

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

Interview U-0572

Tema Okun

May 16, 2007

Field Notes – 2

Transcript – 4

FIELD NOTES – TEMA OKUN

Interviewee: Tema Jon Okun

Interviewer: Bridgette Burge

Interview Date: May 16, 2007 (Interview 1 of 4)

Location: Tema's home, Durham, North Carolina

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

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

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

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

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

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW: May 16, 2007, We recorded in the living room of her loft. The acoustics were fine, but Tema sometimes speaks very softly. Tema was very candid and seemed comfortable during the interview. For the next interview, I should put to microphone closer to her and maybe adjust the settings. It might be best to purchase lapel microphones.

TRANSCRIPT—TEMA OKUN

Interviewee: Tema Okun

Interviewer: Bridgette Burge

Interview Date: May 16, 2007 (Interview 1 of 4)

Location: Durham, North Carolina

Length: 1 track; approximately 120 minutes

START OF INTERVIEW

Bridgette Burge: Today is May 16, 2007, and we're at the home of Tema Okun on Rigsbee in Durham, North Carolina. Why don't you start by—and this is the Heirs to a Fighting Tradition Oral Histories of Social Justice Activists in North Carolina Project [Heirs to a Fighting Tradition: Oral Histories of North Carolina Social Justice Activists]. Why don't you start by telling me a little bit about this place and your decision to move in here and how you use the space?

Tema Okun: Tom [Stern] and I—my partner Tom and I lived in San Francisco for a year in 1998-99, and I've always lived in this area. I grew up in Chapel Hill and moved to Durham in [19] 85. Except for college and a few years here and there, I've always lived around here. We went to San Francisco for a year and we loved it. I sort of realized I am a city person at heart—realized late in life I'm a city person at heart. We thought when we got back and saw that there was this attempt to revitalize downtown Durham, we just were caught with the idea of trying to move down here and be a part of that effort and recreate city living as much as we could [laughter] in a town the size of Durham. We were really lucky. We looked for about a year and found this place. The folks who owned it and sold it to us

are architects. They have an office downstairs and they helped us figure it out. Our original plan was to move into this—we're in the second story of an old furniture store and the second floor was never—I think they used it to store furniture. It was never developed. There was never any plumbing or electricity or walls or anything up here, it was just one big huge open space. We were going to buy it with a friend, an artist friend, and she was going to live at one end and we were going to live in the other end and then we were going to have a shared living room in the middle.

BB: An artist friend?

TO: Yes, named Ellen O'Grady, whose art you see on our walls. She decided, as we were pursuing—we had been looking for places for a long time, a couple of things happened. A small loft apartment came open right away, and she decided that the space in the back wasn't as good for her the way the building lies east/west. It wouldn't be good light and looked out on an alley, and for different reasons it didn't make sense for us to switch places. So she moved, went ahead and moved to another place close by. We decided that although we didn't want the whole floor, we would keep the space we had planned to live in ourselves as well as the middle space that was going to be our shared living room. That's a lot of space for two people, so we decided to design it so the living room space can be closed off and the rest of it. We've been making that available for community groups to use to have a nice, free, comfortable meeting space with nice art in it, which is something I love to do is have art on my walls, our walls. That's what we've been doing. We weren't sure people would be interested. We didn't know if it would go as an idea. It pretty much has. People use it quite a lot. I would say it is used two or three times a week. There will be a fund-raising event this evening for the Fund for Southern Communities. We have some standing, some groups

that use it on a weekly basis, so it's been great. It's been a real, real fun to have that kind of space to offer to people and really a joy that people use it and seem to get pleasure out of it.

BB: Yeah, I have definitely been a part of groups that have used it a lot and it's such a wonderful space. I know a lot of groups are grateful for it. Maybe I could get a shot of the book. The only thing you've asked for is that people sign the guest book basically...

TO: Right, right.

BB: ...in some creative way. How many guest books do you have now?

TO: I only have one. We are ready to start a second one. It's one of those thick three-ring binders and it's pretty full now.

BB: Good. That's nice to document the history of people- -

TO: Yes, yes.

BB: and taking advantage and using the space well. Good.

TO: The only person who has consistently failed to put pages in the book is Gita [Gulati-Partee]. [Laughter]

BB: Gita Gulati-Partee.

TO: [Laughter] She has a rep now.

BB: [Laughter]

TO: We're going to track her down.

BB: [Laughter] Let's charge her interest in cash for failing to obey.

TO: Right.

BB: Your life history biography says that you were born in New York City on March 15, 1952, right?

TO: Yes.

BB: How long did you live in New York City?

TO: My parents moved here when I was six months old, or moved to Chapel Hill. My father got a job at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and has worked there since then, my whole life. He's retired now. I grew up in Chapel Hill essentially.

BB: How did your parents find themselves in New York City? What's the story of them being there?

TO: My father's parents were Jewish immigrants from Bela-Russia. They came when they were young children, grew up in Brooklyn, or in New York City. My grandparents actually were first cousins. I'm named after my great-grandmother whose full name actually was Tema Okun, because she was the—her maiden name—the mother of my grandfather. Her brother married and had Leah [Seligman] and Will [Okun] and Leah married each other.

BB: And who?

TO: Leah Okun; well, Leah Seligman married Will Okun and became Leah Okun. Those are my dad's parents. He grew up in Brooklyn. My mother grew up in Texas in a little town called Blooming Grove, Texas. She grew up in a very poor family. I think there were four daughters and two sons, both of the sons were killed during the war.

BB: Which war?

TO: World War II.

BB: World War II.

TO: She put herself through college and through graduate school and was working as a social worker in New Orleans and met my father on a blind date. He was in the Army then;

this was during the war. I think they went out for a short period and got married and moved to New York City.

BB: Your father's name is Daniel Okun, right? Your mother is Beth?

TO: Elizabeth- -

BB: Elizabeth.

TO: but people call her Beth.

BB: Daniel Okun, and what was her maiden name? Or did she keep her- -

TO: Griffin.

BB: Elizabeth Griffin. Is there a story behind the—your middle name is Jon, J-O-N.

Is there...

TO: It was from a poem.

BB: Really?

TO: Yes. [Laughter]

BB: What poem? Do you know?

TO: A Robert Burns [Scottish poet] poem called "Jennifer My Joe Jon".

BB: Really?

TO: Yes.

BB: How do you feel about that? You're giggling a little.

TO: [Laughter] I feel fine. The only time it was ever used when I was growing up was when my father was angry with me. I knew when he was angry. He'd say "Tema Jon".

BB: [Laughter]

TO: I like my name. I'm very, very happy with it.

BB: It's very unique and lovely. You have one brother...

TO: I have one brother.

BB: is that right? What's his name?

TO: Michael.

BB: Michael.

TO: Mike.

BB: Mike.

TO: He's four years older.

BB: So he was born in New York City then?

TO: Yes, he was.

BB: Tell me about your--.

TO: Actually, no, he was born in Boston.

BB: Oh.

TO: And then they moved to New York City. My father was finishing school.

BB: Okay. Were there other family members in New York City, extended family?

TO: Yes. I had a great aunt named Rose. Actually the reason I'm named Tema is because Rose asked my mother to name me after her mother. Rose and Leah were sisters. I grew up knowing her. My father had a brother or has a brother named Milton Okun. He's my uncle and I grew up knowing him and then he married and his children—but it's not—there wasn't a larger extended family on the Okun side. I don't remember them. If I knew them, it was when I was really young. Besides Rose, I don't really remember them. My mother's family, I really never met most of her family. I don't think I ever met, I don't remember ever meeting her parents. My sense, it's not clear to me, but when she married Dad, she did not keep up relationships with her family. I don't know if it's because she

married a Jew. I don't know if it's because she had difficult relations—it's hard—when I talk to her about her family, she doesn't have a, she doesn't remember a lot. When I ask her why we didn't grow up knowing them, she just says, "Well, I just lost touch." It's not clear to me what happened.

BB: How old was she when she left home?

TO: She was older. She was—she's ninety-four now. She was, she got married when she was thirty-three, which was quite a bit older for women of her generation. She's older than Dad. My sense is that she was having a pretty good time in New Orleans as a social worker and had a rich life and then met my father and married him and moved to New York and her life drastically changed. I think—she's never said this, but my sense is that there was some ambivalence around that decision.

BB: The decision to move specifically?

TO: Yes, I think the decision to move. Once she married my father, her life became dictated by his life. She was—she followed him where he wanted to go and made a life where he wanted to be. At the beginning of their marriage they lived in an apartment underneath his parents. That couldn't have been easy, because my grandmother, although she was a fabulous grandmother I think was probably a trying mother-in-law. [Laughter] It changed her life. In really good ways, too. It definitely—her class status totally changed as a result of marrying my father.

BB: So what was your father's class background?

TO: Well, he was the son of immigrants, but their immigrant story was a very stereotypical successful story. They came and they, my grandfather worked as an engineer and then he opened an insurance company in Brooklyn and they did very well for

themselves. They had these two sons, and their sons did even better. I think I grew up in a solidly upper-middle class family where financial resources were abundant.

BB: Your father is a pretty prestigious fellow, right? [Laughter]

TO: Yes, he is prestigious. He is.

BB: [Laughter] There was a lot about him when I was doing a little research.

TO: Yes, he has, my brother and I like to joke. He's getting ready to turn ninety, and he's planning a big party. The University is involved in planning it. He mentioned at one point that he wanted to bring his plaques to the party and I joked with him about "Dad, there's not enough room for all the plaques you want to bring to the party" and my brother and I were joking that we were going to give him a plaque to commemorate all his plaques.

BB: [Laughter] With the tally.

TO: That's right. [Laughter] We were going to take some of his plaques and rub off his name and put our names in since we don't have any plaques at all. [Laughter] Yes, he is very prestigious.

BB: That's funny. And an engineer, right? He does environmentalist, mostly...

TO: Water and sewer.

BB: ...water issues. Are you particularly close to one of your nuclear family members?

TO: Well, we have a, we all live here. It's very—I don't know that I would have predicted as a young person that I would be, we were the kind of family that would stay close to each other. My parents live in Chapel Hill. I live in Durham, and my brother lives in Carrboro. I think as families go, we're close. We have a great sense of humor as a family, which I think is very important. My brother and I have definitely become closer as we've

gotten older. We weren't particularly close as children. My parents are—my mother is bed ridden. She doesn't get out of bed. My father is really doing well for someone who is ninety and his age is beginning to show. We all are going through some changes.

BB: Yes. Is your mother ill or is it just her body is frail because she's older?

TO: Well, she—you know I never really understood—there's a southern expression: She took to her bed. I never understood it until I realized that that's what my mother did. About three years ago she just decided to get in bed and not get out. There's not really anything physically wrong with her, but I think she's, she's had a history of depression, so she took to her bed. Now, because she doesn't get out of bed, her body is weak. Really, that's the main thing that's wrong. She can't move without assistance.

BB: Who cares for her? Who assists her?

TO: My parents, because they are of their strong financial situation, moved into Carol Woods [Retirement Community] about ten years ago, which is a very high-end retirement center which has all levels of care. They moved in and have lived independently in a duplex, which is the most independent living. They have all the way up to nursing home care, so my mother is now—my father still lives in the duplex and my mother is in the nursing home facility.

BB: Did your mother—was she affiliated with a specific religion or spiritual tradition growing up or her family?

TO: No, I've asked her this, and I'm ashamed to say that I think it's Methodist. We did not grow up—my parents—my father is a confirmed atheist and my mother is also, not as adamantly atheist as he is. When we grew up, although my father identified certainly culturally as a Jew, and I think part of coming down to the south in the early 1950s when

there were very few Jews here, he felt it acutely. I know he felt acutely his status as a Jew in the south. When I grew up, because I grew up knowing my father's side of the family and not my mother's side of the family, I identified culturally as Jewish. We were raised in a church called The Community Church of Chapel Hill which was started as a non-denominational church in the late [19] 50s, or early [19] 60s, when a group of liberal families in Chapel Hill started the church in response to the firing of a man named Charlie Jones who was the Presbyterian minister who was kicked out of his church for preaching integration. Some families in Chapel Hill got together and started a church to make a statement and to offer him a place to have a pulpit. It's now still going. It's now a Unitarian church. For many, many years it was non-denominational and that's where—so we went to church there, I think more out of, I know out of political conviction as a family than religious convictions. I remember my Sunday School classes were led by—the ones I remember we led by Dan Pollitt who was another peer of my parents, another esteemed person in the community, a law professor who gave us legal cases in Sunday School. That's what I remember.

BB: Gave you legal cases in Sunday school! [Laughter]

TO: To help us with our ethics, I think. I had no religious training at all.

BB: Do you know anything about—well, I guess I'm making an assumption that your father was raised religiously Jewish.

TO: No.

BB: He wasn't. So even your grandparents--.

TO: My grandparents, they were not religious either. Again, I find that my father wasn't Bar Mitzvahed. It was a different—my grandparents were [pause] I'm trying to think what I want to say here. My grandparents were Fellow Travelers. Whether they were

actually in the Communist party or not, I do not know, but they were definitely sympathetic and traveled in those circles and have a lot of really rich stories. They were friends with W.E.B. Dubois

[William Edward Burghardt- sociologist and civil rights leader] and they hid Pete Seeger when he was on the run, and all kinds of fabulous dramatic stories in my family. I grew up with much more sort of a political leftist tradition than any kind of religious tradition. I don't, you know, I don't know what was happening with other Jewish immigrants and the way they were raising their children in terms of their religion, but in my family religion was not ever an emphasis and I did not become a religious Jew until I was an adult.

BB: I want to ask, what was part of that transformation in your decision to become a religious Jew?

TO: I think in my mid-40s, I was really burning out from the work I was doing and that my approach to the work and really looking for some way to bring balance to my life. I'd always been very interested in my Jewish heritage and I had always—read voraciously about the Holocaust and I did a lot of self-study about Jewish history, so it made sense once I started to realize I might want some spiritual, religious grounding, I started investigating the religious and spiritual aspects of Judaism. I started doing a lot of reading, started going to synagogue. Tom and I joined a synagogue for a while. We are not members any more. Joined a Talmud [record of rabbinic discussions pertaining to Jewish law, ethics, customs, and history] study class and just started trying to understand what it meant to be a religious and spiritual Jew. I think that was a result of burnout and wanting to address the burnout.

BB: Do you practice regularly or not?

TO: No.

BB: Disciplined?

TO: No, not now. That's a whole story in and of itself. I think that as old as I am, I'm a remarkably naïve person. I keep being astounded sometimes at how naïve I am. When I was reading about Judaism, I was reading people like Michael Lerner [rabbi and political activist], and who else was I reading? Arthur Waskow [rabbi] and Phyllis Berman and religious people on the left or religious scholars who talked a lot about the Jewish tradition of justice and the religious commitment to justice. I was very inspired and I thought that, you know, I felt very at home. I felt very inspired to have found this religious tradition that was so invested and committed to justice as part of its religious tradition. Then Tom and I went to Palestine and it was completely shattering. I was so naïve. I didn't, I knew nothing about the Jewish mainstream. I knew nothing about Israel Palestine. I knew nothing about ICHAD [Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions]. I knew nothing about, I just didn't, I was totally uninformed. So I sort of walked into Judaism with this incredible spiritual longing, and I found this very motivational writing and study, and I found great solace in the synagogue and in learning. Becoming a religious Jew late in life is not easy. Judaism is not easy. It's not like, I'll compare, I shouldn't compare, but there's a whole process to the service, there's a whole ritual to the service, a whole sequence of events. A lot of it is done in Hebrew. A lot of the songs are kind of mumbled sung with these tunes that are never written down. There's no—you have to really want it in order to understand what's going on. You have to read and study, you have to go, and it's not something where you can walk in one day and sort of go here I am. It takes, I was really engaged in this. I started a B'nei Mitzvah class where I was considering converting because I tried Reconstruction synagogue which considers you Jewish if you were raised with a Jewish- -if you have a Jewish father, if

you were raised with a Jewish education, which I wasn't. I decided I wanted to convert and started the process with this B'nei Mitzvah classes. I was just immersed in this lying and this pull and then I went to Israel. We were some of the first outsiders to get into the West Bank in 2002, after Jenin and after the Second Intifada had started and it was the big incursion by the Israeli military into the West Bank when there were closures and curfews and the bombing of Jenin and was the a massacre, wasn't there a massacre? What I saw was so devastating and so what I learned about the occupation and about what had been happening in Israel Palestine by then thirty some years, I was just, I was, I was [pause] I don't know what to say. I was devastated. I felt like I'd been betrayed. That I'd done all this reading about Judaism's commitment to justice and then I was seeing something totally different. The dissonance was almost unbearable. I remember coming back and talking to—I was just in utter pain. The other thing that happened was that, so we came back I was in utter pain. I remember leaving Tel Aviv. I was, and because we were part of a delegation, we went through quite a process going through customs. We were questioned, our bags were searched, and stuff was taken. It was a pretty horrible process. I remember how thankful I was to get out of Tel Aviv, get on the plane, and land in Frankfurt [Germany] and I thought how ironic that as a Jew I'm thankful to leave Israel and thankful to land in Germany. [Laughter] Then I, we got back and the very next day we got a call that Cassie [Stern] our niece was in a coma. Over the next week, we went through the process of her dieing. It was jus, between the two things, it was just a really hard period. I went, so I was in this sort of raw pain and I remember going to my rabbi, who was really, at the time, a really wonderful woman-and talking to her about the pain I had seen and we had put together some slides and wanted to show people, wanted to talk to people about what we had seen, and what we had

heard, and what we had learned. She sat through it, bless her, and she was—but her first response was to justify it. What I came—and then so we showed it to another rabbi and sort of the same thing, that it was to justify it and that it was important to talk about this, but this wasn't the time and we certainly shouldn't be talking to people outside the Jewish community about it. It took us a full year to get our own synagogue to allow us to show the slides and talk about what we had seen. At that point, in addition to some internal politics in the synagogue, which I thought were a complete, again sort of violation of my understanding of what it meant to live Jewish values. I just said, I can't do this any more. We left. Tom still goes to Talmud class. I went for a while. I don't go any more. I don't really have a spiritual practice now. I still have the longing for it, I just can't, I can't go to a synagogue and pray in a community that doesn't talk about it. I just can't. I haven't found a place—there's not a synagogue here that—there's a reform synagogue where the rabbi who, the same rabbi who told us to wait, actually eventually formed a Brit T'zedek Chapter, but I'm not interested in reform Judaism, so I don't go there.

BB: Have you ever held your political practice and way being in the world as also being a spiritual practice—a way of spiritual practice? Or does it feel...

TO: Perhaps more now. I don't think I used to. I've never really, it kind of, I think it's probably a real reflection of white privilege or white something—a something-ness that I could be doing anti-racist practice for so long without any religious practice, and without any open acknowledgement of the need of one. If you just think about being an anti-racist activist in the south, where religion is so important to people and to communities, in particular so central to certainly oppressed communities' ability to resist, I find it ironic and sad that I never really came to grips with my own lack of religious practice until relatively

late in my life. Now that I'm sort of changing the nature of my activism I think I, it's not that I see teaching as a spiritual practice per se, but maybe I do. I don't know. I'm still too nervous to, I would be too nervous to say that yet.

BB: So going back—I'm going to close this curtain behind you just a little bit if that's okay.

TO: Sure.

BB: So you said that with your wonderful lefty, engaged political family that there are some really great stories. What are a couple of your favorites that stand out for you?

TO: One of them is I remember my parents would take us on marches and get us involved in stuff. On Sundays, before we would go to church, or after we would go to church, after we would go to church, I remember for a period on the highway. Well, it wasn't a highway then, on the two-lane road between Chapel Hill and Durham there was a Howard Johnson's [hotel chain] chain, and Howard Johnson's was one of the last national chains to desegregate. I remember going on Sundays to the Howard Johnson's where people would be picketing outside and my parents would walk, we'd all walk in and my parents would demand to see the manager and demand an explanation for why were all these people outside. The manager would have to say something about the fact that they were protesting the Howard Johnson's policies, so my parents would say that they thought it was outrageous; that Howard Johnson's policy was an outrage. Then they would say, "We will certainly not going to eat there!" Then we would march out and eat wherever we had planned to eat in the first place.

BB: [Laughter]

TO: I think we, I remember doing that several times, so I don't know if the Howard Johnson's manager never caught on that we were the same people or what the deal was, but that's one story.

BB: A little resistance theater there.

TO: [Laughter] Right. [Pause] There's a, this is a story I tell a lot when I was doing DR Training [dismantling racism] which was that I grew up in Chapel Hill and the school system was segregated there like everywhere. The white high school was called Chapel Hill High and the black high school was called Lincoln High, and I was in the first class to go to the desegregated high school. The solution in Chapel Hill was to build a whole new building and put all the students in there. What they did was they built a whole new building and they called it Chapel Hill High, which was what the white high school had been called. They kept the white principal, principal and the black principal became vice-principal. They fired, I assume, I don't know, there were no black teachers except maybe in typing and shop, so there were no black teachers. They kept the name of the white school teams, white school colors. The identity of the white school was, even though it was a new building, the white school was essentially transferred to the new building and the black school was completely obliterated, essentially. Needless to say, that was happening, that's why I almost never use the word integration because there was no integration. It was desegregation on white people's terms. It was a great lesson in—my parents were real leaders in the desegregation effort. They were and are liberals in the best sense of the word and sort of my learning about the limitations of liberalism and the assumption that they made, which was that whatever was good for white kids was going to be good for black kids, too, and that there was no thinking among, within the liberal community about what it meant to integrate on white people's

terms. The assumption was just that it would be better for people; that the black community was a deficit, the white community was the norm, and the idea, the desirous thing was to bring everybody up to the white norm.

In the school, as that was playing out, the black students were quite unhappy about the fact that their whole cultural life and intellectual life, for that matter, had been wiped out. There were a lot of protests and sit-ins and stuff. We formed a race council and white and black students got together in people's homes and would have discussions about things. My, we met at my house once and I have this really strong memory of—we had a basement room that was our, where our TV was. I mean it was a room, it wasn't the basement like unfinished basement, it was a finished basement with a television and windows and stuff and couches. We are all meeting down there, and I was having an argument with a young man named Sylvester, who was accusing me of being a racist. He said, "You're a racist." I went, "No, I'm not." "Yes, you are." "No, I'm not." "Yes, you are." "No, I'm not." That's sort of what I remember about the discussion. And then I said I have to stop and go upstairs and get refreshments. I did. My mother was up in the kitchen and she had been hearing the conversation and she turned to me and she said, "Get a grip. You are a white girl and you are being raised in a racist country. You are a racist and you need to deal with it." That was a transformative moment in my life, because my mother, and I've thanked her many times although she doesn't really remember it, gave me this gift of turning something I had been defending against into something I had to consider. And it made a huge difference in my life. That's a story I tell a lot just sort of to, when I'm trying to work with other white people about our own racism and how admitting it can just be a relief and a way to really look at ourselves rather than spending all of that useless energy pretending it's not true.

BB: Do you have a favorite story that was passed down to you about your grandparents?

TO: You know, my family wasn't great on the story telling. I kind of pieced things together. My father's going through all of his things. He's very concerned about his legacy, which there will be one. He's going through all his books and all his papers. He went through all of his books and this was like a month ago, I go to his house and I see a Langston Hughes book on his table. I say, "Oh, this is great. You have an old Langston Hughes book." I open it up and it's autographed! It's to my parents, and it's thank you for having me in your home—it's on a shelf up here, and I go "Dad! What? What? What?" I mean I'm—Langston Hughes. I am such a huge Langston Hughes fan. It's like what? He was in your home? He was in our home? I've met him? And dad was "yeah, yeah, yeah." Apparently Langston Hughes came to the University. There was not a hotel that would house him so my parents housed him. I mean hosted him. He stayed at our house!

BB: How old were you?

TO: I don't know. Let me see if there is a date on here. [Gets up to get the book off the shelf.] I have no memory of this.

BB: Wow.

TO: That's how I learn the stories. I basically, it was 1960. I was eight.

BB: So this book is Tambourines to Glory?

TO: Yes. "Especially for the Dan Okun's on my first visit to your home. Sincerely, Langston Hughes."

BB: [Laughter]

TO: It's like "Dad!" It's like trying to pull information out of him about it, so I guess I need to ask my mother, although she probably won't remember it. We're not big storytellers. All I know is that my grandparents knew, because they were Fellow Travelers and they traveled in these circles that when Pete Seeger was, I don't know the details, but I know at one period he was under investigation or the H.U.A.C. [House of Un-American Activities Committee] was after him or somebody was after him, and so he was kind of in hiding, and my grandparents helped to, helped him, I don't know, that period. My uncle was a musician and was in the music business. I know that I've met—when I worked for the Grassroots Leadership [southern-based national organization that works to defend democracy] I, one of our fundraising strategies was concerts because the director Si Kahn [social activist and founder of Grassroots Leadership] is a musician. Si at one point, Ronnie Gilbert and Holly Near came and Ronnie Gilbert knew my grandparents, so she knew who I was. Pete Seeger and Si did a concert and Pete knew who I was and we kept up a little correspondence after that for a while. These are things that are part of my history. I don't know the full stories behind them, and I didn't know to ask them when my grandparents were alive and my father doesn't know them.

BB: You said that you knew your aunt Rose in terms that she's one of the few it sounds like that really older ancestors or family members that you knew some. Did she ever talk about her life to you? Did she ever describe her life to you?

TO: She died when I was in high school, and I was a very—I was not a very alert child. What I know about Rose was that she loved me deeply because I was named after her mother. When she died, she left me all her money, which was two thousand dollars. She made—she was a lesbian—which I found out afterwards, which everybody knew but nobody

talked about in the family. She—there's a picture of her in the other room. She ran stores, and I remember a little—she had a restaurant once, but what I remember is—and her fortune sort of declined over time. What I remember—but as a young kid I had no idea of anybody's fortunes. Adults were just adults to me. She ran one of these great little places in the city where you are walking on the sidewalk and there's an opening and you can go and order your food from the walk-in, or you can go and there is a narrow little strip of barstools and you can sit at the counter. I remember she ran a place like that, and I loved going in there with her and I'd go behind the counter and I'd help out; whatever that meant. I remember she would take me shopping and she would buy me whatever I wanted. She just doted on me. That's my memory of her. I don't remember being alert enough to inquire about her life and what was it for her.

BB: And this was in Brooklyn?

TO: In Brooklyn, yes.

BB: Do you remember the name of her little restaurant?

TO: No.

BB: So what do you think it is about your parents not sharing stories? Is it habit? Is it reluctance for some reason? Is it—what do you think is behind that they...?

TO: I've never thought about that before. My father, my father's life is his work, so I don't think he's someone who—he's always been completely devoted to and immersed in his work which he loves and which he has a passion for and is obviously very good at and very challenged by and very engaged in. So I think that those—and I think he had a difficult relationship with his mother. She was a very domineering, strong, fabulous woman. Again, I

think a tremendous grandmother and probably really challenging mother and as I said mother-in-law because she had such strong ideas about everything.

A story I remember—this is classic Leah, is that Dad—she bought Dad, we were visiting with her, and she had bought Dad two shirts. So he went in and changed and had gotten into one and comes out and she says, “So, you didn’t like the other one?” [Laughter] She is the quintessential Jewish grandmother. I remember that she doted on my brother and me, she was a great cook, and took us to—I loved going to Brooklyn because I was growing up in North Carolina and this was before we were the sort of happening place we are now. There was, you know, we’d go up there and go to a Chinese restaurant, and there were no Chinese restaurants down here. We’d have bagels, and there were no bagels down here. She’d take us to a Broadway show always, and she’d give me her credit card to Abraham & Strauss and I’d go and buy. It was just, it was just, I loved to go to New York.

BB: Were there certain foods that she cooked that were traditional or a ritual for your family?

TO: Yes.

BB: What were some of your favorites?

TO: She cooked really good rugala. That’s the thing I remember the most. Her pastries were really good.

BB: What is rugala?

TO: It’s a dessert where you—it’s a flour, sweet flour thing that you roll around with fruit. It’s very good, a good dessert.

BB: Was music and art or literature or other things a part of your, kind of the rituals in your nuclear family?

TO: Well, my father played classical music every Sunday. I hated it.

BB: Played it on the radio?

TO: Played it on the record player, all through the house. I just—classical music, oh, no. I was a huge fan of musicals so on my little record player I would play musicals, and my uncle who was in the music business, was a musician himself for a while. Then he—some of the stories I remember about him are that he conducted for Harry Belafonte. I remember going to a concert and meeting Harry Belafonte back stage. What I remember about that is that he was very young and sweating. There was just sweat poring off his body because it was just after the concert. That's what I remember about Harry Belafonte, [Laughter] and that I enjoyed the concert very much.

BB: What's your uncle's name?

TO: Milt Okun.

BB: Milt?

TO: Milt Okun. He was very well known. He also, like my father, was very successful. He was a producer and an arranger during the folk music period of people like Peter, Paul & Mary and the Chad Mitchell Trio. He discovered John Denver, and was very good at what he did and very successful. Then his money started making money, so he's certainly—he was an original investor in the Hard Rock Café and lives in Beverly Hills [California] now. When—we don't see them hardly at all, but when I was growing up, I have a cousin that's more my age (his daughter), and I remember going to one of my favorite memories is going to Chicago with them when he was recording the Chad Mitchell Trio.

BB: The what?

TO: The Chad Mitchell Trio. They were a very well known folk group, sort of a little bit before Peter, Paul & Mary—political music and beautiful musical arrangements. I would, he would take us to the studio sometimes and I just loved that. I just loved being a witness to that kind of music production. When the Chad Mitchell Trio would come and perform here, we would always, they would call us up and we would go. There was music in our family in that kind of way.

BB: What about art?

TO: Not so much. I remember my parents liked to drag us to art museums, so they liked art. Of course as a kid I hated it. “Oh, my god, going to another art museum.” When we lived in—my father, because he’s a professor, took sabbaticals every seven years, and so in third grade I lived in Holland for a year. We all did. I spent a lot of time in art museums looking at impressionism. Oy, I hated it.

BB: How did you come into your own as an artist which such [laughter] childhood hatred for art?

TO: Well, I don’t think it’s I hated art, it’s I hated being dragged to museums. It wasn’t until I figured out that I could look at paintings in terms of whether they were things I would want to have hanging in my own house, or whether I actually liked them, that it didn’t have to be an intellectual exercise in memory that things started to shift. I started to develop my own taste, which happened later.

BB: We’ll talk more about that later. I want to go back to your aunt being a lesbian and yet your family never talking about it. When did you find out? What was that...?

TO: I was an adult, it was after she had died.

BB: How did you come to find out? What were the circumstances or the context of that?

TO: I don't remember.

BB: Were issues of gender and sexuality not talked about at all in your family, by your parents and aunts and...?

TO: I think the—it was a totally heterosexual assumed norm. So it wasn't talked about because heterosexuality was assumed. I do remember my mother telling me that if I was going to become sexually active and wanted birth control I should talk to her about it. And it was really clear that I should not talk to her about it. Those were the words she said, but the tone was, "do not talk to me about it." [Laughter]

BB: Here's the right thing to say,

TO: Right, right.

BB: but don't you dare talk to me about it.

TO: Exactly. I do remember that.

BB: What about early gender socialization? Do you feel like certain people, even family or friends, had an influence on telling you what you should, how you should be a girl?

TO: No, actually I think one of the things that I noted about my parents is that there was very little of that if any that I remember. I think that the, one thing that really stands out to me is I never heard a word ever from my parents that they expected me to marry or to have children. Not once. I think part of it is because my mother was so ambivalent herself- this is my theory again and not something she has told me—but about marrying and how that affected her life. I think also that she was born a generation too early, and I think that if she had been born later and had felt more entitled to make choices in her own best interest, that

she would have lived a very different kind of life. There was never—the only pressure I felt in my family was to be intellectually active. That was hard for me because I wasn't a good student and I didn't like school. All the assumptions were that I should—I remember that when it came time for me after high school to go to college, I didn't want to go. It was like the equivalent of telling my parents that I was pregnant, telling them I didn't want to go to college. I couldn't do it. It was such an unspoken value that you had to go to college that it was unthinkable to me to say to my parents I don't want to go to college right now. I'm not ready. So I went and it was horrible and a total waste.

BB: You went to Oberlin College in Ohio.

TO: No, no at first I went to Lake Forest north of Chicago, because I couldn't get in to any school. I was not a good student, I did not have a good record and I couldn't get into any of the schools I applied to. My parents, my father called I think Wesleyan where I had applied--.

BB: Wesleyan?

TO: Yes, and asked them where I could get in and suggested Lake Forest, which was essentially a party school for rich kids. That's where I went. In my memory, and this could be wrong, but my memory is that when I applied, I graduated from college in [19] 75, so in the late [19] 60s at lot of colleges still had blind admissions and they would let you in whether you could afford to pay or not, and then that policy started to change. I'd gone to Lake Forest for a year and a half and by the time I'd applied for the transfer to Oberlin, your ability to pay didn't make a difference. Because my parents could pay my way Oberlin accepted me. Oberlin didn't accept me initially when I applied.

BB: What year did you graduate from high school?

TO: Seventy, I guess.

BB: 1970?

TO: Right.

BB: What was the name? That was Chapel Hill High, right?

TO: No.

BB: No? Oh.

TO: [Laughter] I have been—when Tom and I got married, my brother, who is famous for his games, created a game where he paired people, one person from each family into pairs, and then he had a quiz. One of the questions on the quiz was he listed all the schools I'd ever attended, and asked people to identify which one I'd not gone to. There was probably a list of twenty, and I couldn't even get it right. I have been to so many schools. So no, I graduated from The Independent School which was a—it's another whole long story, but it was a school that was created by this guy who wanted to start a school for all the white kids who were dropping out because of drugs and other problems. He wanted some respectable kids in the school. All my friends were seniors and had graduated, so I was ready to try something different. So I went to this school.

BB: That was the name of it, The Independent School?

TO: Yes.

BB: What was the man's name who started it? Do you remember?

TO: Robert Kimsey, I think. Bob Kimsey.

BB: What was it about school that was so miserable for you?

TO: I don't think—I learn by doing. I'm a slow, methodical learner, and I'm a hands-on learner. School is not geared for people like me. I just never did well. I was never

highly motivated. I never, I don't remember a teacher ever taking a particular interest in me. I just remember kind of struggling and doing mediocre work, even in college. I don't really have any memories of being turned on by a class.

BB: Where there any other meaningful things going on in your life in your college years?

TO: Oh yeah, politics.

BB: Politics?

TO: Politics, sex, and hormones. [Laughter]

BB: Politically, what was exciting?

TO: Well, in college, we were—I was—the women's movement was very strong, and I was very involved at Oberlin. There were a group of women who formed relationships—on the campus formed relationships with women in the community and together we formed a women's center to serve women in both places.

BB: Serve them how?

TO: We were like a resource. It was a resource for women who needed help in all different kinds of ways. I think from everything from depression to self-help groups to, you know, it was all in the context of women's liberation and women being able to do what they wanted and needed to do.

BB: Was it called The Women's Center?

TO: I think so. Oberlin Women's Center. We had a women's paper called *Coming Out*. I was so clueless. I had no idea. [Laughter]

BB: So it wasn't intentionally about coming out in terms of being a homosexual?

TO: I don't think so, and I have some issues somewhere, but again, my understanding of gender diversity was below zero. I have a feeling—I knew a couple of the women were lesbian, sort of, but I don't remember ever, I just, I was involved with this newspaper called *Coming Out* for three years with no consciousness about that. [Laughter] When I say I was a slow learner I am quite serious.

BB: [Laughter] I'm sure it's all about you, Tema. It has nothing to do with the society or culture you are in, right? [Laughter]

TO: I lived with people who ran a printing press at Oberlin. It was a Wobbly, IWW printing press. We did a lot of—it was there that I learned my typesetting skill, which can in to play a lot in my future activism. That sort of was the—I had a very rich college experience in the sense that a lot of my friendships were with people off campus as well as on campus. I lived off campus in a community house with people who were not only involved with Oberlin. I majored in Physical Education because that's where the politics was happening on the campus at that time.

BB: Is that right? How did that come about?

TO: Well, this was the, you know the Vietnam War was over, SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] was also over in terms of—I don't know where Weather Underground was at that point, but the politics on campus was very dormant in terms of broader, you know, the women's stuff was very active, but in terms of sort of a broader politic and the antiwar politics that had been—that was all very much on the wane. Oberlin decided to do an experiment with their P.E. department where they hired a guy named Jack Scott who was—some people—he's dead now, but he is known by some people for being somebody who drove Pattie Hearst across the desert—across the country when she was trying to escape

from police or I don't know, but that was after Oberlin. At that time, he was part of a sort of loosely called the Athletic Revolution that was happening on campuses; started sort of this seminal event I think was the publication of a book called Out of Their League by a football player named Dave Meggyesy who with Jack Scott's help, published this book about his experience as an athlete at Texas, I think. In Texas, I'm not sure, but I think it's Texas. How he had been—he, like other athletes, were being exploited by universities and sort of used up and used to make money for their athletic programs; but if they were injured or anything, not necessarily graduating. So it was just total exploitation. That was the beginning, at least in my mind, sort of this whole athletic revolution and the bringing a political perspective to sports. Bill Walton and Kareem Abdul Jabbar and all this; that stuff was happening. This was after the Olympics in Mexico City where the black athletes boycotted and the athletes who did go stood on the stand, Tommy Smith, with their fists in the air. And Jack Scott was very central to a lot of that activity, along with a guy named Harry Edwards. They hired him to run the athletic department and I remember Howard Cosell [sports journalist] came on campus because Jack Scott allowed the football team to hire their coach, which was unheard of. He brought Tommy Smith to the campus to teach. He brought a guy named Dan Millman who's now known for all of his "The Way of the Warrior" books. He was a gymnastics coach and teacher. He brought—so, it was the most political department on campus. It was the most racially diverse place on campus. I knew it would freak my father out if I was a P.E. major, because it was anti-intellectual. So those three things kind of converged, and I became a P.E. major. [Laughter]

BB: How did it go over with your father?

TO: When I told him, I made the mistake of telling him—you know, I was in my rebellious period—telling him when he was driving and I was in the back seat so I couldn't see his face. I'm sure he was disappointed, but he didn't fight me on it. I am not particularly proud of myself for that, but it was my passive-aggressive way of asserting myself.

BB: And your mother? How did--.

TO: I don't think she cared. I don't remember her being a factor in this.

BB: So really do you feel like the pressure to perform intellectually and become one of the intellectual elite was more from your father--.

TO: Yeah.

BB: and not your mother?

TO: Yes, I think so. Yeah.

BB: What was your brother doing? How did he fit in to the expectations pattern of higher education?

TO: My brother took nine or ten years to graduate from Antioch. [Laughter] I think he might have graduated after I did. Is that true? I'm not sure. My brother was also very politically involved, and he was living in Chicago at the time and very active in a group called Rising up Angry. Then he eventually finished school and came, moved back to Chapel Hill to go to law school, and most of his adult life has worked as a-- as the—in North Carolina, unfortunately at the labor lawyer in the state. He represents organized labor.

BB: Do you want to take a little break?

TO: I'm okay.

BB: You're okay? Okay.

TO: I could talk about myself for hours. [Laughter]

BB: Oh, good. I love it. I could listen to you talk about yourself for hours.

TO: Oh, god.

BB: [pause] Let me just—I'm just catching up where we are on- -

TO: Sure.

BB: my questions. After Oberlin, what went on in your life from [19] 75 to [19]84-ish? What was going on?

TO: I'm just doing my resume because I'm getting ready to look for some teaching jobs, and it's interesting try and reconstruct all of that. I graduated with this degree [chuckles] in Physical Education and I decided that I was going to be an athletic trainer because I wasn't an athlete by any sense of the word. Coaching was out and teaching P.E. was out, so there was this new field called Athletic Trainer where I thought I could do something. I came to Chapel Hill and they'd just started a new sports medicine department, and went to graduate school in sports medicine and hung out in the [laughter] my past is so, um, checkered—hung out in the training room. I taped lots of ankles and [laughter]. I remember for a while I had a gig in the weight room where my friend Stephanie [Alexander] and I, our job was to motivate the athletes to lift their weights. I would be in there shouting at Mike O'Koren and the UNC basketball players to work harder. [Pause and laughter]

BB: What's checkered about that, Tema?

TO: Oh, it's just all over the place. It's not a judgment. It's just a tapestry.

BB: A tapestry?

TO: [Laughter] I was politically—so the skill I got as a type-setter meant that, in terms of my activism, a lot of what I did was the design and development and publication of materials for groups that I was involved in. When I was doing my stuff for my resume, I

pulled out a drawer of all this—so for many years, a lot of my activism was producing materials for The Institute for Southern Studies [a non-profit organization in Durham, NC that advocates progressive political causes in the south], Rural Advancement Fund, all these different groups...

BB: The Rural Advancement Fund?

TO: Rural Advancement Fund. Doing, that's where my relationship with The Institute for Southern Studies started. When I was in graduate school and I was hanging out a lot there, they had a typesetting service called Southern Types. I would do work there and help out. I co-edited a sports issue of *Southern Exposure* and then had a disastrous love affair and left to go to the west coast. I never finished school. One of the many schools, I never finished.

BB: Where was this graduate school?

TO: At UNC.

BB: UNC in Sports Medicine. Okay.

TO: Yes. I got all the way through and I went to take the training exam and I failed it. Then I, because of this disastrous love affair, I moved to the west coast and started working for the YMCA [Seattle] where I was an aquatic and fitness director for one of the branches of the Seattle Y [MCA]. I was politically active there, and again was typesetting and stuff working on a paper called *The Northwest Passage* and was active with the—I'd started doing clogging when I was here and joined a clogging group called the Duwamps Cloggers in Seattle. I lived there for two years and then came back to work for the Rural Advancement Fund, essentially in a secretarial position, and worked there for several years. As a—I started doing their materials, produced their newsletters, their seed catalogs, and that

was a lot of the work I was doing there. I worked for them, and then I left there to work for—I moved to Charlotte to work for the Carolina Community Project when that started and then worked for Grassroots Leadership and that was sort of my non-profit social justice career started with the Rural Advancement Fund and then...

BB: So tell me what the Rural Advancement—is it RAFI?

TO: Yes.

BB: Is that the same thing?

TO: Well, it is now. It wasn't then. It used to be the Southern Tenant Farmers Union. It became the Rural Advancement Fund maybe in the [19] 80s or something. It was initially an organization that organized tenant farmers and then became, that sort of started, that had a broader mission. It was based in Pittsboro [North Carolina] with an office headquarters in Charlotte, but a large office in Pittsboro. A lot of what it was doing was research—it had sort of two approaches. One was organizing farmers in North and South Carolina, small family farmers. That was Betty Bailey doing that work. Then doing research and education around the loss of genetic diversity in plants, particularly in agricultural plants. One of the first projects I did was to compare all the apple varieties in the early 1900s with the apple varieties now, sort of to note the incredible loss of species that had happened in that period of time.

BB: Even though you were in an administrative position, you were doing research.

TO: Well, I was doing very elementary research, yes. And then, I don't know if my title changed, but they were doing enough, there was enough material production that that became almost my full time job. I was doing their newsletter and they had a lot of catalogs that they did. When I was going through materials, I found a lot of educational kits and stuff

so I did that. And then realized I wanted to be more involved in programmatic work and there really wasn't room for me there to do that. So I started looking for another job. The Carolina Community Project had just started in Charlotte and Cathy Howell had been hired to come down to the south. The idea of the Carolina Community Project was sort of an incubator for organizing projects in North and South Carolina.

BB: Organizing projects of any sort or..

TO: Yes.

BB: justice oriented?

TO: Well, justice oriented organizing projects. There was a voter education project, the Piedmont Peace Project [founded by Linda Stout to bring together poor blacks and poor whites in the same organization] started out of that. I can get to the newsletter, but there was a whole list of organizations that started out of Carolina Community Project. The idea was to not have to—as to provide—to have a staff of experienced organizers to provide support for people. Two or three people were experienced and the rest of us were learning. It was a fabulous environment for me because I learn by doing. This was before there were development directors and stuff, and again because of my publication experience, even though I wanted to do programmatic work, I ended up doing a lot of publications and then a lot of fund-raising. I did a lot of concert productions because we were associated with Si then and we did a lot of concerts to raise money. I—there wasn't, we were just—grassroots fund-raising was just beginning as a concept in terms of a formalized concept. I went to some of Kim Klein workshops, and because I knew just a little bit more than everybody else I was sort of the expert, and then I started doing training and fund-raising, even though I

didn't know that much. About that time Carolina Community Project morphed into Grassroots Leadership.

BB: Right. How did that feel like for you? What did it feel like for you emotionally to sort of dive in and start doing trainings and to become the expert by default almost? What was going on with you?

TO: I have this memory of sitting in a training about, I think it was about strategic planning or something, that we had hired somebody to come and do. I remember sitting there watching this woman train us and going, that looks like fun. I want to do that. I'm never someone—I have never, up until now, been somebody who sat down and sort of said—I mean, I became a P.E. major because of the circumstances in my life at that—it was not like I had a burning ambition to be a—I've never had a—I was somebody who always responded to the circumstances and tried to match my skills to the circumstances and what was needed. It served me well for a really long time. I'm very grateful for that kind of intuitive path, and grateful for the timing of it that I was in the movement in a time when that could work. It wasn't as professionalized as it is now. You didn't need degrees, you didn't need—you just needed willingness and some skill. I was in the right place at the right time. I think both Cathy, as my boss and then Si as my boss were people who were really—their leadership style was to assume you could do a good job and allowed you to do that and I responded well to that. They showed a lot of confidence in me and gave me more and more responsibility. I think that the thing that, the down side of that, when I reflect back on it now, is that I was and still am a very dutiful person. So if there was a need and I felt like I could fill it, I would do my best to do that regardless of whether it was something I actually wanted to do or was even my best talent. I'm very detailed oriented. I'm very skilled at lining things up and making

sure things happen in a certain—I'm very—I would have been a good German. [Laughter] I'm very organized. I think that they needed somebody to do the fund-raising skills. I was available. I enjoyed the training aspect of it. I enjoy training other people how to do it. I didn't particularly like the fund-raising, but I was really good at setting up the systems that fund-raising requires and luckily I was paired with a woman named Michelle Handler at Grassroots Leadership who was very good at the schmoozing. Together we were a really great team. I'm good at doing what people told me, so I followed what Kim Klein said and it worked and so we were, I was successful. We were successful.

BB: And your budget was, in the end...

TO: By the end--

BB: \$350,000 or something.

TO: Yes, some \$300,000. Yes, yes.

BB: And it was twenty—how many years ago was that? That was--

TO: That was in the [19]80s.

BB: In the 80s.

TO: We had a big budget.

BB: That's impressive.

TO: The other thing that I think we were part of, I know we were part of doing, was raising issues of about how much organizers were getting paid and advocating for people getting paid a living wage and playing a role with foundations. There's a classic story about how we submitted a proposal to Reynolds, I think.

BB: Z. Smith Reynolds [Foundation – private charitable family foundation in Winston-Salem, NC]?

TO: Yes, Z. Smith Reynolds where the salaries for the organizers were \$14,000 and apparently Mr. Reynolds was apoplectic that the salaries would be so high and in the next breath said, “Of course I can’t imagine anybody living on less than \$100,000 myself.” It was kind of back and forth. I can’t swear that that actually happened I just know it’s one of those stories that gets told. We really saw ourselves as trying to play a role in pushing the foundations to acknowledge that salaries needed to be higher. It had this unintended consequence, as everything does, which is that people started coming to social justice organizations for jobs because the money, because they were well paying jobs, not out of a belief in the values. It created some dilemmas for us that we hadn’t really foreseen. That stuff always happens.

Carolina Community Project was also the first intentionally, overtly, thoughtfully, bi-racial, multi-racial staff I’d ever worked on.

BB: But you, Cathy, and Si are all white. Was it--

TO: Right, but Carolina Community Project was Cathy Howell, John Wancheck, Melvin Whitley, Abdul Rash, no, no that’s wrong. I’m thinking of somebody—oh, I can see him, but I can’t think of his name—Linda Stout, me, Tawana Wilson-Allen, Ella [Townsend]. I can’t remember all the names, but it was about a fifty-fifty black/white staff. At Grassroots Leadership once things got morphed, it was the same.

Then, my entry into DR work--

BB: dismantling racism.

TO: -- happened because I was doing all this development, producing concerts, managing all the direct mail systems, major donor systems and producing all the materials that go along with all of that, doing training—fund-raising training for groups, and then

somewhere in there Harvey Gantt [first black mayor of Charlotte] ran for Senate and we agreed that I would, that Grassroots Leadership would lend me to his campaign, so I worked on his campaign for six months or so. I came back and Grassroots Leadership, so Cathy had started working at Grassroots Leadership and at that point it was a staff of very experienced organizers. It was Cathy, Kamau Marcharia [founding member of National Organizers Alliance], and Si. I think Pat Callair [founder of The Leadership and Empowerment Institute, Inc.] came later. Michelle [Johnson] was the administrative person. We were getting—we were doing a lot of—with Kamau, a lot of organizing was happening in South Carolina and we were doing a lot of organizing support for groups in both states and getting all these requests that had to do with race, class, and gender; like, our group is, you know, “There’s racism happening in our group. What do we do?” Or, sex or class issues. So, not so much about how to organize, but how to address these issues, and we had no idea.

BB: About what year is this? Is this - -

TO: I need to go look in my thing. It probably - -

BB: It looks like it overlapped with your work - -

TO: Mid- to late 80s.

BB: [19] 86 to [19] 90 you were doing both. Okay.

TO: Right. Si, who is brilliant at this kind of stuff, decided to make a project out of our ignorance and created a big proposal—which Kellogg [Foundation] funded. I think it was the biggest proposal we’d ever gotten. The first stage was to go and get as much training as we could from people who were doing this work, and this was in the—obviously anti-racism work has been going on for a long time, but in terms of the contemporary anti-racism

movement, this was very—The People’s Institute [anti-racism training and organizing institution] existed- -

BB: The People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond. Where was that based?

TO: That was based in New Orleans.

BB: Okay.

TO: And there was a group called Equity, Inc. that was based in the Bay area. I don’t know if Crossroads Ministry existed. We didn’t know about them if they did. A group called Lillie Allen Institute in Atlanta, [Georgia]. There wasn’t a lot out there, and most of what was out there was short-term workshop type things, at least as we investigated. We, Grassroots Leadership hired James Williams. He and I—I was doing fund-raising for Grassroots Leadership, but I’m not sure how, I don’t remember how it happened, but he and I ended up pairing up. He was the director of this thing called Barriers and Bridges. Then we became partners in the effort. He was the leader and I was his help slash—I don’t think he—well, so we were partners.

BB: Okay.

TO: We went and took a weeklong training at Equity, Inc. That’s when I identify my first understanding of gender diversity, because I remember my memory of that is going to the Bay area and being in this workshop with Equity, Inc. doesn’t exist any more- but with these really skilled facilitators. It was the first time I ever did the crossover exercise where you call out categories and people cross. They called out gay/lesbian/bisexual—I don’t even know if transgender was a term then—and over half the room crossed. I was like what the fuck! I had no, I had no idea. I was so clueless. I just sort of, just like all these bulbs were going off in my brain. It’s like I walked into this room, I assumed everybody was

heterosexual. I have no context for understanding the Bay area much less, I was just, my own clueless-ness was illuminated above my head, and it was the beginning of this incredible period of just realizing how little I knew about, well, just about everything. It was interesting because I became good friends, not long-lasting friends, but during that time hung out a lot with a woman who was very surprised that I didn't cross—I was clueless!—in a sense have come to understand that many people assume I'm a lesbian, which is fabulous, but I didn't, you know again, I was just completely clueless about how I presented gender-wise or just my—so that was the beginning of that whole education around that. James and I just kind of immersed ourselves, we got as much training as we could, and we took the lead, but all the Grassroots Leadership staff really participated, and we developed this program where we realized we wanted to work with people over time. So we created a pilot program and eight groups applied. We worked with them over two years, sort of creating the curriculum as we went along. They sent a bi-racial team, I think. I'm trying to remember—to quarterly gatherings where we did training and talking. Then we went to their organizations. It was very productive. We learned a tremendous amount. I think the groups benefited some. We got some funding to do a second round, but Grassroots Leadership, it was a very financially expensive process, the long-term processes is, so Grassroots Leadership never explicitly carried on that specific program, but we started integrating the stuff that we were learning into everything that we were doing.

BB: So was the pilot project also Barriers and Bridges? Was it- -

TO: That's what it was called.

BB: a continuance of Barriers and Bridges- -

TO: Yes.

BB: even though it had already been existed, you still called the Barriers and Bridges- -

TO: No, no, we created it to be the pilot project.

BB: Oh, I thought James Williams had already- -

TO: We'd hired him, but it was to kick off a pilot project.

BB: Okay.

TO: The beginning of the pilot project was for us to get as much training and try to incorporate what we were learning into whatever we were going to offer people.

BB: Okay. Let's take a little break.

TO: Sure.

[Recorder is turned off and then back on]

BB: Fuck! I'm so sorry. [Bridgette messed up and didn't start recording again for about 10 minutes.]

TO: When you were asking about why dismantling—given that I've been talking about anti-impression work, why “Dismantling Racism Works” and I was talking about how the history of that has to do with—I was working with James at Grassroots Leadership in this thing called the Barriers and Bridges Project, and we were doing a larger anti-oppression thing, each group bringing its own focus. Some groups were working with class and some were working on race. Then I met Kenneth [Jones]. He was working for the Peace Development Fund, which is a funding foundation that was funding a lot of work in South Carolina. Grassroots Leadership was doing a lot of work in South Carolina and there were turf issues between the two groups. I made some joke about how we didn't seem to care what the people in South Carolina thought. We were going to fight over South Carolina.

The solution to these turf issues was for Kenneth and me to train together. So we set that up. He was doing—although they had a dismantling racism training that they did as—the Peace Development Fund had a training arm called the Exchange Project and Kenneth was a trainer for them, or the trainer for them. They did a dismantling racism training, but we weren't talking about that, we were talking about Kenneth doing the organizational development, board planning, long-range planning stuff, and I was doing the fund-raising piece. We agreed to do our first training together at the Penn Center, and I was saying that Kenneth was more senior than me, had more training experience than I did, and I felt pressure to make this work coming in as the junior person and knowing that the peace depended on this working out. I show up and I've never met Kenneth before, I don't really remember—we had an agenda. We must have talked about it beforehand. Our pieces were fairly discreet. The audience that we were training was predominately African-American from organizations in South Carolina. He does his piece and he's really a good trainer and very dynamic and very back and forth with people, just unbelievable. It's my turn, and I start doing my little stuff about fund-raising and a young woman stands up and starts to challenge me and says things like, "What you're talking about is not going to work in our neighborhood. What do you, a white woman, know about raising money in my community? You don't know anything about it. This is bullshit." Which I think was probably my deepest fear that somebody would challenge me, because I thought that everything she was saying was absolutely true. I remember I held it together and Karimah [Nonyameko Moore] who was there, I don't know if that was the first time I met her, Karimah Nonyameko was there, and she told me years later that what I said was something like, "Well, if you don't want to learn fund-raising, then that's up to you." I can't imagine that I would say something so flip—it's not really like me,

but maybe I was scared so that's what I said. I don't remember. I can't remember what I said. I held it together. I ran out of the room and I burst into tears. And I thought, "It's over. I'm doing a terrible job. I've lost all credibility. Kenneth must think I suck. I don't know what I'm talking about," and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. I'm sobbing, and Kenneth is standing there looking at me and he comes over and I remember he pulls up a chair and he sits down and he just looks at me. He lets me calm down and he says, "Tema, your problem is that you don't believe—you need to believe more in your material." That's all I remember. I'm sure he said some other things, but in that one sentence—[crying] in my life—I hadn't met Tom yet—in my life, the number of people who showed faith in my abilities was less than the fingers on one hand. In that one sentence, Kenneth just sort of said, "I think you can do this. I'm not worried about it." It was just—I loved him from that moment on. I went back out and somehow we managed it. There was a skit later and they made fun of both of us, and it was fine. We started training together.

BB: You decided to train together--

TO: We just decided to keep do--.

BB: you and him?

TO: Well, the two organizations kept training together. Then he suggested that I learn—Barriers and Bridges was winding down—he suggested that I learn their dismantling racism model, which I did. I can't remember at what point I left Grassroots Leadership and at that point Peace Development Fund was contracting with me to do trainings beyond South Carolina, things that they were doing in other places. I would do the fundraising part, and then as I learned his model of DR, I started doing his model. Then as we did that several years in I started introducing things from our model and we started merging our models and

then just adapting from there. By that point I was on my own as a consultant and he was still working at PDF and so I would contract with PDF. Then he left PDF and we formed, along with Karimah and Jeanne Gauna, something called ChangeWork [group of organizers working to build democratic organizations and institutions in US]. That was a collaborative that was doing—and so the rationale for doing DR trainings and not anti-oppression trainings was our feeling that it made more sense to go in depth in one, that you could choose whichever one you wanted, to go in depth and to use the framework, the analysis framework for that to understand others, that that would inevitably lead you in understanding others. That if you tried to skip over the surface of all of them, you wouldn't do any of the justice. Our expertise became racism. It didn't—and we would always say this doesn't mean we are not equally committed to other oppression issues, it's just that we feel like if you understand racism deeply then it will help—the analysis that we are going to give you will help you understand sexism and heterosexism deeply as well. So that's what we did.

We continued to do organizational development and board planning and fund-raising. We were sort of doing it—we were organizational development—ChangeWork was organizational development, consultants, trainers, facilitators, with a DR lens. We also started doing organizing training, Jeanne and Karimah, both. Jeanne was an incredibly strong organizer for SWOP, Southwest Organizing Project. She was doing our organizing training. Ow.

BB: You okay?

TO: Yeah, my foot just cramped. So, I was doing a lot of the board and fund-raising stuff for a while along with the DR stuff, and then I started becoming disillusioned with board development and long-range strategic planning. I felt like I stopped being a believer. I

started to feeling like the 501 c3 model is a terrible model for social justice organizations and that board structure doesn't really work for social justice organizations and that long-range planning, the way that we were doing it, doesn't really work because we would go through these intense processes of people and they would do what they wanted to do any way. It didn't make sense for me to keep training on things I didn't really believe in any more. I started focusing on the DR work and Kenneth and I sort of developed the DR work and started bringing in other people to DR training and then he and Karimah and Jeanne were doing the OD [organizational development] work. We were still one organization, but we were split into these two pieces. That's how that happened.

Then, when Kenneth died, he was the spoke to this wheel and it just made sense, for reasons I don't think I'm going to go in to, for the two entities to split. We formed DR works to represent the group that was doing the dismantling racism work, previously done under the rubric of ChangeWork.

BB: ChangeWork is still around, too, it's just- -

TO: Yes. Jeanne and Kenneth are both dead, so Karimah and some other folks are doing the ChangeWork piece. I'm pretty much—I'm not the active person in DR works. Bree [Carlson] and Susanne Plessick are active there.

BB: So tell me some more about Kenneth as a...

TO: [Long pause] Um, I think I'm still not—I'm still in denial about the effect his death has had on me. [Tears up. Pause] What can I say? He was one of the most amazing trainers I have ever known. His ability to be present with people and to—I think one of the reasons that our DR trainings were so successful was because we both had a sense of humor and they were fun, which people didn't expect, because Kenneth was totally committed to

having a good time. [Laughter] He was just—again, it was sort of like when I was talking about Tom, which didn't get on there, about how we are opposites, Kenneth and I are very much opposites. He is so sociable, very sociable, he's very outgoing. He loves to party, loves to have fun. I'm such an introvert. I—it's not that I don't like to have fun, but going out and partying and dancing at night is not something I'm interested in. I think we were just very, very complementary. He brought the—we worked together for so long that I don't know if I'll ever have another partnership like it in the sense that—and he was also such a strong personality and so confident in his own skills that allowed me to—in some ways it might have been a disservice in the sense that I didn't have to think. I didn't have to second-guess myself in terms of the role that I was playing because I couldn't—like I do when I'm working with new trainers and I can be very powerful or be, or interrupt too much or take over or—there was none of those issues with Kenneth, because Kenneth would be up front when he wanted to and be in the background when he—there wasn't, we just—somebody, after he died, sent us a note saying watching us train together was like watching a dance. We just learned each other very well and became very intuitive and, you know, which just made me a really, really good trainer. He took responsibility for himself, which was a great gift.

BB: What does that mean?

TO: [Pause] I didn't have to worry that—I didn't have to think for him and me too. Sometimes—and that was an issue in my relationship with Tom, sometimes it's because Tom is so good at doing unconditional love that sometimes he'll think about my needs more he'll think about his own. Kenneth was considerate, but he wasn't considerate at his own expense. I could push knowing that he would push back. He would give way if he didn't care and he would stand his ground if he did. I think we were both like that. We could have, we could

argue about a strategy or how we would approach something and then whatever decision we reached we would both honor it. It was just amazing. I think I'm still struggling with how to both work with other people and work on my own because it was such second nature to work with him. Also, I learned a lot about working with somebody else and not expecting them to be me. There were—he can be so frustrating; I'm sure I was equally frustrating, but he would be frustrating around details. I would get ready to leave for a training and realize I would have no idea when he was coming, what his flight information was, sometimes where the training was. The penultimate story is I remember we had a training at the Boggs Center, which is in the middle of—no disrespect meant—the middle of very rural Georgia. I'm not sure where. I flew into the Augusta airport, again had no information—this was before cell phones—no information when Kenneth was going to be there. He was supposed to meet me at the baggage claim. I look around, no Kenneth. The airport is packed with people who are there for some golf thing, so a lot of white people in golf clothes and no Kenneth. I'm waiting an hour and I realize I don't know where the Boggs Center is. I don't know when we are starting—I don't know anything. I don't know why I'm blaming him for this. I didn't take responsibility. So, I'm very angry. I call somebody. I think I call Bob Hall or somebody. Where's the Boggs Center? I figure out where it is. I see this long line at the rental counter. I have a brainstorm. I pick up the phone. I call the rental counter. I get a car, probably one of the last ones. I get in the car. It's getting dark by now. I'm driving into the middle of rural Georgia, I don't know where. It is dark, pitch dark now. I don't know where Kenneth is. I'm pissed off beyond belief, and this car pulls up behind me with the headlights on. I'm almost at the Boggs Center. I turn into the Boggs Center and the car follows me. It's very, you know, there's nothing there but the Center. I pull in to the parking lot and this

car pulls up and Kenneth gets out. He's been driving around looking for me. It turns out he was at the airport. He didn't know—he didn't see me. He thought maybe I'd flown into Savannah. He drove to Savannah, didn't find me there, drove back, and went to the Boggs Center. That was kind of, that was, oh my god, totally Kenneth—distracted by the details, but totally committed to making sure I was okay. I finally learned that it didn't matter. He had so many strengths—in his ability to—and in the training, and then he always followed up with people. He maintained these relationships with people from trainings, and I'm not that way. I'm just not. I would—again, it took me a couple of years to catch on to these incredible gifts that he brought. It was a great learning for me to appreciate and really pay attention to all the amazing things that a person has to offer and to get over the fact that they don't offer some of these other things; that nobody offers everything. And it's stupid to want that. I don't offer everything. I don't know—I just, I don't know what else to say. He was an amazing person.

BB: Where did he grow up?

TO: He grew up in Pittsburgh.

BB: How did he come to organizing work?

TO: He went to college and then—he told me—he's told this story a thousand times. I stopped paying attention. I think he started working for Nuclear Freeze/SANE [an anti-nuclear proliferation organization which is now Peace Action] doing some training there. He was very active in some of the Cuba stuff. I found out after he died he was—he had all these other—he was a very private person and he had all these other interests I knew nothing about which is totally fine, but his ability to be present in so many different venues and to have relationships with so many different kinds of people. I don't know if he was an activist in

college, but I think he always had that bent. Pretty much after college all his jobs were social justice jobs.

BB: Yeah, and he died pretty—it was pretty quick and sudden, right? It was- -

TO: Well, he- -

BB: He didn't have a long term- -

TO: He didn't know he was dying. He has colon cancer. I think he had it for a while. He didn't know he had it. I don't think he knew he had it when he died. It was sort of after-the-fact diagnosed.

BB: Wow.

TO: He thought he had the flu.

BB: Oh, my gosh. So he didn't have painful symptoms, I guess? Other than- -

TO: I think he lost a lot of weight. At the end he had painful symptoms, but if he did, he was ignoring them.

BB: Yeah.

TO: He was terrible about taking care of himself.

BB: He was?

TO: Yes.

BB: Do you see that a lot in social justice activists and organizers?

TO: Mm hmm.

BB: Why do you think that is?

TO: Well, with Kenneth I think it was he couldn't—he worked all the time. This was where class and race have a huge impact in terms of how somebody can or can't work. He was responsible financially for himself and also took on financial responsibilities for

other family members, which again is not my experience at all with my class background, which is very much attached to my race background. He just worked constantly. He played constantly, but he worked constantly. His schedule, to me, was grinding. I think he didn't have time with financial pressures. I also think it was like he didn't, I don't know that he—I don't know if he saw himself as vulnerable or not. We—it's not something we really talked about. I doubt if he had health insurance. We were self-employed. I don't know if he did or not, but I know he never got check-ups. When he was losing weight he thought it was because he was exercising, but he had been exercising. I didn't know he wasn't—I didn't even know he wasn't feeling well. I hadn't seen him. He died in December. I hadn't seen him since July. I didn't know he had been losing weight and all of that.

BB: Let's talk about another love, which is Tom. All these—just for the record—these—Tema's innuendos to “what I was saying”, was because I messed up with the recorder and it was on pause for maybe twenty minutes or so. So let's go back a little bit. [Laughter] You were saying some really lovely things about the story of how you met Tom and what you love about him the most and value about your relationship. You want to say a little bit?

TO: Sure. I met him—essentially we were set up by a friend on a blind date—me, Tom, and ten other eligible bachelors. [Laughter] We fell in love very quickly. We moved in together very quickly. It's sort of a miracle actually. I think what drew me to him was his capacity for loving me, which sounds selfish and probably is, but I had never really met a man like that before. I was thinking about how we were talking about gender before and how when one of my—when we were living in—we lived in San Francisco, Tom and I did in [19] 98 and 99, we got married in 85. My friend Dueker was meeting him for the first time and Dueker talks about how Dueker was walking up to the house and could see Tom through the

window and couldn't figure out who was that butch dike sitting next to Tema. [Laughter] I think one of the things about Tom and me is that we're kind of gender anomalous, both of us, which I kind of like. He has an incredible capacity to love other people. His mother, who's fabulous, we joke about how she is a pathological nurturer and Tom has those tendencies as well. I think that's what drew me to him.

Then, I think other things are that I was saying we have a lot of things in common. We're both controlling. We're both perfectionists. We're both—[pause]—which makes for some interesting arguments about how things are going to get done and who's going to do what, although we've got enough history now that we can roll through those pretty quickly. We both share a lot of the same values. The ways that we are different are that he's very—he's a very steady, calm, diplomatic person. I was talking about how he has some of the best diplomatic skills I've ever seen. I mean that—his ability to speak respectfully with people when he is having an argument with them, or when he wants something. If he's a customer and he's not getting good service, his ability to move, to get what he wants with great respect but also great determination. I've never seen anything like it. Those are not skills I feel like I particularly have. I'm much more up and down and sort of passionate cold/hot, and that those are very complementary. I think I bring some passion and drama into his life and he brings some calm and smoothness to mine. It's really the—certainly the longest-term relationship outside my family that I've ever had with anyone. I'm very grateful to be married to him and feel like we have a strong relationship. I try very hard not to take it for granted and feel very lucky about it.

BB: Let's see, there're a few things floating around in my head here. You were talking about how you drifted away from organizational development and board development

and long-range strategic planning and how the whole sort of culture 501(c) 3s isn't, in your mind, a good fit with social justice work. Will you say more about that?

TO: Well, the 501(c)3 structure is borrowed directly from the corporate structure and that what I've noticed is that social justice organizations or efforts get started because people are trying to meet a need or address an issue or organize themselves in order to do something proactive on their own behalf. Then as soon as the idea of institutionalizing into a 501(c)3 starts to come into play, then that group of people starts to try and fit into the rules that are established by the government in order to govern—in my view control—the way those efforts evolve. I think the most obvious or egregious or whatever you want to call it, evidence of this is that 501(c)3 status limits the ability of direct—the ability of an organization to do direct lobbying, which I think is very interesting. You can incorporate and you can be a charitable, but you can't have a voice in political affairs. So that tells you something right there, I think. And what I've noticed is that it limits it. It doesn't forbid it. Yet most organizations that I know with 501(c)3 status limit themselves way below what the government allows because they are so afraid of overstepping the rules and losing their status. I think it's a beautiful example of how the 501(c)3 structure—it's like Franz Fanon [July 20, 1925 – December 6, 1961; a psychiatrist, philosopher, revolutionary, and author from Martinique] says if a—that the way you oppress a people is not only you make them go through the back door, but then they create their own back door. You take on this structure and you start to follow rules that don't even exist in order to—out of fear that you are going to break some rule that the government has set up for you that's not even in your own interest to begin with. Then there is this whole idea of a board and a structure of—and again, an effort that's organic or community run has a lot of different options in terms of how it wants

to create this decision-making structure and how it wants to get advice and help. The board structure is just one way to do that. In my experience as an organizational development consultant when I was doing board training, I have never once seen a board operate the way it's supposed to on paper. Why are we trying—it's like making a square peg fit a round hole. I think the [?] becomes so concerned with meeting the frame that's set up by the 501(c)3 structure that gets distracted from what it was initially trying to do. I don't think any foundation has ever funded revolution. The whole discussion about money and ownership gets shifted in a certain way. Historically you can track how foundations, and particularly the Ford Foundation, have played a very central role in modifying social justice movements. I think all of that is stuff that we should be talking about.

BB: What does revolution mean to you?

TO: Well, really challenging the—mostly challenging the profit motive, challenging the profit as an end-all/be-all of everything, assuming that the right to make profit is more important than people. That's what it means to me.

BB: Do you have an economic system that you feel like would work? And what would it--

TO: Oh, no. My job is to criticize, not to provide positive alternatives. [Laughter]

BB: Well, I'm really asking because I want to write it down and use it, because it is really a tough question.

TO: Well, there are groups of people out there way more qualified than me who have been looking at this—everything from, and I don't remember the specific names of them, but there's a whole group of people sort of looking at what if we expanded the definition of gross national product to actually incorporate—there's another word for it—but to incorporate the

actual costs to the environment and to people and to—so that if we sort of reframed the way we understand the whole notion of costs and benefits, that that would be one way to do it.

BB: But still within the capitalist system?

TO: Yeah, I think so. I think democratic socialism is still a valid idea and has some treads still in Europe. People in this country, of course, are trained to believe that democracy and socialism are somehow—that capitalism and democracy are synonymous and socialism and democracy are not. That's not true; never has been. Again, I think it's just the whole drive to make things smaller and to put more power in the hands of people locally, to think about economies more in terms of state-ability and those are all—you know, I don't have a wholesale thing to offer. I just—just that this idea of the right to profit should trump everything else is destroying us in every way: physically, environmentally, spiritually, emotionally—in every way.

BB: Let's pause again. We'll stop here for today and do a second interview at another time. Thanks.

END OF TRANSCRIPT

Transcribed by Denise Kelly, July, 2007