

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

**Interview U-0580**

**Bryan Proffitt**

**July 18, 2008**

**Field Notes – 2**

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## FIELD NOTES- Bryan David Proffitt

Interviewee: Bryan David Proffitt

Interviewer: Bridgette Burge

Interview Dates: July 18, 2008 (First of Three Interviews)

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

Locations: Bridgette's home, Knightdale, NC

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: Bryan Proffitt is a white, Hip-Hop generation organizer, public school teacher, and writer living in Durham, NC at the time of this interview. He was born in Woodbridge, VA in 1978. His father served in the military and he moved frequently when he was young through his high school years. He a bachelor’s degree in microbiology with a minor in film studies from North Carolina State University in 2001 and a master’s degree in liberal studies and a secondary social studies teaching certification in 2004. He is a founding member of Men Against Rape Culture (MARC) and has been affiliated with Hip Hop Against Racist War, United for Peace and Justice, and the North Carolina Peace and Justice Coalition, among other organizations.

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.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW: July 18, 2008, Bryan is coming to my house for the interview. I've set up the Marantz PMD 660 in the family room. I'm recording in wav format. I've positioned my daughter, Ella June's, stuffed monkey in between the couch and a chair and attached one Shure lapel mic to its ear. The chair and couch might squeak a bit when we move, but the room is carpeted with plenty of furniture and children's toys and crap, so it shouldn't have an echoic sound.

It's hot as hell today, but rain is predicted for this weekend. That would be great because this part of the state is still in a "moderate" drought.

In preparing for the interview last week, Bryan and I discussed how we might handle organizations that he's involved with that could threaten his position as a public school teacher. I encouraged him to speak freely and suggested that we could use a restricted release form and/or close off portions of the interview that concerned him for a certain amount of time. We decided to see what comes out the recording today and discuss it later.

The interview went well. No technical problems that I know of. I barely have to ask any questions because Bryan offers thoughtful, thorough answers and often anticipates upcoming questions or simply covers the topics in his responses.

Interestingly, I felt comfortable asking him more questions about sex and if his parents had talked with him about it. I suppose it's because we are closer in age than some of the other Heirs and we're closer friends.

## TRANSCRIPT– BRYAN PROFFITT

Interviewee: Bryan Proffitt

Interviewer: Bridgette Burge

Interview date: July 18, 2008 (1 of 3)

Location: Home of Bridgette Burge, Knightdale, NC

Length: 1 disc, approximately 183 minutes

### START OF INTERVIEW

BRIDGETTE BURGE: Today is Friday, July 18, 2008. This is an interview with Bryan Proffitt. Bridgette Burge is the interviewer. This is part of the project Heirs to a Fighting Tradition, oral histories of North Carolina social justice activists. This is the first interview in this series with Bryan, if there is a series. Okay, Bryan, would you start by saying your full name and today's date?

BRYAN PROFFITT: Bryan David Proffitt, and today is July the 18<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

BB: Oh, here's the other weird thing I forgot to say, if you can remember. It's going to be an annoying one. I'll say, "What was that person's name? What was that?" I'll say that a lot.

BP: Sure.

BB: And then the other thing is if you could start by repeating the questions that I say, so it's my name and--.

BP: Okay. Do you want me to do that again?

BB: Yeah.

BP: All right, so my name is Bryan David Proffitt, and today's date is July the 18<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

BB: Tell me when and where you were born.

BP: I was born in Woodbridge, Virginia on December the 14<sup>th</sup>, 1978.

BB: Are there any stories about your birth that you've been told?

BP: Not that I know of. I finally--. I drive through there all the time because my parents live just north of there these days. And I finally found out, I finally asked them, because they were living on a military base at the time, which is called Quantico. And I always remember there being hospitals on the bases that I lived in. So I never knew why I was born in Woodbridge when my parents lived in Quantico, but apparently it's not--. I just wasted your time. It's not really an extraordinary story. There just wasn't a hospital on the base. That's all.

BB: Are you older or younger than your sister Jennifer Morales?

BP: I am four years younger than my sister. Am I doing this correctly? Or do I need to like verbatim repeat it?

BB: No, that's perfect, yeah.

BP: Okay. All right, so I'm four years younger than my sister, who has always functioned as my mother in her own estimation. As soon as I came home, sort of trying to carry my big fat self down the hallway and freaking my mom out, and then all the way up to driving me and my friends around everywhere when I was in junior high to the motherly advice that sometimes I am not all excited about hearing. But yeah, she's like my other mom.

BB: Were you really a fat baby? You're so tall and lanky.

BP: Oh my god. I was huge. I was nine, nine eleven, yeah. I was big.

BB: [Laughter] You're so tall and thin and that cracks me up that you were a fat baby.

BP: No, man. I was a little chunky little thing.

BB: So tell me your parents' names and then describe their personalities to me.

BP: Huh. So my parents are Elizabeth Proffitt. Betsy, that's my mother. And my father is David Proffitt. And, let's see, my mom. My mom is a talker, like just sit down at the table and just yap, yap, yap, yap, yap, yap, yap. So you go visit her, it's just like you better just be ready to sit and just hear it. But it's cool because she--. I think she does it in a way that really kind of lets people engage in conversation, you know. So I think in some ways it kind of fills in, if other people aren't ready necessarily to start talking. Yeah, she's cool. She's solid. We had the fortune of her not having to work when I was growing up. So my mom, you know, she was always there. I got home from school; my mom was there. Had to go to a basketball game two hours away, my mom was always there. Had to go stay out of town for the weekend for a soccer tournament or something, my mom was always there.

My dad was in the military. So he was in and out quite a bit, but my mom was just solid. And she's real like, I get a lot of their openness and my desire to kind of deal with things as they come up from her. Like we didn't have problems that stayed problems. It wasn't like I could come in the house and be like all Eeyore [a gloomy donkey depicted in author A.A. Milne's series of books, *Winnie-the-Pooh*], and she'd just be like, "Oh, okay. That's fine. I'm just going to let him be." It was like, "No, no, no. I've got to get to the bottom of this." So I have some impatience that I'm learning to deal with a little bit from

that, because sometimes people don't want to deal with something right away. But my thing is like, "No, no, no. Why are we wasting time? Let's just do this and be done, so we can hang out." So she's real good like that. How else would I describe her? She's just overwhelmingly loving with me. She's just always like, yeah, my mom's great. My mom's great. She's always been just like really supportive.

There was never any imposition of, "This is what you need to be doing." I mean they were real strict, but I didn't really need a whole lot of boundaries, but it was like, I was still eighteen. Summer after I graduated from high school, I probably had to be home at midnight. So there were boundaries, but I never questioned whether I was safe. And there was never any like, "Well this is what you're supposed to do. Why don't you be a doctor? Or why don't you be this?" I just got to be me in this really, really healthy way. And if I stepped out of line, I knew it. Mostly because they had trained me so that I would know it before they even had to say anything to me.

But yeah, and then other the last few years, my mom and I's relationship has changed. I think it was hard because her role for twenty-two years was mom. She didn't start working until I was like maybe fourteen or fifteen. And then she did real estate, so she could be real flexible. So that kind of brought some extra money in or whatever, helped pay for college, but that wasn't like a nine to five kind of thing. So she was still like my mom, you know. And then I think when I left home--. Because she and my sister had kind of a tumultuous relationship, but I was always like little Bryan, always like solid. We were always going to get along. And then when I left home, I think that was a real hard adjustment for her, because now she wasn't like mom anymore in the same way. So it took awhile to have an adult relationship with her, but kind of training her to do that and kind of

training myself to do that has been really instructive for me, sort of how to have adult relationships. If you can have an adult relationship with your mother, you can have one with anybody.

My dad, my dad's funny. It's hard because I have these memories of my dad being around when I was young, but I think until I was about twenty-two, twenty-three, I felt like I didn't really have a relationship with him. I mean I did, but I just don't remember it in the same way. I can remember sitting and watching basketball games on TV with my mother. I can remember going out and shooting baskets with my dad or my dad being at things or whatever, but I don't know. He would just like--. I think in a lot of ways he trained me on how to like sort of--. A lot of my politics feel really like a result of just organic expressions of what I grew up with. So my dad, he was gone a lot, and he wasn't going to come home and be like, "This is how we do shit." Or should I--? Am I allowed to curse? [Laughter] Okay. So he wasn't going to be able to come home and say, "These are the rules," or whatever. That just wasn't going to happen, because he wasn't there enough to do that. And I'm sure some people who are in the military, some people who travel have that kind of experience. And their partners or their families can kind of contain that or that's how it goes. But that just wasn't how it went in my house. It was like, "Why would you ask Dad something, because Mom's the one who has the answer. Mom's the one who makes the decision."

So I think I learned a lot from my dad. He was just real good at easing back in and knowing what that looked like. He didn't come in and assert himself. He didn't come in and say, try to play a role bigger than what he probably ought to of. But at the same time, he was there, too. When he was home, he was at all those things, too. He was always around. If I



needed help with something, he was going to be there. But it's hard. I just don't have much in the way of memory.

He's a funny guy and he's kind of corny, and it's funny because I've noticed these jokes that he--. And it's not like a joke with a punch line, but just these ways of being funny that are about timing or just some--. And you can't see the quotes, but funny in quotes, because it's just corny. It's stupid, but it's repeated over and over. And you can never overdo the joke where somebody says something about their ears or their hearing and you say, "Huh?" And then they repeat themselves and you say, "Huh? I'm sorry. Say that again." Like you can never overdo that joke with my dad. And I do the same thing, so it's funny. So I notice these mannerisms about how I behave that are really about how my dad did stuff, which is deep because I never really would have thought he'd have been that much of an influence.

And then I think when I was like twenty-two, twenty-three, I was just like, "Wow. I should probably have a relationship with him." So we started going camping. He grew up out on the West Coast, in Fresno [CA], but his family was from the mountains, the Sierras right there. And they had come down out of the mountains and moved into Fresno like some Beverly Hillbillies looking folk. And so he spent a lot of time up in the mountains in the summers hunting and tracking animals and that kind of Hardy Boys growing up. So I think that that was something he always was really into, and every now and then, we'd move someplace, because he doesn't have friends, friends. I don't know how it does, but he doesn't have strong relationships outside of the family. You know, there's a couple guys. There's a guy that was his roommate in college and they're close, but they don't talk. Like when they go visit each other or something like that, it's just kind of old times. But it's not

like my dad has friends that he hangs out with. We'd live someplace and he'll find somebody to be a buddy, go for bike rides or go camping or something like that. I think some places he had that, and a lot of places he didn't. My mom isn't that type. My mom doesn't really like to be outside like that. So I think he missed a lot of that.

So when I decided I wanted to have a relationship with him, I was like, "Well, why don't we start going hiking or something like that?" Because I like being outside and I can learn this from him. So we started doing that. And it was neat because at first he kind of had this way of talking to me that was like talking at me, sort of. I just told him, flat out, again, if you can't have a grown relationship--. If you can figure out how to speak to your parents in a grown way, it means something. So the first time we went out, I don't know where the gumption came from, but I said something and he talked for like twenty minutes and I was like, "Look, man." We were just lying on our backs in a tent and I was like, "Look. If we're going to hang out, it's not going to go like this. You don't get to talk to me like that. We need to have some dialogue." And it was deep because he kind of sat there and sort of heard it.

And it began this trajectory of a couple of years where we were really, really close. This like twenty-four, twenty-five year Marine vet working at a defense contractor and all that, and he's picking up Audre Lorde [(February 18, 1934—November 17, 1992) a Black, lesbian poet, teacher, writer and activist] and telling me I need to read her, going back and forth. So there were a couple of years where he was kind of having this identity crisis, I think, and we were real open with each other and going back and forth. And then there was some kind of crazy stuff that closed the door on that a little bit. And we're sort of, spent the last couple years trying to heal from that and figure that out. But yeah, he's an interesting

character. He's a character, you know? He's a real like--. And he's also real good at --. I think from both of them, but particularly from him, I kind of picked up this, you just do shit because it needs to get done. So the joke was, particularly when he started getting in this mid-life crisis thing, he'd gone from being a pilot, flying F-18s three or four times a day with these fifty million dollar jets or whatever and this exciting life to sitting at a desk. So it was just tragic. So he just really lost it. He couldn't function. So at the house, you put a glass down on the counter and turn around, next thing you know the glass is in the dishwasher. It's just like, "Man, you've got to chill." But that's just the--. If there was something that needed to be done, he just did it. No, "I want credit for this." You just do it. So I think I picked that up from him.

And then also I think a lot of my physicality, like playing baseball, playing football, playing basketball, playing soccer. Even though he didn't play soccer as a kid, he saw that I was into it, so he'd take a great interest in that. And we'd go running. I started running when I was in high school. And we'd go out on days I didn't have a practice and we'd go running together and just talk, just like, "Oh, I read in the news about the Philippines," and we'd go back and forth and talk about stuff. But a lot of this, there aren't these physical limits, like you could always do more. It's all kind of in your head, because he wasn't one of these Semper Fi [*Semper Fidelis* is Latin for "Always Faithful." The shortened phrase is used as a motto in the United States Marine Corps], Great Santini [a reference to a novel by Pat Conroy (later made into a film) about a Marine] motherfuckers that is just all macho or whatever. But he had gone to Ranger school just for fun, which is like, nobody does that. So while he was in the Marines, he'd always taken these opportunities. He used to run marathons. So he was taking these opportunities to push

himself physically and I think I learned a lot from him. And that is always in your head. You can always do something more, if you just make yourself do it. I think a lot of times when I'm in workaholic mode, and this doesn't just have to be physically--. If it's the end of the semester and I've been sleeping three or four hours a night for like three or four weeks straight, if that's what I need to do tonight, if I need to work until two in the morning, just work until two in the morning. My body will figure it out, if that's what needs to happen, which obviously has its downsides as well, but yeah, I appreciate that about him, too.

BB: How about your sister's personality?

BP: Man, my sister. My sister's complicated. A lot of my memories coming up are around my sister and my parents fighting. They didn't really get along very well. One more thing that I wanted to add that I think about both of my parents is that they're very expressive emotionally. So there were lots of, "I love yous," lots of hugs. You always knew that you were loved and appreciated. And I think I've taken a lot of that on, too. You know, the question wasn't, "What is it about your parents that you feel like you've taken on?" but I feel like those are the things that really stand out for me are the things that kind of are me.

My sister is--. She was volatile coming up. I mean apparently, even when she was a baby, she and my mom were at it. So I think they always had a hard time, and that was kind of hard for me coming up because I was really close to my sister and I was also really close to my mother. And so I'm sitting at the top of the stairs--. And this memory's probably an amalgam of five or six different things, but I'm sitting at the top of the stairs, maybe like thirteen, fourteen years old, hearing them downstairs screaming bloody murder at each other and just hoping to God that neither of them was going to say the thing that couldn't be taken back, like "Fuck you, I'm gone." And then the other one really--. I mean even though I

knew if somebody said, "Fuck you, I'm gone," they could go. And my sister did every now and then. There was a couple times where she'd go—and then she'd come back. And it was always like we'd figure it out, because that was the thing about us.

We moved around so much. We just had each other. That was it. Every place you start over, you've got your sister to hang out with and you've got your parents to do shit with because it's like you don't know anybody there. So there's a tightness and I think there's--. And sometimes my mom gets a little pushy with it. She'll call me and be like, "You really should talk to your sister more." And I'm like, "My sister can call me, too. My sister and I are fine. Don't worry about us." But it's like, "No, no, no. You need--." Because I think both of them didn't have parents that were really emotionally present in the way that they were. So they're sort of like an overboard reaction. They didn't get it, so we're gonna get it. We're gonna be close. We're gonna love each other. We're gonna hang out. And so my sister and I kind of have this--. Sometimes we don't talk for a month or more, but it's like, that's my sister. She's always going to have my back. She's a bit pushy sometimes and she's a bit jump--. You know, see something happening or assume something and kind of jumps out to a particular thing, but she's real protective of me. And she's funny. She likes to have a good time, which was part of the problem with her and my parents because she was kind of wild, which again I think influenced me because I was carrying her drunk ass up the stairs at age thirteen or fourteen and just being like, "You know what, man? I don't want to do that." So I didn't touch alcohol or drugs or anything like that until I was almost twenty years, even though I was around it all the time, just because I was just like, "No, that's not for me." And I think a lot of it had to do with that. And I don't know what that was for her,

whether it was just having fun or whether it was some other stuff, but she's fun, too. She would always push me a little past the edge.

I can remember driving around and her--. She had this, we called it the Crayola. She had a Toyota Corolla from 1978. I think my parents had bought it new. And this is in the '90s. We used to drive around in that. I remember the first--. It might have been the first day that she had her license where she'd gone on her own. We ended up in Beaufort, South Carolina. We ended up on this little dirt road. She was like, "Watch, I'll do a fishtail." So she does this. We just end up right, like an inch from a tree, stuck in some sand, and I'm just like, "Goddamn, Jennifer. This is your first day with your license, you know?" I can remember driving around in the Crayola. She'd put in 2 Live Crew. I'm like in fourth grade, and then it's like, "Damn, what is that?" So she exposed me to a lot of stuff that was--. It was cool. I had this safety at my parents' and security at my parents' and my sister pushing me just a little bit, kind of outside of it. So it was a nice balance, I think. You know, she loves me. She's just really always been very loving with me. She's real smart. She's a teacher, too.

BB: What does she teach?

BP: My sister teaches math. She started off at the high school level. Now she teaches at a middle school level. She lives down in Mandeville, Louisiana, right across the lake from New Orleans with my brother-in-law and their child.

BB: What are their names?

BP: My brother-in-law's name is Andre Morales. My nephew is named Jacob Morales. And I have a niece, his daughter from a previous marriage, Taylor Morales. She doesn't live with them. She lives in Mississippi, maybe about forty-five minutes away, but

I've known her since she was about two. She's going to be a sophomore in high school now, which is just bananas.

BB: How old's Jacob now?

BP: Jacob is five now.

BB: Y'all are pretty tight.

BP: Yeah, he just turned five. Yeah, I love Jacob. I do. It's hard because I don't get to see him that much, maybe just once, twice a year, but that's my dude. I love Jacob. He's just a little ball of energy. He's great.

BB: Can I ask you to do a favor? I know that chair is really comfortable, but I keep hearing it squeak a lot.

BP: Yeah.

BB: So, up in Ella June's [Bridgette's daughter] room, up at the top of the stairs, she's got a wooden rocking chair. Do you mind bringing it down?

BP: That's fine.

BB: And we'll slide this back.

BP: Yeah, that's fine.

BB: And just put that that way. It'll be more quiet.

BP: And I probably needed to take a little pee break, too.

BB: I was about to say, "If you need to pee, now's the time." Did you raise your hand, "Can I go pee?" Mr. Proffitt?"

BP: We don't do that in my classroom. If you've got to go, you go.

BB: We'll get there.

BP: Man, Bridgette, I told you I'm not moving stuff this summer. Although I am about to move in three weeks or so.

BB: That's right. You are moving. You think you're not moving. You're moving, Mr. Mover.

BP: Moving my stuff, Rebecca's [Silver, Bryan's wife] stuff. Probably move Katie [Haworth] on Tuesday as well.

BB: Damn. Is she moving here?

BP: She lives here.

BB: Oh, I thought she was in Greensboro for some reason.

BP: No, she's here.

BB: What's Katie's last name?

BP: Haworth.

BB: Okay, thanks. See that little bitty baby black chair there? You could get that if you want to put your feet on it.

BP: Oh, I think I'm okay.

BB: Okay. Is that all right?

BP: Yeah, I feel higher. The other one was real low.

BB: It was. I love that chair.

BP: Is that okay?

BB: Yep, it still sounds good. I got that at a Goodwill when I was fifteen years old, which clearly it looks like it, but--. [Laughter]

BP: Wow.

BB: It's like some old ass nasty chair, but it's so great.



BP: That's fantastic, but it's made it. It's made it. Good work, chair.

BB: [Laughter] So tell me your grandparents' names and what your relationship with them was like.

BP: So my maternal grandparents are Edward Orr and Joan Orr. Joan passed in 2003, I think, it's been about four or five years. They are from New York. My grandfather's amazing. He's like ninety-two or three, probably, Big Ed. And he's just the most charming guy. He was a cop in New York City; he grew up in Brooklyn. I try to mine these stories about the Depression out of him and stuff like that, and he says, "We were okay." He's like, "I guess we didn't really have much," he's like, "but I don't remember being hungry, either." That's pretty good. A lot of folks went through the Depression kind of hungry. But he grew up in Brooklyn. He was an athlete. I think he was maybe a swimmer, football player, did stuff like that. And then he fought in the War, and there's endless stories about him fighting in the War because he ended up going to France. I think he was in right at the end. And so he was in France, spent some time in France. He spent some time in Germany after they'd both been liberated and worked on Eisenhower's [Dwight David Eisenhower, October 14, 1890 – March 28, 1969, 34<sup>th</sup> president of the United States] staff, I think. But it was like this occupation Marshall Plan [officially the European Recovery Program, *ERP* and named for then Secretary of State, George Marshall, this was a plan for rebuilding and creating a stronger foundation for the countries of Western Europe, and repelling communism after World War II] kind of thing. He said they were sports leagues kind of stuff that he would help set up. But he's just got these stories about being in Versailles [a city in France] one day and in walks some big figure from the SS to sign some treaty or something. So it's funny. He's started to lose it a little bit. He's got Alzheimer's. But his stories about coming

up and the stories in particular about being in France and being in Germany are real lucid. He's a singer. He does quartet kind of stuff. And he's just the cutest thing. I could take my grandfather into any space and he would just sit down and just start talking to somebody and make you feel good. He's just a charmer, cut out of this mold, listens to [Frank] Sinatra and Rat Pack [a group of popular entertainers most active between the mid-1950s and mid-1960s. Its most famous line-up featured Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis, Jr., Peter Lawford and Joey Bishop, who appeared together on stage and in films in the early-1960s] kind of stuff. He's a good one.

My grandmother, she was kind of smaller, like in terms of the space she took up because he took up a lot. But she was the sweetest thing. Most of my life, they were in Florida and so it was rare that I would end up going down there. But I can remember these really nice memories about going down, god, it must have been first grade, second grade, and them taking us to this place called Lion Country Safari, and my grandma making me three bowls of spaghetti and just being amazed at how much I ate, them taking me to the beach. I went to spring training with my grandpa. I have these nice memories. I didn't spend a whole lot of time with them because I never really lived very close to them, but yeah. And my grandmother actually--. I don't know how. I guess it was just fortunate.

I didn't grow up with a lot of death around. So when my grandmother passed, she went into the hospital to have some surgery on her heart and I think there was an infection that developed. Things just went downhill. I was in New York visiting some friends and my mom called and said, "Your grandmother's probably going to die within the next twenty-four hours." So I drove down to Virginia and I went to the hotel. My parents weren't living there at the time, but this is in northern Virginia where my aunt and uncle live and a bunch of my

cousins live there. So everybody was around. I drove straight to the hospital and I ended up just going straight to the hospital and just staying there. And she died over a period of like four days, three or four days. And I just didn't leave the hospital once. I don't know. I just felt like I needed to be there for it. I felt like I needed to know her in that way. So it was really interesting because she was--. It didn't look like her. She was this skeletal figure. Skin didn't look the same. Face didn't look the same. But when you'd walk in, anytime anybody new would walk in, she wasn't talking, but she would kind of start making these noises and raise her arms up. It was like she knew that we were there. Somebody new had come, and we had to go and give her a hug. And she would do it every now and then, even if somebody didn't walk in the room. We'd go over and we'd give her a hug. We'd kind of sit and talk to her. It was just cool. It was a really great experience to, again, get to know her in certain way. And almost get to know her through the way everybody else was relating to her. My mother and my aunt were there probably more than anybody else over those period of days.

So it was also really great to be with my mother because my mother was really close with her because she and my grandfather, I think, had had a hard time growing up. I think she had had a great relationship with him when she was younger, but her mother she always felt really close to. So it was really nice to be there with my mother through all of that and really, again, sort of in an adult way, be there for my mother. So yeah, my grandma was cool. And I watched my grandmother die. I wasn't in the room when it happened, but I came--. My mother and I, it was like we had to leave. We'd just been in the room for a really long time. My mom was kind of freaking out and I was, "Let's go get some food." We just went downstairs to the cafeteria, ate. We were joking around about, "Oh, grandma's

never going to die.” [Laughter] So like, goddamn, we’re going to be here for like weeks because they had moved her from one room into another and all this kind of stuff. And then it was like my task to take my mother out of the room or something because when we got back, my cousin was praying and he just looked up and was crying. And he said that she had just passed, like a minute earlier. So that was a good way to get to know my grandmother.

On my father’s side, my paternal grandparents are Dorothy Proffitt and Jack Roy Proffitt. They don’t make names like that anymore. Those are fantastic names. Man, I don’t even know if I know where my grandfather’s from. I think he might be from the mountains out in California. My grandmother, I believe, was from Kansas, and was a teacher as well and moved out to the mountains to teach. And my grandfather was an electrician. I just pieced some of this together lately, old union electrician, union guy for like thirty years, forty years, something like that. And I remember he used to do a lot of work in the mountains. So he always had--. They spent a lot of time up there anyway. They had a big RV and they just used to drive places and just go, like, “We’re going to go to Vancouver [Canada].” And they’d just drive up there or whatever, just live out of their RV. But he had this great big huge enormous smile, like the most jovial guy. And they always had fool’s gold and just these different rocks that he had found while he was digging in some, putting electricity through the mountains or whatever. And so I just remember these rocks, all the time these rocks in the house. So that was cool.

We actually lived near them for about three years. My father had grown up in Fresno and he had gotten stationed at a Navy base about thirty, forty-five minutes from Fresno in a town called Lemoore, California for three years. So I actually got to live thirty, forty-five minutes from my grandparents for like three years. And it was cool because they would

come down or we'd go up and see them. And Jack would take you out and throw the baseball with you and just this big toothy grin. And he had fucked up teeth, like caps and stuff on his teeth. We grew up in sealants and fluoride and all that. So I was always like, "Damn, what's wrong with Grandpa's teeth?" Because he'd grown up in the mountains, you know? But he had a motorcycle, took us out on a motorcycle and he just had this kind of wispy hair. And Grandpa, he was just down to have a little adventure. We'd go out in the pool in their backyard. We'd go swimming. But he was kind of old school, like they'd come to Lemoore and stay with us, and my mom and dad would go somewhere, and he'd be like, "When you need to come home, I'm going to whistle." I was like, "All right, I think I can do that." And I can remember playing across the street, like just right across the street, playing football for hours and hours and hours with some friends, just right in the front yard. And then finally I'd come home and be like, "Grandpa, why didn't you call me to come home?" And he was like, "Boy, I was whistling at you from over here." Because that wasn't--. I wasn't trained--. My dad heard a whistle, he probably came running, but I just never heard that. It was just like, oh it was a bird or something. So Jack was a funny, funny guy. And my grandmother was real proper. She's funny. She's hilarious. My grandfather just passed in 2006, yeah, I think the end of the summer 2006. Maybe it was 2007. No, it was a year ago. It was last summer, right, so, 2007. And so we went out there for the funeral and I got to hang out with my grandmother. I didn't realize how funny my grandmother was and how my dad's funny in the way that she's funny. So it was cool hanging out with my grandmother because it was like, "Oh, you're why I'm funny like this."

BB: She's the genetic roots of your corniness.

BP: Yes, she is, she is! But she's sharp as a tack, man. [Snapping his fingers] Just on point with a little witty comment here and there and just straight faced, like you say something, just this little old women who's just so proper because she was a schoolteacher. I mean I can remember growing up and running into the house and being like, "Grandma, I've got to poop." And she'd be like, "Do you mean you have to have a bowel movement?" I'd be like, "No, no, no, no. I've got to poop." [Laughter] Or saying, "Me and Jennifer are going to go out and swim." "Jennifer's not mean. You mean Jennifer and I." "Yeah, Grandma. We're going to go out." So was just real gentle and real proper, but then you'd be sitting at the table and she's got some wisecrack about something, but you're just looking at her and she's not even changing her face and she's kind of just give you a little sidelong glance. And you're just like, "Oh man. Grandma's hilarious." So my grandmother's really, really funny. It's hard because my dad--. They were always there for him, like very physically present, but he didn't feel like emotionally they were very present. And then over the years they kind of had some falling out over some stuff. So it's hard because I don't really feel very emotionally connected to them. I love my grandmother, but we just don't really communicate. I don't get my way out to Fresno ever. So it was good to go out for the funeral, but I think even that was kind of a question for a second. Like, were we going to go? Which I'm really glad that we ended up going. But my dad's still got a sizeable family out there. It's just him and his sister, but he's got lots of cousins and uncles and all these folk that either settled in Fresno or settled out in the country and farm and stuff like that because the whole valley's just all these farms. So people are either in the mountains or in Fresno or got a farm somewhere. Yeah, that's my grandparents.

BB: Did you know your great-grandparents?

BP: Mmm uh. I think there was one. There's a Grandma Mae and there's a Grandma Pearle. And I just have these vague recollections of going to somebody's funeral, but I was three or four or something like that. But again, how's that for some names, right? Mae and Pearle.

BB: What about your family history, like immigrant history or where people--?

BP: Yeah, I mean I don't know a whole lot, right, because that's sort of how it happens with us white folks. But I know that my mother's grandmother was Irish, came here by way of England. I think her husband was British. So they came over. So that's like just my grandfather's parents. So that's probably turn of the century, like after the famine, migration and all that kind of stuff. It's not part of that. I know that on her side, a good percentage of folks on my mother's side are Irish in a variety of different ways. On my father's side--. Because I'm assuming they've been here a little bit longer because they made their way out West. My grandmother's family was, like I said, in Kansas or they might have been Oakies or something like that. So they kind of had been in the Midwest for a minute. And then, like I said, my father's father, they'd been in the mountains in California for a little while. And my grandmother has some stuff, mostly just names. And there's like a Quakenbush, which is like a German name, apparently. But my sense is that it's mostly British Islander, either Irish, Welsh, British. I think there's a little bit of German, maybe even a little bit of Dutch, but I'm not real clear.

Again, sort of because my parents had these slightly ambiguous relationships with their parents, we didn't have these great big family reunions in the same way. And if so, we didn't live close to people. So if they were getting together, we weren't really getting together with them like that because we were--. You know, my father was from Fresno and

caught the first thing smoking when he graduated, moved to Annapolis, Maryland, drove his car cross-country to go to the Naval Academy. So he was gone, and essentially that was it. We lived back there for a little bit, but that was kind of, he cut his ties. My mother, as soon as she graduated from high school, she moved into the city. She grew up in Long Island, but moved into the city because she just had to go do her own thing. She lived in the city for a year or two, met my dad, and then it was sort of around the world from then. Whatever connection my grandparent's generation had with the people above them, again, I don't even know if that was strong. I didn't get any of that because I just barely have a connection with my own grandparents because we weren't geographically bound.

BB: Were your parents political in any sense when you were coming up?

BP: No, absolutely not. It's interesting growing up on military bases. In the sort of conventional spectrum of United States politics from the moderately to sharply conservative to the just barely liberal, it's like it doesn't matter. If [William] Clinton's the president, you had to do what he says. If [George] Bush is the president, if [Ronald] Reagan's the president, you've got to do what they say. So to get invested in that, it's kind of silly, you know. And so I don't remember a whole lot in the way of--. I remember there was some Clinton bashing because he cut back on the size of the military and so they lost some of their preparedness or whatever. This is how the story, this is like the dominant narrative if you're connected to the military. I think whether you even believe it or not, that's kind of the line you take, whether you even have investigated it on your own or not. But in the way of this issue or that issue, again I just had a lot of space to work it out on my own. I mean of course there was a lot of nationalism.



There's nothing like living on a military base during a war, which I did, the first Gulf War. And my father's squadron, my father was a commanding officer of an air squadron. So his squadron had just rotated back from being in Japan for six months. So they didn't have to go, but two or three squadrons from the base that we were at in Beaufort, South Carolina went. So a number of my friends' dads, and I think probably even a couple moms, but I don't remember that as clearly, went. My best friend's father, who was also a pilot, went. So I can remember the night of the invasion watching Wolf Blitzer [a U.S. journalist and TV reporter] all night, watching these tracer bullets over Baghdad, just being stuck to this TV set. And it was kind of a spectacle. And you sort of thought, "Oh, Nick's [Schmidle] dad is doing this. This is cool," because it's like you don't really question, like, "Oh, everybody's dad flies a plane in the Marine Corps. Everybody's dad is part of the war." I was probably, god, what was that '91? So I must have been twelve at the time, thirteen maybe. Just nothing, just sort of like, "Oh this is what happens."

And all this sort of anti-Saddam [Hussein, president of Iraq from July 1979 to April 2003], probably anti-Arab kind of xenophobia stuff because there wasn't a lot of Arab folks on the base. The diversity was pretty...you know, I feel privileged to have grown up around a lot of diversity that I don't think a lot of white kids grow up around in the U.S., but it was a very white-Black, sort of Latino, some Asian-American and some Asian, but not a lot of Arab folks around. So you just take for granted, you watch *Back to Future* and the Libyans, I remember when the Libyans were the dangerous ones and Kadhafi [became a leader in Libya in 1970] was the enemy. And then there was Saddam Hussein was the enemy and it's like the Saturday Night Live skits, plus the yellow ribbons on the trees, plus Lee Greenwood [famous U.S. country music artist born in 1942] singing on the radio, plus Wolf Blitzer on

the TV and Bernard Shaw and all these folks. So it's like that the lens through which I looked at this war.

And it's really interesting because my roommate, who I was just living with recently, he's a little bit older than me, oh, Josh Reynolds. And Josh talked about the first political thing he ever participated in was a demonstration against that war. And it was just deep because I was like, "Somebody demonstrated against that war? Really? Man, because Saddam was crazy and his crazy ass had invaded cute, sweet little innocent Kuwait, and the United States had to go in and save the day!" Just the notion that anybody had demonstrated against that war is just bizarre to me because it's just like man, that is not--. And I literally, in Beaufort I lived on a base. It was interesting because some places the housing is on the base where everything else is, and some places the housing is on a separate kind of spot. And in Beaufort it's a separate kind of spot. So it was just like our own, it was just like a little world. All of our houses, the school, the little grocery mart, the baseball fields, the pool, the soccer fields, the basketball court, the river, the woods. That was my life. I could have never left that base. You know, we went to church off the base and I played in basketball leagues off the base. Or we'd go to Paris Island, which is the Marine Corps, the basic training. If you enlist on the East Coast, you go to Paris Island. If you enlist on the West Coast, you go to Camp Pendleton in San Diego. So we'd go out to Paris Island because they had a PX there. They had bigger stuff coming there.

BB: They had a what?

BP: A PX. It's like the department store. That's where everything is. Again, you grew up military, right, it's like you either get Levi jeans or Lee jeans because that's what they've got at the PX. You got these Nikes or these Adidas or these A6 or whatever because

that's what's at the PX. You get a Franklin soccer ball because that's what's at the PX. That's it. And then you'd grocery shop at the Commissary, which is the grocery store. So growing up on, fourth grade through sixth grade, that's like pivotal, adventuresome years, so just growing up on this base on Beaufort, that was my whole world was just that little fenced in place where I lived. And it's deep because that's the only place--. There's two places that I've ever lived that I couldn't go there if I wanted to now because I couldn't even get on base. If I went with my dad, I could because he's retired military, so he could show his ID and could get on base, but I wouldn't be able to go. So it's just really deep that I spent these three really pivotal years of my life and these just flood of memories, and I couldn't go see my house if I wanted to. So it's interesting. It's interesting.

But the question about politics, right. So there was nationalism for sure. There wasn't a whole lot of questioning over America's military might being correctly used or not. No, it was. And a level of social conservatism. I'm sure that there was some homophobic stuff, but I don't think it was real overt. There's not like epithets being thrown around. Again, I'm sure--. I can remember going to New York, the first time I ever went. I was a freshman in college, and I was supposed to go stay with my girlfriend who was in Italy for a couple of months and I was supposed to go for my spring break just for like a week. And it ended up not working out. So I was all bummed out. My parents kind of stepped in and they were like, "Let's go to New York. You've never been. I'd like to show you." My mom wanted to show me her old house and take me on a ferry and go see a Broadway show and all that kind of stuff. So we went up there. And I don't even remember--. We drove around the city. We didn't take trains, which just looking back at it is kind of bizarre, but we drove. And I don't know how it even ended up happening, but we ended up, all of a sudden, on

125<sup>th</sup>, so we're like right in Harlem. And I can remember this like it was yesterday. I remember my dad locking the doors. And I think it was something that I had seen before because when I lived in Illinois, I lived right across the river from St. Louis, about five, ten minutes from East St. Louis and then maybe twenty minutes from downtown St. Louis. And I can probably remember being in some working class communities and some Black communities in St. Louis and probably remember the same thing, but it just felt stark, and I don't know why. I don't know why that particular moment stands out, but it does.

So I know that there was some of that, but I also know that my very, very first girlfriend, kindergarten, Brooke something, I forget Brooke's last name. It was a Black girl that was in class with me, and I came home and said, "I have a girlfriend, Mom." And she's like, "Oh, tell me about her." Just this sort of very funny liberal, "We are the world," sort of story. I was like, "Well, she's beautiful and she has brown hair, or she has black hair. She has brown eyes and she's just beautiful!" And my mom knew that there was this Black girl that was in the class with me, but she didn't trip about it or anything like that. If my sister pushed me, my older cousin pushed me even further, even though I wasn't around him as much. So I'd go see him. His name's Pete [Rorabaugh]. I'd go see Pete, and Pete hit me with a Slick Rick and Doug E. Fresh mix tape when I was probably six, seven maybe. So I go back out to California and buying up tapes and my sister and I are renting break dance movies. In Central Valley, little, funny pseudo military kind of town, we've got cardboard out on the driveway, trying desperately to break dance.

So hip-hop was this thing that hit me from real young, and I played basketball always. And so basketball was kind of this medium through which I stepped out of my white world and into a Black world, but it wasn't, I couldn't do it on my terms. I wasn't going to

go to the basketball court and set the conditions. That's not how it was going to work, at least not in the places where I lived. And so I had to figure out culturally how to adapt, how to exist in a space, how to make relationships, whatever. I can remember this kind of teasing from my mom that I think for her had an element of discomfort around me quote unquote wanting to be Black, which is deep because I'm sure in this way that young white boys that kind of admire the swagger or whatever, sort of like, "Oh, I want to be that." It's kind of when we realized that a lot of what we'd been growing up with is really kind of culturally bereft and bankrupt. It's like, "Oh, let me just take some other shit that we think looks cool." I'm sure there were some ways in which that manifested. But my mom, I think that kind of came every now and then. And I'd get--. Because I hung out still mostly with white kids in high school, and even a good portion of college. Almost all of my close friends were white, but I would spend these large periods of time with basketball teams, friends of mine on basketball teams, in other cultural spaces, particularly Black spaces. I'd catch shit from my friends, you know, like whigger [derogatory slang, a combination of the words "white" and "\*igger"] and shit like that. I mean it wasn't deep because I still could function in this really, really white way. I could make them comfortable and then if I wanted to, I could push them, but if I didn't want to, I didn't have to.

BB: Your white friends.

BP: Yeah, my white friends and my white parents. I could sort of turn it up and fuck with them, or I could turn it down and just be what they wanted me to be. I kind of played with that a little bit. And so I think that in terms of my political development, the race stuff comes first, just again, organically, that's just where I was at. I was fascinated by race, and I can remember my cousin, again, the one who's turning me on to hip-hop--. I read the

screenplay for Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing* probably three, four, five, six years before I saw the movie because I was young. I was like in middle school. And he had the screenplay, like written. They sold it like a book, you know? And I'm reading and like, "Who's this Buggin' Out? Who's Radio Raheem?" And he's kind of explaining the characters. I'm sort of developing the movie in my head, even though I've never seen it because I'm not allowed to see it because I'm not allowed to see rated R movies. So I took all this in. I remember going back, I was probably in middle school, I remember going back to my school's library and finding a copy of John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me*. John Howard Griffin? John Griffin Howard? John Howard Griffin, I think. And again, if I look back at that book now, I'd be like, "Wow, this is really fucked up that this dude thinks that he had this transformative experience in like four days in this skin," but at the time, as a young white kid, you'd be like, "Damn, that's what it feels like?" Yeah, so hip-hop and again, being in these Black spaces, even just for snippets of time, kind of pushed me there.

So I think while my parents had this subtle narrative that I don't even think that they were really--. Again, did they express some discomfort sometimes and teased me sometimes? But they also allowed me space to be me. There was never, "If you don't turn this shit off--," and throwing my tapes out the window, like a lot of kids get that sort of backlash. And, "No, so-and-so's not coming over to the house because then you start talking like this." I never got any of that. There's the like, "I'm in Harlem and I'm going to lock the door" shit. Or, "Why do you have to talk like you want to be Black?" type of shit. But I had this other kind of space. And again, same politics around gender. I'm sure there's some really conventional gender stuff that came up. Again, growing up Catholic, that's going to be there as well and had his very conventional--. Like my dad's a Marine pilot, flyboy shit and

the guys. And then there's my mom and the moms who hold it down at home, but again, my house was ran by two women. My dad didn't come in the house and say anything—he couldn't.

And so I think, again while there's probably some kind of conservative things around gender that came through, I think my parents did a really good job of two things. One, kind of checking what had come from the generation before them—because I can remember stories, though I don't know if I ever heard it out of their mouths themselves, of my grandparents saying some pretty racist shit. Out in California, my grandparents talking about Mexicans, Mexican Americans, Filipinos, Vietnamese, because it's farm country where they stay. So I can remember some of that and hearing stories about that. And then I can also remember some anti-Black stuff coming from my mother's parents. Again, I didn't really experience it first hand, but my parents tell the stories. So I think my parents did a really good job of saying, of absorbing that, holding that. It came to me, and instead of--. And I didn't like it. So instead of taking it and throwing that back out in the way that we kind of do, they kind of held it. And I wonder what repercussions that has for them, like what swallowing that, what taking that on has done, what that's done for them.

BB: Say more about that. What do you mean?

BP: Because I think that that's a lot of responsibility. It's like the sins of the father are kind of visited and so they're coming up with these things, and I don't even know what it is that helps them to see that those things are not okay. Maybe it's just growing up in the '60s and '70s, yeah, late '50s, '60s. But again, while Chavez [Cesar Chavez, March 31, 1927, – April 23, 1993, a Mexican-American farmworker, labor leader and civil rights activist) them are doing their organizing out in the Central Valley in California while my

dad's living there, I'm sure there was all kinds of disparaging shit about that, but I also know my dad picked grapes in the summer. My dad did roofing jobs in the summer. So I can imagine some of that came through work, and also the military. For all of the ways in which the military is this institution of reproducing those things, the military is also in some ways on the cutting edge of that shit. The first federally desegregated places were military places. And so there's also this kind of thing like, well, you're going to die next to this dude, so you better fucking figure it out. If federal rules say this, then the first people who are actually going to have to follow that in a real way are going to be federal government places. So I think that my dad being in the military--. When he was at the naval academy, there probably wasn't more than a handful of black midshipmen that were there, I can't imagine.

BB: Black men shipmen?

BP: Midshipmen, that's what--.

BB: Midshipmen.

BP: Yeah, that's what folk that go to the naval academy are called. It's like pre-sailor, I guess. I guess it's not a really cool title, like, "I'm a junior sailor." But I think probably being in the military tempered his stuff a little bit. With my mom, I don't know.

BB: What about Catholicism?

BP: [Sighs] Man, I don't know, because Catholicism didn't prepare me for any of that. I grew up in, man, just the whitest, driest, the most boring ass Catholicism that exists. And it's really interesting because there's a lot about a Catholic upbringing that still reverberates for me, like this model of Christ as how you're supposed to be. I think at a pretty early age I started questioning, like middle school, early high school, I started questioning, "Do I believe that Jesus is the son of God and born of Virgin Mary?" and all this



kind of stuff. "I don't think so." And then I had Thomas Paine in my junior year and I was like, "Aw, fuck that. I'm done with this thing." But I don't think you can grow up in mass every Sunday and CCD every Sunday, Sunday school, catechism, we call it, and see Jesus' bloody corpse up on the wall, dying for your ass, and not hold that, and not be like, "Well, I've got to give. I've just got to give."

And it's interesting because this ethic that I think that I've developed over my lifetime of being a pleaser, and part of that's like being a momma's boy and just sort of like, "Well, I don't really want to do this shit, but my mom wants me to, so all right because that'll make my mom happy. I'll do that." But I also think part of it is like no, like Jesus. Jesus gave and gave and gave and gave and gave. And no, I don't believe Jesus was God, but do I believe the story that Jesus is the model for how you're supposed to live on this planet? I don't want to, but yeah, I do. And that shit is really, really hard to put away. I probably came to this after smoking three blunts with somebody one night or something, but sitting on a porch somewhere and just being like, "Well, shit. Jesus is this model for how we're supposed to live. And so we just give and give and give and give and give." And people say, "No, no, no. You need to take care of yourself." And then you look around and you're like, "Well, damn. Anne Braden was ninety and she was giving and she was dying, you know, to do this. And everybody, Malcolm X, everybody that we are taught to follow, right, are these people who just sacrificed everything for the good of humanity, for the good of the planet, you know? And so it's like, well fuck. How am I going to critique this Jesus shit when it's like no, that's the same, you know, Che [Guevara]. This is the same message over and over and over and over again.

And so I think coupled that with my dad's like, "You can really do anything. You don't really have limits. It's all mental." It's just like, "Yeah, I'll fucking meet for another hour," and then I'll go home and I'll type up the notes, which is going to take me three hours. And then somebody calls me and they're crying because somebody just did something hurtful to them, so, "Yeah I'll come over and sit with you for an hour." And yeah, I know I've got work tomorrow and I've got three hours of lesson plans to do, but I'll go home and do them later on because it's just like that's what you're supposed to do. Jesus did it, so I should do it, you know? It's not literal like that, right, but it's undeniable. So I think I got that from Catholicism.

I got this sense of organization and structure from Catholicism. I remember the first time I went to a non-Catholic church service, and I mean this shit wasn't even some like out there emotion. It wasn't like some Pentecostal shit. This was probably some Methodist something, and I went with some friends. I was probably in junior high or in high school. And it was like stand up, sing a song, sit down, guy gives a talk for like fifteen, twenty minutes, stand up, sing two, three more songs, sit down, then read one verse from the Bible, guy talks for another ten minutes, sing three more songs. Yeah, we're going to do Eucharist this week. We have Eucharist this week, I think. So go do that, sing a song. I was just like, "This is fucking chaos, man! This is just bananas!" Because I could say a mass for you right now. You could give me one line and I could just go and just go, go, go, go. I'll give you fifty-seven, fifty-eight minutes and then I'm done. I'm out, you know? There's no improv. There's like a seven-minute homily in the middle. That's it. That's the only character that you insert into that mass. That's it. All over the world, that's your mass, fifty-seven, fifty-eight minutes. You're out. I can just remember being blown away when I saw some other

people's shit. And then later on, I did go to a Pentecostal church. I was just like, "This is bananas. This is just--. People showing emotion in church? No! No! You kneel. You pray. You repent. You feel bad about yourself. That's what church is for." [Laughter] "Damn, what are you standing up and clapping? What the hell is that?"

BB: [Laughter]

BP: [Laughter] You know, it's just like--.

BB: You've got me in tears. **(0:10:28)**. You've got me in tears.

BP: I mean because it's just, it's nuts. So I think, again, just in terms of stability and safety, I couldn't--. I mean that's just as safe as it gets. Boring as fuck, but safe. It's always going to be like this, and, "Damn, I don't want to go to mass, but I'm going to mass. There's no question." I can also remember friends, my best friend, they used to--. It'd be Wimbledon Sunday, the finals, and they'd stay home and watch the tennis match. Please. I've got to go to mass. "Stay over at somebody's house on a Saturday night? That's fine. I'll be there to come get you at nine o'clock. You're going to mass. You better bring your clothes with you, better get up and get some breakfast." Staying up until six in the morning with some friends, they'd sleep till one in the afternoon. I'd have to ask their mom to wake me up at 8:15, say, "Can I get a bowl of Cheerios or something like that because I've got to get up and go to mass." So some structure to that, but no, there was no--. Aristide wasn't preaching at my church. There was no liberation theology. It was just white, white, white, white, white. And relatively conservative and not even some like kind of old Irish Catholic or Italian kind of city. No, this is like small town or suburban shit. So it's just these kind of class assumptions, just mass. This is normal, right. This is what we're supposed to do. So I think a lot of that came through there.

But I mean I'm sure you're supposed to do right. You're supposed to treat people equally. And I'm sure that when I kind of butted up against, when I was in high school, the hypocrisy of the situation. You know, because kids are real good at hypocrisy. Kids are real good at, "Man, you said one thing, but then you did some different shit." Like I can pick that out like that. Kids are great at that. So I think that in high school when I started seeing how these people are professing this faith, right, that was the one that got me, the profession of faith. Again, I can say the whole thing right now, right? "We believe in one holy Catholic and apostolic Church." So I could do the whole thing, but I could do it right now and I could watch a fucking tennis match. And I could probably be doing some math problems with my hand because I don't have to think about it. And so I can remember it just felt hypocritical because I was like, "This is my profession. This is a profession of my faith? This is what I believe in? I'm not going to say this and not even think about it." So I started picking out certain parts, and I wouldn't say it because I didn't believe it. But the stuff that I did believe, I would say.

And then I'm looking around the room and I'm seeing all these people say this stuff, and I'm like, "These people don't--. I don't think they believe this because when we leave in the parking lot--." My dad used to complain about this all the time because he's not Catholic, but he always came to mass with us. So he's got these little side critiques, these little snide little digs all the time. When he grew up, I don't even know if they went to church very much, but some kind of Protestant something. We'd be leaving church and people would be cutting each other off in the parking lot. I'm like, "This motherfucker just professed his faith and just said that God is this all-giving whatever and now you're cutting somebody off." My dad would always point it out. So I probably started looking at folks in

the church and being like, “What are you doing with this? What are you doing with this belief that you have?” And so I think maybe in some ways kind of as taking the faith at its word, and then seeing folks not live that probably also had a little bit to do with my political development in some ways.

BB: So high school was sort of the seeds of--

BP: Yeah.

BB: Race first.

BP: Yeah, high school was--. I read Malcolm X and hip-hop and basketball and then reading Thomas Paine. I thought I was like that, too. I was like this little philosopher reading Paine, reading [Ralph Waldo] Emerson, even reading Thoreau, getting all deep. And I'm at the parties every weekend. My friends are shitty drunk and we're sitting down by the river and I'm like espousing some whatever. And they're like, “Yeah, man. That's deep.” Because you can say anything to somebody who has never smoked before and just got high for like an hour, anything. You could be like, “Man, that lamp is like really red,” and they'd be like, “Dude. You're so right.” So I probably thought--. I probably got kind of gassed off of that. I probably thought I was really smart. I was probably really obnoxious. So some of that stuff happened and then, yeah, high school.

I can also remember a story, again just this thing of my parents giving me space. I can remember going to baseball games in St. Louis. We used to go see the Cardinals play because I love the Cardinals. And, you know, homeless folks around the stadium. There was this one guy who was always in a wheelchair and always right around the stadium. I just never--. I'd never been around homeless people before. I knew that it existed, but I didn't grow up in places where it was evident, you know, publicly. And so I can remember

stopping and hearing the guy out and giving the guy a dollar if I had a dollar or something like that. And it was cool, because my dad--. I don't think my dad gave him money. He might of, if I did, but he wouldn't fuck with me about it either. He'd just kind of stand there and I'd be engaging the guy in a conversation. And I'd hear the guy's story. I'd get the guy's name. I'd introduce myself. My dad would be there for it. He wouldn't have done it if I wasn't with him, but he was going to be all right if I did it. So I respect that. I really respect that about the way they did that. I don't know if my mom would have felt as comfortable, but my dad was okay with that. So I respect that. So yeah, just little bits and pieces.

And I also think growing up on a military base--. I feel like you've probably been in the room for this story ad nauseum, so just yawn and doze off for a second. But military bases, that's a socialist state. You don't own your house. Nobody owns the basketball court. There's no private school, no private pool. There's no extra baseball team for the better--. No, everybody goes to that pool. Everybody plays on that baseball team. Everybody goes to that school. Everybody plays at that basketball court. Everybody swims in that river. And they might move your ass from that house to the house two doors down, right in the middle of living someplace, even though you're only living there for three years. You can't do shit about it, you know? But it doesn't matter, because that house is just as good as that house, and you're safe. There isn't a safer place. Again, I'm sure, I'm sure, again my dad's status as a pretty high ranking officer afforded us some privilege relative to other folks that was I'm sure very real, but everybody was all right. Everybody had enough, it seemed. And we were all right there. I mean, yeah, my house is bigger a little bit, but it wasn't like but four blocks from where the enlisted people lived and their families. So I also think growing up on a, in a

socialist state--. We all had health care. We all went to the doctor. We all went to the dentist. All of it, it was all taken care of. Get on your bike on a Saturday afternoon, say, "Mom, I'm going to play." "All right. Be home by six." "Okay." That's it. I'm in fifth grade, getting on bike going wherever I want because I'm in this box where everybody knows everybody. I couldn't fuck up because somebody was going to tell somebody. The cops weren't going to be real far away because they were always kind of like around. And I'm sure, again as a little white kid, I experienced that very differently, but it was socialism.

BB: So what does that mean for how you understand what your class background was coming up?

BP: It's interesting. So like, upwardly mobile, right? Because my dad was probably--. So you go from like, you have second lieutenant, first lieutenant, captain, major, lieutenant colonel, colonel, general. That's the officers. My dad was probably a first lieutenant, whatever the--. I forget whether it's--. Whatever the like next highest one up is, or maybe he might even have been a captain when I was born. And so there's stories my mom tells about, it kind of, not having a whole lot of dough around when either I was young or before I was born, and having to make sacrifices here and there. And then, again, sort of moving up, my dad became a full colonel eventually, moving up. But a lot of it had to do with space. So when you live on a base, like I said, again, living on a base and being the son of a major, a lieutenant colonel or a colonel, yeah, I could go out of town and shop at Belk's or something like that. I could get something a little bit nicer or something like that, but really for the most part, if you lived on base, you shopped at the PX. And they don't have fancy shit at the PX. They got the same stuff everybody else got. So you're going to rock the same jean shorts that that kid has. You might just have a different color to match your style or whatever. So

even though I had privilege relative to other people, in certain places where I lived, it wasn't evident because we all sort of had access to the same things, you know? And then I can remember--.

I only lived on a base for those three years in Beaufort, South Carolina, lived near bases other times and relatively more military or less military influenced kind of towns. So some towns we lived in that were off the base, but there was almost all military families around us. Sometimes I lived off base and there wasn't anybody that was military around. When I lived in Japan, lived off a base, and we lived in a Japanese neighborhood, and there was some other families of guys that were in the Marines that lived out there, too, but it was mostly just a Japanese neighborhood. But what was really shocking, I think when I first kind of felt class in an interesting way was when we moved from Beaufort, South Carolina when I lived on the base to O'Fallon, Illinois, which is like this town, again this suburb of St. Louis. And there was a base, but the base is maybe like fifteen, twenty minutes away. And I can remember, the four years we lived there, I only went on that base maybe four or five times, just didn't really have a relationship with the base. There were some retired Air Force people, a handful of active duty Air Force people, but most of the people who lived in O'Fallon were not military connected. But at this point, my dad is full colonel. So he's probably making--. I don't even know. If I had to guess, it'd be upwards of like seventy, eighty, ninety, probably, a year. I don't even know, but if I had to guess, I'd say somewhere in there.

But again, class as sort of like a relatively lived experience, I can remember moving there and I went to school the first day and I had some Levi jeans. And my Levi jeans were folded, just like regular folded at the bottom. They were too long, so I just folded them up.



And I can remember catching shit for having Bobo jeans because they weren't Guess or they weren't Polo or whatever. There was some--. Again, relatively, they weren't Bobo. They were Levis. They were some shit that every--. That's what you're supposed to wear or whatever. It wasn't even like I should've been embarrassed or something because these were like some second-hand jeans or like the five-dollar jeans you bought at Rose's or something like that. These were like Levi's jeans. But I remember people being like, "What the fuck? What is this that you're wearing? And why are your jeans rolled like that? We don't roll jeans like that." Because they tight rolled the jeans, you know?

And I had some corny sneakers, because again, you got your sneakers at the PX. So they had some Nike cross trainers, that shit was cool. You got Nike cross trainers, you know? I don't think I remember--. There might've been one, I remember one kid that I went to elementary school with that had some Jordans, one. And then again, if you're going to play soccer, you go to the PX and you get your soccer shoes. They probably got some Adidas, but they're not top of the line Adidas. They're like a fifty-dollar pair of Adidas. They got, man, that might have even been it. Something, right? And then I get to Illinois and I go out for the soccer team and I think I'm kind of fresh because I've got some Pumas. But again, I didn't know any better. I got some Pumas that were like--. In a lot of places, particularly in the West, they play indoor soccer, and so you get turf shoes, little bitty stubbly kind of cleats. I got some Pumas, but they were turfs, and I didn't know the difference because I'd never played on indoors. I didn't know what indoor soccer was. I got some turf shoes. Turf shoes to play soccer outside is ridiculous. You're going to fall all over the place, but everybody on the team that was cool, that were like the cool kids, they had Adidas Copamundos. You had to have your Copas, Copa Mundials, right? But you had to have

your Copas. And it was deep, because all the kids--. You'd be lining up. The coaches have you line up, like on the end line. They do some sprints and stuff like that, and they'd get all the kids who had the Copas together. And here I am over here with my Puma turf shoes on like a clown. They've all got these slick looking Adidas, and Lotto shorts and all this kind of stuff. And I've got the little Umbros with the little stripe at the bottom or whatever. They're soccer shorts.

I can remember going home, being like, "Mom, I've got to have the Adidas whatever." And my dad would be like, "You've got soccer shorts." And I'd be like, "No, no. You don't understand. I've got to have the Adidas, the silky looking ones." And they'd be like, "Well, you know, it's going to be a little while." So my parents navigated that really well, and particularly around sports stuff. Again, when I got into high school, I was playing ball all year round. I was playing soccer all year round. So I would get the good shit. I'd eventually, once I got past the middle school, I'd get the hundred dollar Nikes to play basketball in because it was important to have good basketball shoes so I didn't fuck my feet up or whatever. And I was going to use, was going to wear them all year to play in games, and the next year I'd wear them all for practice. And I'd get a new pair to wear in games the next year. Same thing with soccer shoes. You just wore them until they just kind of fell apart, get some new ones because you've got nice ones. But in middle school, they weren't having that shit. So everybody had the Guess jeans, had the Polo shirts, Polo sweaters, Guess shirts. Everyone had this ugly ass shit, these horizontal striped shirts that just said Guess Jeans, Inc. on it, but everybody had one. My parents wouldn't let me get one because those shirts were like fifty dollars. And they were like, "Fifty dollars for a shirt with some stripes on it? No. Look at this shirt. This shirt has stripes on it. Let's go to Penney's." So my

parents were cool about it, because they might could of afforded probably to get me that Guess shirt, because I know kids that didn't make nearly as much money as my father did, but for some reason their parents were okay with that being a priority, and so they had the Guess shirt. So in some ways, that kid had this relative class advantage, even though there wasn't the same level of income, because my parents just didn't prioritize that shit. So it's funny.

And so I kind of developed this aesthetic that was kind of anti, because I could've have--. I wasn't like--. Please. I was still totally like that kid, like that preppy athlete, 4.0, yes, ma'am, everybody wants your daughter to date this kid even though none of the girls wanted to date the kid. I was still that kid, but I can remember being in high school and people would be like really kind of obsessing about what clothes or whatever. And I liked to look good, but I kind of developed a different sort of style. I mean everybody thinks that their style is different, but I started wearing my shirts inside out because I didn't want to have a label showing. And I'm just sort of like, "Fuck ya'll. I'm not going to be some billboard for some corporation or whatever." When in some ways, that kind of came out of a, "Fuck, I couldn't have that anyway," because my parents weren't going to get it for me. So yeah, you know what I mean? Class, like, I've been all over the world. Some of that was just being in the military, but when my soccer team was going to go to England and play for ten days, my parents could afford to send me. If I was going to be on a basketball team and it was going to require some travel during the summer or whatever, I didn't have to get a scholarship. I didn't have to go through the process of asking somebody else for money or asking the coach for some support. It was like they could do that. It's interesting.

And it also like, again, space, right, the places we lived changed so dramatically from military bases and kind of smaller, more rural kind of military towns where you're just sort of in the middle of everybody. I can remember living in Lemoore, California, and one of my friends' dads is a doctor. I think both parents were doctors. They lived down the street, but then Brad's parents were--. Brad's dad was a firefighter, I think. And then so-and-so next door was a high school teacher. So-and-so across the street, he might have been in the military, too. And we were all outside all the time. We all ran in and out of each other's backyards. We had block parties.

And then sort of as my parents accumulated more and as our class status got up, by the time I lived in New Bern, North Carolina, which was my last two years of high school, we lived in this fancy golf course kind of neighborhood. They lived there for ten years, maybe. Didn't know any of the neighbors. People were really unfriendly. People weren't trying to make friends with you. Nobody was outside, you know? It's deep, like when I kind of have conflicts sometimes with my partner around where I want to live and the kind of places that I want to be in because for me, and class, because for me, upward mobility means loss of a vibrance. And again, that's a really privileged perspective to come from because I was never hungry. I never had to really go without. So it's kind of fucked up to say, "Well, oh, you shouldn't have something, because you lose." Because I know a lot of folk that could stand to have something and they wouldn't feel real bad about it, but at the same time, for me that's kind of what it represents because, as my stuff came up, as my parent's stuff came up, I lost a lot socially. I just didn't live in the same kinds of communities that I had really been nurtured by growing up. Again, I wasn't growing up poor, so I'm not even like laying it out like that kind of, "We had to have each other's back and folk were feeding each

other and stuff.” It wasn’t anything like that. I’m not trying to romanticize it, but it’s palpable, the differences between where my parents were at at a certain point when they got older and what kind of neighborhood we were supposed to be living in or what kind of house we had to live in. The kind of class expectations that came with that didn’t really sit well with me.

BB: So were those last couple years in high school pretty tough, moving to New Bern?

BP: Nothing’s ever really tough for me. I kind of just fit in, like, that’s the cool thing about moving every two, three years when you’re young is that you could parachute me down anywhere right now and I would figure it out, you know? I think in some ways that was the toughest place to live. I still had this sort of like, “Oh, I was this athlete. And I’m really funny and charming.” You know, I have these--. Like I grow up around--. I grew up in very, very social spaces because my dad was this high-ranking officer, because he was the CO of a squadron, we had people, my mom would have people at the house all the time, always entertaining folks, always having all the officers’ wives come over. It’s like me and like twenty-five ridiculous, some drunk, some fucking other people because their dad, because their husbands are out of the country, but I didn’t know about any of that. All of them kind of, you know, just being in the mix. And so I know how to just go into a space, you know? And so it was easy to go in. I think what--.

And then who I found to kind of be with be with were some of the folks that didn’t really fit that much either because New Bern is this old coastal Southern town, much like Beaufort. Even though I didn’t live out in town in Beaufort, I recognized some of the similar dynamics, where folk have lived there, and their parents live there, and their parents’ parents

live there. So they don't need new friends. They grew up--. People who grow up in a place, live in a place for seventeen years, went to school with these twenty kids, this was a clique for ten, fifteen years, they don't need you. And so I think some of that was a little bit hard for me because--. I mean the stuff with my parent's neighborhood, I recognized that sort of after I left, because I had a car. None, there wasn't a single person that I hung out with that lived in my neighborhood, but it didn't matter because I could just get in my car and go to somebody else's neighborhood. So that wasn't hard. I sort of recognized in hindsight, like, "Damn, my parents were in a really bad spot because they didn't have friends in the neighborhood." But for me, it wasn't deep. But again, they didn't need me. So when things got complicated with people sometimes, they didn't have to commit to it. They could just kind of go do their own thing.

So I had a little bit of a hard time, you know, and it was always hard because I didn't drink and I didn't smoke. I wasn't having sex. And so a lot of that--. And I was really okay with that and I was really firm about that. And I also really kind of got how I was, to the extent that you could be self-actualized in high school, I kind of was, because I'd always been allowed to just be okay with who I was. And nobody ever really made me feel very bad about that. So that's intimidating, I think, and I think the stuff around smoking and drinking and sex and all that, I think some people saw that as me making some kind of moral judgment about them. And my thing was always like, "Look, I'm not saying you're fucked up. I'm just saying I don't want to do it. I'll go to the party. In fact, I'll drive you home." But I think at a certain point people were like, thought I was kind of like claiming some sort of moral superiority or something like that, and so they kind of started coming at me. And it's not like that significant in the course of my personality development, but it was kind of

one of these periods where you figure out who's really down. I had this amazing--. My first love was like amazing. Megan Whitley, she was--. We just had the best high school relationship that you could have. And I had a couple of other really close friends, who when shit got hard, they were there. And so I was okay, because again, I'd grown up like that. You move to a new place and it's hard, but you've got your three people: your mom, your dad, and your sister. And so you're okay. And so I had my girlfriend and my two other guy friends or whatever, I was going to be good.

BB: Did your parents talk to you about sex?

BP: Huh. I don't remember. I don't remember. You know, it was always a joke. It was always a joke with my mom. I don't even think they really left me alone and had me stay at the---. Like if they went out of town, I'd have to stay with somebody else. And then, I'm a senior in high school, right? So they'd be going out for the night or something like that and my mom would be like, "No drinking, no drugs, no sex." Or, "No drinking, no smoking." I forget what it was, but it was like, that was the joke. I don't think we really had to talk about it because I wasn't going to do it. And I don't know how I knew I wasn't going to do it, and I don't know how they knew that I knew I wasn't going to do it, but I wasn't, you know? Yeah, I really don't think we talked about sex, like at all, ever. I can remember-- . You know the line around drinking and drugs and stuff like that was always like, "Look, if you're ever in a bad spot, yeah we'll be mad at you, but call. Three o'clock in the morning, it doesn't matter. If you're---. No questions. We'll come through." But again, they didn't even have to say that because it wasn't going to happen. I was going to be okay because I'd made up my own mind. I don't know why, but I had made up my own mind.

And Megan and I were like in love, you know what I mean? This thing was like for real. She was two years younger than me, so I think she wasn't (0:40:01), but even if she had been, I wouldn't have been. It just felt complicated. It just felt like, man, I just watched people around me when they started having sex and the shit just got wild and I was like, "You know what? I really love this person. I have this great relationship with this person and I don't want to fuck this up." That feels huge, you know? I'm playing ball. I'm going to school. I have this girlfriend. I've got my friends. I've got my (0:40:24). Risky shit? No. There's no time for it. You know what I mean? It doesn't make any sense. And it was just playing ball with kids or playing soccer with kids, they'd be fucked up on the weekends. I'm just like, "How? Are you serious? What are you doing? We've got soccer next week. We've got a game on Monday. Why are you getting drunk on Saturday night?" Of course, I have no context for what that even means, but it just felt like, "Why?" Being a kid is hard already. Why you got to add extra stuff? It doesn't make any sense. So, no, there was no conversation about sex.

I can remember it was funny, funny slash faded in a way, because I was a sophomore in college and I started smoking weed the summer before my sophomore year in college. And my-- I don't know what any of this has to do with me as an organizer, Bridgette, but you're just pulling stuff out of me here. Shut up. Quit asking questions. And I didn't, I had never drank, but that didn't really appeal to me. So I just tried this, whatever. So I kind of started smoking a little bit, and it was funny because I was home for Christmas break. My mother and I were watching TV. Some show was on. A commercial comes on about marijuana. So my mom, she's looking at the TV and I'm looking at the TV. I'm on one couch. She's on the other. She says, "Did you ever try that?" I'm looking at the TV.



“Nope.” “Did you ever try that?” “Yep.” And then we talked, and it wasn’t deep because she wasn’t like, “Oh, you’re going to die. You’re going to be addicted. You’re going to ruin your lungs.” None of that shit. It was just like, “That’s stupid. You’re on a full scholarship. You could get in trouble for that.” And I was like, “Yeah, yeah, yeah. I know. I’m safe about it, whatever, invincible.” Man, three weeks later I got caught with that shit and lost my full scholarship. It was a hot mess. [Laughter] It was not pleasant, man. The only time I ever thought--. My parents never laid a hand on me. I think I might have been spanked once, maybe twice, but I think I can remember being spanked but once.

I came home to tell my dad. My mom was out of town. I came home and told my dad, and I made sure. My mom was getting ready to go on a trip on the weekend and she went out of town. I didn’t want to tell her before she left because I didn’t want to ruin her trip. So she left town. I drove home to New Bern, told my dad, because I was living in Raleigh. I went to North Carolina State. And he would walk in the room and ask me a question, I’d answer it, and he’d leave the room for five or ten minutes. I’m just sitting at the table, like, damn. I mean I’d made sure I’d already found an apartment. I’d already found a job. This was like a wakeup call because I’d never had to take responsibility for anything, you know? My first job was like lifeguarding the summer after my senior year, after I graduated from high school. If I was playing sports, my parents were like, “Cool. Do that. You get your little twenty-dollar a week allowance and take care of chores around the house. That’s what you get. And if you need some other stuff, whatever.” So I’d taken care of these things, so I thought, “Well, I’m being grown.” [Laughter] “I’ll get all this stuff handled and then I’ll go tell my dad.” Man, I thought he was going to punch me in the face. It was deep. It was really deep.

And then my mom, it was hard. I drove home a couple nights later and my dad had told my mom. He said that's how he wanted to do it. He wanted to tell her and then I would come home. Walked into the house, the first thing she said, tears on her face, "Do we need to get you some help?" Fuck, I thought I was going to die. I thought I was going to die. I mean there isn't anything that--. And she wasn't doing it to like--. Like she was being sincere. I was just like, "Man, there is not a worse thing that you could ever hear your mother say. Do we need to get you some help?" And I was just like, "Oh, god." It was awful. It was awful. Then we sort of had to start talking about stuff. So we eventually talked about sex and drugs and all that, but I was already like in my twenties. It wasn't like "the talk." I never had "the talk" as far as I know, because I remember seeing, what do they call it, "Joy of Life." I was in sixth grade. [Sighs] I didn't want to talk. I was done. I was like, "Nope, no, no, no. There will be none of that going on in my world, no."

BB: [Laughter]

BP: I mean I can't even imagine what--. I don't remember--. I remember vividly just this like--. [Laughter] I won't even get into it, but the image is seared in my head of this woman giving birth. And then I came home. I mean I don't, I can't--. I remember the image. I don't remember what conversation I must have had or not had when I got home, but I'm damn sure that I did not want to talk about it.

BB: [Laughter]

BP: It's like, "Well, what'd you do today Bryan?" "Nothing."

BB: I'm still upset. [Laughter]

BP: Man, I did nothing. I went to math class and I didn't have health today, Ma. I didn't have health class. Because I'm sure that I was just like, "Oh, no. I will not be talking to my mother about that." So yeah, no sex talk. No sex talk.

BB: So in high school did you--. Totally switching gears, but in high school did you have ideas about what you wanted to study? Did you have aspirations of a career?

BP: Oh yeah, oh yeah.

BB: What'd you want to do?

BP: I think that from an early age I wanted to teach. I have that story about the inspiring, usually it's a social studies teacher who's charismatic and who--. You know people get into teaching either because they had really bad experiences in school or they had one or two teachers that just blew their world, right? So I had that dude. I had that dude in eighth grade. His name was Mr. Dietz. And it was interesting because I had him, I had him again, a different time, my junior and senior year in high school. The second round was better in hindsight, because Mr. Dietz, charismatic guy, funny, football coach, history teacher, you know, that guy. But this was the early--. This might have been--. This was either the campaign of '92 or like the early Clinton years, maybe the first year of Clinton. I can't remember which. Man, this guy was awful. This guy was on some, like faggots and the fairy flyers that he was going to let into the military and I can remember him fluttering around the room. You know what I mean? Like on some this shit is cute. This is okay to say. And us just eating it up, you know? But he was like really engaged with history, really engaged with politics. So I was engaged, too. You know, we thought Mr. Dietz was great. Turns out Mr. Dietz was an asshole.

And then I had a guy later on, Howard Matthews, in eleventh and twelfth grade. He was my U.S. history teacher and then he taught government elective, twelfth grade, so I took him twelfth grade, too. And, man, this guy was great, old white guy from the South, from Edenton. So he's from down east. I think that's where he's from, somewhere up in like the northeast corner of the state. And you know, he had that same charisma and that same gusto for teaching, but he also--. And again, I don't remember. I don't know how strongly the stories stood out at the time, but these stories, like I remember him telling us about when Brown vs. Board got handed down and him and his father riding in a pickup truck and his father switching off the radio, turning to him, slapping him, and saying, "You will not go to school with that, with any of these 'n' words." So he's laying--. I mean again, this guy got really--. My class was kind of special, the group of us that I was in eleventh and twelfth grade with. My senior year we basically went from A.P. English to A.P. Calculus to A.P. Physics together. And the same crew had been in A.P. U.S. History before. So we kind of like, we were a crew, and we just, we pushed each other really hard. We were all like these great students and, "Man, you got a ninety-eight? I got a hundred and one." You're on some bullshit. And you know, just great, just like really thoughtful conversations and so a lot of our teachers kind of engaged with us in a little deeper kind of way. So he laid out these stories, right? So he would talk about that. He talked about when they did desegregate the school in New Bern and there was a race riot, and him telling these stories. He's kind of talking about somebody throwing stuff out of--. And we're all laughing and he's laughing with us, but again it's this white racist teacher coming up out of where he came out of laying out this experience of being at a newly desegregated school in New Bern, North Carolina

where they still got the railroad tracks and it's still black folks live here and white folks live here today, you know? And then him talking about--.

You know, he was a coach. We called him Coach Matthews. There's no Mr. Matthews. It was Coach Matthews. And he told us a story about this black girl that he coached in track and she didn't really have a whole lot of money or anything like that, but she got up every morning and ran like eight miles before school, and how when she ran track for him, she was just this, just the hardest worker and just the most determined human being he had ever seen and how through giving her rides home and building this relationship with her, he really had rethought a lot of his ideas. And again, I'm sure he had to have been in his forties or something when this happened, maybe even his fifties, because he had to have been probably sixty when I had him, sixty something. And to have this transformative experience because of a student, because of a seventeen-year-old, and the openness. Again I remember being kind of struck by it at the time, but I was sixteen, seventeen. I didn't really get the gravity of this story, but know sort of looking back on it, it's like this guy was dropping stuff on us in an either all-white or all-white with like one or two black kids in the class. He would just lay these stories out.

I knew I wanted to teach, but when you're like top of your class white boy who's got enough dough, you're supposed to either be an engineer or a doctor, because I loved calculus, loved physics. So I was like, "Oh, well, engineer or a doctor, okay. Well, I'll be an engineer because I love math." So it was Georgia Tech, North Carolina State, or Virginia Tech. I only applied to North Carolina State because I was a momma's boy. I needed to be two hours from home. I had a girlfriend who was going to be, who still had two years left of school, so I was going to be at home. So I'll go to NC State, went to State, sat in the

engineering class. I took a class. We had freshman and seniors working together, like senior electrical engineers and they're working on a project together and stuff like that. And we're sitting in this room and looking around at these kids who are like engineers hearing the stuff they talked about, looking at what they wore, hearing what they were interested in. It's like, "Man, I'm not one of these kids. This is really not me, and I'm not interested in what it is that they're doing. I'm not interested in these projects." We built a robot, having these, you know, could teach you to do all this stuff. It was like a competition. I didn't care. So I think I was probably in that class like four days. I stayed in the whole semester, but I was just like, "I'm not an engineer. Well, I'm really interested in the environment. I'll be an environmental scientist." Not because I'd really been interested in the environment, but like because I should be, you know? So let me be an environmental scientist, took like a class and I was like, "Naw, that's not what it is. That's not it either."

And then I was like, "Well, I'll be a doctor then. I'll be a doctor because I like science. So I'm going to get a degree in microbiology." Then the summer before my senior year, I had like fourteen credits left. I had like five classes left to take. Went to Haiti, worked at a friend's dad, who was like this international public health genius kind of guy who travels all over the world and works with these rural hospitals, a guy named Henry Perry. I don't know why. I wanted to go to Haiti and I heard another girl who had been in the same scholarship before I had lost that scholarship, she wanted to go to Haiti, too, don't know why. We just wanted to go to Haiti. Turned out Luke, Henry's son who was my friend, Luke's like, "Yeah, my dad runs the hospital in Haiti." So we applied to the school to get a little grant, you know, summer travel thing, summer study, went down to Haiti, worked at a hospital for six weeks, this rural town called Deschappelle. And the hospital was

L'hôpital Albert Schweitzer, so it was modeled after Albert Schweitzer's work in Gabon, but it was one of the Mellons from the U.S. had fallen in love with Haiti and just threw all this money at this hospital down there, right? So, very Western funded, you know. Of the budget, the hospital was like eighty-five or seventy-five, eighty-five percent of the budget. The public health programs were like ten percent of the budget. The economic development programs were like five percent of the budget. And so I'm hearing people tell these stories. I'm only there six weeks. I'm hearing people tell these stories about kids who came into the kwash [kwashiorkor], like the malnutrition ward, be there for like six weeks, two months, leave, two months later, right back in there.

And this is the same time when, I guess this is probably where we're, this is we're getting into the political stuff. So I was reading C.L.R. James, the Black Jacobins, which is this Marxist analysis of the Haitian revolution. And I had just recently gotten politicized like in the semester before that, really started getting pushed on stuff. We'll go back to that. And hanging out with this guy who grew up in Haiti. He lived in Haiti for like twenty years, moved to the States, lived in New York for like twenty years and had just moved back, just sharp guy, François, and so François hiping me to Haitian history while we're drinking Barbancourt rum. I'm reading C.L.R. James. I borrowed Marx from him, you know, Capital, like I read the first four sentences of Capital like forty times, had no fucking clue what he was talking about and just put the book away and I ain't opened it since.

But just, and talking to Haitians about Haiti, talking about the revolution, talking about Aristide, talking about the overthrow of Aristide, because this is in 2000, so Aristide had been elected, overthrown in the coup. The U.S. had brought him back. He'd served out the rest of his term under these like IMF [International Monetary Fund] sanctions, basically.

They got him out so they could get him to sign the contract to do a development plan, went back in. You can only do, I think it's like a six-year term, and his term had run out. And René Préval, his right hand guy, his second guy was the president when I was there, but Aristide was going to be able to run again the following year. I think it was 2001, he was going to be able to run, or later on in the same year. And so talking about Aristide because there was starting to be graffiti about Aristide up everywhere and just trying to understand like what had happened, what was Aristide about, and all of this, and being, talk about class, right?

Living in the town that was around in the hospital, we all had these cottages. And a lot of the people who were the staff at the hospital were these Westerners. People, they were Swiss. They were French. They were Canadian. They were from the States. For the most part. A couple of Haitian doctors and then a couple of Haitian people that were on staff, like public health people or whatever. But a lot of the people that lived there were blancs, were white. And so we got these cottages. We got people to cook for us, people cleaning for us, living in these houses that had these amazing tin roofs, man. Haiti in the summertime is monsoon season, so every night like five, six o'clock, it rained and just this tin roof with just this dramatic downpour. I mean like the sky is falling out. It's unbelievable. So anyway, lived in those houses and then there's the people who, the other people who lived in Deschappelle who don't live in those houses, who don't work for the hospital or who work for the hospital but as like custodial staff or construction or maintenance or something like that, or they ain't got work because unemployment in Haiti is like ninety percent at the time. So you're just there in town and the tension was palpable. I mean there was a guy that got shot while I was there. You'd walk to the hospital and it was like you were two things. You were



either an ATM or you were somebody to buy some shit from. So people were just walking up to me all day showing me stuff, paintings, drums, whatever. You know, my sucker ass bought some from some dude like the first day, so they were like, “Oh, we’re going to get this white boy.” So I got followed basically the whole time I was there, and it’s just this like, couldn’t connect.

And it was deep because I helped out with a couple of the surveys that they were doing, like out in the mountains. Go out all day with these two Haitian guys, didn’t speak a lick of English. One guy didn’t speak any French. I had un peu français, petit petit Creole. So we’re just doing this like Creole, English, French thing all day while we’re out for a couple of days. And go out in the mountains and go up to somebody’s house, and you know I say, house is as big as this rug over here. It’s like ten feet by ten feet. And kids around the back of the house ain’t got clothes on. They’re all dusty. It’s almost like cliché, like some Sally Struthers commercial or some shit. But the people would walk in that house, would take out the little bench they had, the little chair they had, set it up outside, sit us down, and we’d talk. And again, we’re sort of on official hospital business, so I’m sure in some respects there was this kind of like, “Oh, well, I need to talk to these people because these people have status,” or something like that, but we could talk. We could laugh, you know? And in town it wasn’t like that.

So it was like I started to kind of figure out, oh, like when there’s a bunch of people that really, really have some shit that are right here, right next to the people who really, really don’t have shit, then you can’t relate, right? But if you get in these other spaces where there’s sort of a flattening of that, at least a little bit, people can connect with each other. And so I think it was that experience. I came back and I was like, “Man, I can’t be a doctor.

I cannot do this thing that is about giving people medicine when the whole society is set up to make them sick. I can't do that. It's such a waste of my time." And I didn't have access to writers like Paul Farmer or somebody like that who's talking about ways that you can practice medicine that are about really, really challenging poverty. And I think I was just so tired of--. Like I was studying science, but I didn't love science anymore. I was just kind of like, "Aw, I'll just do this so I can be a doctor." So I was just tired of it. So I didn't want to go and study public health because that would have been starting all over and doing a whole bunch of stuff and I just didn't want to do it. So I was just like, let me take my senior year and instead of just finishing in one semester, which I could have, just take a whole bunch of other classes on top of this and get a job. So I started--. I worked at this organization called Reciprocity. I ended up working there for like two, a little over two years.

BB: So what year was that that you started working with Reciprocity?

BP: 2000, summer of 2000.

BB: And say what it is or what it was at the time.

BP: Yeah, so I met this dude. I went to this conference and the conference was about--. It was called the Campus Outreach Opportunity League, the COOL conference. I think it still exists. And the COOL conference is this space for like do-gooder college kids to hook up with other do-gooder college kids and learn more about how to do better, I guess. So I was a do-gooder college kid. There was this organization that my friend Luke [Perry], the guy whose dad ran the hospital, he had started, called Hope for the Homeless. And we used to go out and get pizza and stuff from like Domino's or like sandwiches from other places and just take them downtown where the homeless guys stayed in Raleigh and just hang out, just give people food, and just sit, talk, and just build relationships. So I did that

for maybe like a year or more before this and had really been transformed by it in a lot of ways. And I was like really--. You know, I've always been an organizer, but it wasn't necessarily around, like, change. It was more sort of around alleviating conditions of something rather than changing the root of something. So I started getting involved in that and I can't ever just stop at that, right? So now I'm trying to like--.

I'm looking around at other service organizations on campus that are doing good work, but they're not communicating with each other. And these people in Habitat for Humanity are friends with people at Hope for the Homeless, but they're not talking about how their work can help each other out. So I was like, "What if we build this umbrella organization called Campus in Action, CIA?" I don't know how we came up with that, thought that was cute, no political understanding of what the CIA meant at the time, even though I probably ought to have. So I'm going to build this, me and some other people were going to build this connecting organization that can kind of help improve people's work, amplify people's efforts or whatever. This is sort of a theme, Brig. And went to this conference. There was this cool office on campus called Student Leadership and Public something development, CSLEPS. I forget what it's called. Anyway, there's a woman named Janie Musgrave that was the coordinator of the office and Janie's job was basically just to find cool kids on campus that were leaders and get them more skills and kind of like advise them, you know? So Janie sent me and my partner at the time, **(0:06:08 third file)** named Angela [Trauns] to the COOL conference. So we go to the COOL conference and I go out there and I'm trying to have conversations with people. I remember the first workshop or two. I'm like, "Are there service umbrella organizations that coordinate the service on your campus?" And people are telling me stuff about, you know, I'm just excited

about this or whatever. It's up in New Hampshire, I think. And they had a woman, a young woman, talk who'd been in Seattle for the WTO [World Trade Organization] demonstrations.

BB: WCO?

BP: WTO. You know, the 1999, the Battle in Seattle. They shut down the whole city and kept the WTO from having their meetings. And I missed it. She talked, but I missed it. You know like, I heard her. I heard her saying what we can do and just, it didn't click for me. And so I go to another day's workshops or whatever, and the next day this guy named Billy Wimsatt gets up to give a talk. And Billy is this, just oozing charisma white boy, like late twenties probably at the time. He was probably twenty-eight, twenty-nine, maybe thirty. And he gets up and he gives this talk for like an hour and a half maybe. Just smack you in the face, shit, about racism and white people, but not in like the way that I had read about Malcolm X talking about racism and white people. This sort of like, "You college kids have to do something!"

And just totally fucking inspiring, and talking about how he had learned how Chapstick, the people who made Chapstick, had put fiber glass in Chapstick and that would like put little cuts in your lips or whatever, right? And then the petroleum would get into your lips and the petroleum fucked with your lips' natural functioning. So in the winter there's supposed to be a brief period where your lips kind of crack up because they're adding a whole new layer of skin. And then in the spring there's supposed to be another period where they crack up because they're getting thinner, right? That's how your body works, but the petroleum doesn't allow it to do it. So then you put the petroleum on it and now you need more petroleum, and so this corporation's gotten you hooked onto their product. And

he called it a pseudo-solution to a non-problem. And it was just hilarious. He's just charming and he's just laying all this shit out.

And he's just like telling a story about some woman who's going to a soup kitchen with her daughter or granddaughter or something like that and saying something like, "Well, I hope you'll get to bring your kids here." And him just being like, "No, that's not the fucking point. There should be no homelessness." Like that should be the point, right? And he's like, "And all you kids who are doing stuff to deal with the symptoms of a problem, if you spent half as much time looking at the problem itself, you wouldn't have to deal with the symptoms." And I was just like blown, blown, blown, blown. I mean I went outside and just broke down, just cried, was just like, "What am I doing with myself? I'm doing all the wrong things. Who am I?" Just, I mean, just broke down. For like half an hour, me and Angela were out there. And then she was like, "Well, what do you want to do?" And I was like, "I want to go talk with Billy."

And so I went inside and Billy's still standing there. I'm sure he's got these swarms around him because that's what he does. And I met him and I was just like, "Oh, my god." And I'm sure I'm person number like five thousand hundred million, comes up to Billy, like, "Oh, my god." But he knew how to deal with it. He was doing, that was his thing, you know? He was really good at that, and so he heard all of it and kind of absorbed it and was just like totally humble. He was like, "Oh, my god. Thank you so much," and all this kind of stuff. And then he was like, "Wait a second. You're from Raleigh. Do you know Easter Maynard?" I said, "No, I don't know Easter." He said, "Easter, that's my partner. We're starting this organization together." Not like romantic partner, but like, you know. "Go meet Easter. She's right over there." So we go over to Easter and same thing, [makes sound of

someone babbling] and Easter's just, you know, Easter's just got this real--. While Billy's like aggh and big and Easter's just kind of like smooth and just really graceful. So Easter's just got this smile on her face. She's like, "It's so great to meet you," and all of this kind of stuff. Easter ends up inviting me and Angela over to her house when Billy's in town like a month later because they're going to start Reciprocity, this organization of theirs, in Raleigh. So we're meeting all these people and all this stuff just feels really big and important. And they're going to start this organization that's about--. It's hard, right? We redefined the vision of that organization like every twelve days when I worked there. And I think it was a problem. I think it was like this kind of period--. And I think this is similar to what Billy was doing for a while. It's like I have money or I have access to somebody who has money. And I have a good idea, so let me just start some shit, not really thinking through like what it would look like. So the idea of Reciprocity was to build relationships across social and political divides to make social change, right? That's like the most ambiguous sounding thing I've ever heard in my life, but I was hooked. I was like, "Yeah, I want to do that. That's what I want to do." And I started writing for the campus paper at the time, writing these missives about the IMF [International Monetary Fund] and fuck Columbus Day, all of this kind of stuff. I'm like that dude who's like got the hoodie, the **(0:12:11, third file)**, the beard, the little picture in the paper, writing these like political rants, you know? Thinking he's just like the shit. And so, you know, I'm just like this kind of cauldron. And I come back from Haiti and I called up Easter and Billy and I was like, "Hey, do ya'll need summer staff? Because I'm coming back from Haiti and I'm going to need a job for the rest of the summer. And they were like, "Yeah." So I started working for like ten hours a week at first. And then by the fall I was working like thirty, forty hours a week there the last year

of school, and was looking at--. Billy's big thing, like he was talking a lot about, this is like '99, 2000, one of the big things on the political map at that point is the prison industrial complex. This is shortly after the first Critical Resistance gathering. And this is the big thing that's getting a lot of political momentum. So I'm working on prison and criminal justice issues. Never thought about prison before until Billy's kind of laying all this stuff out. And I was like, "Oh, my God. Prison's like the worst, you know?" So I started doing organizing with young people around that, you know, campus-based kind of stuff. We had this big, huge--. We had this big conference. We got like a hundred and fifty people to come to this conference at State, talking about prison issues. We've got these people from all over the country to come. So I was cutting my teeth as an organizer.

BB: What was the conference called?

BP: Youth Seeking Justice Now. Man, it was October of 2000, yeah. And during this time I met Erica Smiley, who was a student at UNC-Chapel Hill and later to find out, a member of all kinds of nefarious organizations. But she was an organizer. She'd been political and she'd been organizing black students on campus. She'd run for student president, student vice president in Chapel Hill. So I'm meeting these people who are sort of like ideologically political, you know, and on the left, and then I'm meeting this organizer. And I kind of like, organizing makes sense to me because I'd always kind of organized shit. After Hurricane Floyd, I coordinated this campus-wide effort called "The 35,000 Challenge" because they were like thirty-five thousand students, faculty, and staff on campus, and it's like if each of us gave one thing, we could go down to ECU [Eastern Carolina University] and give some other college kids all this shit. We got like thirty thousand things. I mean it was just this amazing kind of thing, but that's--. I was the organizer. That's what I did, you

know? So Smiley's got the organizer thing plus the left political thing, and I'm like, "Oh, my god." And I'm learning all this stuff and learning about queer politics and all this kind of stuff. And I am messing up left and right, stepping all over people's toes, really doing hurtful things to people.

BB: Like what?

BP: Like just really privileged kind of stuff, you know, just not recognizing the way my voice could take up a whole lot of space in rooms. Like Smiley and I worked a lot on the conference, and I was getting paid to do it because I was on staff at Reciprocity, so I had more time to do it. So when the conference came, I caught a lot of shine. I got a lot of people being like, "Oh, Bryan Proffitt pulled this together," and all this kind of stuff. And I wasn't really cognizant of how like, how that would impact Smiley. And I actually don't think we've ever even talked about that to this day, but she's like one of my best friends. But just stuff like that, right. Or like doing homophobic shit and not really even knowing that I was. So, yeah, I was doing that stuff and there was also this political climate in the Triangle around that time period because Tema Okun and the folks from Dismantling Racism had just done this training with NCLYN, the North Carolina Lambda Youth Network. And so they had put these ideas about systematic white supremacy and privilege into the hands of a lot of a really young, hurt, kind of bewildered, smart, energetic, fierce kids. And so I'm working with some of the folks who've been through this thing. So I'm messing up and they're just slamming me. I'm messing up and they're slamming me, messing up and slamming me, right? And I know that what I'm doing is really damaging to them, but the way they're coming back at me is really damaging to me.

BB: Were they mostly white kids or were they mostly--?



BP: No, it was mostly people of color, mostly women of color and calling me out on sexism and just all this kind of stuff. And if, I mean I'm sure it's hyperbole, but I felt there was like six months where I couldn't really eat very well and I couldn't really sleep very well because it was just like I'm not, I'm not like a good person. I'm not worth--. I want to make these changes and I want to play a role in making this world a better place. And the people who look like me mess up the world. So I want to play a role against that, but I'm just, I'm not doing it right. I'm terrible, and I'm setting it back. And Easter kind of kept me afloat through a lot of that, but it was hard. It was real hard, but I had sort of been bit by the bug, right, so I wasn't going back anymore. So now I was going to be an organizer.

BB: And did you see a difference between activism and organizing there?

BP: I did. I did, because what--.

BB: Will you start by saying the differences (**0:18:47, third disc**) because I asked everybody this question.

BP: Yeah, so I saw a difference between activism and organizing because when we had started the Campus in Action thing, which had started as this umbrella service group, right, but then Angela and I go to this conference. And we come back and Campus in Action ain't going to be a service club anymore. Campus in Action is now going to be like, it became--. There was a big demonstration, the next one after Seattle was in Washington, D.C., April, April, A15, because the anarchists, they do the A and the month and the number. So it was A15, right, in D.C., the IMF/World Bank protest. So I was coming up and so we did this like solidarity thing on campus, right, which meant I write something for the campus paper. There's like twenty of us marching around in the little brickyard in the center of campus talking about the IMF and doing a little speak-out or something like that, and

drawing some crowds. These people are like, “Who are these crazy people?” But not really drawing crowds because, “Who are these crazy people?” So now Campus in Action was going to be this left kind of activist pole on campus, and it was for like the white kids. And so we get together weekly, and there would just be this like--. You know, I needed it at the time because I needed to learn all this stuff, you know, just kind of like, “Oh, this is fucked up and that’s wrong.” Maryanne Fox, who was the chancellor at the time of school, she’s capitalist and all this. [Laughter] So we’re not reading. We’re not studying, but we’re sort of learning because we’re just kind of ranting at each other. And then this becomes the social thing, too. So you’re hanging out with the same kids. You’re partying with the same kids. You’re drinking. You’re smoking with the same kids. And people would talk about going to conferences and going to demonstrations, but nobody was doing it on campus to connect it to campus stuff, you know? And that was deep for me because I had relationships with folks in student government. I wrote for the paper. I had a relationship with the people in the campus newspaper, in the radio station.

I had decided, and I don’t even know how this happened, kind of organically, that I was just going to go start hanging out at the Black Cultural Center. There’s an African American cultural center on campus. And I was just going to go start--. If there was a lecture on something I wanted to hear, I would just go by myself and sit and listen to the lecture. And undoubtedly somebody would be like, “What do white people think about this?” you know, and would ask me. So I guess like instinctively I kind of figured it out, how to do that, though I didn’t really have the political tools to sort of, like, well how do you go into this space, or whatever. Because again, it wasn’t like a brand new space for me. So I had relationships in all those places, and all these white kids that I was hanging out with, a lot

of these punk rock kids, didn't really have relationships outside their little crew. And so they could talk about this political stuff with each other, but it never really amounted to much because they weren't like moving with it, you know? And so we did that for a while, and then it was like, no, because I had met Smiley and Smiley's talking about how you leverage power and what do you want to win. You can't just talk first about what you're going to do. You have to talk about what it is you want first. And so I was like, "Oh, this is organizing. This is getting people together to improve something, to make something better." And then not just to make it better and then go away, to make it better and keep it better.

Activism seemed like, if you were an activist, you were like mad about racism and capitalism and sexism. You didn't necessarily even have to live in a way that reflected your anger about those things because it was deep. The same blunt smoking punk rock white boys that talked about how misogynist, whatever, whatever, whatever was, you'd walk in the room and it'd be like fifteen dudes and like two chicks in the corner like behind the dudes, like they don't say anything all night. And it's just like, wait, what? [Laughter] Hold on. You know, and I would go into the space with friends of mine that were women and they'd just feel really uncomfortable. They'd be like, "Hold up, hold up, hold up, hold up," like, you know. And so there's starting to become this sort of difference between people who had these beliefs and wanted to talk about being mad or wanted to go to stuff, but they weren't really interested in looking at how to change and stuff. And when we'd try to like push a little bit--. We thought about organizing this campaign because the school was going to build a--. You know, it's a big agricultural school, and they were going to build this slaughterhouse. And so we talked about developing this campaign and looking at how we could connect it to the neighborhood around like the environmentalism, the environmental

impacts of the neighborhood it was going to be in, and all this kind of, but it just never was going to happen because that wasn't who these kids were. And so I was fortunate enough to be in the space and learn the politics and kind of get all that. And then some of those folks ended up doing some stuff later on, but eventually it just felt kind of toxic. It felt sort of static to me.

So I went back to what I knew, sort of like, well, what about the student government? What about the Black Cultural Center? How can we start to interact with these spaces in different ways? And so I graduated. I was working at Reciprocity and kind of working on these relationships that I had with student government, with the Black Cultural Center, and with the activist white kids to do stuff around prisons, criminal justice kind of issues. And then Reciprocity just got really dissatisfying because it, I never felt a direction. We'd rethink things like every other month and it was just like, "Man, I can't do this." And I think I got kind of a big head at the time, too, and I thought I knew how to do certain things. I know I came at Easter in really arrogant kinds of ways, which were not at all reflective of what all she had given to me or taught me. But I was just--. It just didn't make sense. And so this was when the University was like, the state was threatening to cut a hundred and twenty million dollars from the University's, from the system's budget. And so I don't even know if I was a student at the time. It might have been the year between when I was a student and when I went back to school. So this was like maybe the end of the school year 2002. And we just walked into the student government's office. They announced this on like a Thursday. We walk into the student government center on Friday, said, "What are we going to do?" I must have been a student. I don't--. This might have been the year I graduated. I think this was 2001. And on that Tuesday, we turned out about three thousand people from

the different universities around the state, marched from NC State to the Capitol building downtown.

BB: Now, who is we? And literally from a Saturday to a Tuesday?

BP: Yeah.

BB: So tell me, dig deeper. Like, who's the we?

BP: We was like me, Angela, like one or two others of us that went to the student government because we knew the kids. And we said--. The student body president was a friend of mine. Who was it at the time? It was either Harold Pettigrew or Michael Anthony. Michael was, I think, president twice, and Harold once. I can't remember which one was the president at the time. I think it was Harold. But we walked in and we say, "All right. We gotta do something. What are we going to do?" And I knew other people. There was a guy named Andrew Payne. Andrew who was a student at State, but he was the president of the whole UNC student government system. And we went in there and we just said, "All right. Let's do this." And they were kind of like--. It was cool because we were sort of like the--. There was the way out-there kids that weren't trying to talk to the student government, and the student government wasn't trying to talk to them, either. But we were sort of like the left wing of the acceptable, like the left wing of the mainstream. So they'd talk a bunch of junk about me, I'm sure, but when we went into the office and we said, "Okay, are ya'll ready?" they just gave us the reins to the student government. That next morning, Saturday morning, we had a meeting of like forty student government kids, plus some activist kids and kids that we know, said, "All right. Ya'll ready to do this?" And then we just ran the show, did this whole strategy chart that I'd learned from Smiley and all this kind of stuff. And low and behold, it might have been Monday or Tuesday--. I mean it was the most amazing thing I'd

seen at that point. So like three thousand people, and mad, mad, because these were kids who weren't going to be able to afford to go to school or they couldn't graduate because their classes were getting cancelled. Beloved professors weren't going to get to come back. Financial aid wasn't going to come through. All this stuff, right? Mad. So we went down there and there were some speeches and stuff like that. And it was cool because I was the organizer. I wasn't a leader. I wasn't a speaker. I'm just some kid with an armband on, you know? Kind of pushing behind the scenes, got my bullhorn, got my clipboard, asking people questions, going up to the leaders, the speakers, and saying, "Say this." Just kind of working all behind the scenes, you know?

So Andrew Payne was giving his speech. I keep wanting to say Andrew Pearson. We'll come to him later. So Andrew Payne is giving his speech and I'm by the door. And he's supposed to be the last one to talk and then we're going to take people--. I don't think we really figured out what this was going to look like. We were going to take people on the other side of the Capitol building where we'd have a big chart up that said, "If you're from this county, here's your representative and here's where your representative's office is, and the office building. Go talk to 'em." I don't know what we thought, how we thought we were going to get from the front to the back. I don't think we thought we were going to have three thousand people and I don't think we thought those three thousand people were going to be that mad. So I'm standing at the door. Andrew's giving his speech and he's getting fired up. This little geeky looking white boy just getting fired up, and he says at the end, he says, "Now we want you to go in there and we want you to tell your representatives how you feel and just march right through that building!" And I'm standing at the door. I'm like, "Oh shit!" I got all these people about to walk at me going through the office building, where the

chambers are, not the office building, where the chambers are. I don't even know if I'd ever been in that building.

So we walk in, some big steps in front. No, that doesn't look right. So we'll walk around. So we go, we walk around, and the building's like a maze, but to get from the front to the back you've got to go in these little bitty hallways that are like, if you stretched out your arms, you'd be touching both sides. So we're going to get three thousand kids, mad, beating on walls, cursing at the office staff. I sort of walked through the building first because I'm like, "I've got to get out in front of this because I have no idea what's going to happen." I'm walking through first and there's this roar behind me. And you're seeing like, you know, sixty-something year old little white woman with the little funny hair walking out of their office looking at us like bug-eyed, and being like, "Oh, god," and storming back into their office. [Laughter]

And I mean it must have taken us twenty minutes to get through the building because basically like two people could walk at a time, and then two people behind them, just screaming, banging on walls. So we go in the back. I thought people were going to start tearing stuff up because we hadn't gotten this far. We hadn't thought this through. And then so we had the chart up and people went and we said, "Okay, there's the office building. Go." Man, I walked into that office building about twenty minutes later. Every floor you went on, you'd see a representative in the hallway in a corner with five or six kids, fingers in his face, talking about what he was going to do and what he was going to not do. And I was like, "Oh my goodness." I'd never seen anything like this before. It blew my mind. And sure enough, the budget cut went from a hundred and twenty million to ten that next week.

BB: [Laughter]

BP: But here was the problem though, right, is that I looked around and it was like, wait. They're going to get their a hundred and twenty million. They're just going to get ten a year. They're going to raise our tuition twenty percent every year, and so it was like, we need to go on the attack, because now I've got a taste. Now I see how this works. Now I see how, if I'd have just sat in the room with the CIA kids and been pissed, nothing would have happened, but we got this stuff together. And so you'd sort of take the people who have the organizational know-how, plus the political perspective and now you could do something.

So the next year I think I wasn't a student that year. I was working at Reciprocity, and went back and I said, "Look. We need to go on the offensive. We need to call for a tuition moratorium. And in fact, we need to use the apparatus of the ASG, the whole Association of Student Governments. So I convinced Andrew, who was the president again, to bring me to their weekend retreat. And I've got a couple of other kids with me, NC State student government kids. They're sort of on the left side of liberal, who are with me. So we go and we start working the room. People are not feeling it because they didn't really analyze it correctly. The historically black universities in the system, their stuff is very tuition based, in terms of what they get from the system, is not as high. So they were concerned that if we froze tuitions that they wouldn't get to grow and expand their programs. And I kept trying to say, "No, no, no. What we need to say is, 'No, we expect this growth across the board, but we're not paying for it. Freeze it for a year, not freeze expenditures. Expenditures are the same or more, but we don't pay for it. It's not on our back.'"

And spent all day hustling, trying to get these folks on board and they weren't. It wasn't happening because this was this sort of consolidated leadership of the student governments. We worked best with the volunteer staff, the people who were kind of a little



bit behind the scenes. These were the heads. And we knew the heads of State because they used to come to our house and party. So we'd have the student government drunk in our house during the weekends. So we had something we could build off of. We hung out with them, but with these other kids, they didn't trust it. So it didn't happen and I watched. When I was there, the tuition was about eleven hundred, twelve hundred for a year. Ten years earlier, in 1990, it'd been about five hundred. It was about eleven, twelve, maybe upwards of fifteen, seven, eight years ago. Now it's like four, five, six. It's gone up hundreds up percentages. And we read it right, but we just didn't have the organizational apparatus to do it.

BB: So, back to that strategy chart with Smiley, that Smiley had showed you. Did it involve media? Did ya'll get some media attention for that day? Did you think ahead about organizing or what would be the next step? What was involved in that strategy?

BP: Yeah, so I mean there was definitely media. I mean this thing was a spectacle. This thing was big time. You can't have three thousand students marching on the Capitol building and--. I think we did that relatively right because again, we sort of looked at what we knew. And because this was the established student government, they already had all these media relationships for when they did their whatever they do. Their, like, "NC State's a great place" programming or whatever. So they had relationships with the media. So all that worked really, really well. What didn't work well was a long-term vision. It was sort of like this thing came up. We've got to fight it. We fight it. We win. And then in the next couple of years, when we start to push out a little bit more, we lost because we didn't have a long-term vision. We didn't analyze the situation properly and because a lot of people got

bamboozled by people in power. So because we were working with the student government, they had relationships with the campus administration.

So a couple years later, we take over the library because they're calling for a--. Again, it was like two years later, I think, and the state cuts the budget again. So the University responds by closing the library at midnight. In the summer, that was okay. But they wanted to do it when the year started. This is supposed to be a Research I university, right, number one. Number two, I think the number was like seventy-five percent of us worked twenty hours or more. We had to go to the library after midnight because we worked all day, or we worked and went to class all day. So we had to be--. We slept in the library. So we did a read-in at the library, kind of conceived of it, again, a Thursday or a Friday of a week and then pulled it off like a Monday or Tuesday of the next week, and managed to get about six hundred kids to stay in the library. We're like passing out little sneaky flyers all day, you know, "Shhh, don't tell anybody. We're doing a read-in."

So we do this read-in and the chancellor sends over her provost to meet with us. We said, "No. We want to meet with the chancellor." He's standing there talking to us like it means anything. Again, we'd been working with the student government, because it's sort of like the longer-term stuff--. A couple of us had it in our head, but it wasn't on the formal strategy chart because the people in the room weren't there yet. It wasn't going to be the consensus in the room, sort of like a bit by bit kind of pushing folks and sort of pushing their development. But unfortunately, the five or six or seven of us that were kind of the foundation of the thing, we didn't do the long-term strategy chart, either. So we were doing the pushing and doing the development of folks, but not in an even way, not in a concentrated kind of way, not in a way that was going to yield long-term results. We knew

we had to push further. We knew we had to have a long-term vision. We knew we needed to be strategic, but we didn't have the time or the skills, probably had the time, but not the skills yet, to sort of really look at that and what that would take. So at this point, we'd had a core of people that we'd pushed far enough, so that when they sent over the provost, we didn't even have to go to them and say, "Ya'll don't talk to them." They already knew. "We're not talking to him. We're talking to her. Where's she at?" And so she didn't show up. So we went around and asked everybody in library, said, "Well, what do ya'll want to do?" And they said, "Let's go to her house." Said, "Okay, ya'll want to go to the house? Yeah, we'll go to the house." So again, and sort of in that moment just like, "All right. We're getting ready to leave the library. We kept the library open past when it was open. How do we push the politics a little bit further?"

So that weekend was the UE's state convention, United Electrical Workers 150, the public sector's union in North Carolina. And so we were going to, some of us were going to go and connect with them. And so we said, "Well, before they leave the library, let's take up a collection for the custodial staff at the library." And so we kind of pushed this politic. People were like, "Oh, okay. I could see." We managed to collect like two hundred dollars or a hundred and fifty dollars or something like that, left it with them and said, "Thank you for staying here later." So it was cool. It was kind of like, how do we at every opportunity radicalize this, push this a little bit further.

But again, the response to the thing to go to the chancellor's house wasn't ours. We asked people and people said, "Let's go to her house." We said, "Okay." Her house was right there on campus, right at the edge of campus. So about three, four hundred of us marched over there. It's probably one o'clock in the morning, 1:15. Now she's up. I mean

she knows because she's sent her lackey over. She knew we were going to do it because we held it until about noon that day. And then after that, we couldn't hold it any longer. We didn't do any press release or anything like that, but we got word around. And probably somebody at the student government had already snitched to her anyway. So we marched over there, march onto her lawn, three, four hundred kids chanting, "Chancellor Fox, Chancellor Fox." So we see a light flick on in the house, like right, like you were asleep, Maryanne. So she comes down, stands up on a chair in her yard among three, four hundred people.

And again, our thing, we had strategized among a smaller group of us and we had built the analysis in with a little bit bigger of a group, but not enough. We weren't good enough at it yet to say, look, the problem isn't the chancellor. The problem is the state. The state's cutting this money. The chancellor's making a bad response to that cut. So all we need from her is to get her to say there's the state. Once she articulates the state out loud, now we've articulated--. Now she's articulated the target for us. We don't have to make these long leaps to do it. She's said it. So we kind of let the questions go for a minute because people were just pissed. And there was no facilitator. It was just like people raising their hands, hollering out questions to her, and her trying to answer back. But again, some of us knew what her role was in this whole thing. You know, she's a politician. She is the power in this scenario. And so all we were hoping for was to get her to say that it was out of her hands, but she's good at obfuscating, "Look over here," while there's something going on on the other side. So people were asking these questions and she's giving these really kind of slick answers. And then finally at one point I raised my hand and she looks over and she's like, "Yes, Bryan." [Laughter] Sort of like, "Oh, you," because I had just started back on

campus like that month. And I was like, “Chancellor Fox, do you have the money to keep the library open? Is this a possibility? Why are you closing the library?” And she didn’t answer it exactly how she needed to. And so we’re like, “Fuck.”

So we had to work, but then we went back. And so the thing was do the read-in. Get this big public spectacle. Then re-identify the target and go back to the statehouse. We’re going to have a “death to education” march, coffins, look at our education. It’s going down the drain or whatever, had this whole thing structured. So this is towards the end of the week we did the read-in. On the weekend, we were supposed to be meeting, planning, strategizing. The administration calls the student government and asks them to have a meeting with them on Saturday. So we go into the meeting, in their ear, like, “Ya’ll, we shouldn’t even be meeting with them. This is a waste of time.” They were like, “No, no, no, no. They were on our side for the last--.” Because Chancellor Fox had supported us in the last one because the hundred and twenty million-dollar budget, that was not in her interest and she got that. This one wasn’t in her interest either, but it was small enough and she wasn’t going to step out and lose any power over it. So we knew that, but not everybody knew that. So we spent all day in this meeting just getting bamboozled by these folks, hoodwinked, and spent the whole weekend trying to decompress, trying to like get this out of their heads, and ended up having this shoddy, shoddy, shoddy, didn’t even march to the Capitol because they was only like thirty people. And we turned out like three thousand a year or two before.

So we didn’t end up going, but it was like it was really instructive because it was like, no, we have to be--. We’re always responding and we’re always responding because we’re not being analytical. We’re not thinking about what their next step is going to be. We don’t understand how this economy works. We don’t understand what the goals of the system are.

We didn't get what neo-liberalism was. We didn't know that this is a part of a global phenomenon to de-fund the public sphere. Some of us were starting to get it, but we didn't get it quick enough. And when we didn't get it quick enough, we weren't able to articulate it in a way that we could really build an organization around it. And so seven years later or whatever, they've done it. They've absolutely done it. They've just chipped away at the core of the thing.

So when we talk about the strategy chart, there's always a couple of different levels. There's like the strategy that I would argue, and this isn't to sound elitist or hierarchical or anything like that, but I would argue the folks with a deeper, like the revolutionaries, the people who have a deeper, longer-term, systemic, like what's your strategy? And then when you're working with folks who are getting engaged in something for the first time or who are new to something or whose politics aren't as deep or it's a coalition so you don't even share a lot of politics with a lot of the same people, then the strategy's different. So there's the strategy for the organizing work and there's sort of moving the program and then there's the strategy for how to build the strategy to move the program. So there are kind of two layers to it, and so I don't think we were really good at either at that point. I think, again, for some kids who were kind of in a vacuum, it's not like there was this long tradition of organizing at NC State that we kind of grew up out of. We started it all. I mean it had been there and gone and been and gone, like ebbs and flows, but there was nobody mentoring us. There was some older people around, people like Ajamu Dillahunt and other folks who were kind of helping us, but a lot of it was just us, just learning it. So we weren't good at our strategy for how to work with them. So in turn, our strategy that we developed with them wasn't good enough, either.

BB: And when you say “we,” this core group of five or seven, tell me the folks’ names.

BP: So, Angela Trauns, Christopher Massenberg, who we all affectionately know as Dasan, who wasn’t even a student at NC State. He was at St. Aug [Augustine] at the time. Yolanda Carrington, who was also not a student at State. She was a student at Wake Tech [Community College] at the time. That was the main four people that were at State that were kind of the core of those particular waves of things. Those four people ended up being the core of some stuff a little bit later on after September 11<sup>th</sup> called Hip Hop Against Racist War. We kind of did some stuff on NC State’s campus and then hooked up with some other young folks in Durham, Manju Rajendran and Snehal Patel and some other people that were around at the time.

But the stuff at State was very--. It wasn’t of an ideological kind of character. It was like a systemic, like this is the issue. Again, I’ve said I’ve picked up Marx once, read four lines and put it down. A lot of my understanding of--. And I’ve never read much in the way of Lenin, read some Mao, but a lot of my understandings about how to take ordinary political issues, like economic struggles that people have on the ground, electoral issues, you know, things like this that people are struggling with on a day-to-day basis, a lot of my understanding for how to try to politicize those as you move people around them kind of happens organically, kind of happens just sort of like, some of through the stuff that Smiley taught me, the Midwest Academy’s training. But the Midwest Academy’s training and some of the sort of more, this model, this guy Saul Alinsky developed years ago, is very practical. It’s very non-political, non-ideological. And so it’s like how do you take the tools of the practical organizing and put a political analysis on it? Hell, I still don’t know if I know how

to do that real well, but it came in a cauldron of practice. It was a very different experience than I think a lot of people have. A lot of younger people who get politicized, you know, they sort of read about these ideas or they go to some workshops on some things or whatever, and then they try to apply them to a bigger ideological kind of struggle, like the IMF and the World Bank or the war or something like that. And for us it was sort of like, “No, no, no. It’s bread and butter shit. It’s like, how do you pay your bills? Can we go to class next year?” and trying to politicize that. So I feel like that’s been really helpful for me as I think about the kind of organizing that I want to do going forward.

I spent a lot of years in between then and now kind of in the more ideologically focused realm, like bigger picture kind of stuff, and then I’ve been going backwards. Like, I want to stop the war. How do I go into certain communities and get people to engage in that? And then you’ve got to connect this issue that they’re having with that thing, rather than working on the issue that people are having and then connecting that up with the bigger thing organically, which seems to me like something that could be a whole lot more successful. And I think that that’s kind of the model that I’m looking at around the country, people who are organizing around gentrification and stuff like that. And then hooking that up with like, this isn’t neo-liberalism. This is a global capitalist crisis. Or like urban gardening. There’s a global food crisis. This isn’t just like we’re teaching some kids how to dig dirt. So the meandering kind of went a little bit away from what I was trying to do as my job because I went back to school to get certified to teach.

BB: This is in ’02.

BP: This was in ’02, yes. I graduated the first time in ’01 with a degree in microbiology by the hair of my chiny chin chin. I’d never gotten a B in my life and I got



some, "Thank you Jesus," type of Cs, and I wouldn't have graduated if I wouldn't have gotten those Cs. I don't know how that happened because the last year it was just politics. I was writing for the paper. I was organizing. I was taking my class on class stuff, my class on race stuff, my class on feminism, my film class. Maybe I'll go to my microbiology class. And organizing and being in love and throwing parties and playing ball. I just didn't have time for the old stuff.

So I did that, worked at Reciprocity for a year, got really burnt on that process and went back to, oh my god. Howard Matthews, Coach Dietz. I'm supposed to teach because I want to work with kids because kids are fresh and you always have to stay on top of things with kids, to help kids to understand the situation that they're facing and help them build their skills in how to deal with it. And I had these vague notions that I should organize teachers. I'm just now barely trying to figure out what that looks like, going into my fifth year of teaching, because organizing your workplace is a whole different ball of wax. So I went back to school to get certified to teach. And so again, now that's the approach. So how do I take an issue like struggling around an educational issue around the reform of a particular school or the reform, like reform kind of issues around school, and then connect those up? How do I connect the crisis in urban education in the United States with neo-liberalism? How do I do that when it's hard enough to build a struggle around the crisis in urban education without adding the other piece to it? But I don't think that the Alinsky approach is correct because you can't properly build the fight unless you understand what it is you're fighting. And so for me that's the piece about, you kind of develop the core of folks who really see the thing for what it is, and then those folks can more effectively build

the reform struggle. And then through the process of the reform struggle some more folks see it.

BB: What's the language of the reform struggle?

BP: Well I mean at my school it's like, "Can we get a policy on how tardies work?" [Laughter] I mean it's really as simple as that. Like this is a broken place.

BB: So that's not--. I mean I'm wondering if the reform structure, is that a phrase in some organizations or are you just using that as a way to describe--?

BP: I mean reform just--. I think a lot of people kind of use it to juxtapose, like this is a reform versus a revolutionary kind of thing. And I think it's a false dichotomy. Reform is like, it's not a struggle against the system itself. It's trying to get the system to change something that's not good. We're not going to get people to struggle against the system itself before we get people to change against getting the system to give them something that's not good. So we have to do the quote unquote "reform stuff." Can I get a tardy policy? Can we talk about how we don't have enough money? Can we talk about how kids are getting suspended all the time for minor offenses? Can we talk about sexual harassment in school? Can we talk about a better policy around students that identify as queer?

BB: Just yesterday the legislature shut down that bill on bullying to include language around a whole laundry list that lays out specific identities that kids are targeted around. And the sticking point was sexual orientation, right?

BP: Right, because there's a powerful right-wing money base. They don't necessarily even represent a constituency. They've just got dough and they can use that dough in key ways. And if they had to mobilize a constituency, they probably have the dough to organize it and to actually do it. So it's like fighting around things like that, then

your kids start to see, “Oh, this is around this.” So, a better ESL program for immigrant kids. And how do you connect that up to something else? So that’s the task in my mind of the folks who have the broader vision and maybe even deeper vision around like, “Okay, so we’re fighting around this. How do we connect it with this other thing?” So when we were talking about when we were doing organizing against the war, how do we connect the war intellectually at least, I mean even just on paper, to education? And the crisis, there’s no money in education. There’s a whole bunch of money for war. Well, somebody’s got to say that those two things have a relationship and then use that statement to get more folks engaged.

BB: This is a good place to take a quick break, although I’m going to keep the recorder going because **(0:59:48, third file)**. I need to call Pete to tell him to get the babies since we’re going a little longer and I’ve got about twenty more minutes of tape on this, but I want us to do a little bit of organizing in real time around what--. Cynthia Brown just called. About--.

That’s funny because I facilitated this retreat last Thursday for a group of NC education advocates and it’s this really neat mix of advocate attorneys, Lewis Pitts and the folks at NC Legal Aid Advocates for Children’s Services, some pissed off parents from Greensboro, Beaufort. What were a couple other towns they came from? Durham, and then a few students, three students. One had been suspended, George, I don’t know how many times this year. And then some grassroots advocates paid, so Beth Jacobs, who’s now at the Justice Center with--. She’s the **(0:00:50, fourth file)** woman. She got Tar Heel of the Week. She’s done a lot of organizing, used to work at Democracy NC and now she’s at the Justice Center with Angella Dunston doing education stuff. Umbrella group NC Cares and

then some unpaid, just parent advocates. So it was this pretty amazing day and we spent some time talking about the Heirs Project and how we can organize with parents and students to start taking those little steps around issues they're grappling with now, some of the reform issues you've just laid out. So we did skits. "My son wore red and I've got to leave work and come get his ass. I didn't get the memo about, 'Red's a gang color.'" I mean it was great. They acted out how much shit they get from the teachers. And the students were saying, "Oh, what I hate is how two-faced the teachers--. You told them the shit that's going down. You told them you're struggling with this. You get in a room with your parent and the principal for another conference and they all, 'I don't know shit about it.' Like they conspire." And just this level of distrust--.

BP: Right.

BB: And nastiness and the attorney's like, "Oh, we don't sit out in the office of the principal for twenty-five minutes waiting to be seen." When you come with your attorney--. So there's all kinds of shit that they're playing out and talking about, but I want to talk to you about that a little bit.

BP: Well, I'm going to go to the bathroom while you check out.

BB: Yeah, you go pee. And Cynthia Brown's called three times. I need to see what she's up--. Let's see here. [Dialing phone] Hey sweetie. Bryan's still going strong, so will you get the kids? Oh right, we've got to get diapers and stuff. Okay, well we'll just have to stop. I've got to go get the pumpkins, so okay. All right, see you soon. Love you, bye.

[Sound of checking voicemail]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Madeleine Baran, Dec. 26, 2008.