

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

**Interview U-0583
Manju Rajendran
February 13, 2006**

**Field Notes – 2
Transcript – 4**

FIELD NOTES- Manju Rajendran

Interviewee: Manju Rajendran

Interviewer: Bridgette Burge

Interview Date: February 13, 2006
Two interviews total in the series

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

Location: Manju's home in Durham, North Carolina

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

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

THE INTERVIEWEE: Manju Rajendran is a 26 year-old organizer from Durham, NC. She has helped with vision, design, development and outreach for the Heirs Project. Manju and her family immigrated to the United States from India when she was a child. As a biology student at UNC-Chapel Hill, Manju was awarded the Davis-Putter Scholarship for young activists. She has shown leadership in many organizations, including School in the Community, Youth Voice Radio, NC Lambda Youth Network, Hip-Hop Against Racist War, Southerners On New Ground, and the House of Mango, a living collective of young activists in Durham. Manju was a member of Breaking the Chains, an anti-imperialist coalition, and she has worked with the NC Peace and Justice Coalition. She is on the national advisory board of Not Your Soldier.

THE INTERVIEWER: Bridgette Burge graduated from Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee in 1995 with a degree in Anthropology/Sociology and a semester of intensive study of oral history theory and methodology. In 1995 and 1996, Burge and a colleague

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

TRANSCRIPT—Manju Rajendran

Interviewee: Manju Rajendran

Interviewer: Bridgette Burge

Interview date: February 13, 2006; interview 1 of 2

Location: Durham, North Carolina

Length: 2 cassettes; approximately 150 minutes (for both interviews)

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

BB: Okay, we're going to start by saying your full name and where we are, when we're doing the interview.

MR: My name is Manju Rajendran. We are at 823 Wilkerson Avenue in the Birch Avenue neighborhood in Durham, North Carolina. Durham! (laughter)

BB: We're up in your cozy little room up here, in the bedroom, on your bed. Like I said, we'll start kind of chronologically. If you just want to tell me a little bit about your childhood.

MR: Like what about my childhood?

BB: You were born in 1980, right, in Ann Arbor, Michigan? Where were your parents born?

MR: My parents were born in Kerala, India. Kerala is the southernmost state in India, one of two southern southernmost states. And my mother was born in Kayamkulam, which is a town in the Alappazha district in Kerala. My dad was born in Eravankara, which is a small village outside of a town called Marelikara, which is also in Alappazha.

BB: We can fix all those later, so don't worry. I totally butchered that stuff. (laughter)
Okay, good. And do you have siblings?

MR: I have a sister and a brother. My sister, Anjali Rajendran, is nineteen years old. Oh my God, that's not true. She was last time I checked, but since then, she's become twenty-two. Okay, let's try that again. My sister, Anjali Rajendran, is twenty-two, and my brother, Rajeev Rajendran, is nineteen. My mother remarried to someone named Rush Greenslade and he has five children, the eldest being Isaac Greenslade, who is my sister's age, and a pair of twins, David and Matthew Greenslade, who are my brother's age, and then another pair of twins, Sarah and Stephen, who are a few years younger; they're seventeen.

BB: Your mom's name is Vimala. When did your parents immigrate to the United States?

MR: My dad came in 1979. He came to do his post-doctorate studies at the University of Michigan. My mother came that next year, in 1980. They came in sort of interesting circumstances. I mean, my father came to do his post-doc, but my parents had planned that mom and dad would reunite in Bombay, which is before I was born. But my dad got in touch with mom and said, "I'd prefer you came here. It would be a break in my work and it would be difficult. So please come right away." And she said, "I'm seven months pregnant. It's out of the question. They won't let me on the plane." He said, "Well just try it." So she came to the ticket counter with my father's best friend from college, someone who I call Lal Uncle. They asked for a ticket to the U.S. The folks at Air India thought that was absurd and they said, "It's out of the question. No one with a belly like that is going to be allowed onto a plane, especially to fly to the U.S. Immigrations just isn't going to allow you." My mom begged and pleaded and wheedled and Lal Uncle said, "Well, let's talk to the manager." The

manager came out and Lal Uncle said, “I need to make a phone call” and he got in touch with his brother, Regu, who was then advisor to Sanjay Gandhi.

[tape interruption]

BB: Okay, so you’re saying he asked for the manager.

MR: So Lal Uncle called his brother, who was at the time working as an advisor to Sanjay Gandhi and had him speak directly to the manager of the airline, saying, “Let this woman get on the plane.” And they sold her a ticket and she brought me in her belly to the U.S. at seven months pregnancy. I was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan, two months later.

BB: Wow. So you said that the last time you were in India was when you were four. So you went back with your family when you were very little?

MR: So I was in Ann Arbor from born to two. My sister was born that year and she and I went with my parents to India from when I was two to four. Then we came back to Carrboro, North Carolina. I was there until I was nine, Carrboro and Chapel Hill. From nine to twelve, we were in Canada, in Ontario.

BB: What was involved in the decision, when you were four, to move from India to Carrboro? How did y’all find Carrboro?

MR: Because my dad got a job with Burroughs-Wellcome, which is a pharmaceutical company in RTP. That became Glaxo and then it became Glaxo-Wellcome. But when I was nine, dad was transferred to a Canadian subsidiary of Glaxo called Allelix, in Toronto, which is what spurred that move. We were there from when I was nine to twelve, and then we moved back to our house in North Carolina, in a neighborhood called Elkin Hills. That was a really cool neighborhood. It was on Barclay Road, off of Airport, which is now called Martin Luther King Boulevard. We had an amazing time. There were lots of kids our age and lots of

young families. There was like an active child-care cooperative where parents never had to pay for child-care; they just traded hours with each other. We had monthly potlucks at rotating people's houses. We used to go on walks together all the time, like all the moms and all the kids would go on walks up and down, among the crepe myrtles.

BB: It sounds nice.

MR: It was wonderful.

BB: And your brother was born—where would he have been born in that timeline?

MR: My brother was born in '87. My sister was born in '83, and I was born in '80. Rajeev was born at UNC Hospital.

BB: Do you remember having any feelings about having to leave India when you were four, or even feelings about moving any of those times? You were pretty little when you were four, huh?

MR: I remember really enjoying being in India from two to four, like my sister and I were the baby princesses in the houses where we were. We felt really special and had a lot of fun. I remember really being very upset about having to go to school at four. Kindergarten starts at age four in India. Kids go to junior kindergarten at age three, and then senior kindergarten at age four, which meant that when I came to Carrboro Elementary, I already knew how to read and do math. It was a struggle to convince the school to let me in, because policy is so strong that kids should only come in when they're five. But my parents were able to argue that I was enough ahead that it was going to be a serious problem to hold me back a year. So yeah, I started at Carrboro Elementary and was pretty thrilled about that, I think. I made friends easily. I think I felt proud at that time of my differences, like I was proud of being from Karala. I used to teach kids Malayalam on the playground.

BB: What is Malayalam?

MR: My family's home language. We all spoke it at home when I was growing up, but we stopped when my parents split up.

BB: When did they split up?

MR: When I was fourteen. Things were really abusive in my household and I was really troubled and suicidal, very angry. I insisted that we leave. I said that if we weren't going to leave my father, I was going to do something really drastic or leave my family behind. I was determined to get out from under his thumb. It felt really oppressive.

BB: And your mom agreed finally?

MR: Well, we didn't really plan our exit. It was a sort of sudden one, born of crisis. Holidays were always a pretty difficult time, as they are in a lot of families. It was Thanksgiving of 1996. No, I'm sorry, it was Thanksgiving of 1994. It had been a difficult November. My father and I had been fighting a lot and I had wanted to have some sort of birthday celebration, and he said that my birthday didn't deserve to be celebrated. So I think that was kind of the last straw. I think it was really just a matter of days or weeks, I guess, in our case. That Thanksgiving Day, we were invited to have Thanksgiving dinner at the Fochler's house, a family who lived close by in our neighborhood. We were all busying ourselves getting ready and my dad didn't appear to be making any moves in that direction. Mom asked what was going on and he said we weren't going. She said, "This family has already been preparing food for us all morning. This isn't an option. We don't get to just drop it and cancel and get in a bad mood today." He didn't really come up with reasons for what he did. He just declared these big statements and everyone was just supposed to go along with it. But mom said to us, me and my brother and sister, "Why don't you just sneak

out? You go ahead and start playing with the kids over there, and I'll just convince him that we need to go. I'll meet you over there." So we made it over. We just left the house. But what erupted after we left was a huge fight and mom got over to the Fochler's house and we just were cooking like everything was normal, but dad showed up and he was screaming from outside the house, "Let my family go!" Mr. Fochler stepped into the front yard and said, "You don't need to be yelling. You're welcome to come on in and join us. We want your whole family to come eat with us this Thanksgiving. We don't want a scene, but we're also not holding your family here. Your wife and kids came here because they wanted to be here, and we're not sending them out." This erupted into a really loud shouting match. The police came and the crisis counselor, who had been working on our case for the multiple other times that police had been involved, came and he also lived in our neighborhood, a man named Jim Huegerich. [author pauses]

We ended up sleeping at the Fochler's house that night and we left the next day for Charlotte, North Carolina. We stayed at the house of someone else, I don't remember very well. Someone I didn't know. Then we came back and we stayed with Joella Holman and her son, Jeff. We had police monitoring the neighborhood. Maybe we stayed at Joella's house first and then we left for Charlotte; I can't remember. [author pauses] We went to stay at the Ludy's house, this guy, Doug Ludy, and his daughter, she went to Chapel Hill High. All this time I was going to school and acting like everything was fine. Then we went and stayed in a neighborhood in Chapel Hill, I think it's called Fair Oaks, with a family called the Eversons. They were church elders in the church that mom had just joined. Mom had just been born again.

BB: Christian?

MR: Mmm hmm. Do they use that term in any other religion?

BB: Maybe, but just to be sure. (laughter) I haven't heard it in any other religion.

MR: Mom grew up Catholic, but she became a born-again Christian and she joined Grace Church. The Fochlers were part of that church and the Eversons were church elders. So we stayed in their house and I was just going on that school bus in that neighborhood to school. For about a month, we lived there. Then Joella Holman, whom we had stayed with early on, got in touch with someone from her church, a woman named Lou Bright, and she agreed to let us live in her basement at very cheap rent.

BB: Were your brother and sister with you and your mom?

MR: Mmm hmm.

BB: So it was your mom and the three of you?

MR: Yeah, we came and lived in her basement for the next couple of years.

BB: And all this time, you were really involved in a lot of stuff, right? I mean, at twelve, that's when you started the Center for Peace Education's Leadership Institute, right?

MR: I didn't start the program. I started participating in it.

BB: Oh. What was involved in that decision to participate in it? Do you remember why you wanted to?

MR: Mom was working for the Center for Peace Education and she asked us if we wanted to go to their peace camps and we were excited about that. After going to a couple of their trainings, I started helping facilitate them. I became a counselor and became a trainer. I started going to their youth leadership stuff at age twelve, and was involved with them for the next several years. Then at fourteen, I had my first contact with Youth Voice Radio. They had just started.

BB: Were they in Durham or Chapel Hill?

MR: They were Durham, but Kelly Overton, who was the director, was driving to Chapel Hill to pick up kids from Chapel Hill High School. One of my friends, a girl named Jessica Storm, invited me to come up with them to Massachusetts, to the youth summit. That was really exciting. That was where I first met anarchist youth. It was the first place I met un-schooler youth, home-schooler youth, and just tons of youth activists, lots of leftist young people, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, up to their twenties.

BB: What's un-schooler?

MR: Un-schoolers are young people who direct their own education.

BB: And that's different than home schoolers, in that home school has a parental-driven curriculum. Is that the only difference? That's a huge one, but is that the main difference?

MR: I think most un-schoolers don't shape their curriculum according to state regulations. Most home schoolers, while having a really wide array of experiences, do try to direct those towards meeting state guidelines.

BB: So when you came back from the summit, you said it was really—what was the word you used, powerful? Did it inspire you to get more engaged with anarchist communities here? What ways did it change you?

MR: Yeah, I was super inspired by that and started reading a lot about learning, education, more youth-directed schooling stuff. I just became more interested in youth-run organizations. I started seeing myself as part of a national movement, because I made so many friends who were far away at that conference and at many other conferences I went to through Youth Voice Radio and North Carolina Lambda Youth Network. I started getting

involved with Lambda Youth Network when I was fifteen. It was developed by someone named Hez Norton at around the same time as Youth Voice Radio. Both Youth Voice Radio and Lambda Youth Network were shaped in their formative years by Southern Community Partners, who funded their inception and Julia Scatliff O'Grady, who started that program, did a lot of coaching for Hez and for Kelly.

BB: Is that a foundation?

MR: Mmm hmm.

BB: What was it again?

MR: Southern Community Partners. They gave seed grants to young people who wanted to start organizations for young people, and helped coach them through the first two years in how to do their own fundraising and how to run an organization, how to bring people on, how to keep folks engaged.

BB: So you said in the letter you wrote—that's kind of your bio; it served as a great bio, didn't have to do double work, good for you—you said that both your experience with Youth Voice Radio and the Lambda Youth Network, even though the other work you've been involved in with the Peace Center was meaningful for you, but that those two things really helped shape your philosophy and style as an activist. In what ways? [tape interruption]

BB: Give it a second. Okay, so in what ways?

MR: In Youth Voice Radio and in Lambda Youth Network, I was really strongly supported. I feel like I was getting constant coaching on how to see myself as a leader and how to run different aspects of an organization. I feel like both Hez and Kelly were really close mentors and they just went to really great lengths to make it possible for me to be

active and strong and creative and have a lot of fun. It was funny, I was living this kind of double life, like just feeling profoundly powerful in the world, feeling like this fiery change-maker in my day life, and having this really chaotic, stressful, turbulent home life, that was just alternating between eruption and shambles.

BB: I so deeply relate to that as the oldest child from an abusive family, and just that double, that schizophrenic feeling, and being involved in so much. Did you bring any of what was happening in your personal life to the day life, to your work in activism? Did you share that with people? Did you try to integrate it into your work and try to make sense out of them together?

MR: Maybe, I don't know. I feel like there were ways that it kind of inevitably expressed itself. Like I was just so fiery and confident and fierce, and I feel like in some ways that might have been like a volatile reaction to being really angry and fighting to survive. But I don't think I ever gave name or voice to that. I think I really suppressed any specific language about how traumatic my whole life was. I don't know. I think I sort of expressed it in really weird ways, like I'm really distracted a lot, or have a lot going on, or physically hurt myself without really any intention to do so. Like there was a time when I was actually physically mutilating myself as an adolescent, but I don't do that at all; I haven't done that for years anymore. But it still sort of happens, like I find myself getting burnt and cut and bruised to what I'm finally noticing might be an abnormal extent, and it's all by mistake. But it's weird, like I don't even remember when I get hurt; I just find scars on my body. I feel like that's probably about quietly processing trauma.

BB: I'm sorry that all happened. It's so [expletive] unfair and so many people carry it their whole lives in a million different ways, right? I'm sorry.

MR: I just, I wonder about how many people are out to save the world because of going through hard stuff as kids. You know, like I feel like in recent, more healthy years, I've been slimming my work down to what seems like really pared-down proportions. I've been mourning what seems sad about that, that I just feel like that I can only do less or can't handle more. But in some ways, I feel like that's kind of exciting. I feel like I might be reaching more human proportions of undertaking and focusing more on what I do, choosing what I do really carefully and doing it really well, maybe not using my movement work to crowd out the down-pressing voices in my head, you know?

BB: It's a form of escapism?

MR: Yeah, less of that.

BB: Congratulations. Good for you.

MR: Yeah, thank you.

BB: That's revolutionary in itself. So when did you become an artist and start writing poetry? Maybe those two things were different or used different timing.

MR: I feel like my parents both really encouraged me as a kid to express myself through art and writing...that's my cup.

BB: I think I put mine there. I see yours over there. Are you sick? Do you want to share?

MR: No, I didn't want to share mine because I've been having a sore throat. So you should have yours. I just wanted to make sure you didn't...

BB: That's mine! That's mine! (joking)

MR: I'm sorry. (laughter) I was just worried I would make you sick.

BB: Thank you.

MR: You and the baby.

BB: Thank you.

MR: I would hurting two people at once. (laughter)

BB: Carry the weight of the world on your shoulders much, Manju? (laughter)

MR: There's this Yevgeny Yevtushenko quote from a poem: "I carry the world like a sobbing child on my back."

BB: That's powerful.

MR: Do you know him?

BB. No.

MR: He was this really amazing Russian poet who was exiled. [pause] What were we talking about?

BB: Art and poetry. You were saying your parents really encouraged you when you were young.

MR: Oh yeah. I feel like they've always given me tons of materials and just given me freedom to create with them. I feel like it was a really giant gift that they gave to me and my sister, and in some ways, my brother. I feel like Rajeev feels the least fluent with visual art, but he's a really amazing actor.

BB: What are some of your mediums? How does your art range?

MR: Lately, I love making woodcuts the most.

BB: Are those yours?

MR: Yeah.

BB: They're gorgeous!

MR: Thank you.

BB: Can I take a picture of them?

MR: Yeah.

BB: () the woodcuts.

MR: It would be dark. Do you want me to bring them into the light?

BB: Sure. They're so beautiful.

MR: This is a woodcut I made of myself.

BB: Can you hold them up a little? That's you?

MR: I was in the bathtub after a long day at my friend, [Sang Lee] Madonna's, house. She burst in while I was reading Rainer Maria Rilke and she snapped a picture by surprise. She took a ton of them that were really beautiful photographs; she's an amazing photographer. This is when I asked Amanda, my girlfriend at the time, to pose in the same bathtub. She was Madonna's roommate.

BB: They're so beautiful.

MR: Thanks.

BB: Well Maria Rainer Rilke, is that—

MR: Rainer Maria Rilke. He's a German poet.

BB: Okay.

[telephone alarm rings]

BB: That's my cue to turn over our tape. Oh, we still have plenty of time left. You're going to have to help me watch it now. Yes, that's right. I've heard of him, and I always think it's a woman and haven't read much of him.

MR: He has such a pretty name. (laughter)

BB: And so Madonna was your former roommate and then your former girlfriend at the time, what was her name?

MR: Amanda.

BB: They're beautiful. What other mediums? I've seen you draw and doodle all the time.

MR: I love to draw and doodle all the time. I like to paint, though I haven't done it for a while.

BB: Oils?

MR: Usually acrylics are what I've been able to afford. (laughter) And what I'm able to afford is what usually shapes my artwork. (laughter) I like bookmaking. I'm very shy about my poetry now. I used to feel very proud of it, but I don't know. I feel like the more I read, the more I realize I have to grow as a writer.

BB: Maybe you have some perfectionist tendencies to work out? Huh, Manju?
(laughter)

MR: No. (laughter) Yes.

BB: I was going to ask you if you wanted to share a poem that you wrote related to your movement work, but maybe your comfort zone is more in sharing some of your art or paintings, letting me look at some of them. What do you think?

MR: My poetry is really bad. I don't think that's such a good idea.

BB: Okay—okay that you don't feel comfortable, not okay that I believe your poetry is bad. (laughter)

MR: Maybe I'll be ready at some point for sharing with you.

BB: Okay. So I wanted to go back and ask you a little bit about your thoughts on your class background. Did it change from when you were in India? What is sort of your understanding of class background or status from when you moved here? Then when your parents split up, did it change again?

MR: That's a really good question. I feel like it's been complicated, and you're the first person to have described it like that. I feel like that's pretty accurate. That there were big transitions at those times.

MR: When I was pretty little, I thought of us as a middle-class family, though both my parents had grown up really poor. My father grew up in a small village in Karala, Eravankara, and he was the first, and I think to date, the only person in the village to have ever gotten a Ph.D. He grew up without shoes for his feet, for his entire childhood, up through college. His Ph.D. acceptance photograph has him in flip-flops.

BB: What did he get his Ph.D. in?

MR: In chemistry. Is that right? I don't know. He was an endocrinologist. He isn't doing lab work now. Now, he's doing training for doctors for a pharmaceutical company in India called USB. He's in Bombay. In New Bombay.

BB: I'm sorry I interrupted, but you said he was very poor and even in his Ph.D. photograph he was in flip-flops.

MR: Yeah, he grew up really poor and had an image of himself as a rather self-made man. Throughout my childhood, he always said no if we ever asked for anything that might involve money. There was always money for things involving our education or the arts, but no frivolities of any kind, and that was really strict. I feel like in some ways that shaped my spending. Like I'm really careful with money, but at the same time, I spend really lavishly on

gifts or frivolities for other people, like that feels really easy to me. I love saying yes. It feels healing somehow.

My mom also grew up really poor. I grew up just hearing these stories all the time about not having enough and barely being able to eat. I don't know. It was kind of a strange incongruity, my mother having multiple degrees and my father having a Ph.D., and just having these super-educated parents who really helped me along in school. Our house was really an academically-rigorous place. We were doing lots of work outside of school and were always well ahead of whatever our grade level was. To just have this constant tutoring and support and parents who were so involved in the schools: they were on school committees, they were often the class parent, but also just getting a gradual sense that we were the poorest family in our class, always wearing hand-me-downs.

BB: In Chapel Hill, in Carrboro?

MR: Mmm hmm. Well, Chapel Hill's a pretty affluent place. A lot of my fellow students were kids of professors and folks who worked in RTP. I don't know, I didn't really get how my dad worked in RTP, but we were definitely just scraping by. Or it felt like we were scraping by. I mean I don't really understand the particulars of what was going on at the time. But when we left Dad's house, we really had nothing.

BB: Let me flip the tape, okay?

MR: Mmm hmm.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

BB: So you said economics for your family changed pretty drastically when you moved into the Fochler's basement, or what was the—

MR: We were living in the Bright's basement.

BB: The Bright's, okay, sorry.

MR: Lou Bright's basement. She lived with her daughter, Martha, and her daughter's son, who was little...Hey this is the kind of recording equipment I used in my studio.

BB: Really?

MR: I always put the levels a little higher, but I think you're being reasonable.

(laughter)

BB: Thank you.

MR: Yeah, yeah, it's good. I probably recorded every crackle and pop.

BB: Did you notice anything...

MR: But yeah, we just left with absolutely nothing, like we just left. It was a big surprise when we were out of our house and basically whatever could be grabbed we raced out the door with—with what we had. We hadn't planned on leaving forever. We heard from dad for a while, but then, he, um, mom and dad actually began a legal separation and a massive court battle.

BB: Custody?

MR: Yeah, I guess it was a custody question. I mean, my dad was basically trying to establish in court that the courts didn't understand that this was just the way that an Indian family is run and the man is supposed to be the boss and he should be beating his wife if she is acting out of line, and he should be beating the kids if they're not making good grades, or whatever. Just a whole lot of crap about how they just didn't understand our culture and had Indian men, who had been in our lives, come in and testify that my mother was just making things up and this is the way our families are run. The court ordered that we all undergo psychological counseling and they ordered that our visits with our father be supervised, which he was furious about. He found that to be a real insult to his dignity. We had a lot of battles over that as well, which continued. He ended up leaving after a year. We had a year of some limited visitation and then he just came to the apartment where we lived, that basement apartment. Where we didn't know that he knew our address. I was the only one home at the time, and he just blew in there like a gale and he declared, with his big suitcase in his hands, that he was leaving the country and he just wanted to say goodbye. I said, "Where are you going? Leave me an address. I want to keep in touch with you." He just said, "I don't know. I don't know. I don't know. I'm leaving now. Goodbye." So we had no way of getting in touch with him for the next four years.

BB: What year was this that your parents separated, and the court, and he left? Was that all the same year?

MR: The courts require you to be separated for a year in North Carolina before you can have a divorce. So mom ended up filing the divorce unilaterally, since he was gone and unreachable.

BB: And that was probably 199—

MR: That would have been 1995. And then '96 is the year I left school. Did you know that?

BB: That you left high school? Yeah.

MR: I don't think that would have gone over with Dad very well. It didn't go over with Mom very well, obviously.

BB: You used the language that you "rose out" of high school. What does that mean?

MR: It means that I felt bored in the regular public schools and I felt like I wasn't being treated like a whole human being and I wasn't being challenged. Yeah, I mean it fundamentally just came down to I wasn't learning and I wanted more out of life.

BB: So this was at Chapel Hill High School and you left on your sixteenth birthday?

MR: Right.

BB: So what year were you on your sixteenth birthday?

MR: I was a junior.

BB: A junior, and you rose out. What did you do?

MR: Well, the day that we were leaving Chapel Hill High, my mother and I went so that I could sign the papers saying that I was leaving of my own volition. It had been kind of rough month, like my birthday's November first and that October fourteenth, my friend, Nora

Nicholson, had been killed in a car accident. I felt like the school handled it really insensitively. I was on Model School Committee at the time, which was a group of good students and loyal teachers and visionary administrators and maybe a smattering of parents, charged specifically with designing an ideal school for North Carolina. So I knew the principal reasonably closely. We had interacted on previous occasions when I had tried to organize a walk-out after a really messed-up sexual assault that happened during school hours, that the school did not handle in a responsible way at all.

BB: To a student?

MR: Yeah, a student was assaulted by two other students. We heard about it through the town newspapers, like the school didn't try to bring it to our attention or do any sort of collective response. So we organized our own collective response. We had kids walk out of classes and come to a sexual assault training with folks from the Rape Crisis Center.

BB: In Chapel Hill?

MR: Mmm hmm, The Orange County Rape Crisis Center came and helped the students do workshops and speak out and stuff. But in the days leading up, the principal called me in and said, "I understand you're one of the ringleaders of this whole walk-out thing and I was part of sixties protest movements and I just want you to know that you don't have to challenge the system this way to make change. You can do it through other avenues. Why don't you work with a counselor?" I said, "I'll work with a counselor as well. We can do that as well, but we really do need to have an angry response to the fact that you all have done nothing for us around this."

Anyway, so when I was leaving the school, I wrote about my experience for the school newspaper. I was working for the school newspaper at the time, and I talked about

what had happened with Nora, and how I felt like the school had handled it really inhumanely. I talked about really wanting to learn and how I had a lot of exciting things that I wanted to be working on, and just didn't feel like there was room for that kind of challenge and intensity and depth of learning in traditional public schools. The principal came and tried to talk me out of it. It was kind of sweet. He came during lunch and found me at my place where I hung out at lunchtime, and sat down and talked with me, but he didn't have answers that were profound enough, like it wasn't like these big things that I was frustrated with were going to change.

So the day that we were leaving the school, Mom and I, Mom was sobbing. She was very disappointed. A man named Fred Good was walking into the school. He was a friend of my mother and he was teaching a course at the time at the high school. He saw her crying and he said, "What's wrong?" She said, "My daughter's life is over." He said, "Your daughter's life has just begun." (laughter) And charter school legislation had just passed that year and so he was writing a proposal to start a new charter high school, and he asked if I would come help. I started going to meetings with him, with community leaders, to discuss this new high school-middle school combination that was going to have classes in various community institutions and museums and libraries and art centers, that sort of thing, and really try to practice student-centered learning.

So I had planned on just helping set up this school, because I was content with my curriculum. I was excited. I was learning French on my own. I was in Advanced Placement classes at the high school and was able to just kind of continue reading French literature on my own. I had a German teacher who I was studying with daily. I was reading African literature with a neighbor, Latin American literature with a college student at UNC. I was

meeting with a whole lot of other folks, meeting with an artist who volunteered himself to tutor me. I was working for innumerable organizations, volunteering with Internationalist Bookstore, good stuff like that. I ended up falling in love with the school, though, like I helped hire the teachers, I helped design the curriculum, like all these cool kids were coming in and were getting involved at all different levels of the school's formation.

BB: What did you call the school?

MR: It was called the School in the Community.

BB: The School in the Community?

MR: Mmm hmm. It was based in Carrboro. So that summer, I traveled all over North Carolina and had planned to hitchhike across the country from there. But I ended up deciding to hitchhike home and enroll in the school that I started that fall. So I did my senior year at the School in the Community. I had cool classes like "Law, Lawmaking, and Justice," with someone named Tom.

BB: Tom what, do you remember?

MR: Tom Newsome. I had a bookmaking with English composition class with somebody named Amanda; I don't remember her last name. I had math classes and SAT prep classes and psychology classes and kind of this cool American history stuff. A student named Tom Michael was teaching a ceramics class and I took that. My brother was going to the school and my sister was going to the school. My brother left after one semester, though, because he felt like it was too unstructured. I think for a lot of kids who were coming out of really structured environments, it was a tough transition. But for me, it felt really ideal. I had an advisor named Aaron Winborn, who was an anarchist and an autodidact himself.

BB: Autodidact?

MR: He was a self-educator. Now he teaches at a self-directed learning school up north, the Sudbury Valley School. It's famous in the un-schooling and self-schooling movement. So I graduated that year and I enrolled in Public Allies. I had been working with Youth Voice Radio all these years and I talked with Kelly and Aimee [Argote] and Darnell [Williams] and other people who were core to Youth Voice Radio's development, and agreed that it would make sense for me to become program director. I was seventeen and became eighteen that year in Public Allies. Public Allies is an Americorps-run program. It trains people ages eighteen through thirty in working in non-profit organizations and being a part of community change. In recent years, they've focused particularly on working with young people, training young adults to work with youth. I considered that the year that I became an adult ally, when I turned eighteen. I was trying to transition myself out of Youth Voice Radio. I feel like I did that semi-successfully. Like I was able to work with some young people really closely and watch them develop into really amazing activists and organizers in their own right. But the organization ended up falling apart in the following year, in some ways, like it became much more exclusive and cliquish. Finally then, the radio program that we had been doing on a weekly basis for years on end felt apart.

BB: Sorry.

MR: It's sad. I feel like I've watched a lot of organizations grow from birth and then die. I'm seeing this year as my year of completion, like a year to really deeply reflect about those cycles and try and make sense of my part in them, how I've done well and how I could have done things better.

BB: What are some insights you've had in your reflections?

MR: I feel like there has to be a balance between really giving young people the reigns of power and helping them feel a deep sense of ownership in an organization or school or project or whatever is being worked on, so that they really understand their importance, their worth, the necessity of their growth for the organization's growth and survival. But I also feel like young people need lots of support and coaching and structure and commitment, boundaries, so that they don't feel like they're being thrown into something unreasonable, so that their expectations are livable ones and succeedable ones.

I feel like that because of responsibilities that were placed on me and responsibilities I placed on young people that I feel like were unfair or unlivable. I think the stuff around accounting and fundraising and creation of lasting structure is much more important than I realized as a youth participant. I wish that it had been more transparent why that stuff is important and how to be a part of that stuff. I feel like a lot of visionary people have great ideas about exciting things and then they don't have the skills around the logistics, the mechanics, to create something that really lasts. So I wonder how to help people get better at those kind of skills and still keep the vision huge and exciting and revolutionary. Like I want to figure out how to create laboratory inventions that are conscious of gravity and space and time and realistic about the capacity of energy. And I feel like work with young people has to be so multi-dimensional, like I feel like it has to really recognize young people as whole beings. I feel like that necessitates having smaller groups that are more intentionally created, with more capacity to get each young person's full attention.

I feel like adults have to go through so much healing for us to be really ready to work with young people so we're not taking out our past hurts on them, or trying to impose them

into who we wish we were, or repair ourselves through them, or hurting them more than we're helping them.

So those are the kind of rough realizations, the hard stuff. I feel like I was also really inspired and thrilled and I learned how to play and learned how to work really hard for something I love over and over again in so many organizations. I learned how to be a mentor from having really amazing mentors. I feel like that today, like I feel like even at twenty-five, I have people who've really stuck with me for five, ten, fifteen years, folks who feel like they're committed to me for the long haul, like they're really trying to develop me and make me better.

BB: Who are they?

MR: Folks like you. (laughter) Folks like you! And Russell. I feel really constantly grateful for Russell's presence in my life. Russell Herman coaches many folks in this area, many organizations in this area—like the behind-the-scenes facilitators, a lot of the movement work which goes on around here by really supporting people and meeting their goals and loving themselves and loving the work and doing it better all the time. Kelly Overton, who was the director at Youth Voice Radio for the years that I was a participant; Hez Norton, from Lambda Youth Network; Marion O'Malley and Authur Scherer from the Center for Peace Education; so many of my teachers in school at Chapel Hill High and at School in the Community, even teachers from Phillips Middle School who I stayed friends with all this time, a teacher named Ms. Wiggins, a teacher named Mr. Wicker. One of my closest mentors, a man who's almost a parent to me, is named Ray Eurquhart. He works with Black Workers for Justice, and UE-150, [author requested organization's name be edited out for confidentiality purposes]. He's the Soil and Water Conservation elected official for

Durham. He calls me often and checks on me. He, like you, pays my rent. A couple named Sidarta and Janaina from my Capoeira group; Mab Segrest, Akiba Temoya, Kim Diehl and Alyce Gowdy-Wright, Jia Ching Chen, a friend of mine who's out in the Bay Area now; someone named Billy Wimsatt, who works with the League of Young Voters.

BB: What a community you have, what a community of mentors.

MR: And innumerable other people. I feel like any list that I make of mentors is incomplete.

BB: So it sounds like around the time Youth Voice Radio was kind of coming to an end, was also when you were about nineteen and you started the House of Mango, right, on Arnette Street in Durham? What was involved in that decision to start a collective house?

MR: House of Mango started when I was eighteen as I was finishing Public Allies and working at the Durham Food Co-op as personnel manager. We were looking for a big house to rent, my partner at the time, and I. Most places were really expensive and we figured out that it would be cheaper in the long run to buy a house—if we could find the money to pay the down payment—than to rent. He was nineteen and I was eighteen and he had been given a trust fund to go to college. In his parents' prenuptial agreement, his mother and his stepfather's, rather, there was an agreement that he would have money in his trust fund enough to be able to go to Harvard. We borrowed money from that trust fund by enrolling him at NC Central in a history program. He got forty thousand out of it to pay our down payment and we used my income to get a loan from the Bank of America to pay our, to leverage a loan from the Bank of America, and we started paying the mortgage with that.

BB: Then what made you two decide to make it a collective, or had you already decided that?

MR: We had hoped to live in a collective and rent this house, but we just ended up buying instead. We bought from an amazing woman named Jen Schradie, who was a local filmmaker and organizer. She was organizing the Food Lion, or trying to. She's out in the Bay Area now. Yeah, we bought the house from her for ninety-nine thousand dollars.

BB: Wow!

MR: A beautiful place. Are you saying wow because it was a lot or little?

BB: Little, relative to the size of the house.

MR: Yeah, it was definitely a good price. I mean, she was knocking off a thousand for us doing the good work.

BB: She rocked.

MR: Yeah, she did rock, for sure. She still rocks, wherever she is.

BB: What did living in a collective mean to you, to you two?

MR: It meant sharing responsibilities and sharing chores and sharing the work to make it thrive, trying to create a haven for activists and organizers to come home to. In some ways, it thrived, and in some ways, it failed. It went through many cycles and in the most recent cycle, I'm not a part of it anymore. I'm living in this new house that I'm renting with Kia and Rachel and Odinga, [author declined to provide last names] and our wonderful dog, Pablo.

BB: What were some of the struggles or conflicts over the cycles of the House of Mango?

MR: I don't want to talk about that. It's too fresh and too messy. It was so stressful and tiring. Like I feel like home should be a really safe, joyful place to come home. Yeah,

home should be fun. Home should be stable and calm and it just stopped being so for a couple different rounds, but mostly badly, the last one. It feels good to be out of there.

BB: Good for you. I mean I'm sorry about it, but...

MR: And it also feels sad, like it feels like I worked really, really, really hard for something that ended up falling apart for me.

BB: Does that affect the way you feel about the possibility or potential of collectives? Or do you think the struggles were unique to that, but that you still really support the idea of collectives and want to nurture that again?

MR: I think I feel about collectives like I do about youth organizations. I feel like youth-run organizations are, in principle, a really good thing, and collectives are, in principle, a really good thing, but I just feel like to be in them and giving them my all and getting burnt and suffering through a couple different cycles of creation and destruction, that I have a lot of lessons about that. I feel like in the next round, I would do things differently. The thing is that both youth organizations and collectives are often short-lived and are often undocumented. So it feels like there's not much carry-over of the lessons learned. That feels really huge, because there will always be groups of people who want to work together and there will always be young people being born, full of vision, full of life, full of energy and excitement. We need to figure out ways to pass on the knowledge so that those same mistakes don't have to be made over and over again, so that we can be getting better at what we do.

BB: That's actually one of my deepest hopes for the project, for the Heirs to a Fighting Tradition project, is the documenting and not just sharing stories, but sharing stories of lessons learned, and how we do things differently, sort of that capturing of history as it

grows and evolves and is happening now. It's one of my deepest hopes. That's why I ask about conflict and lessons learned. I think they're fascinating and so important and not what we're trained to document or capture or definitely not what we're taught in history courses. It's still kind of a rare bird for courses like that and classes like that, even in organizational culture.

MR: Yeah, like either the Left is proclaiming loudly about our triumph or the Right is talking venomously about our failures. There's little careful, intentional discussion of our failures to make things better, like real strategies born of mistakes, forgiveness for ourselves.

BB: Want to take a little break?

MR: Yeah. (laughter)

BB: A break it is.

[tape interruption]

END OF INTERVIEW