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

Interview U-0558
Mandy Carter
May 30, 2007

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TRANSCRIPT: MANDY CARTER

Interviewee: Mandy Carter

Interviewer: Bridgette Burge

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START OF INTERVIEW

BB: Today is Wednesday, May thirtieth, 2007. This is an interview with Mandy Carter. This is our third interview together as part of the series *Heirs to a Fighting Tradition: Oral Histories of North Carolina Social Justice Activists*. The interviewer is Bridgette Burge, me. We are at Mandy's home again, same place, in the cozy kitchen on Shepard Street in Durham, North Carolina. So let's start with when I came in today, into the neat entranceway to this part of the apartment here, the home here, there are all of these boxes and crates of very organized, surprise surprise, documents. So tell me what you're doing with all of those.

MC: Well, the good news is that up at Duke University right here in Durham, there's the Sally Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture, and I was asked about a year ago to see if I'd be interested in submitting my papers, and I said, "Absolutely." And so what I've been doing over the last six months has been going through all of my files that I've been working on since I started doing my activism and what you saw in the hallway is all of my 2003-2007 files. So the way the work it at Sally Bingham, they have this amazing archival process in which they come and they take every scrap of paper you have in your house and they then decide what they're going to take and not take and whatever. But I've been trying

to just make sure that I've given them everything I had prior to 2003. So this is the last and I have to just go through and pull stuff out, but it's preparing for them to take the rest of that stuff. So that's what's going to happen.

BB: Wow. And you said that they often do cultural workers as opposed to activists. What's the difference?

MC: Well, I think initially, and Sally Bingham is out of Louisville, Kentucky and I don't know if I've got this right, but I thought it was part of the Bingham, there's this whole Bingham family Kentucky connection, and she has always been intrigued by women, southern women, particularly southern women, and has always wanted to know the history of women, but most times in the beginning it was cultural workers and/or organizing that had a strong cultural bent. Like the civil rights movement, in addition to organizing, a lot of it was through song, plays, spoken word. She's just been documenting southern women's history and culture and I think what she explained to me or the people who are doing it through center is that they also want to make sure that now they're covering all women, not just cultural workers. So someone like me, who is bringing this activist organizing, where in the peace movement, the movement I've been involved with, cultural work has been SONG, whatever. So they want to just have this stuff available at the center so people can come in and look at who's been doing southern organizing as women, and I got added to that mix. Now that wasn't very articulate, but kind of.

BB: It was articulate. You are so great about documenting dates—

MC: Yes.

BB: And places that you've been and that you've spoken and event places, books you've appeared in. How did you learn that and why do you think it's so important?

MC: Well, you know for me, it was a personal trait. I've always been obsessed about keeping track. I am such a pack rat and I remember thinking when I was first getting involved in organizing, what helped me was to go back and look at other people's work. This is in like 1968-69, whatever, and people then really understood the importance of documenting. The civil rights movement probably did the best job because they were on record, they always kept track of each particular campaign. Too, a group called the War Resistors League, they do an annual calendar every year and because of that annual calendar, they were always, when you open up a page, any particular day, you would have a reference to some historical fact of the days gone by. With that, I guess it just put me into a space that, whenever I did my work, just track everything. And probably this is amazing, Bridgette. The number one mistake people make when they do any activist organizing, they always forget to put the year on it because they think, "Well, we know it's this year," you know, for that year, but ten years later, what year did this happen? I always put the month, the day, and the year on everything, and so that's just been a habit.

But also I think with me, the War Resisters League also had their files at the Swarthmore Peace Collection at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania and because they were already doing that out of their national office in New York, we had our office in San Francisco and in Durham, and we would do similar, make sure we had our regional office files that would also go to them as well. So it made sense for us to keep track year to year of what we did as well, all the newsletters, posters, demonstrations. Anything we did that was on paper, we kept track of and I just rolled it over to every place I've worked.

BB: Very organized. You even type the date at the top of every email you send.

MC: Yes, always.

BB: Even though it's on there automatically, you always type it.

MC: I always do it and you're right, it's on every email, but I know for me, when I go back and I have an email history, it's just easier to like, the day, the date. Sometimes I'll even put the place where I'm emailing from. Because like I was just in San Francisco, in very email I sent out, I always put the day, the date, San Francisco, California, because that's where I was, not here in Durham. It just makes it easier with me and maybe I'm anal, but it helps.

BB: We'll say "organized," Mandy. We'll say "organized."

MC: Yes, okay, organized.

BB: So I just want to describe your kitchen for example a little bit. You've got metal shelves, like shelving, inexpensive, thrifty, white, neatly screwed onto the wall. And you have your spices all neatly stacked. There's a series of a brand that's blue and then below that there's some brand of spices and herbs that's red. Then you have dried beans and vegetables all in neat containers. Your refrigerator is impeccably organized. You've got the same little shelves beside your sink and you have five, little short Dawn bottles.

MC: (laughs)

BB: It's really wonderful. Every place you look, everything is stacked just so, your bathroom; it's great.

MC: There was a great quote that I heard and it's so true. What's the quote? It's like, "There's a place for everything and everything in its place." And that has been my mental space in terms of how I look at my kitchen, my files. And in fact even when I organize, I just think that's so true. Everything has a place and there's a place for everything, or something like that, but it works for me. Like I said, they were really happy when they came over

because they had been doing other people's papers and they said, "You walk in and papers were strewn all over. They're not even in any order." And they said, "Mandy, yours is so nice because it's by year, by topic, by project." I said, "Yeah, because it helps me," but it helped them too.

BB: It's kind of a nice counterbalance to the chaos in the world politically and socially. It's like it's some way to have some control because you're in the thick of just the mess of the world your whole life.

MC: That's a good way to put it.

BB: I hope it helps you feel balanced and in control.

MC: Yes, it makes me feel very balanced.

BB: Good. I think this is kind of an interesting question. I asked Lou Plummer with his interview the other day, but when we did a second interview the next day, I said, "So did you think about the interview last night?" "Yeah, definitely." He and Tina, his wife, talked about it. So I said, "Is there anything that you wish you had said that you didn't? And also is there anything that you wish you hadn't said that you did?" I know it's been awhile since our April interview, but do you remember thinking anything like that?

MC: Not really. I have to tell you honestly that my day, when I look at my calendar, like I did that event, short of like—now what would have made a difference is to go back and see words that I said and think, "Oh yeah, that was what I was thinking of." I've already kind of moved on. I'm hoping that whatever I'm missing, you will catch it in these upcoming ones, and there's nothing I regret and if anything, I'm hoping I didn't leave anything; that's my fear. I've been trying to be as, intentionally include everything, because like I said earlier, the thing that I'm struck by now as there's more and more activists coming on, my fear is

that a lot of them don't really understand and/or get the importance of documenting. It's just you want to keep things, you want to keep them, but then document in the past and send them on.

And/or there's a sense of some activists, thinking of the lesbigaytrans, it's almost like, "Well, that was then; this is now," and not realizing that it's so important to remember what came before you. That would also be true for the feminist movement as a black lesbian because I hear some activists today, "Yeah, but that's old hat. Who cares? We have all these new ways." And I'm saying, "Excuse me, but why reinvent the wheel? At least have a respect for those who came before you because you don't want to walk around thinking, 'We're the ones who came up with this idea.' 'No.'" You know what I mean? And I just get worried. So there has to be some kind of, I think, creative, wonderful way, especially activists who want to have a sense of learning it or getting trained or whatever and want to know that. I think it gives them a different sense of humility in thinking, "How do I go about my work now?" And yeah, you might come up with some wonderful new concept or whatever, but just don't act like it all started with me and me. No, it started with you thinking about who came before you.

This has been a major discussion in the women's music era. I'm on the board of Ladyslipper Music, which is here in Durham. This is their thirtieth anniversary year and they started out very humbly. They were going to hear people like Holly Near and other women and they got back home and realized there was no place to get copies of the music of the women who performed at these women's music festivals. And of course, they used the term "women's music festival," but it was just chock full of lesbians, like no one would call it the "lesbian women's music festival." And then when you realize, they came and they thought,

"What would happen if?" These are the words that always strike me as how as an organizer, it really makes a difference to how you think, you organize. It's always something like, "You know what we need?" Or "Gee, what would happen if we were to--," fill in the blank. When you start with those sentences, because if you think about it, how do we have what we have now? Because someone had the nerve to say, "We don't have it. Let's go make it happen." Or whatever the existing institution is, it's not quite working right, you try to fix it within that, but then finally someone says, "You know what? Why don't we just go and have a vision? What would happen if--?" And out of that "what would happen if" around women's music, you have Ladyslipper Music.

But there was a time when, Melissa Etheridge, I would count as the person who probably, in my opinion, was the—you know you always find that breakthrough and Melissa Etheridge, for whatever particular reason in time, she was the one who as an out lesbian performer caught the attention of the music industry. The music industry didn't care about the women's music. So what did women musicians have to do? They had to create their own label called Olivia. You know what I mean? So you start to begin to see that when you see that it's possible and for many years, the women's music festivals, Olivia, there were like five or six independent women's music labels, they made a profound impact on the culture of this country. And then when Melissa, quote, unquote "made it," because she got signed onto Island Records or RCA, one of them, then all of a sudden women said, "Well, wait a minute. Why do we have to go to a women's music festival? Because here's Melissa who's on Island Records and everyone knows she's a lesbian. Why can't we go there?" And that dramatically changed, I think for the better. All I hope is that Melissa once in awhile will tell people, "Oh yeah, by the way, before me, there was women's music festivals," and I want people never to

forget where she came from. So I think that's important and you wouldn't have that if you didn't have a clear way to look back and see where did it all begin.

BB: So at the end of 1990, you had just finished up working with the Harvey Gantt campaign in his run against Jesse Helms for US Senate in 1990. That year, you were awarded the Mab Segrest award by North Carolinians Against Racist and Religious Violence. Will you say a bit about Mab and that organization?

MC: Well, Mab is another one of those wonderful women, an out, white, southern lesbian activist who has had a profound impact not just here in North Carolina and Durham where she's living, was living. But I remember when I moved to Durham from San Francisco, one of the first people I heard about was Mab Segrest. She went to Duke University. She's a writer. She's an activist. She's white, southern, and she was doing very activist anti-Klan organizing. I said, "I can't believe it. Wait a minute. You're talking about an out, white, southern lesbian taking on the Klan and she's still living?" That's how I met Mab. She and I have had this interesting relationship over the many years since we've met. It's been kind of a friendly, but also kind of sometimes tension-filled. But Mab was around when anti-Klan organizing went from individuals to the structure of this thing called North Carolinians Against Racist and Religious Violence because the Klan certainly was one of the groups. And they formed an organization, had an office; she was on staff.

BB: Can you tell me about what year it was that you met her and then what year you're talking about?

MC: Yeah. I moved here in '82. So I met her in '82, '82-83 when I moved here to Durham. She was also active with an organization called the War Resisters League Southeast Office and that's why I came, moved here to join that particular group. So that's how I met

her. But in terms of NCARR, that was more, you'd have to almost Google that to see, but I don't remember when they actually formed their office and she was on staff. And Mab, because she then moved on from NCARR, one of the ways they wanted to honor and/or acknowledge Mab was to form this thing called the Mab Segrest Award through NCARR. Ironically, the other person who also was being honored at this particular event where I was presented that was Harvey Gantt and just in terms of the practicality, when we organized North Carolina Senate Vote '90, we were what they called an "independent expenditure campaign," which meant that we could have no contact, literally none, with the Harvey Gantt campaign just because of the Federal Election Commission rules. So I didn't really get to see and say hi to Harvey Gantt until that night when I got that award and even though we had worked all that time, but he was also there.

BB: What was involved in some of the tensions between you and Mab? Was it political?

MC: I think it was interesting because we have such a mutual respect for each other and I found out later-well, some of this stuff I'm not sure if I should say or not, but—I don't know. I think it's when you live in a town, Mab was here before I was, she was certainly well-known and respected, did a lot of great organizing, as did a lot of people who were living in Durham when I first moved here in '82, and as someone who had been doing activist organizing in San Francisco since 1969 when I got my first job, I came already kind of "credentialed," if you can use that term in terms of my organizing. It wasn't philosophical difference. I think it might have been a tension around who knew whom who was doing work.

I'll share one particular story; I don't care. One of the things that happened when I got here and did a lot of work in Durham because our office was sitting in Durham, I'm around, I'm at everything, I like to be very visible and very viable, and one of the things that I got awarded was a twenty-five-thousand-dollar cash award through the Paul Anderson Foundation. Paul Anderson was a gay man, left a lot of money, and wanted his money to be given to five people every year, gay and lesbian activists, to promote gay and lesbian equality. And Mab, when she found out that I had gotten that, somehow she had been contacted and they might have given her the impression that because she was contacted about the award, that she might have been one of them to receive it. She shared with me at one point, she said, "Mandy, you need to know that when I found out that you were going to get that award that year, I was in tears because I thought I was going to get it and we were going to use it to put a roof on our house." So I don't know why Mab thought she was going to get it, but whatever that tension was, and I got it and that was just an incident, I don't understand what happened with that. She was really unhappy, but that wasn't me, but maybe she felt like, "Why is Mandy getting this? I've been in the South longer than her. I've been doing activist organizing." And maybe in her mind, she felt it was unfair, but it bothered her enough to share that with me.

Also with the Harvey Gantt campaign, we didn't even have a name for this campaign. I was working with Ladyslipper in 1989 and Sue Hyde—I think I shared this earlier—had come down for some kind of a public forum at the City Council downtown and had said something off the cuff like, "Jesse Helms is up for reelection in '90. What y'all going to do about that?" And we all looked at each other and said, "What do you mean *us*?" That ended up being a meeting over at Chapel Hill; Mab was there, everyone was there. And we said,

"Well, why don't we go for it?" And I said, "Well, I'll take some time off and I don't know if we can raise any money or not, but I'll be more than glad to give up my time and help coordinate this thing." Well, I did, I left Ladyslipper and told Laurie I'll be back in a year; that never happened. But that campaign took off in a major way. It became nationally known, internationally known, and I think Mab was feeling a little bit like, "Here we go again."

At one point, we were driving up to New York to go to the Human Rights Campaign Fund office because they wanted to talk to us about giving us money and we're at the meeting and I'm not a shy person, I was speaking my mind and whatever, and on the ride back, Mab just lit into me, like, "Don't you ever ever treat me that way again." It was some tension that just exploded in the car and that was the quietest ride I ever had from Washington, DC back to Durham. She was furious and I don't know what happened. But after that, that was like we just had this kind of, "You're there, I'm here; we'll respect each other," but it just went downhill from there. I still don't understand to this day.

So I think it was a sense of competition. I also think and I'll be blunt, but sometimes I think as a black lesbian that there was a sense why Mandy might be getting more attention as a black lesbian than as a white lesbian. Who knows? I don't. But we made up to the point of where we just know that there are certain things we just don't talk about, we just don't cross that line, and we have a mutual respect for each other. It's just, I don't know, it saddened me. I don't know what else to say.

BB: And also the piece about the Paul Anderson Stonewall Award, if y'all were both pretty well-off, it probably would have been a non-issue, right?

MC: Right, but we weren't.

BB: Most people who choose this type of work, to be activists and organizers, grassroots especially, don't make a lot of money.

MC: That's right.

BB: So what's the most money you ever made in a year, do you remember?

MC: That was it, in terms of an award.

BB: No, I mean like your income, if you don't saying, as an activist.

MC: Oh, the most I made was when I worked with the Human Rights Campaign because that was, as I said, when I first went up there—now this is all relative and it all happened, quite frankly, I got the job at the Human Rights Campaign, they're based in New York, only because they saw the work I had done with the Harvey Gantt campaign in '90. So '91 went by and I did some work, whatever, but then they said, "We'd love to have you come and give you a salary and have you work and live in DC." I went up there and I was making—what was I making? I'll have to figure that out and tell you, but it was more than what I have ever made, plus it was a steady paycheck every two weeks. Working in an office, I've always worked with like one or two people maybe. They had an office of like twenty-five people. It was astounding to have an office. You had your own office. You had all this stuff that you normally would never had and it just blew me away to say, "And this is where I'm working now."

Also at the same time, I need to tell you that the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force also set up in Washington, but I took the HRCF job because I knew that I could probably be guaranteed a check; I wasn't sure about NGLTF. And that did more in terms of my economic stability than anything and I did that for three and a half years. That's the most I ever made. That was until I took another couple of consulting jobs, but at that point, that

was the most. What was I making? I was making like, in relative terms, really not that much, but for me it was. I can't remember. I'd have to find it out and tell you. I have it somewhere, what I made each year for those three and a half years.

BB: A ballpark? Was it forty-grandish?

MC: More like twenty-five, twenty-six. For me, that was in 1991-92. I think the most I made was like thirty-one. It went from twenty-eight, twenty-nine, and then each year, the longer there, the more you got. But when I saw the salaries of other people, like I was making thirty-one when I left, thirty-one thousand, the executive director of the Human Rights Campaign was making like sixty thousand a year. That's when I said, "Something's really wrong with this picture." Now they're making like a hundred and fifty thousand. These are the executive directors of gay and lesbian organizations in this country today. It's astounding that they would make that much and there's been a huge discussion about. But needless to say, someone said, "Well, wait a minute. They're make a hundred and fifty thousand, but people like Jerry Falwell and Pat, they're making millions." But it's all relative. But I think thirty-one might have been the most I ever made, thirty-one thousand.

BB: So Jerry Falwell and who?

MC: Pat Robertson.

BB: Oh, Pat Robertson.

MC: Of the Christian Coalition. If you think about it, if you're equating who else are we struggling against and the salaries they make, don't even get into someone like Home Depot, who's making, like what did he make? Twenty-four million. It's just obscene.

BB: Or the CEO of Blue Cross/Blue Shield North Carolina, for example.

MC: What is he making?

BB: Oh, something ghastly.

MC: Something outrageous.

BB: I think I blocked it out.

MC: It's just so off.

BB: So in January of 1991, you became the office coordinator for Rhythm Fest, a southern women's music, arts, politics festival—

MC: Yes, that's right.

BB: Held on Labor Day. Was that Labor Day in '91? So you started in January and then just a few months later?

MC: Well, actually, I'm trying to remember when we started Rhythm Fest. I think we did Rhythm Fest for like five years and we chose to do it out of Durham only because there was four other women who came to me, approached me, and said, "Hey." And this is interesting about Rhythm Fest. The reason why Rhythm Fest got formed was that there were a number of other women's music festivals already existing, a number of them, but there was an undercurrent of a lot of women who were going to these, that felt like they were being told, "But not you." And people that fit in that category were women who were into leather, women who were into what you might call politically incorrect behavior. And so Michigan, I'm sure you must have heard maybe, Michigan has this strict policy: Women born women only.

BB: Women?

MC: In other words, because transgender was coming into the scene, someone said, "You're not welcome if you transgender even if you transgendered into female. You have to have been born female." This was a major, major, kind of it's always been there.

BB: So women born—

MC: Women born women. To put it in a timeline, remember I went back and told you about Ladyslipper Music being formed, which this is its thirtieth year in 2007, so it was—what's thirty from 2007?

BB: 1977.

MC: Right, yeah. So in the beginning when women were thinking, "We need to find ways to get together and celebrate all these wonderful women artists," the whole birth of the women's music festival started and when they started, even though there were lots and lots and lots of lesbians going to them, not everyone was a lesbian, but they never called it a lesbian—the women's music festival was sort of a code word for there's a lot of lesbians there. And because it was never written down "women only," but it was called the women's music festival, as more years went by and more of the g word going from gay to lesbian to bisexual to transgender, a number of women music festivals said, "And by the way, when we say 'women,' we mean 'women born women.'" And one of the strictest policies of a festival that had that was the Michigan Women's Music Festival and say what you will, the producers wanted to say, "This is a women's only music festival, women born women." It caused a huge political, amazing uproar.

BB: Tell me again the year of this Michigan.

MC: I'm trying to think. I'll have to go back and see because the Women's Music Festival, they just celebrated their thirtieth too. It's not a coincidence that you had all these now twenty-, thirty-, forty-year anniversaries because there was this huge cultural up--, and a lot of it came out of the feminist movement who didn't like lesbians. There was such an anti-lesbian bias that a lesbians said, "But we are feminists," and they said, "Yeah, but we don't

want lesbian feminists." So a lot of lesbians said, "Fine. You can have your feminist movement. We're moving onto our next phase," which became a very lesbian-identified movement and a lot of that lesbian-identified movement all of a sudden then involved cultural work. So I'd have to go back and remember when that came up. I could probably Google it and find it. I want to say it was maybe ten years ago when there was that and that caused a huge thing.

Anyway, to make a long story short, a woman named Michelle Crone that I met through the Seneca Women's Peace Encampment when we did that peace walk back in 1983, we got to be friends. She was born in Albany and I was born in Albany, and blah blah blah. So she called me one day and says, "Mandy, there's some friends of mine who have been going to women's music festivals. We're thinking about we want to start our own because we feel like there's an uncomfortableness with Michigan and some other women's music festivals, and we thought, 'We want to put a festival on that welcomes all women.'" And they said, "Would you like to join us?" And I said, "I don't know. I just got done with the Harvey Gantt campaign. I'm tired. But this sounds interesting." So I said, "Alright, I'll go," and I signed up.

That's how we formed Rhythm Fest. We wanted it in the South. We wanted to use the words "women, music, art, and politics." A lot of festivals didn't want any politics. So we said, "We're going to do a new festival and these are going to be the parameters," and that's what we started. And I said, "Well, I live in Durham. I'm out of a job at the moment." So that's how I became coordinator. We had an office at 604 West Chapel Hill Street and that's how we started. But I think we started it before '91 because remember I took a job with the

Human Rights Campaign in ’92. So I think it was five years, so it had to have started before ’91, but I was willing to be the coordinator in that particular office for that.

BB: Oh, I see. Do you remember the first festival you pulled off?

MC: Absolutely.

BB: How was it?

MC: It was amazing. I had never gone to any other women’s music—oh, no, I did. There’s a woman named Robin Tyler. She was one of the few women’s music festival producers who would do one in the South. All of them were either in the Midwest or West and a lot of us said, “Well, why don’t they put one here? Why don’t we?” She had a thing called the Southern Women’s Music and Comedy Festival down in somewhere and I went for two years. That turned out to be not great and when she heard that we were starting this thing called Rhythm Fest, Robin Tyler, she hit the roof and said basically, “It’s my territory. You can’t have it.” We said, “Excuse me? There’s not enough room to go around?” And so when we did our first women’s music festival, we said, “Wouldn’t it be natural to have our fliers at Robin’s festival?” Well, you know what she said: “If I see one of your fliers, you’re going to be thrown off the land.” I was thrown off the land for having fliers about Rhythm Fest at her festival and then I said, “Oh, so I guess feminism doesn’t go that far.”

And we had our first one. It was amazing. It was held in Lookout Mountain, Tennessee and we had a number of great—in fact, I have the fliers and posters. I have a whole file called “Rhythm Fest.” We had a lot of women come from the South and we didn’t do it on the same weekend as Robin. She always did hers on Labor Day and we always did ours on Memorial Day; so we thought it would compete. And it was very successful. It was

amazing. It put us on the map and I got another thing I can add to my name: women's music festival producer. It went really well. It went really well.

BB: Who were some of the performers?

MC: God, I'd have to look at the poster and see who we had. I don't know if we got any of the big names the first year. We always tried to get at least one. We didn't get Holly and all those ones until later. The other important thing to remember is that women's music artists, the only places they could make money were concerts and the women's music festivals. So once they heard there was one in the South, a number of them called us and said, "Hey, when is it? Can you add me to the list?," and all that. I'd have to find the flier and see who was on there.

BB: So you charged people to enter the festival and that's how--?

MC: Well, the other thing we did, we challenged the culture of women's music festivals. All the ones that you went to, you paid a certain amount of money and when you got in, you had to wear a band. We said, "We're not going to have any wristbands." We also did a sliding scale. We actually got kind of radical about it. They said, "No, you have to do it this way and that way." "No, we don't care." Then also if you were a worker, you got a different distinguished band and somehow you were elevated and we said, "No, we're going to be just like everyone else who comes. We going to work it." I had to end up working the box office, the computer. At the end of the day, rather than sitting in some special section where the producers and all, we just sat with everyone else. We tried to just deemphasize this culture of hierarchy and all that. People came and said, "Wow. There's no bands? You don't want us to be wearing bands? And you're going to have a sliding scale? Are you for real?"

We were and it worked. We made money, didn't lose any, and more people came the second year.

The hardest part, though, was land. It's so hard to find land for an event like that. You have to have insurance. You have to think about the security of people going, women, women like to take their clothes off, and what can you do to not worry about whatever. It was so hard to find land every single year. Then by the fifth year, we just couldn't do it anymore without land that you own. So we stopped after five years.

BB: Can you talk a little bit about the politics involved in the language and terminology around sexual orientation and identity ? So for example, you talked about how first it was just gay, and then lesbian, and then bi, and now it's LGBT-Q for queer or questioning.

MC: Right.

BB: And now there's pansexual.

MC: And intersex.

BB: Intersex. Maybe you could just talk a little bit about--.

MC: I think what's been intriguing to me is how if you think about women and gender and don't always think about women in terms of like male-female, I think what's happened is that there's been such a diving into understanding, trying to explain and/or articulate the real uniqueness of what makes a women against the backdrop of this concept of orientation and identity because it used to be just sexual orientation. But I think that as more women who were feminists who got more like feminism into lesbianism into really trying to understand about this orientation and identity, people just got more and more specific because there were so many unique experiences and I think people kind of could say, rather

than just the g word, everything was gay: “Well, can’t we just be called gay?” “No, you can’t because there’s just too much variation.”

What we found within the lesbian culture against the backdrop of these women’s music festivals, it was interesting about how policies got set at these music festivals kind of based in a real interesting way, based on the producers of who’s doing them, on their own politics. I wish I could have been a fly on the wall, to have been sitting in the meeting with the producers of Michigan. Michigan is the single largest women’s festival in this country: ten thousand. We’re talking like a city. And the producers of that, women named Boo and whoever else, Lisa, at what point did they have a discussion and say, “Well, we’ll take women, straight women, we’ll take lesbians, we’ll take bisexual women,” which for some was a problem, “But we’re going to draw the line at transgender. If you weren’t born female, then I’m sorry, you’re not welcome here.” But what was going on in their mind that that became such an issue that they put down the whatever? I think for a lot of people, people began to realize something, which is why I’m fascinating by the activist organizing. You know what they said: “We can either sit here and try to find a way to fit into their--, or you know what? We’re going to say, ‘You know what? Thank you, but we’re leaving.’”

So when Michelle Crone, who had gone to Michigan, and the other producers, it was like Barbara Savage from Tennessee and Kathleen Mahoney from LA, who actually introduced Melissa to the whole music scene, these were women who were veterans of the women’s music festival, and said, “You know what? We’re not happy here. What would happen if we took and started something on our own that would allow this?” And that’s how we came up with Rhythm Fest, only because of the dissatisfaction, but also they were willing to say, “Well, we’re going to add the word ‘politics’ into ours because we do want to believe

in politics." They were the first festival to put the word in there and they also said, "We're going to be more open about how people self-identify." So we didn't have a transgender issue with Rhythm Fest at that point, that didn't happen to us, but it was happening with Michigan.

But I think more and more women were willing to say, "But I want to say, 'I am this. I am, da da da. And I'll even further describe who I am.'" I think every time people would kind of further explore their own identity, then you began with words like transgender, then pansexual, then intersex, because it was just getting more and more clear. And why not use those letters? Someone said, "There's too many letters." Not in my opinion. If you need to add letters onto it, add them on. What's the difference? You need to really try to understand people's lives, who they are, what they believe in, and all that cultural stuff that goes around that, and that has been so rich. And for those who have a real issue with it, you know what? People self-select out. If they're not interested, don't do it. But don't stop those who feel like they really need and I've just been so excited about that. In my opinion, right now in terms of the lesbigaytrans community, transgender activism is at its—it's just happening in a major, major way. It's very exciting. So for those who want to be risk-takers, go ahead because there's room for you too.

BB: What's exciting that's happening in the transgender movement?

MC: One, the acknowledgement of it. Two, the acceptance of it. And three, the legal changes happening. You might have heard about the manager out of Key Largo, Florida. A man for eighteen years, married with kids, who was the town manager of that town for eighteen years, and he finally said, "You know what? I need to be honest with myself. I need to have a sex change because I now want to become a woman." And the townspeople heard

that and said, “Oh, no, you’re not,” and they fired him. And he said, “But I’m the same person that was--.” They said, “No, but you’re not a man going to become a woman.” So the National Center for Lesbian Rights took on his case and they’re now taking it to court and saying, “It shouldn’t be based on whether he’s a male or a female. It’s whether or not he could do his job correctly.” They just got a major win with something that’s going to take them to the next level of the legal challenge. That’s unbelievable around transgender. It’s incredible.

But I also think look at TV. Remember the movie *Queen Priscilla of the Desert* out of Australia. Remember that? That was drag queens. Then we had our own version of that with Patrick Swayze. It was called *To Wong Foo, I Love You, Julie Newmar* [title: *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar*]. Look at the actors in that: Wesley Snipes, male, straight black actor. Have you ever seen that film? When you think about that, you think culturally, look at the shift that that made and I’m getting chills about it. So I think sometimes you can’t win, sometimes you go to the legal route, which the National Center for Lesbian Rights, LAMBDA Legal, they’re doing that, but then you go the cultural route and sometimes that cultural stuff just is so amazing. Now on the cover of *The Advocate*, did you see it?

BB: In your bathroom.

MC: Yeah, John Travolta and Queen Latifah are going to do the remake of *Hairspray*. How groundbreaking was that when Divine? You know what I mean? It’s like people are going, “But wait a minute, yeah, what’s wrong?” God, it’s just happening in a major way. It’s so exciting. And everyone now uses LGBT and Q, but there was a bit

struggle to add that T word in there, but now it's just part of what it is. It's just so amazing. It's great.

BB: So between 1992 and 1995, you had several key roles with different Democratic campaigns.

MC: Yes.

BB: You touched on this a little bit, but let's start with when you became a staff member for the Human Rights Campaign Fund as the southeast field coordinator, but you worked in the DC office.

MC: Right.

BB: So tell me what some of your roles and responsibilities were.

MC: Well, first of all, the Human Rights Campaign Fund, what was interesting about that organization, they started out to be just a gay organization like a lot of many groups did. But there was one of their members who said, "You know what? If we're going to make change in terms of the United States, we need to be thinking not only of a change of hearts and minds about who we are as gay and lesbians"—that's what they used back then, "gay and lesbian"—they said, "But if we don't start thinking about who are the lawmakers and who's making these laws, if we don't figure out a way to come up with a strategy for having a base in Washington, DC where the Congress meets, that if we were to figure out as a gay organization, that if we shifted the focus into working on Congress to try to change some laws in addition to hearts and minds, this might be an avenue," which really was the whole basis and the foundation of the Human Rights Campaign Fund, which is why they sat in Washington, which is why they did a whole kind of activist organizing around how to become a lobbyist, how do you go and lobby Congress to start changing specifically the Civil

Rights Law to add the words “sexual orientation” to what already existed as civil rights law on the protection of race, religion, whatever. They said, “Let’s figure out how can we add the words ‘gay and lesbian protection’ in Congress.” And that was the sole reason why they formed.

So by the time I joined them in 1992, one of their main jobs was to create lobbyists, to train lobbyists to go and lobby the Hill, but because I came from the South, all of my assigned members of Congress were southern. So any southern congressman or woman, I was their lobbyist. I use the term “lobbyist” and they didn’t use the word “lobbyist.” They came up with the word “public policy advocate” because lobbyist seemed even back then to have a bad name. But as a public policy advocate, the one thing I will thank the Human Rights Campaign Fund for was one, to actually go and walk the halls of Congress. Have you done that? Yes, you have. Bridgette, I had been doing activist organizing up until that point and I cannot tell you the impact that that had just to literally walk over to Congress, walk in the—there’s three different House office buildings and then there’s US Senate. To me, all I knew was that big dome thing that we see when we think of Congress because you have the US House on one side and the US Senate on the other, but I didn’t know anything about all these different, Rayburn House Office Building; I learned all that. I remember the first day I walked in the halls and I was going to my first visit. I said, “Wait a minute. How many activists do I know that have never stepped foot in any of these buildings because they’ve always done organizing in the streets of DC?” Which is good, but if they don’t figure out how to add walking the halls of Congress to larger political activist organizing, I said, “That’s the missing link.” And for me, it was like a light bulb went off.

I remember walking, I said, “Wait a minute. Aren’t they here for us?” But I realized they had done just a fantastic job, you feel like the US members of the Congress and US Senator, you feel like you’re at their beck and call, and I said, “Wait a minute. Aren’t we paying their salaries? They’re here for us.” But the thing has been so turned around that when I went to my first visit, my attitude changed, like I’m going to go visit whoever it was from North Carolina and I’m going to walk into that office and I’m going to say, “You know what? You’re my representative. I’m your constituent.” And the power dynamic just shifted in my mind about that. That for me was amazing and that’s why I think anyone who ever does activist organizing should go to a lobby day whether it’s in Raleigh or up there because it’s just dramatically--.

Anyway, so I did that for a couple of years and I learned how to lobby. You know that backpack that I carry, that red one? When I first moved to DC, I used to carry my backpack into when I did lobbying and someone said, “No disrespect, Mandy, but I think you might want to get a briefcase because that’s not the code of how we look,” and I kind of got into that whole thing and how you dress up and how you write and whatever. It was great. That was a very exciting couple of years for me to do that. And also more importantly, meeting specific members of the Congressional Black Caucus, that was very important, and as one of their few black folk on staff, that was also one of my assignments. And to be working with the members of the Congressional Black Caucus, oh, my God, such respect, and remembering there was a time when there was no women, no people of color in Congress, and thinking, “Wow, what an impact they had.”

And the gay cause, the Human Rights Campaign had a great reputation on the Hill and I thought if anyone can walk in and if you just say, “Hi, my name is Mandy Carter and

I'm here, and I'm here representing the Human Rights Campaign Fund," and see the look of, "Oh, yes," that didn't come from nothing. That came from a lot of respect and building those relationships and having a track record, and I thought, "Yeah, HRCF has a very pivotal role to play." That was the upside. The downside was all the time that I was at the Human Rights Campaign Fund, even when it changed into just the Human Rights Campaign, it was a predominately white staff. There was just a handful of us of color and yet they kept on talking about being more and more exclusionary. But by the time I left in '95, I pretty much had had it because I said, "You talk about more people of color inclusion, and I don't see a whole lot." But also people of color inclusion that could make decisions, not the person who's the receptionist, not the person who's the bookkeeper, not because you look like you have diversity, but who in this organization really of color has an impact not only on what you believe in, but also brings a racial kind of overlay dynamic about what policies you're going to try to work on, who you're having your relationships with? It just got be so disappointing to see, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, we're going to do it," and it never happen.

I must thank Suzanne Pharr, who came to visit me one day in the office. We went and had lunch and she said to me, "Mandy, what are you doing here? You have such skill and talent. You've done your thing there, but you might want to think about taking your talents and going elsewhere." And that's what I did. I finally said at one point, Elizabeth Birch, who was then the new incoming executive director, first woman ever at the Human Rights Campaign. And one or two incidences when I was working at HRC really kind of put me in the position of I'm ready, but Suzanne just had those magic words at that moment to say, "Why are you here?" And at HRC, when Elizabeth Birch came on in her administration, first ever woman, it was exciting.

BB: Is she a white woman?

MC: White woman, had formerly worked at Apple, an out lesbian; that was good. But I saw that when she came in with her sense of vision, she had such an opportunity to have made such a major difference at that place, but she kind of fell back into the same old, same old, and was trying to do one-on-ones with all the staff to have these conversations, and I said, "Elizabeth, we still haven't had ours." I never had my one-on-one with her and during that time, you might have remembered, Newt Gingrich, his cousin—wait a minute, his sister came out, Candace Gingrich, and HRC had this interesting thing because they had the most money and anytime someone came out and they became known in the media, who do you think would go and grab them to have them become their--? Human Rights Campaign. So Candace Gingrich gets signed on as this special role or something like that and they're organizing a tour for her. They said, "Well, we certainly need to have her go down south," and I'm saying, "Well, where do you want to have her in the South?" They said, "Duke University called and they want to have her come speak." And I said, "Well, you know, I live in Durham and wouldn't it make sense if I were the one to be the person to introduce her, be there, go down with her?" And what do you think they did? They didn't and they chose another white lesbian who actually had the hots for Candace and wanted to get this thing.

I remember I didn't get this and I said, "That was the last draw. How can you sit there and say you're going to put Candace Gingrich in the state of North Carolina, in Durham, in my hometown, and I'm not the HRC person going?" So that was it, because I said, "Apparently you're not getting it." And they said, "Oh yeah, we're going to have her go around the country. We're going to make sure there are people of color," and all this stuff. Never happened. So I said, "You know, the problem is you're a rich, white organization that

has money as its prime tool and what are you doing to change that? And here you have this huge opportunity. The media was everywhere on this and what did you do? You did the same old, same old."

And I thought about what Suzanne said and I said, "You know what?" I went and said to Elizabeth Birch, "I'm out of here. I'm sorry, I just can't do this anymore." She said, "But Mandy, why?" And I told her, but it just went over her head. When I decided to leave, I didn't do what some other people at HRC had done of color. If a person of color who used to work there would leave, they would make a huge big thing about it, like, "Let's embarrass the Human Rights Campaign. Let's make them look like they're shit." I didn't do that. I said, "I did my three and a half. I'm glad I was here. I learned so much." And I said, "You have such potential, but you're just not doing it and I just can't do it anymore."

I left very quietly, came back to Durham in mid-1995, and then got myself ready to work on the second Mobilization '96 campaign when Gantt ran again. But that was that time when they said, boy they had such--, but it's the same rich organization, bought a building, have a staff of like a hundred, a handful of people of color staff, and nothing's changed to this day.

BB: Where did most of their funding come from then and now, do you know?

MC: A lot of rich gay and lesbians who have a lot of money and they were willing to pour it into this organization, not as much funding from foundations; they didn't have it. There was a very large population of gay and lesbians who have a lot of money and the place that they put most of it is into Human Rights Campaign. So they were never having to worry about funds to this day. I think what's happened, fortunately, I think there's been some good change since then. But what's happened is that, Bridgette, the other thing that was going on

during the segment when I joined them in ’92 until I left in ’95, that was a world in which when you talked about the gay and lesbian movement, there were two organizations that you almost had to go through and/or get okay from: the Human Rights Campaign Fund and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. And a lot of people living in states and counties said, “Wait a minute. Isn’t there another way we can organize? Are they the only ones?” So we began to question how policy or how whatever issues--. Someone said, “Well, who is making these decisions? Oh yeah, HRC and NGLTF. But we live in North Carolina. Why can’t we make ours?” So more and more people began to think, “Why don’t we start our own statewide organizations and think about how we can then work in partnership with NGLTF and HRCF,” and that was another wonderful kind of change in the air about how organizing happens. So it was an interesting time frame with that, but that’s what happened.

BB: Yeah, it strikes me that a key lesson that you’ve mentioned three or four times just in today’s interview is how some sea changes occur because people think outside the box, they take a new look at power relationships, and are creative. Why not? Why not us?

MC: Absolutely.

BB: Why not now? I don’t like that. Let’s do it different. That seems like a key of liberatory action, I guess.

MC: I would also add to that, I think the other dynamic that happened was I remember as an organizer and you might have seen this too that sometimes when you work within an organization or a project and things aren’t going the way you want, people would almost find ways to undermine it, like, “If it’s not my way, then I’m going to make sure you have a hassle.” But people said, “Wait a minute. Why take that energy and find ways to undermine and/or hold up or get in the way of? Just say, ‘Thank you, it’s been great,’ but

then take that energy and take it and then go create something out of the box." I think that was another shift of just how, what I saw activist political organizing happening in this country. That just gave people a different feeling and some people were looking for it, but, "Is it okay" or "Do I need to check in?" "No, you just start up because you think it's so important." There might be one or two of you in the beginning, but there's so many groups you can point back to now that had there not been those courageous one or two who said, "I've just got to do it differently" or "Let's just try something different" and you think about how that is just such a positive, creative, exciting, sometimes on the cutting edge, that's made a difference. People said, "Yeah, let put me energy there.

I mean, NOW, I'll go back to this Lavender Menace that was going on around feminism. When this whole feminism started happening, this feminist movement, and clearly there were lesbians all over the place in it, remember when NOW had this issue of, "Well, we don't want to have NOW identified with lesbians." So they actually have this incredible kind of what they called the Lavender Menace: "If you are, don't tell anyone" or "Oh, no, we're not lesbian."

BB: Can you say a little bit more about the Lavender Menace? Was this a phrase that NOW came up with?

MC: Well, no, NOW did and I think people who worked with NOW. Why? I lived in California and organized there from 1969 with the War Resisters League Southeast until '82, until I moved here to Durham and even at that time, NOW was very active in the state of California, very active, but this whole concept of feminism was just happening and why? The word "feminist" came out of the fact that so many women were involved in the antiwar movement that was so male-dominated. A lot of women said, "I want to find out how I can

find my voice, my particular way of working on this as a woman," because they were kind of being not paid attention to from the antiwar movement. So a lot of women said, "Well, wait a minute. Then we'll look at the feminists. Let's look at issues around gender and whatever." So antiwar movement moved into the women's movement and feminist movement only because they were feeling not welcome in the antiwar movement. They formed their own, but then they turned around and didn't like the idea of so many lesbians. So every time you got a new thing, it was like, "We're happy to be here, but we just can't handle *you* being here." And I said, "How many times have we heard that? The antiwar movement is so male-dominated. We're happy women are here, but this is your place." And then women go, "Alright, we're here," form their movement, and then say to lesbians, "But, no, I'm sorry." And then lesbians get out of it. So you see what I mean?

I think with NOW, because NOW is becoming this power force, I mean, look at it and Gloria Steinem and all that. So NOW is saying, "And we don't want to have any sense that we're lesbian because we'll get bad media." Well, NOW was just so full of lesbians, it was unbelievable, but a lot of them said, "But because of the reality of trying to be viable and be taken seriously, if we can put a lid on that lesbian thing, we'll be okay." Well, putting a lid on that lesbian thing was called the Lavender Menace. People were saying, "But I've been with NOW, I'm active." "But not with this you're not." Now NOW has done a complete turnaround to come around to understanding it, but in the beginning, they were so worried and so a lesbians said, "Well, then you know what? We're not welcome here. We're going to go form our stuff." That's when you start getting the lesbian movement.

BB: What's the significance of lavender?

MC: Because purple, lavender, you talk gay and everything's gay and so Lavender Menace was meaning gay, lesbian, because at that point there wasn't L, it was just gay, so lavender was gay, right, purple. That's what they meant, Lavender Menace, lesbian menace, lesbian concern about NOW. That's where they came up with the word.

BB: I want to go back a little bit to the Congressional Black Caucus and HRCF. What was their relationship? Do you want to take a break?

MC: Yeah, I want to take my vitamins with my banana, if that's okay.

BB: Okay, let's take a break.

[break in conversation]

BB: So once again during our break, we start talking and it's juicy and wonderful.

MC: We should have just left it down.

BB: Yeah, we should just leave it down. So say what you were saying again.

MC: What I was saying was I was just back in San Francisco and contacting a number of the folks who I went with to the very last session, 1968 summer, of the Institute for the Study of Nonviolence, and next year we're going to have a big fortieth anniversary year anniversary. When I was out in San Francisco, I was talking to some of the folks that are going to be a part of this and it struck me, and plus to piggyback onto the interview we're doing, is just how can you ask people, thinking particularly of the Heirs Project, not only their personal journey about how they individually and personally got involved in their journey for their activism, but against the backdrop of the journey of activism in this country?

What I was saying was that for a lot of us who are now in the 60s generation demographically, seventy-eight million born post-World War II, that when I got engaged in

the movement, I got engaged in the movement because someone from the American Friends Service Committee and the War Resisters League, I got involved with because that was the whole anti-Vietnam War era. But what was interesting though was that in the anti-Vietnam War era, it was very male-dominated and very white male-dominated and I was just saying that what I found intriguing is that one reason why we got a feminist movement or the women's movement, because a lot of women felt not welcome in the antiwar movement that was so male-dominated. So they formed this thing called the women's movement and then there was also a very kind of anti-lesbian within the women's movement, that then formed a lesbian movement because they weren't--. So every time you have a movement for change, and these are all movements for change, and they're looking at people that are, "Everyone but *you*, sorry," and whoever that "everyone but you, sorry" becomes the next phase of a movement, women's movement, feminist movement. Women in the feminist movement, they were saying, "Everyone, but not lesbians," and lesbians said, "Well, I can either sit here and put up with it or try to make life miserable for you. Or do I, as a lesbian movement, take our movement and make that a thing?" But then the lesbian movement, some of it said, "But we don't want to have any women who weren't born women." So they're anti-transgender, then the transgender--.

It's this incredible, incredible journey. So to ask people who are self-identifying as social justice activists as part of the Heirs Project, I said it would be neat to have this conversation about "what was your journey" against the backdrop of whatever the journeys were of our social justice movement. It would be absolutely intriguing to me. I'm just so fascinated by it because my question is as we think about new movement organizers and social justice organizers, how are they doing it differently? Do they even care what came

before them? Do they have some new ideas or ways in which they're becoming organizers? Or if I were to start an organizers' training school, what lessons would I learn from all that? Personal journeys, social justice journeys, in terms of this country. I don't know. I'm just looking ahead and thinking, "Wow, that's intense. That's pretty cool." So that's what I was saying.

BB: Yeah. So let's go back. I want to hear some stories about the relationship between HRCF and the Congressional Black Caucus. So let's see, what's a succinct—well, just go for it.

MC: Alright, I'll go for it. One of the things I must say that when I came and joined the staff of the Human Rights Campaign Fund and became a public policy advocate, the only African-American one that was there, certainly one of the things I was asked was to work specifically with members of the Congressional Black Caucus. One of the things that we found out is that in terms of the voting record on the gay and lesbian issue, the one single caucus that was the most consistently with us was the Congressional Black Caucus. Why? Because everyone I would talk to, they would say, "You know what? Been there, done that." Because if you're sitting here in this office talking to me about you being a gay and lesbian trying to get equal rights, I will tell you that take out the words "gay and lesbian" and put in the word "black" and then we're on the same path. We have been down this road. And so I think there's been this wonderful, interesting kind of partnership between black members of Congress because of the whole civil rights struggle around race and here we sit in our civil rights struggle around issues of orientation.

However, what I have now seen, however, as those years have gone by, is making sure that a lot of what I call the "white lesbian movement" doesn't make the mistake of at

some point thinking that being protective of orientation or gender is more important than race because you end up competing with and/or undermining the work of racial justice work. I'll give a classic example. Kentucky Fried Chicken in Louisville, Kentucky has a great policy around gay and lesbian non-discrimination. So you can be a gay and lesbian employee at Kentucky Fried Chicken and you're fine. At this particular Kentucky Fried Chicken chain, a black worker had been let go and it turns out he was being let go for not any really good reason, and people in the community were trying to organize some kind of a support effort for this particular young man, black man, who'd been fired, and they thought that because the black community and the gay community kind of got along, that would be great until someone in the gay community: "But wait a minute. Do we want to jeopardize our protection at Kentucky Fried Chicken to stick our neck out for a black man?"

And I said, "Oh, my gosh. We can't go down that road," but that's happened more than enough because all of a sudden what becomes more important is protecting me as a gay person than understanding we need equal protection for all, whether it's on race or orientation, and that turned out to be a very negative situation. In other words, gays were saying, "I don't want to jeopardize our protection for being gay just to stick up for some black guy," and we said, "Excuse me? We need to stick up for each other based on race and orientation and I don't want to see us, as we continue down this road, having to pick and choose."

Second example: New York state had a Republican—I'm sorry, Al D'Amato, was Al D'Amato Republican or Democrat? Senator Al D'Amato. I can't remember. I think he might have been Democrat. We'd have to check on that. [he is a Republican]. Anyway, Al D'Amato, he was up for reelection and even though he was good on the gay issue, very good

on the gay issue, he was bad in terms of a woman's right to choose and he was bad in terms of people of color. So the Human Rights Campaign on their own decided they were going to endorse Alfonse D'Amato despite the fact that the people of the state of New York said, "Don't do it. We have to challenge Alfonso D'Amato in terms of his issues on gender with NOW, National Organization for Women, his issues around a woman's right to choose." So a lot of people said to HRC, "You can't stand up there and endorse a man and tell everyone they should vote for him when he's not good on choice and/or people of color." But they said, "But wait a minute. All we're concerned about is is he good on gay stuff." And we said, "Excuse me? That's the problem right here." And the Human Rights Campaign ignored the people who live in the state of New York and said basically, "We don't care. We're going to endorse him."

And everyone else was going to endorse his opponent and I remember, born in Albany, New York, they were having a special Human Rights Campaign Fund town meeting in New York around this endorsement of theirs of Alfonse D'Amato. I went up. I had already left the staff and I went up and what I brought with me was a Human Rights Campaign award that I had received. And there's another woman named Barbara Smith, a black lesbian author, Barbara Smith, who helped co-found Kitchen Table Press, who had also received a Human Rights Campaign Fund award in the past, who also was from Albany, New York. She couldn't make it, but she said, "Mandy, I'm going to send you my HRC award." And what I did was at this particular meeting, town meeting, I stood up and said, "The Human Rights Campaign used to be my family. I worked there for three and a half years." And I said, "However, I must tell you that as a black lesbian social justice activist, I cannot believe you're going to sit here and continue with your endorsement of Alfonse D'Amato." And I

walked up and I turned my award and Barbara Smith's award over to Elizabeth Birch, the executive director, and said, "I'm returning these because community means to much for us to believe that you could, as HRC, continue on with this endorsement."

And guess what? Alfonse D'Amato did not get reelected. But that was probably one of the most important, I think, conversations in the gay movement, was, "Do you simply say it's more important to support someone who's gay supportive than it is about choice or people of color?" I said, "That's a choice you'll have to wait," and I think that was one of those moments. Since that meeting, they said, "You know what? I think we did blow it on the endorsement because we just can't talk about just gay only. We cannot just be only about gays. It's got to be gay and people of color and women issues." So that was one of those moments for me. That's what we got down to.

BB: You look like you still feel a little angry.

MC: I think not angry, I think just saddened. I mean, we have been saying this over and over and over again and yet it was almost like their attitude was basically, "We don't care. We have enough money. We don't care what y'all want to do. We can afford." This was the attitude: "We can afford to do whatever we want because we have the money." And I think at that moment, Bridgette, what I was saying earlier was that at some point as a movement, you realize if it's only about just being gay, that won't cut it, and it almost took that drama of this endorsement and this real schism for the movement to say, "You know what? It is about not just only being gay. If we don't figure out about the connections," and especially with the African-American community who has been so supportive of the gay movement. But they were saying, "But we want to put ourselves first," and that lesson was, "No, it's got to be an *and* situation, not either/or." And things have changed since then.

Someone like me and others felt really in a bad position of going up against all this power, but you know what? That didn't matter. That was a valuable lesson.

But I also thought it got into this issue of when do you let states decide for themselves how they're going to function? Because HRC based in Washington said to the state of New York, who said, "No, don't do this." After D'Amato lost, New York said, "Can you now respect our space?" That began what I think was this trail toward autonomous, independent organizing state by state and still work with or have conversations with Washington, but not like they can dictate. So that was one of those, another moment in my opinion.

BB: I'm struck by how many social change groups and individuals still struggle with the intersection of oppressions. For example, the organizing and we were on the planning committee for the antiwar demonstration in March in Fayetteville, North Carolina in 2004. I guess specifically in 2005, there was a lot of controversy on the program committee about whether or not the Cuntry Kings could—which were LGBTQ veterans, were they veterans?

MC: I don't know.

BB: I don't know if they're veterans. I think they're just LGBTQ young folks—could perform or not. There were anxieties among some people about this is about antiwar stuff. This isn't about gay rights. So that's just another example and I'm thinking of North Carolina Women United.

MC: That's right.

BB: You and I just co-facilitated a retreat for their board of directors and they're really struggling with ironically, they made a statement that they felt like a lot of predominately black organizations didn't support gay rights, which I think in some ways is a racist assumption because history goes to show that it's been very different.

MC: Absolutely.

BB: But there is a tension there. So I'm rambling a bit. I'm not sure what my question is here except to say that it still is a real ongoing challenge and I guess one of the things I hear organizations say is, "We have to be targeted and strategic. So we can't be everything to everyone." Tell us the right answers. (laughs)

MC: I've clearly got the right answer. What I find interesting is that I think if we all look back and I'll speak as a "me" statement in terms of my work, what I'm really struck by is this idea that somehow that there's always been this schism between single-issue organizing versus multi-issue. That's just been on the table for so long and it's like you said, we can't be everything to everyone; we can't do all this work. But I'm thinking that might be in terms of what's your underlying philosophy. I know for me, I think my introduction to nonviolence and nonviolent activist organizing and the style, what made a huge difference for me and it came through the American Friends Service Committee, certainly the War Resisters League, was this idea that if you take the principle of equality and justice for all, those "equality and justice for all," five words, if that is your underlying primary premise, then it's almost like no matter what the particular issue or project or year, if that's your underlying philosophy and politic, then you're going to be much more able to adapt and be flexible enough to do the work.

But if you start out with the principle that we're only going to do women's organizing in the state of North Carolina and that's it, then you can see how problems would come it. As I understand it, one of the things, a black woman who was on the board of NC Women United was not happy about their progay position. But when I looked at this mission statement of NCW, there was not one very "put in print" word "gay lesbian bisexual

transgender;" it wasn't there. And so you can argue the point that if you're not going to be very specific and put it in writing, then you can see how someone would say, "But I didn't know that's what you all were working on. I don't see it in there."

I don't know. I'm just thinking that this is my theory, this is how I feel like I can organize and it might be how other people have and there's been examples. Rather than trying to be the end-all be-all organization for everyone and everything, what if you look at my particular group is going to take this particular segment of activist organizing, but I'm going to work with you who's doing this particular segment. So if you have this cooperative model of how all of us can take segments that we know that we're great at and can be so good at and focus on that, and then work collectively and work in unity, that puts a whole different model on the table. So I don't have to be the end-all be-all women's organization. I'm going to take a segment of this and I know I'm going to go and work with this partner, that partner, whatever. So that on the surface.

But the other thing is in this country, the demographics are changing so dramatically in the United States of America, demographically in terms of race and class. And what North Carolina looked like when North Carolina Women United first started—and it wasn't called that; it was called the Women's Agenda—look at the demographics of when that was to where we are now in 2007. You have more people of color, not just black, Latino, Latina, Asian Pacific Islander, so on and so forth. If you don't factor that into who your audience is or who your issues are going to be directed to, and if you have the model of basically, can I be honest, white women and white women either middle-class or whatever, there's no way it can have an impact on what you're trying to get done.

So I'm just wondering when I think of being a North Carolina activist, I love this state, if I were to venture out as an individual and look for something I'd be excited about, the glasses I would look through and the prism, this is what I'd look at: folk of color, are there any? What's the class of the folk that I might be working with? Are they going to be inclusive of issues of gender? Which is one reason why we started Southerners on New Ground. What could we do? So we said, "Well, we're just one group, but what would happen if we were, as a small organization, to talk about transformative models of organizing that connect race, class, culture, gender, identity, against the larger backdrop of justice?" We're now in our fourteenth year and it seems to work, Bridgette. I'm just thinking that's going to be our particular group, but I think people see it differently and boy, it makes a big difference in terms of what kind of work you get done and I think that's a great model.

BB: Yeah. Well, I just want to say I was joking about tell us the answers, but you did it brilliantly anyway. (laughs)

MC: This is like a version, my two cents worth. I'm sure there's other two cents you can throw into the pot.

BB: Oh, lots of them, right. So it's just you still hear that and lots of different movements struggle with this thing around specifically the single-issue organizing or multi-issue, and there's a lot of either/or and less creative thinking around both/and and the model that you're talking about.

MC: Yes, I love it. Can I go back to the Cuntry Kings for a minute, though?

BB: Yes.

MC: There was also, before that issue about them performing at the Fayetteville rally, also within the lesbian community, I was talking to someone, I think this is purely

generational, when she heard about the Cuntry Kings spelled C-U-N-T-R-Y, she said, "I can't believe a group would even use a name like that." Then you go to someone else who says, "That is so radical. That is so great." So like I said, even within our own lesbian community and movement, you have differently degrees of what's acceptable and not. She was like, "I'm outraged. They're putting their name on a flier?" And she's a lesbian too and I'm thinking, "What's up with that?"

BB: Then the Vagina Monologues with Eve Ensler.

MC: Yes.

BB: There's a whole segment about reclaiming the word "cunt."

MC: Yes, perfect, exactly, like what's that?

BB: Okay, so I want to go back again. I've got a long list of notes here, Mandy, that we could talk for years, I think. There's a bill that just recently got a lot of news in the North Carolina House about trying to add sexual orientation into the hate crime legislation. Was SONG involved or have you all or any group that you're involved with now weighed in on that?

MC: SONG, because we're a non-profit, we don't do any political work. But I remember when we were working with, when I was working with NC Safe Schools and they were talking about all this issue of adding that language. It was a combination of this particular language around hate crimes, but also in high schools about this bullying thing. I think that passed, didn't it? Did you hear? I thought they had said that there was some particular language around anti-bullying and that went through.

BB: That's what I'm talking about.

MC: That's it.

BB: And adding sexual orientation to the laundry list of groups that often get targeted by bullies.

MC: So we did have a relationship with NC Safe Schools and we supported that.

BB: And that's Melissa Weiss.

MC: Yeah, Melissa Weiss, right, exactly.

BB: She was the former executive director.

MC: Right, exactly, exactly.

BB: So tell me, what year was SONG founded? Fourteen years ago. What's that year?

MC: The conversation about starting SONG was in 1993, but 1994 was the first official year.

BB: And who was involved in that conversation?

MC: The six women were Mab Segrest, Suzanne Pharr, Joan Garner, a black lesbian out of Atlanta, Pat Hussein, which I think you have on there too, a black lesbian out of Atlanta, Pam McMichael, white lesbian out of Louisville, Kentucky—did I already mention Suzanne Pharr—and myself, six of us; we are the six cofounders. We purposely wanted to have three black progressive lesbians. We called ourselves "three black southern lesbian progressives," whatever. We wanted to make sure we had the word "progressive" in there. And then three white intentionally. Conversation in '93, started in '94, so 2007 is our thirteenth year, going into our fourteenth year; that's it. Yeah, and it came out of this conversation. Actually, it came out of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force 1993 Creating Change conference where we did see within the gay and lesbian movement this sort of anti-southern kind of thing. But it's turned out to be an amazing effort and I think a great model. A lot of us have moved on. We have two new staff people. People are still around.

I'm surprised how many emails we'll get from someone: "Yeah, you know you're one of the few groups that not only is southern-based, but as a white out activist, I feel so comfortable knowing that there's a group that believes in this bridge-building model and you're more into," like I said, "the race, class, culture stuff." Kind of a welcoming, like it's okay to be who I am, because I know there's a lot of groups who are either predominately people of color who don't want to work with white folks or white folks who don't want to work with people of color. That's a tension, but SONG has always been about "why not?" I love it.

BB: Tell me more about the story of SONG. How did you first become a non-profit and what were some early pieces of work and how were decisions made?

MC: Well, you know, it's interesting. Before we started thinking about starting the group called SONG, what is now SONG, the people who came to this 1993 conference, all of us already knew each other. So Suzanne Pharr was there, Mandy Carter was there, Joan Garner was there, Pat Hussein was there, Mab Segrest was there, and I don't know if Pam McMichael had come or not. So we already knew each other's work because we're all southern-based; so that relationship was there. But the two things that made us kind of come together and have this conversation after the Creating Change conference was that Mab Segrest did a keynote at this particular gathering and her keynote, which we have in print, really challenged this idea of being gay and lesbian activists against the backdrop of economic justice issues, particularly in the South. But then we did a workshop, Pam and myself and Suzanne, whoever, we did a workshop about being southerners organizing in the South with a social justice agenda. Between Mab's keynote and what happened with us in the workshop and this general attitude of "why are we here in the South? Do you have regular

food there?," we said, "Wait a minute. Why don't we talk about at least having conversations about what could we do to get this different idea about strategizing and organizing?"

So we had a retreat, I think, in Louisville, Kentucky, at this place called Hopscotch House started by Sally Bingham, going back to why my papers are going to Duke, and we sat down and we said, "Wait a minute. We're all doing work. We don't want to move. Can we figure out some group or something we could start?" We started messing around with the possibility of starting a group. We had conversations. We had two or three retreats about that with all six of us and we all came to the conclusion that, "Yeah, maybe." And at that point, I think I was not employed so I said, "Well, can I be the first person to help?" But I didn't become paid staff. It was Pam McMichael in Louisville who got an office. We wanted a co-director. We talked a lot about models of how you organize, how do you start an organization, how do you not do it top-down, and all that. Pam McMichael started a SONG office in Louisville. Pat Hussein started a SONG office in Atlanta, Georgia. So they were like co-directors and they got it going. The first couple of projects that we tried to start off with were things that were local enough that people could get involved with.

The name SONG, I think this might be myth by now, but I thought Suzanne Pharr had. We were all talking one day and we thought, "Well, what are we going to call ourselves?" And someone says, "Well, the South has to be in it." And you know the South in terms of civil rights organizing always talked about song and culture in how they organized. We said, "SONG. Can we come up with words that would fit the acronym?" Well, then there's always this stuff about the "old South." Well, what if we talk about the "new South?" New. Southerners. Where are we? So Southerners on New Ground.

What was interesting is the first few years, because we had Pam and Pat working and I was already doing work and Suzanne was employed and Pam and Mab were, I think the first couple of years we really were hard on just keeping this vision. We'd meet regularly and talk about what's going on and what the work was. At one point, we were at a retreat and it was one of these, "Is it going to just be about us at this point?" Because clearly what started out to be a black-white dynamic, which mirrored kind of the South, the black-white, we said, "You know, things are changing now. It's not just black-white. And can we only talk about being women?"

So one of the first things we did was talk about getting a male, gay man, on the board. We thought maybe a gay man of color not. A lot of us thought, "That's kind of (**87:33**). We're so comfortable with each other, but what about really getting serious about changing?" That changed and then also, I think, the idea of having a male co-director, so we got a black gay male out of Atlanta, Craig Washington, to be taking Pat Hussein's spot. That was the first time we added a male, a black male. Then we thought, "Is it just about being lesbian?" We added Matt Nicolson, who was a gay man who identified as, I think, trans.

So I can't go through every year, but it's just been an interesting growth or an interesting journey, and also quite frankly, the age stuff. I was the youngest and Suzanne was the oldest. We thought, "Is this age dynamic going to work? Are we not talking about younger--?" So we kept on questioning ourselves. We kept on saying, "We have to be open to this. We can't just be trying to keep our hands on this thing." Then in 2003, I ended up getting the job as executive director for three years. That was great, but it was like a lonely job. I was by myself down in this office with no windows.

BB: In Durham.

MC: In Durham. That was actually because the first offices, one was Louisville, one was in Atlanta, and then in 2002, we moved the whole office over to Durham. Everything's now here in Durham and we closed the office when I left and we're going to probably reopen it, but it's not been open. We hired two new staff people, getting running again, and trying to reopen that office. They're doing great work.

BB: So let's just stick with the SONG story for a little bit longer. I know we've skipped many years, so we can go back, but just since we're here. What was involved in your decision to become executive director?

MC: Well, quite frankly, what was going on with SONG was we had, at that point, three staff: Kim Diehl, Akiba Tomowa, and Rebecca Silver. They were the current staff in an office in downtown Durham and Kim Diehl decided that she really needed to move on because her partner got a job down in Florida with a union and put out the word that they were looking for a new person. It wasn't really the director at that point. They got rid of the word "director." I think they were all trying to be like co-staff. They were trying to do this kind of model of no one person in charge; everyone has equal responsibility. Kim's position—oh, go ahead. What were you going to say?

BB: So that was Alyce Gowdy-Wright.

MC: Yes.

BB: And was it with IUE-CWA?

MC: What was it that she was going down there for? I thought it was the SEIU. No. What did you just say?

BB: Well, the IUE-CWA is the local union here at Local 188 and she was working with (**90:24**) at the time.

MC: Right.

BB: And also the president, I think, of that union, but we can figure it out for sure.

MC: Yeah, and you're right. I'm not sure which union it was.

BB: Sorry to interrupt.

MC: No, that's okay, because it's good to keep it on track.

BB: Go ahead.

MC: Kim, whatever her [position], development coordinator, I think. And I said, "Gosh." I had just wrapped up doing some work with Evan Wolfson around this whole Freedom to Marry. Because I was doing that as a consultant, I thought, "I'd like to get a regular job again, like a paycheck, right?" It's in downtown Durham. I thought, "I'll apply for it." A lot of people applied for it and fortunately I got it, the development coordinator job. When I got it, I had said, the first thing was, "Is there financial security with this office?" "Oh, not a problem." Well, unfortunately there wasn't. I have to be careful I say or not say here. Let's just put it this way, that the financial reality of what I thought I was going to walk into was different than the financial reality of what it was. So what started out to be a staff of three, (**91:28**) and me coming in to keep that staff of three, ultimately because of financial realities, we got cut down to one and the board at that point kept me as the sole staff.

At that point, we didn't know how long I was going to have to be there as the sole person, keep the doors open, keep the work done. We had a huge number of responsibilities with grants we had gotten. So Kim moved. Rebecca Silver rotated off staff. Akiba off staff; she moved back to San Francisco. And rather than just using the term "coordinator," we had a little bit of a conversation about using the term "executive director." But I said, "You know, there's a number of groups that we work with at SONG and to keep on using the word

‘coordinator’ goes so far, but if I could use the term ‘executive director,’ that just has a different way of how people respond to you.” So I said, “I’ll start using director.” It went coordinator, director, executive director. There’s this incredible annual executive director retreat that happens every year that’s always held in Laguna Beach, California, and this is the executive directors of every single national LGBT group in this country. It’s major and I was invited to go and I’ve been going to it for a few years.

Anyway, to make a long story short, for three years, we never had enough money to hire another additional staff person, and I did it for three years and by the time that third year was done, I was just like, “You know what? We need to do something because I just cannot do one more day in that office.” You’ve been in that office with no windows. We were doing great work. It wasn’t like work wasn’t happening; it was in a major way. But I was also at a point in my life where I just didn’t want to just do that. I said, “I’ve got to get out of here.” So I gave my notice and put the work out and we got who we have now, Paulina Hernandez and—my mind’s going. We might have to stop for lunch—Caitlin Breedlove. Have you met them?

BB: Caitlin, yes.

MC: And you haven’t met Paulina?

BB: No.

MC: We got them and then all of a sudden, we did grant writing and Mab’s a good grant-writer and Suzanne is, and got a chunk of change and we’re now okay.

BB: Congratulations. Well, let’s take a break.

MC: Yeah, because my mind’s going.

[break in conversation]

BB: Well, we've just had lunch and we've decided we're going to call it a day. It's a ninety-degree North Carolina afternoon. We're just going to take it slow and meet again for interview four of the series. Okay.

MC: Cool.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Emily Baran. January 2008.