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R.47. Speaking of Feminism: Today's Activists on the Past, Present, and Future of Feminism

Interview R-0894
Alice Wilder
November 6, 2015

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ABSTRACT – Alice Wilder

Interviewee: Alice Wilder

Interviewer: Rachel F. Seidman

Interview Date: November 6, 2015

Location: Chapel Hill, NC

Length: Approximately 1 hour, 31 minutes

Alice Wilder was a member of the girls activist group SPARK Movement when she was in high school. In this interview, conducted when she was a student at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, she reflects on her childhood, the daughter of a father whose family came from the north and a mother whose family was from the deep south. She describes a childhood in which she moved often as a result of her father's work, and the adjustments she had to make when moving to Charlotte, North Carolina for high school. Her experience was deeply shaped by the deaths and suicides of several members of her school community. Wilder describes her love for popular culture, including John Green novels, *Parks and Rec* television show, podcasts, and, especially, the Harry Potter books by J.K. Rowling. The latter had a major impact on her sense of identity, and she traces her discovery of feminism in large part to the online community she found among other Potter fans. She describes her activism in the SPARK movement, including campaigns focused on *Seventeen* magazine and educating high school coaches about sexual assault. In college Wilder edited the feminist magazine and volunteered at the Orange County Rape Crisis Center. The latter position led to many acquaintances telling her about their own rape experiences, and that, along with the pressures of activism and balancing her other commitments led to a feeling of burnout. She discusses her frustration with what she saw as a lack of sensitivity around race and gender queerness in organizations like NARAL and Planned Parenthood, and her criticism of non profits and the way they use low-paid labor to accomplish their goals. She reflects on the impact of the economic recession of 2008 on her family, her friends, and her own sense of career options. She talks in depth about the issues facing girl activists, including the notion of building a personal brand, and aging out of the movement. This interview was conducted as part of Rachel F. Seidman's research for her book *Speaking of Feminism: Today's Activists on the Past, Present and Future of the U.S. Women's Movement*.

FIELD NOTES – Alice Wilder

(compiled November 6, 2015)

Interviewee: Alice Wilder

Interviewer: Rachel F. Seidman

Interview Date: November 6, 2015

Location: Chapel Hill, North Carolina

THE INTERVIEWEE. Alice Wilder

THE INTERVIEWER. Rachel F. Seidman

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW. Alice Wilder sat on a large, green chair in my office for this interview. Her older sister had been a student of mine, and Alice had been recommended to me by Dana Edell, the director of the SPARK Movement. She yawned repeatedly during the 8:30 a.m. interview, which was an early hour for a college student.

NOTE ON RECORDING. Recorded on a digital zoom recorder.

TRANSCRIPT—ALICE WILDER

Interviewee: ALICE WILDER
Interviewer: Rachel Seidman
Interview Date: November 6, 2015
Location: Chapel Hill, NC
Length: 1 file; approximately 1 hour, 31 minutes

START OF RECORDING

Rachel Seidman: OK, this is Rachel Seidman, and I'm here at the Love House and Hutchins Forum in my office on UNC Chapel Hill's campus. Today is Friday November 6, 2015, and I'm here with Alice Wilder, and we are undertaking an oral history interview for a project on feminist activism in a digital age. Alice, I'm going to start by asking you to tell me—kind of situate me in your family by telling me about your grandparents. Do you know your grandparents? What do you know about them? Where were they? Where did they live? What did they do?

Alice Wilder: So I did get to know both sets of grandparents. My dad is from Madison, Wisconsin, and so I have family on that side of the family that's in the north, and then my mom is from Jennings, Louisiana, and so that's the side of the family that I've spent more time with growing up, the Southern half of our family. So I think with the Northern side, it's a little bit like—it's always been sort of competitive of which side of the family my sister and I spent more time on in terms of family holidays and stuff, but yeah. I mean, I was much closer to my grandpa on my dad's side—I'm much closer to him than I was to my grandmother. She was, you know, I think one of the women of the second wave who never really addressed a lot of deeper stuff going on in her life and sort

of was often—could be unkind, and—I need to stop thinking about whether or not my dad is going to hear this interview, although he would probably agree. And my mom's side of the family is my grandfather. My grandma on my dad's side passed away January of I think my senior year of high school, and then my grandfather on my mom's side passed away January of my first year of college here.

RS: And what did they do for a living?

AW: My grandma on my dad's side was, I believe, just a stay-at-home mom, and my grandfather was—I don't even really—I know that he was in the war. He was in World War II, and so that's the main part of his life that I sort of hear about, but other than that it's always sort of been a blue-collar, Madison, Wisconsin—you know? So yeah, I don't know. And then, my mom's side, my grandma worked in an antique shop. She owned her own antique store early in her marriage with my grandpa, and then had five kids in six years, so. But she was a teacher for a long time, and then I think also sort of split her time between being a mother and being a teacher and her love for antiques. And then my grandfather was a lawyer.

RS: OK. And where did they live? They were in Louisiana?

AW: Mm-hmm. They lived—I think my grandma grew up in Baton Rouge and my grandfather grew up in Marksville, Louisiana, but they lived most of their life as a couple in Jennings, Louisiana.

RS: OK. And then your parents? What did they do?

AW: My mom is a Renaissance woman. She changes around a lot, but mostly I think her passion is writing and teaching, so she's done freelance stuff, she's taught in high school, middle school, college, started the writing across the curriculum program at

UNC Charlotte, and now works at LSU doing first-year writing, but she's also done sort of more creative—like doing workshops for people for this organization when we lived in Rochester. And my dad is a professional librarian, so he basically runs university libraries.

RS: OK. And so you grew up mostly—you said you move around a lot. Where?

AW: Yeah. So from—this is the part I'm good at reciting. From I think—up until I was three, we lived in Baton Rouge. That's where my parents met and got married and started everything, and then my dad got a job as, I think, the assistant dean of libraries at the University of Rochester in upstate New York, and so we moved there. I lived there for ten years, and then when I was I believe fourteen—I was going from middle school into high school, about to start ninth grade—we moved to Charlotte, North Carolina. And I've been in North Carolina ever since then, up until 2015 and the future, but my parents, summer of 2014, moved back down to Baton Rouge because my dad got a job to run the library there, and also my grandfather had passed away by that point so my grandma was alone in this big house and my mom wanted to be able to—she had been moving around for my dad's jobs for fifteen years and kind of wanted to get to have a bigger part in the decisions that were made of where we lived. And so they moved back down to Baton Rouge, but that's not even really a for-sure, forever location for them.

RS: And so your high school experience was mostly in Charlotte?

AW: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

RS: OK. And you have how many siblings?

AW: One.

RS: OK. And that's Coco Wilder?

AW: Yes.

RS: OK. And so how would you describe yourself in high school? You had just moved to Charlotte.

AW: I think the first year of high school I was floundering a lot because it was like I had been taken away from my entire life, basically, that I had always known, and so it was a big transition to move to the South after having grown up in the North. And in the North, in middle school and everything, they sort of teach you that the North is good, the South is bad, the North is smart, the South is dumb. And even though I had family in the South in Texas and Georgia and Louisiana and I loved those people, and my mom really tried hard to bring Southern culture into our home when we lived in the North, despite all of that I still felt a certain amount of shame around the South, and so I think for the first year it was definitely a big transition.

I think I was very confused about all these evangelical friends trying to get me to go to their church, and it was also a big transition to go to a high school that had no funding at all from a very wealthy public school system in upstate New York where there were greenhouses and workshops and all of this stuff, and Smart Boards in every classroom, to going to where you didn't know if your teachers were going to get laid off the next year, and you couldn't print anything out. It was a huge culture shock for me, but I think overall I liked high school. I went to a small arts magnet school, and so it was more intimate. It was less of the corporate—the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system vibe, and I had friends, and I really liked a lot of my teachers. There was a lot of death in my high school, unfortunately, which I think kind of colored the experience.

RS: A lot of death?

AW: Yeah.

RS: What do you mean?

AW: My first year of high school, my Algebra I teacher committed suicide. I don't know when it happened because they didn't tell us for a long time, but he sort of disappeared from the classroom probably around late November, early December, and then we had a big state exam at the end of that year, so everyone was like, "Where's Mr. Dover? We'd really like to pass this exam." And basically we just had subs for a month or two, and then Ms. Manshack, who was just the best math teacher I've ever had, just took us in midway through the year and got us all to pass that exam, and just worked so hard. Anyway, so we had found out basically that he had killed himself. He made me cry constantly. He was not a very kind person, so it seems like he was very unhappy. And then my sophomore year—it's honestly like one death per year pretty much. Sophomore year I think it was a teacher who had worked there who didn't anymore who had died, but my junior year our principal killed himself.

RS: Oh my goodness.

AW: Yeah, and that was a very intense thing to have—especially to have an openly gay principal at an arts magnet school who really deeply cared about the students and—this has all been said before, but he knew your name, and he was just a nice—seemed like a very happy person and then killed himself, and it was a high school and middle school combined building. So it was very—seeing sixth grade girls wearing black dresses to school and going to a funeral when you're fifteen is weird. And then my senior year—I think the summer before my senior year one of my very favorite teachers, who

was actually just a resource officer for the school, but he had a sudden heart attack and passed away. He was very young. Then my senior year, a sophomore in high school killed herself. So it's weird to be like, "High school was really cool except for all of those things." Obviously by the time my graduating class—by the time we all graduated, we were like, "We can't even believe we made it through this intense, wild thing."

RS: How do you think that affected you?

AW: I mean, I think it brought a lot of grief into my life, for sure. It was—I don't know. I think Dr. Bowe was a specifically hard thing because no one wanted to say that it was a suicide, but everyone knew that it was a suicide, and it felt like—CMS schools, they would just bring in counselors. It was like this ritual of bringing in counselors, and have them say, "We have counselors in the library," for like two weeks, but there was no real long-term thing. And it was like, "Well, if we have multiple suicides in this school, it seems like maybe we shouldn't just have them in for a couple of days." So there really wasn't a lot of coping mechanisms. Sometimes it felt like—especially after Dr. Bowe died—that everyone was sad about it for like a day, and then the teachers were sort of instructed to pretend it hadn't happened, or to not fixate on it, and we were all like, "Wait. How are we acting like everything's normal? Our principal just killed himself. This isn't normal." So, yeah.

RS: So how did you—looking back, you started being a girl activist with the SPARK movement. Can you tell me about how that started, where that came from?

AW: Yeah. I started reading Rookie Mag the summer after my sophomore year of high school.

RS: Rookie Mag?

AW: Yeah. It's like an online magazine for teen girls, and that's like when it was launched, because I had had some weird pseudo-breakup, and so I was just feeling very sad for the summer and was just watching Parks and Recreation and spending time on the internet learning about feminism. That was honestly a very beneficial thing to happen in the long run. And Rookie Mag ended up tweeting about the applications to join SPARK, and so that's how I found out about SPARK.

RS: All right, so hang on. So you were reading Rookie Mag online and following them on Twitter?

AW: Tumblr.

RS: Or Tumblr. OK. And they tweeted about —?

AW: Yeah. They tweeted about the application. That part was on Twitter, and I think it was—I'm trying to think, because I know they—I guess they launched summer before my junior year of high school, and so basically having that connection and endorsement.

RS: So you said that you had started kind of reading about feminism after a breakup? How did those two things connect?

AW: I think I was just—it was a larger breakup than—it wasn't even really—anyway. But I had—that was after the last Harry Potter film had come out, and I had [been] and continue to be a very deep and devoted Harry Potter fan, and so it was sort of like a larger breakup of this period of my life where it was just like rereading the books every time I got the chance, and when the last movie came out, in that moment I knew that it was a new period of my life was going to start after that because this was this huge part of growing up for me. And I had a lot of friends that I had made on the Internet about

Harry Potter and stuff, and from Harry Potter conventions, and it was just like this really solid part of my life, and so after that it didn't end, but it was like that chapter was definitely closed. I sort of was just like, well what do I do now in terms of media consumption?

And so I started watching a lot of Parks and Rec and reading books by John Green and doing sort of the typical Internet girl route to feminism. Yeah.

RS: So how does John Green get you to feminism?

AW: Well, he doesn't, but I don't know. I don't want to give him credit, although I like him a lot, but I think it was more of the—there was sort of a larger community that was built around people who really like Harry Potter and who like his books and stuff all tended to sort of have similar interests. And so even after Harry Potter, the last film had come out, it was like I still would sort of follow other authors that I had found out about through him, or —

RS: Through—who's him?

AW: John Green. Just other authors that were his friends, like Maureen Johnson and stuff. The internet kind of leads you quickly from one source of interest to another, and then you kind of go down that road, and so that's how I—I think that that's how I sort of got to that internet location where suddenly I was reading posts about bell hooks and intersectionality and the wage gap, and yeah.

RS: Do you think there's anything in Harry Potter—Hermione and all of that—that helped lay the groundwork?

AW: Oh yeah. I mean, Harry Potter is like the foundation for most of who I am as a person.

RS: So tell me more about that.

AW: I think—I mean, Hermione I think is part of it, but I think just a sense of justice, to me, was imparted by those books, with the idea that a serious side is that the world is not divided between good people and Death Eaters. So that's—it wasn't really good versus evil necessarily, although that's certainly a theme of the books, but that how you treat people who are looked at as inferior to you says a lot about who you are and what it means to be kind, and when it's OK to break rules. I think definitely the fifth book was really—I remember writing an essay about it in middle school. It taught me a lot. The whole larger community taught me a lot about activism, but in that book especially, the character of Dolores Umbridge, of this imposing teacher who wants to control all these students and openly kind of hates them obviously speaks to most school students because you feel like you're getting trapped. But I really liked the idea that you could be like Hermione who really likes school and likes to follow the rules for the most part, which was who I was as a kid. I was very much a rule-follower—but also there are times when you can kind of throw that out the window and be like, "Following those rules that this person sets out is not right, and so I should be breaking these rules." But the larger Harry Potter community taught me a lot about censorship. I listened to a lot of Harry Potter podcasts where they'd discuss news when there was a period of time where a lot of parents were trying to get Harry Potter books banned, and so I kind of got involved in that sort of fight as well. I learned how to sort of argue about why these books needed to be in schools and why there should be separation between—like it shouldn't be religiously imposed whether or not somebody can read Harry Potter.

RS: So when you say you got involved, you got involved just by listening? Or you actually participated in—?

AW: I don't know. I think—I mean, at this point I was probably—a lot of this was in middle school and I was just listening to Harry Potter podcasts and listening to wizard rock and reading all the blogs and stuff. I never really got into fan fiction, which is interesting, but there were news sites and everything like that. But I wasn't really involved—I think maybe I signed a petition or something, but I wasn't really involved in actually—because they were really just between individual parents and school boards, so there's not really a lot for other people to do. But certainly I talked about it at the lunch table with my friends. It was something that I thought about a lot and would talk about with other people just in my life. There's a pretty obvious comparison between banning these books, and then there's the scene in the fifth book where Dolores Umbridge is trying to ban this magazine that Harry did this interview in, and that just makes everyone want to read it more, and so that was something that I just really loved finding that connection. It made me really excited.

RS: That's great. So for you, it was sort of the Harry Potter world community and then the online community that sort of led you toward feminism. Were there any particular people in your day-to-day life—friends, teachers, siblings, parents—who were guiding you in that way at all, or who had sort of discovered feminism first?

AW: I mean, my parents are liberal people, so I wasn't like against—it's not like I grew up kind of having to come up against that, which I know a lot of people do. I mean, I guess it was discussed in our household. The Dixie Chicks are an important figure to my mom, and that was something that we talked about, but I think it was a lot

more politics generally. Like, talking about the Iraq War and surveillance and wiretapping and stuff like that was something that we talked about in our home, about who was George Bush, and let's watch The Daily Show when you're eight years old. So I mean, obviously there's some feminism to that, but I think my parents didn't guide me to those sources. It was pretty self-directed.

RS: And did you have friends in school who were doing this with you? Or was it pretty much you on your own and a virtual community?

AW: So in high school, it was friends in my day-to-day life, just classmates. But in middle school—I don't think I was really a feminist activist in middle school, I don't think. I sort of have a tendency to, when I get excited about something, I just want to talk about it to everyone I know, and so I did that with a lot of my friends, and said, "Have you read this website Rookie Mag? Oh my God, look at this article." So that kind of gave us something to really get into and talk about. So for me, that first thing was just watching Parks and Rec and telling all my—because I didn't know anyone who watched that show, and it was like, "Well, how am I going to talk about this when no one watches it?" So I basically—my best friend Joneka from high school and also my best friend continually, I was like, "You have to watch this show," and so we sort of talked about it through that a lot.

RS: So what was—why did you think she had to watch it? What's significant about Parks and Rec?

AW: Oh my gosh. I mean, I think the thing that kind of hooked me into it initially was that friendships on the show between women were not competitive or toxic, which was not something you see very often, especially when you're that age. You sort of

think that's the only option for you, and so it was really cool to see the characters of Leslie and Ann who just straight up love each other. There's some Onion or Clickhole article where the headline is like "Women Spend Raucous Night of Validating the Living Shit Out of Each Other," and that's really what that show is, is them just being like, "You're awesome," and, "I believe in you," and, "You can do it." Not in a corny way; it was also really funny and sincere and authentic, but that's something that really spoke to me because I was like, "Wait, you don't have to have a 'not like other girls' complex. It's OK that I love my female friends so much and just think that they're awesome." And it's also just a very funny show, and it was a funny show that I could watch without feeling like all the jokes were sexist or racist. That's always a plus as well.

RS: Where were you getting the other message that you had to be competitive with girls?

AW: I mean, just everywhere. I don't know. I think it's just implemented in middle school especially. My middle school was very academically competitive, and so I definitely felt like I was the stupid friend out of my friends or the ugly friend out of my friends, and just because it was already academically really competitive, combined with just the social aspect of being a middle school-aged girl, it sort of combined to the idea of, "These are your friends, but also you have to compete with them a little bit." It's also, I just think—I can't think of one particular piece of media, but I think that it's overall sort of a theme of these friendships where there's a lot of passive-aggressive comments, and there's sort of this idea of, "Well that's just how girls are. They're just drama and they just are unkind to each other."

RS: All right, so let's go back. You see the tweet about the SPARK movement, and what did you do?

AW: I mean, I think I must have probably—knowing me, I probably applied for it late at night when I should have been asleep, and I think it was—I guess it was a Google doc that I had filled out and showed my sister. I was like, "OK, do you think this is good? I don't know. Oh my God," and just submitted it and was very—I remember being very nervous. A lot of the girls submitted their application the day it was due, and they were so shocked when they actually got in, which is funny. But I did submit it before it was due, and then I just remember getting that—just because I had seen what they had done with Seventeen Magazine and all those previous campaigns and was like, "Well, this sounds like exactly what I want to do."

RS: What had they done that you had seen?

AW: I had seen the petition that they did—and it hadn't actually been successful by this point yet. That hadn't been announced. That news broke shortly after I joined—but just to petition Seventeen Magazine to include more diversity in terms of race and body type and ability, and then to also pledge to no longer Photoshop their images for girls. Actually, what we were asking for was one spread per issue that wasn't Photoshopped, which felt like a more realistic goal than when they ended up publishing their Body Peace Treaty. They said that they wouldn't Photoshop at all which is not something they've actually followed up on, but—so I was really excited by that, that project.

RS: Had you been—were you a reader of Seventeen?

AW: No. My parents—we didn't really subscribe to magazines. They subscribed us to New Moon magazine, which is like the best magazine for little girls, which I loved, so I guess that is feminism that my parents taught me. You know, you read it in the school library, and you read it at your friends' houses because it's not allowed. It wasn't not allowed in the house, but it was just, we're not paying for a subscription to Seventeen for you. So I definitely knew what Seventeen was, and sort of the whole lore around it, and had definitely also felt like at times reading those articles and thinking, "Oh my God, I can't believe I have to do all of this and go to school. How am I supposed to be this pretty all the time?"

RS: So what do you remember thinking when you applied to SPARK? Why were you applying? What did you want?

AW: I mean, I think it was that at that point I had sort of identified within myself dual passions for media and feminism, and that is what SPARK is, and that was something that I felt—because I sort of felt this divide between like, "OK, I really love this book series, and I really love TV. I think TV is great, and music, and all these things, but I'm feeling this disconnect between that and what I know of feminism." And so this seemed like a good way to sort of bring those two things together and then also a nice, larger community—because I had friends in high school who were interested in feminism by that point, but they didn't want to talk about it all the time. So it was nice to know that I could possibly have this online community of girls who would want to talk about it all the time, and also adult mentors as well.

RS: And so you got an email saying you were in?

AW: It was like, "Welcome to the SPARK team." And, yeah.

RS: And then what?

AW: And then I should have gone to the retreat that year, but my family was on a vacation and so we could not—I couldn't attend it, which was too bad. I was pretty heartbroken, but it basically just brought me into the Facebook group and blogging and doing these video chats, and it's sort of like you do some orientation stuff, but really you just hit the ground running. And then pretty soon after I joined, we got a message in our private Facebook group that was like, "No one can say anything, but we know that Seventeen is going to publish this Body Peace Treaty, and who's ready to talk to the press? Who needs to rehearse?" It was very undercover, like, "We're talking to the New York Times in two days," and that was just—you know, when you're a sophomore in high school it's like, "Holy shit." Suddenly, I get to know these secrets, and that's so fun. I love secrets.

RS: And was this Dana Edell who was writing to you?

AW: Yeah, Dana and Melissa Campbell, and I don't know who actually—I think the email was probably from both of them, the introduction one. But most of my day-to-day in terms of just work for SPARK interaction was with Melissa, but Dana was very actively a part of it as well.

RS: And so you said that you were on this Facebook group and you were blogging at this point?

AW: Yeah.

RS: So tell me about blogging. How did that work, and how did you feel about it?

AW: We would write posts—basically, we would pitch to Melissa and just email her or post on the Facebook an idea that we had, and then she would tell us 99 percent of the time to go for it, and then I would just write it on a Google doc and share it with her, and then we'd kind of go through and make edits. And a lot of times this would be whenever I had free time at school or after or before homework, and her edits were very much—my high school, because it was very underfunded and just not—there wasn't a ton of focus on writing, which was frustrating because that's always been my passion. So this was a really nice way for me to be able to actually get writing feedback that wasn't just, "How can we prepare for this state test?" because unfortunately in high school you're just preparing for state exams. And so this was a way where I was like, "Oh, I get to actually write and get feedback from someone who's a really good editor," which was something that I really enjoyed a lot.

RS: And was this the period when you did the Seventeen Magazine sort of do everything that they say?

AW: I think that was junior year—I think that was senior year of high school. God, I feel old, and I know that must sound crazy. Yeah, that was my senior year of high school, because I think we had petitioned Teen Vogue, and it had been largely unsuccessful, and so we were thinking of what are some ways we can put more pressure on them, and then —

RS: Petitioned them for what?

AW: Basically for the same thing as what we were asking Seventeen to do because we were like, "Seventeen is the number one magazine for teenage girls, and Teen Vogue is number two," and so we were like, "Moving on to the next one." But they were

not—I don't know. I have negative feelings towards Teen Vogue. I think Seventeen has actually improved in their content by a lot since we last—since I was in high school, and maybe Teen Vogue too. I haven't really paid attention on that side. But, yeah. [Ying Ying?] and I were talking about—I'm trying to think. I feel like it was my idea, but I don't want to give myself credit for it if I don't know for sure, but just that it would be kind of fun for the month of April to just kind of give evidence of how hard it really is to actually abide by the instructions that these magazines set out to just live by it for a month. And then we talked about it with Dana on a conference call, and she was so excited about it. So we made a plan. Ying Ying and I talked a lot about it and got really close, and then we basically just flipped a coin of who was going to get Seventeen and who was going to get Teen Vogue to do, and thank God I got Seventeen because I think that was the more fun one to do actually.

RS: So what did that involve? What did you actually do?

AW: So for each week of the month, we had a different theme. And this was a Tumblr account that we both had access to, and it ended up getting over a thousand followers or maybe more, I don't know. By today's standards, it wasn't that popular, but back then it felt like a pretty huge deal. So yeah, there was a beauty week, there was a fitness week, there was I think a lifestyle or something week, so basically just different sections of the magazine, and then we would do that. We would basically live according to that for the week and then write about it on the blog—and I think there was a fashion week too, yeah. And then on Sundays we would answer questions from followers, and on Sundays we'd do self-care Sunday or we'd take the day off from doing that stuff and just write about something nice that we had done for ourselves, and then we would also send

out a little prompt to our readers and be like, "What did you do for self-care this Sunday?" and publish it and be like, "That's awesome."

RS: So what do you remember—you know, for someone who hasn't read your blog, what do you remember about some of the actual things that you were doing? Pick one of those weeks, and —

AW: Oh, I remember being hungry. I remember being really hungry, and this was during the health and fitness week. That was definitely the most—I don't know, maybe harrowing is a dramatic word, but it was really hard to—we basically both picked just one issue of Seventeen and one issue of Teen Vogue, so it wasn't like the whole website, thank God, but the whole notion behind at least the fitness activities they had in that magazine is that there's never a time where you shouldn't be working out. So they had sneaky workouts to do in class. So while you're in your math class, you should also be gripping the table in such a way that you're flexing your biceps, and when you're on the phone—I remember, as a girl, even the exercises they told you to do while you were on the phone so you could tone your calves while you're on the phone, and doing that. So it was hard to keep in your head constantly that you should always be working out. Sometimes, I'd forget and be like, "I should be—I need to be doing this activity right now." And I knew I was doing it for the challenge, but it was also crazy to be sitting in class and just thinking, "OK, what are the exercises they were telling me to do and how can I do them in class?" And it also looks ridiculous when you do it in real life. But the food part of it was the hardest because there was one day where they had the meal that they set out, which was just a fist size amount of whole wheat macaroni and cheese and some steamed broccoli, and your snack for the day was dried fruit. And I just remember

being so hungry all day and just thinking, "I just want to eat," and finishing my food and being like, "I'm still so hungry and I can't believe this is all this food. I can't believe that they're telling girls to read this," because it's not just seventeen-year-olds reading that magazine. It's even more appealing when you're younger, and it has this lore of the older sister vibe, and so it was also hard to do that and imagine a twelve-year-old doing that same thing and thinking that it was appropriate.

RS: So when you saw the Seventeen Magazine Body Peace Treaty and the kind of success that you got, how did that shape your sense of your own efficacy?

AW: I mean for me it wasn't quite as much just because I hadn't been on the team when that campaign was happening, but it certainly made me feel like this is a team that makes shit happen. I may not have been there for this action, but we've done this big thing that has gained national attention, and so let's go out and do it again. Even though we have no money and we're just—not just, but a group of teenage girls who live in different time zones and are communicating on a Facebook group and via email, but look at what we've done in the past.

RS: And did you feel—were there things that happened after that that felt as productive?

AW: Yeah. I think my favorite action that I actually got to be a part of was a reaction to the Steubenville case—Steubenville, Ohio—in which—and this was—I think I was seventeen when this happened, and this was pretty soon after, I think, for the first time someone who I was close to had disclosed being sexually assaulted, and this was a friend of mine who was my age. So this was even more—this was kind of when sexual assault sort of came onto the scene for me in addition to the idea of just sexism in the

media and body image. It was like, "Oh, shit." Not that that other stuff isn't serious, but it was also this feeling of, "Oh, we're being killed and attacked on the regular, and we don't have—there's not a lot of time. This is not something that you can just sort of wait around on because this is happening every day." So hearing about that case of the young girl who was my age who found out about her sexual assault because it was Instagrammed. We had a group Facebook chat about it—I think this was on—anyway, this was on whatever website we were using to have our group meetings—basically just to process it because all of us were around that age and everyone was just kind of stunned and being like, "What? We're all so angry and we feel powerful, and what is going on here?" And from that grew the Educate Coaches campaign, which happened my senior year of high school, and basically the idea was that since the football coach was a part of this cover up that what we needed was on the prevention end of this [were] coaches who were these leaders who students look up to to have some level of knowledge around sexual assault and toxic masculinity. So we petitioned—and this is not our most glamorous action, but it's one of the ones I'm the most proud of—the National Association for High School Federation or something like that, which is basically the group that certifies high school coaches, so every high school coach has to go through them to get their certification. We petitioned them to make sexual assault prevention training, or just sexual assault awareness training, a part of that certification process for their coaches, and I don't think they actually made it a mandatory part of it, but by the end of the campaign—and this is a campaign that I worked on a lot and did a lot of things for—they ended up putting some of our workshops and some of our resources on their site that is visited and downloaded by millions of high school coaches. So that to me felt like, "OK, well, this awful thing happened, and we

were all really mad about it, but look what we did. Even if it's not necessarily the success that we imagined—." Mostly, their reasoning for not having it as a part of their thing was that they just didn't have the money to design a full training program, which I don't know if I buy that, but we got that on their website, where people could see it. And also I think we started a larger national conversation about sexual assault in high school and high school athletics. That campaign, I think, made it more of a conversation than was happening in the media.

RS: Now are you still a member of the SPARK team?

AW: Yeah. I mean, I guess so. We're basically—I don't know how much Dana has told you, but I think we're preparing to basically wind down sometime in the near future, and so SPARK is really in the stages right now of just tying up loose ends and archiving all of our work on a nice, newer website, but it basically got to the point where we just didn't have enough funding to continue, and Dana was working, like, four jobs, and it was just not sustainable with the model that we had. So it was sort of—I don't know. It wasn't like there was—I want to apologize to the person who's transcribing this because I do freelance transcription work, and so just shouts out to the transcriber.

RS: She's yawning; that's why.

AW: I know, I'm sorry. But it wasn't that there was some internal organizational conflict so much as the fact that it's really hard to get funding for feminist activist work that happens online because foundations that give grants want to see in-person work happening. So that was just—the reason why I think we didn't end up going that route is that it would have meant that we would have only been accessible to girls in the New York area, and so for me it was like, “Well, this is one of the great things about this

program is that you can be living in any city in the United States and participate.” Girls in New York City have a lot more opportunities when it comes to activist work and groups to get involved with than girls in rural North Carolina—not that I was in rural North Carolina, but just that we had girls that were in isolated areas where no one around them was a feminist, and it was very conservative, and it's like, without SPARK, they wouldn't have had that access. So the idea of us having it just—I don't know. I know that the funders would have preferred that we were just an in person organization, but I think that would have actually cut out a lot of girls who really needed SPARK in their lives a lot.

RS: So how do you feel about it ending?

AW: I mean, I think that by the time—by last summer at that point in college it was just at a stage where it was just not sustainable for me. And I would have—I mean, I'll age out when I turn 21, but I think there was sort of a short-term plan that didn't last very long of us having girl action teams, and I remember when that happened that my first thought was like, "I don't have time for this. I'm tired. I'm just exhausted—not of SPARK, but just I'm overall tired."

RS: You were in college at that point?

AW: Yeah. This was like last summer when this was happening, and it was like, "OK, I'll do this, but I'm going to have to quit a bunch of other things, and I really don't feel capable of leading a girl's group in Chapel Hill of middle school and high school aged girls. I don't know how I'm going to do that. I don't feel like I'm capable of it." And that was something I was very anxious about, and I ended up talking to Dana about it and being like, "Is there another way that I can be of support? Can I do other things? I don't

think I can lead a group here. I just don't think I can do it." And then it ended up I think in July is when they sort of told us all. It's still not public information. I don't know when it's going to be announced formally. But at this point, it's really just Dana and a select couple of girls who are just maintaining our social media and working on tying up all the loose ends.

RS: So now that you are in college and that's kind of ending, what are you—are you an activist in different ways now?

AW: I don't know.

RS: Or is that just not a part of your life so much now?

AW: I mean, I think it's not not a part of my life. It's just that I think when you've been doing something since you were fourteen, at a certain point it's easy to get burned out, and I think freshman and sophomore year, or first year and sophomore year, I just did nonstop—and a lot of it was in the activist realm at UNC, and so it was just constantly putting myself—I think the nature of what I was doing changed from activism that felt really fun and exciting to activism that felt just like wading into more trauma, especially the sexual assault aspect in college. It felt like, "Oh my God, this is all just so painful and also so real," and I just—there was a point in my first year, because I had trained with the OCRCC, the rape crisis center. Once people know that about you, they disclose to you a lot, which is something that I understand is a sign that people trust you and that they feel like they can come to you with things like that, which is something that I value, and that means a lot to me, but at the same time it can definitely be pretty exhausting when you're just going about your day and then someone comes up to you and just sort of tells you that they've been raped. It's just like, "Whoa. This just completely

shifted. Now, I'm in this crisis mode and working out all this stuff." Anyway, it's just—this year especially, I think I just have not been—you know, I'm the coeditor of the feminist magazine on campus and I'm working on that, but it's not my main thing that I do in my life, mostly just because I have a part-time job and I realized I didn't want to work for a nonprofit, which is something I thought I might want to do when I was in high school. Now I'm like, no. I could not.

RS: So what's that decision about?

AW: It came from working for a nonprofit. It also just overall [came from] sort of working for activist organizations that sort of I think sometimes view you as a means to an end of accomplishing a task, like, "We need someone to organize this carpool. We need someone to set up this conference call." And it just felt like all of this—with SPARK, what made it different for me was that, A, we weren't really doing as much of the logistical stuff, because that's more on Dana and Melissa's end, but also that there were these intimate bonds between us as the girls, and we really formed these friendships that continue to this day very much. These are women who are going to be a part of my life forever. But with the student orgs, it just felt a lot more like everyone's just exhausted, and it didn't feel like as much of a bond between the other people, and I don't know. A lot of nonprofits exploit college students with unpaid internships to do work that's just not very fulfilling. Running social media for a nonprofit is not really—if I'm doing it unpaid, I feel like I should at least be learning a skill or gaining some sort of experience that's valuable, but I think a lot of orgs just sort of look for college students and expect them to work for free or be underpaid. I've also seen in nonprofits a lot of just

being chronically underpaid and then expected to work incredibly long hours, and it was just like, "Oh, this is not the life I want for myself."

RS: So what are you thinking now?

AW: I don't know. Well, right now I'm actually doing freelance transcription for a podcast that's based in Durham, and I really love that work. I work at the Daily Grind on campus, so I do part-time barista-ing there, which ends up being fifteen to seventeen hours a week, and just going to school, working for the Daily Tar Heel. I started writing a column for the Daily Tar Heel, I think, the summer after my first year of college, and I've been working for them ever since. Or no, the summer after my sophomore year, yeah—no, that's not true. OK, the summer after my first year of college is when I started writing the column. The summer after sophomore year is when I was the opinion editor for the summer, and then now I do a podcast and a column for them. So I think—yeah. A lot of things have changed in my life in the past year.

RS: All right. So I want to kind of pull back a little bit from just you and your life and get your perspective as a young person on some bigger questions. So this is a very broad question and probably unfair, but how would you describe your kind of cohort, your generation, in terms of politic, civic engagement activism? Do you see yourself as kind of representative of lots of people or as a kind of outlier in terms of your level of engagement?

AW: I don't know. So I've been asked this before, and I think it's hard for me to really tell just in general of my generation because, I mean, that's just such a huge number of people. But I will say I'm a pretty staunch defender of quote-unquote "Millennials" because I think that—I think that we're very politically engaged, and maybe

this is just the people who I tend to be around, but I think for a lot of us it's growing—there's a lot of cynicism about politics, especially because we all grew up in the Bush era. I mean, I haven't really decided how I feel long-term about Barack Obama yet, but I think there's definitely been a certain level of disappointment from a lot of people of like, "Well, why is Obama still sanctioning these drone strikes in the Middle East that are killing lots of innocent civilians?" At least, that's what I've seen is a lot of cynicism around that, and people are hyped about Bernie Sanders, which is, I don't know.

RS: Is that a particularly noticeable—how did they feel about the 2008—how old were you in 2008?

AW: I was in the eighth grade.

RS: OK. So is this because they had such high hopes?

AW: Maybe. I was in upstate New York at the time, so I didn't really—I knew like two people who didn't support Barack Obama. Everyone was just like, "Well, obviously." But I think so, probably. I think also—I mean, I think the blame lies way more with Congress than it does with Barack Obama, who I think will be remembered as an amazing president long-term. But I think that there's been some frustration over the Voting Rights Act and just a lot of regressive things that have happened recently politically that's just very frustrating. But I think I would really like—I don't know if I would even define our political engagement by presidential politics, necessarily. I think at least my activist generation is much more actively engaged in politics around race and class and gender—and gender not just as women but as gender identity and fluidity and queerness, and I've seen a lot of activism that's much more based from younger and younger kids. There was a girl who I mentored during our mentoring program in high

school, and we're still Facebook friends, and she'll post about mental health stuff and about Black Lives Matter and about respecting genderqueer people, and that's really dope to see that the internet has given younger and younger kids access to learning and identifying privilege and oppression in their lives and taking action about it. That's something that just makes me feel very excited.

RS: You also have been in North Carolina during a period in which there's been a very dramatic political shift. How have you seen that play out?

AW: You know, that's something else that I was really involved in, I think, after graduating high school. So the summer after my senior year of high school I remember driving—there was that motorcycle vagina bill, which was announced—the fact that there was going to be a vote on it was announced something like seventeen hours before the actual vote occurred, and my friend and I drove from Charlotte to Raleigh to be there and be out there protesting. So that Moral Monday summer was very intense and something that I participated in a lot, and then it sort of fizzled out because I think everyone was just—it's hard to keep that momentum up for folks. But yeah, I mean I remember there was definitely a part of my life where reproductive justice and pro-choice activism was a main thing for me, but, again, it ended up sort of feeling like a lot of the organizations that worked around those things, I didn't really identify with their values necessarily across the board.

RS: Like what?

AW: Like, I didn't—I felt like they were just sort of—and maybe this is unfair, and I think that a lot of them are probably doing better today—but not doing necessarily a good job around race and gender identity and the fact that—I don't know. I don't know if

NARAL still has this—I can't remember if it was NARAL or Planned Parenthood—but a Margaret Sanger award, which is just like, “What the fuck, you guys.” Like, are you serious? This was about—a lot of this was about eugenics. She was a blatantly racist person, and how are we still giving out an award with her name on it? And you're trying to recruit young people to your organization? Like, no, and it's frustrating to hear why are we using—when there's people who are genderqueer who get abortions and need reproductive care, and transgender men who need these things, and so to hear only the rhetoric is all just, “Women want this, and women this, and women this,” and it was just like, A, which women are you talking about, and B, that's not even really inclusive to—the people who have the least resources available to them to begin with are the people who are not cisgender, and then you're further alienating them. Anyway. It's just frustrating to me, and, I mean, I want abortion access, and I think that Planned Parenthood should exist and be well funded, but I don't—anyway. So that's why those attacks initially were really galvanizing to me, and nowadays it just sort of feels like I'm just very tired.

RS: The other—so there are a couple more kind of big, structural issues that I think are interesting about the last several years, and this maybe connects back to what you were talking about with the funders, but how aware were you of the economic crash of 2008 and how much did you see it impact either your own family or your own friends, but also kind of the way you think about the future, activism?

AW: Yeah, I mean, my family has been pretty consistently middle class and upper middle class, and so for us it was like—my dad didn't lose his job. That was not something that I was—but I was certainly worried about that, just overall. A lot of my

friends in Rochester were employed by Xerox and Kodak, and those groups started to fold and lay off tons of people after the crash. I remember being at the dinner table and thinking, "Oh my God, when are people going to stop talking about the economy? We've been talking about this for a year." This is funny because it's like we're still doing it. It felt like—I remember this feeling of like, "Well how am I ever—," because there were all these news stories about young people and unemployment, and just thinking, "Well, I really hope this is all finished by the time I graduate college." In high school, and I guess now I college, there's this sense of like, "OK, well I have to make a living and I can't just be a canvasser for a nonprofit and expect to have economic security that way," especially when you have donors that are so—and this is something Dana and I have talked about a lot when I was trying to write grants for SPARK, that it's so much work to write a grant, and then, A, you might not even get the grant, or the grant might not be for enough money to even make all that work possible. And it's just like, "What are we doing?" It changed my certain perception of possible career paths to be like, "Well, I want—," especially now that a lot of my friends have graduated college and are underemployed or unemployed, my thought right now is just like, "Well, how can I put myself in the very best position by the time I've graduated, where I can have skills that are marketable and enough of a cushion that I feel like I can pay my rent?" And activist work just is not really going to be able to provide that for me, and it doesn't mean it's not going to be a part of my life, but it's not going to be the main thing because, you know, I want to be able to go to the doctor and eat food.

RS: The past year or so, we've seen this kind of intense focus on police brutality, structural racism, violence. Have you seen that? How have you seen that affecting either your own activism or that of people around you?

AW: I mean, I think it's interesting because I think these themes of police brutality and all these things have always been happening, but they've certainly, like you're saying, had enough of—the conversation around them has certainly shifted. I've seen some organizations—feminist organizations—making really positive moves on this, and making an active effort to look at themselves and think of like, "OK, well, what are we actually doing here? Who are we helping the most?" But I remember—I think this was—I can't remember. It's just the nature of the world that I can't remember which case this was, if this was Mike Brown or Sandra Bland or Trayvon Martin or which one, but there was something that was happening in the legislature about maternity leave or something, and Planned Parenthood, all of their social media was just about this law that was possibly going through the Senate or something. And I just remember thinking, "Not that this isn't important, this is important, but also do you see that people are dying right now, and people are in the streets and getting arrested and being brutalized, and you're just kind of going along as if nothing is happening?" It's something that was just very frustrating for me, but I think it's also just—I don't know. It's something that I grapple with a lot. Am I doing enough? Am I—I'm part of a women's activist magazine that is predominantly white, and I think that that is a problem, and I want to fix it, but I also don't really know how. And it's something that hopefully we will be working on—or, we will be working on—and I know that everyone who's in the organization is interested in working on this. I've seen a lot more white women talking about racism, which is good,

than about the ways in which our—it makes me very angry that white supremacist men use white women as justification for their violence against black men and black people in general. It's just like, you don't—if you're going to be racist and brutal, please don't do it for me because I don't want that to be in my name. So that's just like—Dylann Roof especially, that he had this obsession with "our women". I just want to be like, "I'm not your fucking woman. You don't get to use me as your excuse. You just need to come out and say that you're a racist," because that's just something that makes me very frustrated. I mean, I think everyone is just—everyone needs to be doing better and having more conversations, and I'm glad that the Say Her Name conversations are happening about the fact that while we talk about police brutality, we don't talk about police brutality as much—on this campus we do, and in the internet circles that I'm in we do, but I know overall—against black women, especially against transgender women of color. That's something that is still not really a mainstream conversation. I think we're getting there, but that's also—there's still an element of—a kind of notion of like, "We kind of just want the women to be the support for the movement and not actually be at the center of it." I mean, I'm obviously not trying to speak for black women on that part, but I would think that that would be incredibly frustrating.

RS: What is—so you're the—what is it, coeditor of *Siren*? It was interesting to me what you were saying about the racial makeup of it because it was sort of brought back to life by a queer Asian man and a black woman. Do you think that—and when it first kind of reemerged a couple of years ago, I would have said that it was at least half people of color involved. Has it—so you've seen a shift over time?

AW: Yeah, well and it's interesting because it's like there's no break between us. I was talking to Mars about this recently, and—I actually need to message Ping about it—but yeah, I mean I think it's just been—I mean, I didn't pick the leadership that we're doing right now. That was selected by our previous leadership group, but I feel like that's kind of a bullshit excuse. I don't know. I mean, I at the time even was just like, "I don't like that we are two white women as the coeditors of this magazine," but at the same time we didn't—I don't know. I wish I could explain why this is happening, but I think that it's a problem.

RS: What are the issues that Siren is dealing with these days mostly?

AW: I mean, I think one thing to note is that although we are a predominantly—like, our leadership team is white, we are making an active effort to—a lot of our writers are people of color, and our coverage. So our theme for—if we can't have it in our meeting room—which is frustrating, and I think we can do it, we just need to do it—we want to at least have it in the magazine. But our theme for the next issue is going to be basically people who we feel are moving UNC forward, just because I personally needed an ethic based in love and hopefulness after the past two years, and so that's sort of our effort to do that is to highlight, "So we know that there's a lot of things that are messed up, but why don't we also give some space to people who are doing really good work despite all of that and help lift them up," and also make them available as resources for others so that if someone else is interested in that same thing they can contact the person who was profiled in the magazine.

RS: So, stuff that was messed up—are you referring to the—to what?

AW: I mean, just everything.

RS: Like the UNC scandal, and those kinds of things?

AW: Well, not the sports—I mean, I guess we've talked about—I think most of our focus has been on sexual assault, sexual harassment, and then structural racism on campus, and economic—the way the tuition keeps on going up, and we've seen undocumented students unable to get in-state tuition who have lived here for most of their lives. So it's more—it hasn't really been quite as much around Weinstein Report-type things, although we've had writing about the devaluing of Triple AD as a study.

RS: But that's interesting, the kind of wanting the magazine to come from a place of hopefulness and optimism, or at least holding up a —

AW: Yeah, and that was really—the idea for this issue came from me, and that was sort of the result for me of just the past summer, which was just immensely exhausting, and I had some traumatic things happen, and I just needed to think of, "Well, we have all these amazing people in our community who are these radiant sources for us," and sometimes it can feel frustrating to me when—I think that we can talk about all the things that are wrong with our system that we need to fix and also lift up people who are doing good work, because if we don't also do that then everyone's just going to burn out. I think that the people who are doing really amazing things in the UNC system and in our community deserve to be lifted up and praised because a lot of times when you're doing it, you just have tunnel vision of just going through the slog of this work. Sometimes, I just know from being on the other side of it with SPARK, you need someone to say, "Hey, what you're doing is really important," because you just get so caught up in the nitty-gritty and interviews and workshops and trainings and conference calls that it means a lot to also have someone on the outside say, "What you're doing is

meaningful to me." So I kind of want for Siren to sort of be that force for people to say, "I know that maybe while you're in it it feels awful, but just know that there are these other people who really appreciate what you're doing."

RS: That's great. Do you identify—how does the whole idea of waves in feminism matter or not to you? Do you identify as part of the third wave? Do you see—do you guys talk about that?

AW: Well, the shorthand for—I've certainly seen, "Well, she's very second wave," as a phrase that is used sort of to—when someone's saying, "Hey, have you taken a class with X professor?" and someone will be like, "Yeah, they're kind of second wave," and you're kind of—you're like, "OK." You know what that means. You sort of know that it's a focus on—you're going to be talking a lot about the second wave stuff, and it's not necessarily going to be as queer, and it's not necessarily going to be as people of color inclusive. So I've heard of it talked about in that way, but I wouldn't really put myself in a wave. I mean, if you needed to you could put me in whatever wave, but it's just not that important to me.

RS: That's really interesting. OK. So in terms of girl activism, I mean, so you've gone through this really intense experience. You had a lot of success. You got to a point in your life where it was difficult to keep being a part of it, and now the organization is sort of falling apart. Do you end up feeling generally optimistic or pessimistic about the notion of girl activism?

AW: Oh, optimistic. I mean, I don't know. There's no one—I don't think there's anyone in the world that's braver or more powerful than teenage girls, and that's—I don't know. When people ask me what I want to do, I'm just like, "Whatever teen girls need me

to do. Whatever is most helpful to them is what I'll do." I think that just because SPARK is closing out doesn't—we're never the only people doing that kind of work, and so all of this stuff is going to continue, and our hope is to sort of put the resources that we've accrued out there so that other people can use it. I mean, I think girl activism is good because on a practical level, donors like the idea of it, of building their own future activists who they can kind of claim, which is weird. But it's also something that the media really likes, is having the story that's like, "Seventeen-Year-Old Makes Video About X" or "Starts Petition about X." And I remember feeling a certain amount of fear when I turned eighteen, thinking, "The media's not going to want to cover actions that I lead anymore because I'm not a teen girl anymore," and this fear of, "Well now I'm in college, and it just takes away a hook from the media angle of 'High School Girl Does X.'" And that's something I had felt a lot anxiety about, which is—yeah. But I think that the media really likes the narrative of teen girl activists, and donors seem to like it, and I think that when it's done right—and I think that SPARK did it right. I think that we—I just wrote to Dana recently because I was working on my resume and was just thinking of all of the skills that SPARK has taught me, that a lot of them don't even fit on a resume, have just been so immensely useful, and I will use them for the rest of my life. And I think that when girl activist groups focus on girls and trust girls as leaders who know what they need the most, then they'll be successful. Where I personally don't find it fulfilling is groups where they sort of have adults sitting you down and saying, "So you are thirteen, so we'll teach you how to do these things and we'll give you a task, and here's our plan for you." SPARK was much more like, "Hey, what are you all mad about right now? And how can we work together to work on that? How can we help give you

the resources that you need and the skills that you want to learn?" So I think as long as girls are in the driver's seat and have adults who are willing to support them and an amount of funding where they can hopefully make a stipend or some sort of thing off of their work, yeah. I mean, I just think teen girls are the best, and it's going to be fine.

RS: Let me just ask you to—can you enumerate the skills that you think you think you learned from SPARK?

AW: Yeah. I mean, gosh. I should really just find the email that she wrote me—or that I wrote her: practical things like how to write a press release, how to do an interview with the press, how to create a message map to sort of prepare when you're working on a campaign, like, "What is our concrete goal? When will we know that we have won? What are the steps we need to take to get there? How do you stay organized on something? How do you run a team, and when you're leading an action, how can you—when you're the point person for that action—how can you keep the other people on your team accountable in a way that's also compassionate, but also you need to get things done in the end?" Stuff just like working with others, and when there's a physical distance between you how to really build those bonds and still make work happen, which is something that Ying Ying and I, I think, did really well. And then other stuff just like video editing and how to use social media in a way that's powerful. SPARK didn't necessarily teach me these things, but I learned them because of SPARK. I learned Photoshop. I learned how to create and edit video blogs and stuff through work with SPARK, and these are all—and then also just I think general organizational ethics of, like, how do you treat people who you work with? And one thing that I value about them is that they always paid us, even if it was not a lot of money. They valued our work—and

Melissa sort of talked to me about this in the beginning. She's been an incredible mentor to me—that you shouldn't—if someone's asking you to work for free, you should really think about that a lot, of A, why? If they don't have the money to pay you, is that something you're really willing to do? Are you going to resent them in the long run, or maybe they actually do have the money to pay you and are just choosing not to because they know that they can get away with it? These are—Dana, I've called multiple times, especially during my first year of college—or, sorry, Melissa—when I was panicking about school or how to get things done or the world, to sort of say, "I don't think I'm doing well in Women's Studies 101. Oh my God, am I a failure?" And she was like, "No. You just need to relax." I mean, it's also nice to know that adults are also people, and I think that's what I have really appreciated about my relationships with Dana and Melissa. Though they were always older than me, I sort of learned that just because they're older, who cares? They're just other people, and they always respected us and they treated us like people even when we were all younger than them, and so that had made me feel a lot more comfortable asking them for advice about other aspects of life that weren't even related to SPARK.

RS: That's great. So are there any things that I didn't ask you about that you wanted to talk about, or things that I am missing as part of your story that would be important?

AW: There are so many things. Not like—there's just so many things with SPARK. Gosh. I'm trying to think through high school, freshman year, yeah. I don't know. Not really. I feel a certain amount of guilt from my doing less activism stuff these days.

RS: When you said people ask you what you're going to do and you said, "Whatever teenage girls need me to do," what does that—what do you image that might look like?

AW: I don't know. I mean, I think I'm trying not to think of it in terms of career necessarily because I don't think everything you love has to be your career. But I think just that whatever issue teen girls think are priorities, that's what I want to work on. I'm trying to work on some stuff around Title IX in high schools right now because I dealt with sexual harassment in high school and some of my friends did too, and that's something that we want to—high school people don't know that they are protected by Title IX. That's something I care about a lot. Dress code policies have been in the news a lot more often. I think that a lot of dress code policies are actually violations of Title IX, and so I mean really it's just whatever I can do. I think a lot of it is just on the support end as well. I think there's a fear that I certainly had, and I know a lot of my friends had from SPARK, of like, "Are we peaking in high school? Are we doing so much when we're fifteen and then now that's all we're ever going to be?" And so I kind of just want to give some reassurance [sic] that it's OK if your life kind of goes through different phases. I don't know. I think that Ying Ying and I have talked a lot about how we sort of had anxiety around the idea of peaking, and I think that a lot of girl activists have fear around that.

RS: It seems connected to what you were talking about before, of this notion that people won't be as interested in you once you turn eighteen.

AW: Yeah. It's sort of like—it's funny, because I think for a lot of kids it's like you'll finally be taken seriously when you're eighteen, but it's like the opposite when

you're a girl activist because then, suddenly, you're lumped in with all these college students who are doing all this stuff, and it's like, now you have to compete with them whereas when you're fifteen, you just have to compete with other fifteen-year-olds. I mean, there's amazing fifteen-year-olds out there, but it's a much smaller pool, and so it's easier to kind of get headlines and stuff and get—not headlines for you, necessarily, but you need headlines for your petition to put pressure on your target. You need media coverage to sort of help publicize your campaign and stuff. So if you can't—it really is like a serious thing, and if you can't get the media interested and invested in you as having a story and as a narrative and as a character, or your organization as having those things, then you're going to have to really work—you're going to have to figure something out, but I don't know what I would do.

RS: Do you think, though, that there is something about the social media aspect of this and our culture's—I mean, I think you're right that media attention has always played a major role in people being able to get attention to their causes and get enough signatures on a petition or whatever, but it does also seem like the sort of way social media works puts a particular spin or a more intense focus on this notion of you and your story and your ability to kind of get attention. And there is a sort of merging of the—I mean, I don't know. From my perspective, it looks sometimes like there's a merging between the kind of cause and the —

AW: Oh, yeah. There's a lot of personalities who are very important. Yeah. I think that that's something that—you think about your brand, and that's something that SPARK has never pressured us on or even really encouraged, of like, "You don't have to

have a brand as a person. You can just be a person." But a lot of other groups would encourage that, I think.

RS: What does that even mean?

AW: Just like being a character. I think that I probably play into that, on Twitter especially. You have this—there's girls whose—their whole thing is that they're—you know, I'm trying to think of someone who I can use as an example. They sort of build their own narrative online and their own character for themselves, and it's not necessarily dishonest, like it's not untrue, but there's also things that you decide not to tweet. So you sort of have someone who their whole thing is like, "OK, I'm based in DC. I go to this school. What I care about is the wage gap and I'm interning with Senator X, and this is my—and I really love Gilmore Girls," and so they'll add in a personality fact to make it seem more human. And that's what the Twitter is, and that's what their account is, is like, "Oh, I'm this quirky college student and I really care about this issue, and I'm following a lot of journalists on Twitter." I don't know, maybe this is an unfair assessment, but I think there is a certain amount of calculated brand creation from—I think it's older teens. I don't know if a thirteen-year-old would necessarily do that, but maybe.

RS: Where do people learn that phrase?

AW: Branding? I mean, it's just sort of a PR thing, and it's also—I think where it is applicable is when you're talking about organizations. What is SPARK's brand? Basically, what do people think of when they think of SPARK and things that we would say? Spunky, excited, committed, teen girls, international, girl power, like those are all words that you'd want to come to mind. I think you learn a lot from workshops and stuff

around how to market your cause or your organization, and there's also just a ton of resources online of, like, how do you have a good Twitter account, which is so weird.

RS: So, I mean there is this whole new emphasis out there, or, you know, ethos around social entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship in general, and brand and marketing are ideas that come from the commercial world, and it seems like we're seeing a kind of

—

AW: Well, and I think that that's because that's how you could ostensibly make money in this. If you have a brand and you're known as a person, then you can have an agent who books you to give talks on college campuses, which is a way to make money, or you could have someone offer you a book deal, or have someone offer you, like, "Hey, will you do a column for our big deal website? Or will you do a podcast, or will you do a video blog series?" So if you have that cemented brand, then people are more interested in that as a figure. If they see—if I apply to write for BuzzFeed and say—I mean, I don't have 20,000 followers—but if I said, "I have this really loyal followership who are really invested in me as a person and what I'm interested in," then they're probably more likely to hire me because they'll think, "Well, she'll bring all of her followers with her when she works for us," and I think that that also sort of extends to the whole doing college campus circuits or doing webinars, or just doing things that are—and I don't begrudge people these things because you have to make money. And I think that the talks that they're giving are important, but it also is calculated to a degree, and I don't know how I feel about the idea of commodifying yourself. That's a little bit scary to me.

RS: So are those—when you say people are giving talks and books, are those girl activists, or are those older?

AW: Those are older women I think, but I think a lot of girl activists sort of have that notion in mind. Like, you learn that from those people, so you look up to them, and maybe you're not traveling to give talks, but you might be—I mean, you might be going to a conference. It's not—you might be giving a talk or be on a panel or something, and you certainly want to be like those people when you grow up, when you get older, and you want to have the careers that they have, and so you kind of start at an early age or sort of trying to—I think Madison Kimrey from—just of North Carolina, who's like this progressive, she is doing an amazing job. I'm worried about her. She's like fourteen [and] creating this brand for herself of, "I'm a North Carolina progressive teen girl, and this is my character." And I believe that it's authentic. She's done a really good job of right from the jump leveraging any press coverage she gets into this larger notion of her as a person.

RS: Why are you worried about it?

AW: I just want to make sure that—I don't know. I feel like you still have to be a kid, and I worry that it's—politics is important, but also I also—I don't know. I feel like I got to have a fairly normal life, and when you see people from that early of an age interacting with trolls on the internet and having these meetings with North Carolina politicians and speaking at events and stuff, I just think, "Oh, I wonder how are you going to do long [term]?" It just feels like sort of a smaller version of being a child star, of like, "Well how are you going to do long term?" I certainly had fears of like, "Am I peaking or am I going to burn out?" So I also have those fears for others, when I see younger activists sort of coming up and doing those similar things. I just worry for them, that, long-term, how they're going to feel about it. And maybe great, and I think that she's

amazing and doing really cool things, but it also feels like, "Oh, God, you're like a brand at twelve." That's like, "Oh, my God."

RS: So last question. If that model—she's really—we see her at various events, and she's giving all these talks like you were saying. If that model is worrisome because you might burn out, what do you think—if—I know you don't want to start your own nonprofit, but if you were going to start your own sort of girls activism something initiative organization, what do you think, for the future, is the kind of best model to harness girls' energy and creativity without —

AW: Making them feel like they're being marketed?

RS: Yeah, and burning out.

AW: I think—so I think the organization that's doing a really amazing job of this right now is Girls Rock, and I like that they have the chapter model of it, that's it's a national organization but it happens—there's different camps across the country and across the world, which I think solves the issue of, "Well, what if you have an organization based in LA and there's a girl in Oklahoma who would be amazing for it, but she doesn't live in LA, so what's she going to do?" Because I think that that organization really values girls and their creativity in a big way, from what I've seen, and also has an emphasis—and I'm sure it varies from chapter to chapter, and I know most about the North Carolina one—but it seems to have an emphasis on gender and race as something to really talk about with girls at a young age, and trusting them that they can handle it. And I think an important part of that is that it's fun. It's a fun camp, and it's also like they talk about serious issues, but they also allow girls to be silly and to be kids, and they don't put too much on them. And it just seems like from what I've seen they build these skills

in girls. They give girls all of these resources and then sort of set them out into the world and say, "Hey. If you want to come back and work for the Teen Action League—" which is like their older girls' camp, at least in North Carolina—"you can come do that. Or you can just go to camp and learn a lot about how to love your body and be inclusive to others and make fun songs and be a good friend, and that's enough. You don't have to go out and necessarily become a feminist star or a public figure or a part of women's history, quote unquote. You can also just have a really good time at camp and learn a bunch of skills that are going to make you happier and kinder in your life, and that's enough." And I think that that's a really good approach to have. I think a lot of—I worry about orgs that sort of have goals of building lifelong nonprofit activists because it feels like sort of an ulterior motive. When you're talking about a young girl, you should really just be thinking about, "Is she having fun? Is her timing valued? Is she learning skills that she's going to use in her life?" and not worry about, "How can we get the most out of her?"

You know?

RS: Well thank you very much.

AW: Yeah, absolutely.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by: Emma Tomko

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