

## **Transcription of Jim Ryan's Conversation with Hira Azher Regarding the Poster on her Lawn Room Door**

Date: Thursday, Sept 17, 2020 at 8 PM, prior to Hira Azher's surgery on Sept 18, 2020.

Hira Azher (00:00):

Like there's no excuse for the police being there. So that's quickly, that's kind of what I wanted to touch about on the sign. Because like, like the whole purpose, again, isn't about the sign, it's about the underlying issues, and I also wanted to be clear that like something, I think that would come up a lot and that has come up, especially with Dean groves, is this emphasis on free speech, which I get, but to say do not disagree with the student or do not attack the student because she has the freedom of speech isn't enough. Like it should be like, no, this isn't okay because all of these things are right. And the university knows that every everything on this sign is right. The university knows that we have these problems that we have this history and it's not enough to just be like, this is a free speech issue. Going more into the underlying issues, I think there needs to be serious conversation about how UVA is an exploitative institution with UVA students, as well as like with the Charlottesville community, as well as how UPD is unnecessary. And that there's no reason for us to have such a close relationship with CPD as well. How, the ways in which student self-governance is exploitative and just at the core of it, like there's no denying that white supremacy and settler colonialism are like foundational and built into this university. And then also like UVA really needs to not just acknowledge, but respond to, and like substantially start working towards the different demands that have been made particularly now. I haven't seen UVA make any formal response to any of those demands. So, like the RA demands, the YDSA and UCW demands, BSA demands, BLM Cville demands, the Defund CPD - can you still hear me? It says the internet cut.

Jim Ryan (02:02):

I, you, you, you, you froze for a second.

Hira Azher (02:05):

Okay. Can you hear me now?

Jim Ryan (02:06):

I can hear you now.

Hira Azher (02:07):

Okay. Yeah. I was talking about the different demands. So, I mentioned the UVA RA demands, YDSA and UCW demands, BSA's, BLM Cville, Defund CPD, and UVA beyond policing. And additionally, because there is no specific list of disabled students demands and CDIC is kind of an up and coming org, they haven't really made anything. I've been talking to a couple of different students about my own experience with some demands that need to be met. Since you do have a time constraint, I don't know if it would be best for me to email you this later, or if you would like me to read it out now.

Jim Ryan (02:53):

I'm fine. Either way.

Hira Azher (02:55):

Okay. Um, yeah, I can, I can quickly skim it. One of the biggest ones was that like the paratransit system that UVA has with DART is not working. It's not a safe system, it's not a reliable system. The accessible paths at UVA are not kind of comfortable for students like to have to spend double to triple the amount of time to get to places is not accessibility. The parking spots for students with disabilities, like as in the ADA parking spots, are always full, even though I know students have had conversations about this and have always been told 'it's up to code,' even though students have continually complained that it's not sufficient and that's not equal access. I don't know if you know, Lucy, she was a recent grad who worked on a lot of this, but that UVA students who have had disabilities have been told that they have to go into a separate graduation ceremony, because they would be too slow and slow down the graduation, which is obviously not okay, and that's ridiculous that that was even ever allowed. Obviously captioning of all A/V presentations, giving different accessibility trainings to RAs, professors, guides, OLs, all these different groups. Um, a big one, obviously that relates to me, is making each and every lawn room fully accessible. So that means accessible, like physically accessible to the bathroom, accessible to laundry, and parking. There needs to be a timely response working on these disability concerns, as well as expansion of UVA, mental health resources and replacing all of the brick paths. They can still be brick. But ones, I'm sure you know, that are accessible to students in wheelchair, such as like the path outside of Clark or the paths around the rotunda that have bricks that are not accessible or that like when you're on a wheelchair, it's literally like you're going on a roller coaster on those paths, which is not fun. Um, so that just covers kind of what I was talking about with the accessibility concerns. And then to talk about the email more specifically, I think at the heart of the email, like I said, the university needs to acknowledge the truth and lived realities of the people who built and were exploited by UVA currently and historically. I think it's really important to acknowledge that this sign is not slander. There's nothing slanderous about the sign. A hard boundary for me is that it is not okay for the university, for you, to publicly denounce the sign. It is the university's job to protect their students, and I know the university has a history of not doing that, especially in these public emails. As one of the students, I really think it's important for me to feel protected by this university, which I haven't. Um, and then again, like not making it a conversation about free speech. Like, yes, that can be a line or it can be a subtle message, but to revolve the entire conversation around free speech would be such a disservice to all the pain and suffering that students, especially that I, have faced, and other students from marginalized identities have faced.

Jim Ryan (06:24):

So-

Hira Azher (06:24):

Sorry, just the last one,

Jim Ryan (06:25):

Okay, go, keep going.

Hira Azher (06:25):

I just wanted to say, responding and substantially working on the demands.

Jim Ryan (06:31):

Alright, um, so some of the reactions, so, um, you know, I'm sure you're receiving a lot of emails. I'm receiving a lot of emails. Um, a lot of the reaction is to just "fuck UVA" and the, just the profanity. Um,

and I think that precludes a lot of people from actually thinking about what the rest of it is. I also think the KKK Cops, um, stops a lot of people in their tracks who think it's basically an epithet. Um, so I'm curious, like how, how do you respond to that, right? That is completely fine to raise complaints about these issues, um, and, and, and, um, and, and concerns about them, many of which I share, but, but a lot of the reaction I'm seeing anyway, it's just as a visceral reaction to the headline, a subsidiary reaction to, wow, are you saying all cops are members of the KKK? And I think that, that stops a lot of people from thinking about the valid points that you're raising. And I, I'm just curious, like, how do you think about that? And if you were me, how would you think about that?

Hira Azher (07:54):

So, the first thing is like for which people? First of all, which are the people who are most offended?

Jim Ryan (08:03):

Oh yeah. It's all, it's all alums.

Hira Azher (08:08):

Okay. And it's also like which demographic of alumni? Because I've had alumni who've come up to me who have loved the sign. I've had families with children, who've come up to me who have told me that they appreciate that this sign is here.

Jim Ryan (08:20):

Yeah. I know. I will be the first to say [laughter] opinions are divided.

Hira Azher (08:29):

I think it's like, who is, who are, the people that are upset with the sign? And then also like if you are upset, there needs to be some kind of self-reflection that happens and examining what is making you upset. And is it truly the fuck UVA? Is that what's making you upset or is it, is it the fact that you are being confronted with things in which you are complacent? Um, and I think that's one of the biggest things with the fuck UVA is that we all, everyone at this institution, at the lawn, understands that, even I, as a lawn resident, like I'm living on the lawn and I have a sign that says fuck UVA, like I understand those contradictions.

Jim Ryan (09:04):

Well, I, I think that that's part of it is that I think a number of people feel like you're a fourth year of living on the lawn. You are UVA.

Hira Azher (09:13):

Yeah. And that that's the issue is that I feel that I'm UVA, but UVA constantly tells me and white students and alums who show up at my door with razorblades, constantly tell me that I'm not UVA, and that there are students that are more valuable. When a cop shows up at your door, it shows that the university isn't really there to protect you or is not going to protect you. And then also like the issue with the KKK cops, especially now, like if that is something that you don't understand, the relationship between the KKK and the cops, the history there, there's a reason that they say the cops and Klan go hand in hand. If those are all things that if you were serious about addressing these issues that you can check with a quick Google search.

Jim Ryan (10:01):

Oh, I, I, I, I, I, I'm more than well aware, but I'm also aware of the modern-day complexities of police too.

Hira Azher (10:13):

Okay. Which are what?

Jim Ryan (10:16):

Well, which is that, um, modern day police are not in hand in hand with the KKK.

DeVante Shands (10:28):

So, if the police in the United States, if the institution of the police in the United States came directly from slave patrols, then how can you say that? If at its base, integrally, this is an inherently racist institution, how can you say "Oh, today it's different because it's different."

Jim Ryan (10:46):

Well, I mean our country, I mean, um, I think it's just more complicated.

DeVante Shands (10:53):

Could you explain what's complicated about it?

Jim Ryan (10:56):

Um, well the, the origins of things don't necessarily represent the current day reality of them.

Hira Azher (11:03):

But we do see the current day reality.

Jim Ryan (11:05):

I mean, I think of this as, at a very personal level. I mean, I know members of the UPD, Black and white, who are good people who are trying to do their best, who are trying to protect people.

Hira Azher (11:19):

It's not about individuals. That's specifically about structures. It's not like I have the UPDs names on my door.

Jim Ryan (11:26):

I think individuals feel that way.

Hira Azher (11:30):

And then that's, again, a moment of self-reflection. And if you have a certain amount of privilege to think of this as an individual problem, why? Like why, why do you have that ability?

Jim Ryan (11:41):

No, no, no, it's not, it's not me.

Hira Azher (11:44):

No, no, no, no, not just you, but I'm saying like, if this is. like you said, how would I respond to this? If, if you are, if anyone is thinking about this as an individual problem, that's a privilege to be able to think about this in and of your own identity in itself. I don't get to wake up and think about myself. I wake up and think about people with accessibility issues. I think about Brown people. I think about Muslim people. I don't get to think about myself individually. And if there are people who have the privilege to individually be like "this offends me and this offends my friend, who is a police officer," that's a privilege, and that also needs to be examined. If you let that privilege cloud your judgment of what actually needs to be done, what's just, what's equitable, and if you allow your being offended by the word, "fuck," cloud your offense over racism, over enslavement, that's an issue and that's a privilege.

Jim Ryan (12:45):

Hmm. Um, so, so what's the plan do you think?

Hira Azher (12:54):

Of what

Jim Ryan (12:56):

For you going forward?

Hira Azher (12:57):

I mean, like personally, or?

Jim Ryan (12:58):

Yeah.

Hira Azher (12:58):

Like, I mean, I won't, I won't be able to stay in this lawn room because it's not accessible., if that's what you're asking me. What, what do you mean by the plan?

Jim Ryan (13:11):

Well, I mean, what are you, what do you, what, what do you hope to be like the end result of all this?

Hira Azher (13:19):

Change. Like actual substantive change. And also, like specifically from the email that you're saying you want to send, or I don't know, I assumed it was an email, but whatever is to be said about the sign, that, like I said, that UVA agrees that everything on that side historically is accurate, um, and even currently accurate and that the sign is not slander and that the sign cannot be publicly denounced by the university and the university needs to protect its students, including myself.

Jim Ryan (13:54):

Hm. Okay. Okay.

DeVante Shands (13:59):

What are your thoughts on those goals?

Jim Ryan (13:59):

Do you think people are listening because of the sign?

Hira Azher (14:03):

Yes. Even I can speak from my personal account. You know SDAC ignored me for three weeks, I was left homeless for three weeks, and Pat Lampkin reached out to me because of the sign, and suddenly there was some sort of accessible housing, which there wasn't, but there was some sort of solution that I was never offered before. So clearly people are listening and people are tuned in. And, specifically, the sign isn't targeted towards white people to be listening, or people who are offended by it to be listening, the sign is for us and our communities, and people in power.

Jim Ryan (14:47):

And, and what kind of reaction are you getting?

Hira Azher (14:51):

From?

Jim Ryan (14:53):

From the sign?

Hira Azher (14:54):

I mean, I touched on that, the backlash already. Like you said, it's mixed, but it is clearly which people feel entitled to the space on the lawn, which have some kind of issue with the sign, even though it's not on their door, even though they have the privilege to simply turn their heads away. Um, and then there's also lots of students and people who have said that the sign makes them feel like they have a space at UVA, as much as you can physically tell that the lawn is not a space that is made for them, that UVA is not, and never was meant to be a space made for them, that at least this one space, this one single sign on the lawn represents something in their communities and gives a voice to all of the trauma and suffering - not all of it - but like some sort of trauma and suffering that those communities have experience.

Jim Ryan (15:46):

Right. Alright. Okay. Well, I appreciate having the time with you and hearing from you.

DeVante Shands (15:57):

So just to, I guess, explicitly be clear, like, will you, as the president of the university, be like, "Hey, we will not denounce this sign" and like agree to the goals that she stated?

Jim Ryan (16:10):

Um, I'm gonna think about it. Um [pause] you know, the, the part that's hard for me on it, I'll be honest with you is, um, [pause] um, I get, uh, the idea of saying things in really bold ways. Um, I personally don't believe that, um, that is always the most effective way to bring people along. It's just, it's a question of, um, how you promote change. Um, and I think that the sign has alienated people who might've listened.

DeVante Shands (17:08):

So, like, I don't understand what would sway them from not listening because of the language, if you're insinuating that they would listen because the things on the sign are true, then you're also saying that they're invalidating because there's profanity on the sign?

Jim Ryan (17:23):

Yeah. I think some people stop with that.

DeVante Shands (17:27):

So, then those people are just saying that profanity is equal to racism and it cancels out?

Jim Ryan (17:34):

No, I think that they're just not going to listen.

DeVante Shands (17:36):

Because?

Jim Ryan (17:39):

Because of the profanity, and because you're, you're not starting a conversation, you're stopping one.

Hira Azher (17:45):

I strongly disagree because these conversations have been happening, um, and these conversations will continue to happen. And people who want to be in these conversations have been.

Jim Ryan (18:00):

But, but, but it seems to me a conversation, um, invites people who may not already agree with you.

Hira Azher (18:10):

I disagree. Um, and I think there's variables to how much you can, you can say "may not agree." Somebody may not agree that it was the best idea to put the f-word up there, but that doesn't mean that you disagree with everything else on the side, and that doesn't mean that you invalidate the rest of the sign. You might say, "Hm, maybe I wouldn't have done that," but everything here is valid and I will not denounce this sign. There's, again, variations to what you disagree with, but when a disagreement completely invalidates student suffering, student pain and trauma, and the history of pain and trauma and extreme exploitation here, that's not just something you can disagree about. Those are facts. It is a fact.

Jim Ryan (18:52):

Well, I, I, um, I think we're [laughter] I think we may just be disagreeing about the means, um, and, and disagreeing about how you actually invite people into a dialogue. Um, and I think that, that, um, the sign itself in, in my view is not inviting people to a dialogue except people who already completely agree with you,

DeVante Shands (19:24):

But there seems like there wasn't a dialogue before.

Jim Ryan (19:24):

And that can be fine. If what you want to do is just invite people who already agree with you to have a conversation. But I think starting that way, um, is not a way to invite people who may not know, may not have experience, um, but would be open to a conversation.

Hira Azher (19:46):

And again, I'd say in that you're privileging the experiences of people who are already privileged. Um, and you're saying this sign is meant for those privileged people who've never had to experience these problems, um, and because the sign makes them uncomfortable, it is our duty as students who have experienced the pain and trauma.

Jim Ryan (20:03):

It's not, no, no, no.

Hira Azher (20:03):

I mean, you're not explicitly saying that, but that's, what's implied.

Jim Ryan (20:10):

No, no, it's, it's not about duty at all, honestly. I mean, it's just about strategy really at the end of the day.

Hira Azher (20:18):

But you were saying that your strategy-

Jim Ryan (20:20):

and it's about like, how do you actually promote change.

Hira Azher (20:23):

But again, those people aren't our audience. Um, and I would expect -

Jim Ryan (20:29):

That, that that's, that's fine. That's fine.

Hira Azher (20:33):

What's fine?

Jim Ryan (20:33):

That's fine to recognize that's not your audience.

Hira Azher (20:37):

Okay. So then knowing that you have the audience that you do with UVA students, if this is like an email you plan to send to them, is that going to change anything or is it still going to be...



Jim Ryan (20:51):

Yeah. You know, I, for better or for worse, like I, [laughter] um, you know, I feel like my job is to hold the community together during a time where I think the university should change. Um, and as I look at it, I want to bring as many people forward as possible, that's, that's how I think about how change happens. I think people have very different views about how change happens. Um, and that's fine. I mean, there are there reasonable disagreements about strategy. Um, I feel like in my role, my job is to bring as many people along [pause] to change UVA in the way I think it should be changed. Um, and my worry honestly, is that this sign makes it harder for me to do that.

Hira Azher (21:48):

I know I have to leave, so I'm just gonna quickly say this. I hear "I" a lot and "I want to change the university in the way that I think that it should change," but if the communities that you want it to change for, such as the community I'm in, I obviously don't represent the full communities; but if these communities have been voicing these concerns, which were mentioned in the demands, um I think if you want to change a university for the students, and particularly marginalized students, then those marginalized students should be the voices that are heard, in all their anger, in all their grief and in all their suffering. And even if that includes being angry and having a sign that's angry, that's valid.

Jim Ryan (22:33):

Yeah. Yeah, no, I, I, I don't mean to, this is clearly not about me. Uh, um [laughter] and I [laughter] don't mean to use the word "I" to describe all this. Uh, it's just, it's the responsibility I feel.

Hira Azher (22:56):

But it's also the suffering that we feel. It might be your responsibility, but the people who suffer for it are us.

Jim Ryan (23:04):

Yeah. Yeah. Okay. Um, well, listen, I really appreciate your time. Um, and being able to talk to you, um, and, uh, I would be more than happy to keep this conversation going.

Hira Azher (23:24):

Okay.

Jim Ryan (23:25):

Okay.

Jim Ryan (23:26):

Alright, thank you.

Jim Ryan (23:26):

Alright. Uh, yeah. Um, and good luck tomorrow.

Hira Azher (23:30):

Thanks.

Jim Ryan (23:32):

Alright. And are you set for the next couple of weeks?

Hira Azher (23:36):

Um, no, but I'll figure it out.

Jim Ryan (23:39):

Okay. Alright. Okay. Alright. Well, thanks again. I appreciate the time. All right. Bye.