

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Emily Wright and Justin Garner of River Valley Organizing

JVN [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness. Today we're releasing a bonus episode about the train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio just over a month ago. We know from guests like Erin Brokovich that a community is only as healthy as the air they breathe and the water they drink. If you have not seen that movie, honey, get your life together. When this train derailed, it exposed Ohio residents, their pets, and local wildlife to hazardous materials—and they've been feeling the health impacts ever since. Last week on Instagram Live, I had the opportunity to speak with two community advocates from River Valley Organizing about what's happening on the ground in Ohio. These two guests, Emily Wright and Justin Garner, live in the immediately surrounding communities and have been directly impacted as a result of this train derailment. That conversation was so impactful that we wanted to release a modified version of it on our podcast feed as a bonus episode. The audio quality's not the best we've ever done, so just bear with us on that. Mine is not as good as theirs is specifically, but I really was so moved by the information and I thought that the information was so impactful from the people that got to listen to it on Instagram Live that we should release it here. Without further ado, here's my conversation with Emily Wright and Justin Garner, where I ask them: What's happening in East Palestine? We are trying again. We are trying again. Trying them. Trying again. It's like, in the words of iconic Aaliyah, "If at first you don't succeed, dust yourself off and try again." Hi, everyone. Hi. Hi. Hi. Let's pick it up where we left off. Ohio. Okay, Ohio. Emily, take it away. What is going on?

EMILY WRIGHT [00:01:45] So about actually a month ago, yesterday, on February 3rd, and pardon my voice, we've all had symptoms since this and the typing. So much so it may sound a little rough by apologize. I live just so you know, I don't live in East Palestine. I live one community over, I'm about six miles from the derailment site. We had a large train derailed on Friday night and this is on the border of Ohio and Pennsylvania. If you're familiar with our region, we're about an hour outside of Pittsburgh. And a lot of people, you know, worked in the area in Pittsburgh. So after this happened, we didn't hear a lot of news. We just kept getting, like, alerts on our phone that there were certain evacuations. We didn't really get a full picture. And then on Monday, we started getting a lot of alerts that there were multiple cars of vinyl chloride and other different chemicals. Vinyl chloride is a very toxic substance that's used to make plastics eventually. And there was four different chemicals go through it all and a lot of oil that was spilled out. We didn't know that at that time.

JVN [00:02:50] It's February 3rd, you're just minding your own business. It's Friday night. You get some, like, automatic alerts to your phone, like, when, like, an Amber Alert comes up or something. And it's, like, telling you that there's evacuations in surrounding communities and that's it.

EMILY WRIGHT [00:03:04] Yeah, basically. And we really didn't even have that Friday night. From Friday to Sunday, there was really no picture of what was going on. We had people that were flying drones over to try to figure out, but we didn't really hear a lot. There may be five cars with toxic stuff. There may be ten cars. So on Monday, we start getting these alerts Sunday night into Monday that they're evacuating people. Apparently, one of the cars was gonna blow up.

JVN [00:03:26] Wow.

EMILY WRIGHT [00:03:27] Yeah, it was going to be catastrophic and they didn't have any good solutions, we were told. So they were going to do a controlled burn of the sub. There's no such thing as a controlled burn out in the environment of these substances.

JVN [00:03:39] It's just something to not freak out the public.

EMILY WRIGHT [00:03:42] I guess.

JVN [00:03:43] So then by Monday you were saying?

EMILY WRIGHT [00:03:46] Yeah. So we were told at 3:30 p.m. they were going to do this burn because the car was going to explode and shrapnel could go up to a mile. And so they evacuated everyone from the immediate area. They were going to do this burn. Unfortunately, it went off 2 hours late and we had to call for high winds. So instead of the cloud going up into the atmosphere, it went over four counties and two states.

JVN [00:04:09] Oh, my God.

EMILY WRIGHT [00:04:10] The next day, we started seeing dead fish everywhere. Daddy, animals. People had dead chickens. There was a fox sanctuary that boxes off. I didn't even know how to Fox Sanctuary. People were having symptoms. They were talking about how we were supposed to be sheltering in place. That's all we heard. And people were covering their windows with blankets, like, doing whatever. We get told that there's no toxins in the air the whole time. This is what I really want to forward. "There's no toxins. There's no toxins. There's no toxins." There was no focus on water and soil and surface testing. The only thing we were told is the air quality monitors were better the next day. People were let back into their homes. This is a 100% back with absolutely no completed water, well, surface, or soil testing. They went into their homes with a meter that is, you know, not—so, it's supposed to be a beginning reading that you follow up with actual testing. They took the meter people's hands and said, "Here, you know, your homes are okay." But as you know, what is the saying, JVN? "When the dust settles." So they weren't doing the surface testing. So people that weren't sick from the burn symptoms or being by the derailment wound, then it started getting sick when they went back to their homes, waking up with rashes all over their bodies. We have people that have been diagnosed with chemical bronchitis, pneumonia, you know, dermatitis,

nausea, headaches. And that's when people started understanding that, you know, something's been had for months. Then the EPA put out this scathing report that Norfolk Southern did not let anyone know until two hours after the derailment that it happened, they didn't report everything that it was. We had 50,000 gallons of, of oil go into your ground. It has—they're called—forever chemicals that are in that place. And we are surrounded by agriculture. 75% of my groceries come from local farms from April to November.

JVN [00:06:15] Oh, my God.

EMILY WRIGHT [00:06:16] People don't want to buy from them. Their businesses are failing. People are out of their homes but can't afford rent and they're getting sick in their homes. But Norfolk Southern is in offering any, like, relocation where they clean up the EPA. I mean, to be honest, we've, we've been we've been failed and. And unfortunately, what it's happening is everybody wants to finger point. But what I'd like to say in, like, a minute, if I can, and then I'll give it back is unfortunately with our area. This is the Rust Belt. You hear about that a lot. Where we live was filled with steel mills, all these things. This is layered environmental degradation that happens in our area. So each time an industry fails, it's replaced with something else, like fracking or waste incinerators or things like that. And we're almost in what's called a "sacrifice zone." So in our area, it's like the poorest people in the country. We're in Appalachia, like, we have some of the poorest counties around, and they set up in these places because they can offer jobs. Like my father, he worked for thirty four years in the mill. He has bilateral asbestosis, rheumatoid arthritis, sitting in a chair most of the time now.

So these, these men—and women now—are giving their bodies to these industries. And then we live by these industries and these trains go, you know, I mean, I have a track behind my house, you know, through our neighborhoods. So there's such a tie to commerce with our area that it's almost like we're being sacrificed for the almighty corporate profit. And unfortunately, this week we have a waste incinerator in our county. It's a little farther south of East Palestine. It has had hundreds of violations. It has, I mean, RVO started with suing the federal government and this waste incinerator because there were all kinds of studies that showed that there were increased cancer rates, asthma rates, all these things in the area. We were promised on Friday that the waste from the clean up site from East Palestine would not go there, by the government. On Sunday night, they secretly took it there because no one else would take it, and now they're incinerating it. So now not only our wells are oil, our soil for 20 years is affected. Our animals, they're finding more dead water, aquatic animals. But this is decades of consequence. And Justin, he lives near the incinerator, so he lives a little bit farther away from the derailment. But now he's there.

JVN [00:09:59] Justin, I'd like to ask you. So Justin Gardiner is the communications director for LGBTQ A-plus representation for River Valley Organizing. One thing that I've thought a lot about and write about is queer people in rural America and how oftentimes queer people in rural America are really some of our most forgotten people. Obviously, being LGBTQIA intersectional experience. You can be white, black and ethnically Latina, be literally anything

and queer in these spaces. We know that people experiencing homelessness and a young queer population is especially high in these areas. Like, if someone is like, you know, kicked out of their home or, like, doesn't have, like, financial security or housing security because of their sexual orientation or gender expression, how is the community, the queer community doing in East Palestine and how can people help?

JUSTIN GARNER [00:09:47] Yeah, absolutely. So it definitely is a different environment than, like, what you would see in a city, and I think that's a given. But a lot of people are very in the closet or if they are even out there, very subdued. There's not a lot of, like, gender expression, There's not a lot of, I would say, community in our area. When I moved back, I came from Columbus. But my family, I've been born and raised here. I was doing drag down there and when I came back, I'm, like, "There's really nothing like that around here." So me and some of my friends, we started hosting drag shows in our area and it was funny because there were so many straight people that came, or people that were so different from us. I mean people that work on farms or people that, you know, I mean, just people that stereotypically you wouldn't think would come and support that. But I mean, we've really just seen like an outpouring of support and coming into this role, like that's really something that I'm passionate about, is just bringing more representation here, being able to educate people here, kind of breaking down those walls that, you know, we're we're all the same. You know what I mean? Like at the end of the day, like, you know, we're all united just as a human being. And just kind of on a different note of that, I just wanted to thank you, just as a queer person, just for breaking down walls of gender expression. For me personally, living in an area like this, like, it has just, it has honestly changed my life. And I just thank you so much for that.

JVN [00:11:39] Oh my god you're gonna make me cry on this live! Stop it! We've got to talk about East Palestine! But thank you so much, that's really kind of you to say! So that, like, literally meant, like, so much to me, what you just said, that was really so sweet. And I didn't mean to say stop talking. You just, like, ah! Sorry, I just am, like, it's not about me! I want to talk about you guys! Justin how long have you been back?

JUSTIN GARNER [00:12:00] I moved back in 2020.

JVN [00:12:02] In 2020. I'm also, like, extremely bad about taking compliments, which is weird because I tell people to be better at that all the time and that I was incredibly uncomfortable talking about it anyway. So then I just, like, immediately start crying. So I think that this is a question for both of you. When this first happened, not to be one of those people that makes it about me as I just was, like, "I don't want to make this about me." There's a train that goes down in Austin that goes right through the center of Austin, like, all the time. And it used to wake me up when I lived downtown in our production offices, like, when we first did Queer Eye here. And when that derailment happened in East Palestine, I was, like, "There are trains everywhere." So was this something that you all knew about or had your eyes on, or did this catch you all equally as off guard? And then, like, who was taking the possibility of an accident like this seriously and who, like, has not been?

EMILY WRIGHT [00:12:53] This was not a surprise. We actually warned the EPA in 2014. So River Valley Organizing started in the living room of our founder Amanda Kiger. And one of our first things that, you know, we did was about the trains. And we had a campaign, not just us, several different large national affiliates and different, you know, people in environmental orgs started a thing called "bomb train." And we tried to tell the EPA that, you know, with the increase in fracking that's happening in our area because we have that shale here in Ohio and Pennsylvania that you do down in Texas as well, which is where, like, fracking really originated in the United States. People, you know, started doing it down there. A lot of these materials coming back and forth and also to make plastics. And so really it's all combined. We're not trying to make it a beyond the derailment, but really, this is all connected to the oil and gas industry, too. So we kept telling them Norfolk Southern, not just them, but other railroad companies, but especially them, are having safety violations, 71 million violations, they've had, and 21 million is just in environmental safety.

JVN [00:14:05] But if a corporation has had that much money that they would rather, like, subvert, like, "I'll just pay the fine."

EMILY WRIGHT [00:14:12] It was actually a letter that came out before the derailment that basically said that they're running in a way that they're not going to lose profit. So we've been putting it out there that these trains are going very fast through residential neighborhoods with lowered restrictions and with these toxic chemicals. And it's just a matter of time before we have with metastatic. And so what we kept saying so unfortunately, there were you all know, I think during the Obama era, they had some different regulations that they kept on with the railroad. But, you know, that changes time to time. So Trump got rid of some of those safety regulations. And then it's been two years and the Biden administration hasn't done anything to get those back then.

JVN [00:14:54] Because the Biden administration I mean, Trump did away with it from an executive order. So it could have been reinstated the increased rate or could it not, because of that, the report says, and it said that the EPA can't enforce things as much anymore.

EMILY WRIGHT [00:15:07] Some of the things could have been—like, they do, like, precision scheduling. So here's the thing. That train that wrecked, it broke down on February 1st in Madison, Illinois, and three of the employees from Norfolk Southern told CBS News anonymously that they called corporate and said, "This train's too heavy. It broke down. We're very concerned about derailment." So they knew and they kept the precision scheduling. So that's one of the things that those safety regulations also there's enough blame to go around because—

JVN [00:15:41] I literally just wrote down "blame."

EMILY WRIGHT [00:14:46] Listen, corporate greed and profits is number one. Norfolk Southern is, you know, like a \$55 billion company. They made \$8 billion in profits in just one year, 2021. That was just their profits was about 8 billion.

JVN [00:16:01] And when you think about that corporate tax rate, these corporations don't have to pay anything for safety, community safety for the environment. They don't have to put anything in for everything they take out. Now, I do have this little thing I wanted to just venture, and I was curious about your guys's thoughts. This is years of deregulation. Republican politicians favor deregulation and have deregulated courts who have judges appointed by Republicans have also been working hand-in-hand with corporations to deregulate. So it's like when you think about a singular event, when it's up against systems, it's easy to say—or not for you guys to say, I'm seeing in the comment, like, “Biden this, Biden that,” and I get it. Like, should Biden be there? Absolutely. Should he do everything that he can do to reinstate any sort of safety measures that he can from an executive order around train safety? Absolutely, should have done it on day one. And also, this isn't a reason to completely stay on your ass and like not get involved, because part of why these things do happen is because so many people don't fucking pay attention when there are people like you two working so hard from River Valley Organizing to bring attention. And then it takes a disaster for us to realize that we're not safe. So we actually really need to, like, wake up and pay attention more often. I mean, it was the same thing with monkeypox. It's the same thing with so many things where, like, the only people who give a fuck are the people who are directly affected and we need to be more caring about our people because it literally could be any of us. So anyway, sorry I freaked out.

EMILY WRIGHT [00:17:35] I totally agree with what you're saying. Just to be, like, totally honest about: River Valley Organizing is non-partisan. We're a501c3, so we really don't care what side of the aisle you're on, but we are aggressive. So our politics are issues, are things that, you know, we have progressive mindsets. So it really is our job to give it to everyone that needs to do, you know, different. But I think one thing that really needs to get pointed out and this is, this is, like you said, this is a lot of conservative politics, but also, unfortunately, it's made its way into moderate politics that are a little less progressive, is that we all have this to commerce. I mean, I get it. Like, our government depends on our area. It really does. But unfortunately, you know, people can feel like they're forgotten in this area and, like, “Okay, we're doing the commerce for the whole United States, like in a lot of these areas.” But then, like, where the attention and the money goes is the coast. So that's how, like, a lot of people feel about that. But I think you're right. Our number one focus, to be honest, is Norfolk Southern. And if I say “Norfuk,” I'm sorry, I used to live in Norfolk, and you don't say “Norfolk.” So... that's why. One of the the biggest, biggest things is understanding that no matter what, they're lobbying. Okay. So they're lobbying our Congress right now to not have any conductors on their trains. They're lobbying to have these trains in five years, have no conductors with the technology that they're building. And they're already one less conductor than what most people feel is safe. I mean, these are conductors who are saying that these are actually workers for the union because this isn't just about us. Their union, when they fought

for their pay. People were, like, "Oh, they just want to get paid more." No. They were fighting for their safety. They're not even allowed to take a day off because it can mess up with the precision scheduling. So there's a little bit of blame for everyone.

And listen, what you should be doing is, especially if you're under 40, please listen to me. I'm barely under 40, so this doesn't cover me. But please, please, please be more involved in the civic process. Instead of wanting to pull out of politics and saying that politics or issues or organizing isn't going to do anything. If everybody says that, then it won't. But we need people of all ages, of all backgrounds, of all races, of all genders, of all, you know, everything, we need representation. So please use this as a way to be more involved. And one of the things you were talking about the LGBTQIA community during this. So I have a story and then I'll get back to whoever. But I have a friend that I've met through this. Her name's Melissa and she's called Moo, Moo is her nickname. Moo is awesome, she's hysterical, she's loving, she's awesome. You know, she was unhoused before this, and she got, she got her apartment in East Palestine a day before the derailment, after she fought to get this apartment for six months. And now she's couch surfing again. You know, this, this is just this is just a few of the stories. And we, we need people to realize and I have to say this, our government should serve all people no matter how they voted. And I've heard a lot of people, "Say the people around here are, you know, a large swath of them voted for Trump and he lowered the regulations and this is what we get." Do we say that to women when we're pro-choice, or do we say that to women—, you know, no, we don't.

JVN [00:21:30] Well, no one deserves this, like.

EMILY WRIGHT [00:21:31] Right. And people around here. Yeah, like, I didn't vote that way, but I still think that those people deserve to be advocated for because that's what if we really are trying to change America to be what we say we are instead of what we *think* we are, we have to do that. And I, I know it's hard because a lot of the bigotry and the hate that's been spread by people that vote that way, but people around here, especially in AP, they just wanna make sure their kids are going to have cancer fighters. They, they just want to make sure that, you know, their water's okay. We got people in our room that voted all across the spectrum that were coming together to say, "We don't give," like, I have—, One lady looked at me and she said, "You were in a protest last year. I was on the other side of that protest," and she grabbed my arm and said. "I'm so glad that we can, you know, understand that there is mutual causes and maybe we can learn from each other." So I think that this situation has really. Showing people that we need to start talking to each other more. And it may change minds, and it may change things.

JVN [00:22:43] Yeah, that maybe it's, like, capitalism is the enemy and not each other. I mean, it is really hard when someone is, like, spewing really intense, like transphobic misinformation or like, you know, homophobic misinformation. But one thing I try to remind myself when I come in contact with one of those types of people is that they have been given misinformation by right wing folks to scare the ever living shit out of them. So it's, like, when people are

coming from fear, like, they aren't coming from love, even though some of them think that they are coming from love.

EMILY WRIGHT [00:23:14] His group, like, I want you, I want to give a shout out to them, like, I want you to give a shout out to all your groups. But they have changed the valley in three years. Like, a lot of the closeted community has come out and is celebrating with each other. We're planning Pride around here now. Their drag has really changed this valley and I'm looking forward to what it's going to do.

JVN [00:23:44] There's just so many questions and comments on, like, how people can support, and get in, and work shoulder to shoulder with y'all. I think one thing you need to do yesterday is everyone, if you're on this live and you're still watching and you're vibing, follow @rivervalleyorganizing on IG, like, yesterday. What else can people do to get involved?

EMILY WRIGHT [00:24:02] Our LinkTree on our Instagram bio, we keep that as up to date as possible. Justin and I are working on the website right now, so we're not really directing people towards it, but we're a nonprofit, so we keep that website up even as we're working on it. It's part of our parameters. Go into our LinkTree. We have petitions, ways to donate. Just so you know, we're a 501c3. So what our money will go to, if you're wondering, we're going to do independent soil and water testing and that's with the University of Pittsburgh, Carnegie for short term. And then the University of Kentucky is working on their IRB review. An IRB review is an international review board that reviews and makes sure that the scientific processes is followed. So we're getting that cleared, and that's going to be through the University of Kentucky. So we're going to be with people for the next three years through this, with testing and those types of things. We're also offering—we're going to have free legal clinics. So we are non-soliciting. We're not doing a class action, we're not taking your money. These are fair shake environmental lawyers that are going to come in and just basically give you advice, give your rights, tell you what's the best advice so you can make for—, decisions for yourself. We're also going to be working with the Clean Air Council in Pittsburgh and providing, like, free air filters, cleaning supplies, stuff like that. And we're going to continue on—our lead organizer's name is Jamie Cozza, and she's right down from the development site.

JVN [00:25:26] What about the, like, the animal shelters? Not to be one of those people that's, like, worried about cats, dogs, more than people, but I do worry! Do people need—do they, I bet they need help, are the cats, like, do they need help right now?

EMILY WRIGHT [00:25:38] One thing about this area and it's kind of weird because it's a dual thing: we hunt, but we're very respectful of animals. And we have, you know, there are people that wouldn't eat what they don't hunt, now they can't hunt because the animals are, you know. The ASPCA has a shelter, I believe, in Youngstown, Ohio, and there's Angels For Animals, and that's in Columbiana County, Ohio. If you look it up and they've been helping take people's pets. So. Yes.

JVN [00:26:01] So please look them up, y'all.

EMILY WRIGHT [00:26:04] Yeah, you can Google them. Absolutely. So that's what we're going to be doing. We have a service to power model that we model, and it's actually after the Black Panthers.

JVN [00:26:12] Yes! Come through, free lunch program! And community fucking safety!

EMILY WRIGHT [00:26:20] Yeah. So we do public safety in general and we have harm reduction programs in East Liverpool, Ohio and we have an actual syringe exchange program in Portsmouth, Ohio that works with the health department. We give Narcan. We've seen over 13,000 lives reported as saved in the last three years.

JVN [00:26:35] Wow.

EMILY WRIGHT [00:26:37] Yeah. People are organizing on the streets. They're saving one another. They're reducing overdose rates, like, we were number three in Ohio, in overdose rates in East Liverpool. It went down to the 6/10 spot. So what we're doing is we're organizing out of that service, getting people civically involved, so registered to vote, ballot initiatives, be involved in the process, and also giving them their autonomy.

JVN [00:27:03] And that's all at River Valley Organizing?

EMILY WRIGHT [00:27:04] Yeah, we do a lot of different stuff.

JVN [00:27:07] Damn, y'all! Get on River Valley Organizing's fucking train!

EMILY WRIGHT [00:27:04] Yeah, enviro—enviro was our first heart, and that's what we do, like, you know, it's our thing. But we also started in the harm reduction stuff because the drug war has ravaged Ohio, West Virginia and Pennsylvania. And we are working to end that. So...

JVN [00:27:24] I'm a harm reduction queen, I love harm reduction. It is, like, so major, I am obsessed with it. We love harm reduction. We just—I just love you guys so much.

EMILY WRIGHT [00:27:35] Unfortunately, where we live, we work from the upper Ohio River Valley and East Liverpool clear down to Portsmouth, in the lower Ohio River Valley. So it's considered Appalachia, you know, all the way down. And environmental degradation's one thing, we have, you know, a lot of poverty, we have a lot of, you know, overdose. And these things are all connected. Like, that's what we're trying to show is that, you know, we have areas where people live in areas where their families work at these factories and they're sick and kids are being born with, you know, delays and developmental issues. And then they're becoming in the system, and then they get in the system, and then they're in mass incarceration. And it's, it's a cycle that happens in our area that we're trying to break. And we

don't need to break people. We need to break systems. Like, people aren't the problem. The system is the problem and how people react with it. So that's very much our focus is, yes, we do these services, but we only do services in a way to build power and let people lead the way. Like East Palestine, this entire campaign has been led from people that are actually displaced from their home from East Palestine. I'm six miles away, but I'm not going to go in there. And I mean, I've worked with the community, I'm inside the community, I'm organizing, too. But I mean, like, they're taking the hit. They're the ones. They're making the decisions. When we had our public meeting, we sat down after: "What are the top five things people want us to demand? Let's talk about it." It's community led because unfortunately, in the enviro community activism community, there's a lot of paid advocacy, which we're not again, we're not against advocates. That's just not what we do. So everybody in our organization, whether you're a comms director or development director, you do some type of on the ground organizing. And we want to follow up with you, too, because in the summer we're going to start doing a lot more. He's doing the comms stuff right now, but in the next few months, he's going to be launching, you know, his campaign more. And we would love to follow up with you.

JVN [00:29:39] Yeah, please! I mean, this is going to be a long term, you know, process of healing for you guys. I think that a lot of times when people go through a traumatic event, we think that, like, you know, it's over quickly or you can, like, I write in Over The Top, like, "I wish I could put my trauma in, like, a cute little box and like, put it on a shelf and be, like, 'Okay,'" like, but, like, I mean, in a fucking chemical spill, like, this is going to be, like, a decades-long thing. And it's really when the camera crews leave, that's when it really has. So however we can support, however we can amplify you in future. We are here for it. We love you. I also think that it is literally people like River Valley Organizing who will help us, like, navigate through these incredibly difficult times. Both on, like, a, like, right now scale and, like, a long term scale. So I am so grateful for both of your work. This person did ask a few times, "Do we now have the figures for how many people are affected?"

EMILY WRIGHT [00:30:33] Just in Columbiana county there's about 100,000 people. I would say we're close to a million people that have been affected. There's 5000 people that are just in East Palestine proper. So it's a small village, like, it's not, of course, I guess 5000 is small for everybody, but that's the immediate effect. Then out from that, you know, here's one of the things, the way people were exposed and the oil that went in the ground, it's our whole county. So probably about a million, but 5000 were immediately affected by the derailment.

JVN [00:31:06] You had said before and then I think I freaked, with, like, about the controlled burn and how there is no such thing as a controlled burn. So that stuff we saw in the media that one day with that, like, huge, never seen an explosion, like, plume of smoke that big before, like, then also I think it looked like it could have been from my hometown, like it looked just like where I'm from, like, giving cornfields, soybean fields, farms. Like So is that what the controlled burn was?

EMILY WRIGHT [00:31:32] Yeah. So the only way you can really do a controlled burn is if you can control the oxygen. And you can't control the oxygen outside, like, it would have to be inside a building, that type of thing. Have you ever heard of an aversion cloud?

JVN [00:31:44] No.

EMILY WRIGHT [00:31:45] Basically the way the clouds were, it was supposed to take what looked like a pyroclastic thing up straight into the air. So unfortunately, we had those high winds and it went everywhere. And they kept telling us that it didn't matter because. Okay, all right, I'm just going to say it: they said the shrapnel could travel up to a mile, but they had already evacuated people mostly in that area. And then they waited two more hours, which we haven't really got a good answer to let it go off. And then that was the wrong time and the wind took it everywhere.

JVN [00:32:20] Why didn't they wait for the wind to die down?

EMILY WRIGHT [00:32:22] They said they have time to wait because it was going to blow up. So I went and got my daughter from school because it was going to be at 3:30 and we're in the next school district. So I didn't want her to be on the bus when this happened. And I picked her up, and I was, like, "Okay, nothing's happening. You know, nothing's happening." And then all of a sudden at 6:00, my grandma's sick to stomach, my dad's like, "I can't breathe well," and I'm feeling weird. And we go out and it's just you can start to see the air change. And it went as far north as 30 miles. And they found fish dead the next day up in Bull Creek, which is 30 miles from East Palestine. And they kept telling us that there was nothing wrong with the water, but there's dead fish everywhere. And people were leaving their homes, because a lot of people have creeks that run behind their homes. And unfortunately, you know, because you're from Illinois. Correct. So I don't know if you have the same basement problem that because we live on the river with all the waterways and a lot of people live at the bottom of the hill, like with the valley. And our houses are all, like, a hundred years old. So the basements are not finished. And they they take on water. And our lead organizers had to leave their home because of that. They were told by Norfolk Southern, they admitted that their house was toxic and they offered them cash for their house to basically stop organizing and getting the community. Yeah.

JVN [00:33:49] Someone had a really good question, which was, who is "they"? Was it the government doing the burn? Like, the EPA? Or was that Norfolk Southern, or was it a collab?

EMILY WRIGHT [00:33:56] It was a collab. Our governor was actually at the press conference announcing it and he was rushed out with all the media because they thought this was going to blow up right then. This was supposed to be Norfolk Southern that was doing this, with the state government overlooking. But one of our first things we fought for was for FEMA to come in here. And because we needed immediate, like, help, like, this was not being handled, but our governor would not ask the president for that help because he said we didn't get the

FEMA thing. So we called all our big partners, everyone, and we got the governor to call the president. And guess what? When he did, we got FEMA relief. So we don't know how they're going to come in. But at first, the cleanup, the burn, all of that was being led by Norfolk Southern. The EPA was there, but really Norfolk Southern was the one, like, taking the helm. But after everyone flipped out, because they weren't trusting that Norfolk Southern was going to clean up properly, the EPA demanded they clean up, but then said that they would be in charge of watching them do it. So that was a better answer for us because it wasn't just the corporation in there. But I don't want people to be mistaken. We did have state officials here on the ground. We had our governor here, we had a couple photo ops that were happening, you know, those types of things. And EPA, we did have a few federal EPA people that were on the ground here and there were Ohio EPA on the ground here. But we needed the full force of FEMA to be able to come in here with that relief and send more people in, because one of the big things that should have happened is people should have been relocated for free. But they wanted the trains to run again, Norfolk Southern. People had got back to their homes at 430. By 5:12, the first train came on trucks.

JVN [00:35:51] Oh, because they were like, "We've got a backlog."

EMILY WRIGHT [00:35:54] Yeah. So that's the issue, is that people were being told that their homes were safe to go back to, when the EPA and Norfolk Southern knew that they didn't have that full picture. I'm not saying it wasn't true. I'm just saying they knew there wasn't enough. You can't not do water, soil and surface testing because this is what's—

JVN [00:36:16] Has that happened now? Has there been that testing done now?

EMILY WRIGHT [00:36:16] it's happening and there's independent testing happening, too, because people are, you know, and it's important anyway. One of the things that we challenged EPA with is they want testing for a full gamut of toxins like VOCs and some different things. And we were pressuring them to add those. One of the main things that they won't test for is dioxin. I don't know if you know about dioxin. So dioxin comes off from these chemicals. It falls on the ground. It's everywhere. It's in your home, it's in the grass, it's in the parks with the kids. Every time you step on it, it goes up. It rains, it spreads out. Every time, you know, these things happen. But the EPA, because they've ignored I mean, for years—this is not administration Biden, this is everybody—has ignored that dioxins are a real issue and there's no basis for testing in the federal government. So they want to test for it because they don't have a good enough basis. But unfortunately, this is what would get the picture if our farms could survive, you know, because the cows are eating the grass, which the dioxin falls on, goes into their milk, is being fed to people. So we have farmers that are losing 70% of their business and not being helped.

JVN [00:37:37] What is DeWine gonna to do about?

EMILY WRIGHT [00:37:40] He's going to go to a house, with our useless representative, Bill Johnson. He's useless. Now, I hope—you know, he's never going to see this, but he's useless. I want to tell you something. I'm going to say this. I did interviews all through, and my interview on Fox News was cut because the last 30 seconds of it, I was handing it to him. Telling him, "Don't come for just a photo op." Him and our governor and an EPA administrator went into someone's home and took a sip of water for a photo op. Like, we're not talking about a sip. Come, bring your pillow. Come sleep in their beds, come wake up by the tracks, come feel the nausea, the rashes, the headaches. That was the most ridiculous political stunt, one of the worst I've ever seen in my life. And Bill Johnson is tied to oil. He is. He is oil and gas. He is bought by them and paid for. Mike DeWine is taken for Norfolk Southern. That's the thing. You have to look at who is buying your politicians. And, you know, the fact that both of those people could come from their comfy homes and they could sit there and drink that water. We know they're not going to get cancer or get sick from taking a sip of the water.

But if you're here for a year and you're using the things and you were here when it first happened, you know, vinyl chloride causes liver cancer, by the National Health Institute. This is the NIH that's saying this. So that's the problem, is that the full gamut start being tested for. And it's also the EPA after these events, no matter what administration they're under, they kind of operate the same way where they try to just do a bunch of immediate things and then say, you know, there was one person answering phone calls in the Ohio EPA, one person for East Palestine. That's it. And they put a health clinic chair through the Ohio Health Department that they said was going to treat people. And really all it's doing is documenting their symptoms and referring them somewhere else. They're not getting medicines. They're not really getting any treatment at all. So, yes, our governor, while his base has been, you know, here, you know those things. He is not holding the feet to the fire that need to happen. And also he lied. Okay. He said that he never talked to Biden and then did talk to Biden. He said he didn't know these things were coming through Ohio, these trains, because Norfolk Southern doesn't have to tell us. That's true. But everybody knows, we did those campaigns. He understands, we've written letters. He understands that they're coming through.

So we need more. And this is another thing. What we need are people that are going to come in and do something. And I really think President Biden coming here to show the people here that they're not forgotten because they feel forgotten would be something that would be really awesome. I understand that people don't want to come here because they don't want to be poisoned. I get it, like, we're already in this. We've already been poisoned. We understand. But I think you know, the leader of the free world, as we call him, this is in the top five worst environmental disasters in history. Train derailments, for sure. We're not Chernobyl 2.0. I'm not doing that. I'm not, you know, overshooting this.

JVN [00:41:09] But it's incredibly serious.

EMILY WRIGHT [00:41:10] It's incredibly serious. So that would be good. And ineffectual politicians like our governor, that, you know, yeah, we're, we're challenging him. "Do more."

Tell Norfolk Southern to make a \$25 million fund, just to start, for these people. Not just, "We're going to pay for clean up or donate to your high school," really make them pay.

JVN [00:41:32] We're going to do a clean gorgeous, I'm going to offer a yogi recess moment, which is where both of you get the floor, come to the floor and say whatever you need to say, you want people to know, where we can follow you, where we keep up with you. So Justin, take the floor, darling.

JUSTIN GARNER [00:41:44] Follow us. Our LinkTree at River Valley Organizing. Everything's going to be up to date there. In the Ohio Valley, we're doing more drag shows, promoting community inclusion, and we have a lot of things to roll out in the coming months that I'm really excited about. Also, as a side note, I was told by my partner that I would be yelled at if I didn't—so my partner Jim loves you, so this is for him.

JVN [00:42:20] Aw! We love, he's so sweet, and you're so sweet.

EMILY WRIGHT [00:42:17] And I want to thank you too, like, as a—okay, so I'm a woman who grew up in Appalachia, small town. I've traveled the world and everything. I mean, I have a different perspective than just here. But what you've done for, like, I guess, gender or breaking down gender, I guess? I don't know how to say it, but some of my roughest times, because a lot of us—if you don't know this, we all we all come from church. That's where we were met, we're friends, you know, and our—Daniel Winston, our leader, is my friend, and we come from church and we all met there. And, you know, it hasn't been always the most welcoming place as we've been changing our focus or doing these things. And sometimes turning on the TV just to watch you, you know, helped me during that. And when I saw that I missed a message for a week that your show wanted to have me on, I started screaming. I was just, like, "Ah!" But anyway, that's it, so I just wanted to thank you.

JVN [00:43:18] Don't worry. You were busy, queen! You were really, really, really, really, really busy. You know, it, I really can't—that was, like, one of my biggest goals, like, just in my career, was to, like, break down those boundaries for people. So really, if anyone ever says that to me, that is, like, from a geographic location that reminds me of where I am from. Like, I just it happens immediately. I can't even, like, like, my voice starts to shake and my chin's gonna, like, ugly cry. I'm, like, "Oh my God." But you know, really, please do follow River Valley Organizing. I can't wait to talk to you again. Thank you so much. We are obsessed. We love you all so much. We nailed it. Emily Wright, Justin Garner, playing the game. River Valley Organizing, made me cry twice. It's a record. I love you both so much. Stay safe out there. Like, so safe. And also, it could be really helpful not to be your social media manager like newly appointed, but it could be really good after we get off this to make a post on your @rivervalleyorganizing of, like, your three requests of, like, what would be the most helpful—whether that's volunteering, whatever, like, whatever the three most things would be to kind of, like, wrap this up for people. I know that we need direct support and it would be great to

have a clear, like, little bit of, you know, explain to people what you really need. So thank you so much for everything that you do. We love you so much and stay safe. Thank you guys!

You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. This was a bonus episode, recorded on Instagram, featuring River Valley Organizing's Emily Wright and Justin Garner. You'll find links to their work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. And if you want to join us for our next Instagram Live, make sure to follow us on socials! We're on Instagram & Twitter @CuriousWithJVN. Our theme music is "Freak" by Quiñ - thanks to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, honey, introduce a friend and please show them how to subscribe. Our editor is Andrew Carson. Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto, and Zahra Crim.