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

Interview U-0573
Tema Okun
June 22, 2007

Field Notes – 2
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FIELD NOTES- Tema Okun

Interviewee:	Tema Okun
Interviewer:	Bridgette Burge, Heirs Project director
Interview Date:	June 22, 2007 (Interview 2 of 4)
Location:	Tema's home, Durham, North Carolina

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

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

THE INTERVIEWEE: Tema Okun is a white, Jewish woman who was born in New York City, NY on March 15, 1952. Okun has been active in Middle East peace efforts as a member of Jews for a Just Peace and as a volunteer with the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions-USA. Okun has worked with social justice organizations for over 30 years. She has worked as a development director, production coordinator, training director, interim director, trainer and facilitator. Much of her work has focused on anti-racism training. She has been an adjunct professor at Duke University, Guilford College, UNC-Chapel Hill's School of Social Work and at UNC-G. Okun is working toward a Ph.D. in the Department of Education Curriculum and Cultural Foundations at the University of North Carolina—Greensboro. As of 2007, Okun lives with her partner, Tom Stern, in Durham, North Carolina.

THE INTERVIEWER: Bridgette Burge graduated from Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee in 1995 with a degree in Anthropology/Sociology and a semester of intensive study of oral history theory and methodology. In 1995 and 1996, Burge and a colleague conducted fieldwork in Honduras, Central America collecting the oral histories of six Honduran women. She earned her master's degree in Anthropology from the University of Memphis in 1998. In 1999, she moved to North Carolina and served as North Carolina Peace Action's state coordinator, and later as North Carolina Peace Action Education Fund's executive director. In 2005, Burge began her own consulting company to provide training, facilitation and planning to social change organizations. The same year, with the support of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Burge launched the project “Heirs to a Fighting Tradition: Oral Histories of North Carolina Social Justice Activists.” The interviews from this project are archived at the Southern Historical Collection in the Wilson Library at UNC-Chapel Hill.

DESCRIPTION OF INTERVIEW: We sat at her kitchen table today with the Marantz 660 PMD on the sturdy surface of the table as opposed to the arm of the chair she sat on during the May 16 interview. She moves a lot while she talks and sometimes speaks very softly. The sound is more consistent for this recording.

At one point (27:35), Tema requested that I pause the recording. I had asked her to describe Si Kahn and she had concerns about it. She and Si worked together a long time at Grassroots Leadership. She was willing to share some positive comments, but she did not want to talk about him at any length.

TRANSCRIPT—TEMA OKUN

Interviewee: Tema Okun

Interviewer: Bridgette Burge

Interview date: June 22, 2007 (Interview 2 of 5)

Location: Durham, NC

Length: 1 track; approximately 2 hours

START OF INTERVIEW

Bridgette Burge: Today- - this is an interview with Tema Okun with Bridgette Burge as the interviewer. This is part of the project Heirs to a Fighting Tradition Oral Histories of North Carolina Social Justice Activists. Today is Friday, June 22, 2007. This is the second interview with Tema in this series. The first interview with her was on May 16, 2007. We are conducting this interview again at Tema's lovely home on Rigsbee Avenue in Durham. Okay. Are you ready, Freddie?

Tema Okun: Yep.

BB: Oh. There's another dumb thing. See. [Laughter] All right. So, did you reflect on our last interview; that day or that evening? Did you think about it at all?

TO: I'm sure I did, but I have no memory.

BB: Okay.

TO: I'm sure I did, but I- - it was too long ago for me to remember.

BB: [Laughter] Okay. So here's just a more, what's the word for it? - bigger question. [Laughter] Do you see a difference between activism and organizing? Do think there's a difference that's important to make?

TO: Yeah, I mean I don't see a difference. I think organizing is a form of activism. I don't think it's the only form of activism. I remember coming up in a period when the people I was with and I all thought it was the only form of activism. We used to do workshops, in fact, that would sort of try and make that point. Organizing- - not that it was the only, but certainly it was the highest form of activism [laughter] in the hierarchy of things and we would talk about - - I can't remember what the exercises were, but I have a visual of James [Williams] and me being in a workshop getting people to do some exercises all to make the point that organizing was the highest form of activism. I don't think I believe that any more. I don't really remember what we talked about last time so I may be repeating myself, which is not unusual anyway even if I did remember, but I think that I've come to believe that there's really no way of knowing what it is that is going to trigger the kind of change that the world needs at this point. Of course I believe we can learn from history, and if we look at history, most of the significant changes have come from people getting together and no longer - and saying they will no longer put up with what's being dealt them. Every movement, every strong movement in this country has been about that. I don't know enough about world history to know, but I wouldn't be surprised if that was somewhat the same. Obviously, the world events is going to be affected by people, but I guess I just don't - I feel like there needs to be such a profound change, that part of the limitations of organizing I would say are that we tend to organize and then create institutions that in many ways replicate the very situations that we say we are fighting. We haven't really dealt with the deeper issues of how to hold power and how to build equity and justice in ways that are really meaningful in a day-to-day level. Our egos get in the way and so many of our Left and social justice organizations are grappling, and of course it's not - but they're grappling with racism and sexism and gender issues and ego issues and sort of a very - sometimes a very simplistic way of thinking about the world and it's just not enough to keep doing it, to keep repeating the same stuff over and over. I feel like whatever people do to try and make the world a more humane place where people see each other in their full humanity is activism. It takes a lot of different forms.

BB: How do you define organizing?

TO: Well, so when I talk about organizing, I'm using it in pretty strict definition of working with other people to organize yourselves, to act together and create power in numbers, to create more collective power than you have individually. I'm thinking of more traditional labor organizing and community organizing and neighborhood organizing. That's how I think of organizing. Of course, you can expand the term organizing to mean any kind of collective action.

BB: And is it that activism doesn't necessarily have to be collective? Someone can take a sign to a rally and make a statement?

TO: That's a very good question. I don't know the answer to that question. I really don't. I think that the U.S. is peculiarly - or Western culture is peculiarly individualistic and has sort of - and I'm just starting to study about this now, but just this whole individualism and freedom as an individual is a fairly new concept in the cultures. Many cultures have never really had that concept, but I'm not an authority on that. I don't know what it means to say one person can make a difference. I think there's danger in saying that because it gives so much power to the idea that one person on their own can do something without - and I'm - I've been in organizations where - that have been headed by people who - where the organization is identified with the person. That person - usually because that person has so many strengths and has so much to offer, and yet inevitably also has weaknesses which the organization - the person, I'm thinking of somebody now, who just has no understanding of the weaknesses and how that those weaknesses affect everybody else around them and the organization. The - I can see the danger in this kind of individualism and this belief that I have the ability to do everything on my own. And at the same time, I think people do have incredible power and that sometimes the most important witnessing is when you are the only one, or you are a small number. I remember being at a rally against the death penalty. Maybe it was when - it was a long time ago when Velma Barfield [serial murderer who became the first woman to be executed in America since 1962] was being executed or someone in North Carolina was being executed and I was living in Charlotte and there were very few people there. I was very agonized about it. As we were marching I realized in some ways it can be most important that somebody's witnessing against it and that when the odds are so overwhelmingly against you, that you do witness against what you know to be wrong. I don't know, I guess I would just say that I think there is activism in praying, there's activism in healing work, there's activism in teaching in the classroom, there's activism - it can take a lot of different forms. In the end, do I think people need to act collectively? Yes, but that's because it's the human condition—we live together. We are interdependent. It never makes sense for one person to feel like they can act on their own without being in a relationship with other people. And I also think that there's this - and I don't think that looks the same for everybody. I don't, whereas I used to think it did.

BB: So when- -

TO: That there was one right way to win this battle, which is how I thought about it.

BB: And what was the right way?

TO: To organize in the old school model.

BB: The old school—Saul Alinsky, January 30, 1909 - June 12, 1972, often credited with initiating a grassroots community organizing model widely used in the 1960s and on] old school model?

TO: Well, just in the traditional understanding of organizing, like labor organizing or what I was talking about Movement organizing.

BB: Is that when you and James Williams were doing these trainings together, is that the distinction that you made? And then how did it - what made it shift so that you let go of it some?

TO: I'm trying to remember. What I remember is that we did training where we would talk about the different strategies like education and advocacy and organizing. The point that we made about the organizing was it was the only strategy that involved the people who were the most directly affected. I do think that its major strength. The advocacy means you're advocating on behalf of other people. And education means you are educating other people, but organizing means that you are the people and are working with other people to make a change. I would say I still really strongly believe that people should act—that activism needs to be about, at some level, people advocating and working on their own issues. Not that we can't help each other, and not that everybody's issues aren't our own issues. There's some - I'm not sure I can talk about, articulate very well, but there's some - [pause] I think there is just a great deal of power in sort of saying these are the things that affect me and these are the things I'm going to do something about verses I think what I would call, with no disrespect to social workers, but the social work model of I'm okay and I'm going to go help fix these other people. And thinking more about how…

BB: What’s that beautiful quote by an aborigine woman [Lila Watson], I think I’ve only seen it attributed to her, but “If you are here to help me- -

TO: Right.

BB: then you are wasting your time, but if you’re here because your liberation-

TO: Right.

BB: is bound up in mine, then let’s us work together”, or something.

TO: Yes, that’s what I’m trying to say.

BB: It’s very beautiful.

TO: She said that much more quickly [laughter] and more beautifully. Yes, that’s exactly—just put down that quote and say that’s what I had.

BB: No, it’s beautiful. Do you think it’s important to organize specifically in the south and North Carolina even more particularly?

TO: Well, I think it’s important to organize everywhere. I think the most important thing is for people to do whatever brings them the most energy. That’s my - I live in the South, and I’m - actually I’m starting to realize that I need to start, I need, I don’t know what I’m going to do, but I need to do something about immigration. I haven’t done anything and it’s just so out of control, the racism. Yeah, I think it’s important to do something about where you live, but right now I’m most active about stuff in the Middle East, and it’s not because I live in the Middle East, it’s because I’m Jewish. I feel like the future of Judaism depends on what - not depends on what’s going to happen. Depends is not the right verb. It hinges on what - how that’s going to play out and it may already be too late. So I think it’s important for people to- and I work on that issue because it is my issue. It effects me and my - who I am and my identity and my values and my community. So I have a lot of energy for that. Which is not to say - I have - and the reason I would want to get involved with immigration is because it's my community too, and it affects me. I don't distinguish the South as needing more organizing or more activism. Every place needs to be - activism is needed everywhere.

BB: I guess I ask the question, whether or not you're curious [laughter], I ask it because I - and maybe you can help me think of a better way to word it and your answer might still be the same, so I ask it because is it - who's the quote maybe W.E. B. Dubois? The "as goes the South, so goes the nation" and how militarized it is and that religious fundamentalism has a strong hold here, all their repercussions from slavery. And I learned some of that from Freedom Road Socialist Organization and some materialist slants on what's happening in the country. People have—long-time activist organizers have really different opinions about it so I think I'm just trying to hear and learn more about where people stand on that and how people have thought it through.

TO: Well, I [pause] you could say - you could make the same quote about the Northeast in terms of who funded the slave trade and who - from where our government sprung. I guess it sprung from Virginia and that's the South so, I don't know. I don't think I have strong feelings about it. I feel like there has been - there's plenty - I'm always struck when my students, when I teach every semester and I ask people where they are from and when we start talking about racism inevitably have one to two students who say "I'm from the North so I don't, I haven't experienced racism" which I just find so intriguing. A lot of slavery was funded by people in the North, there was - I've been doing some reading, but it's not coming to me, but about certainly the North was segregated and the federal government was segregated everywhere for a long time, so this idea that racism doesn't exist except in the South is kind of interesting to me. Native peoples were expunged from the North just like they were from the South. The Chinese Exclusion Act [US federal law passed in 1882, allowing US to suspend immigration] didn't - wasn't - the way the Chinese were treated, the way the Japanese were treated wasn't a southern phenomenon so I just - and I'm not saying this because I'm - I just - I'm not saying this to excuse the South, I think the South is absolutely the center of a lot of the white supremacy culture and institutions that we have, but I feel like it's a national phenomenon and so the South got its own character in terms of how it contributed to that phenomena, but every single region of the nation contributed to the phenomena in very meaningful ways and put its own imprimatur on it. I don't feel strongly that the south needs to be the focus more than any place else. What I'm saying is that every place needs it. Every place needs to be doing.

BB: Just listening to you that really brought something or sharpened something for me around the question. One is I think there's a real danger and shortsightedness in southern exceptionalism on lots of levels, right? And then on the other hand, there's something very empowered - empowering about focusing on what's meaningful in the South-

TO: Yes, right.

BB: in this region. So really, my interest is more that part of the question, like what do you find - I don't know, I'll have to work on that, on the question around it. What is it that you've found unique or powerful or inspiring or something like that?

TO: Well, the main thing that I think is unique is that we are still very much stuck in a black/white paradigm here, even though our demographics has really changed. If I go to other places in the country the way that racism is played out and the way that white supremacy shows up is altered or different because of the ways that different cultures and different peoples of color have lived and been in for longer periods of time in other places. So the slavery story here and the slavery experience and the white/black dynamic continues to inform our thinking and our cultural approach and our - even as - isn't North Carolina one of the - don't we have one of the largest number of folks coming here from South and Central America?

BB: I think we're second in the nation.

TO: Right.

BB: A year or so ago we were. We were the second highest number of immigrants.

TO: Right, so we are definitely demographically changing and we can feel it, but it's still not - I just still don't feel like it's taken into account by the larger culture. I think that's a pretty important characteristic of the South, and the heavy, heavy Christian - yeah.

BB: Yeah. So let's go back to your work history around the time we left off in our last interview, which was you were talking about your work with Grassroots Leadership [southern-based national organization that works to defend democracy] and this is after it had been the Charlotte -

TO: Organizing Project. The Carolina Community Project.

BB: The Carolina Community Project. Sorry. I can't -

TO: There was a - there is a Charlotte part of that.

BB: Yes. I am curious - I want to hear more about Si Kahn [social activist/founder of Grassroots Leadership] as a person. What is he like and what was he like to work with and what are - yeah, I shouldn't ask three questions all at once, but what are some things that you really learned from him and attribute directly to his influence?

TO: Well, Si, I think, is someone who has an incredible ability to choose people that he thinks have a lot of potential and then to allow them to fulfill that potential. I think he is really, really strong at that and he's - time and again I see him hire people and allow them to - he's not somebody who's at all - he's not one of those leaders who - he is one of those leaders who wants people to really be all they can be. It sounds like the Army. He would be appalled. [Laughter] He's not jealous. He's not a jealous leader or somebody who's worried about people becoming too powerful or that kind of thing. I feel like it was really good for me to work under him, and he really encouraged me to do and try anything. He's incredibly supportive. He was very instrumental in helping me understand how my critical thinking was out of control and not always a helpful thing to bring to meetings.

BB: And critical thinking in the pejorative sense?

TO: Yes. He told me once that I shouldn't come to a staff meeting because I tended to always notice what was wrong and sometimes that was hard for people and for the morale of the staff and at this particular meeting, I don't remember what it was about, and he didn't want me to come. I was like "What are you talking about?" I was furious and then I thought about it and he was - it made all kinds of sense to me once I thought about it. It was a real turning point for me of trying to - of understanding how in myself and then seeing it in other people this ability to think critically can really be a gift and it can really be a weapon that we use against ourselves and against each other. I still have - it's still an issue for me. My - I come from a family where my mother tended to see no glass at all so I definitely have glass half full tendencies and it's not fun. It's not what I would want for anybody.

BB: You've also talked about that in that groundbreaking, really, article that you and so many of your friends and colleagues wrote, "White Supremacy Culture". You talk about being overly critical -

TO: Right.

BB: in one piece. So before we go back to Si, can you just say a little bit about how you see that culture of -?

TO: Well, it directly came out of that of that experience with Si in sort of realizing how always that - one, it never occurred to me that I was affecting other people's morale with my critical thinking. I wasn't even thinking about my effect on other people, which was interesting. I just thought I was being helpful pointing out all the things that needed to be fixed. Never - and then realizing that meant I never talked about what I appreciated about what people were doing or what I was doing. It was a weapon I was using on myself as well as other people. It was, it's a drag. Now of course, I think it's - in my classroom as a teacher now I'm trying to get my students to learn to think critically because it's so much more an opposite problem. In the dominate culture I think we just are conditioned to obey and -

BB: absorb the propaganda. [Laughter]

TO: absorb the propaganda and to not think critically, but it's not an either/or proposition and I think I thought it was. Once I became aware of that, and then I started doing a lot more organizational work and saw how because the Left is really about thinking critically, that's the roll that we play, we tend to over value it in the sense that we think we should apply it at all times and sometimes it makes sense just to let go and not be so critical and to sort of say - to be able to point out the things that we appreciate more, to be able to understand that things are complex and hard and not everything changes at once, and it's not about spending your day talking constantly or thinking constantly [cell phone rings] about how people -

BB: Oh, the fancy cell phones.

TO: can improve.

BB: About how people -

TO: can improve or what a deficit there is or how even - I was reading a really interesting article two days ago by Henry Giroux, the theorist - G-I-R-O-U-X - and he was talking about how sometimes the Left can be overly critical of government in the sense that government actually does have a useful roll to play. Part of the message of the Right is to dismantle government except for its ability to provide a military or to do whatever serves the wealthy, and that government can and has at different periods of history played a role of providing basic levels of care the people need. Just trying to be more open to what the possibilities are and not always – so, thinking of critically - being able to develop critical thinking is a skill, not as a way of life, I think is important.

BB: So back to Si. Let me just get some more water before we start. I want to hear what he's like as a person.

TO: [Laughter]

BB: Why are you giggling?

TO: Well, it's been a long time since I've worked with him so I don't-- and I have to be honest, I don't feel like [cell phone rings] -

TO: Sorry. It, um [pause and Tema asks BB to pause the recording.]

BB: Okay, we'll pause. [Recorder turned off and on again]

TO: Well, you were asking about -

BB: I've got to push pause again. Okay.

TO: You were asking questions about wanting to know about Si, because you're wanting - you feel like there's this legacy of some of the older, both age-wise and more experienced leaders around where people say this and then they say that and they say the other thing and they roll their eyes and then they glance and there's this kind of - you feel like there's this secret language going around about who to work with and who not to work with. What I'll say about that – a couple of things - another thing I learned from Si which I really value is that no matter what your relationship is, you speak in public well about other people in the Movement and that's what you do and that's the ethic that you follow because it's like - people are already more than willing to tear us up and tear us down and divide us and conquer us, that whatever our conflicts are internally, that you never bad-mouth anybody in public. It's such a good rule of thumb both for individuals and for organizations. I feel like that's a great learning from him. I think it's different from saying - I don't think it requires you to be dishonest or to - I can say about a certain organization I don't agree about their approach but I think that their leadership is fine or is admirable or - it's sort of trying to - and part of that is because - I'm going the long way around to answer this, but part of that is because again what I feel like I've learned after many, many years is that there is no way for me to know what the right way, not that there is one right way, but what is going to be effective. So for me to go around and say oh, well that advocacy organization is full of crapola because they do advocacy – it's just absurd. First of all, who does it serve? It might temporarily make me feel better, but in fact, many advocacy organizations make the kinds of changes that show up in people's daily lives while those of us who are doing more long-term work, people aren't going to see those changes in their daily life. I'm just - it's not - I don't think any of us are in a position to judge about what's helpful and what's not. It's all, for the most part, it's all helpful. Then there are the details about how people go about it that can be criticized. And again, unless I have reason to know that people have absolutely have the malevolent intentions, which is not usually the case, I will - there are few people who I will say very clearly I will never work with ever again and I don't trust them, and I'll give the reasons why, but for the most part that's not the case. I think with older – some of the older leaders, people go "oh, you should never work with them" or "stay away from them or they'll chew you up" or blah, blah, blah. That comes from the fact that some of us have had relationships where these tensions have played out and where our needs and the needs of the other person have been different. Si and I had, for example, had plenty of conflicts. I can remember yelling at him numerous times [laughter] and one of his strengths was that he stood his ground or yelled back and thought about it - I think the trick for those of us who have been around a long time, and it's very hard, is that it's unclear what our roll should be as we get older. I think particularly if we are the head of an organization or we've been in the Movement a long time or people have attached certain things to us and we have a long track record, which includes making a lot of mistakes, as any track record will, then - and there's not really a clear place for us to go, particularly those of us that need to continue to make a living. There are some of us who are lucky enough to have some financial security, but most of us don't. So what do you do with someone - what is the appropriate roll for someone who gets - is older, who's probably not - how do you use the accumulated wisdom of folks who've been around a long time and yet not require them to be in positions that might not make much sense any more? I just think that's a good question for all of us as we get older. What is our appropriate roll? Whatever that appropriate roll might be, can we afford it? In many cases, it might make sense of those of us who are older to be less in the front, but if we have to keep making a living, that might not be an option. If we have to support a family, that might not be an option. I've been able to make the tran - I think about Kenneth [Jones – training development specialist and consultant], for example, who and I think I said this last time, which is that he worked in the Movement because he was a deep believer in the Movement. He worked all the time because he needed the money. He was supporting not just himself, but I think members of his family. As an organization we suffered because he was not able financially to take the time that he needed to step back and just do the things that don't get paid for because we were not a subsidized organization. I think that that's just a case in point of how a lot of us as we get older and are trying to figure out what our roles should be are constrained by what our financial situation is.

I think that the glances and the "You work with that person or don't work with that person," in my mind, the response to that is, "Tell me specifically why you say that" and get the specific story. And if there's not a specific story, then find it out for yourself because then it is probably more based and it's kind of whatever the personality conflicts were. The people that I would never work with again I'll give you the specific story about why or why I would never trust them. But if I can't give you that specific story, then – and I'm glancing and rolling my eyes, then I'm basing it on rumor, innuendo, or that somebody sees - somebody has a different way of approaching things than somebody else and so they are just participating in, as we all do, in this kind of "Well, they're not doing the right kind of work" or "Well, you need to be careful of them" or "Well, they do such and such". It's not meaningful criticism, I don't think.

This idea that any of us would be - the other thing I feel like is that if any of us are really taking risks and really trying to push the envelope about what our role is or what it means to be serious about making social change, we are going to make some pretty horrible mistakes. The other, which I have done, and I think the other feature in that article about white supremacy culture is this idea of perfectionism and that if we make a mistake we are a mistake. I would say it's hugely present in the Left, in the sense that when folks get together it takes a long time before people are willing to talk honestly about their mistakes or what they would do differently or - I remember a gathering we had once of some of the folks doing anti-racism work and it was, to me so disappointing because nobody was really willing to lay out—and there was so much posturing going on about all the great work each organization was doing, which was true, but I also knew that at least from our experience, and it had to be true of other groups too, that there were all kinds of challenges that we never talked about because somehow even within the Left, the culture is that you don't talk about what's hard. You don't talk about what you don't know how to do. You don't admit you don't know how to do things. You don't say you've made mistakes. You don't lay yourself vulnerable in any kind of way. I think that doesn't really serve us when we do that.

BB: Can you think of some breakthrough moments in your work with Grassroots Leadership where that, where you all did, for whatever reason, have the courage or the presence on mind or the intentionality around looking at some larger shortcomings or places that you need to grow and that you collectively overcame and there were significant changes afterward?

TO: [pause] I don't know. It's such an organic - for me change is so organic in the sense that it doesn't happen quickly. It's not usually made up of moments like that. It's more gradual. I can think of - the things I think of when you ask that question are I think one of the great things that learnings for me is realizing that people have their strengths and their weaknesses. I needed to stop assuming that somebody should be able to do all manner of things and I should be able to keep pushing and expecting people to do things that they clearly didn’t have the interest or skill or desire to do, and instead focus on the things that they did have the skill desire and the focus to do particularly when they were really complimentary to whatever - really important to whatever the process was. I say that because I think that again we tend to think of, coming back to one right way, we tend to think - our organizations tend to think that there’s a certain way to do things and if we are not doing them in that way, then there’s something wrong. What that means is that we overlook all kinds of other ways that people contribute, and I think it’s the root of racism and gender issues and gender conflict is because there’s this construct that it should be done in a certain way then we don’t see how people are really making things happen in other ways. The example, I can’t remember what I said last time, but the examples that I think of are when I was chair of the NARAL [leading advocate for privacy and a woman’s right to choose] board. Did I tell that story? I’ve felt - I had in my mind an idea of what the chair of the board was suppose to do, and I remember saying to Jewel Wheeler, who was the staff person at the time, I’m so sorry I’m not being a better board member - board chair. Maybe I was just a member, I can’t remember. She said, “What are you talking about?” And then she listed all these things I had been doing, but because in my mind they didn’t fit into the traditional roll of board member, I felt like I wasn’t contributing. That was a real ah-ha moment for me. It was like, “Oh, so I am contributing. It’s just that I’m not contributing based on a list that I have in my head or on a piece of paper.”

Then I think about working with Kenneth and realizing how frustrated I would get because we would be going to a training and I still didn't know exactly where it was or I didn't know what his plane flight was or I didn't - some of these details which I just didn't know. There are all kinds of stories about being lost in airports and all kinds of things, which are all very funny now but at the time of course, they were all quite aggravating. Finally, finally, after many years, getting that when Kenneth showed up, he was one of the most powerful trainers I've ever known in my life. He had this incredible ability to follow up with people so that he had relationships with people in the training years afterwards, something I never did, and how long it took me to understand the incredible gifts of this person and that just because he didn't do some of these other things didn't mean - it just stopped having mean - it was really important to me for a while and then it was like "so what?" So, what? Either we'll find each other in the airport or we won't. I've always - he's never missed a training. He's never - I've never gotten lost. It's like, let it go. Or in working with James, it's just realizing that there're some levels of conversations we could have and some that we couldn't. The levels of conversation that we could have were incredible, and so why keep pining for the levels of conversation that we couldn't? Just holding on to this idea that something has to be a certain way so you just miss all this other stuff. I do, I think that's one of the ways that racism plays out in most of these organizations or is that the people are - white people are often are so stuck on how something has to happen that they are just missing – we're just everything else.

BB: What about not right and wrong? I think it's interesting that they way I said that question kind of -

TO: I don't even remember the question now.

BB: Yeah.

TO: I kind of went off in my own direction. Sorry. [Laughter]

BB: No, that - what about not right and wrong, but better and worse or more effective and less effective? Or more liberated and less liberated? So for example, if you reflect on in 1990, how - maybe Grassroots Leadership isn't the right organization, but whatever, an organization that you worked with. You worked there ten years and in the first couple of years how you all made decisions was just horrible and it was top down and it was people couldn't bring their full selves or their full gifts, and then as y'all struggled through it and worked it out because it was related to being the change that you want to see, that there is some pivotal lessons learned about here's a better way to do it. This way allows us to bring our fuller selves so it's not so bam, bam, bam, we're wrong, we're wrong. You bring home five A's and one B and your dad goes, "Awww, so close." You know? [Laughter]

TO: Right.

BB: So I guess when I ask those questions, just to plant that seed about maybe that's different, what I just offered, that way of thinking about it to tease out lessons learned and paths of more libratory ways of relating on the Left and in our organizations. Maybe it isn't. Maybe it is still some of that white-funk perfectionist crap, and part of my desire to know what older and more seasoned - or people who've had longer relationships with each other, like part of some of us who were younger—because we've definitely had these conversations—is in our interest in knowing what those glances are about is because I don't want to screw up like that. We've got you all on pedestals which we try to check, but sometimes we don't, et cetera, et cetera. So it's complicated, right? But I guess if I can figure out ways to ask questions and to plant the seed in your head to think about it more in the terms of in what ways have we - evolved is a yucky word, but you [laughter] know what I mean - grown [laughter] and flourished and become better and more liberated in our processes and things. Those are the lessons learned that I hoping to capture some too, so that helps me, that feedback helps me think about how to set the questions up to get at that - not that what you said isn't -

TO: Right.

BB: You know what I'm saying? All that stuff you just said is excellent and important and great lessons to learn, so I - and a wonderful perspective.

TO: Well, I would say a couple of things. One, just to go back to the glances thing, when - I think what my advice, if you see those glances, is just to say, Oh, there's a history there, to yourself, There's a history there and maybe someday I'll ask about it or maybe I'll - but to detach it from a meaningful judgment about anybody. So if somebody's glancing about Suzanne Pharr or about me or about Si, you go, Oh, there's a history there. And not Si must be fucked up or Suzanne must be fucked up. That's what that's telling you, is that there's a history there. Something happened between those two people and you'd be interested in knowing it or not. If somebody says something to you more specific then push it and say I want to know - you just can't leave me there. Tell me what you mean. If you're going to warn me about somebody, why? Specifically why are you warning me. If you're not going to tell me, then I'm not going to – I can't pay attention to it. That's unsolicited advice.

BB: [Laughter] Unsolicited advice. Gotcha. Alright.

TO: The other is that - yes, and I think that the Left culture has changed and has kind of started to absorb that this critical thinking non-stop is not necessarily good. I think about the group that formed after the lacrosse stuff happened at Duke [University, Durham, NC] and how really intentional they've tried to be about setting up a loving culture.

BB: UBUNTU group?

TO: UBUNTU [humanist ideology focusing on people's allegiances and relations with each other], yes.

BB: UBUNTU.

TO: UBUNTU, yes, and predominately African-American women who are very committed to the healing of women who've been victimized by rape and sexual assault. I think when I think about [pause] what I've learned from my own experience about that is, well, it's what I've said before. I think what I've learned is that people have their strengths and their limitations and I've learned to start to accept them more and to not – I remember I had a discussion with Suzanne Plihcik at DR Works about -- there was some tension in our group - within the group about our ability to work together on certain kinds of things and I was saying we've got to resolve the tension. How can we say that we are about dismantling racism if we haven't strategically and openly dealt with the tension that's in our own organization? Although this wasn't specifically racial tension, but it was - and she said, That's one way of looking at it. She said, Another way of looking at it is that even with that tension, we continue to operate and that we can show that people continue to operate within the tension, and that you don't always resolve the tension; that you sometimes just have to live in it until it reaches a point where things have shifted. I think that's incredibly wise and something that I've learned that there's not - and again, my thinking coming in was we can't be who we say we are unless we look like this kind of a package. Her thinking, I think, was more broad, which is that every package has tension. Every - the idea that there is some resolved organization is kind of nonsense and that part of the reason that we keep going through this is - and part of the reason that we created the “Holding Contradictions Workshop” and developed that curriculum was that from our learning that a lot of these things repeat themselves because we don’t - we need more space to do personal work so that our egos get out of the way when we’re doing our activism. That’s so much of what I see in terms of stuff repeating is because people are acting out of their personal pain and trying to deal with their personal pain in ways that affect the activist work, of course, as they always will. If there was more space for people to bring that pain and that anger and that dissonance and address it, then it might clear the way for us not to have to keep cycling through some of the same behaviors.

I’ve also learned that there’s nothing - at some point, there is nothing that I can do about how people perceive my decisions or my actions. That seems related somehow. I’m not sure how any more.

BB: [Laughter]

TO: I was thinking about how the mistakes I’ve made and the - what have I learned about how to work better with other people, and I think that one is I can’t [pause] - I’ve come more and more - it’s interesting - I may have said this before, too, that one of the things you hear a lot when you do dismantling racism work from people who are just starting that journey is - from white people is, We’re are all the same. We are all just human. Why can’t we just acknowledge that we all are just human? It’s interesting because I feel like I’ve gone on this long path to come back to that position, but I would see it as a spiraling path so that the spiral is further out in a different way where it has some distance behind it in the sense that I feel like I am more committed than I’ve ever been, both spiritually and politically and every way to do everything I can to really see the humanity in every single person. I am a complete failure when it comes to the mainstream Jewish community or whole groups of people, but I am really working on that and that's really important. Where am I even going with this? It started somewhere. What was I talking about before? About repeating - I've lost it.

BB: That's okay. "I've derailed." Isn't that a verb? "I've derailed."

TO: I've derailed. I make no sense any more.

BB: It often comes later. Well, let's switch gears a little bit -

TO: Good.

BB: and go back to in 1990. Last time you said Grassroots Leadership "loaned me" to the Harvey Gantt [first black mayor of Charlotte, NC] campaign [laughter], so I just want to hear about what that was like for you. What was your roll in the campaign? Start a little bit by saying something about the campaign itself -

TO: Right.

BB: and who Harvey Gantt was, but then what was your roll and what are some fond memories from that time?

TO: Harvey Gantt was the - an architect in Charlotte. He was the former mayor of Charlotte; an African-American man who decided to run for senate against Jesse Helms. He did that twice. I was on his campaign for the first time. It was a very historical campaign. The Democratic Party really didn't back him. They backed [Governor] Mike Easley, who's our current governor. I remember early on in the campaign learning that the Democratic Party had, after Harvey had become the official candidate, had won the primary, the Democratic Party was sending out a fund-raising letter to help Easley retire his debt, and they weren't helping us to fund raise at all. That's what I remember. It was just incredible. It wasn't until it became clear the Harvey was catching on nationally that the Democratic Party actually started to do anything that was helpful. My job, I was on the fund raising staff, and my job was to try and organize the larger donors for Harvey. It was really interesting because what I came to understand was all the democratic bigwigs that we contacted to give us their big donor names gave us their second tier names. It was just incredible. So my job was both exciting, but it was also very frustrating because a lot of my job involved under - just coming to learn how much - how little cooperation we were getting from the Democratic Party.

BB: Why?

TO: Because I think they didn't - Harvey wasn't a Democratic insider and if he won, they wouldn't have, I don't, you know - they didn't take him seriously. They didn't - he wasn't one of theirs. I'm sure there was some racism involved. I remember doing some big donor, trying to do some big donor parties in Raleigh and different places, and getting all these high-power named people together and they were all suppose to raise $10,000 a piece; a thousand dollars and then bring nine of their friends. We'd have the night of the big party and they hadn't gotten any of their friends. It's like I could have just asked them for a thousand dollars each and we would have been just as well off. It was just a lot of work.

On the other hand, it was a very exciting time. Up until the last three days, we thought we actually were going to win. I remember that. I remember the night of the campaign standing on that desk in Durham and yelling through a megaphone to the campaign workers telling them what to do. That was a lot of fun. [Laughter] It was very exciting. It wasn't until we were driving to the - election night to the – to Raleigh when I realized we had lost. That kind of hit me.

BB: What was that like?

TO: Oh, it was devastating. Here's another example of just this incredible campaign, this grassroots campaign, where the money and the energy came from non-wealthy people all over the state. This guy in Greensboro came up with this brilliant idea of doing rounds of parties all over the city and then having Harvey come and everybody would dump their money in and see Harvey. It was some very creative stuff. I remember a) being really disappointed that he lost and then b) afterwards, trying - Grassroots Leadership tried to - this incredible grassroots network had been set in place to elect Harvey. It was like we can't let this go. Harvey didn't get it. He wasn't the least bit interested. In fact, he came and spoke - so we held a conference and we brought everybody together and said where do we go from here? He spoke, and one of the things he said was I don't really care. He literally said out loud, I remember, I don't really care if this goes anywhere. It was horrible. It was horrible. We couldn't keep it going. It was very disappointing. I think that's when I started just saying to hell with electoral politics.

BB: To hell with electoral politics?

TO: Yeah. He was a very nice guy, a really nice guy. I had to - I dealt with him a lot one-on-one and he was very personable and very supportive, but he didn't – he didn't - for him, it was about him becoming senator. It was not about building this sort of larger Movement. I didn't get the limits of his vision until afterwards. I was so disappointed. That's what I remember.

BB: Do you have any fun memories of working with Mandy Carter [one founder of Southerners on New Ground, activist and organizer, and interviewee for the Heirs Project collection] on that?

TO: No, we were in very different - we didn't interact.

BB: Oh, you didn't? So she was doing - they didn't really overlap. Interesting.

TO: No, field and - it was interesting because field and fund raising were like two different animals. I remember we would often have huge arguments because everybody needed Harvey present and there's only one Harvey. We'd have huge fights. Not with Mandy, but just in general: field and fund-raising.

BB: [Laughter] Interesting. So then, we kind of covered the period in between at our last interview, so I'm going to bump us to from January to August of [19] 96, you were the interim director of The Institute for Southern Studies. Tell me a little bit about The Institute for Southern Studies and how did you come to take on the interim director role?

TO: That's a good question. What year was it?

BB: [19] 96, from January of '96 to August.

TO: So I must have left Grassroots Leadership. I was on the board. I've always been – I was - my first activism was with the Institute.

BB: Right. That's when you even wrote an article that had to do with sports because you'd come back from--

TO: I was on the board, and I think I guess I - I don't know why. I must have thought it would be interesting. I don't know. It was a very tough time in their history because they were going through - after Bob [Hall] left- a director with that kind of - the founding director with that kind of political experience and cache and relationships, it's so hard for anybody to follow. I think they had two or three folks try and follow and were having trouble raising money and the staff was down to two staff people and they, both very talented people, and not necessarily -- and both having their own agendas that weren't necessarily [cell phone rings]

TO: Oh, it's Tom.

BB: Is it done?

TO: Yes. They were kind of on their own tracks. It was one of the experiences where I really understood why, just personally, why there need to be unions, because their perspective and mine were very different. Their perspective was from the perspective of people who were doing the day-to-day work with the Institute, and my perspective was at the person who's got to think of the Institute as a whole and the long-term future of the Institute. We were very much at odds. It was very stressful and it was my job to bring in - to sort of assess whether or not the Institute should continue, which I was predisposed to say yes to, and then to do a search. So I did those things. It was fine. It was a fine experience and it helped me understand I didn't ever really want to be a director. I found Pronita and she was – or I didn't, we found Pronita Gupta [Building Bridges project director] and she was fabulous. It was good all around.

BB: Good. Say a little bit about, what's the one sentence mission or so of The Institute of Southern Studies; a quick synopsis of what that organization is.

TO: I assume it's the same. At that time it was to provide the - to be the research arm for the Left or to be an aspect of the research arm for the Left. That their whole life and reputation and skill was at being the investigative and research group that supported a lot of the campaigns in the South, for the environment to labor to women's issues. They did a lot of the research that led to the whole poultry stuff. They led a lot of - they did a lot of the research that led to – that supported the J.P. Stevens organizing campaign. They did a lot of research that exposed a bunch of stuff around the Duke Nuclear Power stuff.

BB: Katrina?

TO: Katrina, right.

BB: Mostly through *Southern Exposure* [magazine published by grassroots groups for social change], the magazine?

TO: Both. They had - the magazine was always a place to publish that stuff, but a lot of that stuff was done specifically for organizations or campaigns.

BB: Okay. And then in the fall of [19] ‘96 and ‘97 and ‘98, you were a visiting faculty member at UNC-Chapel Hill and you taught a course on non-profit management. So was this the first, your first dive into teaching in a college or university setting?

TO: Yes, it probably was, actually.

BB: What was involved in that decision to do that?

TO: I’m sure at that point I was doing independent - because when I left Grassroots Leadership and - I don’t remember how I came to do the Interim thing. I had started working with Kenneth and we were doing - so I was an independent consultant on my own.

BB: Right.

TO: Teaching was just another way to make money and I thought it sounded interesting. My friend, Jim Overton, was teaching the class and wanted some help so we co-taught for a while, for a couple of years. Then he didn’t want to do it any more and I taught it on my own. I think it was mostly that Jim asked me, and it sounded interesting and I thought “okay”.

BB: Did you enjoy it?

TO: Yeah, I loved it. I think that's what got me interested in teaching.

[63:41] BB: This is also in the mid 1990s, you were in your mid 40s then, and you, in our last interview, you said that that's when you really were dealing with some burnout and had left Grassroots Leadership and all that. What are some of the things that led to your burnout and how did it manifest for you personally?

TO: I think that was – that was by 19 - I'd gone to architecture school in there somewhere, and I - that was after I'd been working with Kenneth for eight or ten years.

BB: Let me just get this out. Just your little flow so you can glance at it and that might help you the timing so you don't have to work so hard at it, because you've already worked by writing it all down.

TO: Right. I'm just like - - okay, DR works, yeah. September 1993. Okay. Right. I think that it was - most of my work wasn't teaching. Most of my work was doing organization consulting around dismantling racism and then some other more traditional board development, strategic planning, fund-raising -

BB: Through ChangeWorks, specifically?

TO: Before it was ChangeWorks, I was an independent consultant and Kenneth was working with the Peace Development Fund and so he would contract with me and we would work together and I would do a lot of jobs just on my own. Then we started working together more and more. We and two others formed ChangeWork in 1994, or something.

BB: Okay. Yeah.

TO: I didn't want to go through all that in my resume, so I just - I had been working with Kenneth as part of ChangeWork for several years. I think that it was - a lot of it was the travel. That working in this kind of job means that I was traveling a lot and [65:34] doing a lot of my work on the weekends when boards could meet. I might be away from home three weekends out of the month, and Tom [Stern] had the opposite schedule. I think I was definitely burned out from traveling and never being home on the weekends.

I also think I was burned out from feeling like while I was seeing a lot of - I think there was a lot of individual change going on, but I wasn't seeing much organizational change. I didn't feel like we were [pause]…Well, the joke I made was that I wanted to start something called Tough Love Consulting and charge a lot of money and go in and shake people by the shoulders and tell them to get their s**t together and then leave.

BB: [Laughter] But I thought you said that you saw a lot of individuals changing?

TO: I know, but it was - I did, but it was like within their own personal understanding, but in terms of the way people behaved in organizations I didn't see a lot of change. I don't know what I expected. Again, I think I was still operating, to some extent, out of this idea that things should look a certain way, and if they didn't look that way then - I don't think I was as open to whatever is happening has something to teach. I was more sort of like, "Well, it's not looking like this." I was getting fed up and impatient with people. I realized that in workshops, I was not - I was impatient. And I was not bringing the attitude that you need to bring, which was a loving attitude if you want to help people move through anything at all, including yourself. I just realized I couldn't do it any more. I couldn't be in those rooms and just try and pretend I wasn't impatient with people or frustrated. I remember - and so I told Kenneth I don't think I can do this any more.

BB: How did he respond?

TO: He was disappointed. He had a real strong vision for ChangeWork and where it was going to go. I think by then we'd been working together for so long it was second nature. We didn't really have to think about it. It meant – so one of my foolish responses, one of the mistakes I was referring to earlier, was that I went about unilaterally looking for people who could take my place and brought them on without any kind of collective discussion about it. He found himself saddled with all these people that he had to - I was helping to develop them, but it was not the best process.

BB: [pause] So was your decision to take a sabbatical in '98, and move to San Francisco with Tom, was that part of your - ?

TO: No, no. I wasn't burned out by then.

BB: Oh, okay.

TO: I don't think I burned out until -

BB: You were refreshed.

TO: Yeah, no. We were in the middle – we were at the height of our work then.

BB: Okay.

TO: It was actually - I worked a lot that year. We were doing a lot of work on the west coast, Kenneth and I were. It was actually a great year for me because he was clear that I wasn't going to do administrative stuff and he was okay with that. I would just show up for the - we'd have a workshop in Portland and I'd fly there and we'd work with people. We were doing some really intense good work there with a group called The Western States Center [comprised of the six western states to build a progressive Movement for social, economic, racial, and environmental justice]. It was very - it was where I met Bree and Dueker and made some life-long friendships. We had a great time and I think we were at the height of our game as they say. It was all - we were still in a very creative phase. It was - that was good - a good year.

BB: What were some of the specific elements of being at the height of your game?

TO: I think that just that there was a lot of cross-talk and creative thinking about how we were going to handle different situations and also a lot of fun. Kenneth was a lot of fun. We just laughed a lot. We were meeting these people who are also really, for the most part, keen, very excited by our model and really wanting to embrace it and learn more about it. I remember we would go to Idaho and do training and we would have four or five, not interns, but people who were learning the model with us, and it was just very - it was a lot of fun, because people were a lot of fun. It was very fruitful and creative. We would do things and then we would talk about them and we would think about how to do them better. There was just a lot of really good collaboration. People were very receptive to it and it was - I think it was good. It was a good time.

BB: I think it's safe to say that there's a lot of burnout among Left activists and organizers. What do you think are some of the core reasons for that? Have you found good antidotes to it? Have you noticed either people who've - have you noticed people who have done a better job at somehow avoiding it or getting over it or - ?

TO: That's a good point. It might be helpful to start just thinking of it as an inevitable phase. Not something to be dreaded, but something to be welcomed as its own thing because it leads you to something new. I do think a lot of it is this idea of wanting things to look a certain way and so you burn out when they don't look that way instead of being open to how things are evolving and what that has to teach you, and sort of respecting the kind of organic nature of change and the process as opposed to trying to make it fit into some kind of a box. I feel like if I had been more able to, I probably would have lasted longer and been more productive if I had been able to really - Also for me and my personality, I think, and seeing the glass half full or half empty - half empty, is – so just kind of adds to the burn-out factor. Things need to look a certain way and they don't, so all I'm seeing is how they don't look that way and I'm not aware of all the ways people and organizations are changing. The story I tell is organizations weren't changing. Well, of course they were changing. It's a ludicrous thing for me to say they weren't changing, because I think now about the Chatham County Health Department or any number of places where we worked where there have been some intense changes as a result of, not us, but us coming and people there taking incredible leadership. I think that one way to alleviate the potential for burn-out is to be less wed, which is not a good word, less tied to a specific end and more open to what things produce. I know it would be for me.

The other huge one for me is to get over a sense of urgency. Just this feeling that things have to happen right now, right now, right now, all the time, all the time, all the time. There's no - there's this song that Bernice Reagon [African-American composer, musician, scholar, historian, and teacher; founder of the musical group Sweet Honey in the Rock.]-

BB: Bernice Johnson Reagon?

TO: Yeah. Oh my god. What is the group she sings with, [pause] a woman that she sings with?

BB: I -

TO: Sweet Honey in the Rock.

BB: Sweet Honey in the Rock or something like that. I'd know it any time -

TO: I can't - -

BB: until you ask me.

TO: Right. Sings that she - we who believe in freedom cannot rest.

BB: "Ella's Song".

TO: "Ella's Song". I find that a troublesome song. I actually think we who believe in freedom have to rest and everybody deserves to rest.

BB: Rania Masri had that bumper sticker on her car for a while and she said, "Bridgette, it's a metaphor. She doesn't really mean you can't rest. Hey, stop." I was just trying to make a point. [Laughter] She's like yeah.

TO: I completely agree in the sentiment in the sense that this is a very long haul so we are not going to be able to say it's over and we've gotten there. I think that there's this sense of urgency people have, which our technology has only made worse.

BB: What do you think it comes from and is it more white people than other groups? What is that about?

TO: Well, [pause] I would say originally where I think it came from, in terms of my activism, is that I grew up in a culture where we really thought the difference between being an activist in the 60s and now, is that we really thought we were going to revolutionize things. We really thought we were. There was this sense of urgency about the moment and what could happen in this time. That's part of it I think.

Then the other is that's - we are an instant, we are an urgent culture. Our culture is you can't wait in line for three minutes, we can't - it's like now. I've got to have it now, now, now [pounding on table]. There's just no sense of breathing and waiting. There's all this - every public space almost now has music or some propaganda TV on. It's almost impossible to find public spaces where people can be quiet or - I'm listening to this book about the assassination of John [F.] Kennedy and - I like weird things that I like to read books about those kinds of things.

BB: [Laughter] Books about those kinds of things? Is that what you said? Assassinations and whatnot?

TO: Assassinations and whatnot. He's recounting, and I remember this, how there were hundreds of thousands if not millions of people along the route when his coffin went by, and how the whole route was silent. It was this incredible silence of all these people and what a profound - and I was crying because I was remembering it and just the profoundness of that many people in that kind of silence. That's not - that's very unusual.

BB: Yeah. There's so much about culture that's an assault on the senses in every way, all senses. I remember noticing that coming back from Honduras. It was definitely the reverse culture shock was much more soul slapping than the other. There's also in the paper this morning in the News and Observer [laughter], did you see this? In New York City they had a yoga-thon on whatever, the avenue. What is the street? That's all right. There's this astonishing picture. It was very radical and sharp. It's all these people on this huge main avenue in New York City on their yoga mats. [Laughter] All the traffic is going by, and people are [laughter] - very interesting. So, what are some things in your life as an activist that have really sustained you, nurtured you, and supported you in your ability to keep at it?

TO: Oh, beyond question, the people.

BB: People?

TO: My joke has always been we may not be winning, but we are having a lot more fun. [Laughter] It's just - I just feel like I'm so blessed to know the most interesting, fabulous, complex, challenging people. My life is just - I go to school and this is not going to be fair because I don't really know people well, so I'm going to characterize people in a very unfair way, but I'm in a doctoral program at UNC-Greensboro and my fellow students are fabulous people who I do not know very well, bring all this kind of great educational experience to the classroom that I don't have. A little bit younger than me, probably in their late 30s through their 40s, and a lot of the concepts, this is a theoretical department – a liberation education department, are very new to most of them whereas they are not new to me. There's that difference, but some of them are confronting these ideas for the first time and they are very open and they are very receptive. When they talk, I just realize that they're not aware of us as a community. It's like their communities are much more (this is where I'm projecting so I apologize), but it seems to me from what little I know, their communities are much more traditional.

BB: When you say "us" as a community, you mean the Left and the -

TO: Yeah, or the community that I'm a part of here in Durham. Where I know people who live off the grid or live completely alternate lifestyles or don't - are not engaged in institutions in the same kind of way or who are really trying to live intentionally different, committed lives - not that - these people are very committed. They are very committed as educators and they are probably, from what I can tell, more typically middle-class educated people living in homes with that - I mean just more the regular - and I just feel like I have this - I don't even know why I put that in because it's not like I have to feel better - I don't feel better than them, I just feel lucky to be in a world where people are so interesting and brave. I feel like I know some of the bravest people. Unimaginatively brave people.

BB: In what ways?

TO: Well, I think in particularly about my friends who are transgender and some of the stuff that they go through and choices I know that people make to live lives that – for me it's I've never done anything that my parents have disapproved of. My parents are liberals, so as much as they know about my life, they approve of it and they support it. So many people in the Movement that I know had to make really hard choices to be part of the Movement and were not supported by their family or friends, so just incredible bravery there. People do things like go live in Gaza [coastal strip of land along the Mediterranean boarding Egypt and Israel] for six years and become these incredible artists and then take a tour around the country showing their art to try and - it's the most amazing, astounding people. I'm sure my colleagues at UNC-Greensboro could tell some more stories, so I don't even know why I was doing that. I just feel like I'm able to be part of this community that I wish most people could be part of.

BB: That's been a real source of sustentation for you, if that's a word.

TO: I mean in the literal sense too, these are where my friends - a lot of folks in this community are my close friends and help me through my problems.

BB: And the artist you are referring to?

TO: Is Ellen O'Grady [painter, storyteller, social justice activist].

BB: [Laughter] The great Ellen O'Grady.

TO: Or people like Claudia [Horwitz – spiritual activist, author, and founder of stone circles] who is getting ready to start this - has had a dream and is making it happen; just unbelievable people.

BB: So as you mentioned before, you said from [19] 93 to - do you need a break? Are you okay? Okay. From 93 to 2004, you were working as a non-profit consultant and trainer with the focus on libratory approaches. And that's funny. I've used that word in this Heirs Project brochure and it's - I don't know if it's a word. [Laughter] Anyway, it's a great word. So we're saying it is. So, libratory approaches to organizational development with Kenneth. You explained the relationship as being like it sort of came to be that the dismantling racism work became almost like a branch of ChangeWork, which is doing more kind of organizational development and -

TO: No, I wouldn't say it that way. I would say that ChangeWork had two halves.

BB: Okay, two halves.

TO: And one half was doing the DR work and the other half was doing the organizational development work. The OD work was being done with a DR consciousness and the DR work was being done with an OD consciousness, but they were operating very separately.

BB: Okay. And then after Kenneth died, in 2004, you said that ya'll split, officially did become separate organizations.

TO: Right.

BB: What was involved in that transition?

TO: I just think that because we had operated so separately for so long that our attempts to try to work, and Kenneth was the thing that held us together and was the one who operated in both spheres, and without him there our - and he – what Kenneth is brilliant at, one of these strengths and weaknesses, was accommodating the person's style that he was working with. So I had a style and DR works developed a certain kind of style and Karimah had a style and they had developed a certain kind of style, and they weren't the same. It just seemed to make more sense, rather than try to push these two styles together to just actualize what had already - what had really been happening.

BB: So when you say "the Movement " what do you mean?

TO: I mean all of those people in organizations and some of whom know and some of whom don't know are involved in trying to make us a sustainable and loving and dependent world. There's a really great article, another one that I got in my class, about - who is it by? By the Paul Hawken [environmentalist, author], I think. I'll go check when we're done, but about how the number of small grassroots efforts to do something to make the world a better place is huge. It's beyond our ability to count. I would call all of that the Movement. I think sometimes it's more cohesive and sometimes it's less. I think we are in one of our less cohesive moments, but still a movement.

BB: So let's finally talk about what's been such a huge part of your life and psyche in work for years now, is your community work with Middle East peace efforts. The first time that you and Tom went to Israel/Palestine was when you went to the West Bank in 2002, right? That was your first time. Why did you decide to go? How did you get interested in a delegation?

TO: Well, one of the responses to my burnout was to try and find some relief. I had always identified as sort of Jewish culturally, and I thought okay, I'll check it out more. What does this mean to be a Jew? I started reading everything I could get my hands on about Judaism and what it meant to be a Jew. I started - I joined a synagogue - we joined a synagogue. We started really trying to learn how to observe services and how to be more religiously Jewish. We started a Talmud [record of rabbinic discussions pertaining to Jewish law, ethics, customs, and history] class and we started doing essentially Bible study and just got more engaged in our lives as Jews. Now the problem was I was reading people like Michael Lerner [rabbi, political activist] and I was reading lefty Jewish people and Arthur Waskow [rabbi]. In my naivety assumed that they were speaking for all Jewish people or for the Jewish community. I didn't really know anything about Israel and Palestine at all—at all, no idea, totally ignorant. We started confronting. Once you become religious at all, you start hearing - you start confronting this thing called Israel.

Tom got a call from his law school friend, George Bisharat, who's an American Palestinian, and said that the National Lawyers Guild, which Tom had been active with before, was planning this delegation to investigate what happened in Jenin in the West Bank during the period right after the Second Intifada [second major wave of violence between Palestinians and Israelis] and when there was reports of a massacre in Jenin. Did he want to go? And Tom told me, and I said, "I want to go". We both said we would go even though I'm not a lawyer. So we went. George and the National Lawyers Guild organized a delegation of about twelve or fifteen of us (all lawyers except for me), and organized this trip. We went to Jenin and Nablus and Bethlehem and Hebron and it was totally devastating. I was devastated. It was unbelievable. I felt like this thing that was bringing me relief had just turned around and was slapping me across the face. I just couldn't - I was broken. I mean I was in such pain. I came back – so then I came back - we came back, and literally, within twenty-four hours, got the call that our niece, Cassie, was in a coma and subsequently died in that following week. We were just a mess in every way.

BB: I want to take a little break, and then I want to ask you to describe the trip to me some. And then, yeah, so let's take a little break. [Recorder is turned off and then back on] Okay.

TO: So you wanted, what I saw?

BB: How about you first give a brief summary of the struggles there for the last thirty years? [Laughter]

TO: Okay.

BB: Why do you think this is happening?

TO: Oh my god. Well, there was a movement to create a Jewish state called Zionism [international political movement that supports a homeland for the Jewish people in the Land of Israel] that started actually before World War II. It was not getting much interest. It was a French movement in the beginning. Then World War II happened and the Holocaust happened. After the War was over, Britain controlled what's now Israel/Palestine and had this thing called the British Mandate. They – the United Nations agreed as a body that - or they - I'm getting this wrong. I can't - there's so much pressure. It was the Turkish Empire and then it was the British Mandate and then Britain took over from the Turkish Empire, they published this thing called the British Mandate and then the UN [United Nations] passed a resolution saying that Israel is going to be formed on this land as a Jewish state. The next day, fighting started and then in [19] '47, I think, the fighting ended and Israel was formed on what is now Israel, and what is now the West Bank was owned by Jordan. Syria owned the stuff at the top and Egypt owned the Gaza and Golan Heights [plateau on the border of Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria]. I'm not sure where things are geographically.

Then, in the [19] '68 war, Israel fought against Jordan, and quote/unquote won. So Jordan retreated to its boarders and the West Bank became occupied. Somewhere in there Egypt gave up Golan Heights and Gaza and - or Syria gave up Golan Heights, I'm not - I have to go back. I loose track, but in '68, what's now the West Bank became the West Bank and Gaza. Israel occupied that territory and has for now, exactly forty years. It's just gotten worse and worse and worse. Depending on who tells the history and where you start the history and where you end the history and how you paraphrase the history. If you read the U.S. papers it's things or the Israeli mainstream - the Jewish mainstream, it's that Israel has never had a serious partner for peace and there's no negotiating with people who want to drive Jews into the sea, the Palestinians have had every opportunity to make peace and they refuse to, and those kinds of things. If you are of my mind, it's unimaginable to suggest that if you live under occupation, which means you have no – and under the conditions of occupation that Palestinians live in - under that - there was an editorial the other day about how Gaza had had a chance to rule itself and they had blown it without any mention at all that Gaza was completely - is a small area, completely surrounded and controlled by Israel: who goes in, who goes out, what kind of resources come in and out, how much money comes in and out. And this idea that this pressure cooker of a place should behave in a way that we can't even behave in the so-called democratic free world. People have no idea about what it's like to live under occupation, and particularly the kind of occupation that's happening now, where Israel has been for the last twenty plus years, making these steady incursions into the West Bank and taking Palestinian land, preventing Palestinians from working, taking their fields, it's just out-and-out oppression. And people have no idea. I didn't know all that then, and I feel very ashamed that I'm not giving an accurate history because it makes me look bad.

BB: I'm sorry I put you in that position.

TO: I know it if I'd look at the notes, I just can't keep it straight without the notes. But what I saw was an Israeli assault on the West Bank in 2002. I saw the aftermath of their

- of Jenin, I saw the rubble from the bombing, I saw the - I listened to the stories, I heard - we heard stories from the doctors and from the people that had been affected. We went to Nablus. We saw the destruction of the court system, of all kinds of records. Again, the wanton, punitive destruction and went into people's houses and saw how the Israeli army had blown walls in their homes. They'd go from one home to the next. Just inexcusable, malicious destruction of the Palestinian infrastructure, records destroyed. So this whole thing that Palestinians should be able to govern themselves, which is the big argument, and they've had every chance to govern themselves, well, it's not true. I don't know how you govern yourself when the government that's occupying you destroys your records. People couldn't - all the land ownership, the driver's licenses, the education. People had no way of tracking who had done what, who was - it was a mess. That was before the wall had even started. There was talk of this thing called the wall. It was very controversial and even some people on the Palestinian side said we would welcome a wall if they would build it along the sixty-eight - sixty-seven/sixty-eight boarders.

Then we went back in 2005, and were at the ICAHD [Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions] summer camp which is where we got the next level of education about this land grab and the way that the policy of house demolitions and the wall and settlement expansion is essentially creating apartheid. In between there, I went from being sort of a Michael Lerner Zionist to an anti-Zionist. That's the other - and then we left the synagogue. When we came back from the first trip I went to our rabbi - we went to our rabbi, showed her our slides, and her first response was to talk about why we couldn't show it at the synagogue and to justify why Israel had to do the things that they were doing. She was awesome when it came to helping us with our grief around Cassie, but she couldn't hold our pain around what Israel is doing. We went to another rabbi, and he essentially said he thought the slides could be shown in the Jewish community at some point, but not now and certainly not outside the Jewish community. Again, nobody was able to hold the pain that we were feeling about what we felt was a complete transgression of our understanding of Jewish values. We worked with Jews for Just Peace for about a year and finally got our synagogue to allow us to talk about it. Then that in combination with the fact that our synagogue was going through some internal politics where some people were treating each other horrifically, and treating the rabbi horrifically, it was - I just said fuck this. I don't know why I'm trying to this—be a part of an institution that doesn't really want me and doesn't even know how to honor its own values. Then I became bitter.

BB: And then you became bitter?

TO: Bitter. I've been bitter ever sense. [Laughter]

BB: So tell me about Jews for Just Peace, a little bit about the group and what your role is in the local chapter.

TO: Well, it's kind of moribund right now. Jews for Just Peace was very active for about three years and we brought speakers and we brought a refusenik and we brought the Parent Circle and always tried to raise awareness about the occupation and every time trying to get some entree into the Jewish community.

BB: Will you say what a refusenik is real quick?

TO: A refusenik is an Israeli soldier who wants to serve Israel, but refuses to serve in the occupied territories because they believe it's immoral. Parent Circle is the Israelis and Palestinians who've lost children or loved ones to violence. We had an Israeli man and a Palestinian man come and talk, and in both cases got into the Jewish community some. I believe that Jews for Just Peace, because of our presence, we led to the formation of a Tikkun chapter and a Brit T'zedek chapter. Then we kind of went moribund and most of - a lot of the people from there transferred into the ICAHD: Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, which is based in Jerusalem, was the group we took when we were there the first time. Jeff Halper [activist, coordinator of ICAHD] of that group took us on a tour and showed us the settlement expansion. Then we went back to work at the summer camp at ICAHD that ICAHD sponsors every year to rebuild the demolished home. Then we formed, along with some other people, ICAHD-USA. It's an independent organization, but it has the same goals and we work in partnership. A lot of the activism from this area has moved into ICAHD-USA. Tom's the board chair and I'm just an active person.

BB: What do you think have been some of the most positive things to come out of Jews for Just Peace and the ICAHD work? [Pause] We're breaking the recording rules by eating lunch because we're hungry. So take your time to chew.

TO: I think we're a part of – again, in the last ten years, there's been this proliferation of some small, some larger groups of Jews and some Christians and Jews and Muslims, but of Jewish groups who are taking a stand against the occupation. So I see us as part of that stream in contributing to that stream of people who are, I think, and are in concert with a lot of other things. We are reaching a point where there is more openness than there's ever been in this country in terms of talking about what is happening over there. There's the - Israeli lobbyist had such a strong hold on both the politics and the discussions in this country, and I think that that's starting to break a little bit. So I see us as part of that stream.

BB: And you and Tom are going back in July, right?

TO: Yes.

BB: What will you do there?

TO: Well, we're – ICAHD-USA has a very large donor, angry Jewish Orthodox man who - and some other Jewish donors who are subsidizing what's called the Constructing Peace Campaign where we've committed to rebuild every Palestinian home that is demolished this year. We're all going to go – and that we contracted with ICAHD to do the actual on the ground work and we are going to go and visit some of the houses and see how that's going and figure out how we can help. Every time we go, we come back and have a - put together what we call a slide show. It's a PowerPoint show and go around and give a lot of talks. We'll be looking - one of my goals is to talk to more people on the Israeli side, because I haven't really done that, so talk to more Israeli peace activists and stuff like that and try to get a little bit of a broader prospective.

BB: So how are you doing emotionally around all that?

TO: I think I'm stuck really. It's - I'm very bitter and I'm very angry. Before, when I was talking about trying to see the humanity in everybody, the one place I'm having a hard time is in the Jewish community because I feel like the silence and the complicity - that people don't know what's going on and if any group should understand what it's like for people not to know what's going on, it should be the Jewish community. They don't want to know and the Jewish leadership is very complicit in the silence and in the not knowing. I feel like if you took anybody in this country, for the most part, unless they were extremely right wing, and took them to the West Bank and said this is what's going on, they would be shocked and appalled at the level, just the level of daily oppression of people in our name. So I'm just angry. It's interesting because I compared it to my - I feel like my position in relationship to the white community where I feel like I have come to a place where I really love white people. In some ways, no matter -except for the ones like [President] George Bush and [Vice President Dick] Cheney, but most white people, even those of us who continue to be ignorant about racism, it's like I'm not bitter in the way I am towards the Jewish community. I feel like I'm a lot more effective in terms of my anti-racism work than I am around my anti-occupation work, because I'm not - I don't approach people with this judgment and self-righteousness. In the Jewish community I can't even go into a synagogue because I'm so angry and I've been there for years now so I don't feel like I'm making much progress.

BB: What's your thinking about why it is that there's such sort of mass denial and silence among Jews about this?

TO: [Pause] I wish that I could answer that. I feel like it's the power of the dominant story. There's this guy named Mark Ellis, a great author, historian, and Jewish guy who talks about how as Jews have become - have moved from being a third-world community to a first-world community, we've made this transition without acknowledging it and so we're still - our rhetoric is still the rhetoric of a powerless community and that the marks of what it is to be a good Jew have now shifted from anything having to do with Jewish values to our relationship to the holocaust and our reverence of the holocaust and our relationship to Israel and our reverence for Israel. And those are the two marks. Whether or not you are a good Jew has to do with whether you support Israel and whether you show the proper relationship to the - whether you draw on the holocaust as your rationale for everything you do. I think that's true. I think that certainly in my experience that the support for Israel has become synonymous of being a good Jew and that idea that you can be anti-Zionist and be a good Jew is unthinkable to the - as soon as you say you are anti-Zionist, the Jewish mainstream says well, forget it. We're not going to talk to you. So you have huge debates inside Jewish anti-occupation groups about whether to say - whether you can say things like I'm anti-Zionist. Well, no you can't, because if you do, as soon as you do, you'll - nobody will listen to you. So that just shows me right there that we've stopped being able to think for - to allow ourselves to think. So there's this huge dominant culture thinking within the Jewish community. There are tapes. You can hear people sort of reel out the tapes when they do, and I gave you some of those. We've never had a peace partner. We've never - those are the tapes. People feel - I think it has to do with why we're in Iraq. People have - or the rhetoric about Iraq. People equate safety and security with these tapes. It's too threatening - I think it's too threat - once you start to unravel that idea that Israel could be morally bankrupt, you unravel too much. It's like people who deny the racism in the U.S. It's like they're so attached to America's goodness that they can't afford to see its, our moral corruptness.

BB: Moral?

TO: Corruptness.

BB: Yeah.

TO: In our very founding. I think people just don't - it has to do with the way the culture constructs patriotism as obedience and as uncritical.

BB: Is there anything else, or more that you want to talk about that work and what's happening or anything around the issue?

TO: I've learned a lot from going there and sort of that story about projecting a certain thing and just meeting people on the - in the West Bank. We've become very friendly with a family there and we're actually going to be staying with them in Ramallah [Palestinian city in central West Bank] when we go this time. How - I can't imagine living under those conditions, and yet the people that we met are astoundingly resilient and human and have these reactions that I wouldn't expect. Again, I sort of project a certain reaction to living under these conditions and people, as always, really surprise me. In some ways, it's a very - it's a hopeful lesson for me to see. None of us can imagine what it's like to live - it would be like you coming here. You'd have to get up - you'd have to go through probably two checkpoints. You wouldn't know whether or not you'd get through the checkpoints, so you'd tell me you'd be here at eleven, but you might not be here at all or you might get here at four. Then you don't know if you're going to be able to go home. The electricity could go off at any moment. Then they could establish a curfew and you couldn't go outside at all. Maybe there's not enough food for you to buy and your children don't have enough to eat. That's daily life. Or your child gets sick and you have to call an ambulance, and you don't know if the ambulance can get through the checkpoint. And once they get through, can they get out the checkpoint? Then people in this country, Jews and everybody else, has this attitude about Palestinians and how they should behave. Whereas if any of us were asked to stand at a checkpoint for five minutes, it would be a mass riot. I just think about how impatient I get when I stand in line and it's not moving [fingers snapping]. And you're - I don't - I'm waiting to deposit a check or something in the bank whereas these people are waiting to go to work or for something that's important. They don't have any idea from day to day whether they are going to get to go where they need to go. I really ramble. You can't keep me on a topic.

BB: No, that wasn't rambling at all. [Laughter] Quit knocking yourself. Well, it's right at 1:30, so maybe we should stop today. This is probably a good place to stop. Thanks, Tema, and we'll do a third interview in this series sometime soon.

TO: Okay. You want me to look at the words?

BB: Yeah.

END OF TRANSCRIPT

Transcribed by Denise Kelly, August, 2007