

The Guardian-- I walked 170 Miles to the RNC to talk to Trump Supporters. They Surprised me.

I walked from Detroit to the Cleveland convention to talk to my fellow Midwesterners. The verdict: people simply don't care about Melania's plagiarism when they're worried about paying the mortgage.

Fire! Clouds of teargas! Mass arrests! Armed black power militants facing off with assault rifle-wielding white supremacists! Unprepared and nervous police!

This was what I was supposedly walking towards when I decided to wander on foot the 170 miles or so from my home in Detroit to the Republican national convention in Cleveland, where the GOP would be nominating Donald Trump as their party representative – one of the most divisive political candidates since Lincoln.

I've lived in the industrial – now post-industrial – Midwest my whole life, and much of my family has worked in the industrial economy. I set out walking to hear what my neighbors and fellow regional residents had to say about this man. I wanted to walk because walking is slow and the slowness would give me time to understand. With our ever-churning news cycle spewing quick polls and conjecture, I wanted to get a broader portrait about what it means to vote in the upper Midwest in 2016.

I went alone as there's something about the solitary traveler that brings out the maternal instinct in America, that makes people talk and share in an unpoliticized way. I slept on the side of the road and in the gracious homes of those I interviewed, many found through the Couchsurfing website. In my daily life I didn't know many Trump supporters, but I wanted to hear what they had to say, to see if their values aligned with that of the candidate who said Mexico is bringing "drugs, crime and rapists" to the US. So I conducted dozens of formal interviews, many of them with Trump supporters.

What I found surprised me.

The walk through Detroit was uneventful, but the ghost of the city's fate would hang over the entire trip. Anchored by Detroit and colloquially known as the Rust Belt, our story is broadly one of manufacturing boomtowns, astounding material prosperity for common people, and then a slow and poisonous decline leaving bitterness and uncertainty in its wake.

In every 20-year period since the end of the Second World War, the city has lost half its manufacturing jobs.

Despite rhetorical lip service, both major parties have largely ignored the working and lower middle class for decades – and nowhere as much as in the Rust Belt. When once a job was available at any plant, at any time, a forklift driver position at \$16 an hour is now a prize to be held onto like a winning lottery ticket.

The most prominent issue for voters of all persuasions was, expectantly, jobs. I heard, more than anything else, “bring blue-collar jobs back to America”. What was unexpected, however, was how many Obama voters are now voting for Trump.

“I thought Obama was going to do a lot of good for the country, but ...” Terry Mitcham said, shrugging his shoulders outside a motel near Curtice, Ohio. He said he’d voted a “straight Democratic ticket” his whole life. “I like more of what Trump is talking about now as to cleaning the government up. There’s too much free money in there for everybody.”

Universally, Trump supporters liked his perceived independence from the political class. That Trump is funding his own campaign, shaking the Republican party to its core, and has progressed largely unheralded and even mocked by his own party is seen an asset to his campaign. Voters are looking for change – the change they hoped for with Obama – and if Trump is the only option, then well, Trump it is.

Whether Trump is actually an outsider or a “good businessman”, as I’ve heard time and again, is up for debate. But this is undeniably how supporters are seeing him. People simply don’t care about Melania Trump’s plagiarism when they’re worried about paying the mortgage. Supporters seem desperate for something, anything, different. There were no jokes, from either side, when I spoke with people about his candidacy. Midwesterners, at least, are hurting, and hurting bad.

In southern Michigan and northern Ohio, I met fathers working on the road for weeks at a time, wistfully missing their families because there’s no work at home. Auto and steel workers who are afraid of losing their already tenuous and cut-rate jobs. Sons working full time and living with their parents because wages just aren’t good enough.

“There was hope, there was change, it was we can do this,” said Charles Lough, 23, in Vermillion, OH. “I’m looking now and the economy is a little bit better than it was in the recent crash, but it’s still at the point where anyone who’s is not the 1% is making not enough to survive or is working a job they are overqualified for.”

He's working full time at Apple in a customer service position and living with his parents.

Much fanfare and heckling has been made that few big-name politicians agreed to speak at Trump's nomination. But with trust in the American federal government hitting an all-time low of less than 20%, who would want to stand next to them?

"I've always made a protest vote ... Just as a protest against the two parties. I think it's a just giant crock of shit, just a big facade," Said Brian Dodson, in Wyandotte, Michigan. He's worked at the same steel mill, Great Lakes and then US Steel, as has his grandfather. He's now transitioned to making independent films and taking odd jobs to support his family.

"I always come back to: those two parties are just like big corporations, neither one represents the people at all."

Almost everyone I've come across has simply wanted to tell their story and to be heard above the static of Washington money and the coastal media explaining blue-collar people back to themselves in a manner that doesn't square with daily experience.

I heard it time and time again during my walk, but it was perfectly encapsulated by a remark I overheard at the America First pro-Trump rally in Cleveland: "This race isn't about Democrat or Republican. It's about Donald Trump versus the elites."

There were a few areas where both sides of the aisle could agree: primarily that the political system is "broken", that it no longer represented the diversity of views present in the electorate, and that money spoke louder than voters.

But chillingly, the biggest separation was over race. As often as I heard Trump was a fresh independent voice on the right, I heard from the left that Trump is a racist, and that he only speaks to those Americans who are hurting and white.

The story of the Rust Belt is not just about the loss of jobs, but the loss of people too. Of the large cities I walked through, Toledo has lost a quarter of its population, Detroit and Cleveland more than half.

But the salient point is people most often didn't go far. They simply moved to the suburbs, and this happened largely based on racial lines. The population of metro Detroit has grown steadily since the 1950s and Detroit has become the most racially segregated metro area in the nation: the city itself is 83% black, the suburbs about 70% white. The region's other former industrial cities are not far behind.

Before I was even out of Michigan I heard the word “nigger” twice from white folks. The second time from a man who gave me a hitchhiking ride as I was attempting to make up time: “I’m not prejudiced, but Obama is one dumb nigger,” he said.

This is not the last time I would hear the, “I’m not a racist but ...” construction, always followed by a questionable statement on race.

Inside a truck stop in Monroe, Michigan, two white truckers agreed the government should halt Muslim immigration to the US, and on the necessity of rounding up current residents into camps, just as was done in Japanese internment camps during the Second World War.

“It was the best thing for them to do to take them out of the general population,” said Allen Kessel, about the internment of the Japanese.

“Yes, I think we should separate [Muslims] and I think we should stop them from coming into the country,” Don Meshey agreed.

Both were concerned about Islamic State, in a distant, foreign way.

“Look at Dearborn, Michigan,” Kessel said. “They’re already employing Sharia law.”

“It has nothing to do with race ... but it’s a complete culture difference that we’ve got. They hate our culture and they’ve hated our culture for thousands of years,” Meshey said.

It wasn’t the last time I’d hear Islam, a religion of a billion people, is incompatible with “US values”.

This was in stark contrast to the time I spent just two days before in Dearborn itself, on the Fourth of July in the waning days of Ramadan.

There, I met Natheer Al-Ali, an observant Muslim immigrant from Iraq who had come to the US just four months before. He was preoccupied with a car-bomb explosion that had recently happened in Baghdad and was attempting to find out if his colleagues and friends were alive. He had spent time in the market himself and worked for the Americans against the Baathist government. Dearborn was decidedly not under Sharia law.

“I’m proud to be here in the US, to spend my Ramadan here,” He said. “I am happy and proud to see families lifting the American flag ... We wish that the US can participate more and more to push Isis out of Iraq.”

“I want my [children] to grow up and serve people, help people here in America,” he said.

I found a troubling number of white people have little functional or sophisticated understanding of how historical policies of racism have cascaded through the years to create ghettos, wealth inequality and mass incarceration.

It seemed particularly hard for people to separate their personal, segregated experience from that of the daily experience of millions of people of color. The biggest difference between Trump supporters and those against him was when asked point-blank, if Donald Trump is a racist, every single supporter said “no”. Every person voting for someone else replied in some form of the affirmative. Every single one.

In the Rust Belt particularly, Trump has been able to exploit our mass segregation and use the age-old American racial inequalities and tension to great effect. Many white people are choosing to willfully ignore this fact, dismissing his statements as “off-the-cuff outbursts”, or as not based in race at all.

This was brought to a head along my trip by the shooting deaths by police of Philando Castile and Alton Sterling, and the subsequent protests across the US they engendered.

I stayed an extra day in Toledo to attend a demonstration protesting the shootings, a healthy sized crowd for a city of just under 300,000. African Americans, Arabs, Latinos and white people held signs reading things such as, “Honk for racial justice,” and chanted, “No justice, no peace, no racist police.”

“As a white person ... ignoring the horrible problems of institutionalized racism is a luxury that people like me have,” said Laura Shaffer in Toledo. “But unfortunately because of inaction a lot of this stuff has persisted to this day. It’s easy to ignore it, to put the blinders on because it doesn’t affect me.”

“I have three black [sons] and it’s unfair the way that they have to be raised, they shouldn’t be discriminated against,” said Amber Nolen, who brought her boys to the demonstration. “I want them to learn early that they deserve justice, but also want them to know the world is unfair. I want them to know how to fight without fighting, that you can stand up for what is right by using their voice.”

“Nothing has changed, there’s still Jim Crow, there’s still segregation,” she said. “It’s just in a new form, it’s in the judicial system.”

The tide may finally be turning on this point though. In response to the shootings I began to ask people directly if they thought the police treated black people and white people differently, on average. Almost everyone, including many of the most hardcore Trump supporters replied, “yes”.

This is a start.

The rest of the convention was relatively quiet, the teargas, shootings and blood running in the streets never coming to pass. There were only a handful of arrests. The mass economic benefit predicted for Cleveland never seemed to come to pass either. Residents of the city seemed to largely stay home, their energies better used transforming their post-industrial city into the city they wanted to live in, a place of creativity, renewal and hope.

Peter Debelak, a former union side labor lawyer who quit to start a community woodshop in the city, found me on Twitter and offered me a place to stay before events got underway. During the convention he opened up his shop, located outside of downtown, as an RNC “safe zone ... a place to create, collaborate and chill”.

“I spent years and years out on the streets [demonstrating],” Debelak said, “and since I’ve moved back to Cleveland I’ve decided to spend my time on the community we’re in trying to build something up.”

And perhaps best of all, I met a man from out of town at one of the small protests who had me beat. Father Jose Landaverde, priest at Faith Life and Hope mission in Chicago, walked 344 miles to the convention over 26 days. I had only been on the road for two weeks and walked half the distance.

“We walked from Chicago to send a message to the Republican convention that we will no longer tolerate hate, racism and discrimination,” said Landaverde.

He mentioned the Christian prophets Amos and Moses who walked long distances with their followers to “raise consciousness”.

“On this walk, I learned that racism is a problem that has its roots in ignorance. But when we say that person is ignorant, we are also ignorant because we don’t take a chance to open a dialogue. When we face [this] problem we will solve it, but it will take a long time. This is the lesson I learned.”