

**U.18 Long Civil Rights Movement:  
Heirs to a Fighting Tradition**

**Interview U-0564  
Ajamu Dillahunt  
December 18, 2009**

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## **FIELD NOTES: Ajamu Dillahunt**

Interviewee: Ajamu Dillahunt

Interviewer: Bridgette Burge, Heirs Project director

Interview Date: December 18, 2009

Project: Heirs to a Fighting Tradition: Oral Histories of North Carolina Social Justice Activists

Locations: Cameron Village Library, Raleigh, NC

### **THE HEIRS PROJECT**

“Heirs to a Fighting Tradition: Oral Histories of North Carolina Social Justice Activists” is a multi-phased oral history project which explores the stories and traditions of social justice activism in North Carolina through in-depth interviews with fourteen highly respected activists and organizers. Selected for the integrity and high level of skill in their work dedicated to social justice, the interviewees represent a diversity of age, gender, and ethnicity. These narratives capture the richness of a set of activists with powerful perspectives on social justice and similar visions of the common good. These are stories of transition and transformation, tales of sea change and burnout, organizing successes and heart wrenching defeats. These are the stories of the Movement.

All of the oral histories will be archived in the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and will be a valuable addition to the modest amount of literature about contemporary social justice activism in the South.

Heirs to a Fighting Tradition was formerly a project of the North Carolina Peace and Justice Coalition. Since NCPJC has not been functioning actively as an organization for over a year, in July of 2008 Bridgette changed the name of her sole proprietorship from “North Carolina Peace and Justice Coalition” to “The Heirs Project” on our bank account and with the NC Secretary of State’s assumed name for sole proprietorships.

### **THE INTERVIEWEE**



**Ajamu Dillahunt**

Ajamu Dillahunt joined the Justice Center in April of 2004 as the Outreach Coordinator for the Budget and Tax Center. Ajamu has been a tireless advocate for working families in North Carolina for over twenty-five years. For the 18 years, Ajamu served as President of the Raleigh Area Local of the American Postal Workers Union (APWU). He was Director of Research and Education for the North Carolina Council of the APWU during that period. Ajamu was a Labor Educator and Arbitration Advocate as well. He has done community organizing and training in various communities in N.C. He has a Masters Degree in African Studies and maintains an active interest in the African Diaspora, particularly in the Caribbean and Latin America.

## **THE INTERVIEWER**

Bridgette Burge graduated from Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee in 1995 with a degree in Anthropology/Sociology and a semester of intensive study of oral history theory and methodology. In 1995 and 1996, Burge and a colleague conducted fieldwork in Honduras, Central America collecting the oral histories of six Honduran women. She earned her master's degree in Anthropology from the University of Memphis in 1998. In 1999, she moved to North Carolina and served as North Carolina Peace Action's state coordinator, and later as North Carolina Peace Action Education Fund's executive director. In 2005, Burge began her own consulting company to provide training, facilitation and planning to social change organizations. The same year, with the support of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Burge launched the project "Heirs to a Fighting Tradition: Oral Histories of North Carolina Social Justice Activists." The interviews from this project are archived at the Southern Historical Collection in the Wilson Library at UNC-Chapel Hill.

## **CONTENT OF THE INTERVIEW**

The interviews in the Heirs to a Fighting Tradition project are organized around several themes:

- Lessons learned through their experiences about effective social justice activism, movement building strategies, and approaches to community organizing.
- The ways class, race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and other aspects of identity affect the narrators as social justice activists.
- Questions related to the significance of activism in the South and specifically in North Carolina.
- Exploration of what nurtures and sustains the narrators as activists as well as what challenges and discourages them.
- Questions about the evolution of the narrators' socio-economic, political, and philosophical perspectives.

Generally, the interview questions flow chronologically beginning with questions about the narrators' parents and family of origin and ending with descriptions of their plans for the future.

**December 18, 2009 interview topics included:** Ajamu elaborating on the cultural richness of the neighborhood in Queens, NY, where he grew up in the 1950s and 1960s; the impact of the G.I. Bill; his recreational activities with his friends growing up, including the track team, jazz club, and Latin dancing; the drug epidemic that followed his time there; environmentalism, feminism, and queer rights as part of his broader socialist philosophy; the Right to the Cities movement, Historic Thousands on Jones Street, and other examples of current socialist groups he admires; some of the successes of his work with the postal workers' unions; a local victory by the Black United Front in improving the working conditions of Black employees of Shoney's restaurant in Raleigh; a defeat around countering competency tests required for high school graduation; reflections on his work with the NC Peace and Justice Coalition; the opening of Freedom Books, a progressive Black bookstore, by Ajamu and his wife Rukiya; his prostate cancer diagnosis and treatment, and the loss of friends to other illnesses; the roles of music and family in sustaining him as an organizer, and the challenge of fatigue; his desire to retire and travel to West Africa.

**TRANSCRIPT: AJAMU DILLAHUNT**

Interviewee: Ajamu Dillahunt  
Interviewer: Bridgette Burge  
Interview Date: December 18, 2009  
Location: Cameron Village Library, Raleigh, North Carolina  
Length: 1 track; approximately 103 minutes

**START OF INTERVIEW**

BRIDGETTE BURGE: Okay, so today is December 18, 2009.

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: Or twenty-o-nine.

BB: Twenty-o-nine.

AD: As Charles Osgood would say.

BB: Is that right?

AD: Yeah, the Sunday morning CBS, Sunday kind of thing. He does the radio stuff, too, and he always says twenty-o-nine.

BB: Twenty-o-nine. Twenty-ten, do you believe that?

AD: I don't know if it'll be twenty-ten, two-thousand-ten? I don't know.

BB: And this is the third interview in a series with Ajamu, not counting the original third one that was erased. [This is actually the fourth interview.]

AD: This is three-point-one? [Laughter]

BB: [Laughter] This is the project Heirs to a Fighting Tradition, Oral Histories of Social Justice Activists in North Carolina. Bridgette Burge is the interviewer, and today we are

at the Cameron Village library in a study room in Raleigh, North Carolina. Let's see, so, Ajamu, would you say your name again and today's date?

AD: Yeah, I'm Ajamu Dillahunt and this December the eighteenth, 2009 or twenty-o-nine.

BB: So we just recorded last week, I guess, it was the ninth or something like that. And so we're rounding third base, I think. We're getting close to being done, but we wanted to pick up on a couple more things, right. And you wanted to talk a little bit more about your neighborhood in Brooklyn when you were coming up.

AD: Queens.

BB: Queens.

AD: Yeah, and I actually can't remember what we talked about in the first or second interview. I think we talked a little bit about the neighborhood, but it just occurred to me that after that set of interviews and kind of having some interactions with people I grew up with, and just thinking about that time and that place, how rich it was, and that we didn't even realize the kind of richness that we grew up in, in terms of cultures and class and so on, but mainly the cultural piece. So I don't know if we talked about that. So there may be some repetition here, but I just want to lift it up as an important experience that the neighborhood in Queens--.

We moved there in 1954. In fact, I just, going through Pop's [his father, Amos Dillahunt] documents, found the contract, not the deed, but the contract that he had signed to move into the house that we lived in in Queens. It was very interesting to see that. I can't remember, I think probably it was maybe sixteen thousand dollars. I don't know. It may have been less than that. I can't remember the exact amount, but here he was about to leave Brooklyn along with so many others who were moving to the so-called suburbs from Brooklyn

and Queens and some from the Bronx and Manhattan, you know, Black families trying to become homeowners, trying to escape the harsh life of the cities and apartment living, and kind of following that American dream of home ownership, and taking advantage of the G.I. Bill for many of them, or the civil service jobs that they had that put them in a position to be able to buy a home or whatever. And so there was this exodus to places like Queens, Jamaica, St. Albans, Springfield Gardens, and so on.

And I would describe it as a working class neighborhood with a good sprinkling of middle class, lower, upper middle class folks, all across the spectrum, so that you had truck drivers living in proximity to physicians, and social workers, and teachers, and musicians, some athletes, and again, we're still talking about a segregated community, which changed. In fact, we were part of that wave that saw the White community flee from that neighborhood and become totally Black, but as such, you find a kind of multi-class community, people living together. And in some cases, not even on the same block and whatnot, not necessarily, you know, in some segregated, not segregated, but Black communities, you find the kind of distinction by class that this tract here is where people with more means live and bigger homes and so on, and then here's where the more modest homes are and more working class. And you had some of that, but in many of the blocks, you had the mixture of people from different class backgrounds.

This came out in recent contacts with friends that a doctor, Dr. Hewlett, was like our pediatrician, and the kind of unique thing--. I mean what I think about with Dr. Hewlett is that Dr. Hewlett did house calls. He would come to the house, but he lived in the community. And his home was a little bigger than some of the others on the block that he lived in, but he was right there. He had offices there. We went to school with his kids and played with his kids for

the most part. And Bobby and Billie Hewlett, they had a daughter. I can't remember her name. And then there was another physician two blocks away, Dr. Klein, who was also our doctor. And I went to school with his daughters, but he lived next door to and across the street from transit workers and police officers and housing authority employees. So it was that kind of mix, in terms of class stuff. So, you had the children of working class men and women growing up with, socializing with, hanging out with the children of professionals, social workers, and others.

Not that this is distinct from other Black communities across the nation, but I just wanted to say the kind of impact that had on folks, but also in that mix was this mix of nationalities. I refrain from using the word diversity because it's come to mean so many other things that wouldn't be appropriate here, but you have this mix of migrants from the South, and most of those folks I think kind of made the journey from all places in the South, but New York, typically New York has attracted folks from Virginia and North Carolina and South Carolina, and I think some of the deeper Southern states, folks kind of in that trail of migration ended up in Chicago and Detroit and those other areas, but nonetheless, people would come from the South maybe to Brooklyn and to Manhattan and the Bronx, and then eventually to Queens. There are a few examples, I do remember, when people came directly from the South, but you've got that mixture of folks from different Southern states, and then from the Caribbean, and so from Puerto Rico, from Panama, from the Dominican Republic, from Trinidad, Jamaica, Barbados, all of those places, all kind of grouped together.

And this was the late 1950s and early 1960s, and we didn't make much of a distinction. I mean of course people knew that, yeah, "he was West Indian," or "she's West Indian," and whatnot, but kind of saw ourselves as a kind of monolithic Black community and didn't make

a whole lot of distinctions. And it's only in later years, as we kind of do a survey of where our people are from, that we remember, we say, "yeah, well he was Panamanian," or "he was Puerto Rican," but it was rich in that kind of way. And I think it really was helpful. To me, a lot of folks who don't have those experiences, particularly people from the South, a lot of African-Americans, kind of grew up in that Black/White paradigm that we talk about all the time, so not even bringing up the question of Latinos, which is now part of the demographic here in the South, but a lot of southern African-Americans were not exposed to people from the Caribbean even. And so had the advantage of that richness of the exchange and the dialogue and so on. And so I thought that was kind of important, the kind of class basis of the community, but also the various internationalities, and the kind of internationalism that existed, but not in a real political way, but just in a natural kind of way.

BB: In a cultural way more than a political way.

AD: Yeah, yeah, definitely cultural, but not strongly identified either, like, "We're in this wonderful mix of cultures and we're benefiting from it, and we're sharing." It's just like people lived it.

BB: Do you think it was part of assimilating into U.S. culture? Do you think that's part of what the tamping down of specific cultural or traditional identity was?

AD: No, oh no, no, I don't think it was that at all. I mean I'm sure from family to family, people might've stressed this Americanism to hold onto or to kind of suppress cultural stuff, but I think on the other hand, there's always this thing about the kind of students and youth from the Caribbean and the emphasis on education and excellence and achievement and whatnot. I mean that was clear to people. I would say that that was there, but I don't think it was talked about a whole lot and people wouldn't hold it over one another's heads. And those,



the Spanish-speaking folks, I would imagine that maybe in the households, people were encouraged to speak English and not to speak Spanish and to be able to move into the mainstream a lot more, but not in a kind of exaggerated way, I don't think, in a way that would be apparent to people on the outside, like myself just being an African American with Southern roots.

BB: Can you, do you mind removing some bracelets?

AD: Yeah, yeah. We did that the last time.

BB: Yeah, and while you do that, for heaven's sake, this is the fourth interview, not the, and it would've been the fifth if we hadn't lost that one. So I just want to make that correction on the record there. And let me make one little adjustment. You use your hands a lot, so that'll help, and you can keep using them without--.

AD: Blocking the--.

BB: Yeah, without blocking the—there we go. So, back to the G.I. Bill—you know one of the legacies of systemic racism that's still so very, very current, one of the many, is around how the G.I. Bill around housing benefits and mortgages didn't help a lot of African American veterans, even getting scholarships to get into college because colleges were so very segregated and there weren't very many historically Black universities and colleges. So, literally, so many of the enrollment just filled up, and so a lot of Black G.I.s were just out of luck, and of course that boom, post-war for a lot of White G.I.s returning really helped lead them to middle-class jobs and homeownership and so on. So did that impact your dad specifically or your family?

AD: Well, yeah, but Pop was not on the college-bound track anyway. He didn't graduate from high school and ended up many years later after his brief military service and

being in the workforce, getting a GED. So he wasn't seeking college entry, but I mean what you described as a phenomena for Black people, in terms of going to universities and availability of slots, the limited enrollment because of the segregation in the larger schools, limiting people to HBCUs [Historically Black Colleges and Universities] at the time, and their capacity to accommodate all of those who would like to go just was not there. But I think in the housing front that it might have been a little different, that people took advantage of what might've been available, in terms of those benefits coming out of the service in World War Two. I think that was part of it, but again thinking of that neighborhood, folks would buy homes, and some would have renters in them. You know, they would live there themselves, but these were, in our particular neighborhood, a lot of two-story homes with basements. So you might have renters in the basement. That wasn't the trend, but certainly there were neighborhoods and homes that were like that, so to help people to be able to pay. But just the whole idea of home ownership was really important, and asset development and accumulation. You know, this is a way to develop wealth and whatnot.

I was just thinking also this morning about my folks, you know, my uncle was born in Brooklyn. He used to have this jingle he would say, "I'm Brooklyn born and Brooklyn bred, and when I die I'll be Brooklyn dead." And he actually, he died at work in Brooklyn, but ironically, was about to move to Queens with his wife. They were going to buy a house in Queens, but I mean just this whole thing. We lived in public housing before we moved into our home in Queens. My two cousins lived in public housing. We lived in the Marcy Projects. My cousin Tony, they lived in the Albany Houses. And my uncle Frank and his wife Emma and their son Frankie [White] lived in the Red Hook Houses in Brooklyn. And then other family members just lived in different, other neighborhoods, in Bedford-Stuyvesant, in Brooklyn, but

that's a thing to come out of public housing, to move into a more middle class setting in Queens.

BB: So I'm thinking about you getting back together with some of your buddies and old friends from that area, any fun stories of mischief from when ya'll were young, anything pop to mind?

AD: Well, you know we've done this for four years now, and so we spend a lot of time just b.s.ing and telling lies and old stories, and it's amazing how we just pass the day away doing that without being engaged in any other activities, just telling old stories. But we didn't have--. I'm trying to remember one that would be worth knowing in a conversation like this [Laughter] of stuff that we did that was mischievous, any acts of vandalism, or those kinds of things. I do remember that--. I don't know if we told the story, but how people would stay out late, coming home from parties at two or three in the morning, which was not the norm, but anyway, they did that. And this is still in the days of milk deliveries, and people would take milk out of people's delivery boxes and drink milk and whatever, and bread, whatever those kinds of things were. But yeah, I can't think of anything, Bridgette, right now to do it.

The group that I hung out with, the two notable things, most of them were on the track team. We ran track, and so a good part of our teenage years were spent practicing and conditioning, to participate in competition. And then the other part, we had a jazz club that we were part of, and thought we were very hip and advanced to be teenagers in the middle of a kind of rhythm and blues rock n roll ascendancy, to be jazz fans, kind of distinguished us from our peers. And we listened to jazz music and had a club, but that also was a time when Latin music was very popular in the Black community as well, not called salsa at the time, but just Latin music, the mambo, people dancing, trying to go to the Palladium Ballroom where they

did a lot of Latin dancing. And there's this tremendous cross-cultural environment that was there, in terms of hipness and popularity, to be able to do Latin dancing or to have a popular Latin band at your club's dance was very important. But Tito Puente and Eddie Palmieri, those were popular Latin artists that many in our community listened to and bought their music and would go to see them in concerts and dances.

BB: Anything else about the neighborhood stuff that's coming to mind?

AD: No, I guess I would end that by saying, though, right behind us, our generation, folks got caught up in the escalating heroin trade and proliferation of drugs in communities in New York. And South Jamaica, Jamaica, St. Albans, Springfield Gardens, all of those places with heavy concentrations of middle-class Black folks, Hollis, a lot of people are familiar with Hollis because it's the home of L.L. Cool J and a later generation of rap artists, I guess Run D.M.C. and others, but that generation, people right behind me were affected by heroin in big ways.

BB: What years about was that?

AD: I would say by maybe 1965, '66, '67, you start to see that. And so the younger brothers and sisters of my peers had to contend with heroin as being a part of their social and cultural scene.

BB: So did you and your peers kind of luck out because you were a little bit ahead of that curve?

AD: Yeah, yeah, and I mean it's interesting you say, "luck out," because that's the question. You know, how would we have--? I mean there were opportunities, but not in a big way for us. And so had we been confronted with it in the same kinds of ways, how would we have dealt with it, is always an open question. You know, you like to think, well no, I wouldn't

have been that foolish or whatever, but the truth is that you just don't know. And all of the kind of family rearing and values and all of those kinds of things often fail in relationship to these strong social pressures that people are confronted with.

BB: And of course politically in the late '60s, things were really starting to bubble up, so the Black Panther Party is becoming even more militant at that time, and in New York, there's the raids and the killings. So it just seems like kind of a perfect storm around.

AD: Oh, yeah, yeah. And I mean much has been written about the dumping of large quantities of drugs in the Black communities, movies made about it, and so on, an epidemic that preceded the crack cocaine epidemic, but it did hit that community in ways. And even as we talk now, and I talk to my younger brother about people and places and things that were very surprising to me, because we just missed it. So we were ahead of it in a way.

BB: And tell me, I know we've talked about this, but what year did you move again, out of New York?

AD: Out of New York state to North Carolina?

BB: No, your first move was, I'm sorry. I need to look it up.

AD: Well, yeah, so we moved from Brooklyn in 1954 to Queens.

BB: Right, and then right after Queens, the next move was--.

AD: Well, I was away at school and came back from school, lived in Queens and lived in upstate New York, Bedford Hills, and then lived in the Bronx, and then Queens again, and then finally for seven years in upstate New York in New Paltz.

BB: Okay, anything else around that, top of the mind?

AD: No, that's it, I think, yeah.

BB: So you had talked about wanting to say a little bit more around political

philosophy. And what came to mind for you?

AD: Well, you know, I talked about socialism and I suppose ownership and collectively and those kinds of things, but I think to think of yourself as a socialist in this period, it goes well beyond just who controls the wealth, the factories, and the resources, and who makes the decisions, and who benefits from the profits of those things, most broader than that. And so, today as we speak, there's a major international conference in Copenhagen about climate change and how to deal with that. And so to think in terms of socialism in this period, in this century, one has to think about the value of this wonderful gift that our species has, this planet, and what's on it, how we've been able to use it to the benefit and development of humankind, but also how at the same time, the economic models that we've adopted have put us on a path of destroying that very planet that's given so many benefits. And certainly capitalism has contributed to that destruction, but even in many ways, early socialist experiments, I mean the Soviet Union certainly has horrible examples of the destruction of the environment in so many ways. But I think people's thinking has expanded now, and so to be part of a movement to reduce the destruction of the planet in so many kinds of ways, to deal with the environment in a justice context, all of that I think is part of being a socialist at this time.

At the same time, a much broader thinking, in terms of gender, you know, not limited to class and racial kinds of understandings, but gender, and understanding ideas about sexuality, to be a student of and an ally of folks in the queer movement, and to really open up to those kinds of theories is again part of that spectrum, to embrace feminism, and in our case, in terms of the Black liberation movement, Black feminism as a whole mode of thinking, so to be against patriarchy, to be against chauvinism, all of those things are a part of socialism as a

philosophy, in my mind, and goes well beyond the kind of classic understanding of class and so on. And if you embrace all of those things, it forces one to be an ally to so many folks, depending on where you're kind of situated socially and culturally, but to embrace all of these other folks as part of the human family that suffers oppression, realizing that there's so many forms of oppression, and that a society that we envision has to understand all of those forms and figure out ways to address them, both in the present context that we live in, but also in the vision that we have for the world that we want to live in.

And I think the movement that we see today, whether it's the environmental justice movement or some of the others, has this broad vision of a society, and it's very inclusive, in terms of who's part of it and what are its goals and what are its demands, and how we relate to each other.

BB: So, who are some of the groups or movements that you've seen doing it well contemporarily right now? Where's some good socialist, maybe they might not self-define as socialist--.

AD: Exactly.

BB: But where do you see it happening well?

AD: Exactly, well I think the Right to the Cities formation, which includes a lot of young people.

BB: Say a little bit about what that is.

AD: Yeah, I mean it's essentially a group that is dealing with--.

BB: I'm sorry. I'm going to have you start over. The Right to the Cities--.

AD: Right to the Cities is an organization now which really represents a movement of folks in urban areas that are pushing an agenda around environmental justice, around land and

housing, political empowerment, public policies that benefit working people, workers rights and power on the jobs that they own, and actually governance by working class people and people of color and immigrants. And so it's that kind of wide range of issues that they're dealing with. And while they may not see themselves as socialists, I think that the socialist vision that many people embrace includes this kind of thinking across the board, on a range of issues, but a question of political power is really important, and changing the balance of power in governing.

So, and some people think of what they might call "municipal socialism," so that even though we have a federal government that certainly does not represent the kind of politics and economic development that we want to see, that addressing local issues is very important and a part of visioning a new society, having some control locally is important. And so it leads to, it will lead to, it has led to trying to build local power. So that city councils and even county commissions and these kinds of things are targets for a people's movement, in a way that in some ways is not necessarily reflective of the assault by the Right in those same areas, in those same spaces, like we're seeing now here in Wake County on the school boards. And of course, the right wing for years has really prepared itself for this, not just for the ascendancy of the Right in terms of national political power and the Republican party and the Reagan revolution and everything that's followed after that, but there's also been this very long and deliberate march towards local power. And we're seeing that here and now in North Carolina vis-à-vis the schools. That's a terrain that they've cut out for themselves, but I would argue that the kind of Right to the Cities movement, whether it's in Miami or D.C. or New York--.

BB: In New Orleans.

AD: In New Orleans, and understanding that these more urban kinds of movements is



not a direct response to those things, like a defensive kind of thing, but more a kind of well thought out strategy which continues to evolve around how do poor people, how do people of color, how do women, how do immigrants get power and hold it?

BB: Do other groups or movements come to mind that you feel like are really kind of lifting up the best of what you see as a socialist value system and worldview?

AD: Well, that's probably, I mean I kind of mentioned some of the organizations, the Miami Workers Center, and I think maybe the last interview we had, we might've talked about them, and groups like POWER in San Francisco, and so on. I think within them they represent that, and you know, the workers centers that they're a part of are kind of representative of that, our little trend of groups, the Black Workers for Justice and others. Although it's not a socialist organization, I think the values that we talk in terms of workers' power and the right of people to have power in their jobs, to have an organization in the workplace, to have control in their communities, is part of this thinking of self determination, which is also this value that oppressed people should be able to determine their own destiny, should have control in their communities to determine what kind of communities that want to have, to be in charge of governance and those kinds of things.

BB: And we talked about the U.S. Social Forum a little bit last time, too, so any other groups in North Carolina specifically or movements in North Carolina specific today that pop to mind that you want to mention?

AD: No, but I think I may have talked about the HK on J movement. If I didn't, Historic Thousands on Jones Street, that were generated by the NAACP, and certainly, I mean of course, the right wingers or the Republicans and conservatives and tea baggers would characterize it as socialist. [Laughter] If they could characterize Barack Obama as socialist,

certainly the HK on J is far left, as far as they're concerned. And of course, that's not the case. But in terms of progressive agenda, they do represent that.

BB: Can you describe, the HK on J is--? A quick description.

AD: The HK on J, which means Historic Thousands on Jones Street, which was initiated in 2007 to bring a progressive agenda to the North Carolina General Assembly, has a fourteen-point agenda that deals with everything from educational access to, "Bring the troops home from Iraq," deals with housing, health care, economic development, workers rights, immigration, those kinds of things, but it's brought together I guess now probably eighty-one different partner groups, nonprofits, community groups to kind of work on this agenda to make change here in North Carolina through the legislative process. And as it evolves to be a movement, one of the slogans that came out of the original project that was developed by Rev. Barber, William Barber, who's the president of the North Carolina state NAACP, was that it's a movement not a moment. And so that that moment, of course the moment is the annual February people's assembly that we've had, but in order to make it a movement, it needs some continuity and some structure and all of that, and people are really on it, but it's been a mechanism by which progressive North Carolinians can come together and collaborate on pushing a more progressive policy agenda.

BB: So did anything come to mind around, a specific story around success?

AD: Yeah, I've got a couple, and I may give you more than you want, but--.

[Laughter] I was thinking that I might talk about some of the national work I've done and then some of the local work. And nationally, I was thinking of successes within the Postal Workers Union. There's a way of trying to deal with the struggle against privatization. I mean the Postal Service has been threatened with privatization probably for forty or fifty years. We talked

earlier about the Reagan revolution and the conservative agenda, but certainly that's been part of it, to privatize all government services. And the Postal Service, while a kind of quasi-federal agency, after the 1970 Postal Reorganization Act, which really flows from a strike, which I think we've talked about, the post office strike, postal workers strike in 1970. It's a quasi-government agency, gets some funding, but mainly survives on its own revenues, but even with that status has been a target of privatization for many, many years.

One of the ways, though, in which the Postal Service and conservatives have moved towards this though, is to contract with private transportation firms, with private companies that do mail processing, do it at a cheaper rate, and at times even window service that was not performed by postal employees but by private contractors. And so, the trade union movement has always historically, to its credit, looked at, "Well, where's our work? What's happening with it?" and follow that work. And so, if somebody else is doing it, then the logical thing to do is to organize the workers that are doing that work, and particularly because they get to do it, and the employer seeks them out because they can do the work, or they do the work cheaper. They pay them less wages, no benefits, and so on. And so that's been the problem in terms of privatization.

So a movement developed to organize those workers, not to leave it to a non-postal union, but for the postal unions to organize them, because having them as part of our own process and being part of the same industry would make a difference when you actually talk about collective bargaining, when you talk about power to force the employer to do certain things. That if people are part of the same organization, then there could be coordinated activity and so on, and that the wages that postal employees who work within the U.S. Postal System have should be extended to those who work outside of that system. And that kind of

change and challenge would reduce the incentive for the Postal Service to seek the private sector as a way of saving money and undermining the wages of employees.

So there was a movement to do this within the union, but resistance on the part of the union leadership to actually do that, and just the notion that that's outside of our jurisdiction, our realm. "We don't need to do that. We have to just stick with the postal employees who are part of this system." And so we built a national movement to try to challenge that, to convince the leadership that they should do this, and there should be this private sector organizing. And there were some experiments to actually do that, mainly in the area of transportation, because the postal employees, they're driving, and there's a division within the union of drivers, but then they also developed these other contract workers who would do more cross-country kinds of things, outside of regional postal facilities. And so going after them was important. Then there's equipment repair. There's just a tremendous amount of equipment that the postal service uses, containers, mainly containers to move mail, and of different types, different sizes, and made out of different materials, but nonetheless, there's the manufacture of those things, which postal employees certainly didn't have anything to do with. That's kind of like outside, manufacturing, but the repair of those things--. And so bringing them into the postal workers movement was important. And so we built a movement to do that, and over time, the way you change that, the highest form of governance within the union, of course, is the national convention. And there are resolutions that are binding or should be binding, in terms of which way, what direction the union should go in, or changes in the constitution are actually made. So we had a resolution to call for organizing in the private sector that would be binding. There are details which I don't need to share, in terms of like what that would mean in terms of how many years and how much money, and what kind of resources would go into it, but as part of

that movement, I made a speech at the national convention, which was credited with actually turning the tide, in terms of sentiment and support for the resolution, which passed at that convention, and led to an increase in the private sector organizing that went on. That's changed a little bit now because conditions in the industry are different, but it led to that, but it was a speech that I got to make where I made references to Cesar Chavez and Dr. King and others, and saw it as part of a social movement, wherein the union leadership at the time was looking at it as a simple business decision. "How much of the union's resources would have to be used for it? And what would the return be on it?" And as I recall the speech, I talked about, "That thinking is the decision that you get from the Harvard Business School, as opposed to the George Meany College of Labor," or something, but just the point that in social movements, people don't look at that. Dr. King didn't look at it. Cesar Chavez didn't look at it, and so on. Anyways, it was a nifty piece of oratory, I'm told, but more important than that, I mean it was clear that people thought that argument was the argument that turned the tide. And was part of a movement. We did work within the local unions around the country. We got out literature. We had discussions. We talked about it at meetings and conferences building up to it, and actually worked the convention, as you have to do, and then to make that speech. So that's something.

BB: Do you remember the date and location, or just the city and the year, basically, of that convention?

AD: Yeah, and I'd have to go--. [Laughter] I'm thinking Los Angeles, but maybe Detroit. [The convention was in Los Angeles in 1996.] And I'll go back and get those dates for you, and the speech. I've got the book, the proceedings with that on it. That was a little bit before people were videoing stuff all the time. So I don't think that's available, but I could give

you that. But on the same level, a national movement, and maybe a little bit before that, there was a movement that we tried to build, both, again, locally and nationally because you've got to do that, to bring the four postal unions together, was called Postal Workers for One Union. And even to this day, this is a result of the Postal Reorganization Act, we ended up with four separate bargaining units: one for rural carriers, one for city carriers, one for mail handlers, and mail handlers essentially take mail from the trucks and bring them into the plants and move the mail in the plants, and then the American Postal Workers Union, which represented clerks who processed mail, worked on the windows, and so on, but all the clerk functions, and then drivers, people who were in transportation of the mail, at that time, special delivery craft, and then maintenance workers, that was all the bargaining units that the APW represented. But it all was four different unions, who at one time had coordinated bargaining, but then that broke down. So then it was staggered, and the Postal Service would play one union against the other, the unions were in competition, terrible waste of resources, many of us felt, to have these bureaucracies, four different ones, some larger than others. The rural carriers were the smallest and had the least amount of political clout, and tended to be the least progressive, in terms of their politics, but nonetheless, we tried to bring this together and organize people from all four of the unions to be part of a movement.

We did activities at the conventions, even recruited some of the leaders, the leader of the Postal Workers Union at the time, Moe Biller, who had brought together some of the unions within our own union to come and speak and support it, but at the end of the day, after maybe four or five years, we just weren't successful. It lost its energy. Actually two or three of the leaders from some of the other unions passed away, and just nobody stepped up behind them. And then other issues were more pressing, and so many of the public who were part of

the movement, at the least the leaders, had a vision of industrial unionism, and that is, if you're in that industry, we should have just one union. And so, we pursued that, having this kind of philosophical and ideological position, and it made sense to a lot of people, but to many others it just wasn't the main issue to be fighting on and presented too many obstacles, and it just never happened. So that's a kind of low, I won't say a low moment, but it's just something that we weren't able to take to its conclusion and win a victory on it. Given the state of the postal industry today, it's not likely to happen. Although it could with the shrinking of it, that people might just by necessity now feel like that we've got to combine our resources. So that's on that level, and then I think on a local level, so many things.

I kind of long for the big victory, but I can't speak of that. There are more little things. And so the one that occurs to me, and is interesting, Bridgette, that it's coming at this time in Wake County where so much attention is focused on education, and we, we being the Black United Front, we had an organization here which was a Black organization that affiliated with the National Black United Front, formed in, I guess, 1980. We had a local chapter here. And Rukiya [Dillahunt] and I, Lynice and James Williams were part of it, Angaza Laughinghouse, I'm naming them as people who were activists in the area that you know of and that others know of. They were part of it, many others. And we were doing community work dealing with issues of police brutality and other kinds of things.

And there was a tragic accident, and again, I'm at a loss for years, but I can get those for you, but it was during the time when most of the bus drivers were students. [It was 1980.] They used student bus drivers quite a bit at that time. And an African-American student bus driver, Barry Wright, was involved in a tragic accident where a young woman, who happened to be White, was killed. And we looked at that as it developed. I mean it was very sad that that would

happen, but it focused a lot of attention on just that whole phenomena of the buses, the whole transportation system, even the idea of bussing came up in that discussion as well. But Barry, who probably, I think he was fifteen, maybe sixteen at that time, was under attack, and didn't get much support from what essentially was his employer, the Wake County school system, no defense at all, I mean because he was facing not just the possibility of losing that job and maybe his license or whatever, but also criminal charges. I don't know if it was negligent homicide or whatever, but there was that issue. And it just appeared at the time that there was a lot of sympathy, as there should be, for the family, the loss of a child, but the fact that, "Here was this young, reckless kid driving a bus." And so we took up the support for him and tried to do a number of things. We were looking at getting him some support from Wake County, in terms of his defense. "He needs some defense. He was working for you, and so his family, who didn't have the means, but even if they did, shouldn't be obligated to defend him." And then there was the issue of the kind of hysteria around, given the racial dynamics of the people involved, a White student and a Black bus driver, and how that was playing out, but also a kind of workers issue, workers rights issue. Here are these students that are not paid very much, don't have any protections. It's a kind of part-time job, but shouldn't it be a job that paid better wages and had better protections? And not to take away earning opportunities from young people, but shouldn't we be making greater opportunities for adults who are in need of work, to deal with people who are unemployed or underemployed, people who were making low wages at the time? And so we pushed for including more, higher more adult drivers and paying them a living wage and letting them have the benefits of state employment or county employment at that time. So those were some of the demands.

And we took it to the Wake County school board in a way that they had never seen



before. I mean we showed up with thirty or forty people, chanting with signs, and it just really threw them off. They weren't prepared for it at all. The kind of normal decorum and the respectability of that body and those meetings was really challenged at that time. They hadn't had it before. And we were reminded—Frank Roberts, who was a teacher activist at that time from the Black community who died a few years back, always reminded us of how he was there, amazed at this was happening, and, “Who are these militant Black people coming in?” because again, we hadn't been here that long. And most of the people, a lot of people in the leadership of Black United Front were people who had moved from other places, and so didn't know Frank and some of the others. And it was even a challenge because Rukiya at the time was a classroom teacher, so, “Who's this woman who's not afraid to be involved in protests when she's a teacher?” And these are people who have ultimate control over whether or not she works or not.

But we were successful in getting an investigation on the condition of the equipment in the bus, because one of the things that Barry had said is that the brakes failed. And I think as it turns out, there was some problem with that. But they revisited the number, the student driver policy and hired some more folks, and ultimately Barry didn't have to do any real time. It was a much less reduced sentence, as a result of the activity that went on. One of the things at the time that some of the kind of traditional leadership in the community didn't even look at it as being an issue, just saw it as an unfortunate accident that happened, but didn't look at some of these other dynamics. And so that was a kind of victory for us to help, to support and aid Barry.

And years later, some years later we had a bookstore in downtown Raleigh. And I went in there, I think Rukiya was working, but Barry came by and thanked us. And it was some years after. When we do this kind of community work, and sometimes you do so many things,

you just, you go on to the next fight, and you forget the people, or you just don't think about them. And he came by and really thanked us for supporting him. So that was one that I would lift up. And then on the other side--.

BB: What was the name of the bookstore?

AD: Freedom Books, yeah. Freedom Books. I think we might've talked about Freedom Books. If we didn't, I just don't know how we missed that. And you might want to look back over the transcripts.

BB: I don't think we did. I don't think we talked about Freedom Books. I can look, but I did re-read the transcripts a couple months ago. So, let's not lose that, but go ahead with your--. [Laughter]

AD: Yeah.

BB: Maybe I'm wrong, but--.

AD: So, let's bookmark that and then let me give you a local challenge and defeat, if you will, and then we can talk about Freedom Books. Well, no, I'm going to take the privilege of giving another victory, if you will, and then we can talk about a defeat, because I know you're trying to like, "lessons learned," and all that, but this was more workplace oriented, and again, in the '80s, Shoney's Restaurant at Tower Shopping Center, in particular, here in Raleigh, was a place of some struggle, came to our attention that, in terms of their personnel policies, that Black employees were restricted to kitchen work. And this is in the '80s now, you know, this is '80s.

BB: It was on the books?

AD: Well, no, no, never official company policy that we saw or that we came to learn. And we didn't go through the kind of legal action that would result in discovery and all of that

where you would get those documents, but it was just the objective evidence in that place was that if all the Black people that worked in the restaurant cleaned, they were kitchen workers, you know, maybe doing some cooking, which is not unusual. "Let the Black folks cook." They'll let you cook, but not be in the same room to eat together and whatnot. It's kind of just the ironies of White supremacy and racism. Sometimes, an opportunity for people to put bad things in the food, though, right? [Laughter] And it just shows you the kind of madness, right, of this thing, that you eat food prepared by people who you've just brutalized and physically and mentally and emotionally, but you like the way they cook. They can really cook well. So anyway, but that's who was in the kitchen. [Laughter]. And of course cleaning up tables, but no wait staff. And then the highest non-management position, of course, would be cashier, on the cash register, and just didn't have it. So we mounted a campaign around the city, but focused on Tower Shopping Center.

BB: Again, Black United Front?

AD: Yeah, this was Black United Front, and maybe the Workers Rights in Action Committee, was an organization that in many ways was a local precursor to the Black Workers for Justice. And we threw up pickets and we did literature distribution around the community, just to raise an awareness and a level of consciousness, and essentially, we were calling for a boycott of the local Shoney's. We got then local city council person Ralph Campbell, who later became the state auditor, to kind of get involved in it. And it coincided, as I recall, with some national actions against Shoney's, not just in terms of personnel, but also in terms of serving, much like the Denny's kind of situation, in terms of seating and service and those kinds of things, but as it turned out, Shoney had issues in other places. And as a result, they started, they brought people up in terms of the wait staff and the cashiers, and we went back. We ate there,

just kind of like a demonstration. “Okay, so you do the right thing, then we’ll patronize you.” And that Shoney’s had a meeting room, actually, in the back, and so we would even do Sunday meetings there, as a result. But I mean we responded to that and that was a kind of local, not a huge victory, but definitely a fight against discrimination. And I mean I think it demonstrated to people that you’ve got to challenge this stuff. You can’t just sit back and wait, and that the type of challenge of some militancy, of making some noise, rather than kind of like backroom negotiations, which you don’t rule out completely, but certainly that this kind of thing that draws in the community and challenges things, is the kind of tactical and strategic focus for people, so that one.

A defeat on a local level, back to education, probably in 1979, ’78, the state was at the final stages of introducing the competency tests, which is a kind of earlier form of the testing that was done here, but just in terms of getting a diploma that you had to take these certain exams to demonstrate competency in Math and English and so on. And so there was a movement, small, but yet a movement to oppose the competency tests, as another way of blocking the success of students of color at the time, and even in involving them. Because as I recall, if you took the competency test and passed that, you could graduate, but you’d graduate without a diploma. So we were against that, but just the whole testing piece.

BB: Can you explain how testing, real briefly, the competency test disproportionately affects kids of color?

AD: I mean just in terms of those areas, there’s always the testing issue, in terms of being able to test. And I mean I think some of the supporters of it said, “This is not like standardized testing or like aptitude tests or like the SAT and all that that has deep cultural biases,” but we felt like it did, and that this intermediate or intermediary path should be

eliminated, that people should get the proper instruction, as much remediation as they might need, but that they should just have to meet the regular requirements for graduation, and not have to take this other kind of test. And I think, as I recall it, there were two communities that were engaged in it, folks in Greensboro and maybe Durham and Raleigh were engaged in that effort, the people around what is now the Black, I'm sorry, the Beloved Community Center were involved in it, and some of their friends and allies in Durham as well. And so it was a kind of, you know, maybe a Left project in a lot of ways, not a lot of people in the Black community rose to it, but they were concerned because, as Rukiya's pointed out, that was like an early "salvo" in this testing kind of thing, and that we did education on the implications of testing.

BB: An early salvo?

AD: Salvo, salvo, S-A-L-V-O, yeah. And that people began to understand how testing could be used to hold back student advancement and that there should be other things that people look at in terms of testing their skills and their knowledge, but we weren't successful in holding it back. And I mean it's a story you don't even hear about anymore now, the competency exams, I guess they've lost them, but that was an effort, that's not where the community was at that time. I think we were probably right to raise it as an issue. I don't think we had illusions that the kind of small community coalitions—and as I'm recalling now, I think Brad Thompson was also—Brad was working with a parent group in town, and as I recall. Brad was one of the people who was opposed to the competency tests as well, but it didn't have broad community support, the opposition to it, and so that's one that we didn't win. And I mean I think that the whole notion of high stakes testing now and all of the other issues, the achievement gap and the disproportionate rate of suspensions of students of color remain the main issues that we're dealing with now.

BB: What comes to mind around some lessons learned or your reflections on the North Carolina Peace and Justice Coalition, particularly 2003, 2004. And you and I were a part of a big group of folks on the steering committee and small committees. I saw you look at your watch, too, so I wanted to check on the time.

AD: Yeah, so it's 11:20, 11:30, so we want to talk about this.

BB: We've gone about an hour, so what would you--? Let me lay out, the other couple questions were I wanted to ask you about your cancer a little bit and that beautiful piece that you wrote, "Love, Revolution, and Prostate Cancer."

AD: Okay, all right.

BB: And then what's next for you, and of course, Freedom Books.

AD: Okay.

BB: So, do you want to skip the NC Peace and Justice Coalition piece? Would you rather focus on Freedom Books?

AD: I mean I would address it just in a small way, and then go to the other stuff, and then maybe we could finish by twelve. I still might be able to do what it is I need to do for this next meeting here. Well, that coalition, in a lot of ways, let's say that it certainly helped to foster a lot of friendships that started from there. I know a lot of people would look at the political implications first, but I would say, so even getting to know you and some others, working closely with Bryan Proffitt and Lou Plummer and others who I might not have met, at least so soon, may not have met at all. It's possible, but certainly at that juncture, might not have met them. So it brought us into working relationships and fellowship with a lot of other activists and that was good. I think it reflected problems that any coalition, whether it's dealing with police brutality or war or jobs or sexism, issues that they confront, personalities,

organizing styles, philosophies. And I guess even back to the personalities, just some of the madness that we bring to the table, and we've got a lot of madness amongst us. [Laughter] In terms of people's pain and bad experiences, it plays out in some of these coalitions, and most of them, as a matter of fact. And so being able to deal with them and being tolerant of one another, being patient, all of those kinds of things are necessary, and sometimes there's a shortage of patience around, and because there are not enough of us at this time, it really has damaging effects, sometimes devastating because we get caught up in trying to deal with these problems. And there are not enough soldiers on the field to kind of pick up and carry out the work, and so it stymies us. It holds us back.

And I think that was some of what was there, but I think also that coalition reflects the problems of the broader anti-war movement, and that is: Is it an anti-war movement that's just built on peace? Is it an anti-war movement that is anti-imperialist in its orientation and wants to challenge the U.S. government beyond this particular war that it's fighting or even its understanding of why this war was initiated and why is it being prosecuted, all of those kinds of things came into play, I think, and exist on the national level as well. In terms of the specifics, even now as we look at this, just really sad and frustrating escalation in Afghanistan, even at that time, they'd say, "Afghanistan was okay, but Iraq is not." And then you move beyond those two imperialist ventures, and then you look at: What about Palestine and Israel? How do you understand that and just how do you understand the whole region?

So all of those questions have not been resolved and I think that one of the main things is: Do we want to build an anti-imperialist movement that even has anti-capitalist sentiments or that challenges the economic system on which the country is built, which then leads to its foreign policy, or do we just want to say, "This war is draining our resources here at home, and

we need them for other kinds of things to strengthen our economy and to develop our communities and to protect our young people so they don't get killed, and maybe even so it doesn't piss off the rest of the world and make us a target for bad things to happen to us?" Those are the two kinds of tendencies, and we never really resolved it. And in my own opinion, I think that the Left has made some serious errors, not all of the Left, certainly not all the Left, but some sections, in insisting on an anti-imperialist and only anti-imperialist movement, and hasn't been agile enough to create anti-imperialist tendency within the movement or even a separate movement, but also use its skills and its resources to be part of a broader movement that would include military families, what's the--? I'm trying to think of the name—in fact, Charlie Richardson and his wife, Diane--.

BB: Bring Them Home Now?

AD: Military Families Speak Out and groups of that nature, which the group of parents who've lost children, Gold Star Moms, those kind of groups, that broad tent that includes those folks as well as anti-imperialists and everybody in between and whatnot to have a powerful movement.

BB: United for Peace and Justice got there a little bit.

AD: Yeah.

BB: Toward the end of 2004 and then when the war soldiered on, I think there was dismay and people were disheartened.

AD: I think you're right, and I think that the contradictions between the ANSWER coalition and United for Peace and Justice reflects that, those differences, as well. Although there were people within UFPJ that certainly had an anti-imperialist understanding of the world and moved in that direction, but they wanted to create a broader tent, to create a



movement to really turn things around, and to take advantage--. I mean the kind of sad part of it, Bridgette, is that the polls even showed the growing opposition to the war, but the movement was not able to utilize that sentiment to really change public policy. And of course, a lot of it was I think dissipated through the Obama campaign with promises. And I think we've talked about this before. He did not promise to leave Afghanistan. That was always, "That's the good war."

BB: "It's the right war."

AD: "Right war," and I've said before, I mean I subscribe to the notion of a just war. There are just wars, but leaving all that aside, I think that was one of the failures. So that's that question of that group and whatnot, met some good folks. We did some righteous work, I think worked as hard as we possibly could, a lot of people really consumed with the work, and made tremendous sacrifices, but very much like people who think like us and work equally as hard around the country, we just weren't able to really have the kind of impact and to build an anti-war movement that was successful in challenging the war [as we did the war] in Vietnam.

BB: So Freedom Books or the question about your prostate cancer?

AD: So let's do Freedom Books first.

BB: Okay. It's 11:37.

AD: Yeah, I was just trying to see who—in 1984, with a tax return and encouragement from friends, Rukiya and I opened a bookstore on Tarboro Road, across the street from St. Augustine's College. And our thinking, of course, was that there was no Black bookstore or progressive bookstore at that time. I don't know, it could be The Regulator was open at that time in Durham, in fact I think it was, but certainly no Black bookstore, and not one in Raleigh, either. And that a bookstore would be an important place to, of course, get out

literature to people about the movement, the political movement in this country and around the world, in our community, for culture, to really promote Black culture and cultural enrichment, and to be a center for activity. So we were there for maybe two years, in a house. It was a house next to a restaurant, and the advantage of it that it was right by the campus, so we got a lot of traffic. And then we got an opportunity to move downtown to Martin Street. And it was right on the corner of where the bus, you know where the bus station is now downtown in Moore Square Park? Right across from Moore Square, it was like a really high traffic area, and we were there until 1994.

And it became a center of local activity. People from out of town who came in town looking to see what was going on would stop by Freedom Books, a lot of local activities, anti-apartheid forums and organizing took place there, students, some of the youth groups that the Crabtree Valley Mall boycott found its, the organizing center was there. Our daughters, of course, were high school students at that time, and so they were part of it, and they helped to draw people in, but that was a part of it. And we were able to do it until 1994. Difficulties all the time, it was undercapitalized. As I said, we started with an income tax return. [Laughter] So that might've been maybe five, six hundred dollars for your inventory. And so really having the kind of inventory that we wanted was always very difficult, and then hiring staff, just it was all volunteer. I would work in the mornings in the bookstore. I'd open it up, and then in the afternoon, I'd go to work, because I worked nights at the time at the post office. And the daughters would come and relieve me, or Rukiya would, and so we did that for many years, and friends and comrades would volunteer on the weekends and whatever.

But when our daughters graduated and went off to school, that became a little more of a burden, and you know, it just became too much. But during its time, it was a real important

center. It was the first Black bookstore. After we closed, I think a year later, the Kambons [Kamau and Mawiyah] opened up Blacknificent Books, and they carried on I think until last year. You know, Black bookstores are very difficult enterprises to keep going.

BB: A.B. Debs in Knightdale [NC] just closed.

AD: So these are just independent bookstores, just independent booksellers are always challenged by the kind of large-scale monopoly of folks, the Barnes & Nobles, the Border's, and so on.

BB: And now Amazon [.com].

AD: Amazon, yeah, that's always been a problem. And then just getting, in terms of the Black community, getting folks to read and be interested in literature and all of those kinds of things are challenges. But I think it was an important political project for us for a long time, and people continue to talk about it. Just like Barry Wright came by the bookstore to thank us, we run into people today in various places who say, "Yeah, I used to come in Freedom Books and I bought this book there," or, "You turned me on to this organization or pointed out to me that this or that was happening," or, "As a result of the work you guys were doing, I'm now involved as an activist in some other place," or whatever. So it had that kind of legacy. And I think the article, and it was featured at one time, I believe in The Independent [Weekly] or The Spectator, one of the early independent papers had a great picture of us standing out in front of the bookstore, and it may have even been discussed in the article "Two Troublemakers" that was in The Independent back 2001, I guess.

BB: Who wrote that?

AD: Dave, what's his name, whose brother was killed in Iraq.

BB: Potorti?

AD: No, not, the book.

BB: No the book, no...

AD: Oh, I feel bad.

BB: I don't know.

AD: This won't be on the tape so I'll worry, but he, in fact he always apologized. He spelled Rukiya's name wrong, and he's always so apologetic of it, but was an early activist. His brother was killed early on in Iraq and he, outspoken--.

BB: Oh, Potorti.

AD: Potorti, Dave Potorti. So that was a great piece that he did on us, really appreciated it and whatnot. We framed the front cover because it was a great picture of Rukiya and I and the library, with us goofing, and me with a bald head.

BB: So you were, to switch to the prostate cancer.

AD: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

BB: So you were diagnosed with prostate cancer in July of '05, right?

AD: Mmm hmm.

BB: So on the third anniversary of your prognosis, you posted this beautiful piece on Facebook that you wrote, called, "Love, Revolution, and Prostate Cancer" about your journey. Do you remember what you wrote? Do you remember your thinking around it?

AD: I'm trying to recall all of what I said. [Laughter] But what I think of right away is an expression of gratitude, I think, to my partner, to my wife Rukiya during that period, I think, and just kind of walking through the journey, and what was going on at the time in our lives. It happened just ahead of my daughter Kemba's wedding, and so going into the wedding with this burden, with the fear and apprehension and uncertainty, and then at that time also, we

actually were scheduled to be part of a, not just to be part of but to actually lead an African-American delegation to Colombia to visit the Afro-Colombian communities. And we decided not to do it because--. And not that, I mean my doctor said, "You know, you could go. You're not like going to be sick." I wasn't at that at stage and whatnot. The cancer wasn't at that point, but we felt like our minds, our spirit wouldn't be into the trip, and it could have a harmful effect on the delegation, the other folks and whatnot. So we decided not to go, but a wonderful thing, the delegation did a little tribute to me while they were there, with one of the communities that they visited, which I had visited before, so they knew me, so, you know, prayers and good wishes and whatnot. It was really powerful. So I think I talked about those kinds of things. And I don't know. Help me think about the other parts of the journey.

I mean I'm coming up on—we just passed the fourth year in August. The actual surgery was August of 2005, so August of 2009 would've been the--. And at this point, I kind of started other treatment modalities. I started radiation in January of 2006, around the King holiday, I think. In fact, it was on that day. And the other notable thing, in October of that year 2005, I decided to change my diet to aid in the healing process, and I became a vegetarian, which I've been able to maintain to this day, still craving chicken salad. [Laughter] Of all the chicken possibilities, right? Chicken salad, I was craving that.

BB: You miss it.

AD: Yeah, but that's been some of the changes. I mean there's always the thing: Are you clear? Are you in the woods, out of the woods? Of course, and I think that generally the five-year marker is when you can say that you definitely survived it. And again, this wasn't an essay. This was more recent kinds of thinking about evaluations or reevaluations of the efficacy or necessity of the PSA exam, which is the blood exam that you take to determine

what kind of prostate antigens are in your body, and whether it helps or harms. Not so much whether the test harms you, but whether or not it helps at all, and does it lead to unnecessary procedures and whatnot. And I've just had to say that in my particular case, had I not done that, I could've been in--. If I wouldn't have taken the PSA, I could be in trouble because it was an aggressive cancer, not at an advanced level, though, but it was an aggressive one. And so in my particular case it was beneficial. But I wish--.

BB: There's a piece--. So, when I wrote this question actually a year ago, is that I reread it yesterday, there's the piece around revolution. There's something political that was in it, too, that was a beautiful--. Part of what moved me so much was the way it coalesced around being in love with Rukiya and your body and health and spirituality, and also movement and politics, and something around disease in the Black community and organizing—like you made this incredible link.

AD: Well, I mean it could've been what continues to be a source of anger and great discomfort, it's around the health care debate and all, but the treatment that I was able to receive was only because I had health insurance that was really decent, and realizing that so many other people confronted with the same issue, would not have been able to treat it because they didn't have health insurance. And it just kind of spoke to the deep shortcomings and actual criminal nature of the system that we live in that won't provide life-saving care to people who really need it, simply because they don't have the resources, and have not been in a position to have it. So I probably talked about that, and that's something that's really critical.

And then I think about other folks who've been confronted with the same illness and who didn't make it. I mean right now, there's just so many people that I know that are ill, sick with cancer, that you think, Ashley Osmont, a good friend. We just lost Yonni Chapman to a

disorder. A friend of mine, well she's a friend, but the partner of my friend Martin Eden, Susan Freedman in San Diego, of brain cancer that came on just out of nowhere and took her out in maybe three months time, those kinds of things really challenge you to think about it. And again, the story with her and others is that they had health care, they had insurance, they were able to deal with, but others didn't. And them, being activists and revolutionaries, always pointed that out, that, "Whether I recover from this or not, whether I lose the battle or not, that I've been able to fight it because I've had the advantage of having this health insurance. I'm privileged in that way because of my employment, my union contract that provides it," or whatever. "Wherein millions of people don't have it." And so that kind of comes up I think in the framework of an activist with health challenges that always comes up.

BB: So as an organizer, what temporarily shuts you down? What's hardest for you? And also, what sustains and nurtures you the most in your work as an activist?

AD: So, sustaining, and it's outside, I mean it's separate and apart or independent sometimes of the movement itself, is just music. We were having this conversation about listening to music. I think I might've posted something [on Facebook] about really being engrossed in some music with your headsets on and maybe even singing, not realizing how loud it is, and somebody looking at you. Or if your body's moving to wonderful rhythms and you're out in public and people just kind of look at you. So I asked people about that, and people were saying, "Yeah, sure, we're--." But somebody had a post about—may even have been Tim Tyson—about how music, historically has been really important, in terms of its kind of collective consumption and sharing, and that music is part of community festivals and family gatherings, and so that you listen to music and you make music in a collective setting, and how the technology has facilitated this kind of individualization and atomization of music

and all that. And I mean I think he's right in terms of a cultural phenomena. However, got to have it. [Laughter] And that doesn't exclude the sharing of music in those group settings, but in the meantime to get you from place to place, or whatever, so if it shuts you out completely, then I don't think it would be a good thing, but for me it's really helpful. It helps to sustain me.

Family, I've got to say that having a partner who shares the same values and actually the same work, it really helps. I know a lot of couples—they share the same values, but not the same work. They work in different organizations or different sectors or whatever, but for us it's been pretty much together for so many years, and so that helps to sustain us as well. So those two kinds of things.

And I think maybe an openness. We talked in the last session about working with young people and asking questions and waiting to be asked, as opposed to really trying to direct and steer things, but just the engagement of young people and their energy is really uplifting as well, and helps to keep me going.

I think what shuts me down, of course, is fatigue. [Laughter] Like anybody else, it just beats you up. And victories and disappointments, or not victories, but disappointments versus victories can also do that. It brings you down a lot. I mean I'm happy to say it hasn't discouraged me to the point where I've said, "I'm through with this; we just can't do this anymore. I'm not going to fight. I'm just going to sit back and enjoy my music." It hasn't happened that way, but sharing a kind of collective life with other people, too, outside of just my personal relationship, but with other folks, to be in community with other activists, other radicals, other revolutionaries, other progressives, is really important.

BB: What's next for you?

AD: Well, I think that I'd like to retire in another year or so, at least from full-time



paid employment, and where we go from there, it's unknown. I mean there are a lot of things that we would like to do. I guess it's a kind of Bucket List, but nothing like crazy stunts or anything like that, but some places we'd like to visit, maybe some projects that we'd like to be involved in, maybe do some more video work. I swear I've got to master Spanish before I go away from here—if not master it, become a lot better than I've been over these last ten years of trying to learn it intermittently.

So that's it, like to make a trip to West Africa. We haven't visited West Africa, so we've got this dream trip where our grandchildren go with us and we get to Ghana and Senegal for sure. That's it, and then maybe trying to build a project. I'd like to see the development of a kind of workers center that deals with African-American and Latino work here in the Wake County area. So that's a possibility. I'm not sure. But it's just a different level of engagement, I think. So that might happen. I mean it's not etched in stone.

My partner's going to retire at the end of this school year, so that may shape what it is I actually do in ways that I'm not even aware of right now. [Laughter] So that's it, and to continue to learn from young people, this process of growth and whatnot and change. I mean I think that's clear from people that I've admired along the way, the ability to change and learn and grow, all of that is a constant process, to strive to be a better person daily, and to be open to new ideas and new directions and all of that, that's important. So that's always on, that's on the daily agenda.

BB: Great. Anything else you can think of?

AD: Of course that's the question that gets answered an hour from now [Laughter] or tomorrow or whatever, right? I'll think of it then, no, but nothing occurs to me right now. I mean this has been a great process and helped me to reflect on some stuff. I think, did we talk

about the Thelonious Monk biography and Robin Kelley's book, and all of that? I just read that book, and I'm about to jump into a book by Amiri Baraka called *Diggin'* about African-American music and jazz, and so those two things are really on my mind now.

And I also just read a book, in the middle of this piece, that was put together for a tribute for Amiri Baraka on his seventy-fifth birthday. It's got contributions from all of these different people, from artists and writers and political activists, and I'm just enjoying that.

And you talk about writers, this collection has got magnificent words, if you just talk about words, and putting words together, and writers like Mumia Abu-Jamal and Toni Morrison, Bill Fletcher, I mean it just spans the areas of arts and politics, but all who are able to produce wonderful phrases and wonderful words. So I'm reading that now, and that's good. I don't know if that has anything to do with anything.

BB: Do you remember the name of the collection?

AD: Oh, it's called *Let Loose on the World* or something like that, and I think the title comes from Toni Morrison, who made a speech to writers about their responsibility to be let loose on the world, and Amiri is that. I mean he's somebody who's important. I mean I think when you talk about growth, development, and whatnot—evolution—a lot of people think about Malcolm X, in terms of models, of how he evolved, but Amiri also, in terms of his politics and his contribution as an artist. In that collection, I think Mumia, in the introduction, does a thing about Amiri, and talks about his birth name was LeRoi, which is king, and his African name, Swahili, Amiri is like prince. And so he moves from this royalty down to like proletarian revolutionary, but I think he says something to the effect that he's achieved this nobility in our movement, not through blood but through brilliance. I mean [Laughter], isn't that powerful? So this book is filled with this kind of language and prose and poetry and

whatnot, so I'm really loving it and being inspired by it.

BB: What a great gift for myself this holiday season. [Laughter] Thank you.

AD: Yeah, yeah.

BB: Well, thank you Ajamu. This is, I mean, your stories, you know what a great gift to the movement and all you've done. So I'm super grateful.

AD: Oh, I appreciate doing it. I just feel, again, compelled to say there are so many others that should've been sitting on this side of the microphone and may yet be, as the project goes on, but I appreciate that my relationship to you and others in the project put me in this position to share a little bit and to reflect, and if nothing else, it may not be helpful to anybody else, in terms of examining this life and all of that. But it's been helpful to me, to just kind of reflect and think about it. So, thank you for the privilege.

BB: All right.

#### **END OF INTERVIEW**

Transcribed by Madeleine Baran, February 7, 2009.