

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

**Interview U-0554  
Cynthia Brown  
March 1, 2006**

**Transcript – 2**

**TRANSCRIPT: CYNTHIA BROWN**

Interviewee: Cynthia Brown

Interviewer: Bridgette Burge

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**START OF INTERVIEW**

CB: Now there was a story I was telling you the last time.

BB: Yeah, we'll you started talking about big box stuff. Let me start from the beginning. Today is March first, 2006. Cynthia and I are back. Now we're in Meredith Emmett's Third Space Studios purple couch room in Durham. We're going to pick up sort of where we left out. Does that sound all right? So the last sort of broader topic we were talking about was kind of your work from '83 to '86 as co-chair of the NC Coalition Against Domestic Violence that you helped found, and then also as the representative to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. Then we got into the whole story about Phyllis Schlafly and how that was going. Then you talked about kind of more broadly what motivates people to, how did you say it, to step over that line of convention and do what's necessary to really make change, like what are your thoughts about that, like the sacrifices that are needed. Then the last thing you were talking about was how people were saying to you, "You're the best thing we got going, but I can't vote for you because we need winnable" and what that means, and the difference between electoral politics and organizing and activism built based on relationships. That was kind of just to catch us up as a reminder. So I

guess before we start talking about the transition to interim executive director to the Southeast Women's Employment Commission, you talked about kind of how you left because of burnout. But before we get to that, do you want to say a little bit more about what you've learned about helping people step over that line of convention and do what's necessary to make change?

CB: Say a little bit more, because I don't even remember it being characterized in that way. So say a little bit more about what you're really asking me so I can kind of get to the heart of it.

BB: Well, you were talking about how--. Well, maybe that's not the best question then, if I have to think about it. But I'm curious about it, so let me—

CB: What I'm saying is that you're characterizing it that way, you're reflecting it back to me, and that's the way you heard it. I'm not sure that that's necessarily what I intended, maybe it was, but if you could say a little bit about what I was saying, it may put me back on track.

BB: Well, I just listened to a little bit this morning, so I don't know if I can remember the whole thing. But you were saying that when people are struggling with day-to-day survival and just trying to make ends meet, how do we inspire folks to engage more in activism and the activities that they need to do to make real social change and social transformation happen in our communities.

CB: Well, it's interesting that you asked that because I'm not sure what I was saying the other day and whether or not it was definitive. Because in my mind, that is ultimately the challenge that's facing us right now. When you have mass numbers of people who are suffering in their communities and they are the majority, and you have such a small enclave

of folks who are the top one percent of the population, who really control everything, and who are amassing more wealth than they'll use in two or three lifetimes, and people are suffering so, it is incumbent upon people who care about social change and who are organizers to try a number of strategies to motivate people. One of the things that I think some people historically have come to is—

BB: Cell phone vibration interruption.

CB: I'm sorry.

BB: That's okay.

CB: So I'm saying it's incumbent upon organizers to try to figure out how do you motivate people. I'm saying that there are people historically who've done this kind of work, who understand that the masses will have to be brought along, that there's a certain percentage of the folks that are out here who are going to respond to any kind of stimulus. But I do think that to the extent that you can maximize the number of the people who are actively engaged in organizing, actively engaged in trying to bring about change that the rest of the people will benefit from, that you got to get people, one, where they have an analysis.

No, I think that even before you start talking about an analysis of the root of what's causing the problems in their community, you got to give people a sense that change is possible. So seeing other people who dealt with some of the kinds of things that are happening in their community, job loss, trying to keep Wal-Mart from coming into your community, people have to see that there are folks who can make things different. Because people have gotten such a sense of hopelessness, such a sense of "things are the way that they are going to always be". That's why you don't have so many people voting anymore, that's why you have so few people who participate in civic organizations. Because it's like things

are going to be the way they are and folks are struggling with survival and trying to entertain themselves to try to get their mind off their troubles.

So the idea of going to meetings and organizing and doing something that brings about change is something that people are not inclined to do unless, one, they're personally affected by something that motivates them to get involved, if something is getting ready to get located in their community that they don't want, some of that "not in my backyard" kind of stuff. Or people being motivated because their property is at risk, their family is at risk, and then that motivates them. But even then, there has to be folks who are willing to give people a perspective that it's better to pursue a group and collective action or response to whatever is bothering them, than to pursue just some individual solution to the problem. I think that there have to be people who help people get an analysis of what's happening and then what are some different ways to respond to it. But I do think that that's the fifty-million-dollar question. Because in all of the groups I've worked with, people are struggling with working with a handful of people in a community impacted by everything from a landfill getting put in their community, to not having enough child care, to any number of things, where you try to create businesses in their community. I was just meeting with some folks last night and their whole thing is how do we get people to come out of this.

I resist this idea of apathy, because apathy suggests that people are apathetic because they just don't care. A lot of people care. They just feel a lack of awareness about how to do something about it. They feel hopeless that nothing can be done about it, because several things have been tried and things didn't changed. Different political people got into office making promises and they were unfulfilled. So I don't talk about apathy. But clearly there are a number of people who are talking about, "How do we get people involved?" because we

really want to help them get something done, but we keep having these meetings and they don't show up. We keep getting promises that they'll show up and they don't. So that's why I'm saying it's the fifty-million-dollar question. I just have different things that I said that are the result of trial and error. It works in some communities and it doesn't in others. Did I answer the question?

BB: Yeah, that was great. Do you think it's important to organize particularly in the South?

CB: Oh, there's no doubt about that. I mean I have to be honest with you. When I first started with the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence—I am a Southerner, and so I didn't have any particular consciousness about the South within the context of the nation perspective. So when I came into a national environment in the national coalition and there were people who were from the South, like a woman in particular from Arkansas who approached me my first meeting talking about, "We're Southerners" and identifying with me as a Southerner, I became a part of organizations where people were talking about the southern workers, southern rural communities, and consistently making distinctions about the South. I literally at one point wondered if this was just a way of characterizing the region in a way that made it stand out so that it could appeal to folks, so that it would make it eligible for certain kind of funds.

I actually was naive enough not to understand the particular importance of the South to this nation and to the world. Because over the years I've come to understand very clearly, let's say just from a worker's perspective and from an economic development perspective, I've come to understand the importance of the South of the United States as kind of a dumping ground for all of the nation's waste. Seventy-five percent of this nation's waste is in

the South and primarily in rural communities and communities of color and poor communities. Thinking about when employers have wanted to exploit cheaper labor, before they started going into Mexico and Central America, they were taking businesses out of Canada, out of the West, out of the North, and bringing them into the South, because you had this lax environmental regulation. You had all of these oppressive working conditions, vehement opposition to unions and worker organizing, so that people actually, I've learned over the years, have actually had unwritten rules about keeping organized labor or jobs that have organized labor as a part of their structures out of southern communities. Which means that in the interest of profit and the supremacy of usually white males, but plant owners, business owners, that you would actually prohibit the growth of your economy to keep from having people who have organized labor as a part of their workforce in your region.

I can't speak in detail about the impact of some of the most oppressive policies that we have experienced in this country have been initiated by southern legislators, Congress people up in Washington, that has had an impact on all of the whole country. So the South in particular is very important to the conditions of workers, the environment, important to culture in this country. It is a very significant region that impacts not just this country, but the world. I don't know, what was the purpose or the root of that question?

BB: You answered it just right. I'm just asking different organizers and activists through the Heirs Project: what's significant about the South, if anything, that they think is important and specifically North Carolina. I mean, I hear lots of parallels there about the South and North Carolina, but do you have other reasons why you stay planted here in North Carolina?

CB: The reality is this is home. I mean, I was actually born in New York as I told you, but I've been here most of my life. Even when I was out of North Carolina, I was in Kentucky, so I was still in the southern region. Culturally, I really like the South. North Carolina is a beautiful state. Because of how oppressive it has been, because of how racist it has been in many instances, I was less inclined to be aware of how beautiful this state is. Whenever I was traveling outside of North Carolina, I would hear people talk about how beautiful the state was and I would have this kind of ho-hum attitude, this dismissive kind of sarcastic attitude because I was really thinking about the way that people are oftentimes treated, particularly working-class and poor and African-Americans. So I was less inclined to be aware of, or conscious of, or focused on the physical beauty of this place. But not only is this state physically beautiful, but there are some beautiful people here in this state. When I campaigned for U.S. Senate, I met some of the most wonderful people in the world from the western part of the state in the mountains all the way to the coastal area. There's a way that the systemic kind of oppression that exists in this state obscures the beauty of the people and the land for some of us.

I stayed here in part because I have connected to a network of people who really, I think, are committed to social change, social justice, and who have an analysis and are continually trying to create structures to try to bring about the kind of change that we want. It's where my family is. The reality is I've always been very close to my grandparents. My grandfather died a few years ago, but my grandmother's still living. I very well potentially could leave the South at this point in my life, when my grandmother passes. But I would never get too far outside of North Carolina as long as my grandmother is alive, because I



want to be in her life consistently and be close to her, because she feeds me spiritually and emotionally and I love her to death.

So I can't even imagine that a place like North Carolina, that needs the work that I like to do so much, and my family's rooted here. I don't see any reason to leave for real. I've traveled all over the world as a part of the Kellogg Fellowship. I have been to six of the seven continents. I enjoyed and appreciated everywhere that I visited. But like my grandmother used to say when I first started--. You know when you're young, you start to talk about, "I can't wait to get out of here, I can't wait to do such and such," but North Carolina and the South have been good to me in terms of what I've learned, being supported, being loved, being nurtured, being developed, cultivating me in terms of a consciousness. All of that has been offered to me through living in the South. Not that I could not have gotten it somewhere else, but this happens to be where I got it. I mean, I love it. I love the South and I'm angry about all the negative stuff about it. Even the fact that the South is a place where you find the majority of the military, a lot of the military bases, as well as the folks, what do you call them, the folks who produce the arms?

BB: Weapons manufacturers?

CB: Weapons manufacturers, this being a base of operation for many of them. I mean, there's a lot to be said that's negative about it and then there's also, it's a paradox. The South is a paradox.

BB: I want to ask you about the W.K. Kellogg National Fellowship program. You became a fellow in 1989 and you traveled pretty widely, like you just said. But before that, tell me more about what the Southeast Women's Empowerment Coalition is and how you got involved with it.

CB: It was the Southeast Women's Employment Coalition.

BB: Employment, sorry.

CB: Actually, I told you I was on the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Suzanne Pharr was on there with me. I happened to say to her one day that I was just burnt out working in the battered women's shelter. I just want to say a little bit about when you work in crisis work. For some of us, when you work in crisis work, where you're working with women who are being violated and abused and tortured by men and their children are sometimes subject to that violence, sometimes the women are abusive to their children, when you deal with that level of violence as a staff person in a shelter where you constantly see that, after awhile, you can't see women who have any kind of injuries or children who have injuries, that you don't assume came from abuse. You just become mentally and emotionally worn by that. That's where I was at a certain point. I just mentioned that I was kind of burnt out and I wanted to do something different. Suzanne suggested that I interview with this group. She was on the regional board of this organization. She didn't have anything to do with the hiring, somebody else did the interviewing, but she told me about it. I applied. I got the job. That took me to Kentucky. They brought me in.

It's interesting how often you end up with a job because you express a passion or a vision for something, but you don't really know how to do it. What they hired me to do was to be the leadership program director for this organization, Southeast Women's Employment Coalition. We called it SWEC; the acronym was SWEC. The organization was committed to leadership development. They were primarily looking at employment options for women and leadership development for women. So many of the communities where Southeast Women's Employment Coalition was operating, many of those communities were rural communities,

where the only employment going was road construction. Because it's federally funded, it was required to hire a certain number of women, a certain percentage of women in road construction jobs. So if you had a contract, you had to do it; you had to hire a certain percentage of women. None of the states, when the analysis was done for this organization, were in compliance with that. So this group had a commitment to try to get women in road construction jobs.

The other area was to document what was happening within the workforce around women. So you had women in textile plants and poultry plants and all kinds of workplaces where the effort was to document the oppressive working conditions of women in the workplace, and then to try to develop women's leadership based in their community in a way that helped them establish their own organizations. It's interesting because I started working there and I keep thinking about how much better I would have been at that job if I knew what I know now, because it's taken years to understand program development, organizational development, and things that would have been helpful to inspire women and help women form their own organizations. But we did a lot of good stuff in terms of leadership trainings, but a holistic program that was a sustainable program, that really turned out tons of leaders. I would say that there was a stops and starts with the work.

Ultimately, when I was about to get the fellowship—actually, I applied for the fellowship as an employee of SWEC and had been nominated by somebody in the organization. Because to get into the Kellogg Fellowship, you had to be nominated by your employer, so that they are agreeing to release you from a certain percentage of your time to pursue the learning objectives of the program. So I was nominated, but right around the same time, SWEC was going to relocate from Kentucky to Georgia because there were tons of

things that were happening in terms of changing the board leadership and a number of things that led the organization to come out. But again, my role was primarily, initially it was leadership program director and I helped formulate tons of leadership programs and whatnot. But then when the executive director left, probably about six months before the office was moved, I ended up becoming the interim director to help with that transition from Kentucky to Georgia.

BB: So what were some of the big lessons you learned out of that work? Because you left that in, let's see, 1990, right?

CB: I did.

BB: When you went to work for Southerners for Economic Justice?

CB: That's right. But now you know, it's so funny to have somebody ask you that question, because it's been awhile but there are some important—there is a particular lesson that I learned then, that I have seen played out a whole lot of times over. Remember I said I was the director of a leadership development program, and one of the most important lessons in my mind had to do with focusing on organizational development rather than simply just leadership development. Because one of the things I found over and over and I've seen it lots of times since I left Kentucky in other settings, including here in Durham and other places, is that when you have leaders who are a part of organizations, or who have the potential to build organizations in their community, and you develop those individual leaders, a lot of times what that entails is not only training of those people locally in the communities where they live, but it also entails taking them out of their community, exposing them to different kinds of analysis, different kinds of leadership experiences, exposing them to other leaders who have a range of experiences. And as you develop those leaders, what happens is they

outstrip their organizations. Because of their development, who they relate to, based on this analysis and this increased learning, are people outside of their community not within their organization. So ultimately, what you have done is you've undermined that organization because many of the communities, particularly small communities and rural communities, there are limited numbers of people who are actively working to build organizations. If a person gets all of this experience and exposure and then is recruited by some other organization because of the skill level that they have, because of the consciousness that they have, then you have left that organization or that community without one of the few leaders that's there.

The other thing that it also emphasizes is the importance of organizational development, which means you are not just developing an infrastructure with an office and all those technical kinds of things that say, "I have an organization," but you're developing all of the people. If you are organizing or you're building an organization and you are only having one person who you're investing everything in, then that organization can't survive. It's not even really an organization when that person is gone. Everything dissipates and falls by the wayside, because you haven't cultivated a leadership core of folk who can continue to step into the vacuum that's created when somebody else leaves. So this idea of organizational development that includes developing the volunteers, includes developing the staff and the Board of Directors, so that you have numbers of people who have an analysis, who know what needs to be done, who are a part of creating the work plan, who have the vision, who know what the plan is to try to achieve the vision and move toward the vision. Developing organizations rather than just individual leaders means that you are contributing to sustainability of the work in any given place.

Now that's something that I'm articulating partly what I learned in Kentucky as a part of SWEC, but that learning, some of what I just raised, the knowledge about that understanding or that awareness was cultivated as I've had other kinds of experiences. But I can't tell you how often, even right now, that I see individuals who are being supported—their development is being supported by some organization. They don't understand, even as they continue to invite that person to be a part of forums or trainings or trips where there are site visits, things that take them out of their community, what a disservice they're doing to the overall organization. Because half the time, that person is spending so much time gone, that the work that they actually started out to do, their development was in part based on the work that they were doing. They're being stripped out of the community from doing that work. And they're not there to support the development of new leaders to help get the work done in their absence. You know what I'm saying?

BB: Yeah. Do you want to talk about your travels? Did they change or affect your approach to or your thinking around activism and organizing?

CB: Let me just share a little bit with you about what the program was, because the reality is—I know this is going to get lengthy, but I think it's interesting anyway. I got into this fellowship program on a fluke. I was traveling to Montana to a workshop and a friend of mine—actually, I was just daydreaming about what it would be like to travel all over the country and stay in communities with people who I had met through the national coalition. My thought was, for some reason I was pondering whether or not black communities were stronger and better because of desegregation and because of different things that had happened over the last thirty years. This was back in '89 when I was pondering this. So I'm trying to figure out, "How can I go around and interview people, just kind of do a little oral

history stuff, to interview people about what they felt the changes had been and whether or not they thought that we were better or worse as an African-American community in this country?"

Well, I pondered it, imagined giving up everything in my house and putting it in storage, or putting it in my family members' houses, and just hitting the road and traveling all over the country, and bartering with these people who I'd met through the national coalition to baby-sit, clean house, so they would give me a place to sleep. Then they'd tell me about people I could meet and go talk to. I thought it was a fabulous idea, don't know where in the world it came from, because I normally don't think in those non-traditional terms. I actually was saying, white folks that I know who say, "Oh, I'm going to take a year off and bike through Europe." It was along that vein, but it was never my kind of thinking. So I really was daydreaming on a plane headed to Montana. While I was in Montana though, several of us happened to be laying back, pondering our navels, looking at the sky, looking at these mountains, because it was a beautiful mountainous retreat center where these wealthy folks allowed social change activists to come. They would cook for us, have us fed by workers who were there. It was really nice. Anyway, we were just laying back and we were just talking about stuff, daydreaming, and I shared my vision about doing this thing. People said, "Well, you know Kellogg Foundation will pay for stuff like that." I said, "What?" I didn't have a clue what they were talking about. They explained to me that they offer some fellowship. I literally did not know what a fellowship was. But I heard what they said and so when I got home, a couple of weeks, maybe even a month after we got back, one of the women who I befriended there asked had I applied yet. She said she had already submitted her application. I told her I had gotten so consumed with my work, I had not had time. She

asked for my mailing address. She called for the application and had it sent to me.

Ultimately, to make a long story short, she didn't get in, I got in. I still am very grateful to her for making me do it, because had she not sent me that application, I probably would not have ended up applying. I ended up getting it in right at the deadline and I got it.

The Kellogg National Fellowship Program was designed to develop multidisciplinary leadership. Now I should be embarrassed to admit this, but I also did not have a clue what people were talking about when they said "multidisciplinary leadership." I ultimately learned that, but I asked folks, "What do they mean when they say 'multidisciplinary'?" Because I was educated in a liberal arts school and so I was already multidisciplinary in many ways, but I didn't think in that particular term. Anyway, their thinking was that leadership in this country was very specialized, that people had expertise in a single area, and that to be more effective leaders, they needed to cultivate leaders who had a broad way, a number of disciplines to think about problem-solving in community. So I thought, "I'll tell them what I want to do." One of the things that I said I thought would make me a better leader—the whole premise of this is that you propose to them why you ought to be selected, what your proposed learning plan would be, and what activities might you undertake to make you a more effective leader and more multidisciplinary. You need to flip it over?

BB: Yeah, let me flip it over.

**END OF TAPE 2, SIDE A**

**START OF TAPE 2, SIDE B**



CB: So like I said, to make people more multidisciplinary leaders, your purpose as a fellow was to propose to them a learning plan that would engage you in activities that would make you a better leader and that would give you a more multidisciplinary perspective. And it was pretty loose. I mean there were a number of things that you could do. So I expanded ultimately this idea about seeing what changes had happened in the black community as a result of desegregation to exploring how do people of color, primarily, hold onto their culture and their history and all that makes them who they are. How do they hold onto that in a hostile, racist environment that is intent, and I'm much more adamant about it now, but that is intent on erasing who you are? They want you to assimilate for acceptance. Everywhere I went in the world that was what I was looking at.

So when we went to Brazil, we went to Bahia. Bahia is the African center of Brazil, because the largest number of Africans outside of the continent of Africa are in Brazil in Bahia. We heard about festivals. We heard about a number of Afro-Brazilian art and culture endeavors, cultural and heritage preservation kinds of activities, heard a lot about a number of efforts to retain the African roots through religion, religious practice, just a number of ways that people are holding onto tradition, holding onto history, and preserving culture in the context of an environment where people say, "It's not racist," that, "We're just an amalgam and we're all even," even though all over Brazil, the people who were the darkest were the ones that had the most menial jobs and rarely were seen in anything other than subservient positions on television. I mean, just watching TV, the people who excelled and who were the spokespersons were the light-skinned people. We went to Amazonas, where we looked at what the indigenous Indians were doing in Brazil to hold onto their culture, to try to prevent the destruction of the rainforests, to try to prevent these logging companies from

coming in and destroying generations of culture. We didn't ever make it to Sao Paulo, but it was Amazonas, Rio de Janeiro. Oh my goodness, the level of poverty that we saw!

I went to a number of places and you don't have enough tape, nor do we have enough time for me to tell you all the places I went. But when I was in New Zealand, we stayed with the Maori people. We stayed with the indigenous population and looked at things like Tai Koharenga, which was language nest, literally the effort to hold on to the language of the Maori people by having children brought into these community centers where elders, who were just the few people in the community who knew the language, the elders who would then, not just for the purpose of providing babysitting services, but for the purpose of teaching children from birth to school-age the native language, so that they had a way to transmit the stories of the Maori people, that was essentially being lost because the schools were prohibiting them from speaking their native language.

So what happened, because this is what I was pursuing, was I started to recognize all kinds of parallels, whether you were in Australia looking at what was happening with the indigenous aboriginals who were in Australia, or you were in Hawaii looking at people who were the indigenous people before they were invaded, whether you were dealing in El Paso, Texas and in Juarez with people from Mexico who talked about their experiences in U.S. schools, being made to feel less than adequate and forced to speak somebody else's language, or whether you were in South Africa, where you visited the site of the Soweto Uprisings, where the schools are still kind of torn down. And the children, part of that Soweto Uprising, part of what was behind that was the resistance of the apartheid government and the school system at forcing people to stop speaking their native language and to start speaking the language of the oppressor.

So I started noticing these patterns of invasion by outside, usually Europeans, to take over people's countries. There were similarities in how it was done, besides the military overthrow or the aggressive nature of how you got control of the people whose land you invaded. But almost universally, the effort was to change people's language, to change the history in the history books so that you basically wrote them out, taking people's land so that they were displaced, I mean commonly everywhere I went. One of the things that became clear to me is that people have to be organized to resist that kind of oppression. I mean, literally, I didn't go looking for a lesson on organizing and the importance of it. But clearly, if you are not organized, it makes it a lot easier for folk to take from you what you have a right to and what is yours. And it's played itself out historically all over the planet.

I was sitting on a hill looking out over a beautiful, beautiful landscape with a friend of mine in New Zealand. The sun was setting and we were talking about what time it was at time. I forget the time difference, but I do know that it was evening there where we were, and it was over in the morning at the other side of the world where our families were. It was the first time that I realized what it meant when it said, "The sun never sets on the British Empire." Because for the first time in my life, I understood that for the sun never to set on the British Empire, empire-building is about conquering lands on four corners of the earth. Empire-building means that if the sun never sets on it, you've got a piece of something that you stole from somebody, that you took over from somebody on four corners of the earth. So wherever the sun is going down one place, it's coming up somewhere else and so it never sets. That was the first time I understood that and that comes from having a global perspective to be able to understand what that means, at least from my vantage point. This aggressive nature of institutional power and the control that it exerts over communities and

people, just in the name of profit and power and control, emphasized to me the importance of people being organized in a real way, not just locally, not just on a state level, not just nationally, but globally.

Let me tell you, when we moved the office of SWEC from Kentucky to Georgia, we moved into a building when American Friends Service is located. American Friends Service Committee, AFSC, they were located in the lower office in that building and our phones had not been hooked up. So I had to go in their office to use the phone. Remember now, at this point I had just received my fellowship, so I've never done any traveling internationally. So I don't have a perspective internationally yet, not a real serious one. But I walk into the American Friends Service office to use their phone and I see all of these political buttons that say, "Boycott Coca-Cola because of their investment in South Africa."

I remember thinking how popular Coca-Cola was because my grandmother drank Coca-Cola. Everybody in my family were Coke drinkers. I'm not much of one because I don't particularly like colas, but I know how popular it is in the United States, or at least in my circle of the United States that I'd been a part of and in the places I'd traveled. Because at least at that point, I had been in the national coalition, so I know how popular Coke is in the United States. I'm knowing that if you say, "Boycott it," that it's going to be a tough thing for them to feel it, because if it's as popular as it is all over the country, you're not hardly going to get everybody to do that. Now it would be a powerful statement if you could, because they had this whole US market so saturated. Well, I was thinking, "That's a nice idea, but it's hard for me to imagine somebody being successful at really being able to bring Coca-Cola to their knees by boycotting them or to successfully get them to divest from South Africa."

But anyway, it was a passing thought and I didn't give it a whole lot more thought after that until I started traveling all over the world and the first sign I would see was a Coca-Cola sign advertising Coca-Cola! When I was in Guatemala walking cobblestone streets of this little ancient city, taking a Spanish immersion course, people were pushing pushcarts on the street selling Coca-Cola in plastic bags. They would pour the Coca-Cola in a plastic bag, stick a straw in it, and hand it to you, and keep the bottle so that they could get the deposit for it, which I wasn't mad about, because I would be hot as I don't know what and I wanted it. But what was happening for me was that I was developing this consciousness about if everybody in the United States stopped drink Coke, Coke still was going to be in business, because they had a global market. They sometimes, in some countries I went to, had—I don't know because I never did the research. I don't know if they made more money than the local soft drink manufacturers, but what I know is that they had a greater market base and they had greater resources to do their advertising, so that I saw more advertising of Coca-Cola in those countries, than I saw of advertising by local soft drink manufacturers.

So you know the travel was powerful in terms of helping me understand how this country works, how capitalism works. I mean, I was in China for the Fourth World Conference on Women and there was McDonald's all over the place. Just looking at McDonald's, John Deere, just different fast food restaurants, different manufacturers who are present all over the world, it gave me a whole different perspective about the importance of workers being organized across global lines, because the companies that we work for are globalized. So when you have a chance as a part of a fellowship program to see that in a real kind of way, where you don't even have to spend a lot of time reading books, you really just see it and understand it based on what you're experiencing. That's powerful, that's powerful

and it did a whole lot to give me insight about the need for organizing among working people, people of color, not only in terms of what we have to build, where we live, but what we have to build in terms of relationships across these global lines.

BB: Great. Well let me ask you this. It's 12:15. You need to stop at 12:30.

CB: It's actually 12 o'clock.

BB: It's 12 o'clock?

CB: Yeah, this clock is fast, so we have thirty minutes.

BB: Okay, well we'll check in again in a little bit then and see the choice you want to make. Do you want to say more about your work with SWEC, like how you transitioned out and into Southerners for Economic Justice?

CB: Well like I said, what was happening was I got the fellowship and they moved the office to Georgia. I didn't want to particularly live in Georgia, but I also was starting to get a real clear sense of this organizing thing. Because see, I don't recall hearing anybody talk about organizing per se, prior to going to Kentucky. I didn't fully understand it. I didn't know I didn't fully understand it. All I knew was that organizing from the vantage point of—well, there was some level of organizing within the context of the battered women's movement. Actually, there was a lot of organizing, but not in the most traditional sense that I know now. There was some level of organizing, because you were building organizations to deal with battered women's issues.

But in terms of like community-based stuff, most of my consciousness in those years was raised by my time with SWEC. So I started thinking about how desperately we needed organizing in North Carolina and in particular, in Eden, and in the area that I had grown up. I wanted to relocate to North Carolina to start doing community organizing and build my own

organization. Now understand that at that point, it was a good idea, it was a great vision, but I didn't have a clue what I was doing. I really didn't. I didn't know what I would be doing. I didn't know how to go about doing it. I just knew there were a lot of people doing it and making some powerful change in their community and I wanted to be a part of making that happen at home. Well, the mistake I made, when I came home to do this, was that I forgot I had to pay for my car to be able to get around and do anything. I also was totally naive about what it would take to do the level of fundraising and development of a Board. I mean, really what it takes to build an organization. Stuff I teach now, that I didn't have a clue about then.

I had not been home probably a week when I got a call from Christina Davis McCoy. Cristina made me aware that SEJ was looking for an interim director, because the executive director had gotten a fellowship with the Charles Bannerman Foundation. Because she had already received it, they needed somebody pretty soon. So she told me to go over and interview for it. Now at that point, I'd only been an interim director of SWEC for six months and to this day, I'm still not clear how I was able to do what I did there, because it wasn't like I had been trained to run organizations. Well, I didn't have no more training to run them when I did SWEC, than I did when I came to SEJ. But I had enough to sense to know how to be able to monitor the financial management of the organization, some limited staff supervision experience. So it was like, "I'm willing to come over here and try this and it's only six months." I ended up staying at SEJ for ten years, but that's how I ended up coming to SEJ and leaving SWEC. It was a number of things, from the office moving, to my desire to come back to North Carolina and start organizing.

BB: So tell me about some of that, the mission and the work of SEJ. What was it like? What were some things you learned?

CB: Southerners for Economic Justice. Man, I'll tell you, every step along the path of my development has been critical and important. But SEJ, my goodness, it was awesome because it honed and sharpened my understanding about workers' issues. See, some of what I've already said, I can articulate the way I do because of the SEJ experience, not because of the experiences I was describing. Because the things that were happening prior to SEJ, I could tell you things about it, but my analysis, my understanding was honed in SEJ. Because see, SEJ was an organization that started out historically—and I mean it had been around for quite awhile by the time I came along, I want to say ten or fifteen years. Because I stayed there ten, and I think SEJ may have celebrated like a twenty-fifth anniversary before I left, twentieth or twenty-fifth; I can't remember which—but I know that SEJ started out trying to help support worker organizing in J.P. Stevens Plant. Their whole goal was to build support within the faith community and within the broader neighboring community of J.P. Stevens, and subsequently, other plants to support the right for workers to organize.

We did documentation, we tried to do organizing a working women's project, where we were trying to bring working women together. It's interesting, the working women's organizing project was a very important project in the sense that it brought workers across workplaces together to begin to talk about the kinds of working conditions they were facing. But one of the important lessons that came out of trying to build that project was understanding that it is a challenge to try to bring workers together to organize for any number of things if they're coming from different workplaces. Because the commonality, the synergy around a common threat that they're facing in a workplace is difficult to try to crystallize. You got different infrastructures that you're trying to deal with.



So it was a real challenge trying to build a strong working women's organization, because you didn't have a campaign that you could really kind of bring together different levels of discrimination. Like if you had women who had been sexually harassed or discriminated against, if you're talking about impacting federal law, it's still not going to do anything about what was happening in their particular workplaces. And you didn't have all of the workers from the same workplace that could mount a particular strategy against that particular employer. These were a few workers from several different workplaces. So that was just a real important kind of perspective that we gained trying to build that. Ultimately, instead of having an organizing campaign, ultimately, instead of having really some victories, it was a support group basically for working women, which wasn't a bad thing. But in terms of trying to create institutional change, it wasn't able to accomplish that.

We worked on things like the Workers' Bill of Rights. We documented what was happening to contingent workers by doing interviews with people who were in part-time and temporary work, and recognizing that this whole trend toward contingent workforce, whether part-time, temporary, or contractual, while there is a percentage of people who really appreciate being able to be contingent because it allows them flexibility, there are a lot more people who were saying that they absolutely resented the fact that their only choice was part-time, temporary, contingent work. Because that was the nature of what was happening in the workforce, where full-time jobs with good benefits were being downgraded to part-time and temporary work without benefits. This was across the board, from people who were menial laborers, to people who were low-income workers, to people who were high-income in the technology industries, the IT industries over there in Research Triangle Park. You had people saying, "I came to work today at a job where you have prepared yourself educationally, you

have done all of the right things to get in the door of an IBM or some other major corporation, and then you come in one day and they tell you that you're laid off. They tell you that as of Friday, they're giving you a pink slip. You're no longer employed."

This is observing that people can work hard and do what is so-called, quote unquote, "the right thing," to make the right choices, and the nature of corporate interest is to operate to maximize profits. And you maximize profits when you can create a working situation where people don't have to get benefits, people don't have to work beyond a certain number of hours, their work hours can be minimized so that you don't have to pay them certain kinds of time and a half, and overtime and that kind of stuff; you don't have to give them certain kinds of benefits. Just through our work at SEJ learning about how corporate interests operate and how workers' health and safety is compromised because of that.

We did some work with poultry workers and tried to provide support. We actually, as an organization, helped to facilitate the creation of the Hamlet Response Coalition after the Hamlet [NC] fire. We worked in conjunction with the social workers and the AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations]. It's a whole lot of players who came, NCOSH [North Carolina Occupational Safety and Health Project], a lot of players came to the table, and when they came to the table, we were committed to insuring that the workers were at the table. We really wanted to see that happen. Over time, what I observed was the people who are connected are the ones who ended up at the ninth hour in the state legislature with the policymakers shaping the final deal around strengthening of health and safety laws. I wasn't the one who was there at those meetings as intensively toward the end as I was in the beginning, so I don't whether compromises happened.

One of the most important lessons I think I learned at SEJ, besides the things that I've mentioned, has to do with when you're doing serious social change organizing work, how you really have to look at the people who are most impacted as the target for those who are organized. Because anytime you start to go for people who are at the middle or upper income levels to address a particular issue, when their livelihood, their health and safety, their survival is not connected to whatever is being negotiated, then people compromise. And they compromise in a way that people whose livelihood and their survival is--the way that they won't.

We did work with welfare reform as a part of my work with SEJ, organizing welfare recipients to speak on their own behalf at the state legislature and at the congressional hearings on welfare reform, to speak from their own experience about what that transition ought to look like, what might a new welfare policy look like, rather than eliminating people's access to help. If indeed the welfare system was going to be decreased, what kinds of things do they need to be armed to move from welfare to work? It was interesting, because we went into the state legislature and found a legislator who was willing to sponsor legislation that was supposed to be an overall package for how the state was going to respond and deal with welfare reform.

BB: Who was that and do you remember a bill number?

CB: I don't remember, oh no, I wouldn't remember that now. I might be able to dig that up, but I don't remember. I mean, because you had the House resolution, I want to say 1274. Now where that comes from, it very well could end up being that that's what it is. Somewhere it's in the back in the head and you can pull it up. But anyway, there was a Senate version and there was a House version and there were all kinds of elements to it. But

the particular thing I want to speak to now, and I won't call names, but there is a particular lobbyist who, their job is to be over there lobbying around issues that are important to us as poor and working-class people. There was an effort to get the state legislator who was working with us to include a provision in the legislation that allowed women who were on welfare to use their education toward their work requirement. Because part of what was being pushed was that if you are on welfare and you're able to work physically and mentally, you got to go to work, period, no questions, no ifs, ands, and buts. So the effort was to say, instead of women being required to just jump off of welfare and go into a job, if they are in school, let them stay there. If they want to pursue education so that they position themselves potentially to get higher-income jobs, let them do that. Instead of the work requirement, let their education endeavors meet that work requirement. So that was what we were trying to do.

So when you take welfare recipients into the state legislature to talk to legislators about this issue, you take them in with the understanding that they're not compromising, because whether or not they can get prepared to make higher wages is a matter of survival for them, especially if you're getting ready to say that they can't get welfare anymore for a lifetime after a certain period. But for a lobbyist who's going in, who is comfortable, who is not on welfare, who is not going to be impacted whether or not this is adopted or not, for them to go in and talk to a legislator about including that provision, if you go in and you all are having a conversation and this person says, "This ain't winnable. We cannot win this. This is not an issue that I'm willing to put on the table," or somehow or another, they express some unwillingness or some hesitation, your reaction as a lobbyist, since what you want is a

winnable package, is to let it go, whereas somebody who's impacted by whether or not it passes or not is not.

So that's what I'm saying about understanding who you target and who has the greatest stake in seeing certain things done when you're doing organizing. That was my experience where this person actually, when we weren't there, talked to this legislator and they agreed to take that provision out of the legislation.

BB: Which legislator?

CB: Alma Adams, and I don't mind mentioning Alma, because Alma was a real ally and a friend to us in trying to do this. What happened was the day that the bill was marked up and was coming out of being written, whatever the committee is or the staff's area where they draft legislation. When we saw it, we saw that that piece was missing. We went right to her. She understood why it should be there. She said she didn't know why it was left out, but we know that there was some consultation that was happening with the lobbyist, who we then saw later and said, "Look, this needs to be in there. We've already talked to our representative. She said that she would make sure it got back in there," and indeed she did. But it was really interesting how, because people who were most affected by that particular policy were not there to defend it themselves and to make sure that it didn't fall through the cracks, it ended up falling through.

So I probably should not say that they negotiated or agreed not to take it out, although that it some of what I heard and surmised. The bottom line is they didn't have a vested interest, either of them, in that particular aspect of the legislation staying. And that's why I know that it's important that if you're going to be impacted by a certain policy, you need to be at the table. That was an important lesson I got out of SEJ, you know what I'm saying. So

over and over and over, it was emphasized for us the importance of working people being organized to advocate for their own interests.

The other thing that I remember, that was a significant part of our time spent educating folk in the community, was the work we did to try to help people understand why there ought to be opposition to the North American Free Trade Agreement. One of the convenings that happened that spoke to issues that we needed to understand about NAFTA, was a convening at the five-hundredth anniversary of Christopher Columbus getting lost. It was called a quad-national gathering and I forget what they called that period of time for that five hundred years. Anyway, it was to mark the anniversary of him ushering in the domination of indigenous folks. What we were able to do was to convene. I know I wasn't the executive director then; Leah was the executive director then. I was just there as a program staff person.

The convening included people from the Caribbean, Canada, United States, and Mexico, workers from those four areas. That's when we began to understand how these jobs were moving from Canada as a result of the US-Canada Trade Agreement, that a lot of the workers—see, if you heard the business people or you heard the politicians talk about the US-Canada Trade Agreement, they would laud that as a very successful accomplishment. But if you talk to workers, you heard the perspective that that trade agreement caused them to lose a lot of jobs and lowered wage standards for them. Because so much of our conversation was about people losing their jobs, about people talking about plant closings. The same thing that the South experienced with NAFTA, but see, what they were doing was they were projecting what would potentially happen, what would definitely happen if the US had a trade agreement with Mexico. You would listen to these workers talking about this. You

would hear Caribbeans talking about what was happening around banana production with Europe and how they had their economy crippled when their largest importer of their bananas was saying they weren't going to buy them anymore, because they were going to get them from somewhere else.

So we started to understand some serious, on-the-ground impacts, grassroots impact of trade policy, something that you don't normally think about being something that community people can understand. But if you're talking to community people about the impact, they are foretelling what is going to happen to you. It was a real grassroots effort to understand trade policy and its impact on local communities and to try to organize people to try to fight against that policy, because of what it would do to our economy in the South and this country. So that's a whole lot of stuff about the SEJ time. I don't even know until I start having these kinds of conversations how much I knew or learned while I was at SEJ. That's probably as much as I can say right now. You can ask me more about it, but right off the top of my head, those were the things that made the greatest impression, I think, in retrospect.

BB: Why'd you leave in 2000?

CB: Because I was getting ready to run for U.S. Senate. I was also really ready to transition into something else. I left like in December 2000. Two thousand one was when I started running for U.S. Senate. It was for the 2002 campaign, but really laying the foundation in 2001. It's interesting you should ask that, because what I'm also thinking about is that at the end of ten years, I had done as much as I thought I could do. I felt like there were things that needed to happen in terms of Board expansion and development, in terms of time for a new strategic plan. So when I left SEJ, I left SEJ with a year's budget in hand or committed, and a consultant who had already been hired to help with the strategic plan, and

an administrative staff person who could be there to help set up meetings and do stuff with the Board as they began to figure out if they were going to hire a new executive director or if they were going to just be on the sidelines, and do the planning before they looked at hiring new staff.

Part of what I was realizing was that not only was I about to run for office, but I think that it's important for organizations not to have executive directors that are there for perpetuity. I think it's important for new leadership to be in place. I wish that we had had the resources and I had the insight to cultivate somebody to take my place, to develop somebody to take my place. The other thing is that there's questions that are often raised for me, not just from the SEJ experience, but from other organizations about when is enough enough? When is it time to throw in the towel and not keep struggling to try to make something work?

BB: As an organization or a person?

CB: I'm saying as an organization and as a person. I'm saying organizations need to be making that assessment, "Have we outlived our usefulness? Are we just writing grants that collect money to keep people in jobs? Or have we important work that we still need to do in this organization? Or is it time for us to stop, because a lot of what we set out to do is done and we don't need to stay in place just because we established it five, ten, twenty years ago?" I do believe it's important for working people and poor people to have organizations that ultimately form institutions for them. But I don't think that you ought to keep being formally organized when you don't have the kind of critical mass of interest to keep the organization viable. I also think that as leaders, we have to consciously ask, if certain things are not happening or things are happening, at what point does it make sense to move over for somebody else to be in that leadership position? It doesn't even mean that you have to leave



the organization completely. I mean there are a number of roles you can play that you don't have to be the executive director or the person who's heading up the organization.

BB: Well, since it's almost 12:30, let me tell you what I still want to talk about, and then let's make a decision about—

CB: We can get together again.

BB: Good.

CB: I don't have no problem with that. First of all, I know the way I talk drags out a story for a hundred years before I get to the end of the point. So I know it could take a long time. What I'm not clear about is how much tape and paper do you plan to use up on one interview. (laughter)

BB: No, I think this is wonderful and really rich and just the kind of stuff that adds a lot to the historical record and a lot to activists and organizers coming up who want to learn, and even informs us today. You're in the thick of it. So I think it's just rich and wonderful. If you've still got the energy and the willingness to keep on going, let's meet again.

CB: Okay.

BB: All right, then I'm not going to even talk about what....

CB: Yeah, you don't have to worry about that.

BB: We'll just plug along next time. All right, let's stop here then. Thanks, Cynthia.

### **END OF INTERVIEW**

Transcribed by Emily Baran, March 2006.