**00:00:00**

**Joel Berger (he/him):**

…Into it. So let's just start with just a simple question, if you could talk a little bit about how you got into teaching, what made you want to be a teacher. Just tell maybe the story of how that happened for you.

**00:00:15**

**Jessica Tang (she/her):**

Sure. So when I was an undergrad, I started my first year of college tutoring at The Mather School, which is America's oldest public elementary school actually. And I really enjoyed working with the students there. I worked both with kindergarten and third graders, um and just doing some individual tutoring. And so I would take the Red Line, you know, out of—I went to Harvard as an undergrad—so out of the Harvard bubble and all the way down into Fields Corner and that's where I really, I think, realized that I really like working with young people and children. And then I also was involved in a number of different, kind of, activist activism groups specifically involved in the Phillips Brooks House Association, which is what the tutoring program was run through. It's a student-led, actually, nonprofit that runs I think over 80 programs in the greater Boston area. So that's where a lot of my student leadership development took place. And so, when I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do after college I originally—I was thinking education policy, and then realized that, you know, I think one of the problems with institutions like Harvard is you have these people come out of the colleges going right into policy but they never had any experience on the ground and that's really problematic. And so I wanted to make sure that I actually taught. And so that's why I decided to apply for the Undergraduate Teacher Education Program—really, really small program, it was like seven of us, who would then take classes over at the Ed School and then be able to get our teacher licensure that way. And the other reason I picked teaching too is I was interested in a lot of other different fields—housing, equitable health care, a lot of other social justice issues, and realized that schools are where a lot of these issues intersect. And so my commitment to social justice work is what really brought me into the classrooms.

**00:02:34**

**Joel Berger (he/him):**

Wonderful, and can you tell maybe a little more just about—you talked about The Mather School—but maybe it's some of the school or schools that you taught at as well, and just maybe talk a little bit about like, what was your classroom like? What was a was a day like in your classroom? What was your day like in general, just maybe give us, if you can, like paint a picture of what it was like to teach there. What unique things your students were bringing to the table, whatever you want to share about your actual teaching experience.

**00:03:09**

**Jessica Tang (she/her):**

Sure, so I mean there's basic things, you know, when I was undergrad I brought in a team of volunteers to help redo the playground, because the playground was really in disrepair and the principal was trying to get it repainted, and so we did like a volunteer project. But that is just like a tiny, tiny, tiny, I think, example of the inequities between urban and suburban school districts. And this I saw in even greater contrast when I started teaching at the Gavin Middle School, in Boston public schools, and I was just, you know, really, I think, angered by the inequities. So, for example, my class size was supposed to be 28 for middle school, I had 34 kids, 32, 30 in three of my classes. You know, we only had enough books for one set of a class of 30, not you know, not a book for every student to take home. You know, when I first set up my classroom it was like abysmal in terms of its conditions. I remember one of my friends came with me and I just sat down and I literally teared up because it was just in such terrible shape I didn't even know where to begin. And so, he helped me to like clean it up and he's pretty handy so like we put on new, like, just like handles for drawers and we put up, you know, a whiteboard to cover the disgusting, you know, blackboard that was so old, probably from I don't even know when. You know, you know come to find out two thirds of our schools in BPS are built before World War II and so, you know, the amount of deferred maintenance in our schools is just incredible and lots of teachers, you know, would repaint their walls themselves and, you know, I took the time to actually power sand the graffiti off of the desks and then shellac them so look new. But you know these are not things teachers should have to do. And so you know we would ration the paper, you know, we’d reuse paper.

And this is also, by the way, when I started to really question the role of charter schools because I had some friends from Harvard who would oftentimes go into those kind of schools, who were teaching in nearby charter schools, and they had like class sizes of 15, 18, you know, all these resources. And then a lot of the students I would get mid-year were students who were kicked out of the charter schools down the street and I was like, “How does this make any sense?” And so—I almost taught in a charter school myself truthfully—and then, but I chose Boston public schools because I saw that the need was greater there. But you know that's when I was like, “Wow there's so much inequity.” And that's really what I think fired me up in terms of my activism around educational justice, and then also getting involved in the union my third year of teaching where—and then I started going to meetings and realizing, “Okay, well this is where other educators are coming together to figure out how to fight these injustices.”

**00:06:23**

**Joel Berger (he/him):**

I'm, you know, I think—I'm so fascinated by your—first of all I just, the stuff about what you had to do in your classroom to just get it ready for kids to—for it to be like a space where kids could be and learn is both, is like simultaneously like horrifying and unsurprising and it's, you know, teachers—whenever there's this narrative about greedy teachers I just, constantly I'm thinking there’s so many colleagues of mine who would come in, and—you know, two weeks after the school year was over—to start prepping for the next year to get that room ready, um so that just really resonates. But I think something you said at the end really—I'm so fascinated by, because I was listening to another interview that you did and just how your passion for education justice really—you were involved in so many incredible, like, critical pedagogy efforts and groups really focused on critical pedagogy and then, kind of, that was kind of your pathway into union activism. And it's so interesting to me because there is overlap in those worlds but it's not total and, you know, there's some critical pedagogy folks that are more into that world and more teachers union folks that are more into that world. And I was, I was hoping, you could talk a little more about that education justice work and the role of critical pedagogy in it, and why it's important for both of those worlds to connect and what you see your role as in kind of bridging those worlds and pushing them together and forward. If that makes any sense.

**00:08:09**

**Jessica Tang (she/her):**

No it does, it does. I mean I've told the story before, like I'm not from a union background or union household. And, and I am, I think, for like one of many educators who comes in and like doesn't really know about unions and, in fact, have heard so many stereotypes about unions, which was totally a, you know, a purposeful, I think, strategy from the right to try to undermine and devalue unions. And so I had a lot of unlearning to do about unions. And so, I remember though, you know, I helped to found a teacher activist group here in Boston. And when I'd originally met with folks from like NYCORE (New York Coalition of Radical Educators) and Teachers 4 Social Justice in San Francisco, Teachers for Social Justice in Chicago, seeing the national platform and one of the platform points explicitly being the right to organize and collectively bargain. I was like, “Okay, well if I know I'm definitely for social justice and if, you know, unions are part of the social justice work, I need to clearly learn more about unions in the history and the role there. And so that actually did help inspire me to get more involved in my union, but I just didn't know because, you know, labor union history is not typically taught in our history books. And I think there've been a lot of right-wing efforts to intentionally, like you know, slander and undermine unions, it's been like decades long, if not centuries long, struggle. And so, not having come from a union household, I really had to learn about union labor history and being like, “Oh wow, you know, unions are clearly on the side of social justice and we've gotten away from our roots and we can do better, and, you know, we can't take for granted any of the wins that we've had in the past, and have to continue to organize if we're going to continue to build power, otherwise, the Labor movement will continue to weaken.” And so I believe in the potential of the Labor movement and believe that we need to do better in getting back to our roots of organizing and being about all workers and social justice and our larger communities, and that is how we build power and restrengthen unions.

**00:10:37**

**Joel Berger (he/him):**

That’s a beautifully-stated—and what a great vision. Can you talk a little bit about your—you said it was in your third year of teaching that you started getting more active in the Boston Teachers Union—a little bit just about what that was like, what you just, kind of, what you started to do at meetings and maybe how did that end up leading to something like BTU For All and the vision of that caucus or that group.

**00:11:07**

**Jessica Tang (she/her):**

Sure, so yeah my third year teaching, I believe it was, was the year one of the building reps retired, and so there was, you know, a “vacancy,” although all spots are always vacancies every year. And so I ran and I—I figured, why not? You know, I was already involved in the instructional learning team, the school…council and all these other committees and things at the school. And, and I don't know, I don't know what inspired me to do that, but I just, I just did, and I won and so—I apologize, this is the superintendent calling me…

**00:11:55**

**Joel Berger (he/him):**

We can come back later, yeah I can—I'll hop off.

**00:11:58**

**Jessica Tang (she/her):**

No no no no it's okay, can you give me one second though?

**00:12:01**

**Joel Berger (he/him):**

Sure yeah yeah.

**00:12:06**

**Joel Berger (he/him):**

All right, and again if you need to hop off just let me know, obviously. Yeah so I—we were just getting into the story of how you got involved in your building as a union rep and then into BTU For All and how you got involved with that.

**00:12:24**

**Jessica Tang (she/her):**

Thanks, thanks for—so yeah so I ran for building rep, I won. I think some folks were surprised that I was interested in running cause I was a third-year teacher, and I think at that time there was definitely kind of a stereotype of the “building reps” and I was not it—that's okay. So I started going to union meetings and just learning a lot, and also meanwhile simultaneously was learning a lot through like the teacher activist groups networks in Ed for Lib and—I'm sorry, EdLib. And um I was part of Free Minds, Free People, you know, back in the day and in other groups like that, so that's where I kind of, I think, built a framework analysis for around educational justice. And I was involved in the union, and, you know, I guess I've always been kind of an outspoken person, so when I didn't understand something I would get up to the mic and speak and I remember being very nervous about it at first, but my, I guess, drive to like understand overcame my like fear of going up to the mic in front of like 300, 400 people ask questions and such. And so, then um I think a few folks, including like Garret Virchick and Erik Berg who are kind of, I would say, had been fighting kind of the—or not even fighting just leading, kind of, this social justice kind of lens of teachers unions for some time, and another man named John Allocca who had previously been on the board, they kind of encouraged me to run for Executive Board.

And so I did, at the age of 28, and I think with their support and others, I managed to get onto the Executive Board, and—which was kind of unusual I suppose—one, because, again, I was the youngest person on the Executive Board and the second, because most people don't get on their first time they run. So I don't know, I think it was just with a lot of help that I was able to get on there and, when I did—and I also did run on a very specific platform, which was around social justice unionism. You know, at that point the, you know, core—national core—hadn't even been established yet, but we were working on these frameworks—national frameworks. And I did get connected, inspired very much through, you know, the work that was going on in Chicago and other places. And so I ran on this platform of you know, yes, we need to be a stronger union, and one way we can do that is through building with community and parents and students. And that was something that we'd been trying to do and tag for many years already, and so the foundation was already there and a lot of the relationships were already there. And so, was able, when I was Executive Board member to start our first Parent Advisory Council, and again this came out of my like learning also through PBHA and other places, I guess we could call “popular education opportunities” and so started the PAC—the Parent Advisory Council—and the Community Advisory Board, which then actually grew into the founding of the Boston Education Justice Alliance, which was originally Boston Truth, and now BEJA has now grown into MEJA which Massachusetts Education Justice Alliance. But all of those efforts were part of an intentional focus on building that bridge. I think our union, you know, did a lot of work and kind of it, you know, it's like many unions over the years, became more of a business union, more of a transactional union, as opposed to a transformational union or an organizing union. So trying to push us in that direction and rethinking what type of union we wanted to be, you know, not just the insurance policy, not just, you know, the firefighter when, you know, a problem arises, but thinking bigger and more long term is, is what I was trying to get our union to work towards.

And so after being on the board, some folks in the EBoard decided to try to make this director of organizing position, which then I applied for, and then was appointed by Richard Stutman, our previous president, and that's kind of how the organizing department of BTU was born. And I make it sound simple now, but I want to be very clear, it was a struggle, a lot of this was a struggle. You know, and change within a union is not easy, and change while bringing everyone together and moving together is not easy too. And so, there was, though, a group of folks who had a similar vision, I think, just by virtue of being elected to the EBoard. And then, then I did run for vice president, and that was a big deal because I was challenging the establishment. And it was very close and it was a very difficult election and I ended up losing by 62 votes. And, the next time, two years later, when I ran for president, I actually ran unopposed. But I think all that helps to show that there are definitely a critical mass of members who weren't previously necessarily as involved, but believed in this new vision, and folks who were involved who want—believed in this new vision as well of what our union could be. And so that's kind of how BTU For All came to be, is, you know, we had to organize within our union and to really, I think, share a clear vision of, you know, building upon our past. And I do believe we were still a very strong union, much more of a bread and butter union, but we were still a strong union, but if we wanted to continue to increase our power and not just rely on, you know, our laurels of the past, then we had to change how we were doing business and that meant transitioning from a business model to a transformative organizing model and being much more explicit, and this is the platform I ran on, on not just being about our union members, but all workers and social, racial, and economic justice. And so that is what we're still working on today.

**00:19:21**

**Joel Berger (he/him):**

Thank you so much. Um, just have a few more questions, one kind of builds on a lot of what you were you were talking about here, especially, even as you talked about in your first election for building rep and how you said you didn't look like or seem like what the stereotypical building rep was, what other teachers in your building thought a stereotypical building rep was. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about um just the importance of representation, of being the first woman of color to lead the BTU, of being the first openly LGBT BTU pres, and just, you know, what—you know, the importance of that. And yeah I have some other questions, but I was, I was hoping, you could talk a little bit about that and maybe about like what—what was the stereotype of a building rep, and, you know, what has changed in the interim, since you’ve become a building rep, since BTU For All has really taken off in Boston.

**00:20:30**

**Jessica Tang (she/her):**

Sure. So I would say the average building rep was not around my age at all, and so—and certainly there were only a handful of Asian American—actually I can only think of two or three—who were building reps too, amongst our like 300 or so. So I think I was unusual in those two respects. In terms of being openly bi or queer, there were some, there were definitely some trailblazers, but I think, for me, what was important about it is that, you know, there is this kind of like idea of who was “in the union,” and trying to expand that out and saying, “Hey, actually, you know, if we want to have a strong union, we need our younger, newer members. So a lot of the initial work I did was around new teachers, so establishing a new teacher orientation around the union, a New Educators Committee. Some of the—and then we have a lot of union members who are activists but weren't necessarily utilizing our union in their activism. And so, how do we then create space for those union members to be like, “Okay, if you believe in housing justice, hey let's do that work through the union,” right, “If you believe in LGBTQ rights and supporting our LGBTQ+ students, then how do we do that through our union.”

And so, yeah, so I think representation does matter, you know I've actually had young Asian American BTU members, you know, come up to me and just say that they're like—or even students—come up to me and say like you know, I’m, you know, really proud that you're the president and in, like, even like were in tears and really, that was very moving to me that like just my existence in this leadership position meant that much to them. And it was hard because, you know, it's, this is still relevant today, you know I'm often the only person who's a woman who's on the younger end of things, although I'm you know turning 40 this year. And you know when I first started I did have like the imposter syndrome, where it'd be like you know, a room full of typically majority older white men and me and feeling like, “Hm, I don't feel like I belong,” and having to learn to own my power and own you know, like that “I do belong here,” you know, and there's a reason I'm here and it is to bring perspectives and representation that oftentimes, especially with the labor community, hasn't been represented. So those are some of the reasons I think it matters, but again, it was not without struggle. But you know even coming out, I didn't really mean to but I had to make a choice, and—cause the reporter was doing like a bio or something—and then I made a choice to out myself, because I was like, “Well if there’s some, you know, young queer Asian American out there who's struggling and feeling like you know their possibilities are limited, or not seeing people like them, you know, represented in positions of leadership, then it’s worth it to me out myself,” you know. Yeah.

**00:24:03**

**Joel Berger (he/him):**

Thank you so much, thank you. I was, I was also hoping you could talk a little bit about—it's amazing to me how much you're involved with leading this new task force for the AFT, the Asian and Pacific Islander Task Force, and just about—maybe speak a little bit about how how that came to be and what kind of work you're hoping that AFT can do and be part of the, you know, the movement, especially—obviously, I mean, it's always relevant, but, you know, especially battling this anti-Asian hate and discrimination that's disturbingly been on the rise in the past year, few years. Just, if you could talk a little bit about that, that work, that would be wonderful.

**00:24:50**

**Jessica Tang (she/her):**

Sure yeah. I'm actually really proud of that work cause it was so timely. So the idea for it came actually, I want to say, maybe two conventions ago, I had attended—I'm not even sure how I ended up there, I just I don't know, I like to learn so I just attend things, and I'm curious. And so I went to the Latinx Caucus or the—it was the new Latinx, the AFT, like, Latino kind of task force, and I just, I attended the meeting. And, you know, even though I'm not Latina, I just wanted to know, like, how can we support this work, and you know we had started a Puerto Rican Educators Committee in the BTU and, cause you know at that time there was a lot of the, kind of, neoliberal corporate takeover shenanigans happening in Puerto Rico and a lot of government issues and fraud and things like that. And so you know, our—we had a committee Jonathan Rodrigues helped to start when he was an organizer here with some of our members. So I think I just wanted to learn more and figure out, you know, how can we support this work and take it back to our own union et cetera, and the hurricane too had struck and there was just a lot of need. So anyway, so I attended this meeting and I was like, oh, you know, and a lot of the issues they talked about were the same issues that Asian Americans are facing too. And so you know I think the AFT has done a lot of great work in terms of addressing Black community issues and, always more work to do and always can do it better. I thought it was great that Evelyn was then tasked with creating this new task force too, and so I said, “Hey, can we have a AAPI one too?” And I asked Randy and Randy was really supportive. And then, and then the last convention too we tried to get a resolution done and we didn't quite get it done in time. And so this was all building off of that, but she did make a commitment that we would get this going, and, like, the timing of it was I think impeccable, or much needed. So we’d only had one meeting before what happened in Atlanta happened, and we were—but at least we had a structure to start talking about this in a more intentional way of how do we support our Asian American educators and students and community and bring more visibility to the AAPI community. And so that's really the goal, and so I think—gotten off to a good start and we’ll continue that much needed work. And I think there also needs to be more intentional intersection, intra-racial solidarity work, and I'm hoping that these structures can be an avenue for that as well.

**00:28:04**

**Joel Berger (he/him):**

Wonderful, thank you. I have maybe two more questions if that's okay with you. The first is kind of going back to the beginning, talking about the conditions at the school when you first got there and just the kind of rank inequities that you—are literally visible in the actual physical infrastructure even. I was curious about the 2019 Massachusetts Student Opportunity Act and the role of Boston Teachers Union and what your role was in getting that passed through the state legislature, and maybe talking a little bit about like what that process was. You know, so many teachers unions across the nation are really getting so involved in tax politics now because of these funding inequities, and so just talk a little bit about that and what's been good and what's maybe still work to do in terms of, you know, now that the law has been on the books for a couple of years. I was hoping you could talk a little bit about that.

**00:29:09**

**Jessica Tang (she/her):**

Sure, so that was actually intentionally our campaign after the Question 2 campaign. So just for a little bit of history, 2016 was the Question 2 campaign. In Massachusetts there was a ballot question to basically have unfettered charter school growth, and that would have decimated the funding for the traditional district public school systems, and it was just a terrible ballot question and we had to defeat it. And so even though we were outspent almost two to one, you know, we really buckled down and did a ton of grassroots organizing, I was organizing director in Boston at that time, and…leadership, also Barbara Madeloni, really fought a huge battle to overcome this ballot question. But we always said, you know, it was not just enough to defeat Question 2, this was about longer-term funding, the need to actually reform the Education Funding Act, Education Act 1993, the formula hadn't been updated in over 30 years, and it was part two of our campaign. So part one was we had to defeat the ballot question and part two was we had to then, you know, we couldn't just let that mobilization and energy just die, we had to channel them into this next part, which was around actually adequate funding. So, stop this terrible disaster from happening and then also ensure that we put all that energy and funding—and that's how MEJA was born honestly, to, well MEJA actually already existed but the SOA funding campaign, Fund Our Schools, Fund Our Future campaign, directly built off of the Question 2 campaign, and so that was the next step. And so now we’re enforcing Fund Our Future and also fighting for higher ed funding, which was part three of our efforts too. And so, you know, that was a great win, but we lost a year because of the pandemic. So it was supposed to be—what was supposed to be funded last year actually got pushed back a year. And so we're still fighting that fight, but it too was taking the lessons from the Question 2 campaign and really mobilizing, organizing and using all different sorts of, you know, grassroots, electoral, and other means to get that passed. Yeah so we were deeply involved in that, and the teachers union certainly were helping to lead that fight.

**00:31:52**

**Joel Berger (he/him):**

Wonderful, thank you. And maybe my last question is kind of, I don't know, it's kind of a broad one, but I was wondering if there's just maybe one moment from your years, whether in the classroom or as an activist in the teachers union or just in education justice more generally, that that really sticks with you, or that motivates you. It could be with a student, with a parent, with other teachers at a workshop, I don't know. But I’m just wondering if there's like a moment or two that really sticks with you that you'd be willing to share.

**00:32:33**

**Jessica Tang (she/her):**

Um. Honestly, one of the ones that pops in my head the first is my third year teaching, I lost a student. The student was very close to me—

**00:32:53**

**Joel Berger (he/him):**

I’m so sorry.

**00:32:54**

**Jessica Tang (she/her):**

—and she had a really bright future. And she and her little sister, who I also knew because she would babysit her all the time and bring her by school. And I was a basketball coach at that time so she would sometimes bring her to practice because she, her little sister, had nowhere else to go. They both died in a fire, an arson, and so, it really broke my heart. And, you know, I think things like that, where you're in a situation where you're trying your best to create opportunities that your students deserve and then something tragic like that happens, it just like, you know, it broke my heart, took me a while to recover. I actually ended up switching schools, because it was just too sad for me to be there. That like, I don't know, there's just some kind of motivation that like, how do we ensure that these like brilliant, wonderful, young people get the opportunities they deserve, because there's so much they're up against that's created by society and it's not their fault. And so, if we really want to have a truly equitable not just education system, but society, so that students like Acia, you know, can have the future they deserve. That, I think, drives me a lot. And also, I'm a little feisty, I guess. I get really angry when I see injustice, and feel like, you know, I can’t just stand back and not do anything about it. I have to speak up and use whatever privilege or access I've been given to fight for a better world. And, yeah, I don't know, I’ve been through a lot, I guess, unusually, in my 39 years, you know, and, yeah, like I had cancer, when I was 28 and, you know, it just makes you, I think, sit back and reflect and be like, “What's really important in life, what's really important, you know, what is—what is really, you know, my legacy or purpose.” And, yeah, so those are some of the things that motivate me, you know. Like, I was very lucky I had health care, you know, I can't imagine what it's like for people who didn't have health care and to find out you have cancer. You know, I happen to be in a city with incredible services and health care access, and just you know, again, the injustice of it all. It just—I’ve just seen so much injustice, you gotta, you gotta fight, and I do believe in the labor movement, I do believe in workers coming together, I do believe in, you know, fighting the—what did MLK say—capitalism, patriarchy, and—

**00:36:25**

**Joel Berger (he/him):**

—militarism yeah. Capitalism and racism or—

**00:36:32**

**Jessica Tang (she/her):**

—yeah and racism.

**00:36:37**

**Jessica Tang (she/her):**

Yeah so that's, that's what drives me. And it's just incredible to me too, sometimes, when I see like how much progress we've made, but how little progress we make at the same time. I mean you know, like the fact that I’m even the first Asian American on the AFT Exec Board or Exec Council, like that was, you know, a little surprising to me. But yeah so there's a lot of work to do in that realm too, you know, that's why I'm so involved in Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance. And yeah there's just a lot of work to do in all of our communities and really understanding the importance of labor and worker solidarity and intersectional, intra-racial solidarity, in terms of how we can win and fight back, and, I think, a lot of the corporate and abused capitalist system that's created so much so much inequity between haves and have-nots.

**00:37:39**

**Joel Berger (he/him):**

Thank you so much. I'm gonna to pause the recording there.