

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

Interview U-0579

Lou Plummer

May 27, 2007

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FIELD NOTES- Lou Plummer

Interviewee: Lou Plummer

Interviewer: Bridgette Burge, Heirs Project director

Interview Date: Sunday, May 27, 2007

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

Location: Lou's home in Fayetteville, NC

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

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

THE INTERVIEWEE: Lou Plummer has been the primary organizer for Military Families Speak Out at Ft. Bragg, NC since the beginning of the Iraq War and is a charter member of Fayetteville Peace With Justice. He is a member of Veterans for Peace, serves on the national coordinating committee of the Bring Them Home Now! campaign and is a member of the board of directors for NC Peace Action. A veteran of the North Carolina National Guard, Lou is the father of former military resister Petty Officer Andrew Plummer. A former correctional officer, Lou became involved in activism through People of Faith Against the Death Penalty. He participated in a successful campaign that culminated in the adoption of a death penalty moratorium in North Carolina. Lou lives with his family in Fayetteville, NC.

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 – LOUIS PLUMMER

Interviewee: Louis Kimbal (“Lou”) Plummer

Interviewer: Bridgette Burge

Interview date: May 27, 2007

Location: Fayetteville, North Carolina

Length: Approx 2 hrs 30 min

START OF INTERVIEW

Bridgette Burge: Today is Sunday, May twenty-seventh, 2007, and I’m doing an interview with Louis Kimbal Plummer, who’s often known as “Lou” now, mostly known as Lou. This is the second part of an interview. We did the first few hours yesterday, May twenty-sixth, same place, Fayetteville, North Carolina. And this is part of the series *Heirs to a Fighting Tradition: Oral Histories of North Carolina Social Justice Activists*. I am the interviewer, Bridgette Burge. We’ll just kind of pick up where we left out yesterday, if that’s okay.

Lou Plummer: Okay.

BB: So one thing I was thinking of that I first wanted to ask was you said that you and Tina talked about some stuff that we did in the interview, but I always think it’s interesting to ask as you were thinking about it last night, is there stuff that you wish that you had said that you didn’t, or stuff that you said that you wish you didn’t, keeping in mind that we’re right around 2000, right? 2001, we touched on a little, but we’re going to go forward. But before getting to those parts of your life, what are you--?

LP: The question that you asked at the end of the day yesterday about the books, Tina and I talked about last night and the book by James Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, is a book that was really meaningful to me. I read it after *A People's History of the United States* and since I've given it as gifts several times and it was interesting that Tina talked about *Horton Hears a Who* by Dr. Seuss as having a deep political meaning to her.

Then it's always difficult for me as a person with a mental illness to feel comfortable talking about that and kind of explaining my whole history of substance abuse and it's kind of hard to articulate that, but I gave it my best shot, so we'll see.

BB: Okay. So let's start with, I'm so curious about how you gained your amazing computer skills or information technology and how did that happen? How did you come into that?

LP: Right after my second wife, Cathy, and I split up, I was single and I hadn't really been single since I was seventeen and I was twenty-nine, I guess, at the time. My uncle Fred that I'd lived with on the farm, who would have been the last person I'd thought to get into computers, had a computer that he had built and was learning how to use. Then a friend of mine, who was a schoolteacher, had a computer. Her name was Carol McFadyan. And so I got interested from just watching what they were doing and went to Circuit City and borrowed fifteen hundred dollars and bought an IBM 486 and went home. I bought *Windows for Dummies*, the yellow books, and sat there with that book on my lap until I felt like I was proficient and I bought the computer in February of 1994.

Now as a person who, I make my living as a computer technician for Harnett County School System and so I work with a lot of people at various levels of computer proficiency and I just believe that certain types of minds, certain types of logic systems, and a certain

amount or type of patience is what makes one good or not good at using a computer. In my department, there are eight computer technicians and half of them have bachelor's degrees and two have associate's and then there's myself and a woman who's a former teacher's assistant who are making our way with just self-taught stuff.

Tina's always been really supportive because computer stuff can get expensive and so we've always kind of made way for me to experiment with computers. It's not quite so expensive these days because I can do most of what I want to do with stuff that I have at work. But yeah, it's just stuff I learned on my own because I was interested in it and still am, but I've never been a computer gamer. I went through the stage where I subscribed to eight different computer magazines and spent hours a day online with message boards and reading technical articles. That stage passed a while back. Some of the younger guys I work with are still super really into them.

But I've been, I guess, earning my living with doing computer stuff for ten years now. It's not just a job. I really, if I was independently wealthy, I would do my job now as a hobby because I enjoy it that much, not that there's not times when I don't get frustrated. But that's how that happened.

BB: So you mentioned that it takes a lot of patience, which I so relate to, and as a very, very impatient person, I think it's one of the reasons why I'm not very computer proficient. Are you a patient person in general?

LP: No, not really. I guess having a lot of curiosity and Tina had just got her bachelor's degree in education and so we've talked about different learning styles and my learning style is almost obsessive-compulsive. When I get interested in whatever it is, I just kind of focus in on that. Tina wanted to buy a cockatiel about six years ago and now we have

close to a hundred birds. We went to Wal-Mart or Dick's Sporting Goods about four or five years ago and bought cheap bicycles and in the next six months, I rode my bike close to four thousand miles. It's just that's just what I do and so I'm patient if I'm really interested in things, but I'm not one who's going to a restaurant where people are standing out front waiting to get a table, that kind of stuff; I don't have a lot of patience for that.

BB: How did you find the job at Westinghouse Electrical Corporation and what's the relationship between Westinghouse and Eaton? I got a little confused when I was reading.

LP: I got the job at Westinghouse through a temporary agency. When I quit working at the prison, I did it kind of spontaneously and I didn't have a job waiting for me. So I went to a temp agency and actually got two jobs. I unloaded trucks for Burger King on Fort Bragg and I got this job at Westinghouse and within a year of getting the job at Westinghouse, Eaton Electrical Corporation purchased a factory and they actually named the factory after a subsidiary of Eaton Electrical Corporation, which is Cutler Hammer. So it's the same building, just three different names over the course of time. And so I worked about six months as a temp and then was offered a job actually working for the company and I worked out in the shop for about a year and a half. That's where I met Tina and then I got offered a short-term position in the front office to do some technical writing and I was able to kind of parlay that into a position in the quality department where I did a lot of technical writing over the next three years, three and a half years.

BB: And how did you get offered the technical writing piece? Had people just seen your good writing skills or did you ask for it?

LP: We had to use different software and this was in 1996. So at this time, digital cameras were a couple thousand dollars and laser color printers were five thousand dollars.

Because people knew that I was into computer and knew how to use computers, that's what got me the position more so than being a good writer, but I do like to write.

BB: You are a good writer.

LP: And so I bought a couple of books on technical writing and basically the key to technical writing is write short sentences and don't utilize words like "utilize;" just say "I use." And I enjoyed it and that's what I did when I moved on after Westinghouse was I went to work for a company in Cary making the most money I'd ever made in my life, but driving a hundred and fifty-two miles a day from Fayetteville to Cary as a technical editor for a company that did information technology training and I did that for about nine months and the drive just was a killer. So I left there and went to work as a computer technician for one of the state health education centers within walking distance of our house and worked with family medicine residents and a medical library and public health educators. It was an enjoyable job. It didn't pay much so I ended up leaving there after about nine months.

BB: What was the name of the company in Cary?

LP: Global Knowledge.

BB: And what the name of the public health--?

LP: Fayetteville Area Health Education Center.

BB: So to go back a little bit, do you remember the day that you quit at the prison? You talked a little bit about it yesterday, but what were the circumstances of that?

LP: I quit at the prison in October of 2003. I was working downstairs from our mental health ward and one of the mentally ill patients came downstairs and wanted me to do something. I don't even remember the exact details and I told him to go upstairs and ask the officer who was working upstairs on the mental health ward and it got to be one of those silly

workplace disagreements: “You should have done it.” “No, you should have done it.” And I felt like I was in high school. Then it got escalated to supervisors and it was just—prisons, like any state agency, are just really bureaucratic and after being called to the principal’s office over something that I thought was dumb then and I think was dumb now—I’d been doing it for between seven and eight years and I’d hated it for four years—it wasn’t the maturest thing I ever did, but I did the classic “take off my badge, put it on the table, ask for an escort to the front gate” kind of deal. It was over.

BB: Okay, so that’s when you met Tina. That was a great story about how y’all first met when you went to the front office there.

LP: No, I met Tina in the shop.

BB: Right.

LP: Yeah, she didn’t work in the front office; she never worked in the front office.

BB: Oh, okay.

LP: We had computer terminals in the shop to order parts and complete jobs and stuff like that.

BB: Oh, I see. I see. Okay, so what are some more of the things that you appreciate most about your relationship with Tina?

LP: Well, when I first met Tina, the whole aura of some factory worker going to Peru to do this wild and crazy stuff was mind-boggling. I went to her house and we sat out on her deck drinking cranberry juice. I read poetry to her. It wasn’t for her, it was just to her, which she dug and that was cool. I hadn’t done that in years and years and years. And she had this amazing garden in her backyard and just knew all the names of all these different kind of plants and I thought that was really fascinating. Having lived and worked in a farm for four

years, we didn't do a whole lot of flower growing, but I knew there's a common thread between agriculture and gardening and it was really interesting.

I remember as a teenager being really excited about music. When *Nebraska* came out in 1984, the Bruce Springsteen album, you know I remember just laying on the floor with my speakers as loud as I could get them listening to it over and over and over. And I've always had that appreciation for music. On our second date, I had James Taylor's *Live* album and plugged it in and Tina was like, "Oh, I'm crazy about James Taylor. I've been to see him." So that was kind of "soul mate" kind of things like that. When I walked into her house, she had five or six bookshelves full of books and so here's someone who likes to read and who's intellectually curious. And of course, having just seen her across the floor in a factory, I thought she was pretty and I still think she's pretty.

So that was kind of the initial stuff and then through the years, Tina has a compassion for people as individuals that I find amazing. I remember talking to you about when you first got into helping folks that it was at soup kitchens and things like that. And when I met Tina, she was tutoring this black lady who lives in the projects who dropped out of school in the third grade and wanted to learn how to read. So Tina took this adult literacy tutoring at Fayetteville Urban Ministry and was tutoring her and I thought that was amazing. Tina took Amber down to the botanical gardens when they were establishing those in Fayetteville to volunteer and she went on trash pickups. To this day, whenever we go shopping, Tina always grabs a shopping cart out of the parking lot and says she's being a good citizen by pushing it up there. Just a crazy sense of humor and through the years, we've almost our own language in talking to each other. I just was never silly. When I met Tina, I told her that I was the oldest twenty-nine-year-old man in the world. And I felt like it and she still brings that up.

But you know, through the years, I've seen her give her best shot at Christianity and be devout and mean it and help people and do the things that I think Christians should do.

What happened with that was September eleventh was on a Thursday and Tina went to the Seventh Day Adventist Church, which is a pacifist church. The most famous Seventh Day Adventist of the twentieth century was a man who was a medic in World War II who refused to carry a gun and who won the Medal of Honor at Okinawa by pulling fifty wounded soldiers up this cliff until he was shot so many times that he couldn't do it anymore. He's still alive to this day. That's who people in the church look up to in association with the military.

BB: What's his name, do you remember?

LP: I'll have to look it up, but I will get it for you. And our church was unique in that there were so many different nationalities in the church—people from Romania, Panama, Mexico, Australia. It was a multiracial church with Latinos and Asians and a good friend of ours there was from Burma; so we just really identified. It wasn't one of these "God Bless America" places until September eleventh. We went to church that Saturday and they had American flags outside of every window and you go inside and they ask all the members of the military to stand up and applaud and this is a very conservative church. I mean, if Beethoven came back and played the piano, people wouldn't clap because you just don't do that, but they're clapping for these guys in the military, a lot of whom were my friends, you know people that I knew.

But very quickly the attitude within the church, I mean –Tina went to a Bible study the next day, which was on Sunday, and when she said that we should be praying for peace, people very quickly gave her the same bullshit line that we've been hearing for the last five

or six years: “What’s the matter? Don’t you support the troops? Don’t you love soldiers?” Tina’s dad’s a retired sergeant major and Drew had already signed his enlistment papers and it was just heartbreaking. People called us, people still run into us and are like, “Why don’t you come back to church?” But it was just a precursor for this incredible nationalism that’s taken over our country and that’s when we stopped going to church. I didn’t go all that often—Tina was very, very regular—but I kind of just cut it off.

BB: Is Amber Tina’s daughter from a previous relationship?

LP: Yeah, Amber had just finished first grade when Tina and I—because Tina and I’s first date was June eleventh, 1994. So June eleventh’s been a really weird day in my life because that’s the day I met Carolyn too on our first date. Amber was in the first grade. Tina and I moved in together three days after our first date. So Amber has been part of my life, she’s twenty now, so for the last thirteen years. Even before Tina and I were married, Amber started calling me Dad, I mean within like two weeks. I don’t ever remember her calling me Lou ever. She probably did that first couple of weeks, but I don’t remember.

BB: And did the three kids, Drew and Amber and Anna, did they all get along?

LP: Yeah, like brothers and sisters. Amber was a bridesmaid when Anna got married. They’re all adults now, but they talk on the phone a lot. There were squabbles. Anna can be hard to get along with because she’s such a perfectionist and so driven, and Amber and Drew are your classic slacker class. But no, they got along and still get along great.

BB: Then you quit Westinghouse in ’98?

LP: Yes.

BB: Did you already tell me why you quit Westinghouse? I’m getting a little confused with the IT jobs.

LP: No. I quit Westinghouse because I had had substance abuse issues that resulted in me being sent back to the shop from the front office and rather than go and do that, I quit and didn't have a job, a little series of doing that, but luckily within a couple weeks, landed that job in Cary.

BB: And then how did you come to work for the Harnett County School System? This was in 2000, right?

LP: Yeah. So I went from Westinghouse to Global Knowledge in Cary, to Fayetteville to work at the Fayetteville Area Health Education Center. From there, I went to work for BB&T, the bank, for their insurance division for about a year. Thankfully, this time I had the job at FAHEC. I went and interviewed for another job, turned in a two-week notice, and then got the job with BB&T. It was like a real, mature, adult kind of transition.

BB: Congratulations.

LP: And I worked there for about a year and traveled all over the state, which was really cool. Just I really enjoyed the traveling part, but the salary was still not what I wanted and I started looking for a new job, saw the job in the newspaper for Harnett County schools, and the contact person who was listed had been a friend of my mother and stepfather's when we lived in Harnett County back in the 70s. And so I filled out an application and went to an interview and got that job. The upside to that is that because I'm once again a state employee, that my seniority by virtue of having worked for the Department of Corrections counts toward retirement and vacation leave and some other perks that you get when you work for the state based on the time that you've worked there.

BB: Were there unions at any of these places that you worked?

LP: No. Of course there's a law in North Carolina against collective bargaining for state employees. I am a member of NCAE, which is the North Carolina Association of Educators, which advocates for collective bargaining for teachers and is a member of the NAE, which is the National Association of Educators, which bills itself as the largest union in the country. At Westinghouse, there were certain so-called radicals within the shop who talked about unions. There would be flyers on the doors of the stalls in the bathroom for the shop employees about meetings for people who might want to form a union. But I remember working in the front office, it seemed like they got mail all the time in human resources from companies who specialized in thwarting unionization. That's just like their consulting business is "we can help you defeat unions in your shop."

BB: What was your opinion of unions and labor organizing then?

LP: I was very much in favor of unions. When I worked for Westinghouse, mandatory once a month, you had to go to safety meetings. So they'd show you these videos on how to pick up heavy loads and how to protect your back and then you had to sign a piece of paper that you'd gone to the meeting. Well, then I'd go back out in the shop and I worked on a piece of equipment from which the safety rails had been removed and I had to bend over at the waist and then twist and then pull these hundred-pound pallets down this conveyer belt and when I complained about it, I mean we came out of this safety meeting, I called my supervisor over, I said, "The safety equipment's removed from this and I'm having to bend and twist." And of course, you know, his response is, "You either do the work or you don't have a job." So then we started talking about the safety stuff that had been removed and he goes, "Well, they're not going to spend the money to put it back in because this machine's going to be replaced in about two years." So I talked a friend of mine here in Fayetteville

who's an attorney and I said, "Can they do anything to me if I call OSHA?" [Occupational Safety and Health Association] And he goes, "Oh yeah, yeah, they can fire you."

BB: Who was your attorney friend?

LP: Chris Godwin. The money that I made at Westinghouse was good money. I wouldn't necessarily have joined a union to advocate for more dough, although that would have been nice, but safety concerns, protection from supervisors who have personal agendas and so forth. I was never victimized by a supervisor, but you just didn't have due process there on much of anything at all. So that's why I liked the idea of unionizing that plant. Now as a state employee, we deserve collective bargaining and we deserve to negotiate all sorts of different things. And if you look at where North Carolina stands educationally in the country, there are plenty of states above us in the ranking of achievement who have collective bargaining. So I believe that it would have a positive impact on the kids that we're trying to educate. Right now you don't have due process for anyone except for tenured teachers and the starting salary for the position that I started at seven years ago hasn't risen in seven years. I've managed, I've gotten promoted and a few other things, but if we were to hire someone tomorrow, they would start in 2007 making the same money that I made in the year 2000.

BB: And isn't it the case that it's just North Carolina and Virginia, there's only two states left in the country that don't allow collective bargaining? Is that right, do you know? [As of the end of 2007, that is correct.]

LP: I don't know for sure about that and I would be surprised if Alabama or some of the Deep South states--. I know that there's several things that North Carolina and West Virginia have in common. Right now if I were to purchase health insurance through my job as a state employee for Tina and Amber, it would cost me four hundred and twenty-six

dollars a month, which is nuts. The insurance that we had at Westinghouse was much better than the state employees' insurance and it was fifty dollars a month. And what happened, North Carolina and West Virginia are the only states that are actually self-insured. So the money that employees pay for their insurance premiums is what the benefits are paid from rather than going through a third-party insurance company. Forty-eight states use third-party insurance companies and North Carolina and West Virginia insure themselves. Usually what happens is if we get a percentage raise as state employees, all too often the price of the health insurance goes up and it just eats whatever raise that you got so you don't actually bring home any more money.

BB: Yeah, my family, we're all on Pete's insurance, which is Blue Cross/Blue Shield of North Carolina and they're evil. Our insurance just went up again this month to eight hundred and eleven dollars a month, Lou, and our mortgage is eight thirty-five. That's why, what it is, like fourteen million people in North Carolina don't have it? I mean it's just...

LP: It's absurd.

BB: It is.

LP: I think if the revolution ever does come, it's going to be because rich people start living longer than poor people because they're the only ones who have access to health care. Tina and I, we make seventy thousand dollars between the two of us and won't go to the doctor because it's expensive and it seems like every time we go someplace, we get double-billed and hassled and you pay a bill and then you get a letter from a collection agency. I go to my shrink because they're pretty good, but it's just crazy trying to navigate the system. My mom's husband is a pediatrician and the last time I was up there visiting him, he talked about how much he was having to pay for health insurance for his employees because he's a great

guy and provides free health insurance for the people that work for him, but it's costing him a huge amount of money.

BB: Yeah. I know I'm jumping ahead a bit, but why don't you talk a little bit about what's happening with veterans' benefits and mostly returning folks and what kind of health care they're getting or lack thereof, mental health care or lack thereof, and what's going on there.

LP: Well, it's a big question. One of the more evil things that the Bush administration has done is it's all too easy for critics of the administration to look at the money allocated to veterans' benefits and to criticize if it decreases. So rather than drastically slash or cut veterans' benefits to pay for the war, the Bush administration is smart enough to know that the biggest problem for getting veterans health care is to get into the system because you have to apply and then you have to be screened. So what they did was they cut the number of screeners, which increases the bottleneck, and so people can wait anywhere from six to eighteen months after their initial application for VA health care before they get approved. So that causes part of the backlog.

Another thing that happens is there's a huge difference, if you're on active duty and you apply for a disability discharge, then the Army determines the amount that you're disabled. And you have to be thirty percent or more disabled in order to get a disability discharge from the Army. If you have that disability discharge, that entitles not only you, but also your family to military health care for the rest of everybody's lives—or the spouse, not the kids; the kids age out. Well, because that is so expensive, what the military does is to discharge people with a disability under thirty percent and say, "Then you need to go to the Veterans' Administration." Well, when you go to the VA, they may give you a hundred

percent disability, but when they do that, you have health care for life from the Veterans' Administration, but your family doesn't get any health care. It's this really thought-out plan to save money and it's horrible.

Then the third part of the question is you asked about mental health care for returning soldiers. National Public Radio has been doing a fantastic job of covering mental health care at Fort Carson, Colorado. What they first discovered were that soldiers were being denied access to health care for post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD, and that they were in fact being punished for claiming to have PTSD. And they interviewed soldiers who had been diagnosed and the soldiers talked about the things that had happened to them as a result of seeking mental health care. Then they interviewed leaders, sergeants and junior officers, who described people with PTSD as "rag bags" and "dirt bags," and "people who can't cut it" and "people who can't deal with it."

So it was a pretty big story and when the story came out, the Pentagon and Congress investigated Fort Carson. Well, the military did what it's really good at doing; it made a power point presentation, made every leader at Fort Carson go the presentation. Daniel Zwerdling was the reporter who did the story. When he came back—literally the chief medical officer at Fort Carson got down on his knees and thanked Zwerdling for doing the story. Well, Zwerdling went back and did a follow-up, sat through the power point presentation, was given a copy of it. He took it to several people who were experts on PTSD, including a former major general in the Army who was chief of the military hospitals in the southeastern United States, let them listen to it, and they said it was garbage, it was bullshit, it didn't do any good. And then Zwerdling did what he'd originally done and talked to soldiers suffering from PTSD and to leaders and basically nothing had changed. The Army is

so conflicted between their mission of following the orders of the leaders and taking care of soldiers and the mission will always come first.

I worked in a prison for seven years and around some nasty people from time to time and in the whole seven years, there were fifteen minutes that I was scared—I mean “scared I was going to die” scared, and that’s it. Fifteen minutes out of my whole life, I’ve had that amount of fear. I still remember it; I think about it all the time. It’s a shaming, it’s a powerful, it’s a mysterious kind of feeling. I was in my late twenties when that happened and I look at friends that I have, that have been in Iraq or that are in Iraq right now, and I think about having that kind of fear every day for a year and how that affect someone for the rest of their lives. Statistics say that twenty to twenty-five percent of returning vets have PTSD. We talked yesterday about my dad. My dad left Vietnam in 1972 and to this day it’s difficult for him to have a conversation without talking about that war. I believe from my own experience and from living in Fayetteville and from knowing so many vets that if this war was going to end today, which it’s not going to, people will still be feeling the repercussions in this country, much less in Iraq, for decades.

BB: So you would call what your father had PTSD, lifelong PTSD?

LP: Yeah. My dad was wounded twice. He had friends die. He had people that he commanded die. He killed people. I know that he’s conflicted because as a minister and someone who tries to base their life on spirituality and trying to reconcile that with having killed women and children and teenagers and seeing their bodies, you know, I just can’t imagine. I think of things in my life that have embarrassed me or that I’ve done that I’m ashamed of and none of them involve killing people. And, you know, it’s just so painful

when those memories come up for me, and that doesn't compare to someone who's been exposed to the type of things that my dad and my friends have been exposed to.

BB: When you talk about how it affects families for generations, do you see a link in what your father suffered through, went through, did, and your relationship with him, and then in turn, your relationship with your kids?

LP: I believe that there is. I really don't know how to analyze it and say, "This happened, so this happened, so this happened." I believe if my dad hadn't been in the military that I wouldn't have been in the military and that Drew wouldn't have been in the military. Drew was the fourth generation, starting with my grandfather, my dad, myself, and Drew, to be wearing a uniform when they were eighteen years old. I was three months past my eighteenth birthday when I signed up. My dad was seventeen. I don't know exactly how old my grandfather was, but...

BB: Children, you were all children.

LP: Yeah.

BB: Like most people who enroll are children, right?

LP: They are. The United States is one of the few countries in the world that allows seventeen year olds to enlist, like we're one of the few countries in the world who execute people who are fifteen, sixteen, seventeen when they commit crimes. You can't buy a beer and you can't vote when you're seventeen, but you can enlist in the military and be trained to do all sorts of things for which there is no equivalent in civilian life. One of the ways that things have affected my relationship with my dad is that when I did become political about American foreign policy and about wars, it's the way that our relationship has kind of gone up and down since then. Prior to this war, politics never affected our relationship. Even

though I try really hard to love my family and my parents because they're my mom and dad, it's still difficult not to be able to identify with them on things that have become so important to me.

BB: Are you okay?

LP: Mmm hmm.

BB: What about gender stuff and the military? You talked about the whole culture of macho manly men and how that's a part of--.

LP: I saw some ugly stuff when I was in the military. I was at Fort Hood and I was in a mixed-gender company. I was in Headquarters Company for the division and that's where you have the division band and all the drivers for the commanding general and just details of enlisted soldiers who work at division headquarters, who take care of the stuff enlisted people do for generals. So it was a mixed-gender company and there was this young eighteen-year-old woman in the company who some guys, and as far as I know it was consensual, but she had gone into a barracks room with two or three guys for sex and they'd taken pictures and she got pregnant and it was just this really ugly, sordid kind of experience. Probably between one third and one half of women in the military are either sexually harassed or sexually assaulted. It's a very macho atmosphere and any time a woman succeeds, it's either because she's a bitch or a whore. If you're around that kind of atmosphere voluntarily long enough, it's very difficult to keep from adopting some of that mindset. I grew up, as I told you yesterday, in an antiracist family; that just wasn't what we did. And when I worked at the prison and eighty percent of the people in prison were black and you're trained from the beginning as a correctional officer to not trust anything an inmate ever tells you, so anytime an inmate tells you something, you assume it's a lie until you can

verify it. And what happened to me toward the end of the time that I was there, when I was out in the world and I saw a young black man, I immediately assumed that he was a criminal and that anytime anyone told me something that I didn't know to be the truth, I doubted whether it was true or not.

So when I was in the military and people, men that I worked with, made these assumptions about women, at that time I was eighteen, nineteen, twenty years old, and didn't have the moral courage to say, "Maybe she got promoted because she's good at what she does." I wasn't one to join in the whole "putting people down" thing, but I kept my mouth shut.

You know, that's another thing that I got from Tina. When people would tell racist jokes or jokes about gays or jokes about women, I would just be quiet and Tina taught me that you can tell people, "That's not funny. I don't appreciate that. I'd rather you not say stuff like that to me." That's something that I learned from her is to be able to do that. What's hard for me is not to get mad when someone does it and just to understand that I was in a place one time where I couldn't say anything about it and just dealing with it maturely.

BB: Do you feel like any of the culture of sexism in the military spilled over into your parents' and step-parents' relationships or do you feel like some of that was internalized and played out that's not just because of the sexist society at large, but specifically because of what the men in your family learned in the military?

LP: There is a culture in the military for men. There's this saying, TDY is Temporary Duty Assignment. It's when like you're stationed at Fort Bragg and you get sent to Fort Hood and there's this slogan: "What happens on TDY, stays on TDY," which basically means if you sleep with someone on temporary duty assignment, that's okay. My father was

serially unfaithful to my mother. He met his second wife while he was on a temporary duty assignment and I think a lot of that kind of culture, that's military culture. There's certainly a lot of infidelity in the civilian world as well.

But I remember in the first Gulf War in the early 90s here in Fayetteville because they emptied Fort Bragg for that war. For this war, they're rotating one third of the people at the time out, so Fort Bragg's never been empty. But when they emptied out the post, there were so many women who were married to soldiers who were filling up the bars here in Fayetteville, which was weird, and just the whole thing of separating young people from each other. It's like in this war when the first group of soldiers came back from Afghanistan, we had five spousal murders in the first six weeks and it was a mix of men killing their wives and one wife who killed her husband who came back.

BB: The wife came back?

LP: No, no. The husband came back and when he came back, the wife killed him. The whole dynamic of young people and that's one thing people need to understand about the military. Half of the people in the military are younger than twenty-two and the difference in today's army and the army my dad served in is that today a lot of those young people are married. I remember being married at eighteen and how mature or immature I was at that point and so there's a lot of that immaturity and the relationship problems that come with the prolonged separations, that come with the stress of being in war. And you have people today who are twenty-one or twenty-two that have spent three out of the four years in combat situations and it just does all kinds of things to relationships.

Any man that serves in the military just gets this whole, I mean it's a celebration of masculinity, and Jeremy Hinzman was a friend of mine who has had a really interesting life.

He lived with Patrick O'Neill at the Catholic Worker House in Garner and then enlisted in the Eighty-Second Airborne. When he was in basic training going through bayonet drills and they were chanting, "Blood makes the grass grow," he began to realize that he had done something wrong, you know. Jeremy eventually went to Canada and then publicly said that he refused to serve because it was an illegal war. But certain people when they get in the military, they just don't identify with all the manly stuff, the "killing makes you a man," but most people do, most people; I did. I was yelling and screaming and marching because my whole life, that's the kind of environment that I'd lived in. For me, it didn't translate into thinking that women were bitches or whores, but it did make me kind of adopt this American machismo thing.

BB: I can imagine that really plays a role in the whole group-think mentality that can be really, really difficult to break out of and challenge, whether it's standing up against racist comments or sexist comments, but now particularly thinking about Jeremy and some of the others who resist and become conscientious objectors or defectors and just how damn difficult that is because of the group-think mentality. Let's talk about what happened with Drew and if you can give a little bit of background on the story.

LP: In March twentieth, 2003, Drew was home on leave. He had just finished his nuclear training. He had been in the military about a year and a half and had left Balston Spa in New York, had leave on his way to Norfolk, Virginia where he'd been assigned to the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower. So he was home on leave. Fayetteville Peace with Justice had planned a day of action for the day that the war started and it was March twentieth, 2003. I was at work that day and a reporter called and asked to speak to me and Drew said, "Well, my dad's at work, but he's going to be at the Market House this afternoon for this

demonstration.” Then Drew said, “But I’m going too and I’m in the Navy.” So the reporter came to the demo and took Drew’s picture—

you got the pictures—holding the sign that says, “Bring Our Troops Home,” and talked to Drew and Drew made the three statements that he thinks the war is about money, he doesn’t think people should be dying in Iraq, but that he enlisted and he was going to do what he was told. And Drew’s job, he was a nuclear reactor operator. He wasn’t a gun firer. He just kind of made sure the ship could go from one place to the other. So the story ran the next day and things went nuts. Tom Brokaw’s people called the house and the story went on the newswire and it hit about seventy newspapers. It was in the *Boston Herald* and the *LA Times*.

Drew was one of the very first military people to say anything about the war negatively and when he reported to the Eisenhower, he’d never been there before, when he got there, within an hour of arriving, they told him that he was going to receive punishment or have non-judicial punishment. It’s called “Captain’s Mast” in the Navy. He was going to go before this commander of this nuclear aircraft carrier, which is fifty-five hundred people, and he was being charged with making disloyal statements. So he went and so he’s before this guy who went to Annapolis and the guy is like, “Do you support the enemy?” And I wish Drew had said, “No, I don’t like George Bush,” but he said, “No.” They asked, “Are you going to sabotage the ship?” He said, “No.” And they said, “Well, are you sorry for saying that?” And Drew said, “No.” So they convicted him and the punishment was to be reduced in rank one level, suspended, which is kind of like a slap on the wrist. Well, I called the— actually, before the actual hearing when I found out that he had been charged, I called the AP [Associated Press] reporter, his name’s Alan Breed, and told him who I was and said, “My son’s being tried for making those comments to you.” And I don’t know for sure, but I

believe that Breed called the Eisenhower and let them know that he was aware that they were going to try this sailor and I think that's why Drew's sentence was suspended.

So Drew goes on the ship and is immediately identified, not by his fellow sailors, who by and large were either apolitical or thought it was cool as shit that he said this stuff, but the petty officers and particularly the junior officers, the ensigns, they called him the "hippy," his hair was half an inch long, and that he was a scumbag and just gave him a bunch of shit for what he'd done and made Drew's life miserable.

After some period of time, he went AWOL. His plan was to go to Mexico to get one of those high-paying jobs that they give to white people that don't speak English, which is what I told him, I said, "That's not a good move, Drew." So he went to Mexico and went over the border at Brownsville and stayed an hour was terrified and came back, ended up hitchhiking back to Fayetteville. And I called Stan Goff and Stan said, "You need to get him back before thirty days are up or they're going to throw the book at him."

So Drew came here and I drove him against his will pretty much back to Norfolk and made him go in and turn himself in. So he did and then he got all kinds of punishment. They took a third of his pay for a couple months, demoted him, confined him to quarters. They put him on a ship in the middle of the James River where he had to stand guard at this open door of this derelict ship in the middle of the water and he made wise-ass comments, you know like, "Chief, you think al Qaeda's going to swim across this river and climb in this ship?" But anyway, his military career really continued to be a lot of harassment. And he started doing things like giving out copies of the *Travelin' Soldier* newsletter, which is an antiwar newsletter, and telling people about [Howard] Zinn and [Noam] Chomsky and just falling into the role of a radical kind of sailor.

And eventually about six months later, he split again and this time he didn't contact me. But by this time, I was fully supportive of him leaving. This was after Camillo Mejia had left and after Jeremy had left and a number of GI resistors had gone public and I supported him being gone. I didn't hear from him for months and he called me on a cell phone and three days later he was arrested. I've since found out that—I don't know if there's a direct correlation, but—as an antiwar organizer in Fayetteville, that me and some other people were in a Pentagon database called the Talon database and we were actually entered into the database because we do antiwar organizing near a military base and are perceived as potential threats. And so I don't know that the phone call was intercepted or what happened. I just know I didn't hear from him for six months, he calls me, and three days later he's arrested.

BB: So he called you on your cell phone basically and you answered?

LP: He called from a cell phone to my home phone.

BB: Oh, okay.

LP: He ended up in this jail in Grady County, Georgia because he was held by civilian authorities. It freaked me out. Nobody in my family to my knowledge had ever been in jail. Then he was picked up by the Navy, who, he said they handcuffed him to walk through the airport in Tallahassee and they offered to drape a coat over his handcuffs so as not to embarrass and he's like, "I don't give a fuck. Let's just go." He said it was funny because he's walking through and these women are like grabbing their kids and pulling them aside. I organized this letter-writing campaign that I have pictures of and people from all over the country, from Germany, sent him letters and really bolstered his spirits because what he was hearing from the Navy people is that he was a scumbag and a dirt bag and a coward and

blah blah blah. I thought it took an awful lot of courage for him to say, “I don’t care what happens in my life. I’m not going to be a part of this war machine anymore.” And that’s what he did; he split.

The whole process, of course, was a growing process for me, having wanted him to go back the first time into being very proud of him the second time. When he got out and came back the day before this big demonstration that so many of us had poured our lives into for months, it was just fantastic. He only stayed here a couple weeks because his partner in Georgia was pregnant with our grandson. So he stayed here for a few days and went back down there and just started this new life.

BB: Can you tell me more about what you think accounted for the shift in you from taking him back to being proud of him and supporting him? You mentioned that more and more people you admire were becoming GI resistors, but what else do you think was involved in that shift over those few months?

LP: The antiwar movement really became my life. In the time period before the 2005 demo in Fayetteville, I worked six, seven hours a day writing and calling people and conference calls. I had started traveling to speak in different places and when you arrive in a strange city to go to an antiwar panel discussion or whatever, the whole time you’re there, you’re talking about the war. I was doing organizing in Fayetteville and talking to military wives whose husbands were getting screwed over or who had just had all these negative military experiences and that’s what I lived almost all the time. And even at my regular job, I was on the phone, on the Internet in between busy periods, reading and talking and doing interviews and just that total immersion in opposing the war is what changed me. Talking to my mom and my dad about it—there is a plaque at Quaker House about a woman who died

in an automobile accident carrying soldiers to Canada during the Vietnam War and that woman had been a classmate of my parents in high school and I talked to both my mother and my father about her and I just, in that time period, wanted to use every second that I had to stop the war. That's not emotionally sustainable as I found out later. I'd have done anything I could have done at that time period to help any military member leave, whether it was Drew or somebody who came knocking on my door; that's just where I was at that period in my life.

BB: Legal/illegal, well—

LP: It's all illegal.

BB: It's all illegal. Well, let's back up to 2001-ish when you first got involved with— well, you were a founding member of Fayetteville Peace with Justice, is that right?

LP: Right, yeah.

BB: So tell me about what that group is and who all was involved and what you did, how you got involved.

LP: Well, the only progressive group that I was aware of in Fayetteville was People of Faith Against the Death Penalty and that was a mixture of, it started off with mostly Quakers and then Chip Smith came and he had this forty-year history of activism and people who weren't Quakers, like Tina and myself, started getting involved and some people of color that Chip had known through some economic activism started to get involved. The most important thing in the world to Chip is getting your email address and your phone number because that's what organizers do. So he had a contact list and prior to the invasion of Afghanistan or maybe simultaneously to it, decided to see if there was interest in forming a grassroots peace group. So we had a meeting and there were people there, mostly from

Fayetteville, but a minister and his wife from Southern Pines came and we talked about, “Who are we and what do we want to do?” At this point, it was still prior to my understanding very much about US foreign policy or American empire and I was real adamant that, “I want peace, but I want justice too,” and justice to me meant, “Let’s punish the people who knocked down the World Trade Center.” I was still more admiring the people who were American soldiers and Marines and airmen and sailors who were fighting the war than understanding that they were victims of this maladjusted foreign policy.

We didn’t do any demonstrations against the war in Afghanistan and what happened in the early days of Fayetteville Peace with Justice is people just wanted to get together and talk about how fucked up US foreign policy was. And Chip as an organizer wanted us to do stuff, not just sit around and talk about how smart we were and how dumb all right-wing people are. So he started pushing us to do outreach events and put us into contact with people like Stan Goff and Rania Masri. [description of Rania] One of the first things that we did that drew a lot of attention was to have a panel discussion with—and help me out, Bridgette—the anthropology professor from Chapel Hill.

BB: Kathy Lutz.

LP: Kathy Lutz. Kathy had written a book about the relationship between Fayetteville and Fort Bragg and what being near a military base does to a community. It was really controversial when it was released here in Fayetteville. Anything that isn’t flag-waving tends to be controversial here. So she came and we drew quite a crowd of people who came to talk to her and I met her and thought she was amazing and had read the book from cover to cover and had some personal questions for her. A couple months after that, we did an event at the library, a panel discussion, about the Patriot Act. We had an FBI agent, we had the editor-in-

chief of the *Fayetteville Observer*, we had the head of the law library at UNC-Chapel Hill, and we had an attorney from the ACLU, [American Civil Liberties Union] Seth—I don't remember his name. He's the chief ACLU lawyer in North Carolina.

BB: And where did you hold this?

LP: This was at the public library here in Fayetteville.

BB: Do you remember the date about, the month?

LP: It was March of 2002 and it was standing room only. Teachers had assigned their kids to come to it. It drew out right-wingers who were thinking the government was going to take their guns away. It drew out left people who didn't like the erosion of civil liberties. That poor FBI agent just got bombarded. The head of the law library at Chapel Hill started crying. She was so angry about having to do things like keep records of people who check out books to give to the FBI without warrants.

BB: Do you remember their names, the FBI agent and the--?

LP: I don't, but I just remember being amazed at the power of organizers to get a message out and to spark debate. Of course, Chip's there with the "can I have your email address and your phone number" thing and that really helped us add a few members to Fayetteville Peace with Justice. The next event that we did was with Stan Goff reading from his book, *Hideous Dream*, about Haiti and Rania Masri came as well to talk about Palestinian justice issues. During the program, Rania began to talk about the prison-industrial complex in the United States and a student from the Young Republicans at Terry Sanford High School started challenging her with this whole rundown of "people who are in prison need to be fed bread and water and work twenty hours a day." Then for the first time in my life, I stood up before that room of people and just kind of laid out, "You don't know anything about prison.

You don't understand. You can't treat people like animals because other people have to go in there and manage them and these people are going to get out. These people could be you and just—"

BB: So you're feeling it.

LP: Yeah, I mean Rania's looking at me like, "You go, Lou!" And I got done and Tina's freaking out because she had never seen me do this around people.

BB: This is still at a time when the social anxiety piece was—

LP: Yeah, yeah huge.

BB: This is huge!

LP: Yeah, so it was a big deal. I just started understanding that grassroots peace groups shouldn't be discussion clubs. It's cool to have a place to go to talk about how you're feeling about the war, but generally you can take for granted in those spaces that we all think the war sucks; we all want it to end. Let's win people over to our point of view or see what we can learn from people about how they oppose the war. That was the early days of Fayetteville Peace with Justice.

BB: So where was this event, the one you were just talking about?

LP: It was also at the public library.

BB: Also at the public library. About how many members did Fayetteville Peace with Justice have around that time?

LP: Well, it's hard. Who do you want to call a member? The people who come to the planning meetings? If you have twenty people who come to that, you're lucky. And I thought, "Man, this is sad because there's so many people in town," until I went to New York and saw that some of the people who organize big things up there feel like they're lucky if

they get twenty people to come to a planning meeting. We ended up having about two hundred people on our mailing list who would read our emails, come to our larger events, and that kind of thing.

BB: How is Fayetteville Peace with Justice organized in terms of leadership and division of labor and decision-making?

LP: We took turns rotating who would chair and sometimes we'd go through a period where you'd agree to chair for three months at a time, sometimes we would just ask for a person to chair the next month. Generally we don't do any collecting of money. So we don't have a treasurer and there's not a president and a vice-president. We did try for a period of time to have a planning meeting, the meetings were a month apart, so we'd try to have a planning meeting two weeks after each meeting to plan for the next month, but it was hard to get people to commit to that. So then it became a meeting of the full group and then if there were projects underway, we'd ask for people to volunteer to be on committees to help with projects. I'm a chronic volunteer so we had a lot of meetings here at my house for different things that we planned to do. We had sign-making parties for different demonstrations. Excuse me, I need to get some water.

BB: Yeah, let's take a break.

[break in conversation]

LP: Because Fayetteville Peace with Justice wasn't called Fayetteville Natives Against the War, there were other issues that certain parts of the group wanted to work on. There have been some of us within the group who've been supporters of the Campaign for Justice at Smithville Packing Company for a long time.

BB: Will you say what that is?

LP: Yeah, it's the largest hog processing plant in the world is located in an adjoining county to Cumberland County. It's located in Bladen County and it's owned by Smithfield Packing Company. Smithfield Packing Company has committed a series of labor violations in fighting a union that's attempting to unionize the plant. As social justice activists, some of us feel it's our responsibility to support those workers. So one of the problems that came about for me as a member of Fayetteville Peace with Justice is understanding that it's a coalition of people and some people aren't interested in economic justice issues. They're against the war and that tends to be why they want to take part. Once again, it's hard for me to relate to that type of attitude and so it would be disappointing to me when people who were members of the group would become disinterested in participating in those type of campaigns. We had an organizer from United for the Fair Economy—it's an economic justice group based in Massachusetts—who came to do a program and several members of Fayetteville Peace with Justice attended that, but others were disinterested. We had African-American members of our group who wanted to talk about racial justice and some members of Fayetteville Peace with Justice were disinterested in that as well.

BB: White members?

LP: White members.

BB: Was it also white members who were opposed to economic justice organizing and disinterested?

LP: Yeah, and I'm just going to call it like I see it. It tends to be a certain demographic of people who are white, fifty-plus folks who a lot of times, radicals refer to them as liberals and it's not the good liberal; it's used as a pejorative and I use it as a pejorative at times. One of the biggest conflicts that happened in Fayetteville Peace with

Justice and that continues to happen and has been very divisive is the participation of Quaker House and when I say Quaker House, I'm actually referring to the paid director of Quaker House, Chuck Fager. There are certain types of people who are really good based on their experience at brainstorming ideas and coming up with things that groups can do. So they help you come up with the ideas and then they're like, "Okay, y'all go do it!" I have issues with that kind of attitude within a group. But for me the largest conflict with Quaker House—Chuck's job that he gets paid to do is to promote Quaker House and to make it visible within the community because of his perception, that allows him to raise money and without raising money for Quaker House, it can't exist. And I openly acknowledge that that's what he gets paid to do. However, having said that, there are other people within Fayetteville Peace with Justice who have full-time jobs, who don't get paid to do anything within the activist world, who put a lot of time and energy and blood, sweat, and tears into it. And Quaker House isn't an organization that has members. It's an organization that's got a board of directors, but you don't join Quaker House. On the other hand, Fayetteville Peace with Justice is a grassroots peace group that attempts to enlist people in all of the myriad social justice issues that there are for people of conscience to work on and to that end, Fayetteville Peace with Justice also needs to get its name out and needs to be known within the community for the good work that it does.

Chuck is an old head in activism. He's done some amazing, admirable things. He was a bodyguard for Dr. King in Selma. He's been arrested. He has been an advocate kind of on the left wing of the Quakers for many years and has done stuff. He was a conscientious objector during the Vietnam War. He's from a military family. His father is a retired Air Force officer. So there are things that I can relate to, but there is a conflict. Two forces

pushing against each other, when it comes to him representing a well-known organization within this group of individuals... And all too often, Fayetteville Peace with Justice would organize an event and it would be those of us who were volunteer grassroots activists who would do the work and get the venue and do the publicity and make the phone calls and when the newspaper shows up, Chuck would have the opportunity to speak with a reporter. At worst, it would become an event sponsored by Quaker House and at best, it would be an event sponsored by Quaker House where Fayetteville Peace with Justice also participated. That was hard, but Chuck can...

There are members of Fayetteville Peace with Justice who don't see things the way that I see them and who really feel that it's very important for us as a group to support Quaker House. And that if organizing events which allow that name to get out there, the name of Quaker House, then that's a good thing. And in a certain sense, it is a good thing. Chuck has been a positive force in some ways in this community for our organizing. Especially since I kind of stepped back from doing a lot of media work, Chuck has been the go-to person for the press to talk about all kinds of different things. Recently we had nine soldiers from Fort Bragg who were killed on the same day and the paper called Chuck for a comment and Chuck's comments, his analysis of things is generally pretty good. He's got experience in doing this and he knows how to get the message across without pissing people off. I mean, hell, he went on Bill O'Reilly's Spin Factor and kind of got the best of O'Reilly, which is amazing. But it's kind of hard. As I became more radicalized within the social justice movement and began to explore other groups other than Fayetteville Peace with Justice, I became more disdainful of the liberals and they became more disdainful of me. It's very difficult.

BB: What were some other groups you were involved with around 2001, 2002?

LP: I became a member of Veterans for Peace, although at that time it really only consisted of filling out a form on a website. In the period between 2001 and the run-up to the war, I went to events that were sponsored by Freedom Road Socialist Organization, but I wasn't a member.

BB: Can you say a little bit about Freedom Road?

LP: Yeah. I learned about Freedom Road Socialist Organization, or I'm just going to call them Freedom Road, from Chip Smith. When he first came to Fayetteville, Freedom Road was still publishing a magazine and he gave me a copy of the magazine and he talked about Freedom Road quite openly. I went to an event at his house. He had Ajamu Dillahunt, who's a member, who currently works for the North Carolina Justice Center, but at that time was the head of a postal union in Raleigh and Chip had several people at his house to ask questions about Freedom Road.

One of the funniest things I've ever seen in activism, there's an activist in Fayetteville whose name is Ernest Crawford and he is the cofounder or the founder of a B-Me organization, which is for black gay and lesbian folks. Ernest comes across sometimes almost as clownish, but he has got a sharp, sharp mind. He's got some very particular opinions on certain things. So Chip and Ajamu were talking about Freedom Road, that some members are open and don't mind disclosing that they belong to the organization and other people for various reasons are members of Freedom Road that don't make it known. And so Ernest asked Chip, "Well, Chip, do you let people know that you're in Freedom Road?" And Chip said, "Yes." So Ernest says, "So some of y'all are in the closet and some of y'all have come out." And I died. I mean, that's just the way that he analyzed stuff.

But Freedom Road is an organization of organizers. You can't buy a newspaper and fill out a form and become a member of Freedom Road. They do a lot of political education for folks who might be interested in joining and it generally has to be a good fit between the organization and the individual. They have members from coast to coast. They have a website that's got a lot of writing. Stan Goff is a former member of Freedom Road who has done a lot of military and political analysis; his stuff's on their website. As the years went by, I met more and more members of the organization and I think really highly of them. But in the period 2001-2002, prior to the war starting, I pretty much did almost all the organizing that I did for Fayetteville Peace with Justice and still was a member of People of Faith Against the Death Penalty.

BB: So there were also some coming outs for you of sorts? Like it's your first public speaking hoorah and then you started to write, you wrote one of your first guest antiwar op-eds, right, for the local paper?

LP: Yeah, it was the first thing I'd ever had published in the paper. I talked about kind of the attitude of military people from my perspective when I'd been in the military, that it's not always groupthink and there have always been and will continue to be individuals within the military who don't march to the beat of whoever's beating the head drum. It was really interesting because this retired colonel who was an executive with an IT company with Fayetteville fired back at me with his own op-ed and then Chip fired back at him and then another person put a letter to the editor. It was a dialogue, but it kind of opened the door for me with the local media to get a second look at things that I wrote and it was cool.

I remember, I also began to write a series of letters, which I did for a couple years, about the National Day of Prayer when the groups in Fayetteville decided to invite rabbis and

Christian ministers, but excluded the imam of our local mosque and for a couple years, I wrote letters about that to the editor.

BB: And did you join Freedom Road around that time or did you join Freedom Road?

LP: I joined Freedom Road in November of 2003. My activist life exploded in the summer of 2003. I hadn't flown on an airplane prior to that for ten years and Fayetteville Peace with Justice became a member of a larger national umbrella organization called United for Peace and Justice. They had their first national conference in Chicago in the summer of 2003. I was selected to go to that and I went and all of a sudden, I'm looking at people who are in the major leagues of activism in this country. I saw the Rev. Graylin Hagler from Washington, DC speak and he blew me away. I met Leslie Cagan, who was on the staff of United for Peace and Justice and an old head activist; Hany Khalil, who was the editor of *War Times* magazine; Bob Wing, who also worked on that, just lots and lots of people. I hung that weekend with three folks from North Carolina that I knew who were there: Ajamu Dillahunt, Bryan Proffitt, and Yolanda Carrington. While I was there, I saw a group called Military Families Speak Out, which I was peripherally aware of, but I went to them and—it was Nancy and Charley—and introduced myself, told them that I lived at Fort Bragg. It kind of clicked for both of us that this was a good meeting; it was good that we talked to each other. I talked to the fellow who was currently the executive director of Veterans for Peace, Woody, and I don't remember his last name, and told him that I was a member and it kind of clicked for us as well.

And came back from that and a couple of months later, President Bush made his famous statement when asked about Iraqi insurgents who were fighting with American troops to “bring ‘em on,” which became the event that spurred the formation of the group

bringthemhomenow.org. That group kicked off its existence with a series of press conferences. One was at the National Press Club in [Washington] DC. The second was at Quaker House in Fayetteville and I spoke at that and helped to organize it. Then the third was in Crawford, Texas where President Bush's ranch is. So now I'm beginning to know folks who do work all over the country in Military Families Speak Out, in Veterans for Peace. I'm now on the board of this national group, Bring Them Home Now. I'm meeting people and being on conference calls and doing a lot of stuff.

Based on something that I wrote that was published in the Fayetteville paper, I got an invitation to speak to a student group that was a campus antiwar network group, which was organized, it's kind of a subsidiary of the International Socialist Organization, which I'll call the ISO, in Greensboro. So I went up and spoke with them. I took a guy from work with me who isn't a leftie, but is interested in seeing how people think. So I went to Greensboro and I spoke to this student group and one of the people that were there is actually a professor at Wake Forest and he put me in contact with some folks on the national level of the ISO. And then for a number of months—

BB: I'm sorry to interrupt. Was that at Guilford College?

LP: No, that was at UNC-Greensboro. For a number of months, I traveled the country speaking to different groups that were panel discussions primarily that were organized by the ISO. I also went to Paris in November of 2003 to the European Social Forum and when I was in Paris, then I met people from antiwar groups that were in specific countries: Switzerland and Australia and England. I met members of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War based in Europe and I met people who were doing antiwar work specifically about American

foreign policy in Germany. That's when I met Shuja Graham and roomed with him. It was a heady time. I'd gone from not leaving my house to leaving the country for the first time.

BB: How were you during that time emotionally and were you taking good care of yourself? How was it for you?

LP: No, I wasn't taking good care of myself. I was so high on doing all this traveling that I went into kind of the manic part of what bipolar disorder is. One of the problems with bipolar folks is when you start to feel good, you stop taking your medicine. So I stopped taking my medicine and continued to function relatively well. I joined Freedom Road and I was on this national conference call about different subjects. I went to a meeting of the North Carolina Peace and Justice Coalition at Guilford College and advocated as hard as I could to do a demonstration against the war in March of 2004 [in Fayetteville] and really started beginning to understand what statewide coalition work was like and planning and be strategic and, by virtue of working in a smaller group of people who I really started admiring, started getting the kind of education about all kinds of things that I didn't know about.

I remember being with Bryan Proffitt in Chicago at that United for Peace and Justice meeting and that's where I heard the term "white privilege" for the first time and I didn't know what it meant. I went to a "white people's caucus" and the first time I saw it, I thought that someone was being racist, it was a racist joke, and it wasn't. It was a group of white people talking about white privilege and I was amazed. I remember being at that meeting at Guilford College for North Carolina Peace and Justice and people had different opinions and we were advocating to get things done in Fayetteville and the group of my friends that I was with supported Fayetteville and there was a woman there who was disagreeable and I said that she was a bitch. I didn't think...I didn't remember saying it and...[voice cracks]; this is

tough. So I got this letter from Bryan in the mail, in my email, and in his special way, he said that, “Man, I used to say that all the time,” because Bryan cusses more than anybody I’ve ever met in my life and you don’t even notice it; he could cuss to your grandma. But, you know, he said that there’s no word that women can use that has that same context as when men say, “bitch” and that it’s just not cool. I haven’t called a woman that since and I don’t use that word anymore, but that’s the kind of education that I started getting.

To be honest, sometimes it would get on my nerves. Here I am, a fortysomething-year-old white man who hasn’t grown up or lived or been exposed to these kind of ideas. I live in Fayetteville and I’ve never been in college so I didn’t get that academic stuff and I’m struggling so hard to do the right thing. I’m an overly sensitive person anyways and sometimes I would just feel like I was just scared to talk because I didn’t want to—I don’t know if I was because I didn’t want to offend someone or because I didn’t want them to tell me I’d offended them. [laughs] It gets overwhelming. Even today, it’s gets overwhelming sometimes trying to be right, trying to wrap my head around white privilege and heterosexism and ageism and all those kinds of different things. Sometimes I have more energy to do that than I do at other times.

But anyway, through 2004, we had this demonstration in Fayetteville in March with the North Carolina Peace and Justice Coalition and it was a lot of work and a lot of conference calls, at least at that time I thought it was a lot of work, and I kept doing the speaking gig. I went all over the place, the northeast, I went to Atlanta at some point during the summer to speak for another Socialist organization. I was invited by North Carolina activist Theresa El-Amin to Solidarity at Spellman College down south and just continued to

meet different activists. I was beginning to be able to tell what had happened to Drew as a result of his speaking out, talk about the organizing at Fort Bragg.

There was just a sense nationwide on the left that in this war, it was really important to make allies with GI resisters and military families and to not be condemning of people in the military. Sometimes I feel like it's a calculated move on folks' part. I think some people and sometimes I even have the attitude that you know, people sign up for the Army most often for economic reasons, but the idea that everyone in the Army is a target to be organized is ludicrous; it's not. There are quite a few people who believe in what they're doing and sometimes it spills over. I remember being at a meeting at UNC-Greensboro in early 2005 and an old head SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] activist, Efiya Nwangazza, told Kara Hollingsworth that her husband was a mercenary. I went nuts inside trying to figure out how to deal with that.

But in December of 2004, Michael Hoffman from IVAW [Iraq Veterans Against the War] and I went to Great Britain and traveled through England and Scotland. That's where I met Rose Gentle. That's where I met some English vets who were attempting to form an antiwar organization. That's where Mike Markesy—I stayed with him and his wife in his home, began to learn a little bit about English politics, which can be just as fucked up as American politics. *Did you know* that prior to Tony Blair, that members of the Labor Party called each other “comrade” and that Blair changed it to “colleague”?

But I also learned how people—you can get pimped out. To this day, I get a copy of the *British Socialist Worker* newspaper in the mail every week that I don't subscribe to and didn't ask to get, but people try to curry favor with whoever might happen to be a rock star one day. When Michael Hoffman, he was on the cover of *Mother Jones* magazine and here's

a young guy who's just gotten out of the military and everybody loves him and everybody wants to talk to him and everybody wants him to come to their event. As other people from the GI resistance started stepping into the forefront, Michael started having a difficult time with not being a rock star anymore. I think it's sometimes what happens to people who get in the spotlight is everybody thinks you're brilliant and they think everything you've got to say makes a lot of sense and it's sometimes because they want you to come to their events so they can turn out a lot of people. To me, it can be kind of the dark side of being on a stage, a big stage, because it turns into kind of a club after awhile and an event gets measured not by how much we did to stop the war, but how famous the people are that we had on the stage—and I've been guilty of it. In 2005, that demo, it was a national event. It had the support of United for Peace and Justice and we had politicians and Cindy Sheehan was there and this was before Crawford, "Cindy Sheehan BC". [Sheehan camped outside President George Bush's ranch in Crawford, TX and garnered national and international media attention for her vigil.]

BB: And this was the Fayetteville Bring Them Home Now?

LP: This is the Fayetteville Bring Them Home Now in 2005. It takes maturity and it takes experience and it takes not taking yourself too seriously to make it through these movement rock star moments. It's why for the past year, I haven't wanted to travel and to speak and I had to separate the real Lou Plummer from this person who was—you know, I went to Italy last year and I'm not an international kind of guy. It was really cool to do that and to have the opportunity, but I work full-time and having the energy to follow up—and people want you to do a lot of stuff and have unrealistic expectations. The trip to Italy, the folks who organized that wanted me to come back and to get Military Families Speak Out to

write a letter about this and a letter about that. Military Families Speak Out is a diverse organization that is very narrow-minded—not narrow-minded, but very, it's got a single focus and that focus is supporting military families in the United States and being in solidarity with like organizations across the world. But one of the issues that was really important to folks in Italy was depleted uranium and military testing near the island of Sardinia. I just couldn't deliver on things that they wanted the groups in the US to do. One, I'm not a representative or a decision-maker for that group; I'm just a member of the group. I felt a lot of pressure to do things that I couldn't deliver.

The other part was we talked earlier about prior to this Bring Them Home demo in Fayetteville in March of 2005, for three months, I worked seven and eight hours a day and I loved it, I absolutely loved it, and it kept me going. I wasn't taking my medication and I just lived off the energy and the excitement. But there was so much about coalition work that I didn't know that I had to learn during that period of time. It's groups with different agendas. Some of us within the organizing committee had huge issues with other people and it was pretty much people who were in the ISO and people who weren't in the ISO.

BB: And the organizing committee is the organizing committee to put on the rally?

LP: Put on the rally. And there were different subcommittees. You have a program committee who decides who is going to speak. Then you have a media committee who are the spokesmen for the group. And you have outreach for trying to get people to come. And you have fundraising and with fundraising comes the fundraising record keeping, which this event cost forty thousand dollars to put on and the fundraising and the record keeping were difficult. Folks' feelings got hurt and folks felt like they didn't know the whole story when they thought they knew the whole story. For the program committee, you know, it's people

really wanting certain people to speak. At one point, I was the head of that committee and so, with a vote of the committee, able to make decisions. There was a student from Washington who was represented to the program committee as having organized [dogs bark in the background] an anti-recruitment effort at his school.

BB: Hold on just a second. Do you remember the student's name?

LP: No, but I can look it up. So anyway, he was invited and then after the invitation was issued, we got letters from other students at the school who said that he hadn't been an organizer and that he had joined the ISO and that they were pushing him. It was just this real mess. I decided, with the support of the program committee, to disinvite this guy. The ISO sent four of their paid cadre here to Fayetteville and these were people that I knew, I had been to Europe with them, I had partied with them in Chicago, and when they got here, they didn't want to go to Europe and they didn't want to party; they wanted to make me change my mind. I wasn't intimidated; it just really pissed me off. And the day of the event, they flew this kid here and one of the emcees for the actual demo, Kristen Robinson, was a member of the ISO and toward the end of the program, I saw this kid from Washington who had been specifically—we had decided that he wasn't going to speak. I thought Kristen was going to have him on the stage—and so I did one of the most controversial things that I've ever done as an activist and I asked one of the police officers who was there to make sure this kid didn't get on the stage. In retrospect, I wish I hadn't done it. There were other organizers and people who could have done the same thing that the cop did. It's just real bad activist juju to involve the people in stuff. Because the police in the United States do a lot of fucked up stuff. I was coming at it from, "I'm from Fayetteville. I can look around here and I went to high school with that cop and that cop's married to my cousin." I have a different

perspective. I've got a white guy's perspective who's forty years old, not some young person of color's perspective.

The repercussions from doing that were huge. Just to put it in the context though: this demonstration that we had all worked on was the biggest antiwar demonstration in a military town in some thirty-five years. It got national and international press coverage. It gave military people all over the country inspiration. We had an amazing, powerful performance, and the blood, sweat, and tears that we had poured out paid off. The next day, I woke up and wanted to shoot myself because—not literally, I was just depressed—because people's feelings had been hurt. You've got ten seconds to make a decision and you make the wrong one and people have the rest of your life to analyze that. Medea Benjamin from Code Pink had orchestrated a last minute campaign so that she could be onstage and I gave the okay for that to happen. Then Efiya Nwangazza, who didn't get to speak, and she thought she was going to...

We had to have a meeting the day after the demo in a hotel room. Were you there for part of that? [Bridgette nods.] That wasn't any fun. The ISO folks were still in town. I just got the sense from them that I owed them because they had given me the opportunity to go to fucking Pittsburgh and Cincinnati. Then it got on the Internet and once stuff gets on the Internet, it's like, "Then Lou pulled the cop's gun out and pointed it at his head and called him a spic!" [laughter] It was grotesque. Then a couple of weeks after that, I went to these incredibly painful after-action analyses at your house and you're there and I'm yelling at people and my friends are crying and people out in the yard talking on the telephone to their cadres in Cincinnati being told what to say next, and it was tough. A couple weeks after that, I came home and wrote this email that says, "Leave me alone."

BB: Everybody.

LP: Everybody. "Don't call me. Don't email me. Don't ask me to do anything." I wasn't on a high anymore. I went back to my doctor and said, "I'm losing it." I had a pretty serious substance abuse relapse for a few months over that period. My weight ballooned, which it does on and off all my life. I didn't go to Fayetteville Peace with Justice meetings. I didn't speak. I didn't write.

BB: You weren't burnt.

LP: I just hurt. I still hurt over it. And that lasted for a few months and then I kind of put my toe back in and I started doing a little bit of writing. For the 2006 demonstration, I didn't do any conference calls and I didn't go to any meetings, but I did help the program committee. I still have this network of friends and people that I've met and was able to help them get speakers. And, I don't know, "advise" is too strong of a word, but when people call and ask my opinion about "how did you do this in the past" and stuff, I was open to do things like that. I was actually in Rome when the demo happened here in Fayetteville. It was the first one that I'd missed. It was neat seeing how all over the world, there were hundreds and thousands of people in Rome, and so I was there. So for the rest of 2005 and early 2006, I wasn't working on any big projects. I was somewhat active in Freedom Road. We had demos in Fayetteville for certain landmarks, the two thousandth soldier killed and the twenty-fifth hundred, events that happened at Fort Bragg. There was an organizer from California who came here around the time, Ehren Watada, who the first officer to be a resister. When he came forward and refused to deploy with his unit from Fort Lewis, I did some support work for that. We managed to get several things in the Fayetteville newspaper about the different work that we were doing. That was early 2006.

Then in the fall of 2006, I started having some pretty major emotional issues again and substance abuse issues again. I resigned from Freedom Road, which was really strange. I had done this big fundraising kick and raised a bunch of money from my family and others to help sponsor an event that Freedom Road was having and then the weekend that the event happened, I woke up the day I was supposed to get in my car and go and just had those old feelings of not being able to face a bunch of people. And so I didn't go and I didn't answer my telephone and when it was over, I wrote a letter to the organization saying that I didn't want to be a member anymore. I stopped going to Fayetteville Peace with Justice meetings.

BB: Why?

LP: The conflict between the Quaker House faction and the rest of the world faction got to really bother me. Personality issues with certain people there bothered me. We had had so many potential allies in the movement to come to Fayetteville Peace with Justice meetings and to not come back over comments made by certain people. It was gut wrenching. Tina wouldn't go or if we went together, she would beg me not to say anything because I just had—basically Fayetteville Peace with Justice turned into this year-round institutional organizing for this yearly demonstration and there wasn't really an analysis of is it better to continue to do this thing in Fayetteville or to support grassroots meetings all over the state? Certain people from Fayetteville had alienated people that I really respected and cared about from all over the state. So prior to this big 2005 thing, I could count on allies from all over the place to come into Fayetteville to work on different things and I just felt like Fayetteville had been tainted by these local people with whom I disagreed so vehemently. I would look at Chip Smith, who could just stay calm and accept what people were doing and understand that people are at different places and understand that people are in transition and that the reason

they call us a movement is because we're people in motion, and just really was struggling emotionally. My son and his partner separated and that was devastating to me. I've got one grandson and I just had all these visions of them being in Austin, Texas, which is this really cool place, instead of living in an isolated trailer in the middle of the woods in south Georgia; that hurt.

Then there were just different transitional things. Tina had been in school for the last three years and now she's a schoolteacher, a first grade teacher. She needs my support and there's just a lot of things that she does. Also because I just needed, I felt like, to take a breath and not be responsible and not be on conference calls twice a week. This week, I got a media request from Al-Jazeera, [television network headquartered in Doha, Qatar including the Internet and specialty TV channels in multiple languages, and in several regions of the world] right, and most of the time in the past five years, I'd've said, "Sure." I mean, I did some media stuff since the fall. Japanese TV came and I did some stuff with them, I talked to the *Nation*, but that's not, that's almost like ego gratifying: "I'm so important, I'm talking to Japanese television." I'm in a period of my life—and I'll come out of it—where I'm having a hard time relating to people again. My homies, I still talk to Bryan on the phone, I have coffee with Chip. I was upfront with you when you recontacted me about this project and I've certainly enjoyed talking about it. My love and support is still with the people that are on the front lines right now and I know that I'll be back there. I've gone to some Smithfield stuff and I've done some writing and some backstage kind of hooking people together stuff. But I'm just not in a meeting kind of mode right now; I'm just not.

BB: Are all those reasons the same reasons that you left Freedom Road or were there other reasons that were different?

LP: Just logistically, it was very difficult. The majority of the members in this state live in the Triangle and for me to go to a meeting in Durham is a two-hundred-mile round trip. And if I go to a meeting in Durham on a Sunday, that's pretty much my whole Sunday. I'm married. I'm a homeowner. I've got five dogs. I've got a hundred birds. I've got a yard. I sound like I'm whining; it can be time-consuming to be so involved in stuff. I work, I drive sixty miles a day round trip to my job and for most of the last two years, I've been in stretches where I went to an AA meeting every day and was missing AA meetings to go to political meetings and I became—I had certain responsibilities within Freedom Road that required me to do stuff prior to meetings. It was just too many meetings, too many meetings.

BB: So it was really logistics, but there wasn't anything about political philosophy. Were you still—

LP: The main political philosophy kind of thing is—and I'll just say this however it comes out, alright: you know, being raised antiracist helped me to really not make judgments on people for their skin color or their sexual orientation. I just try to take people at face value unless they're mean. There's a certain faction within Freedom Road that was just really, really, really into sexual politics and stuff around the Duke rape case—which I refuse to call the Lacrosse rape because it's not about fucking Lacrosse; it was about rape. I was sexually abused when I was a kid and I never told anybody about it until I went to rehab in 1987 and they asked, "Have you ever been sexually abused?" And I put, "Yes." And it was so cool to tell somebody and not have that be a deep, dark secret.

BB: Was it one incident?

LP: No, it was more than once. That was a great relief when I said, "This happened to me." I didn't feel then and I don't feel now that I really required a bunch of therapy—for me.

I know it's different for people and I'm not making a judgment on anybody who gets all sorts of emotional damage from that. My dad flew helicopters with a person who was transgendered, who went from male to female, and came back and continued to fly helicopters for the government. My dad talked about it always with not hateful or mockingly. That's something that doesn't normally happen to folks.

I didn't have judgments against transgendered people and the friends that I have who are gay, they're just my friends and I understand that you get a lot of hassle for being gay in this country. So I feel like I understand all of that stuff. But I look within a political movement of all the millions of things that are fucked up about this country: us spending more money on prisons than on education, racism in all its forms, militarism, campaign spending; you know, there's nine million things to be pissed off about and to work against and so much of what I heard in Freedom Road was about sexual politics. It was about sexual abuse and heterosexism and sexual abuse and I couldn't handle it. I have a mental illness and people with mental illnesses have problems that people without mental illness don't have. I can't buy life insurance because I was in a mental hospital eighteen years ago and I can't get some insurance because I take Wellbutrin every day. Those are the issues in my life. Am I ready to go out and be an advocate for the mentally ill? Not today. It's really not something that I want to preach from the street corners. I work around small children and I would hate for someone to consider me unequipped to do that because I'm bipolar. So I just started really dreading Freedom Road meetings because so much of the time was spent on these sexual issues. And it's not that it's unimportant to me, but it's just not something that I felt...I don't feel the call to fight those battles. I'm not saying they don't need to be fought, but I just don't feel that call. And I love the people that do. Some of the queer folks that I've

met in the movement are brave, hardworking people who've slept in my house and I've slept in their house and we're comrades, but I just don't know. I mean, I don't know what else to say about that.

BB: So if chose or felt that you were ready and excited to get back into activism in whatever form and whatever issue, are there things that you feel sure you would do differently to sustain yourself and take better care of yourself? Do you know?

LP: Well, I mean, out of the last eleven years, I've gone unmedicated for one year and it was that year when I first got swept into the meeting people on the national level kind of stuff and I can look back and see it ended up with a cocaine binge, you know, and that was bad stuff. So I'm recommitted to accepting the fact that the medicine I take hopefully gives me the same level of neurotransmitters in my brain that you've got in yours—or that normal guy down the street. So, you know, I would be committed to do that. They say that as we get older, we're supposed to learn more lessons and be able to apply those. Overcommitting, being the compulsive volunteerer that I am, I would really hope to feel less guilty for saying no, because I always feel guilty if I turn somebody down. And I'm not superman and I'm really not so important that if I tell somebody no, it's going to break their heart.

The other thing, when you read the stuff that I've written and you listen to me talk, I've always mostly talked from me, how I relate to this war. This war hurts me because I live in a community where my coworker's husband was killed in Iraq. And it's about how the war makes me feel and that's how I relate. When I tell stories, when I speak, I say, "Well, this is what PTSD has done in my family. This is how it changed my father and how it affected me," and I relate that story about being scared in the prison. I channel things through myself about how it affects me. Because I'm able to describe that relatively well, people are

receptive to that. That's not how everybody writes and does their activism. Stan Goff, who was in the Army for a long time and who's got a son in the Army, is able to just analyze politics and situations and describe those without having to run it through his own emotional wringer. I think part of what's made me effective is running it through Lou and talking about it. I don't think that's emotionally sustainable for a lot because...[voice cracks] I cry listening to the damn radio coming home from work two or three days a week over this fucked up war. [cries quietly for a couple of seconds] My dad's not there and my son's not there and I'm not there and boo hoo because I live in Fayetteville and so many of my friends are, but it just...[cries] I just can't stay angry all the time. I hear those fuckers in Washington lying and I hear these brainwashed people saying this stuff that I used to believe and it just, it's just wrong. I'm smart enough to be able to come up with analysis instead of emotion and I've just got to get to that place. I'm not there right now. I'm okay. [pause]

BB: Do you want to take a break?

LP: No.

BB: So maybe we can shift gears a little bit.

LP: Okay. I like long walks on the beach. (laughs) And candlelight dinners. (laughs)

BB: So who are a few people in your life as a activist that really stand out as mentors and inspirations and why?

LP: Well, Chip Smith more than anybody because he lives close to me and because in certain periods of working on projects together, he's just kind of in my face about, "You need to do this and you need to do that and we need to go to coffee and we need to talk about this and you said you were going to do that." But also aside from that kind of father thing—because Chip to me was kind of like [voice cracks], that's what I wish my dad was like—but

all these rides that we took back and forth to Durham and Raleigh. Chip's life hasn't been a bed of roses in this movement and his relationship with his parents was badly strained by his opposition to the war. He had marital problems due to his association in left politics. To listen to him talk about the way the left has looked at queer folks over the years, it hasn't always been like it is today. He's incredibly smart. You know, I didn't get a promotion one time when I worked at the prison because an affirmative action candidate got it and it made me mad. It really hurt my feelings and I didn't think it was fair and it took many conversations with Chip before I was able to internalize the appropriateness of affirmative action. I look out from my little suburban house and my little middle class neighborhood and not getting that promotion in 1990 didn't fuck up my life. I started being able to understand those things because of Chip. And his book is really powerful, not just having read it pre-publication, but having had the conversations with him.

BB: The Cost of Privilege.

LP: The Cost of Privilege.

BB: Taking on the system of white supremacy—what is the subtitle?

LP: It's right here: "Overcoming white supremacy and racism."

BB: Okay.

LP: I've loaned Chip books and been with him to events. I love history and those discussions. Also Chip's wife, [Dr. Kim Eng Koo]. You know, I haven't talked a whole bunch about how politics has affected my marriage, but it has had positive and negative effects on my relationship with Tina. Tina very briefly joined Freedom Road and then very quickly backed out because it's intense political discussion. Tina's effect on people is she just feels more comfortable on one-on-one, interpersonal stuff. There's a couple of kids that

she's been tutoring and helping and been friends with since they were in the third grade and they're going into high school. They come over to the house. They've gone from living in the projects to living on Muchison Road in Fayetteville to Shaw Road, none of which are neighborhoods like ours. I feel like these are my friends, you know. They're not little girls anymore; they're young women. She's tutoring again. She's tutoring a guy to read who is retired from the fucking Air Force. The man did twenty years in the Air Force and can't read well enough to function as a literate person in society. So on top of this being her first year teaching first graders to read, she leaves there two days a week and goes to Urban Ministry and sits for two hours with this gentleman to help him learn how to read. You know, she just continues to amaze me.

But all the frustration that I went through before and after the demonstration in 2005 caused a lot of conflicts at home. Tina would beg me, "Don't go to that meeting; you're just going to get pissed off. Skip this phone call if it's going to make you mad. I'm not going to go with you to this meeting because I know you're going to say something controversial." Tina really is my best friend and there's nobody in the world I'd rather time [with], and when I have her saying, "I don't want to spend time with you because of the way that this activity is going to affect you," it's difficult. So having said all that, Dr. Kim Koo, who's Chip's wife, has been kind of invaluable to me in having someone to talk to about external politics within a marriage. Because Chip and Kim live so close and we're friends, we watch their dogs when they travel and Chip feeds my birds when I travel. We're lucky enough to have some of Kim's cooking four or five times a year. And those are the people in Fayetteville who have the most experience.

Next would be Bryan Proffitt. He's one of the most amazing people that I've never known. Bryan's the person who explained white privilege to me. He has continued to be my friend whether I'm in Freedom Road or not in Freedom Road.

BB: He's a thirtyish white guy?

LP: Yeah, twenty-nine, thirty. He's a history teacher at Apex High School in Apex, North Carolina. He loans me books. I have a book in here somewhere by Bobby Sands who starved himself to death in a hunger strike against British oppression in Northern Ireland. I have postcards on my wall from Bryan's trip to Ireland for the founders of the Irish Republic and the Easter Rebellion in 1916. Bryan's political focus is on sexual assault and sexual issues and gender identity and heterosexism. And despite me having so many problems with how to be an activist around those issues, he's still someone, when I go on a long trip and I want to talk to somebody on the phone while I'm driving, I call Bryan. And he calls me and they're really long conversations. There's a bulletin board right here and there's a picture there of his dog. It says "thank you" because his dog needed surgery and me and Tina gave him some dough to help Bean get his leg fixed. I can't think of anything I wouldn't do for Bryan and I know if I called him right now and said, "I need you to be here," he'd be here. But he also is going to challenge me on stuff. Bryan's a person who taught me not to say "bitch." And Bryan's the one that, when I just absolutely would go nuts trying to organize, would call me before conference calls to kind of help me get focused. He calls it, "Putting on your nice boy hat." So Bryan's important to me.

Ajamu Dillahunt is, is...being in Ajamu's presence to me is like being around a legend. He just knows so much. He's so cool. It seems like he never gets tired. He just went through cancer and came out on the other side of that experience the same old Ajamu. He,

along with Chip, kind of helped me go through this whole affirmative action experience and that's something that happened fifteen, sixteen, seventeen years ago, but took the time to help me feel through that.

Then there's some people who I have to step back and look at their work and not their personality. So Theresa El-Amin is someone who, I'll tell you a great story about Theresa. So I'm at the Solidarity conference in Atlanta and I was going to stay in the dorm and they were delivering the bedsheets and the pillowcases and stuff because the beds were stripped clean and they were supposed to put them somewhere close to the meeting. So I got hooked up with some friends in Atlanta and decided not to spend the night in the dorm. So as I left, Theresa's the only person that I know at the meeting, so as I'm sliding out, I said, "Will you take care of my linen for me?" And she smiled. You can see where this is going. She believes to this very day that what I meant was, "Will you take care of Vladimir Ilych Lenin for me?" (laughs) Because at that time, we were both into Marxists and we're at a Socialist conference and that just touches her heart that I cared so much about Vladimir, I was making sure that she was going to protect his legacy for me.

I don't like being in meetings with Theresa, but we've had some really good phone calls and stuff. Someone once said, "When you deal with her, you can come away bloody." You have to be careful when you deal with Theresa, but I admire her for some of the stuff that she's done through her illness. She gets mad easy, but I think she forgives easy.

Then Tina and I worked on Cynthia Brown's Senate campaign and knocked on doors and to this day, it's the only money I've ever given to a politician, although I feel it's hard to describe Cynthia Brown as a politician.

BB: She ran for Senate in what year?

LP: 2002.

BB: Yes.

LP: Yeah, so that was prewar activism that we did. She was the first person that I ever heard say, “Shut up!” I’ve heard her sing and the last time I saw her was at the first Heirs presentation when she was there with Barbara and Ed and Manju. She’s an amazing lady.

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

LP: Yes, I do. To me, organizing, in my experience, is what one does in one’s own community and activism is just to me being an advocate for certain causes. So if I’m at New York University speaking about the Bring Them Home Now movement, I’m an activist. But if I’m at a coffee shop in Fayetteville talking to a GI who thinks the war sucks, I’m organizing. They cross over and sometimes you’re doing both at the same time. Activism certainly helps grow the movement, but organizing, I always love to tell the story that I am a person who got into politics because I saw a flyer on a bulletin board. Although 99.99 tenths of the time, paper never organizes anybody, people organize people, that piece of paper someone took the time—because I’ve made many a flyer—to do is what reeled Tina and I in to working within this community.

BB: Do you think it’s important to organize specifically in the South?

LP: Yeah. The South is where the majority of the military bases are that are inside the United States. Most Army bases are located in the eleven former Confederate states. The highest recruitment in the country comes primarily from the South and from some of the poorer areas of California. The South is not the only racist part of this country, there is no non-racist part of this country, but poverty is greater in the South; infant mortality is greater in the South. You know, you can look at the traditional Black Belt counties in the South and

look at the services that are provided within those counties. The South is what won Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan and George Bush and George Bush the presidency because they play on racial issues and changing things within the South can change the balance of power within this country. There's injustice everywhere in the United States, but you sure don't have to go very far in Fayetteville, North Carolina to find it.

As I learn what white privilege is; you know, I work in schools in Harnett County and I go to a school and I look at the Math Olympics team and it's all white kids and the Battle of the Books team and it's all white kids. And I go to Western Harnett Middle School and it's a school with eleven hundred students and they don't have a single black teacher in any of the core curriculum. Their special education teacher is black and their in-school suspension teacher is black, but all the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade teachers are white. I still live in a place where people who I like will say, "I bet they're going to get a black person for that principal," because they don't understand or appreciate affirmative action. Been there, done that you know? So yeah, I do think the South—and one more thing about the South is that just the way that Latino populations have exploded here in the last ten years. I love going to my schools and seeing all these Latino kids. I think Spanish ought to be mandatory in schools now and if you want to take an elective language, you should take Chinese, not French and Latin.

BB: So is there anything that we haven't touched on in the past two days of a marathon snapshot of your life—

LP: (laughs) I don't think so.

BB: --that you want to talk about? Anything we glossed over, anything you want to go back to?

LP: Well, there's just a couple of vignettes I'll touch on. My uncle Fred that I lived with was born in '46 and my dad was born in '47 and an uncle born in '53 and an aunt born in '55, who's ten years older than I am. Well, my aunt and my uncle born in '53 are to the left of center politically and my dad and my uncle Fred are to the right. Well, my dad fought in Vietnam twice and my uncle enlisted in the Air Force and did his four years. When my grandmother died in 1995, we found a bus ticket to Toronto [Canada] in my uncle's name that she'd bought for him before the draft lottery. It just astounded everybody. She'd already had one son go there and get shot and risked having another son sent and at some point, she hit a tipping point where, "You're not going to take this chance with another one of my children," and so she bought that bus ticket. And then kept it all these years. It was amazing. But even my uncle, who went to college in the 70s and had long hair and listens to the same kind of music I do: you know, we all get shaped by our times, you know? Even though he cried when Ronald Reagan was elected and celebrated when Jesse Helms was no longer in the Senate—[phone rings], whoops, I'm sorry. We had a conversation one day. There's this whole mythology of Vietnam veterans being spat upon when they came back and it's mythology. It's not even logical mythology. Who thinks that someone who's been fighting in a war for a year is going to accept being spat upon without *killing* somebody? And he believes that it happened. I just very quickly, because I love him and he's the last person in the family I want to piss off, I just kind of have to not go there, not go down that road.

What that tells me is I'd like to think that I've come really far from who I used to be, but I'm sure there's still plenty of myths that I believe. And your job, because you're my friend and [voice cracks] because you're who I learn from, is to help me see through those. You, Bryan, and Ajamu, and all the people that I told you yesterday, that the spirituality I

have and that's what you pass on. That's what I'm going to learn and that's all I'm going to say.

BB: Thank you, Lou.

LP: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Emily Baran. October 2007.