward. I am not a brave person.

RL: Well, so am I. I am a coward, too. But, if we are together in the same room, we can change shit. Two cowards make one brave person. That's math.

WF: Yeah, that's good. Make a little bumper sticker for your bike. Well, I'm going to go. I so enjoyed talking with you. I am just so grateful you made this time to talk with me.

RL: Awesome, I really enjoyed talking with you. It was awesome.