

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

**Interview U-0585
Lynice Ramsey-Williams
March 12, 2008**

**Field Notes – 2
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FIELD NOTES- Lynice Ramsey-Williams

Interviewee: Lynice Ramsey-Williams

Interviewer: Bridgette Burge

Interview date: March 12, 2008

Location: NC Fair Share Office, Barrett Drive, Raleigh, NC 27609

Length: 1 disc, approximately 2 hours and 35 minutes

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

THE INTERVIEWEE: Lynice Ramsey Williams is an African-American, Christian woman born in 1948 in the Bronx, New York. She is the executive director of North Carolina Fair Share, a statewide people's advocacy, issue education and leadership development organization that works with low-wealth, unemployed, and working poor grassroots North Carolinians on grassroots issues and health care. NC Fair Share provides oppressed people the tools they need to fight their own battles for fairness. Lynice has taught community members about health care policy, organizing skills and leadership development strategies. This work has led NC legislators, Town Council members and County Commissioners to adopt and implement important health care policies that benefit those most in need. Lynice helped establish the *NC Fair Share People's Legislative Agenda* and the *NC Fair Share People's Advocacy Institute*, two programs that have significantly shaped the General Assembly's response to the needs of low-wealth North Carolinians. Lynice serves on the Board of the NC Alliance for Economic Justice and the Wake County Indigent and Uninsured Commission.

THE INTERVIEWER: Bridgette Burge graduated from Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee in 1995 with a degree in Anthropology/Sociology and a semester of intensive study of oral history theory and methodology. In 1995 and 1996, Burge and a colleague conducted fieldwork in Honduras, Central America collecting the oral histories of six Honduran women. She earned her master's degree in Anthropology from the University of Memphis in 1998. In 1999, she moved to North Carolina and served as North Carolina Peace

Action's state coordinator, and later as North Carolina Peace Action Education Fund's executive director. In 2005, Burge began her own consulting company to provide training, facilitation and planning to social change organizations. The same year, with the support of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Burge launched the project "Heirs to a Fighting Tradition: Oral Histories of North Carolina Social Justice Activists." The interviews from this project are archived at the Southern Historical Collection in the Wilson Library at UNC-Chapel Hill.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW: *March 12, 2008:* (I actually wrote these on July 18, 2008. Doh! Bad process to not do Fieldnotes right away.) It was a beautiful, sunny spring day in Raleigh—big blue sky and breezy, comfortable weather. We recorded in the back office of NC Fair Share. The room was being used for storage at this time, so we had to move some things around. I decided to record in mp3 format this time (and I can't remember why I switched from wav format since that's what Warren Wilson library wants and it's a better sound quality.) I used one Shure lapel microphone, which I attached to the top of a letter holder and positioned it in between Lynice and myself. It sounded okay. There is too much feedback using two lapel microphones, or I can't figure out the appropriate settings on the Marantz PMD 660 to make it work. One option is to just have the lapel mic on the interviewee, but that makes it harder for the transcriber to hear my questions, and there might be times we want to hear the exchange on recordings.

Lynice was full of life and vibrance as usual. In fact, I can't remember a time when I was around her that she seemed tired or dull in any way—no exaggeration. She exudes energy and kindness. Even her big, beaming smile and frequent laughter support that description of her energetic demeanor.

The interview went well. She's candid and lively. Near the end, I left the recorder going while we wrapped up. She began talking about Barak Obama's run for the democratic presidential nomination. When I said later that I was still recording, she was a bit surprised. I need to state to interviewees that I'm still recording when we take breaks or end the official interview so they don't feel misled. I learned to keep the recorder on in John Blythe's audio-documentary class at the Center for Documentary Studies. I was enrolled in that weekly class this spring.

Lynice expects for the release form that she signed to be revised. Russell Herman (Heirs Project planning team member) and I are still discussing copy write and right to use issues. We also want to have it deposited in more than one location. The release form the Warren Wilson Library of UNC prefers has them as having sole copy write and depositing the collection only there. We want to have copies available at a variety of places more accessible to communities and the organizations with which the interviewees work.

TRANSCRIPT—LYNICE RAMSEY-WILLIAMS

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START OF INTERVIEW

Bridgette Burge: Today is March 12, 2008. What time is it, Lynice?

Lynice Ramsey-Williams: I'm looking. My watch says 11:40.

BB: 11:40, okay. What time do you need to stop today?

LW: Probably at least by two.

BB: Okay, I think we'll be tired before that.

LW: So that gives us enough time because I have enough meeting at three.

BB: You need time to eat and breathe. So today is March 12, 2008. It is a Wednesday in Raleigh, North Carolina. This is an interview with Mrs. Lynice Ramsey Williams with Bridgette Burge as the interviewer. This is part of the project *Heirs to a Fighting Tradition: Oral Histories of North Carolina Social Justice Activists*. This is the first interview in what might be a series with Mrs. Lynice and we might finish today. So Lynice, would you start by saying your full name, today's date, and why you agreed to be part of the Heirs Project.

LW: My name is Lynice Ramsey Williams and today is March 12, 2008. The reason I am part of this is because I want to let my story be told so that others will know the importance of being involved in social change and working for justice.

BB: Tell me when and where you were born.

LW: I was born in Bronx, New York and I was born December eighth, 1948. This year I'm looking at my sixtieth birthday in December.

BB: Wow.

LW: So it's celebration time for me.

BB: Celebration time. Are there any stories of your birth that you know of?

LW: Yes. In fact, how I came about is somewhat of a miracle. After my mother and father had my brother, who is the oldest, my mother was told at the time of his birth that she would never have any more children because something had went wrong in regards to her uterus and things like that. So my mother and father are deeply religious and they began to, after my brother was close to five years old, they really had a yearning to have another child and they wanted another child real bad. So this is something that they did. They went on a special fast where they would restrict their food for a certain amount of time during the day and they went on a special prayer asking God to please bless them with another child and then they were very specific; they asked for a girl because they already had a son. Within a year, my mother was pregnant with me. And so I've always been told that I was a miracle child because it was already told to them that they would never have any more children and what had happened after I was born, there were three others born after me. So I'm the second of a family of five.

BB: Will you say your parents' names and your siblings' names?

LW: Yes, my mother's name is Mary Girtman Ramsey and my father's name is Ira Walter Ramsey. He is now deceased. He died in 1993. I have one sister, Iris Ramsey Robinson, and I have three brothers, Maynard Ramsey, Paul Ramsey, and Harold Ramsey.

BB: Do you have some interesting stories that come to mind about your parents?

LW: There's always interesting stories about my parents in a sense. My dad, he was a city worker for the New York City Department of Public Works and he was a union worker because he was in the union. That was one of the things that I learned even as growing up and I didn't understand everything at that time of people actually working within a union and what that all entails and what that meant, but I know that my father had pretty good benefits. We were a working-class family and then also I would consider, as I've been told from my mother a lot and my parents as I grew up, that we were poor. So he had like the basic kind of job with the city that didn't pay a whole lot, but he had good benefits and a decent salary, but not a whole lot of money. And my mother, as I grew up, was a stay-at-home mom. Again, it was the church that they were totally involved and we had to go to church all the time. It was part of our lives. My father was a very humorous person, always kept you laughing all the time. There wasn't a time that I can recall my dad really being a person who was down and out in a sense, regardless to the circumstances that we might have been in at different periods of their life. But he was a good, joyous type of person.

Then my mom, she was the strict person in a sense in the family. As we grew up, she was the one who would give the spankings and things like that, whereas my father, if he did spankings, it would be something that was really critical that we really just kind of needed it. But my mother was the stern one and so she was the one who really gave us strength as far as knowing that you'd better do what you needed to do because that was how you were supposed to be as a person and as an individual.

One of the things in growing up in the Bronx, when I was five years old, we moved to Woodside Houses Projects in Queens, New York and when I had moved there with my

family at that time, it was all children were born when we moved to Woodside Houses. My youngest brother was born when we were at the Projects, Harold. When we moved there, one of the things that used to happen, I know when I was growing up, when we would go to school and the public school—the junior high school, and the high school was all surrounded outside of the Projects, and then there were private homes all in the edges of the Projects where there were just private homes and the schools were on the inside as well—so as a child growing up in the housing project, you were always ridiculed from children who lived on the outside of the Projects all the time that “you live in this poor place.”

One of the things that I really always admired about my parents is that they taught us that no matter where we live, we were always individuals, we were children of substance, and that it didn’t matter where we lived; it mattered what we would make of ourselves. So that was one of the strong points that I felt that really helped me in regards to growing up in a housing project, which is nowadays, it always seems like it might not be as far as when you’re raised up, nothing good is supposed to come out of housing projects. But I’m here to say that I feel real good about what has come out of the housing projects, not only myself, but others, my friends that we grew up with. There’s doctors, there’s lawyers, there’s nurses, there’s musicians, good folk who have come out and we’ve finished school. We’ve done, I think, considerably a lot of good things. So that’s not a true thing at all. That’s another thing, I think, that has steered me towards the work that I’m in even now.

Also while we lived in the projects, one of the things that my father always used to do was go around asking people “did you want things better” in the sense that a lot of times, we would see where garbage might not have been taken out at certain times and different things that just would occur in the housing projects as you lived there and I always noticed my

father would be going around talking to people all the time about getting this done and doing this. I used to wonder, "Why is Dad always getting involved with other people's work and their lives or what have you?" But then it's, as I got older that I realized the impact that he had in regards to trying to make sure that people realized what they needed to do to make things better for themselves. So that carried a lot in my mind and in my spirit because I recall him constantly doing that all the time. That resonates with me a lot.

So in my growing up, that's something that I'd seen and noticed about my parents, that they were doers. Most times, when there were people who didn't have, and we hardly had enough for ourselves, but my mother and my father, they always shared. There would be people who would knock on our door asking for food or trying to make ends meet and I always noticed my father and mother would give, a lot of times at their disadvantage in a sense because it was five of us that were there, but they always gave. And all of that resonated in my spirit a lot. So during the course of time in my life growing up, those are some of the things that I'd seen about my parents that really resonates with me and stays with me.

BB: It sounds like they were natural community organizers.

LW: Right.

BB: It's in your blood.

LW: (laughs) Right. Yeah, that's what I see in growing up; that's what I see. That's what I see.

BB: Do you have stories about your grandparents?

LW: I was just going to get to that. One of the things that my mother always would really teach us about was her father and her mother. And her father was a person who

refused—he always had his own business, what you might say, because he was like a farmer. He grew orange and grapefruit groves.

BB: Where did he live and would you say his name?

LW: In Apokar, Florida. His name was George Girtman and he was like 6'4, very tall, distinguished kind of gentleman. One of the things that my mom always talked about, her father in particular, and I only had the opportunity of knowing him until I was about six years old because he died when I was, but I remember him because we would go from New York and go to Florida to go and see our grandparents and then naturally, they would come up to New York as well. But one of the things that she would always teach us is that he always said that he would never work for anybody, never work for a white person. He wanted his own, own business at all times, and so he owned and purchased property. Each time that he grew his groves larger, he would purchase more property, because he would able to do that because he would sell his oranges and grapefruits throughout his community and even outside of the community. And one of the things that he did is that he also, in purchasing property, he purchased cemetery plots for all of his family. My mother grew up in a family of fourteen; they had fourteen children. He made sure that everybody had a cemetery plot. He did just all of this fantastic stuff.

And of the other thing that he did, where he bought his property was on the white side of town and he had to constantly fight the Klu Klux Klan that tried to take his property at all times. He always was in these fights and my mother would talk about the times when the Klu Klux Klan would come up on the property and my grandfather had a load of guns because he was always ready to fight and he would just shoot off his guns because they would come through the orange groves because they were around the house, the orange groves, and he

would shoot off his guns and that's how the Klan would say, "Well, that is a crazy man, that Girtman man," and that's how he kept them away is through fear. She always would talk about that, how her father had to fight to have everything that he had.

The great thing about that, my mother now, her and my father when they moved from New York, they retired to her father's property down in Apokar, Florida because he always wanted this property to be for his children and my mother and her sister and one brother moved down to Florida as a result of having that property there. My mother sits now at that property. That's where her home is, where her and my father retired at. The astonishing thing about that is that we were able, in having family reunions, we would be back at the property of my grandfather, which is all the family members and all come back to this property. As my grandchildren were born, my grandson was christened on this property by his grandfather, which is my husband, who is a minister. And my father, who was living at that time, when he was christened, and his great-grandfather, and you figure that this was on his great-great-grandfather's property. It was so deep, but my mother always told us about these struggles.

Then my grandfather was in the Masons. That's another (14:25) kind of organization. He was very, very, very, he was like a third-degree Mason, so he was very involved in the Masons as well. So he was a strong individual and if you've seen pictures of him, you'll see this man who stands so tall and you can see by the stature of him that he was a strong individual. My mother's mother, she was a minister and she went throughout the country preaching. She was best friends with Mary Bethune. My mother tells us all the stories. There's pictures with my grandmother and her and so we have this history that shows that my grandparents, who I feel they run in my bloodstream, and that resonates with me. Okay,

Lynice, maybe these are the things and this is why you're who you are because my mother never let us forget from where we come from.

That's some of the things in regards to my grandparents, who I think were really significant players also in organizing and also being engaged in entrepreneurship and building their own business and knowing that this is the way in which, if people want liberation, you really should be able to own what you have so that you don't be beholden to other people. That was something that my mother always taught us and something that was imbedded in her and it was taught to us from our grandparents as well. So yeah, I come from lineage, as they say. So that's some of the things in regards to my grandparents.

BB: Great stories. Wow, I got chills a few times. What a blessing, your lineage.

LW: Yes.

BB: So are there any stories about how your grandfather got that land in Florida?

LW: Well, he basically worked for it. He worked, like I said. He began with small pieces. He started, I believe my mother said, with one acre. He saved up money and then he began to grow and plant seeds in regards to his orange groves and his grapefruit groves because that was something he always wanted to do. Then it went out to acres and acres as time went on and this was all stuff that he did. He began. His friends helped him with maintaining the orange and grapefruit groves and then naturally, they would have the harvest time where they would have to pick and being that he had fourteen children, that was a big help as well because they would work all the time in the groves. My mom would always talk about how tired she was, but he had fourteen kids to help with all of that. That's how he did it and he worked real hard to maintain it and to make sure that it was something that stayed

within the family. So he worked very hard and so those are the things that I know of as far as how it came about. That's what my mom always talked about.

BB: This is so crazy, but can I ask you to take off your little bracelet because it taps? Isn't that funny? It's so funny, sometimes by the end of interviews, we're half-dressed. I've got my rings off. Sorry. Okay, that's good. Let's see. What is the furthest back in your lineage that you know about your ancestry?

LW: Well, from my mother's information that she tells me and we have some information that's written down from an aunt, my mother's sister, who documented some of the lineage, it goes back to slavery. My mother's mother's grandmother, I think that's where it is, was a slave and we have that information. We don't know exactly where she was brought at or what. I know there's also slavery from my grandfather as well. My father's parents were from Barbados because it's the West Indies. So I don't know, other than my grandmother, who came, who was here, I don't know much about their background per se because my grandfather died before I was born and I just didn't know him. My father didn't talk very much about his lineage. I know that his mother, because she had him young and then she asked my great-grandmother to raise him and so I know more about, I call her my Grandma Redder and my Great-grandmother Ruby. That was also his grandmother and his great-grandmother. Those were the two that were significant in his life because those were the people who he was raised by. Then his mother came back into his life as he was older and I remember that as well. So I didn't know much other than they were from Barbados and the lineage of his grandmother was just a fantastic person as far as being a person who also, she had her own business as far as cooking and things like that. But I don't know a lot in regards to how far back as far as his lineage his concerned.

But my mother's, I have that. There is some documentation that we have in regards to that, that her mother's mother, that she was a slave, and her father's father goes back into slavery. So we do have documentation. So it would be interesting to dig more deeply into that. We've talked about that a lot at family reunions, how we want to do that where we can look at the tree and look back and look through records and things like that to find out just where because we have such a large family, being there were fourteen children on my mother's side. It's a lot of cousins and uncles and a whole lot of folk. But it would be good to find out in regards to the backgrounds.

BB: Other than union work, do you remember your parents being involved in anything political when you were young? In addition to union work and organizing in your community there in the housing project, were there other specifics, like a politician maybe that they were fired up about or the civil rights movement?

LW: Well, they got really engaged and involved when they also joined, it's the House of the Lord Church in Brooklyn, New York with Rev. Herbert Daughtrey, who is this renowned liberation theology minister, black liberation theology as well, who is an activist minister. That's the church that my husband and I joined. When we were in New York, we went to Brooklyn and joined because we were looking for a church that was relevant, that made the Gospel relevant, and that's a church that we went to as a result of my husband. He wrote a small pamphlet book in regards to our people and the circumstances that they're facing and why they're facing these circumstances and what needs to happen to make the change. And he sent this little booklet out all throughout New York to all these ministers to find out if they were interested in getting or ordering some more and Rev. Daughtrey was the only one that responded back to him out of all of these churches in New York. We did all our

little savings and sent this out and he was the one who responded because my husband was speaking of making the Gospel relevant to the times and Rev. Daughtrey was the only one who responded and that's how we got to his church.

In going there, then my parents joined. It was like a few years later, they joined the church as well and that's where I see my parents really become activists because this church was totally about activism. We would go Sunday morning to a service and then Sunday afternoon after service, we might be in some march that's happening addressing some issue that had happened within the community. And that's just the way that our church was in New York, totally involved in community. We always had representatives and legislators and city councilpeople at our church talking and bringing the issues before the people. We were always involved in voting rights, voter engagement work. One of the things that I thought that was so phenomenal, when I was in New York, my husband and I, we would do all of this type of organizing work and we would do all of this community work and I never thought that they were jobs that you can get to get paid for this kind of work because when I moved here, that's when I first learned that wow, there's actually organizing jobs that you can get paid for. I had no idea.

But up there, that's when I really seen my parents really become really involved and engaged because they were heavily involved and engaged in the work at The House of the Lord, where they got involved with voter registration and like I said, all types of forums and just legislative work and things like that. That's where I really seen them become even more active. I got to experience that with watching them be involved and engaged like that. It was a good thing.

BB: So tell me your husband's name and how you all met.

LW: His name is [Rev.] James Williams Sr. He has no middle name, which I thought is so unique, but he doesn't have a middle name. James and I met in church. It was a church in Queens, New York. It was in Corona. It was there. It was the strangest thing. When I went to the church, James was already there and he used to sit by the organ in the church and naturally, my mom, who spelled it out to me, she said, "That boy just keeps looking at you." I looked over and I looked at him and at that time, I said, "I don't know why he's looking at me because I don't think anything of him at all." My mom said, "No, there's something about him. He seems like he's so nice and calm," and things like that. My head was just someplace else and not paying him any attention at all, but he was there and he would just constantly stare at me and finally, there was a wedding of the pastor's daughter of that church. She had gotten married and we were at the reception. We were in the reception hall and James was sitting down. I kind of was walking towards him and he said to me, "Lynice, you look so beautiful. Are you the bride?" And I said to him, "No, I'm not the bride. I'm here at the wedding." He said, "You look so beautiful."

And I don't know, it just resonated in my spirit that wow, he thinks of me as looking like that and so we began to talk. We talked for hours and he would call and I would call. Some people at laugh at the experiences that we've had in going together and there would be times that he would call and we would just be on the phone and not saying one word, me saying, "What do you want to do?" And he would just say, "I want to just listen to you breathe." And we tell people this story and they would just really laugh because it's so funny where you could be so in love until it's like the littlest things that just seem so ridiculous. He would be on the phone with me for hours and we might not say one word and he would say he was just listening to me breathe. It was just so things that just really, really got me. So we

got married. We got married right out of high school. We were very young and we got married.

BB: What year was this?

LW: This was 1965.

BB: Say it one more time.

LW: 1965.

BB: I'll be quiet and you say, "This was 1965."

LW: This was 1965 and so we got married right out of high school. Then we had to really struggle because then I got pregnant and we wind up going to school at night because we were determined to finish school and things like that. So we struggled as a young couple, but we were in the church and I think that that's what made a significant difference in our marriage is because we were in the church and the church was like the foundation of who we were, also even with our marriage because we, as individuals, we were young. So we really had to have something to keep us together and to be a young couple struggling. What we wind up doing is that we wind up also getting an apartment in Woodside Houses where I had grew up at. We wind up getting an apartment in Woodside Houses and my mom and dad lived within walking distance of us. So they were able to see their grandchild and then four years later, I had my son, but we were in walking distance from my mom and I think that had a lot also to do with it as well because I always had an anchor of support around us.

That was back then and like I said, that's where I met him at is in the church. We've always been active because like I said, from that church, that's where we went to Herbert Daughtrey's church because that was when he began to get involved in writing and just sort of putting pieces together as the church needing to really identify with our communities and

be engaged in the communities and be active in bringing some changes about. And like I said, Rev. Herbert Daughtrey was the only one who had responded to this booklet that we had put our monies together to write and that's where I met James and we've been married ever since, some forty-three years now this year in July. It's just phenomenal and I just thank God. That's basically where we're at right now; so I'm thankful.

BB: So were some of the things you've loved about Rev. Williams over the years?

LW: Actually to see someone grow up because we grew up together. I think to actually see that is so significant, to have a person in your life who's really been with you throughout your life, to see the changes, because both of us have changed and evolved. That's something that I think has been very, very significant. When I married him, he wasn't a minister. He became a minister. He was twenty-five years old. At first, I was saying, "Oh, my gosh, a minister. This is so heavy." But when he was at Herbert Daughtrey's church, he felt the call to ministry and that's where he was ordained and became a minister, an activist minister. So I think that over the years, just seeing this man evolve and he's been an enormous activist as a result of, like I said, being a part of the ministry at The House of the Lord, he himself taking on a lot of issues. As we moved here to North Carolina, he was a part of Grassroots Leadership. He's also been engaged in several things in regards to issues, a whole lot of good work here in North Carolina as well. So just being with him and being a part of his life, sharing the opportunity to have two children with him, we have a daughter and a son.

BB: Will you say their names and the dates they were born?

LW: It's James Williams Jr. He is the youngest, I should say, and he was born May twenty-third, 1969. That's why I was thinking '69. Then it's Latrice Williams McKnight and

I'll tell you about her family as well and his family as well because both of them are married now and have children as well. Latrice was born October twelfth, 1965.

BB: What were some of your early paid jobs? I wrote it down, but I'm forgetting now. You worked from like '71 to—this was still in New York at the New York City Transportation Administration, a communications operator from 1971 to 1976. So will you say, "I worked as...from" and then what your role was there.

LW: Right. Yeah, I worked for the Department of Transportation for the city of New York. I was a city worker. I also belonged to DC-37, the union. For that job, I was a communications operator. It was really like a telephone operator in a sense, but we did all the telephone calls in regards to any traffic lights that was down in the city of New York, any of the stop signs that were down, when there was alternative street parking. In the city of New York, there's days where there's alternate street parking where you can't park your car on one particular side of the street. We would control all of those phone calls. It was an enormous amount of work in the sense where people would be calling in in regards to traffic lights down and it could be anywhere in the city. The Department of Transportation where I was at, the other side of it, you had your communications center and within the communications center, that department would handle the traffic light controls throughout the whole city. So it was a pretty hefty kind of place because at that time—in fact, my husband and I were talking about it the other night—the computers were these big giant cabinets with reel-to-reel tapes on them and that were the computers that controlled the traffic lights in New York, big giant rooms of these big cabinets. When I think about where we've gone from then to now, I know everything now is on probably a little console controlling the traffic lights throughout the city. It was just real interesting to see how this

was done. So this whole department, which is really big because it was, like I said, the transportation department is the department that I worked for, but the communications department was where I actually did my work and we had a whole switchboard, a long line switchboard. It was about six of us who were operators that would take all of the phone calls. Then we would have to patch that information that we might have gathered from the phone into the communications unit that would then make sure that the traffic lights get repaired and things like that.

So it was a pretty interesting job and what I liked about it was the benefits. So it was good. It was a pretty decent salary. It wasn't a whole, whole lot, but it was a decent salary. And that's where I really learned how to communicate with people because you were dealing with the public a whole lot because that's who would call you all the time. So you had to learn the skills of communication. You had to make sure you had everything accurate because you couldn't say a traffic light was down on 125th Street when really it was on 127th because then it would really mess up a lot of things in regards to people being dispatched out to that particular area. So you really had to be on your P's and Q's a lot. I learned a lot about how to communicate, how to make sure you take accurate information, and things like that. It was a good place, a good place to work, a busy place to work, and I enjoyed the work; I really did. So it was good.

And I enjoyed being a part of DC-37, the union itself, because every now and then, they would have meetings and you would be engaged. You tried to make sure that if there were new workers, that if they came on, that they would become a part of the union as well. So I had some little pieces then, not totally being engaged like I am now, in union organizing

because that was a role of informing people as they came on that they needed to join DC-37, to get the information to them and things like that. So it was a good job. I enjoyed it.

BB: And I'll bet your dad supported your union work.

LW: Yes. (laughs) In fact, my parents were very involved with making sure that I tried to get a city job because they felt like that was something that was really stable and then being engaged and involved in a union, that would really make sure that you were secure, getting retirement, and all that kind of good stuff. So yeah, they were very involved in helping me to do that.

BB: So what year did you all move? It looks like it maybe around '76 or '77 that you all moved.

LW: That's right, it was '77.

BB: So what was involved in the transition from New York to North Carolina?

LW: Right. Well, in '76, James and I, we had moved out of the house in the Projects. We had bought our home out in Camber Heights, Long Island. At that time, he again was involved in ministry and we had a fire at our home and we literally lost everything that we had except for the clothes on our backs basically. We're thankful the children and we weren't in the house at the time. It was during the day that we had this fire. The house that we had purchased was old and the wiring within the house had gone bad in some type of way. That morning, I had finished ironing and had taken the plug out, at least that's what I remembered, taking the plug out, and apparently there was some kind of spark that had happened. That's what the fire department said because the fire was within the wall that had sparked out of the wall itself. And we had a fire and from that fire experience, we did the renovations in the house, but there was a friend in the church at that time who had moved to North Carolina and

James said he felt and heard a spark within his spark and his mind that we needed to come here to start a ministry, carry the same type of ministry as Rev. Herbert Daughtrey at The House of the Lord here in North Carolina. And we came. I left a city job. (laughs) He had a pretty good job as well. He did ministry, but he still was working full-time because he was in the church working as an associate minister with Herbert Daughtrey. He felt the leading to come here and start a ministry and be in the work here in North Carolina in the South.

At that particular time, as active as I was even with the church and all, it was still very hard to leave my family, to leave my roots. I had never lived in the South before and I had all these horrible feelings about it. I knew, all I was thinking was hangings and outdoor toilets and the whole works. I don't want to raise my kids in this environment, uh uh. I had these horrible feelings about the South as a person living in the North all the time. When I moved here, I could say it was one of the best decisions that we decided to do. My children flourished in the schools. It was really one of the best decisions that we could have possibly made to live in the South and to raise our children. Our children were very young when they moved here, so they were in the schools. When we left New York, our daughter was in gifted classes and they were very good students and when they came here, they got involved in the schools and we made sure that when we moved that, that the classes and different things were accurate and all. But it was one of the best decisions that we made and I'm so thankful that we moved to the South. Given a person just moving from the North to the South, there was a lot of adjustments that I had to get knowledge of, but it was wonderful. I really am glad. I am so glad to this day that we've moved here to North Carolina.

BB: What were some of the adjustments?

LW: The pace. The pace here was much slower and I think the slower is a good thing. New York, the hustle and the bustle, you're rushing around so much. You don't even really get to smile at people. Here people speak because you have that relaxed kind of atmosphere where people wave at one another. You're not rushing as much even in my work and maybe we'll get to that, but I noticed that here it's different. It's a different way to do organizing. It's a different way to do community work. It's a different way to work on issues. In New York, an issue was there and you just hopped on it and you got to it and that was it. Here I notice in working in the South, you build relationships. That's number one, before you can even think about getting totally engaged in an issue itself. So it's the building of the relationships that's the long-term stability for things to happen.

BB: Will you say that one more time, "It's the building of the relationships."

LW: It's the building of the relationships for the long-term sustainability of working on issues that needs to happen and that's what I've found and learned when I moved here to North Carolina and especially as I began the work in regards to working on issues and working for change.

BB: So tell me about that. So you got here in '77 and then what did you do for that first ten years before you go involved with the NC Hunger Coalition?

LW: Right. For the first ten years, I had been employed with Wake Medical Center as a human resource analyst. Yeah, that was the name of it. At that particular job, because my education in business, what it was is that I was involved in the human resources department and then in that particular position, it was basically you did a lot of information and things like that for the employees of the hospital. One of the things that I noticed when I first moved to Raleigh and then when I was employed at Wake Medical Center is that they didn't have a

union. So the working conditions were a lot different. I could not believe, first of all, the salaries when I first moved here. From the difference of salaries that you would make in the North, I was just astonished on how much less you make in salaries.

BB: What was the salary more or less?

LW: When I first moved here and worked at Wake Medical Center, I believe it was two dollars and sixty cents an hour.

BB: I'm sorry, would you say that again because I cleared my throat and it's a little unbelievable.

LW: (laughs) I know. I was totally taken when I first moved here and I had college education. It was two dollars and sixty-five cents, I believe, an hour. That was in the 70s.

BB: And in New York?

LW: And in New York, when I left New York, I was at twelve dollars, I think it was like twelve dollars an hour because I was a union worker, I worked for the city of New York, and the salary was good. That's right. So it was like night and day. But the other thing I noticed when I moved here is that housing was cheaper, your food was cheaper, and everything basically was along the lines of the salary. So things were a little bit different in regards to your living expenses, but still I found that the salaries were unbelievable. And everybody that I spoke with, who I worked with, were all graduates of college and so it wasn't like, okay, this is just for high school people or what have you. This was the going salary at that time and I just couldn't believe it. But even prior to working at Wake Med, I worked in temporary positions for the state of North Carolina and then went to Wake Medical Center in '78, I believe it was, yeah, '78, because I worked there for ten years; it was almost ten years that I worked there.

While I was there, in the evenings I still would do community work because my husband was very involved in the community. Our children were still young, so I didn't do as much work out in the community in the evenings that he was able to do because I would tell him, "Okay, you go," and he would say okay, he was going to this meeting or going to that meeting or traveling here or traveling there. But the thing was that I realized that the children had to go to school, had to do different things in order to make a home happen, which I did. And the thing was that as they got older though, I began to do more things within the community. I started working at the Women's Center for Raleigh and I started doing volunteer work there.

BB: Doing what work?

LW: At that time, I was a facilitator for sometimes workshops there. I also served as a counselor there for women who would come in who had different issues going on in their lives. And the Women's Center served as a catalyst for women in the city of Raleigh to just learn career skills, to get counseling on personal matters, to also network with other women. We also would have different workshops and things like that. We did a lot of work with prisons, women in prison. We worked there doing workshops with women who were getting ready to come out of prison. I was involved in that. It was just an array of things. I learned more skills at the Women's Center as well and I thoroughly enjoyed it. So I began to work in the evenings. Sometimes naturally, my family, the children would be home from school and then everything was set and I would go back out to the different little meetings and things like that.

So I got involved at the Women's Center and then after that, I got involved also with the YWCA on Hargett Street. And the Hargett Street YWCA is based in the black

community and there's also another YWCA, which was on Oberlin Road, but the one on Hargett Street didn't have as many services or didn't have even the same kind of resources that the Y on Oberlin Road would. So the position that I had in the volunteer work that I did with the Y was serving on their committee of administration. What we would do is try to help with raising funds for the Y. We would try to make sure that more resources got to the Y to be able to do more work within the community. I also did workshops and things like that with the Y as well. One of the things that I thought was very significant is as I completed work with the Women's Center and I worked there for a number of years, I also was put in their hall of fame, the Women's Center volunteer hall of fame, which still is there now to this day with a plaque that's there. But that's where I really, really became really involved as well with issues that were going on with women here in the city of Raleigh.

The other piece of the work that we did was working with the city of Raleigh Housing Project. It was the Housing Authority and the city of Raleigh Housing Authority had a single parent component to it, which we from the Women's Center, women of color that came together, and we began to work with single parents with the Housing Authority. So we did all kinds of leadership development work, career development work with single parents with the city of Raleigh and I was just totally involved in that work, which to me was so gratifying because you would see a lot of the single parents really develop and go onto careers and just really become stronger women overall in knowing that they can make it even with being single parents.

So the work evolved that I was doing as a volunteer and as I was working at Wake Medical Center, I realized that this is where I really wanted to be. Wake Medical Center, as the salary began to go up a little bit, afforded me a good job and they had good benefits and

things like that and it was good for my family with working and James, even though he was in ministry, still working full-time as well, but I had a yearning in my spirit that I wanted to be more involved and engaged in community because this is where I felt my spirit was. But I had no idea that there were jobs available or open. I believe it was in '87, I heard about the North Carolina Hunger Coalition and the person who approached me, because we were doing some community work with the Hunger Coalition and they were working on food stamp issues and things like that. We went to a community meeting and was engaged in that, but the thing was that they said that there was going to be an opening for an assistant director for the organization.

And I just said at that time, "This is what I really want to do." I said, "I didn't know that there was paid positions, that you could actually get paid." You weren't guaranteed a salary because they were upfront with you at first that you didn't know for sure if funds would run out; they could run out at any time. I decided then that I wanted to just go ahead and take that leap, and James and I talked about. He knew that that was something that was in my spirit to do and I took the job with the North Carolina Hunger Coalition and at that time, we had the Hands Across America money, which you know was something that was a large national initiative where people gave into Hands Across America to stop hunger in America. In North Carolina, the Hunger Coalition for North Carolina had the bulk of that monies to do the work here in North Carolina and then also to dispense out to other hunger efforts around the state. So I felt like it was pretty secure at least for the time being.

So our work there was very significant because we worked on legislative work around food stamps. Even though that's a federal program, but we had to be sure here at the state that things were distributed and that people were being educated about the food stamp

program overall and that it was a way in which, an effort to end hunger, at least to try to anyway. Hunger and poverty issues is the bulk of what we did there at the North Carolina Hunger Coalition. It was exciting work. I was introduced to working on public policy at the Hunger Coalition and then also we used to always work with communities, especially public housing communities, low-income communities, to get people engaged and involved on the hunger issues and poverty issues overall. And so that's when I really came into, you might say, the full circle in the sense of, okay, this is exactly, exactly what I want to be doing. I know this is a lifer for me as far as really trying to make a difference in people's lives because we would engage the people from the communities to go and talk with their public officials. We would take people to Washington to talk with public officials at the national level on food stamp issues and hunger issues. And that's what kept me really involved and engaged to know that this is what I want to do.

Needless to say, after a year and a half, our funds ran out and it was so devastating in a sense because we knew what we were doing was the right thing to do and at that time, the director decided that she felt like this was something that we didn't need to continue. And I felt so bad about that because she had tried several ways to try to raise money and it just wasn't happening.

BB: Will you say the director of the Hunger and say her name?

LW: Oh, Blance Lyons at that time. When the Hunger Coalition started in North Carolina, Jennifer Henderson, which is a long-time civil rights activist who now, well, she went to work for the Center for Community Change and now I believe she's out in California working. I don't know exactly what she's doing out there. But the Hunger Coalition was a renowned organization that worked on poverty issues for North Carolina at that time during

its day as one of the strong organizations that was known for working on poverty issues overall. But like I said, Blance, when we had gotten to that stage, it was more or less a feeling that we couldn't go on and I felt so defeated after leaving Wake, which all the friends at Wake were saying, "You can't depend on working at a non-profit because you might have a job and you may not." And I still felt that this is what I wanted to do.

Strangely enough, during the course of our work with the North Carolina Hunger Coalition, with having community meetings and things like that, I was introduced to North Carolina Fair Share. It was just starting and they were just starting to collaborate with organizations who were working on poverty issues and that's when I became just kind of having meetings with Fair Share at that time. The director at that time was Lisa Walper, was the executive director of North Carolina Fair Share. I kind of knew of Fair Share's work and while the Hunger Coalition was closing down, I learned of an opening for an organizer at North Carolina Fair Share and that's how I came to North Carolina Fair Share is putting in my application and explaining to Lisa Walper I was interested in the job and then meeting with the board of director of North Carolina Fair Share, which was really one of the largest interviews that I've had. They had the full board I had to meet with. It was like twelve people and it was a large, large interview. It took a long time and they were very thorough and this was one of the first interviews that I've had that was this intensive, but I came out of it feeling so assured. I just said, "I really want this job and I just believe that I have it and with prayer."

Sure enough, I think it was the next week they had called and said that I was selected for the position, which I was so excited about because at that time, we were based on Person Street, which was in walking distance of the General Assembly. And our work was primarily

at that time, Fair Share had started off with working on energy issues with CPNL against the Shearon Harris nuclear plant, trying to make sure that it didn't get built and then also looking at the rate hikes that were going to happen with people as a result of Shearon Harris being built. So we worked against that and then also we began to take up health care as the number one issue. I was hired as a community organizer to begin to organize across the state with people to get them engaged in working on health care access and reform.

BB: How did you understand what community organizing is?

LW: I think from my experience at the Hunger Coalition, knowing that community organizing was really trying to make sure that people within communities begin to define, one, their issue, and then two, begin to work on that particular issue to make change. For me, that was very significant and I'm glad that those type of roots was instilled in me even from the time in New York in working within communities, just making sure that people are engaged in making the process of change happen. So for me, that was community organizing overall and how it started.

BB: Do you see that as different than activism in any way?

LW: I think activism is somewhat different in a sense because activism could be one individual doing what it is that they see as being active and being engaged in a particular issue or working on change, and there's good activists that's all around everywhere throughout the world, but I think when it's community organizing, then that's different in that sense because community organizing and being a community organizer—

BB: I'm sorry, you've got to say it one more time because your hand went right in front of it. You started by saying, "But I think community organizing." Go ahead.

LW: But I think community organizing, your sense of being engaged is to engage community at levels which they themselves can work on the issue, win on the issue, do the solution of the issue, so that they can say, "Look what we've done as a community." To me, it's somewhat different between being an activist and being a community organizer or community organizing.

BB: So what stands out as a real story of victory in your time with the Hunger Coalition and the story of—well, I guess you really talked about the story of feeling devastated about funding running out. Was there a real victory that stands out for you?

LW: Yeah, to me the victory with the Hunger Coalition was we'd seen the usage of food stamps, that people were educated on the food stamp issue. Also mothers, women and infants with children, we'd seen that program increase as a result, women who were pregnant, who were single parents, getting the kind of resources that they needed for their children. That was victorious for us because we'd seen that we had some kind of impact with hunger and with poverty. Also having people themselves engaged in public policy issues as well as knowing that their voices needed to be heard and that their voices were significant.

So to me, that was some of the big victories and the challenges were funding. I think that even now when you look at community-based organizations that work on community organizing issues and really try to work at the grassroots level with people, our resources is not an inkling of what it is on organizations that don't do that type of work. So it's always, I think, a challenge in regards to funding. We're trying to just stay above water and trying to make sure that you can maintain a sense of presence just to keep your machines running or your telephones running and things like that, just like basics overall. Again it comes to how dedicated you are because there are times when you don't have a salary and you have to

make the decisions to keep the doors open or to continue in the work, and it only comes from dedication and commitment to make sure that this work happens, that it goes on because if it was based on—I always say the revolution will never be funded. So that's what it's really based on is commitment and dedication.

And the uniqueness of Fair Share's work is that people are engaged in the work. We have chapters. So there's people within communities that are brought into the work of the organization as a whole because it's their organization. So that keeps the sustainability going as well and the work going because people are in it for the long haul and so seeing community members become leaders within their own communities and taking on leadership roles, solving issues within their communities, being engaged in the issues, knowing who are the targets, how do you or what (**63:22**) do you need to put in place to make things happen, to make change happen, that to me is the most significant things and the most awesome things of the work itself.

BB: So it sounds like there have been times that you've gone without getting paid.

LW: Plenty of times. (laughs) Over the years, plenty of times. Even here at Fair Share, plenty of times. It's almost the norm sometimes, but yeah, plenty of times because you make those kind of decisions. The work itself—and I'm so thankful. James has a decent job that kind of carries the load when I don't have--. So yeah to me, it's the staff and the overhead of the organization that we are able to sustain, making sure that we are getting our information out, the education materials that people need, those kind of things. So yeah, there's been times, plenty of times that I've had to go without salary. It's just like (**64:25**) at times, not as much, but at times. It's hard work when it comes down to making sure that you

get enough resources and stuff. It's difficult, but it's wonderful work. I wouldn't trade it for anything.

BB: What was involved in the transition from your role as community organizer with NC Fair Share to executive director?

LW: That was really to me a challenge. One is because in your mind and in your heart, you're always still a community organizer. I mean, that doesn't leave you. Your work evolves where you are doing more administrative work, especially more even in-depth, fundraising, things like that. But there is still a part of you that is still a community organizer because I still go to community meetings, still travel within the state to some of the chapters. So you're still engaged, but there is a transition that you make because it's more on the administrative part of the organization that you serve, organizing a board of directors and working with them. It's a difference and it was a transition for me because community organizing is really what I really love, but the thing is that I do realize too that you still have the mindset and that's how your work is driven as well is that you know that in keeping with the mission, in keeping with who the organization is, that community organizing is still part of your mindset as even you do the work of executive director. So it was a transition, but I still do work still because I wear many hats even as executive director, where still some of my work still keeps me in touch with the people and doing community organizing.

BB: What have been some victories in the chapters that stand out for you over the years?

LW: Oh gosh. It's just amazing when I think about some of the work that has gone on within the chapters. Our Holly Springs chapter was able to get clean water and sewer after suffering many years with contaminated water people were living with and didn't think that

they could do anything about it. They basically were buying their water, which was a big expense for them because people were on limited income, but it was until they realized that there was something that they could actually do about this and took it on. This was a nine-year fight that people hung in there and worked on. When they first approached their town council in Holly Springs, they were laughed at that: "We just can't afford to get you new water. I'm sorry, but there's nothing that we can really do about it. Come back and tell us." They actually said to people within the community, "Come back and tell us how this could be done." And that gave them even more of a fight and a force to really research, begin to research and realize what could be done to get their community water and sewer. This was a community that had actually seen redevelopment going on all around them, where \$800,000 homes were being built all around them, and the resources of even gas lines were stopped just as they got to their communities, paved roads, nothing, everything just in the surrounding new development. So these were people who were determined.

BB: And was there disparity of racial makeup of these areas?

LW: Very much disparity. We have a large newspaper article that was done in the disparities within the Triangle that really showed how the people within this community of all this redevelopment that was going on, how there was yet a community that was just left out. This is happening all over the state, but the community got organized. That's our Wake County chapter that's based in Holly Springs. They began to go around door to door to people and find out if you want new water and sewer, get involved and get engaged with this work. They began to do their research with getting the health department to come out and test their wells. That was the one thing that they had to do was even prove that their wells and their water was contaminated, which they did. So they got over two hundred homes tested.

All homes tested for, they had e coli and all kinds of other contaminants in their water. With them bringing that type of information to the town council, they not only brought it to the town council, they brought it to the state legislature. They brought samples of their water to the legislature where they had a press conference before going inside to meet with their particular senator as well as their representative and asking them, "Would you drink this? Would you bathe in it?" And they brought that to the town council: "Would you drink this? Would you bathe in it?" I think with press and media covering this and with people telling their stories, we were able to do a whole booklet that really spelled out the story of Holly Springs where people are actually talking about their story of what they've gone through and how they've organized to make clean water come to their neighborhood.

They, to me, was evidence of one of the—we've had several victories that I'll speak to, but this was one where you are actually seeing the evidence of the work that was put in, and like I said, it took them nine years. They became annexed into the town of Holly Springs, which also gave them other resources with garbage pickup, police, the whole bit, fire department. So they'd seen their community change for the better as a whole because not only did they get water and sewer, but they got these services that's included with being involved and annexed into the town. All through this process, which I really wanted to make sure of, people were educated. What is annexation? What is it to have a water and sewer system put in versus having the wells? How much more money is this going to be for you? How much more in taxes is it going be? We always had community meetings with public officials coming and talking and educating people on the what and the hows of this new effort that you're working on and that you're organizing on. People were totally educated. They knew exactly what they were doing. They were involved in the whole process.

It was just a very, very phenomenal experience with seeing that. As a result of that, people are still banded together. They're working now. Many of them are beginning now to look at running for office. They're working on other resources coming into their community. There's no recreation center. All the recreation centers for the children are in the other areas, but there's no recreation center, there's no library. They're working on these kind of things now coming into their community. There's a lot of changes going on in Holly Springs where some of the people who were there from the very beginning, the settlers there, which was started by African-American people, the history is there, but that's something that the town is trying to even change, the history. They're acting as if this new development is what really started Holly Springs.

BB: They're whitewashing history. They're whitewashing the history.

LW: So there's an effort now by the people to push it to make sure that that stays in place, the history, and so that's something that they're working on to be sure that that happens. There's this band of people and it's developing. They're working on voter registration issues. They're a band of people who are working to make sure that their community is constantly evolving for the better and that's one experience.

BB: Hang on just a second before we--.

[break in conversation to adjust recording equipment]

BB: Okay. You were about to tell another story of victory.

LW: Right, right. For me too, one of the others was down east. We have a Pender County Fair Share chapter down east, which is based in Maple Hill, North Carolina. What we've seen is in the city of Burgaw, which is where the hospital is, Pender County Memorial Hospital, women were traveling some forty miles to New Hanover County to have babies. So

when they got on Highway 40, it might be a chance that they'd have the baby on the highway. It was very sad if babies had critical conditions or if a mother had a critical condition. We feel and people have often talked about it, how there have been deaths, but the hospital didn't have a maternity ward, no maternity ward at Pender Memorial Hospital. And the work that began in Pender County was around the hospital issue of having the kind of services that they needed for the community and one of the things was to get a maternity ward at that hospital. After meeting with the town council commissioners, also the county commissioners because they're the ones who had to appropriate monies for the hospital to have because it's a county hospital, and after meeting, this also went, I think, some three years, four years, this struggle in regards to really spelling out. They had to find out information. How many women were actually using or going from Pender to New Hanover for deliveries? How long is it taking people to get there? Even though they knew from Pender the mileage and all, but they had to really get the documentation on finding out what was the crisis and why was it necessary for a maternity ward to be in this particular area. As a result of that and meeting with the hospital administration on a constant level, again publicizing this, which they did a lot of press conferences and things like that, as a result of that, the hospital built a maternity ward wing at the hospital.

This was to me another significant way in which people themselves have one, identified issues, two, became totally educated around, okay, what would be the targets, where is it that they need to push pressure on and who, obtaining the opportunities to set up meetings and talk with these officials, telling their stories, which I think is so critical. We had mothers that had talked to the fact that they had to travel, how some of them had had the babies in their cars. Having all of these pieces in place to get to the final point in regards to

winning on your particular issue, they themselves were able to be a part of the ribbon cutting, they themselves were a part of saying, "Look what we've done to make sure that this hospital has a maternity ward in place," to me was really, really significant because you're actually seeing from that, they began to work on other issues as far as workers within the hospital getting better wages and also the hospital providing information to people who can't pay and making sure that no one was turned away as they approached that hospital. So they began to work on better ways in which the hospital can better serve people as a whole. That was one other particular instance.

The other large one for me too is Rocky Mount. For our Rocky Mount Fair Share chapter, they were traveling from Edgecombe County to Nash County for preventative health care to go to the Tarboro Health Department. Edgecombe County had no health department at all. The people in the community began to see, "We're traveling sixteen miles, almost twenty miles also to the health department for people to get preventative prenatal care, babies having shots, their shots, anybody having any kind of preventative health care." They didn't have anything in their particular area. Again it was Edgecombe County, which is primarily black, low-income, Tarboro, which is your more affluent area in Rocky Mount. People organized. When they first went to the county commissioners and asked for a new health department in Edgecombe, they were laughed at. The county commissioner said, "There's no way. We don't have any money in our budget for a health department. There's no way and after all, we're getting ready to build a dog pound."

Well, why did they say that and why did people find that out as well? Because when that was stated, then it began to be a real public issue where they began to organize. They had protestors in front of the county commissioners' meetings to really illustrate the fact that they

cared more about dogs, which everybody, I love animals as well, but the thing was that they were going to put all of this money into a dog pound for the county versus having a health department for the people to provide preventative health care, which eventually would lead to less amount of monies on health care on an individual as a whole. They proved their points. They did all the research, the resources of information that the county commissioners needed to know. How many people were insured in Edgecombe? How many people would need to utilize the health department if they would have one there? Just all of the information that needed to happen as well as working to be sure that the county provided monies for a health department.

BB: Wasn't there—I just remember seeing this in some book—some great card that you all had? What is it? Some clever, what?

LW: I'm trying to think what it was because we did so many things around that at county commissioners' meetings in regards to the dog pound versus people. I know it was several things that we had and I'd have to go to our resource book because it was a lot of things that we had where we really, at particular actions that we did—

BB: It was "Dogs Can't Vote" or something like that.

LW: Right, that's what it was. (laughs) You're right, you're right, you're right. We really wanted to bring it home that we will remember. That's the thing that people were saying, "We will remember this because the dogs can't vote" and that the people are the ones who need to be taken care of. And as a result of all of that, the organizing, the people engaged and making testimonies before the county commissioners, every county commissioners' meeting was attended all the time and it took them a few years to do this too. They always had people from Fair Share chapter there in Rocky Mount at every county

commissioners' meeting and they would always get on the agenda to talk about the need to have a health department in Edgecombe County. As a result of all of this and being it was so publicized and things like that, the county commissioners gave resources and monies for a health department to be in Edgecombe County. I watched and was able to see and we got a tape of the chapter members cutting the ribbon of the health department there in Edgecombe County and it still stands today.

You think about these things. These are just some of the things I really look at. We've done other things here as the membership and as also collaborating with other organizations on issues that we've worked on. Just this past year, passing same-day registration for North Carolina at early voting sites, it started with Fair Share members here down in Pender County having problems at the polls, the count, the voting sites not being accurate, and they wanted to do something where they could be able to vote better and vote in a more convenient way. From that, we brought the information to Deborah Ross in regards to having maybe same-day registration here in North Carolina. And from that, we always realize with any of our legislative work that we've worked on that we need to have coalitions and collaborative partners and from that being able to collaborate with so many who just said, "Yeah, this is an issue that we really like. It's a part too of our mission, our efforts," and linking arms together to make same-day registration at early voting sites, which was just passed last year at the General Assembly. And now to actually have seen it, it was enforced first at the elections last year and this year, we feel it's going to really be a big piece of the general election coming up for November.

You look over the years and we've worked on health care access and reform, breast cancer screening for women with no insurance and women on Medicaid. At one time, this

state would let a women who was on Medicaid have surgery for breast cancer, but had no preventative screening for a woman on Medicaid. We worked to see to it that that happened, that any women on Medicaid will have breast cancer screening. I can look over the years where things have happened. We had the low-cost, no-cost breast cancer screening clinic put into Wake Health Department. We worked on that to make sure that it could be where if women wanted to have breast cancer screening, they wouldn't have to pay anything or either make it at cost, whatever they can afford to have for breast cancer screening. One of the other pieces that we worked on is to make sure that public hospitals, when it came up that they would go private, we worked against that, that there would be no privatization of public hospitals. We worked on Wake Medical Center not going public and won. They had to go non-profit, but they still didn't go public.

BB: They didn't go public or private?

LW: Private, they didn't go private; I'm sorry. It's a county hospital, but it's a non-profit hospital now. That's the status of that hospital and that was a two-year fight. They had county commissioners' meetings at seven o'clock in the morning when they were going through this transition, making the hospital private, and they made these meetings at seven o'clock in the morning over at the Commons Building of Wake County, which is right off of Sunnybrook Road here in Raleigh and they thought that nobody would be out there at seven o'clock in the morning to kind of razzle them in regards to not privatizing the hospital, but I can say the Wake County Fair Share folk were there every meeting they had at seven o'clock in the morning. From the meeting, then people would go on to work. But it just shows you the commitment from people when they themselves are engaged in issues and they

themselves are working on the solutions and they themselves see the outcome of their work, was an example.

Wake Medical Center now stands and we made sure to it that they maintained their mission to the indigent, that they would be the hospital in Wake County that provides services to those who have no health insurance at all and that they would stay and remain faithful to their mission because Wake Medical Center really started with Saint Augustine's Hospital, which was the hospital for the black folk. When Wake Medical Center was done, it was Wake Memorial at that time when it was built, they said, "Okay, Saint Augustine's Hospital can close down because we are going to accept all patients, no matter who and what color they are." But they also had a mission and anybody without health insurance would always be able to come to this hospital. That was a thing that Fair Share members held them to, that they were established on the grounds that this would be a hospital for fairness and one that would really have a mission to take care of those who were indigent. So people worked on that and that took, like I said, two years. That was a two-year struggle. It became very public. We got churches involved to really fight against the hospital becoming private. It was a whole kit and caboodle, you might say, of people really being engaged in making sure that Wake Medical Center stays really a hospital that provides services to those who are uninsured and indigent.

As a result of that, they had an indigent study commission put together and put in place for a number of years and I was assigned to that commission, which was good because we looked at how the whole county should look at how to take care of those who are uninsured. And as a result of that, resources were increased for the Urban Ministries, also to the health department and any entity within Wake County. They have these other satellite

places that provide health care to uninsured people. But that work itself was a result of people really becoming engaged and involved in their particular issue.

From Wake Medical Center, we worked on Pitt Memorial not becoming private, we worked on Durham Regional not becoming private, and then also Pender Memorial not becoming private because all of these hospitals were faced with privatization and Fair Share members were involved and at the forefront of trying to make sure that none of these hospitals became private entities.

BB: And none of them are?

LW: None of them are. They're all non-profits. None of them are. They all went non-profit where they still have to hold true to the mission of taking care of uninsured people overall. These are just some of the things as I reflect on that I can say were significant things that really made, I think, a difference for the state of North Carolina as far as our existence and the people themselves who helped to make these things happen.

BB: So that's a whole lot of fighting, Lynice.

LW: A whole lot of fighting. It's been a whole lot of fighting. (laughs)

BB: It's been a whole lot of winning too.

LW: A whole lot of winning overall.

BB: So what sustains you in your work as an organizer?

LW: I think determination. For me, I'm not a person, because I've seen these wins and because I've seen—

BB: I'm sorry, will you start by saying, "What sustains me is...."

LW: What sustains me is determination to actually see people develop into leadership and taking on the role of organizing and taking on the role of making sure that they see things

through no matter what the circumstances are in regards to sometimes the issues, when you take them on, might seem insurmountable, that this is something, “oh well, this can’t happen” or “we know that this might be something that might take years.” But the determination to work with people to make sure that they don’t give up, that they can see the thing to the end, that’s what sustains me. I call it “fun work” because you actually get to have fun also while you’re doing this work, which I think sometimes people don’t do. In many of our chapters, we celebrate birthdays. We make sure that people know one another, that relationships are built. Most people when they join chapters, they didn’t even know that these were some of their neighbors. They’re engaged. So to me what sustains me is to see people develop and build relationships and learn from each other as you do the work overall. These are some of the things that really sustain me is to actually see people develop, especially into leadership and to take on their own battles with the resources that we’re able to provide to them overall. That’s what sustains me.

BB: What are some things that are hard for you or have shut you down over the years or burned you out?

LW: I think the fights that are so hard and to actually see people, especially public officials, that say, “No, no we don’t want to do this” or “we can’t find resources to make sure that people’s lives are saved.” Because many of the issues that we work on in regards to health care access and reform, the environment, environmental justice, these are life-threatening kind of issues and to actually hear people respond negatively, callousness, to me that’s very challenging because the work itself is against the grain because the grain is to not do, especially for those who are poor. There’s a feeling that, to me, people are callous and they don’t care. They think that the poor can just die and go away and that their resources or

what they need to do is develop the more affluent and those who they feel can give back or give more to their particular towns through resources or what have you. So to me, it's very challenging that people don't care.

To lose on things and issues that you know is going to impact people's lives, very challenging, and to me, I think has gotten me to the brinks of burnout, where you actually see people—and for me, it's so hard to actually work within communities where you actually have to ride out and know that people are still suffering has been very difficult at times. There's times when I rode back crying from communities where I'm just so touched by the suffering that's going on and that people are just so callous to wanting to see something changed. So there's been periods where it's been very difficult and very hard from seeing actually the suffering that's going on. And the hope, though, is that it can be changed and that people, if they keep and continue to fight, that things can be better and that resources can be made available to people if they continue in this fight and in this struggle. But it has been challenging times where you actually see where people have rejected things being done that you knew would benefit people on the whole. It's just been challenging, that part.

BB: Have there been particular people who've influenced you or mentored you or inspired you that really stand out for you? And if so, what about them?

LW: Through this journey, there has been quite a few people. First of all, being involved and engaged with The House of the Lord with Rev. Daughtrey, who has been a long-time activist through the years and connecting the faith to this type of work. There is a mission statement from the church that they would be engaged in human rights and all forms of phobias and isms. And to have a mission statement in a church, for this to be who you are, is so profound. I've watched this man and his wife really live out being engaged in fighting

for justice throughout their whole lives. Rev. Daughtrey now is up in his 70s and Mrs. Daughtrey, well, she is ten years younger than he is, but that's what their life is; it's about working for justice.

He has gone all over the world. He just got back from Sudan, really trying to make some efforts to say to the UN [United Nations] and to nations that this is something that needs to happen, giving more to this segment of people who are suffering so badly. He took resources there as well. This is his life. He went to Iraq before the war had started just to talk to the people about what they're about to face and what their feelings were and things like that. Then I think you might have heard him when he came to the Black Workers for Justice conference, their banquet rather, where he talked about his trip to Iraq to actually talk to the people, that they didn't want war. It was amazing.

But he's always been on the cutting edge of things that's happening not only in Brooklyn, New York where the church is based, but throughout the nation and throughout the world. But he's yet not a renowned-type individual. He has books out and there's people who are in the active world, those who are activists and those who work in community organizing know of him and know of his work, but I think that he—and he often says sometimes when he's gone, that's when people will know the impact of the work that he's done. But he has been a profound mentor to me and I know also to my husband, James, to our being of who we are even now, has been a part because of The House of the Lord and the type of church that it is and what it represents. Like I said, the mission statement of who they are and Rev. and Sister Daughtrey, we call her sister, and the folk there has been really profound in my life.

And I think that in moving here to North Carolina, knowing and being a part of Ajamu Dillahunt and his wife, Rukiya, we met them in fact when we first moved here. Like I said, my husband has always been involved in things going on and we were in a protest down near Greyhound Bus Station and I can't think exactly what that protest was about. I don't know if it was about police brutality. It was something and we were marching around in front of the Greyhound Bus Stop. I think maybe the bus station was where this particular incident had happened. Ajamu Dillahunt was coming in from New York and he got off the bus and he just joined the protest line and that's where we met at. Like I said, that was like in '70-something when we had just moved here and we've been good friends with them ever since. Our children have grown up together. But Ajamu and Rukiya have been profound mentors and also influences in my life because of their dedication to the struggle and because of who they are as far as human beings that are just so genuine and so real. So they play a prominent role in my life as well as James's life because we've been friends for a long, long period of time. So they have been really profound people since moving here.

Also Jim Grant plays a role in my life. He has been a long-time activist as well. He has gone to prison, served a prison term for being an activist. He was part of the Charlotte Three. He has a long history of working on social change issues throughout this state and he knows each corner of this state from wall to wall almost, people, organizations, issues that are going on throughout the state. I am so thankful he's part of our board of directors and he plays such a significant role in my life, really keeping us, I think, with focus in regards to what—and because of who this organization is, with who and what we're about, making sure that we stay true to what we are. So he plays a significant role in mentorship in my life.

One of the things that I'm thankful for is that we've been able to capture Jim Grant talking about his life as well in a video production along with Johnnie Mae Nixon, who was the chair and she's just passed last December of Pender County chapter down east, the work down east, as well as Christine Strudwick, who has been a long-time activist in Durham and she's also been a union organizer. She worked at Duke Medical Center and started with the union that they have there some years back. It's very small and very insignificant, but she knows that and she's played a real role in workers' rights and all. These are seniors, but they are significant people that have played a role in my life with helping me to develop even into who I am.

Ms. Johnnie Mae, I'll never forget in going down to Pender County, Jim Grant introduced me to her as we got started with the Pender County Fair Share chapter. And Ms. Johnnie Mae, I was just coming from New York, had just started at Fair Share and stuff, and I was ready to just go into communities and we've just got to start doing this, that, and the other. And I'll never forget, Ms. Johnnie Mae sat me down and she said, "First of all, Lynice, let me tell you something—Ms. Williams," that's what she said, "Ms. Williams, let me tell you something. First of all, you need to sit down and find out who I am. I want you eat my food," because she was a great cook and always cooked all of this food.

I believe when I moved here to the South is when I gained the most weight because I've learned that here in organizing, it's more than just getting involved with the issue. It's about sitting down, eating with people, talking with them. They want to know who your family is. You find out who their family is. And that's how you begin to work in the community. So most people that are engaged and involved in Fair Share, we know each other. When I say "know each other," they know my children, they know my grandchildren, I

know who they are, I know their children and grandchildren. It's all about relationships. I think that that's something sometimes that's missing with work, but to me, if you don't know people or individuals, then that means that you are only doing work just to finish with a particular piece of work and that's the end of it. So it's like a hit and miss: "I'll be in this community to get these stats and get this work and that's it," but it's nothing sustainable for the long-term and for me, the work needs to be long-term so that communities, even if Fair Share doesn't exist, they know how to carry on and get what it is that they need, continue to work together, and get all the resources that they should have. Because most of the communities that we work with are low-income communities and when we are in there and working and they're working, this is for the long term and for the long haul. So to me, that's real key.

But these are some of the key people that have been very significant in my life as far as helping me to develop and be who I am. Those are some of the key people that play a role.

BB: What's your vision of a liberated world?

LW: Oh wow. (laughs) That's a good question, very good question.

BB: So start by saying, "My vision of a liberated world is...."

LW: My vision of a liberated world is where people would know that they can and should control issues that impact their lives, and when I say "issues that impact their lives," because it could vary, but in particular, those who are poor and those who are disenfranchised. My vision of a liberated world would be where people such as that would know that they have rights and that they can help bring about change for their particular issues that are impacting what's going on with them. And so a liberated world would be where everybody has resources that they need in regards in hunger, health care, access to

transportation, public transportation, because we know just affording a car is very, very expensive, but it should be where people can at least have access to affordable health care, sustainability in housing, decent and affordable housing. A liberated-type world would be really broad, but where people themselves would know their rights and especially know that it's a human right to have the type of resources that's needed for their sustainability.

So a liberated a world to me would look fair, where everybody would have access to the resources that they need, not just a few in regards to having. I was reading the top multibillionaires of the world and it's baffling to me that you have people in the Sudan and you have people all over the different parts of the world, even people in this state who are going without resources that's needed and you have so few with so much. Something is wrong. So to me, a liberated world would mean fairness, where people would have the resources that they need to have a sustained life. So that's what a liberated world to me would look like.

BB: So what's next for you in life? I see you're embarking on a new chapter this fall. What's that about?

LW: (laughs) I am. I myself feel a call to ministry and when I say "ministry," because this is ministry, this work that I'm doing even now with Fair Share is ministry. I'm often told that this is ministry when you talk about making sure that people get the resources that they need so that their lives are sustained in a good way is ministry, but I also see where I feel a call in my life to also make the Gospel real in a sense, real that people would see that, to me, the Gospel is about change. And the Gospel, I believe, that Christ wants people to see is about where people, especially those who are disenfranchised, those who are poor, that the work that people should do as a follower of Christ, and that's called disciple when you are a

follower of Christ, that you should be about really following the principles of what he stood for and to me, what he stood for was about change and it was about liberation and was about making sure that those who were oppressed would not be so. To me, what I see for me is that to be able to say that and to preach that and to be a minister that would be about liberation and taking a prophetic type of approach to ministry.

So I am feeling called to go into being an ordained minister. So what I need to do is going to take me a few years because I have to go through school. I'm getting ready to start seminary, looking into the fall of starting seminary. It's a four-year process that you go through as far as getting your degree in divinity, but then it's after that that you're ordained. I know that's the process at our church that you are an ordained minister. Now at first, when you go through a process at our church, it may be probably this year and you'll hear about it, that you have, they call it your first sermon, your initial sermon. And at that time, then you are given papers where you have the title of reverend, but then you have your papers, but you still have to go through your study in order to be an ordained minister where you'll be able to give sacraments and marry people and bury people and all of that, to have your license. So it's like almost a four-year process because you're in study during that time.

I said, "Wow, I'm almost sixty years old. Why am I embarking on something at this time in my life that's going to engage me going back to school and doing some real hard studying?" Because there's Greek and you've got to learn all of these different things. But in my spirit, I want to be a minister that will be still within the community, but crying out and crying loud in regards to what I see the Gospel as being. So I am looking forward to this and hopefully I'll have a little time after school and in between school to really, I think, project to me what the Gospel is really all about. So I'm starting a new chapter in my life. I'm excited

about it and I look forward to it and so it's in the works. I'm already in a particular process at my church. It's been a year now and you're going through a process of study even before you get to the initial sermon piece. So I'm already in that process now and I feel good about it.

Sometimes you go, "Oh, okay," but when you have a call on your life, you just can't just drop it and I've been running from it a long time. I've felt this for a long time, but it's like, okay, we have one minister in the house. Why do we need two? All of these different scenarios of, well, maybe I don't--. But when you have a call in your life, you can't keep running from it. You have to do something about it. So anyway, I'm in this process, so I'm prayerfully going through it and so I'm looking forward to it.

BB: Well, good for you. Congratulations to just turn and grab onto your courage and go for it.

LW: Right, just go for it, just go for it.

BB: Are you going to stay at NC Fair Share while you do that?

LW: I think so, depending on just what is entailed and involved in that. I'm just seeing what happens. I've been here a long time. It'll be twenty years come this July, so I've been here a long time at Fair Share, the majority of the time, first as a community organizer and then taking on the directorship. I'm trying also, most of my work not only just still working with community and doing what I need to do, but trying also to seek out young people to mentor as well so that youth can begin to see themselves as leaders and be involved in this work because we're going on and I really feel like we need to be, I think, involved in mentoring youth to take on this work. There's young people that really, they have stars in their eyes and they want to see change and they want to see things happen and I think that's why the campaign stuff going on now, to see the young people really engaged in the political

process, is so rejuvenating, that, “Wow, they’re really getting it. They can make a change. They can make a difference.” And I think that all of us, who I call them more “the elders” in the movement, we need to be seeking out young people to pour into and that’s what I find myself doing now, is just pouring into young people who are involved in this work, but seeing, “Okay, what can I do to help develop them? What can I do to help them grow into really staunch organizers and activists and being involved in this work?” So that’s another piece that I’m trying to do now and in being still here at Fair Share trying to reach out more to young folk, as I say.

I’m on the board of SURGE now and as I said at the retreat Saturday, they were asking the question, “Why are you involved in SURGE?” And my answer to that was because I want to be involved in young people’s lives to help make a difference in helping them grow into this work and so it’s so wonderful to be sitting around youth who are so excited about working on the environment, working on issues for change and to be involved in that and helping young people to be guided in that. That’s sort of what I see my role as now, which I think is something that’s doable. So I’m enjoying the journey; I really am.

BB: Will you say what SURGE stands for?

LW: It’s Students United for Responsible Global Environment. So that’s what SURGE is for. What I like about it is that they work with all the college campuses throughout the state on environmental justice issues as well as other political issues as well. They work on reproductive health. They work on health care, voters’ rights, all kinds of other issues as well; so it’s good.

BB: Well, say a little something about your grandkids.

LW: I'm glad you asked. (laughs) Grandmothers and grandfathers, but I know for me, to actually see your children's children is one of the most phenomenal things. I used to wonder why my parents had so much fuss over my children and I used to just wonder what is all of this about, wanting to buy stuff when I said no, when James and I would say, "No, you can't. They don't need this," and still it winds up that they have it and you have to just let it go, always wondering what is all of this about until I had my grandchildren. We have three grandchildren. We have a granddaughter, Lynice Renell McKnight. She's named after me; she's my namesake. She's the oldest of my daughter's children and then she's also the first granddaughter with us as well. Then we have a grandson, my daughter's son, Lynn Rogers McKnight Jr. Just really beautiful children. Then my son has a child and her name is Trinity Anise. She also has part of my name as well and she's the one who's going to be two years old.

Grandchildren are so phenomenal because you actually see your children's children, you see them develop, you see them as part of you. It's an extension of your legacy. Your children are naturally, but then to see your grandchildren, you know that you continue to live for a little longer, what you might say. So it's just phenomenal to see them and to see them developing, to see them in college and making their way in life, and even to see the two-year-old now making her life through life. So it's exciting, a very exciting time to actually have grandchildren and see them develop. So it's a good thing.

BB: Do you have a favorite movement song that really touches your heart that you could sing a little stanza to or so?

LW: My favorite movement song is "Organize!" by the Fruit of Labor. (sings)
"Organize, organize, organize. Organize, organize, organize. Organize, organize, organize."

Organize, organize, organize.” And then I know Nathanette always comes in with a verse, but I don’t know what the verse is, but I’ve always told them, “I want you to always sing that song when I’m around” and I’m always pushing them to sing it. But “Organize!” because to me, that’s so significant and it’s so profound and to have it in a song, that’s one of my favorite movement songs is “Organize!” by Fruit of Labor.

BB: We sing it to little Jake and Ella when it’s time for them to clean up his room: “Time to organize your room,” and eventually somebody, “Organize, organize, organize.” (laughs) We love that song.

LW: That’s my favorite one. (laughs) I keep saying I’m going to learn the verses, I’m going to learn the verses, but I just always just sing that one, but anyway, I don’t know the verses down pat yet; I don’t know all the verses yet.

BB: Well, congratulations on the Defenders of Justice award from the Justice Center to NC Fair Share.

LW: Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you. When I think about it, I always say this is the people’s award because to me, anytime awards come—and you could go to our conference room, there’s awards hanging up there—I always just say, “These are the people’s awards” because when we went through the struggle with Wake Medical Center, the Martin Luther King Commemorative Committee had given us an award for the work that had been done with the hospital, trying to save the hospital, and then Holly Springs, we’ve gotten an award from the Holly Springs town council, mind you, which was really something for us.

(laughs)

BB: The irony.

LW: They gave us a proclamation for the work that had been done down there, for the membership and stuff. You just never know. The breast cancer screening for the health department, so we've gotten an award for that. It's not so much sometimes with the awards or recognition. To me, it's has change happened. You may not even get recognized, but has change, significant change, happened. That's what I look at all of this. Most times we wind up giving awards to our leaders, which we always want to keep people involved and engaged in recognizing their work because if it wasn't for them, the work wouldn't be done. There's no way in the world that you can do community organizing without having community involved and that's why I said to me, there's a difference between community organizing and just activism because community means community, that you actually have community engaged, where activism you could just be an activist, which might mean yourself, which is a good thing because everybody should be active and be involved, but you're mostly by yourself. But community to me is, the community organizing and that part is to me more significant and long-lasting.

BB: Is there anybody you would interview for this collection? Say we got a hundred thousand dollars to move on forward with the Heirs collection, are there people that come to mind that you really want?

LW: Yes, Jim Grant would be an excellent person. He's been, like I said, a long-time activism for the state of North Carolina. He has even gone to prison and he plays a significant role, I think, in what has happened throughout North Carolina in a lot of different areas. I think too, [Rev.] Nelson Johnson comes to my mind because he's been very significant in the Greensboro struggle that went on there with the Klan and then also his work in Beloved Community [Center] on working to try to heal the community as a whole and then his work

that he's been doing just over the years. He's been a significant activist overall. I'm trying to think. There's so many good folk overall, but those are the two that just kind of grabbed at my mind right away and I'll need to think.

BB: Good, thank you. So how was this process for you, the interview?

LW: It's very good and relaxing. I think sometimes it's not always easy to talk about yourself. When I was making the digital taping, I was saying, "Wow, it's so hard" because you can only keep it to under three minutes. It's real fast and so trying to comprise all of that and Ajamu was so funny with me because I wanted to talk about my children, I wanted to talk about my grandkids, I wanted to talk about this, that, and the other and what have you, and he said, "We've got to make this three minutes or less." I was going, "Oh." But he helped me to really focus on, okay, what are some of the key things you want to get told and tell it. So I was able and you'll see it. First, I begin where I grew up at in Woodside Houses. There's a picture of our housing project. Then my parents and the role that they played in my life. They were union, did union organizing. Then my family, which is short. Then it starts into with Fair Share and then all the work that we've been doing over the years. So it's very significant and the title of that is "It's Because of Them That I Do What I Do." It really talks to the fact of why I do what I do. So that's why I said you've got to see it because it's pretty significant and it's very short, but it's real significant overall.

BB: Beautiful.

LW: So this process has been good, I feel. It's very relaxing, so it's good.

BB: Good.

LW: You're good to interview with.

BB: Good. Well, thank you Mama Lynice. It's a real privilege.

LW: Wow, so you're finished.

BB: Yeah. Is there anything that we didn't talk about that you want you touch on though? I always ask that because there's always inevitably something that we skimmed past.

LW: Not offhand that I can think of, but maybe as I kind of reflect, then I might call you and say, "Bridgette, you know I think this needs to be added or this needs to be taken away." I don't know.

BB: Okay. I can't wait until in my life I'll be an elder myself.

LW: You've got a long way to go. (laughs)

BB: I'll be teaching some ancestors in training: "Oh yeah, I was with Mama Lynice and I know her story. Do you know that Mr. Williams used to listen to her breathe? He was so in love."

LW: That's deep, isn't it? (laughs) Is that not deep or what? Every time we talk to people, they just die laughing: "Oh, I cannot believe that." Then sometimes I look at him and say, "How come you don't listen to me breathe anymore?" He said, "Because I can hear you breathe all the time." (laughs) Because now when we're on the phone, I mean, we call each other at some time during the day. "How are you doing? What's going on?" But that's it, but we have a lot of long conversations at home and stuff like that because we talk a lot. But yeah, it's so funny. I said, "How come you don't just stay on the phone and listen to me breathe now?"

BB: You don't love me anymore? I'm not beautiful as a bride?

LW: Oh boy. But it, to me, is always anyway when you see the newlyweds. It's like they can't get enough of each other: "Honey, I'm going out to take the garbage out." "Oh, let

me come with you. I'm coming. I'll be right there, honey. I'll be right with you." Then all of a sudden (laughs) what happens after that?

BB: Give them a good couple of years.

LW: What happened? "I'm going out to--." "Good, go take the garbage out."

BB: It's been two damn days the garbage has been sitting here.

LW: That's so funny. I know last night, it was so funny, James was laying there asleep and I just got cuddled all up on top of him and then he kind of woke up and he said, "Why are you all in my space?" (laughs) And I thought to myself, "Because I'm supposed to be. I'm your wife." And he just said, "Uhhh." But that's what I'm saying, stuff just gets real.

BB: You say it again, "But you used to listen to me breathe."

LW: I know, that's what I'm saying, how the difference changes. But we're still very much in love. You can ask anybody, we're still very close and intimate. But yeah, there's just, okay, you need your space. But when you're going together, you just can't get enough of each other, you can't get enough. Then something happens. The kids come and you're just like, "What?" (laughs)

BB: Don't even look at me like you want to touch me. Do you know how many diapers I've changed today?

LW: Isn't that something how things just change? But you've got to keep the romance, you've got to keep the romance. Every anniversary, we always go someplace special. James find the place and we always go someplace. This past year, we were at Fearington House. I'd never been there before. It's beautiful. It's really beautiful. And we save towards stuff and just go to these really, really nice places for renewal and what we do is that we sit down and we take time to just talk about the marriage and talk about where

we're at today, where do we want to be the next year. And you have time to talk besides the whole romance, but still it's time to really focus and we take time to do that and just spend a whole weekend together for the anniversary. I think most people should do that. It's like a retreat for your marriage. People don't think about that. We try to tell couples they need to take a retreat for their marriage.

BB: That's a beautiful ritual.

LW: Every anniversary we do that. It's so touching.

BB: Aw, (128:17).

LW: (laughs)

BB: So do you mind looking over these and making sure I spelled stuff right?

[break in conversation]

LW: And then if you want me to, well, the pictures are mostly in Florida of my grandfather. I wish I could get some of those for you.

BB: Yeah, I would love those pictures.

LW: Tall, statuous man, was so powerful—

BB: What a story too.

LW: Powerful man. Okay, here is G-I-R, Girtman.

BB: Oh, and Rev. Daughtrey's wife's first name. You'll get there, but—

LW: Karen.

BB: I just want to make sure I get that.

LW: Grandma Redder was his great-grandmother, my father's great-grandmother, and then his grandmother was Grandma Ruby.

BB: Did I spell it right?

LW: Uh huh. And she's Karen Daughtrey. Should I write right under here?

BB: Yeah, right under there. That's what that space is for.

LW: She's also a reverend now; she's a reverend doctor and he's a reverend doctor.

BB: What do you think about Barack Obama while we're sitting here?

LW: I think that he has a good chance. The only thing that I'm concerned about is people not feeling like he has a chance and when I say "people," I think when we really get down to the superdelegates and all of that. I think what's probably going to happen is that people feel like they have a chance of having Clinton back in the White House. So naturally, I think Hillary has her own merits because she's a phenomenal person, woman in regards to her knowledge and I think that she can handle it, but I think that people, if they give it to her, it is because they want Clinton back in the White House and I don't think that that would be on her own type of merits. That's what I'm concerned about. The other piece is that I think Obama, it is early for him and he has maybe not—but hey, Bush didn't have any knowledge. Nobody goes into that office with knowledge. But it's such an exciting time to see the energy that is evolving with just him running from people who've never been involved in the political process, the young people especially to me. It's just phenomenal. There's more people registering to vote. We're doing get out the vote. People are ready. They just want to know, "Where do I sign? What do I do?" People are really engaged in this political campaign at enormous rates. Last night, I was at the precinct meetings. Precinct meetings usually, they only have like two to three people. They had a whole cafeteria of people that were there last night. It was unreal. I was like, "I cannot believe this." That's how engaged people are in this process that it's just bringing out people to be involved and most of the people last night were saying they were supporting Obama. I was like, "Wow."

BB: Which precinct was this?

LW: This is the Lynn Road Precinct and then they had other precincts that had met also with Lynn Road: Millbrook Road, they had Sertoma Park, and who else? It was three other precincts that met, but the place was packed and usually nobody is there, but this time around—and everybody is gearing up toward the North Carolina Democratic convention that's going to be next--. It's like people are ready and rearing to go. It's like, I can't believe this, but it's a good thing. And I think Obama has a chance. I think that he has a chance if he wins the other states and he has all of these additional delegates. What are they going to do about that? Are they just going to dismiss the fact that the people, he has the popular vote? So he might just win it. He just may do it. I'm just thinking he may. It would be about time; it really would. I really, I would love to see that in my lifetime, to actually see a black man, especially he has roots in him from the motherland, Africa, I would just be, oh, that would so exciting. Oh, I wouldn't know what to do. But I think that people want it to still be the in-beltline type of folk that would run our country. So I think that that's the other piece of this is that people are not ready for change, change from more or less an outsider type person. They want it to continue to be inside. I think given the power kind of plays that goes on, I don't know if that's indeed what's going to happen.

And I know they're looking for somebody who would beat McCain and who has the best effort to do that and I think Obama does because people see that this is a real contrast of difference rather than Hillary. I think Hillary has less of a chance to beat McCain, but we'll see what the pundits—the pundits are saying that she's the one who would win given her experience and then plus, I think they don't want to say it, but I know what they're thinking that you have Bill Clinton as really the president again and they feel more secure in that, that

he knows foreign relations and so does she supposedly because she was his wife. So the experience thing, I think that's where the Republicans might get him on is his experience. It's an exciting time, though. It really is exciting and I think it's exciting to know that people want change and they're fed up and they just are sick of anything and they really want a whole clean-out of the system in some sense, but this is only one way that they can make it happen, by putting in a different president. So we'll see what happens—a different kind of president, I should say. So we'll see what happens with this. What are your thoughts?

BB: I think he's pretty great. I think it'd just be historic. I'm pretty far left of the Democrats, but we've got to play the game sometimes too.

LW: I know, I know.

BB: I think it's just historic. I love that he was a community organizer.

LW: Yes.

BB: From Chicago.

LW: From Chicago, so he gets it, he gets it.

BB: Yeah, that's right. I think there's so much potential. He's beautiful. He's an amazing--. He's so eloquent and all heart, it seems like. I'm worried about foreign policy stuff. I think he's a little more hawkish than I want, but I think some of that is just having to talk the talk while he's campaigning, but then you never know what they'll do once they're in there, although I appreciate him being bold about "I'll talk to anybody."

LW: That's right and that's what I think is good too. He's saying, "I'll open it up for at least having talks." I mean, he had to pull back a little bit in saying, "Well, naturally, with some things in front," or what have you, but still, he brings another whole dynamic overall.

BB: And I hope the machine doesn't tear him down once he's in there. I hope they don't paralyze him and I do hope he's not assassinated. It's a genuine fear.

LW: I know, it's a genuine fear.

BB: It is.

LW: That is another big, big fear.

BB: It really is, but we can't not vote for him because we're afraid of what some white wacko is going to do.

LW: Right, right, no, you can't. So yeah, that's a real fear, his life. Don't forget just like the Kennedys, Robert was killed on the campaign trial and all that. So you just don't know, you're right. And he's so open. He's always shaking hands with everybody and walking right up to them. I got a chance to meet him last year in January. He signed my book. He's a genuine person. I mean, he's just genuine; he really is genuine.

BB: Yeah, good. You can feel that about people right off.

LW: Got to talk to him.

BB: What book?

LW: He was at the National Families USA Health Conference. You know the one, his autobiography. I can't think of the name of it right now.

BB: Oh, right, his book.

LW: His book.

BB: I thought you meant like you wrote a book.

LW: Oh, no, no, his book, his book. So he signed it and everything. I said, "Wow, I always knew eventually he's probably going to be something big. It's in his eyes and stuff." But he's so genuine. I'll never forget, I said, "Oh, could you autograph my book?" He said,

"Well, young lady, where's your pen?" I didn't even have a pen, I was so excited. (laughs) I said, "I like the 'young lady.' I like the 'young lady.'" Then I asked him where he was on his way to. He was on his way to South Carolina and he's just trying to talk and connect with people. He was very, very genuine. He was happy to be at the health care conference because he was finding out more about the status of health care for people. He asked what I did and things like that. He was so genuine, very genuine.

BB: You met him.

LW: I met him, I actually met him and got to talk with him. I took his picture of him and I really should have gotten somebody to take the picture with me and him standing together, but you know how you're just so excited and there's all these other people standing around waiting to talk to him. So I said, "Oh, I should have had other people take the picture of me and him." But a very genuine person. You know how some people, because I've met Hillary, because Hillary's been at the conference as well as Bill Clinton. They've had this conference every year. Families USA is a national health care organization and every year they have conferences and they usually always have these kind of people at the conference, which is a big plus because I always bring a bunch of people from Fair Share to come and experience this.

At first, Families used to just send for me and I said, "No, it just can't be me," because you get to stay at the Mayflower Hotel. You get an all expenses paid trip and all this. I said, "No, you all have to open this up so that people from the community can come and have this experience." Then you go to a lot of workshops on health care reform, what's happening at the national level, what can be instrumental in helping you at your local level. I said, "We need to have the leaders come." So every year, they pay for like ten Fair Share

people. The conference itself is like three hundred dollars, the registration alone. Then each night at that hotel is close to two hundred dollars a night, but that's just the conference amount. That's the Mayflower. This is where Spitz took some of the prostitutes. It's high-class. They have TVs in the bathroom, that kind of hotel, that kind of place. I said, "No, people have experience--" And some of the people that I take, they've never been outside of their community. They've never, ever been in anything like this. So it's so wonderful because they get to come and there's fireplaces in the rooms and just all of this stuff and they just are just in total awe.

BB: And they can suck it up and they can say, "And they say there's no money out there."

LW: Yes, yes.

BB: Just bust through the lie of how there's no money out there.

LW: And while we're there, they go up to see congressional people because it's a four-day conference and so we go up on the Hill. So there's just a variety of things that goes on, but they get to be a part of it because I said, "No, you all have to open this up. I can't come here by myself, oh no."

BB: Somebody is going to find out.

LW: This is too good for just me.

BB: Good move.

LW: So they opened it up and started having scholarships and every year, we take about ten people up there. It's so great. It's so good, so good, so good.

BB: That is so nice.

LW: But yeah, I got to meet him face to face. But I think he has a chance and I love his wife. I think Michelle is really something and all of the time, I keep saying, "Okay, they've got to keep Michelle in the background because I know she'll say something in the minute because she's very--."

BB: She's fiery. She's a revolutionary at heart.

LW: Right. (laughs)

BB: They did, they pulled out her dissertation paper and her talking about—

LW: Yeah, she's deep. So I said, "It should be a different White House, though, if they get in there." Oh, it would be good.

BB: Change it to the Black House.

LW: That's right. (laughs) And that's what America does not want, there's no way. And I keep saying all these people who voted in like Wyoming and all of these states, I keep saying to myself, "Are they really going to do this in November?" That's what concerns me is that if he becomes the nominee, will people still vote for him like they have voted in the primaries. Sometimes I wonder if they've done this so that they can get him on the ticket and the Democrats not be in the White House as far as president because come November, they'll vote for McCain. You just always wonder when you have an organizer kind of mind for a person. You just always think, "Okay, will they really vote the same in November?" But I think that they will.

BB: I think the racism is so deep and people of color are so used to be screwed somehow or another by the white establishment that it's like—who was it that was saying, oh, my friend said, an elder black woman who works in her office, my friend in Memphis works at a public television station and she was saying, "I love him and we're all fired up,

but in some way or another, I just can't imagine there's going to be a black man elected in this country. The superdelegates will screw us," and then all of a sudden it became "us," or "they'll assassinate him." I think she's just tapping into a long legacy of shady, shady racism.

LW: Yeah, the oppression and stuff.

BB: Yeah, so I hear that, but I hope the time has come that we're turning the page.

LW: Me too. And I think too, we as a people have got to see ourselves as people who deserve, we deserve this, and it's not like, "Oh, well, we really, maybe, I don't know. Are we ready to do this?" We're ready to do anything anybody else is able to do. That's really how I feel. The other thing too I think I didn't talk about is leadership development, which is a core of our work, to be sure that people see themselves as leaders because so many times, people are used to people coming and doing for them, saying for them, creating things that people, other people want to see happen. But we've been able to develop and make sure that people are speaking for themselves, making sure that they are seeing and talking to public officials on their own behalf. So that makes us unique in a sense. I often talk to Z. Smith Reynolds [Foundation] about that and stuff. I say, "Well, most times when people want to talk to somebody who has an issue, they'll call on Fair Share and we're the ones who present the living body for who doesn't have a minimum wage and who doesn't have a--," because that's who we are and for people to speak for themselves. I think that's the uniqueness too, a big uniqueness of our work.

One of the pieces that we try to do is make sure that people can sit on boards and commissions within their communities, be it housing authority boards or any kind of commission that has—most commissions have, especially county commissioners, they have volunteer positions for different commissions that they have and nobody even knows about

these positions. They have like a commission of nursing homes, a commission on women's issues, commissions on all kinds of stuff, ABC commission. There's the Wake County, when you think about the human services, they have all kinds of commissions where it's all volunteer, people who were appointed to these positions, but nobody knows about them and they usually have the same people over and over and over again that's appointed to them.

BB: And can they really leverage some power through their research?

LW: Yes.

BB: They can.

LW: Yes, because this way they're there, they're at the table, and they know exactly what's getting ready to happen. And what we're trying to do is get more people on planning commissions because this way, they'll know what's getting ready to happen in their communities and all before it gets out to the public, in a sense, because if you have somebody sitting there, then they can get information and bring it back out to the community: "Oh, did you know they're getting ready to put this road in? They're getting ready to put this development in?" You know, whatever, because you already know. People are there. But the people they have are constantly the same people because they just get reappointed.

BB: And they start rubber-stamping stuff.

LW: That's right. Most people don't know about that, but anyway, we work on that.

BB: I think that's great. I really want to talk with you more maybe over lunch sometime about just what might fit your capacities and your interests around the Speak Your Truth Leadership Institutes because it's the second project of the Heirs Project, but the curriculum team is developing what those workshops will look like and so training new people to become community organizers and leadership development and the basics of what

is power, what does it look like in my neighborhood and our community. Then another piece of it is training young people to collect stories of heirs locally. So who are the change-makers or your elders in your community or even peers?

LW: Right, that is very good.

BB: So we might do a little digital storytelling training and all that, but I don't know if you have time or capacity. We have monthly curriculum development team meetings around this and it's a great time now. So Manju and Tony Macias, Howie Machtinger, Charles Price at UNC—do you know who Charlie Price is?

LW: Oh really? I've met him. I'm trying to think. I've met him someplace.

BB: "It might be the longest dreads in the Triangle", Ajamu says (laughs), but some great folks are on the team. Or if you want to step in to help develop the training curriculum or might even have some to share around specific pieces. One piece around is assets work where you identify what churches and community buildings and commissions and town councils and all that, how do you identify them, how do you get to know people on them, and how do you get these seats.

LW: Oh, okay, because it's the same thing, yeah. That's phenomenal.

BB: I just thought of that because of what you just said.

LW: Right, oh, okay, okay, yeah.

BB: You just inspired me.

LW: Right, yeah, because that's the same thing that we do.

BB: The assets piece we were thinking about—

LW: It's critical, critical.

BB: How do you connect with chambers and local businesses and churches and community development, stuff like that, but the commissions piece, you really got a light bulb on for me.

LW: That's critical. Most people don't even know. Wake County has a book this thick on commissions.

BB: Damn.

LW: Even the fire department has a commission where they are the ones who structure how many new firehouses will go where and how much money the county would pay, all of these kind of decision-making going on. Then you look at, "Okay, how come some communities don't have a firehouse?" Well, because the people who are sitting there are making sure that they only go certain places and stuff. It's just all this deep stuff. The juvenile delinquency, there's a commission for that on juvenile stuff. There's just commissions for everything where these entities, these bodies are helping to shape what happens ultimately because then also a lot of their things are brought before the county commissioners for the stamping to go on.

BB: How does somebody get on a commission?

LW: You look at when the terms are up and then you apply and you have to apply to the county commissioners that you want to be recognized as one of the people who want to come on this commission. Then they usually get back to people and let you know, "Well, we have ten people who've applied and we're going through their resumes and we're going through whatever." Then you just see how it turns out and who winds up, but the main thing is that you want to shift things that it's not the same people who've been sitting on these commissions all the time. When the welfare reform had happened, for Wake County here,

they have human resources where's it's just monitored on welfare, the welfare department and welfare reform. Well, now they call it human resources. All the human resources they call them now around the state, they're renamed welfare rights [check this past statement: 149:18] and things like that, but they have the same people sitting on these boards and the commissions and they're the ones who make all the decisions.

BB: But if they're the ones who decide the new people coming on, don't they have a vested interest in not getting new people on?

LW: They have a real good vested interest in not getting new people on. The ABC commission, that's where all the liquor stores, all the licenses, it comes by this particular commission. But then you wonder why all the liquor stores are just in, a lot of them are in communities of color where they're able to sell even liquor in even the convenience stores. It's all in the communities and when you go to other communities, they don't have liquor stores on each corner. Where did that come from? It came from exactly where people want to put things and you have to be a part of that mechanism that makes those kind of decisions.

One of the things we keep teaching people is you can't keep going to the same people and expecting any type of change. You need to become those people that make those type of decisions because if you keep going to the same people, you're going to get the same results. So you've got to see yourselves as leaders to help make some of those decisions come about because if you don't, then it'll be the same type people deciding the same things and the end result will be the same. So people have got to see themselves as running for office, sitting on these boards and commissions, being a part of the leadership that helps make the change happens. Besides naturally working within community to make the change happens, but

you've also got to see yourselves as leaders and I don't think that especially people who are low-income, people of color, they don't see themselves as leaders.

BB: They've got that internalized oppression

LW: It's that internalized oppression, not seeing yourself as a leader and that, to me, is the deepest thing to cut through. There's people who we've been working with, they never had seen themselves talking to any public official or going inside the General Assembly or going up to Washington and talking to congresspeople, never, ever. They never even thought the General Assembly was someplace that they could go to. They didn't even think that. They didn't even think they could talk to their local town council. They just thought that all of that is just there and that's not what they are rightfully supposed to do. So it's just getting through those pieces where people see themselves as leaders because people are so used to everybody doing something for them. They can go and talk for them and they can go and decide what it is that we need. That needs to not be. At least I don't think that that's the way community work should be. It should be that the people should be--. Because where you or how you develop people to begin to do for themselves within communities? How or when or how does that happen?

BB: And if you see dismantling oppression as a real core piece, do y'all have specific trainings around that or curriculum?

LW: We go about it in regards to, for instance, our community meetings and we talk more about that. Well, the curriculum for the institute, the Fair Share People's Advocacy Institute, is around leadership and how first you see yourself as a leader and the whole breakdown of what leadership is and then why it's so necessary for you to become a part of the commissions and boards in your community, and what that would mean and what that

would look like if you are a person who is sitting there, and people who are already active in the community, what will happen if they—because they already know the sense of what's going on in the community. So who best can sit there and make the kind of decisions of what more resources and monies need to be in place?

BB: We are the experts on our own lives.

LW: Yes, and that needs to happen.

BB: So we should think about that curriculum too.

LW: Yeah, we'll talk about it.

BB: Instead of reinventing the wheel, maybe that's a piece that, just say, "Hey, here's already a homegrown North Carolina curriculum around leadership development."

LW: It's really crucial. Sometimes we have leadership development consultants come in. I don't know if you've ever met—no, I don't think you probably know Charles Baron. He is a New York City councilman out of New York and he went to the church in Brooklyn, him, Amajatta.

BB: Amajatta?

LW: Amajatta. How do you pronounce her last name? I forgot. They usually come in to do trainings with us as well. James has done some trainings. Cynthia [Brown] was going to do some training and when she had gotten involved with the campaign and other things, but anyway, we're trying to get her to be back.

BB: Good. She's got Sojourner [Consulting] now.

LW: Dan Coleman has helped us with people looking at budgets, how do you look at budgets. Most people, if they sit on a commission, if they do have budgets, if they're on boards, because we're trying also to get people to be on boards, boards of non-profits, but

how do you look at a budget and how do you define how the resources are going one place and only one place and not another. So yeah, we've had people come in and help us also with the trainings, consultants and stuff. So we can talk about that. That would be real good.

BB: Yeah, good. I'd better quit talking to you or you'll never get through.

LW: That's okay.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Emily Baran. May 2008