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

Interview U-0555
Cynthia Brown
March 7, 2006

Transcript – 2

TRANSCRIPT: CYNTHIA BROWN

Interviewer: Bridgette Burge

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START OF INTERVIEW

BB: I already cued it up for this section. Okay, so it is March 7, 2006. Here we are with Cynthia Brown, Third Space Studies, Durham, for part three of our wonderful interview. You ready to roll?

CB: I'm ready.

BB: All right, good. So let's start with, kind of jumping back a little bit, in the midst of your work with Southerners for Economic Justice in 1995, you were elected to the Durham City Council, right? You served through 1999, right?

CB: Right.

BB: So how'd you decide to run and what was that experience like?

CB: Well it's funny, because in some ways, I didn't totally decide and some of it truly encouragement from other people, some of it is about a part of a spiritual journey that I've been on for many years. But initially there was a woman I met in the community who was a long-time activist in Durham. I'd heard her name before. I'd happened to be in a few settings where I was working with various activists concerned about living-wage issues among city workers, people who had been concerned about the need for economic development in Durham to create decent-wage jobs for people. So in this work in various

forums, this African-American older woman, who had been a long-time activist, was somebody who had just observed me interacting with various people in the community.

BB: Who's that?

CB: Her name was Vann [Evangeline] Ellison. She actually said to me, "You should consider running for City Council." Well, I had only lived in Durham less than a year. I had moved here in April of '94. She was asking me this sometime in '94. The election was in November of '95. So when she asked me, I'm thinking, I've worked here since 1990, but I've only lived here less than a year, so it's bizarre for me to consider running for City Council right now. Because I think Durham is a town that is built on old relationships. It can tend to be cliquish, where it's difficult to move in this town unless you've been given sanction by the organized leadership in the various political organizations. So I didn't think that there was anything realistic about me trying to run at that point. But I told her I would think about it. Well, just by saying "I'll think about it", she started talking to various people she knew all over the city, black and white alike. Because she would say to them, "What do you think about Cynthia running for City Council?" They would say they thought it was a great idea and they started putting pressure on me. So everywhere I would go in the city, people would say, "I heard you're thinking about running for City Council. If you do, I'll work on your campaign; if you do, I'll help you." I mean, over and over, this scene played itself out. So part of it was the encouragement I got from various people I ran into in the community.

But then the other piece of it was that I really have been guided by spirit most of my life in a way that I am not aware of oftentimes, except in retrospect, but in a very conscious way at that point in my life. I just prayed and asked God if it was time and if it was something I should do. Because I always had wanted to be in politics, and then at

various times when I started to really understand what politics were about, in terms of relationships and one-upmanship and "you vote for me and I'll vote for you on various issues," I got disenchanted with politics and said I would not do politics. Then I started realizing how important it was for people of conscience to be in politics so we had allies from those of us in the community to get somebody to give us access to the process. So I started realizing the importance of politically conscious people with progressive thinking being in politics.

Between feeling that I prayed and that I got direct instructions from God, truly feeling affirmed by the force of God that this is time for me to do this, but it was a process that combined my spiritual affirmation and encouragement from the community. To be honest with you, when I ran for U.S. Senate several years later, the reason that I started my own business was because when I ran for City Council, I worked every day almost that I was running for City Council. I worked full-time and I campaigned full-time, and it almost killed me. I mean it was absolutely exhausting.

BB: Would you do it again?

CB: Yeah, I probably would do it again, but I would do it differently. I mean, now that I'm self-employed, it makes it a lot easier not to have to be accountable to a Board of Directors, a staff, and a constituency as a part of an organization, while you're also doing the campaigning. But there were a lot of things that I learned from that City Council run. I mean, politics is dirty. I can remember when I ran for City Council and when I ran for U.S. Senate, I mean the kind of jokes that people who love you and who are friends with you do, as it related to the dishonesty of politicians, the dishonesty of lawyers. It's like two of the most reviled groups of people on the planet are attorneys and politicians. Even though I understand the cynicism and the sarcasm, it's also a challenge when you know that what

you're trying to do is bring integrity into a process that is so maligned and hated, reviled by people, because politicians are a terrible lot of people for the most part. And the people who are good even, I've learned if they don't have a base of people that they're organized and connected to, that it makes it very difficult not to get just sucked up by the process of the politics.

BB: So some accountability with community?

CB: Some accountability with community. But the strange thing is that the system is so distorted at this point, that even when you have a base, if we don't get some changes in how the system operates, the fundamental way that the system operates, the people who are good people end up being able to win, because they're getting money from people, and that money ends up creating a level of accountability to the people who have donated the money to their campaign. It's interesting, when I ran for—you need to switch?

BB: Yeah, let me switch. Hang on, I need to change tapes here.

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE B

START OF TAPE 3, SIDE A

BB: Okay, go ahead.

CB: Put me back on track.

BB: You were talking about the money issue in politics.

CB: You know what? What I was getting ready to tell was a story about how one of the people during the same time I was running used to always laugh and tell me how he

wanted to know how I was raising my money, because he said, “You’re raising more money than anybody in this city other than the mayoral candidate.” I didn’t believe it, because as fast as the money came in, it went out, because it was very expensive at that time. It wasn’t nearly as expensive as it is now. I mean, I think I raised a little over a ten thousand dollars for a City Council race. The mayoral candidate raised thirteen thousand. And I raised it only by sending out letters to everybody that I knew who ever knew me. I didn’t get any kind of PAC [Political Action Committee] money or anything like that. It just so happened that that’s what those little bitty checks amounted to. But I had a national network because of having been involved in national organizations and I’d been in the Kellogg Fellowship and of course, I sent letters to all my Kellogg fellows. So I ended up raising all this money.

I remember one of the highlights of my campaign, which was you know, actually very strange. I could not even imagine being in a candidates’ forum, having to go up against and compete with seasoned veteran politicians. But when you’re passionate about something and you think it’s the right thing, you feel like God on one side has said that this is something that you’re supposed to do, and the community people have said on the other side it’s something you should do, then you just stand up, even when your knees are buckling and you really are nervous about it. I remember being in a Chamber of Commerce candidates’ forum that was televised. The question [was] being asked by council member Kim Griffin. He was a retired dentist, he had been on the City Council for eons, I mean many, many years. I was so nervous, because what they did was each of the candidates got to choose a number and the number they chose determined who would be asking you a question of the candidates in the whole pool of City Council candidates.

So this veteran council member asked the question, which I thought he was going to go into stuff related to how the city was run, and he asked the question why I had money from people all over the country. They acted as if I was some interloper who was being supported by some radical activists outside of the community, who had just kind of like inserted me into Durham to take over Durham politics. And nothing could have been further from the truth, of course. What it did was open up the opportunity for me to talk about my fundraising strategy, which was to just raise money from everybody I knew and to really run down the kind of groups I had been associated with, which made a certain impression, obviously, on the voters, but also dispelled a lot of this mythology that had been created about where in the world I came from.

It was so weird, because people also associated some major agenda around anything that I did, even when I was on Council. Usually it came from a place of being connected to people in community and knowing that the perspective that they were bringing was going to be radically different than some major developer's agenda or some political scheme or some politician's agenda. It really was about trying to be a voice for everyday community people.

So clearly I would do it again, but I think that I would do it quite differently. Because one of the biggest regrets I had was when I was on the City Council, it never occurred to me that if you work full-time and you have all those meetings to go to on the City Council and you take seriously being out in the community, going to the different functions that people invite you to, that that's all your time. There is no real time to do organizing to make sure that there's a base to which you're accountable. Because the public, even though they want accountability, they are not organizing themselves in a way, en masse, to hold people accountable. They're angry because people are not being

accountable, but they're not taking extra time to ensure that they're engaged in civic organizations to press for that accountability.

It ends up being a class thing, where the upper-income, middle-income people end up being the ones who are organized to press for accountability around issues specific to their neighborhood, specific to their interests, not to the overall community. So you don't have, for example, people who are impacted by low-wage jobs being the ones who are organizing to say, "You can't use my tax dollars to bring a plant in here that's going to employ people other than me." You don't have people whose communities are being impacted by environmental contamination organizing for the most part, unless they're upper-income people; you got upper-income people. And so the most vulnerable people in the community are the ones that are the least organized and those are the people that I oftentimes wanted to be accountable to.

Only was I successful in one instance in particular that I can think of, where there were some concerns about the housing code, people who were paying rent to slum landlords and they weren't being provided with heat and adequate insulation. So there were some revisions made to the housing code as a result of my connecting with some folks. But even then, there wasn't a mass organizing campaign. It was a couple of folks in the neighborhood who brought an issue that had a broader impact for everybody. So figuring out how you connect with folk in a real way during the campaign so that that work of people working together is not just about getting me elected, but providing support and information and accountability to me for the duration of my time in office.

BB: Yeah, there're so many challenges around that, not just for elected officials, but even for non-profit organizations that say they're accountable to community members.

But what community means and how to do that in a way that crosses barriers of class and race in a real practical way is a real challenge.

CB: That's right.

BB: You mentioned that there's a lot of traditional organized leadership in various organizations and political parties in Durham, that you had to get on the in-crowd or get on their radar. Who are some of those people and groups that you understand to be real…

CB: Well, let me say that when I ran for City Council, and I haven't been plugged into local politics in a real way in awhile, so I know that some of these groups may not be in existence, but most of them I think are. You had the Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People, which is *the* black political action committee, PAC. Then you had the People's Alliance, which is the white progressive political action committee, or they have a political action committee as a part of their agenda. Then you had the Friends of Durham, which was the white conservative organization. Then there was another one and that's the one that I don't think is in existence anymore, the Durham—I don't remember the name of this fourth one, but it was more of a moderate, predominately white, if not all white group. But they were more moderate. I actually got the endorsement of all of these political action committees, with the exception of one. But you also have the *Independent Weekly*, which did endorsements and I got their endorsement. You had the *News and Observer*, which did endorsements and I'm sure I got their endorsement.

So I actually ended up with the endorsement of all the major organizations, except for the Friends of Durham, which was the conservative organization. They said about me, "If you think that you like Lorisa Seibel," who was a white progressive, who they obviously had critiqued over the years because they couldn't stand how progressive she was. She worked for Durham Affordable Housing [Coalition] and was always trying to

advocate for issues that impact low-income folks. And so, because a lot of what she advocated went up against the interests of these conservatives, they actually probably criticized her a lot. So their commentary about me was, “If you think you like Lorisa Seibel, you’ll love Cynthia,” which means that I was even worse in their minds than Lorisa.

It was interesting, because during that time, the race dynamics of this city really played themselves out. Because when I was running for City Council, I remember that the African-American community really didn’t know what to make of me because I had so much white support. So the assumption was that I was this kind of person who could be manipulated and controlled by the white community, which nothing could be further from the truth. But how would you really know that if you didn’t know me? Because I didn’t spend a lot of time going to regular meetings of the Durham Committee, I didn’t know about the organization. And when I learned about it, a lot of their meetings on the night that they convened were in conflict with my community work. So I never was very engaged in the main organization for African-Americans in this community. It wasn’t because I disrespected the leadership or that I didn’t want to do it. It just really came into conflict.

Then there were a whole lot of other issues with folks who really wanted to be somewhat controlling. I’m not one who does real well with being controlled. I like what Shirley Chisolm used to say, that she was “unbought and unbossed.” I liked the idea of being unbought and unbossed. I remember when I ran for U.S. Senate, this guy came up to me from Raleigh, he worked for the state government, and he told me, he said, “I’ve been dying to meet you.” I said, “Why?” He said, “Because I wanted to know who this person is that everybody’s making such a big deal over.” He said, “You know that they don’t like

you over there in Raleigh?" And he was talking about folks who were candidates in the U.S. Senate race; several of the candidates came out Raleigh. I said, "Why?" He said, "Because they know that you don't owe anybody and nobody owes you, and so nobody can tell you what to do." I just remember thinking how liberating it is to be engaged in politics, as dirty as it is, on your own terms, so that you don't have to be controlled by people.

BB: So apparently it didn't totally chew you up, because like you said, there were some liberating aspects of it. Also, from August 2001 through September 2002, you were a U.S. Senate candidate in the Democratic primary to North Carolina's 2002 U.S. Senate race, right? Is that true? I know it is.

CB: Not only is it true, but you know, it's always a challenge to talk about this and why I did this, because it's hard for people to grasp, folks who genuinely have a relationship with God. I don't think that God talks to me like in an audible voice, like you and I are talking. But I truly believe that I talk to God and that God whispers into my spirit things that I'm supposed to do. I know that without a doubt, that if it had not been for God leading me to run for U.S. Senate, I never would have done it. Because frankly, there was nothing logical about running for U.S. Senate when I ran. I had not been engaged in party politics, so I was not one of the insiders in the Democratic Party process. That within itself is enough to keep you from winning any particular office unless you got a lot of money behind you somewhere else to help you overcome the barriers created by not being a Party insider.

I didn't know a lot about the process itself in terms of the way that they have these Party conventions and stuff. But the way that this campaign came together and the kind of progress that we made, with everybody connected to my campaign just about being

absolute novices in the electoral-political process, it just says to me that it is absolutely important that I actually ran in that race. I actually ran in a state with a hundred counties, where I campaigned in at least sixty-seven of them. I actually raised less than fifty thousand dollars. I'd guess we raised about forty-eight to forty-nine thousand dollars. I had no paid staff. I had one coordinator who got a little stipend, God bless him. He lost his job shortly after he started working with me. He lived off of unemployment and my stipend so that he could help coordinate my campaign.

BB: And that was?

CB: Ken McDouall. Ken McDouall, bless his heart, he didn't know nothing about politics, but he was a smart man and he could figure it out, and he figured it out what he could. What he couldn't figure out, somebody else--. There was a wonderful man, Michael Schwalbe. He was a one-man team to help with my positions and to help educate me on issues and to provide me with research.

BB: He's a professor at NC State.

CB: He's a professor over at NC State, absolutely. Girl, I mean, I had some incredible people to surround me, I mean sisters, some African-American women in the community who just made sure that I ate good, that I got places, that I was dressed decent, I mean literally carry me somewhere while I'm dressing in the car because I was having to make appearances in three or four different counties in one twenty four hour period. I actually had people who came together in the western part of the state who would get somebody, a volunteer to drive me—one guy came to my house here in Durham, picked me up, took me to northeastern North Carolina, and then drove me back to Charlotte. Then somebody connected with us once we left Charlotte and went to Black Mountain, and in

Black Mountain, somebody else got me in the west and brought me back that night. Now I'm telling you all this happened in a twenty four hour period.

To me, there were so many things that were happening that made it clear that this was something that was supposed to be. First of all, my presence in that campaign meant that people were forced to talk about things that they otherwise would not have talked about around working conditions and workers and immigrant kinds of issues. Just the spin that I would put, the perspective I would bring on a particular issue, forced them to have to deal with it, because once it was out--. The funny thing is is that see, you figure somebody shows up in a race with a former chief of staff of a U.S. president, Bowles—

BB: Erskine Bowles.

CB: Erskine Bowles; the Secretary of State, of your state of North Carolina, Elaine Marshall, a twenty-two-year African-American veteran of the state legislature, the first Speaker of the House—

BB: Dan Blue?

CB: Dan Blue. You have somebody who shows up in a race to compete with them and they have no roots in the Party and they don't have any history beyond having been on the City Council, and you figure they got to be stupid, stupid or being paid off. And I mean, people actually said to me, "Who's paying you off?" They thought the Republican Party actually had paid me to get into this race. Nothing was further from the truth, obviously, but you also don't expect for that person to come into the process with an analysis and to be able to articulate issues at the same level as these folks.

But see what I had to my advantage was the fact that I had been engaged in public policy advocacy for twenty years. But my perspective on how to advocate for certain kinds of public policies was helping to teach people in the community affected by that policy

how to engage in the process. I had been involved with partners and allies from the local to the federal level. Because we had worked on campaigns to raise the minimum wage, to create living wage policy here in the state. We worked on welfare reform from the state to the federal level. We worked on campaigns to try to get a workers' bill of rights in the local City Council. My whole last professional life, my whole last twenty years prior to running for office had been public policy advocacy. It's funny because until I was running for office, I never talked about it in those terms, but when you consider that you're talking about shaping policy that's going to meet the needs of the people in the community, that's exactly what I was doing. So I understood the process.

What I would say to people is—and I didn't walk in with the advantage of some of my competitors, because they were inside the process, so they had something to negotiate with. We had to scrap from the bottom to be heard, much less to understand what decisions were being made and who we had to talk to, to be able to have an impact. I don't even remember. What was the question? (laughter) You know, I get on a roll.

This U.S. Senate thing, this thing was wild. I mean, for me, I cannot tell you--. First of all, I want to go back and say that we actually came out of that process with almost thirty thousand votes. I want to say that it depends on whose numbers you look at. I never looked at final counts. But at one point, somebody said I had made close to twenty-nine thousand, somebody else said twenty-six, so I figure it's twenty-six to twenty-nine. Anything over twenty-five says I came close to thirty thousand votes. The person who won, who had millions of dollars invested, one with two hundred and some thousand votes. That ain't nothing to sneeze at. It is absolutely nothing to sneeze at, nothing to be ashamed of, to have run in that race and to have gotten that kind of visibility. My girlfriend said, a friend of mine up in Baltimore who I used to room with in North Carolina, she said, "You

couldn't have sent out invitations and you couldn't have bought that many votes." So she said, "That is not bad. That's not bad."

BB: What's her name?

CB: Del-Mia, a girlfriend of mine named Del-Mia Strickland. She was so funny, because she called the next day just to see how I did. I think it's funny, because most people assumed that I wouldn't win. I never assumed I wouldn't win. What I knew was that I was a long shot. But I know that because I believe in a God of miracles, that stranger things have happened. So I thought it would be wild if I woke up and I actually had won as such a long shot. But the other thing was, I was crying, I was so happy when I saw that morning that I had made over nineteen thousand votes. Because all I kept thinking was I don't want to have worked this hard and not have made some kind of impact, not have had some people to listen.

But see, one of the things that happened when I was on the U.S. Senate trail, I ran into people who I'd met on the street who were homeless, who came to a nice, fabulous—see, this is the beauty of being out west. They had this old building that was a senior citizen's tower that had this top floor that had garden terraces all around the rooftop room. They had this incredible, beautiful, looked like a high-dollar, classy affair. It had beautiful live music, had people who were dressed nice, had people who were dressed not so nice. It was a mixture of residents in that building, people off the street, people who had known me since I'd been campaigning out there, people who had never heard of me, but wanted to hear more about this person. So it was literally the melting pot of this state and of this country in that room. But homeless people who would come up to me and say, "I have never heard a politician who sounded like you. I'm telling you I have not registered to vote

in twenty years and I'm going to register tomorrow, because I intend to vote and work for your campaign."

I'm telling you that you could go to the western part of the state and every other block had one of my street signs on it. Let me tell you, my signs were made in the basement of somebody's apartment and they sent those signs all over the state. They just happened to be more plentiful in the west, because that's where we had a stronger base. The irony of that is that I'm an African-American candidate and that's the predominately white part of the state. You know that, because that's where you're from. I'm telling you, it was fascinating.

There were people who were in parts of, like there's a place called Taylorsville and Martha [Bergen]—oh God, I can't think of Martha's last name right now. Now Martha lives in Taylorsville. Martha was—girl, I am so happy to be able to tell this story and have it somewhere documented, because this was one of the more beautiful experiences of this campaign. Martha was in North Wilkesboro when I spoke at a Democratic Party meeting one evening. They had invited all the candidates at different points and this was my turn. Martha was at the back of the room, but I was really connecting with people around the lack of health care, what was happening around economic development and our desperate need for jobs, and not to betray decent workers in communities, who had given their lives to the different employers and now were losing their jobs because of NAFTA and job loss and what-not. So she ended up connecting with me outside of the meeting room. I got a pretty decent reception. There were some folks who were very pro-business, who didn't like this idea of raising the minimum wage and challenged me on that, some folks who had issues around the social security issue. But the thing was is that this woman came outside and she told me she used to be a Republican and she had switched to the Democratic Party,

because she had become very disheartened by how inhumane and how racist she felt that the Republicans had become.

BB: Is she a white woman?

CB: This is a white woman. There was nobody in this room of color but me, which was a lot of the case, and mind-boggling, because it's like you're here now and so it doesn't matter. You got to still tell the story, even if they end up knocking you out of this room. Well, what happened was, because I was being so real and so genuine and talking about issues from, not some political rhetoric place, but from a place that people could really relate to based on their own experience, it ended up going over very well and I really ended up connecting with people in a real meaningful way. So what ended up happening was the lady came outside. She ended up talking to me about really hoping—now it's interesting. Because I was just so genuine, she really was saying she wanted a way to get the people in her community to come together across race lines. She said, "It's predominately white, but there are African-Americans. There's a woman there who's a good friend of mine. I really would like to see you be able to help inspire us to come together."

So ultimately, out of that experience that night, she ended up praying with me outside to give me what she considered protective cover as I came back down the mountain. Because I was leaving there at eleven o'clock almost at night, maybe ten o'clock at night, but it was late. No, it actually was right close to nine o'clock at night and she knew it would be close to midnight by the time I got back home. So her thing was to give me protection. I'm amazed, because I'm very spiritual at this time and I am connecting with this woman around our shared faith in a God that can protect you even as you're out here on your own in these mountains.

So she ended up literally convening the Democratic Party in her county to come to a luncheon to meet me. People brought potluck stuff, set up this beautiful luncheon in this old, white, Democratic Party building. It was an old house, one of those, looked like something from Tara or something, one of those old-South houses with all the columns and stuff. Anyway, I get there and this place is packed. Every Democrat that you could imagine within a fifty-mile radius of this town must be at this luncheon. I'm blown away, because I didn't expect anything this big a deal, black and white alike. They had this woman who gave this resounding, beautiful gospel song and then they introduced me to speak. Something happened, I don't know what it was, but I was overcome with emotion. I was overcome with the passion around the issues that I know are important to me and why I was there, and I spoke from that place. I'm telling you that I got a standing ovation in that room like you would not believe.

When I got it, there was a sheriff's candidate in there, who was the current sheriff, who was running for office. They tell me that for a few weeks afterwards, when there was a Democratic Party event and I couldn't be there, because I didn't know about it, plus I had a conflict, that the sheriff's candidate stood up and spoke on my behalf. They tell me that in lots of places, that's what would happen when people had heard me. They would stand up and speak on my behalf, to make sure that people knew who I was. It was unbelievable.

I remember one time I was in Black Mountain and I spoke. The woman who was the president of that particular Democratic Party precinct or whatever—it was a major event. They had invited all the candidates. This happened to be my turn. It was a dinner meeting—she chastised me, because I wasn't standing at the door, because see, I would engage with people in a real way. So even though I should have been standing at the door, just kind of shaking everybody's hand, I would get preoccupied getting into a real

conversation with a person. Her thing was really like, it was a courtesy in her mind for me to be allowed to come there; it was just a courtesy. So they didn't expect much from me, obviously, and some of them gave me the feeling that, even though they were nice, they really hated that they had to give me this time. But I was there; they had to do it.

So I sit down and I have dinner. Then she introduces me, this president. When she introduces me, as I walked up there, she says, "Mmm, no paper." I mean, looked at me real snidely, and suggested as if to say, "No paper," like unprepared. I proceeded to speak and at this point, I'd been doing this for a while and I'd gotten very, to say I was "polished" would suggest that I was packaging it. What had happened was I'd become very clear and succinct about the key points I wanted to make. Limited time meant focus on the issues, make your points, and sit down. So I was bam, bam, bam, between health care, lack of jobs, living in a country that's as prosperous as ours, understanding that there are people who have to be put back in this process so that they have what they need, understanding that you need an elected official who does not come in with an agenda that is their own, but is committed to a process with people, talking to them about how my life has been about bringing people into the process. I mean, boom, boom, boom, I'm done.

I stopped saying the last word and the room was having thunderous applause. Nobody in this room is not on their feet. The woman who had made it possible for me to get there that day whispered to the person next to her and said, "Is this unusual?" And the person said to her, "This has never happened before. This has never happened before." I was on a high that day. Part of it was understanding that when you're doing what you're supposed to be doing, that there is nothing anybody can do to stop you from being good and successful at it, if you're doing what you're supposed to be doing. And I'm not just

talking about what you're supposed to be doing because you got the education or preparation, but because it is also like a spiritual destiny.

I just am real clear that there are African-Americans and whites who came together in ways they never had in various counties because of their support for me, so that that opened up some doors. I know that there are people in relationships that wouldn't have been. I got at least three couples I know, you included, who I know ended up getting married, because they met or deepened a relationship with somebody who they knew coming to one of the affairs that I had. I have been really clear that much of the work that I've been able to do in grassroots communities, providing support and training to folks as a part of my business, my ability to do my business and I have been doing my own business for four years, is in part something that got spurred from the travel I did across the state, the relationships I began to establish when I was on the campaign trail. Just a lot of things as it relates to grassroots visibility of issues and building a base, continuing to build this base through the work that I do, all of that is a part of the overall plan that got initiated by me running for U.S. Senate. I could go on and on, but I know you've got other questions, and we don't have to want to come back fifty million times. But I just have to say that that was a powerful experience.

One last thing I want to say is I can't tell you how many times I found myself fully clothed, not in the bathroom because I had to use it, but sitting on a commode just pondering why in the world am I here, scared to death, haven't a clue why I don't slip out the back door, except that I got young people who believe in me, who are volunteering for my campaign, who are outside, proud and ready for their candidate, regardless of the fact that we're a ragtag team, and I don't want to let them down. I mean, sometimes that's all

that kept me at some of those events, because they were things that were major in a way that I never expected.

The first time I went to a Young Dems [Democrats] statewide event, where it would be the first time that the Democratic candidates were going to be on a major stage talking to issues, I don't know what I expected because I'd only had two experiences with Young Dems and one was with college students over at UNC [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill], one was with Young Dems who were young professionals, mostly white, one African-American, over in Wake County. So I didn't know what to expect of this event, but I really learned that Young Dems is a training ground for the children of the existing and current elected officials to learn the political process so that they can take on, inherit the mantle that their parents pass on. I mean, it really is a training ground for new politicians. You may not have parents who are in politics, but certainly all of their children are there. And then you have some children who may learn about it and understand that that's a potential place to do it.

It ended up being every Democrat in this state, from the local to the federal level, who were at this particular event to hear these candidates. I'm thinking, "What in the world?" And that was early on, before I'd gotten real crisp and clear about making points, because as you can see, I'm very long-winded. If you've got to be thirty-second responses, one-minute responses, it takes a little practice to get to a place where you can be as concise as some of those seasoned veterans.

The other thing is that it was interesting, because I would always feel so intimidated by the candidate, because they sounded so good. And sometimes I would be gone from a event where we had been talking to the public, and I would be gone for an hour or two before I realized, for real, they didn't say anything! There was very little

substance to some of the responses, but because it sounded good and because it had some key buzzwords, I thought it was saying something. But it took a little analysis and thought later and so it made you think about kind of the dazzle that has people bewitched and keeps them from focusing on real issues. Because I mean, it's hard if people dazzle you, to think about how you analyze what they're saying and really challenge it. So anyway--.

BB: So tell me a little bit more about the Sojourner Group that you founded in 2001, right? Why the name and what's its mission?

CB: Well, the interesting thing is that I actually started that business simply because I knew I could not work for somebody and campaign at the same time. Remember I said that when I was in the City Council, when I was in that campaign, I worked for Southerners for Economic Justice. And because I have a fundamental belief that when you work for folks, that you ought to be accountable to them and that you ought to produce, I knew I could not travel around to a hundred counties in this state and campaign at the level that I needed to, without more flexibility and without a job. But that meant I needed to start my own consulting business. For a long time, I didn't have a name for it. I just was a consultant out here freelancing.

I remember Tema Okun was the first person I called, because I knew she had done consulting for a lot of years, and I just wanted to know what do I charge people for doing what I do. She said then six hundred to eight hundred dollars a day. I remember thinking, "I can't believe people get paid that much money in a day for doing work!" It blew me away. But I thought, "Boy, if somebody will give me that for what I do, then that would really help me pay my bills while I do this campaign," and that's basically what I did. Basically, I didn't even know what I knew. I just knew that if I had been working in non-profits for twenty years, that I had something to share. I had something to share not only

because of having done it all that time, but having had hired a lot of consultants to do training. I had things to offer that I had learned from what was the best of the training, as well as some of the worst. I knew what I could do to improve the training.

So fundamentally, I would say there are five key areas that I do training in, that's designed primarily to strengthen non-profit community-based organizations. I help people either start their own organization or I help them strengthen the organization by focusing on board development, talking about board roles and responsibilities and the whole range of things that they need to do to be accountable to the non-profit that they are governing. I do fiscal management, fundraising, grant-writing, work around strategic planning and program planning, and like I said, fundraising and fiscal management.

Those are key areas, but there's also tons of stuff that people ask me to do that end up being things that I draw from my experience, but they're not formal areas that I had initially planned. I help to do a lot of stuff around meeting facilitation. You may have some stuff that needs to be done or something you want to accomplish. We talk about it, I help people set up the agenda, and then I facilitate the meeting, because they need an outside, objective person to help move them from one place to another. So the whole goal is really building these folks in the community, their capacity to address the issues that they want to address, and still be accountable in these non-profit organizations that they operate.

One day I was coming back from one of the retreats that one of the groups I work for had convened, and there were three of us in the car, Savi Horne and Danyelle O'Hara. We were riding in the van and I was saying, "Y'all, I have to have a name for my business." Savi said, "Well, you need something spiritual, something that's like you, something that is reflective of you, like the Sojourner Group or something like that." And literally, she said that and I kept looking and nothing ever stuck like that. I mean, I really

like the Sojourner Group. The Sojourner Group is about the sojourn from one place to another in your development, from a place where you don't really know all that you need to know to have the capacity you need and the experience that you go through with the group that I'm working with helps you from that one place to the other.

But it's also a play on Sojourner Truth, who was an abolitionist and a women's rights activist. I started reading up. You know, you know the basics about Sojourner Truth, but to really read stuff about her, narratives about her, and to really know more about her, it reminds me of the kinds of things that are important to me, certainly women's rights and women's suffrage is really—this idea of women and their status needing to be championed in a world that is so misogynist and so patriarchal. So my beginnings in the battered women's movement really sealed my fate in terms of being a women's rights activist. But also this idea of challenging slavery at a time when women were just like chattel, as African descendents as well as women. So this idea that she represented those two things, and I certainly see those things being integral to my organizational development. We're helping people look deeper at those kinds of issues.

That's the story behind Sojourner Group. I'm real excited about Sojourner Group, because I see a lot of potential for it. It's primarily me, but I also bring different friends on to co-train with me so that we have a loose association. But I tend to find the work and then we do it. It's usually for people in my circle of friends who are tired of their job and want to get out and do this kind of stuff, or they just need to supplement their income, or they just have good skills and they'll be willing to help me out. That whole group thing stuck, because it didn't mean that there had to be a static group of people, but a dynamic group of folks who come in and out of the group.

BB: I'm glad it's going well.

CB: Yeah, me too.

BB: So, what keeps you motivated to do this kind of work and what shuts you down?

CB: There are not many things that shut me down, to be honest with you, because in my mind, there are a couple of things that motivate me, that keep me from shutting down. One is that I don't have a right to shut down. When people shut down, I think it's a luxury that they afford themselves. I don't knock people when they have to take a break, because I don't think anybody can go without taking a break. But for us to decide, as privileged as we are, in a world where there is so much pain and suffering, and that we, even without suffering in the United States, have more privilege than most people on the planet, I think that there are just far too many privileges that we have, first and foremost, to just take the luxury of saying that I'm not going to try to do anything about this world that we live in. I think that from a spiritual point of view, that we all were born into a certain destiny to do things to help make this world a better place.

There are lots of people who have gone before us, who have dealt with this world, trying to make a difference when they had a lot less to work with than we do. You look at people like Ella Baker [African-American civil rights activist], or you look at the Malcolms [Malcolm X, a Muslim minister, founder of the Nation of Islam, and civil rights activist] Martins [Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.] and the Sojourner Truths. I have a light-plate cover in my bedroom and I bought that thing because I thought, "This is how you contextualize this work." It says, "Sometimes I get so tired and then I remember what Harriet Tubman did for a living." When you consider that there are tons of people who have gone before us, who have made it possible for us to be where we are, then it's just that we're one in a line of people who are supposed to be doing things to keep this world

going and to bring some kind of justice and balance into the world. Even when I find myself getting down, usually it's because I'm tired, I feel overwhelmed by the circumstances. But it doesn't take long before I can break it apart and say, "What is it that's overwhelming me? What is it I can do something about? What is it I can find somebody else to help me something about? What is it that I got to let go of, because it's not mine to deal with right now?" Usually, once I can break it apart, find some part that I can deal with, once I take a few steps, it opens up my vision about what's possible and what I can do, as well as other people who can help play a part in it.

So suffering around me—the suffering and the injustice motivates the heck out of me. And it does get overwhelming, but I'm telling you that fundamentally, nothing will change if we are not working to make a change. I'll tell you the hardest part in making decisions is that, I don't know, making decisions about how you're going to approach the work so that you're more and more effective. I'm saying that partly because I was thinking about a conversation I had the other day.

I think it's a serious issue to think about how you're going to approach work with diverse groups of people. I'm not even trying to avoid saying what I want to say. I want to contextualize what I'm about to say. As I look at what's happening to African-American people in this country right now and all over this planet, looking at how people of color are treated, and I think about the challenge of working with white people to challenge the racism, the fundamental white supremacy that operates on this planet, there are times when I have come to the conclusion, and it's a very difficult conclusion, that there are times when black folks and people of color can't work with white folks. Because the compromise that is required when you're working with whites, who have not reconciled the privilege they experience in this system and the reality of this white supremacy—I

can't get into the mind of whites who are justice-minded who are not willing to do whatever is necessary to truly dismantle this system in a way that eliminates the privilege that's built in, the inherent privilege that's built in for some and not for others.

The thing that's so bizarre to me is that we get so caught up into the racism that we end up, people end up supporting things that are not in their own interest, to maintain the privilege that they think that they have or that they feel that they have. And so fundamentally, just trying to think about who it is you're going to choose to work with, and what priorities you set in terms of who you work with and how you work with them, knowing that fundamentally in my heart, I believe that if we don't all work together, we're going to all perish together. But knowing that each time, you got a limited amount of time and a limited amount of resources, and who are the people that you find most strategic at a given point.

BB: All right, let me flip the tape here.

END OF TAPE 3, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 3, SIDE B

BB: Yeah, you know Anne Braden [white, anti-racist activist] just died this week. Did you see that?

CB: Oh Lord, no!

BB: Isn't that a loss for people of color, for white people--?

CB: That is heartbreaking. Oh God, I didn't know that. Oh God, I'm so sad to hear that. I knew her back in my Kentucky days and I always liked her. God, I always liked her. Where was she living?

BB: In the northwest, maybe. I'm not sure.

CB: I hadn't seen her in a lot of years, but that is--. You know what, let me tell you something. We got to step to the plate in a real way, because I'm telling you that we are losing a lot of folk, people who I wasn't as pleased at this point—some of this stuff has gotten so bourgie [bourgeoisie]. Just to think about a whole era, I mean, Ossie Davis [African-American entertainer and civil rights activist] and a whole lot of these activists, even Rosa Parks [African-American civil rights leader famous for refusing to give up her seat on a segregated city bus and sparking the Montgomery, AL Bus Boycott]. I mean she ushered in an era, people talked about that forever, but it's a whole era that's leaving their body here, girl, and we got to step to the plate in a real way.

BB: Do you think that there are some leaders like that who are really doing kind of radical--

CB: Girl, please close this thing up. [A can of mixed nuts.] I'll be eating these things 'til it's an empty shell. (laughter)

BB: You're eating these peanuts. They're good for you, lots of protein.

CB: Thank God. I mean, I think I'm one of them kind of leaders; I think other people are. I think that we're just operating in a different climate, a different context, different kinds of challenges. But the reality is we absolutely need folks to be ready to take some risks to do stuff different. We can't be worried about trying to be politically correct, because it makes the difference in whether or not people die or live. When I consider right now the fact that they are about to eliminate Roe v. Wade, and that we saw it coming, the

fact that we live in a time where there are no checks and balances on our government, that the Democratic Party is the other side of the Republican Party, their interests are primarily corporate interests and the interests of the wealthy, and that because we don't have an alternative to that moneyed corporate interest, so much of what meets the needs of the masses of the people is not going to be in place with a conservative Supreme Court, a conservative Congress, and in a conservative presidency. Because political process has become so disengaged from real people.

To me there's something sick about the fact that people expect that the masses of people in the community are going to be going to the polls to vote for folks who they know are not getting ready to do anything for them. So it's totally disingenuous to think that somehow you're going to motivate people to go to the polls, and you're not putting a new agenda forward to speaks to how things are going to be different. In the absence of that, it's not enough to forewarn people of doom and gloom when they're operating in an environment where they're struggling with survival. The doom and gloom is already here for them. They don't have a clue that things can get a whole lot worse and they can. I just think that there are a number of us who could do better than we're doing, because we need to take more risks.

There are those of us who are doing a number of things and they just don't get the visibility. I mean, there are a number of people out here, but they don't have the access to the mediums to help people hear those voices in a mass way. I think that there are so many of us—like I'm not sure, in some ways, I think that the non-profit sector has been a wonderful thing because of the kind of services provided to the community. On the other hand, there's a way that these infrastructures have given people a way to create their own entity to address community problems, that prevented them or kept them from forcing

themselves to have to come together in a way that they would have to partner on things. If you get your own non-profit and you can raise your own grants and you can survive and have a job, have income, and you've got a focus, there's just too much splintering in our community that I think is helped by being able to set up a non-profit. It keeps you from having to force yourself to reconcile your differences so that you can build a mass base that's unified.

So, I don't know. The thing that I feel fairly certain about is that things are going to get a lot worse before they better and there's going to have to be a lot more suffering. I think that's tragic, but it seems to be human nature that until enough people are hurting and there's some common analysis about their pain, that people don't get the sense that they need to be working together to be able to overcome the stuff that's oppressing them.

BB: I hate all this construction sound. I'm so sorry.

CB: And it started up right after we started talking.

BB: Yeah, it did. Let me pause for a second so we can talk about this.

[tape interruption]

BB: All right, so we moved to Cynthia Brown's house on Ward Street. What's your address, 1920?

CB: Mmm hmm.

BB: Dang, I can't believe I remembered that! So 1920 Ward Street, a little quieter here. Let's just pick up where we left out. You were talking about working with the group and not just a group, but society at large, the issues of people of color and white folks working together: How possible is it? What does it look like? What are the barriers to it? So what were you just saying?

CB: Well, let me say that when I think about my orientation to the world, because I wasn't a child of the 60s, but what I remember was this feeling that the 60s was about something exciting, about change and possibilities of a future where life would be better for African-Americans in this country. It was all an intellectual endeavor and I mean intellectual from the perspective of, it is a matter of my having read that history and being excited about it, but not living actively in that time period, so that I got to really understand and have an analysis about the level of inequity.

Because the segregated school that I grew up in was a school that was one of my favorite places in my history as a student. Because I remember crying, *literally*, when they desegregated the schools; I was devastated. Because I was born in '58, so the desegregation had probably come years before, but I actually was going into the fifth grade before I had to go into a racially integrated classroom. What that meant was that I would no longer be in a school that had all of the grades, which meant all my relatives were in the same school with me. That is really significant to me, because the segregated school I remember is not the school that people talk about pre-Brown v. Board of Education forty years ago. What I remember was a school system where all of my relatives were there in the same school with me, and I felt very at home. I happened to start school in a brand-new school.

All of that being said, I was always, as I got older, charged up and excited and wished that I lived in the 60s, because I loved that whole idea of radicalism and of challenging the status quo, of fighting for people's rights. Well, I literally was almost an adult when I realized that the civil rights movement as a formal period of time may have been over, but the struggles that the civil rights movement was about were struggles that still needed to be waged. Through my work with the battered women's movement and

ultimately around economic justice and worker's rights, I began to see that these are the same kinds of issues that the civil rights movement was about. So I grew up and worked in environments where they were very racially integrated. They were environments where we constantly talked about the issue of racism and white supremacy and the need for whites to recognize their privilege. But all of my consciousness around my work was about working with whites as a part of the struggle for justice.

I always encountered people who were black nationalists, who talked about building up the community, talked about the evil of whites, talked about the need for us to build our own. I have recognized that for me, it is not an either/or endeavor, that there are large parts of my time that have to be spent building institutions within the black community for black folks to have the capacity to meet their own needs. Because as long as the system that we operate in, operates in a way that is hostile and even violent and intent on not addressing the needs of black folk, black folk better be thinking about how to meet their own needs. Most ethnic groups do that. Even though I abhor the [Klu Klux] Klan and Nazi white supremacists' approach, even their racist activity is about not just killing off other people, but preserving their own. When Latinos come into this community and build their own stores and they build their own institutions, it is about meeting their own needs.

I think African-Americans have to be about the business of building their own institutions to meet their own needs, as an alternative to simply keep trying to push against a white supremacist system that's hell-bent on not giving them what they deserve. I do think that because we have tax dollars that go into this system and that we ultimately all need to be operating and coexisting peacefully, that I also want to use part of my time to push against this system, to make it transform to be something that meets the needs of

everybody who lives in the society. But to me, I've come to the place where I don't see it as an either/or endeavor. I'm going to tell you that while I have always understood that—no, while I have come to that analysis through my respect and appreciation for my black nationalist friends and comrades. I have really become confirmed in that belief when I watch what happened down in New Orleans during Katrina.

Because when it becomes clear to you that you're operating with a government that genuinely cut off people's access to survival, not accidentally, not just because they are poorly organized, but because they actually see African-American people as sacrificial lambs, African-American people first and then poor people. It's almost hard for me, I've always resisted, as I said, this hierarchy of oppression, but it's clear to me that blacks weren't the only ones who were in New Orleans being hurt. But you cannot ignore the primacy or the central role of race in who was being ignored and not prepared for, not supported, not rescued in that tragedy. But clearly, you can't ignore the fact that there were poor white people who were still there too and that their class played a role in that.

I never wanted to think that it wasn't possible for us to do this thing with good white folks. Clearly, I understand that even with some of the white allies that I've had, that there comes a real limit to how much they really are willing to give up. I don't think it's necessarily just because they're bad people. I think that it is scary as heck, given how privileged we've grown up in this country, to think about going to the mat and sacrificing everything for what you know is right if it means that you're going to have to do without basic fundamental needs that you are accustomed to having met. I don't beat up on folk. What I do is say that we better be about the business of making sure that we can provide what we need for our community in a real kind of way. Because this government structure that we're operating in, that really is based more on profit than it is on humanity, is not a

government that we can trust to meet our needs, from law enforcement to human services and everything in between.

It just seems to me foolhardy not to deal with the reality that there have to be institutions built in the black community, so that when the government starts talking about keeping folks from getting access to water, that we got ways of getting water to people when they need it. That when the government says that it is not going to five food stamps to people, it is eliminating access to public assistance for people who are poor. At the same time that you're talking about eliminating people's legal right to public existence in times of crisis, it's at the same time that you're eliminating jobs throughout this country in communities all over.

I would not want to believe that this is possible, but I can't deny that I believe that there will be a time when black folks and Latinos, and poor whites, if they don't have a way to meet their own needs, they will be left to die, because that's exactly what happened to people in New Orleans. They were left to die. Every time they organized themselves with all of those people narratives that came out, every time they organized themselves to be able to get access to help, the law enforcement infrastructure, more concerned about the public image of what was happening, would disband them, give them false hope that there was a place that they could go get help, just to disband them so that they wouldn't be able to have access to the media to convey the dire nature of what was happening. So I'm just pretty clear that if we are not doing what we need to do to build up institutions, the doctors and lawyers in our community have got to understand the importance of being able to have a crisis response to provide legal, medical, and every other kind of need that black folk need. Because if we're not doing that for ourselves, then there are a whole lot of folks that are not going to do it for us.

That's not to ignore the good folks who have come from these colleges and universities to do volunteer help, but I'm saying that is not enough. It's not enough. And especially if it happens on a mass scale. If it happens on a mass scale, where these students come from white communities that are working-class and poor that are also going to be in a dire strait, they're going to go home before they come to our communities, many of them.

Therefore, we better have an infrastructure in place to meet our needs. When I say it's going to get worse before it gets better, I think that until people figure out in the more dire crisis that if we don't work together, that we're all going to die, until people are forced to recognize the reality of that, that we're going to keep operating in our little fiefdoms, in our little islands of race and class and identity. Something else is going to have to push us beyond ourselves to do something that unites us against an oppressive system that don't have no respect for any of us. This creates an illusion for us that we have more privilege, or gives us a little bit more privilege than the next person, so that we're willing to sacrifice the other, whoever the other is, until you don't have any choice.

BB: Will you say some more about your vision of what's needed in terms of white people giving up privilege? You mentioned resources [for example]. Say a little bit more about why a lot of white people get scared when it comes up to a certain point about letting go of some privilege and even down to human needs and resources. What's your thinking around that?

CB: Well, I want to be as concrete as possible. At the same time, I think it's an insult to white people to try to say what I think their fears are, because I think white people have to speak to that. But at least in some of my experiences, like right now I am working

in a commission with whites who right now, to speak the truth as I see it about some of the things that we're looking at—

BB: Is this the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Greensboro?

CB: It is, and I'm a little bit hesitant to give too much detail. Because for me to give an example, I need to go to something that's uppermost in my mind, and that's in my mind. So I want to be careful because we haven't published our final report. I also want to be careful, because I know this is going to be public. I'm trying to draw from these experiences, but in a way that I don't--.

Well, whatever it is I'm trying to do, let me try to be as straight as I can about making this point. Because there are people, whites, who are on this commission who I think, and not all whites but a couple of them, who I think have relationships. These are people who are up in age, who have lived a certain lifestyle their entire life or most of their life, and they have a certain status in their community among whites, who think very similar to the way that they do. They are engaged in a process, this Truth and Reconciliation process, where to acknowledge any role that race played in what happened on November third to acknowledge any role that public institutions played in this, means that you have to challenge people whose respect you want. [The Greensboro massacre occurred on November 3, 1979 in Greensboro, North Carolina. It was the culmination of attempts by the Maoist Communist Workers Party (CWP) to organize industrial workers, predominantly black, in the area. Five CWP marchers were killed by members of the Klu Klux Klan.] You have to challenge and risk the loss of relationship and status in the community where these people are your peers, these white privileged leaders of the Greensboro community. Now how willing are people, even as they see that things are

wrong, to risk the loss of those relationships and their status in the community? That's concretely what I'm talking about.

I'm also talking about historically, when people have seen something unjust happening: you're in a workplace; you have a job as a supervisor. You see that racist things are happening, but to say something means you risk either losing your status as a supervisor or your job even. Because you know that the culture of that environment is a racist culture that says that people of color don't deserve the same level of dignity and respect. You know that if you go up against that, you risk job loss. That's what I'm talking about. I ain't mad with folk for really wanting to hold onto their job, but what I am mad with is right now, recognizing that sometimes you risk a job for a higher ideal and that ideal--.

See this is again where my faith in God comes from. You can get another job, you can create a job, but you've got to be right. You've got to be willing to stand up. I'm telling you I know from my own personal experience, it ain't the easiest thing in the world to do. But the bottom line is that we have to get to a place, just like when I was talking about running for office and people saying, "I know you're the best candidate, but you can't win." Well, if all the people who said I couldn't win had actually for me, I could have won. But we are in this deficit mentality, this fear mode, where our fear of loss ends up dictating that we not stand up or take risks, to stand up for what's right. I'm talking about concrete losses that people risk and being able to say, "Is this loss a loss that I am willing to suffer for what's right?" Understanding that in the long run, it's a greater benefit for me to deal with this loss than to support a system that, if oppressive to this group of people, could ultimately turn around and be oppressive to me.

Because I'm going to tell you something, it is working class white people's willingness to support a system where African-Americans and Latinos and other people of color had the foot of oppression pressed on their neck; to support that system is why you have a system that has perpetuated itself. So now it is reaching up into the race line, up to white working-class people, straight up to white management, straight up to anybody who is not an owner in these companies.

And as I talk, I'm beginning to just articulate what I have known in my head, but not been able to articulate about the primacy of race in this culture. While I have a hard time talking about a hierarchy of oppression, I can't deny that race is central to all of the other oppressions. When you open the door for one group of people to be mishandled, to be abused, to be discriminated against, you leave the door open for that rationale for their oppression to be a rationale for oppression, and to be justifying oppression of people throughout the system.

In these same corporate cultures where it has been acceptable to treat people as racists and overlook people for promotions, to make racial slurs or to do racist epithets, like the little dolls with the little noose hanging around their neck left in people's lockers [a reference to an incident in December 2002 at the NC Department of Transportation where a noose was hung in public view], those are the same corporate environments where now people who have college degrees go into those workplaces—they've done all the right things, they've gotten an education, they've worked late at night, and they come in and find out that they're laid off today and rehired as a part-time temporary contract worker by the next day. Those things are not disconnected in my mind.

I'm saying that when you don't stand up, like Pastor Niemoeller's [Martin Niemoeller was a Protestant pastor born January 14, 1892, in Lippstadt, Westphalia who

was imprisoned by the Nazi's during World War II] thing, you don't stand up for people who the system is coming after, you don't stand up for one group, and before long, they'll be coming after you. That's real. That is real and until we get to a place where we're forced to understand that—and I can see that as the ultimate reality. But in the face of that ultimate reality, I can't deny that if black folks are not about the business of meeting the needs of the black community, the descendents of slaves understanding that their survival depends on being there creating institutions that meet the needs of our people, honey, we ain't going to make it! We are not going to make it. Because I just look at how African-Americans are treated and I realize that it's a distorted picture, but to look in the prison system and to see that twelve percent of the population is represented by over forty-eight or forty-nine percent of the population in the prison system is African-Americans. To know that they are arrested more, but it's not because they're committing more crimes, it's because of the preferential treatment of the whites versus people of color in that system of arrest, certain kinds of selective prosecution, deals made, that kind of thing. To look at who's higher in all of the negative statistics of social well being, and to see that distorted or disproportionately impacting people of color--.

I don't know that I spoke specifically to your question, but I'm just saying that the reality of what I'm looking at around me indicates that you can't have a one-pronged approach, and certainly, when people are still saying to you that you need to bide your time and you need to give it a chance for the system to be responsive. I mean to be justified at this point not being able to find African-Americans in top levels of management in companies, to be justified not being able to find adequate resources for African-Americans or other people of color, or even poor people for affordable housing—I mean, we're in the richest nation in the world. To even rationalize why not give people decent wages or make

sure that they have access to affordable, basic necessities, even if you don't increase their income, in the richest nation in the world, there is something fundamentally insane about that. I just think that there are a lot of us who are lulled into this false sense of security, that keeps us from being willing to work together within the races as well as across race lines. It's that insanity that allows the system to perpetuate itself so out of control, where you have people at the top constantly getting the benefit of our lack of unity and organization.

BB: Do you want to say a little bit more about the history of the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission? It's the first one in the United States and you've been a commissioner, they call you, right, since 2004. Do you want to say a little bit more about what that is and what you've learned from it to the point that you're comfortable, since it's still ongoing?

CB: Well you know the commission came into being because survivors of November third, 1979 decided that they would work with people throughout the community.

BB: '79?

CB: 1979. I'm going to talk about what happened on November third, 1979. But I'm saying the commission itself came into being, because people who survived that brutal attack are still working with people in the community across various sectors in a project called The Greensboro Community Truth and Reconciliation Project. That project, as one of its strategies, pulled together this commission, identifying seven people to be commissioners who would look at the sequence of events that led to November third, 1979, the context, the sequence of events on that day, as well as the consequences: the context, sequence, and consequences of November third, 1979.

What actually happened on November third, 1979 really did end up culminating into an explosion that was very volatile and ending up being tragic for five people. But it was something that grew out of activists' activity around organizing to challenge racist institutions like the Klan. There had been this group called Workers' Viewpoint Organization, that was a national organization as far as I can tell right now, that had made a decision at the national level to call itself the Communist Workers' Party. They had this "Death to the Klan" rally that, as near as I can tell, was about challenging the institution of racism that manifested itself in the Klan. But they said, "Death to the Klan," and they had this rhetoric that was something that ended up being really volatile and inspired the Klan to come and interrupt an organized, legally licensed rally and march. It was convened at Morningside Public Housing Community in Greensboro. Before they could start their march, while they were still at the rallying point, a caravan of Klan Nazis, the Klan and Nazis had come together to challenge this rally, and supposedly they were only going to throw eggs at the group and disrupt the activity. But what they ended up doing was actually saying that they were provoked and defending themselves, and ended up taking guns out of the trunks of their cars and shooting on this rally, killing five Communist Workers' Party members.

The issue for the commission is looking at again the sequence of events on that day, what kind of factors contributed to making that thing happen, and what are the consequences. There has been a severe denial on the part of people throughout that community that race had anything to do with it.

BB: White people and black people?

CB: I think mostly whites, but I mean, the idea is that this was—first of all, this immediate kind of reaction to suggest that the purpose of this thing, some people suggest,

was just some martyrdom on the part of the Communist Workers' Party, to try to get publicity and get people, bring them to their cause. But there was also this whole idea that people started to immediately talk about these being two radical groups who were outsiders, who came into this town and had this cataclysmic explosion and had nothing to do with Greensboro. So the community itself, through the media and through the various political institutions, tried to distance itself from this event.

Just in terms of some preliminary learnings that I can speak to as a part of doing this process, is that when you do a Truth and Reconciliation Commission and you bring people together who are coming across race lines, across gender, across age lines, there's a lot of dynamics that get created just within that group who have no history together. Just the struggle and personal transformation that's required to be in the room together to talk about difficult issues is an important kind of learning on my part, this idea that you want to do what you've been mandated to do and you still want to have a respectful exchange with these people. You want to be able to speak your mind, but people who you are working with don't have the experience or the comfort level to deal directly with the issue of race. Trying to figure out how it is that you prepare people to be in relationship with each other, that is as much a part of this work in my mind, as it is the analysis of what happened and to make recommendations.

The whole thing is that it is a Truth *and* Reconciliation Commission and I think one of the challenges is that people have different definitions of what it means to become reconciled. They have different definitions and thoughts about who it is that needs to become reconciled. But the other thing is that I think that people have this illusion. We had a mandate to do this work in a year with the possibility of a six-month extension, which meant eighteen months. You can't get reconciliation over these kinds of issues in eighteen

months and I think we've already asked for a little bit more of an extension. So ultimately, it will be close to two years anyway. But you can't get reconciliation over these lifelong issues that we've been dealing with around race and class and gender and stuff in two years.

The most that our commission can do is to do an analysis of what actually happened and what led to it and what the consequences are, but at the same time, looking at what are the recommendations we can make about what individuals, what the community can do to begin to move toward reconciliation. There won't be reconciliation at the end of this process. I think that being called a Truth and Reconciliation Commission is a misnomer and leads people to think that something's possible that I don't think is possible. So you've got the issue around the relationship building between the commissioners. You've got this whole clarity that needs to be sought about what it is we're trying to do and what's realistic about what we can do, in terms of uncovering the truth and making recommendations toward reconciliation.

This whole process has been really amazing, looking at how institutions, seeing examples—because see you had this way that you understand that institutions contribute to perpetuating white supremacy and how institutions can let the community down, because they become self-perpetuating entities that have their own agenda that is separate from protecting the community. The fact that we have looked at how the police could possibly not have been in a community to protect this community, when there were two groups coming together who had had a prior history of conflict with each other, and to have a group like the Klan and underestimate the potential for danger or violence. It's just absolutely amazing that you could have an institution that people are supposed to have faith in, people want to be able to believe that they can trust law enforcement to protect

them, and then to be looking at situations where they have failed and to know about the fallibility of those institutions, and to think about right now, when the police department in Greensboro is under investigation for a history of stuff that could go back to November third, 1979 and beyond.

This experience has been about recognizing the imperfection and the outright complicity of our major institutions in creating some of the oppression in our community and the violence in our community. It has been a challenge to deal with that and to think about how do you approach talking about what the community's role is in doing something about that. How do you talk about reconciling with an institution that is on its own agenda, that has very little to do with the community, and the communities who you're asking to be reconciled with these various institutions?

The role of the media, I mean it is amazing to me the kind of control that the media has in controlling what people think about a given situation, and how they had the opportunity to raise critical issues even in the most common everyday language, but they choose to cast a certain spin with a certain agenda, Just thinking about what is that all about, what needs to be done about that?

The other piece then is how you come up with reasonable and rational recommendations that come out of the context of this analysis of the truth and has concrete possibility to bring about reconciliation. Then, how do you take this report and make it as widely accessible as possible and connect it to enough people who have a commitment to those recommendations becoming real? Because people produce reports every day and they end up sitting on a shelf and collecting dust. So for most of us, if not all us at the table, we are concerned about maximizing people's access to the report and the recommendations and then ensuring that we are building a network of organizations and

individuals who really want to do something with it, so that there is a possibility that something will happen.

But even in this process, to be honest with you, this is one of the places where this question of: "Is this the right thing to do, to work with white folk on some of these issues?" Because the compromise that's required to keep them at the table sometimes is too much. The interesting this is when I said that the other day, their whole thing was, "You have a responsibility to yourself and who you represent to then do a minority report." I think that that's absolutely true, but what doing a minority report does is it prevents the people at the table from stretching themselves beyond what they normally would do or say. I don't have a concrete example right now, because I'm thinking that it would be much more helpful with this point to have a concrete example. Because right now, there's a possibility that, there are things that we're debating, and I don't know the end result. But I would rather that we push ourselves to a genuine consensus, rather than a consensus that is a compromise consensus just to make sure that everybody's willing to stay at the table with this final report. It's a real struggle, because you're coming from two totally different worlds as you discuss some of these issues, you know?

BB: Thanks. It reminds me of something you were just saying a minute ago about a big lesson I've learned in organizing over the years, that planning for the follow-up about an event or a process can sometimes be as important, maybe even more important than just mobilizing or making the thing happen. But like the organizing piece on the back end, once it's done, is just another huge chunk of work. And so thinking about that, anticipating it, budgeting for it, building it into how you set up the whole process, is a real big piece of work.

CB: Absolutely.

BB: Do you think there's a difference between activism and organizing?

CB: Well, I've heard people make distinctions and I guess I can see a distinction, partly because activism is you're just acting and giving visibility to an issue and you' re maybe doing direct action kinds of activities, whereas organizing is really about building organizations, creating institutions. Frankly, I don't think it's an either/or endeavor to support one strategy versus the other. I think both are important. But I think that ultimately, whatever you're an activist around, if you don't put legs up under it and an organization up under it to pick up, to carry forward an agenda to deal with whatever you are being an activist about, and then ultimately to create institutions to take on new issues as they emerge, that it is a lot less sustainable, I guess is what I'm thinking about. It has a lot less continuity in terms of--. I mean, I could be an activist and be raising a lot of issues about the lack of affordable housing, but if there's not some organization that ultimately will push an agenda to try to get a fund to support affordable housing, to organize the people who don't have affordable housing, who is working on a campaign to try to get monies put into a trust fund that helps make housing affordable, whatever it is, if all you're doing is trying to raise people's consciousness and being an activist that's not plugged into a collective--. Because I think you can be an activist and not have folks behind you. You could just be a spokesperson about an issue, outspoken about it, and be out advocating and stuff. I mean, I would think that could be an activist.

But an organizer is somebody who's not even necessarily the spokesperson, that you may not even see the organizer. The organizer's the one who's mobilizing and then ultimately building an organization with people who then take on this message-bringing and the organizing and the work of trying to bring about a certain kind of change.

So that's kind of the distinction I see. But I don't think there's anything that I can say bad about being an activist, unless you're constantly stirring up stuff and you're not plugging in with somebody who can help make sure that something happens as it relates to the issues that you're raising or agitating about.

BB: How are you doing? Do you need a break? You okay?

CB: I'm good.

BB: So to back up a little bit, you've been involved with the Latino Community Development Center, right, and the Latino Credit Union, at least in 2000? So why'd you decide to get involved with them?

CB: Well you know, it's funny, because for me, so much of what I've done grows out of relationships. Ivan Kohar Parra had not been the United States very long when I met him. As a matter of fact, when I met him, he didn't even hardly speak English. He had somebody with him who was translating for him. My first meeting with him, we sat down and talked through a translator about what he wanted to do to help El Centro Hispano, which I don't know was even called that at the time. El Centro used to be a ministry of the Episcopal and the Catholic Church. So he was going to be taking over for the young man, Paul—do you remember him? I don't Paul's last name. It's something starting with a V, I think. But anyway, Paul was going to be leaving and he had been working with the Latino community through this ministry. He was bringing Ivan around to meet with various folk, because he saw that--. I think somebody had decided that they would spin off this ministry and make it an independent organization, and Ivan would be the person who would end up being the director.

Anyway, my involvement with El Centro at its very early beginnings was as the staff person at SEJ who made sure that a lot of the training that we were doing to build

community-based capacity, that the Latino group was being invited to those various trainings. I worked with Paul Terranova—that was his name. I worked with Paul Terranova and Ivan to understand budgets, to understand fundraising, to identity potential fundraising sources, to help spin this thing off, and then ultimately engage them in like program-planning workshops, different things.

It was out of the work of El Centro, in conjunction with El Pueblo and some other folks that the Latino Credit Union was born. I happened to be on the City Council at the time that there was this rash of robberies with Latinos who could not access banking services though the traditional banking community. Because they could not access traditional banking services, they ultimately had to identify new ways for people to be able to bank. So that's where the Latino Credit Union came from. Ultimately, because of my involvement with Ivan, with El Centro, with other people in the Latino community, when they ended up forming the credit union advisory board to review grants, I was asked to be on it.

END OF TAPE 3, SIDE B

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CB: So the deal is that I had worked with El Centro, knew Ivan ultimately because of my involvement coming to their community forums, when they were inviting in City Council representatives, inviting in the police department to raise understanding among public officials about the kinds of violent attacks that were happening, because they didn't have access to banking services. Ultimately out of that organizing, they ended up working

with other folks in the community to start the Latino Credit Union. When they started that Latino Credit Union, they asked me to serve on their loan advisory committee and I did that. What that really did was make me realize how I have got to go back and learn Spanish, because I happened to be the only person on the advisory committee who didn't speak Spanish. I really need to get back on track in terms of trying to learn Spanish.

Even when I was working for SEJ and in the Kellogg Fellowship, there were various times when I was afforded the opportunity to interact with Latinos, even back to the battered women's movement, so that I was always conscious of some of the same kinds of issues affecting the Latino community, that were affecting the African-American, and other workers. But I also became very conscious as time went on about issues specific to the Latino community. That means issues relating to immigration, the H2 [-A] worker program, and how workers are brought in from other countries to exploit them as cheaper labor.

Going down to Juarez, Mexico as a part of my—actually, I went to Taos, New Mexico and then El Paso, Texas, visiting with Kellogg fellows and looking at issues in that environment. When I was in El Paso, I happened to be introduced to an organization that was doing a lot of work with immigrant workers and did a lot of work with workers who were coming across the border and being exploited by contractors, who were taking the Latinos into the fields. [I began] just looking at the working conditions, looking at the work arrangements that made them vulnerable as workers, and then becoming very conscious of the kind of impact that US corporations were having on the economy in Mexico, that ended up literally forcing Latinos over the border into the United States looking for better wages, better than what were being paid in Mexico, but much lower than what was being paid to US workers, which created a really bad kind of dynamic, looking at

issues as it related to the spraying of the fields and the toxins that were compromising the health of Latino workers. So over the years, I've just had various connections that then made me connect to this question of making sure that the Latino community had access to resources to build up their community, the same way that I looked at any other workers in the community.

BB: And in 2003, you became a founding member of the North Carolina Coalition on Black and Brown Civic Participation, right?

CB: Mmm hmm.

BB: And "brown" there means Latino only?

CB: Actually, it was primarily looking at Latino community. But that is an organization that actually was formed, should be active now, but I actually ended up by default formulating that organization. There was not enough real concrete support for that organization to exist beyond the election cycle that we were in. We didn't form it just because of that election cycle, but the excitement and the resources to support it happened to be around the excitement about trying to mobilize people to participate in that election that year. But since then, because of my business, because of my role in the commission, I haven't been able to do anything with it. So it really is basically an organization that's on hold. But the goal was to help bridge an alliance between African-American and Latino voters, so that they could, one, become more informed about the electoral process and better equipped to participate in it, but also to build alliances across issues that were impacting both communities, and to strengthen the relationship in a way that didn't allow people outside of the community to exploit our differences and our language barriers and what-not so that we could be pitted against each other. But it was all about civic participation as a core kind of issue, toward some of those other broader goals.

BB: And you've also been involved in the campaign finance reform movement. You served on the board of what was Democracy South and now, Democracy North Carolina, for a long time. Did you get involved in those issues when you were on the Durham City Council? When were you first involved with that?

CB: Honey, I don't know. I don't know, because I was connected to the Institute for Southern Studies when it was just an idea to form Democracy South, and then was not formally involved, I don't think, when the split happened between Democracy South and then Democracy North Carolina was formed, but ultimately was recruited to serve on the board of Democracy North Carolina. And once again, it's all about relationships. I mean, people ask you and if they're people you know and like and respect their work: Bob Hall is somebody I've known for a long time. [Rev.] Carrie Bolton was involved in the board; she was somebody I'd known for a long time. Peter Walz I knew—probably met through the work. There were various people who were encouraging me to get on the board, so I got on there because of them.

It had very little to do…I mean, I understood the issue, but it wasn't my issue of the day. But over time, as you begin to really become clear about the role of money in politics, it's clear that you can only organize so many people in the community to fight a system and have any impact, if the way that the machinery is greased with that money is not changed. So I've had limited involvement, primarily on the boards of these organizations and supporting the program that they have. But beyond that, I can't say that I've actually been out here knocking on doors and organizing around that issue, but certainly supporting other people's efforts to organize around that issue.

BB: That reminds me. I meant to ask you, in the Democratic primary campaign, you said you raised near fifty thousand dollars. What was the average amount that Bowles and—

CB: I told you, I don't know what the average number was, but I know that there were hundreds of thousands of dollars raised. I want to guesstimate that Elaine Marshall had close to half a million. I don't know how much [Dan] Blue did, but I would say his approached half a million, but closer to three hundred thousand, guesstimating. Because these numbers are coming out of the air, but they're rooted in some memory. And then I know [Erskine] Bowles raised over a million dollars. I mean, three hundred thousand dollars is nothing to sneeze at, when all you raised is under fifty. So what I could've done with three hundred thousand dollars, honey, was possibly win. (laughter) Because the key thing is people using money for name recognition, signs and commercials, and those things that would help put their name on people's minds when they go vote. But the other piece is paying people to actually be out in the community knocking doors and working polls on Election Day. Needless to say, I wouldn't say this about any of my competitors in that race, although you might be able to assume that some money was being used to buy votes, but I don't know. I mean, I'm not saying that about those candidates in particular, but certainly that's what some of the money goes to in these campaigns.

BB: So what are some other political issues you've been involved over the years that we haven't touched on yet?

CB: I don't know. I mean, like I said, I have mentioned a lot of them and it takes one of these kinds of conversations for me to remember how many issues: campaign finance reform, anything dealing with workers' rights, workers' health and safety, living wage, minimum wage. It's amazing to me. I didn't even realize I had been connected to

this many issues, getting women access to jobs and non-traditional jobs, going all the way back to women's opportunity in road construction work, battered women's issues.

I have not been as involved, but have been deeply concerned and have supported allies who are working on issues connected to the prison-industrial complex. Because I don't see what's happening around the growth of prisons separate and apart from the kind of crazy approaches that we have to economic development in our communities, where you build a prison and end up with a lot of industry going inside the prison, in a community where people are losing jobs left and right and there are law-abiding citizens who need a way to support their families. Exploiting the labor of prisoners to the sacrifice of people having jobs in the community is crazy. But you know, this whole idea that these prisons are not separate and apart from people who advocate for "three strikes, you're out," so that you can have a lifetime supply of labor locked in these prisons, and the idea that you have people who own the prisons, who not only own the prisons, but actually have connections to or own the security contracts for those prisons and the food contracts for those prisons, so that it's an industry. It's based more on profit and people making a living off this system, than it has to do with protecting the public. That's not an issue I've worked on as much, but it's something that I have been very concerned about and supported other folks in doing. I'm tired.

BB: You're getting tired? Okay, so you want two more little questions?

CB: Okay.

BB: What's next for you?

CB: That's a good question. (laughter) I don't know. I do believe that I will get involved in electoral politics again. I am struggling right now about the time that it takes to engage in electoral politics and the amount of money it takes, the time, and the fact that I

keep trying to figure out if that's the best use of my time and talent given all the needs that our community has. So I'll continue working with the Conservation Fund, which is one of my biggest clients, that's working with people to look at economic development that adheres to principles around environmental conservation, social justice, and economic development that is based on the asset of natural resources in your community. So people are talking about things like eco-tourism, heritage and cultural tourism, looking at environmentally sensitive kinds of development.

Just the idea that I will continue to work with groups through the Sojourner Group to strengthen their capacity and to build their consciousness about the political environment that we're operating in, which mitigates against really trying to do holistic development that pays attention not just to the flora and the fauna and the land, air, and water, but also to the people in that environment, and to constantly work in different ways to keep people from buying into the notion that you got to sacrifice your environment to have a decent job, looking at supporting the development of institutions in the African-American community, so that the needs of African-American people can be met, whether or not this government is standing or not.

I think that the government that we are operating under is set to self-destruct. I think it's set to self-destruct, because you cannot mete out the level of misery and the level of invasion in people's humanity—and I'm saying invasion because I'm thinking about this whole idea that you don't have civil liberties, this idea that you don't have the right to privacy, the idea that you don't have the right to have secret and quiet, protected communication with your attorney, all of that stuff that was in the Patriot Act, this unchecked ability of the law enforcement to invade our lives and to control our

communities, and to have basic necessities that people need being cut off from communities.

I just think that the system is set up to self-destruct, and so people like myself have to continue to be positioned to be a part of that sane voice that leads people when the explosion happens. I mean I literally believe that if we don't do things differently, that people are going to be fighting in the streets. And that terrifies me, if I tell the truth about it. But I don't know how you get people reengaged in the system, so that things turn around until that crisis comes. That's a scary thing. It may not come in our lifetime, but I think it's coming. Because the system is too out of whack, it's too unbalanced at this point, and there's too many people vulnerable as a result of the way that our economic, political, and social structure is shaped. I'll be doing more of the same and who knows? At different points of my life, I'll be emphasizing different things.

BB: That seems to be the way it goes in organizing. Is there anything we haven't talked about over the last few times that you want to touch on, or big chapters of your life I didn't ask about or left out, that feel important to you?

CB: Girl, there might be, but I can't think of it. Because at this point, I must have talked to you in this concentrated period of time about more things than I've talked to anybody at one time. I appreciate having the chance to mull over this. I can't wait to hear the tapes. It didn't occur to me until earlier today that by doing three tapes with you, that I got to listen to three, or read through extensive transcripts to be able to make sure that I'm conveying what it is I really want to convey.

BB: Yeah, another several hours of work, a good piece of work there. So I really appreciate it. It's good for the project. All right, that's good. Let's end here, okay?

CB: Sounds good.

BB: Thank you, Ms. Cynthia Brown.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Emily Baran, March 2006.