

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

Interview U-0578

Lou Plummer

May 26, 2007

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FIELD NOTES- LOU PLUMMER

Interviewee: Lou Plummer

Interviewer: Bridgette Burge

Interview Date: Saturday, May 26, 2007

Project: Heirs to a Fighting Tradition: Oral Histories of North Carolina Social Justice Activists

Location: Lou's home in Fayetteville, NC

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: Lou Plummer has been the primary organizer for Military Families Speak Out at Ft. Bragg, NC since the beginning of the Iraq War and is a charter member of Fayetteville Peace With Justice. He is a member of Veterans for Peace, serves on the national coordinating committee of the Bring Them Home Now! campaign and is a member of the board of directors for NC Peace Action. A veteran of the North Carolina National Guard, Lou is the father of former military resister Petty Officer Andrew Plummer. A former correctional officer, Lou became involved in activism through People of Faith Against the Death Penalty. He participated in a successful campaign that culminated in the adoption of a death penalty moratorium in North Carolina. Lou lives with his family in Fayetteville, NC.

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."

TRANSCRIPT – LOUIS PLUMMER

Interviewee: Louis Kimbal (“Lou”) Plummer

Interviewer: Bridgette Burge

Interview date: May 26, 2007

Location: Fayetteville, North Carolina

Length: Approx 2 hrs 40 min

START OF DISC

BRIDGETTE BURGE: Today is Saturday, May 26, 2007 and we are doing an interview with Louis Kimbal Plummer, aka “Lou,” at his house and his wife’s house, Tina Plummer, on Marlboro Road in Fayetteville [North Carolina]. This interview is part of a series, *Heirs to a Fighting Tradition: Oral Histories of North Carolina Social Justice Activists* and the interviewer is Bridgette Burge, me. Before we start with the traditional “you were born in nah nah nah”—

LOU PLUMMER: In a log cabin I built with my own hands.

BB: Right, in a log cabin you built, right, right, and that apple tree you didn’t cut down. Lou’s going to talk about some photos that he has pulled up on his computer screen here and just describe them a little bit and then we’ll launch in, but there’s some good stories behind some of these photos; so we’re going to start here.

LP: These are the pictures that I included on the cd that I gave you.

BB: Great.

LP: So that's why I'm going through them. The first picture is of two guys. One is a black guy named Michael McPhearson who is the executive director of Veterans for Peace, [a veterans' organization founded in 1985 to promote alternatives to war] which is an organization that I've done some activist stuff with; I joined in 2004. He's being searched by a white guy named Sgt. Tracey Campbell of the Fayetteville Police Department. I've known Tracey since 1979. We went to high school together. His brother is a doctor in the Army who's been in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Michael McPhearson's son has been to Iraq and I just found out a couple of weeks ago is currently in jail in Kentucky.

BB: What's his name?

LP: I don't know Michael's son's name off the top of my head, but he's in jail for refusing to go to Iraq. He had a toddler son who died of an illness in January, Michael's son did, which has caused a lot of difficulty in his life and with his wife and mental health issues. And the Army's attitude was pretty much: "Suck it up and go back to Iraq." So he didn't want to go. So he's in jail. The next picture is of several Fayetteville police officers who have prominent plastic handcuffs and binoculars and they are looking at the first rally that we held in Fayetteville on the first anniversary of the war. It's one of my favorite photos because they're looking at a bunch of Quakers and Raging Grannies [social justice activist women old enough to be grandmothers who dress up in clothes that mock stereotypes of older women and sing songs at protests. They typically write the lyrics themselves, putting their political messages to the tunes of well known songs.] and military families as if we were a bunch of criminals. There's another picture of us being videotaped and also prominent are another set of plastic handcuffs and by the way, no one was arrested at this demonstration.

BB: And this was on February—

LP: March twentieth, 2004. This is another picture of that rally and very prominent is a banner for Military Families Speak Out, which is the organization that I became most associated with during the early part of the war. This is just a cool picture of a sister there wearing a pair of sunglasses with a reflection of umbrellas with the peace sign on them and the umbrellas are from a group in North Carolina with Wendy Michener and Roger—

BB: Ehrlich.

LP: Ehrlich and another guy and they call them “peace parasols” and they’ve been a part of several different actions that I’ve also been a part of. This picture here is my son, Drew Plummer, and my wife, Tina Plummer, and Drew’s partner, Tara Swaim, and we are standing directly across the street from Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, getting ready to go on a march in April of 2006. And that’s another picture of the three of us in the same location. This is us on the beginning of the march and behind us is the Martin Luther King Center. This picture is so much different from Fayetteville in that there’s just a significant number of people of color there.

BB: Is that Braedyn?

LP: Drew is holding my grandson, Braedyn. This was his first peace march and so that’s why I have a lot of pictures of it. That’s us beginning to march again. This picture was taken in front of the slave market called the Market House in the center of Fayetteville, North Carolina, where a lot of the local actions here in Fayetteville have occurred. We’re holding at this time a handwritten list of names of American soldiers killed in Iraq. The woman who’s talking is Beth Pratt. Her husband served in Iraq. Beth was a really vocal member of Military Families Speak Out and a great member of the community in Fayetteville. Her husband eventually was discharged from the Army and they moved to Florida, but she was just a very

eloquent spokesperson and I was very fond of her. This is my friend, Bridgette Burge, on March nineteenth, 2005 speaking to a crowd of about forty-eight hundred folks wearing her very small red t-shirt. Somehow we ended up with kiddy sizes for all of us. Bridgette was an emcee that day and really helpful in the whole organizing process.

This billboard that reads “www.bringthemhomenow.org” over the GI Rights Hotline number, we raised the money here in Fayetteville on two different occasions to put a series of billboards up for three months at the time and we did them on roads that were coming into and out of Fort Bragg [large US Army installation near Fayetteville; home of the 82nd Airborne Division]. I was and still am on the board [of Directors] of the Bring Them Home Now organization and the GI Rights Hotline is associated not just with Quaker House here in Fayetteville, but with the nationwide series of activists. We got a considerable amount of press coverage from these billboards and the GI Rights Hotline every year continues to break the record for the number of calls that it gets from military members who want to get out of the service.

BB: And it’s got the yellow flag, the symbol of supporting our troops.

LP: Yeah, it’s got the yellow ribbon.

BB: Yeah, the ribbon, sorry.

LP: People have different feelings about it. I think it’s really interesting that most of those yellow ribbons are made in China. So it’s really “support your Chinese worker ribbons” is what I call them. This was a counter-protester at the march in 2005. He’s got a hat that says he retired from the United States Army and it’s got Special Forces pins on it and a t-shirt that says “Bush Country” that’s really red. It’s got the red states and the blue states and I like it because you can look at different areas that are blue, which voted for Democrats, and

the whole Mississippi River Delta is blue. You can see the outline of the Black Belt through the US Southeast, the border areas in southern Texas. It says a lot. But you can also see a tremendous sea of rural areas in the United States that are, at that time, were solidly behind President Bush.

The next picture is my wife and I at a demonstration at the Market House in Fayetteville where we spent about four hours reading the names of American soldiers who had died up to that time in the war. It was raining that day. If you ever take place [sic] in one of these things where you sit there and you read these names and you look at how old these kids are and where they're from and the different nationalities that are evident in their names, it's really emotional just to do that.

These two guys are, wearing the "support our troops, bring them home now" t-shirt is one of the cofounders of Military Families Speak Out, Charlie, and I'll have to get back to you on his last name.

BB: It's not Mulholland?

LP: No, it's Nancy Lessin and Charlie. They're a married couple, but they have their own last names. I can look it up. The other guy is Patrick McCann, who has been a member of Vietnam Veterans Against the War since back in the Vietnam era. This is the chief of police in Fayetteville, Chief McCarthy, and I love the picture because right over his shoulder there's a poster that says: "Stand against war and racism." It's one of my favorite photographs ever of anything. These are two folks I know, one of them is a really good friend and the other one is a person I've just worked with. My good friend is Stan Goff, who's a retired Special Forces master sergeant with a son in the military who's been deployed to Iraq twice and the other person is probably the most well-known antiwar activist for the war in

Iraq, Cindy Sheehan, and her son, Casey was killed in Baghdad in 2004. And Cindy and Stan were at the demo in Fayetteville in 2005.

These are the two cofounders of Gold Star Families Against the War and Cindy Sheehan holding her son, Casey's, picture, and Celeste Zapala, whose son was also killed in Iraq, and they're holding the banner for Gold Star Families Against the War [Gold Star Families for Peace is a US-based organization founded in January 2005 by individuals who lost family members in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and are thus entitled to display a Gold Star. It is considered an offshoot of Military Families Speak Out.] This is another picture of Cindy on stage. These are Code Pink [Code Pink's website states that it is a "women-initiated grassroots peace and social justice movement working to end the war in Iraq, stop new wars, and redirect our resources into healthcare, education and other life-affirming activities."]

members being searched as they enter the park where we had the rally and of forty-eight hundred people that were there that day, there was one arrest, Ron Baran. He's an Israeli citizen who is a pro-Palestinian rights activist and he was arrested for not going through the search.

BB: Say what the significance of Code Pink is as a title.

LP: I'm not real sure where Code Pink comes from. [The name Code Pink plays on the Bush Administration's color-coded homeland security advisory system that signals terrorist threats.] I know it's an organization of women. The founder is this really short lady whose name I can't remember.

BB: Medea Benjamin.

LP: Medea Benjamin. I've met Medea on several occasions. Code Pink in North Carolina has done a lot of good work. Medea has, in my experience, been difficult to work

with. She doesn't have a really good record of being a good coalition worker. She likes to get folks and let them have their say in front of audiences, which she's really good at raising. But for example, if she had a member of Iraq Veterans Against the War or Military Families Speak Out, she often or typically doesn't mention the organizations that they represent when she puts them out in front for Code Pink events. And in fact, the day that we had this demo, she conducted a pretty hardcore campaign to be added to the speaking roster at the last moment, which she was and I was the head of the program committee so it was my decision to put her out there. Do I regret it now? Not really. She was really an inspiration to a lot of activists in North Carolina, but I'm sure we'll talk about this later, the internal politics of being an activist and the people skills that you have to have to be successful—or if you don't have, you end up not being successful.

BB: Yeah. I think Code Pink too, it was a play on all the alerts, the colored alerts that the administration puts out, orange and yellow; so they said they're Code Pink.

LP: [laughter] Well, that's cool. Here's another shot of police officers with the weapons strapped to their flack vest and their ammunition pouches, looking at the activists in Rowan Street Park through a high-powered telescope, which just really goes to show the overkill. The march that I showed from Atlanta where I was with Drew and Braedyn and Tara, we marched for four miles through the center of Atlanta, I saw four cops the whole time, it was a huge rally, whereas in Fayetteville, we march six-tenths of a miles and they have a hundred and fifty cops on horseback and helicopters from nine different police departments and sheriffs' departments. Just it's really intimidating for some folks.

BB: Why do you think the difference between North Carolina and Atlanta?

LP: Well, I think Atlanta has more of a history of people marching in the street and the association with Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, whereas in Fayetteville there's not much. This rally where this picture was taken was the largest demonstration in Fayetteville since the Vietnam War and perhaps larger than some that were here during the Vietnam War. And the police department here not having had the experience, I think is really scared, but I also think that they do it on purpose because they want to intimidate people, they want to keep people away. Always in the press before these demonstrations have been held, there's always a lot of coverage that says there's going to be a lot of cops. And it's like what recently happened in Los Angeles when they had the pro-immigration rally is these people have the training to do this riot control and crowd control and they're just itching to use the training and all their tools, and bring out the plastic handcuffs.

It affects people in different ways. There's been a lot of people who have been really angry about the searches that people have to go through to attend these demonstrations and a lot of discussion about how to get away from that. They look at other examples of activism in the South, like the School of the Americas Watch outside of Fort Benning where they went to court and finally won the right not to be searched, but it was a very expensive, prolonged, protracted court case and the School of the Americas Watch has been around for more than a dozen years and has a lot more resources than we have had in North Carolina.

Here's another shot of armed police officers observing the rally. This is a great shot. It's a guy wearing a shirt that says "Dubya, still the president" yelling through a bullhorn at this man named Dave Cline and Dave is the elected president of Veterans for Peace in the United States. He was wounded multiple times in Vietnam, somewhat of a quote, unquote

war hero who, when he came back to the States, became one of the most active members of Vietnam Veterans Against the War. He's prominently featured in the movie *Sir, No Sir*, and is just a great guy. He's wearing some medals and he's wearing a badge, which is the combat infantry badge, but he's also wearing the insignia of Vietnam Veterans Against the War.

This is the photograph that turned my son into a radical. This picture was taken on March twentieth, 2003, which was the first day of the war in Iraq. He's got a sign that just says, "bring our troops home." Later this afternoon, or that afternoon, he was interviewed by a reporter from the Associated Press and Drew said three things that day which were basically: "I think the war's about money; I don't think our guys should be dying in Iraq; and I joined the military and I'm going to do what I'm ordered to do." After that story ran, his command at the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower, which is a good Republican ship, charged him with making disloyal statements and he received nonjudicial punishment and was lowered one rank from petty officer back to fireman. There's a whole lot more to that story; I'm sure we'll talk about that.

This is a picture I took at a march in Paris in November of 2003. I was there for the European Social Forum. It was crazy. There were two hundred thousand people marching in the street. There weren't that many cops in Paris either. I took the picture mainly because the sign was in English and most of them were in French. This is another picture taken the same day. This is when I was learning radicalism. The African-American guy in the center is named Shuja Graham. He's an exonerated death row prisoner. He was on death row because he was convicted of killing a correctional officer and I was a correctional officer. Shuj and I became good friends and roomed together during our stay there and he's still my friend today.

But I'm wearing this Palestinian scarf. I've got no idea what it says. It could say: "Death to Israel." I don't know what it says, but when I wore it into Charles de Galle Airport, which wasn't my smartest move, you have to go through all these checkpoints for international flights. So I get to the last one, I mean I can see the ticket counter, and this woman asks me, "Where'd you stay in Paris?" And I told her. And, "Why were you here?" And I told her. And she goes, "What's this?" And she grabs the scarf and I said, "It's a scarf," and she goes, "It's Palestinian." And I didn't sell out. I said, "Well, I support the Palestinian people." And she hugged me. She said, "I'm Muslim and I thank you, I really thank you." So I could have ended up not being able to fly back home, but that's what happened.

This is a picture of the panel that I spoke on in Paris. Over here behind the screen are the interpreters. It's really difficult to speak to international audiences when you're being interpreted because it throws off your timing and it's hard to translate. It was great being able to go to Paris, but I'm not quite sure what kind of affect it had on the audience. Everyone else up here lives in the United States. This kid was from George Washington to the far left. This was an NYU [New York University] student. That's Ahmed Shawki, who's the editor of the International Socialist Review and a big honcho in the International Socialist Organization. I was there as their guest. This is a picture of a counter-protestor. It says: "American soldiers protected your whiney hiney today." And he's showing it to a guy who's a member of Iraq Veterans Against the War.

BB: And on the bottom of the sign is "freerepublic.com," which, say a little bit about the Freepers.

LP: Freerepublic.com is a far right wing website on which a lot of threats, even death threats, have been made against Fayetteville activists and a lot of mistruths have been spread. Members of Free Republic have been the organizers of several of the counter protests that we've had here. But typically, in 2005, it was forty-eight hundred of us to seventy-five of them, but the press coverage was sixty percent them and forty percent us, which is a frustrating thing but something you just have to deal with. These are members of Iraq Veterans Against the War on stage. This guy here with the Marine Corps hat on had just gotten out of the Marines. He called me two days later because the Marines had called his house. He didn't know what to do and before I could get in contact with him, they called again and he spoke to them and they were calling him to see if he wanted to come back on active duty and help them do recruiting.

BB: What's his name?

LP: Fernando, and I'll have to look it up; I don't remember. This is a picture of Iraq Vets Against the War with Drew, my son, who never served in Iraq, but the IVAW is kind of like VVAW; if you were a member of the military during the conflict, you're eligible to join. Drew, of course, ended up going to jail for leaving his unit before it deployed. This is Kara Hollingsworth, a young African-American woman; she was twenty-five in 2005. Her husband had served in Iraq two times and she on and off was a member of the movement in Fayetteville. I think she's a really good example of someone who kind of got turned off by movement politics. I just saw her in the paper the other day and she was named the outstanding young Democrat in Cumberland County. At one time, she told me she thought she was a Socialist.

This is Larry Syverson; I think who holds the all-time world record for attending the most anti-Iraq war demonstrations. He works for some government agency in northern Virginia and every day on his lunch hour he goes out and holds this sign, which says, "Iraqi oil isn't worth my son's blood." He's had three sons to serve in Iraq, one who's got some significant PTSD problems and I've done several things with Larry. He's a really hardworking member of Military Families Speak Out and one of the articles that I gave to Bridgette here was written by Patrick O'Neill, who is a North Carolina activist and it's about a program that Larry and I participated in at a church in Chapel Hill.

Here's one of my least favorite things. I'm talking to a sheriff's deputy and a police officer, trying to negotiate whether or not we could carry our signs into the park on the day of the demonstration in 2005. I just, I don't like doing stuff like that.

BB: Why?

LP: Because I have a really bad temper and so I have to listen, I have to be diplomatic. When you go talk to the cops, you've got somebody behind you who's wanting you to achieve something. So if the cops don't see it your way, then you've got to go back and tell the person, "I didn't get what you want" and I always feel like they trusted me and it was my responsibility to get them what they want and so I feel like I'm letting them down; it's just kind of hard.

This is a picture of my friend, Isabell and me, Isabell's partner, Nego, my son, Drew, and a former drill sergeant and medic named Dennis Kyne. And what I'm holding in my hands are the letters that Drew received when he was in jail. Drew had been home, he'd gotten out of jail the day before, and had been flown back to Fayetteville. So he'd been out of the military less than twenty-four hours when this picture was taken. I had kind of

orchestrated this letter-writing campaign. On the CD I gave you, there's a movie of when I first see him and we're talking about the letters and stuff. This is just another picture of right around the same moment.

This is at the beginning of the demonstration, the program in 2005 when I brought Drew out and introduced him to the audience. It was touching.

BB: Yeah, I bawled.

LP: (laughs) This is Michael Hoffman, who is one of the seven original members of Iraq Veterans Against the War, and I, speaking at a university in Leeds in central Great Britain.

This is another shot of me talking to the police from that same moment a while ago. This is just a headshot.

This is a picture at the beginning of the demonstration in 2005. There's a Veterans for Peace banner right in front of me and the guy behind me is a member of Iraq Veterans Against the War. It's really been cool that a lot of these young people who are in that organization kind of grew up with technology. So they're all into making movies and podcasts. I just think it's a sociologically interesting thing how people take advantage of technology in the movement against the war. It's kind of groundbreaking because people haven't had that in the past within activism. It's just another "I love Lou" shot.

This is my late great friend, Ralph, who was a Vietnam veteran and a member of Vietnam Veterans Against the War and a musician. I'm unfortunately at this point having to tell Ralph that they can't play any more music. What was really sad was before the next anniversary came around, Ralph died of cancer. He was just a guy who had a big heart and who worked hard and he's missed.

BB: What's Ralph's last name? [Baldwin]

LP: I don't remember. I can look it up; I'm sure I've got it. And this is a member of Congress, Lynn Woolsey. She's a member of Congress from California. We couldn't even get the state head of the Democratic Party to appear at the rally or any of the Democrats or Republicans for that matter from North Carolina, but she actually called us and asked if she could speak and she got three minutes just like everybody else and was willing to come. That kind of stuff lets me know that people were paying attention to what we were doing at that time. This is one of my all-time favorite shots. This is coming down Woodside Avenue into the park and if someone were to see this picture, it's just it's amazing the signs and the number of people. There's Veterans for Peace, there's Italian signs, "win without war," just so many, "union jobs and health care, not war." It just touches so many parts.

BB: "Youth, we want the future back." Puppets, the big puppets.

LP: The big puppets from the Guernica thing.

BB: It's so colorful.

LP: It is.

BB: American flags peppered through. It's a beautiful picture.

LP: And when people say that and I tell them, "That's Fayetteville, North Carolina," it freaks them out.

BB: Yes, it is.

LP: Here's another one, "belly dancers for peace and justice," which some people see stuff like that as being a problem on the left; I don't know. Right in the center of it is one of the best activists that I've ever known and one of the best friends I've ever had, Bryan Proffitt.

This is another picture of Michael McPhearson speaking from the stage. Michael has spoken at every of these big demos that we've had in Fayetteville. He's traveled here for other things because he's from here, his mother lives here, and his mother is a member of our local grassroots peace group.

BB: What's her name and the name of your group?

LP: Our group is Fayetteville Peace with Justice and I have to look up Michael's mom's name. This is a picture of Pat Sheehan, Cindy's ex-husband, holding a picture of Casey and it's got the Military Families Speak Out banner and the Gold Star Families for Peace and Celeste Zapala and her son holding a picture of her other son, who was killed.

And this is me, "Military brats for peace." Having grown up with a dad who was in Vietnam most of my early life, this one fits me too. And this is a picture of the cofounders of Military Families Speak Out, Nancy Lessin and her husband, Charlie, whose last name I've got to look up.

This is the Reverend Nelson Johnson, who is a legend in North Carolina. He was wounded at the Greensboro [NC] Massacre in 1979. I was in the ninth grade when that happened. When it happened, I wasn't in any way politically aware and all I knew was the Nazis and the Klan were shooting at the Communists, but it was one of the highlights of my life as an activist to be able to meet him and to shake his hand and to hear him speak and just to be in his presence.

This is the same guy with the "Dubya, still the president" t-shirt who had screamed at Dave Cline and now he's screaming at Pat Sheehan, Cindy Sheehan's husband, who's holding a picture of their son who was killed. It's just amazing.

BB: And Pat has just a gentle look on his face and a little bit of a slight grin even. It doesn't look mocking though. He almost looks like he sort of feels sorry for him.

LP: Yeah, I see the same thing.

BB: Now the guy behind him looks pretty angry, another guy looking at the counter-protestor, but--.

LP: This guy right here?

BB: Yeah.

LP: Yeah, he is a member of the International Socialist Organization who traveled here from New York to go to the demonstration. And to get away from the antiwar stuff, these are some friends of mine: Yolanda Carrington, Robyn Burge, and Bill—

BB: Towe.

LP: Towe. This was at a Peace Action board meeting. You can see on the corner of the table are some "Bring Them Home Now" postcards that I brought to hand out and some bumper stickers and one of my favorites is "Fight the Rich, Not their Wars."

This was a sign that we had in our window and it said "Peace is Patriotic" and this was during a period of time when we came out one morning to find out that the back windshield in Tina's car had been shot out overnight.

BB: And her car had bumper stickers on it?

LP: Yeah. She had bumper stickers that were anti-death penalty and I think one of them was "Out of Iraq Now." During the time that I was doing most of the writing here in Fayetteville, I was writing a lot for the Fayetteville paper, I got all kinds of weird letters. I got a letter that was really threatening and the return address was the address of my job. So it was kind of the guy's way who wrote the letter of saying, "I know where you work." It was

just strange getting hateful mail in your mailbox. In the internet age, a lot of people who speak out politically on the internet are used to getting flamed because people don't have to see you face to face and it's just part of the sad culture of the internet. But when it's showing up in your mailbox and people are letting you know that one, they know your home address, and two, they know things like where you work and your kids' names and that kind of stuff—

BB: And shoot out your car window.

LP: And shoot our your car window, yeah.

BB: Those little things.

LP: It's weird.

BB: Weird.

LP: This is a picture of Jimmy Massey, who is from North Carolina, and Jimmy was in the Marine Corps for twelve years. He was one of the cofounders of Iraq Veterans Against the War and there's a picture of Drew and Jimmy and Michael Hoffman had just given him an IVAW button and he'd been home for fifteen minutes; he was feeling good. And there's Ralph Baldwin and he's singing. This is from 2004. His partner, Cat, is standing behind him.

BB: His partner, Cat?

LP: That was her name. I don't know what her last name was. And here's a young counter-protestor with a red poster that says "Viva la Reagan Revolucion." Weird, man.

BB: And it looks like it's a take on a famous Che Guevara poster.

LP: Yeah, it does.

BB: Because he's in short of black shadow and the red behind him. "Viva la Reagan Revolucion".

LP: This is another group that's done counter protests, but we've kind of, in some days, reach an understanding with these folks. They're from a group called Rolling Thunder. What's interesting is there's an African-American man who's standing with the counter-protestors and this is a group that is probably most well known for their activism on behalf of prisoners of war and missing in action folks. They do a Rolling Thunder demonstration in Washington, DC on motorcycles every year and a lot of them, I guess, are just kind of knee-jerk against antiwar activists. But we had a period where at the Market House where we do the demos, the cops would split it in half because they would go get a permit for the same space on the same day and when we were doing this weekly during the early days of the war, we would take turns on which of us had to stand on the shady side or the sunny side and we would bring coolers of drinks down there and give them drinks and have conversations and stuff. That's another form of activism.

There's another picture of Stan Goff and Cindy Sheehan. Right behind them is this man named Michael Berg whose son was captured and killed by a group in Iraq and was beheaded.

BB: Daniel, was that his son's name?

LP: Daniel, and his father, rather than seeking vengeance, instead decided to seek peace. He's an admirable man. Here's a picture of my friend, Nego, interviewing Cindy Sheehan. Nego's just a cool woman. And here's Stan Goff giving this really impassioned speech where everything he said is, "They lied to us on purpose. They put us in war on purpose." It was like, no excuse for the government for like, "We did the best we could do with what we knew." I mean Stan really socked it to them.

A counter-protestor with a little sexual stuff throw in: "Straight girls love men in uniform," which I guess means lesbians love people who work for the post office, hell if I know.

And there's Tina and Drew in the front yard at Quaker House. And there's Tina and my friend, Liz Seymour, famous Greensboro anarchist and organizer, and a woman that I don't know.

BB: Say a little about Quaker House in Fayetteville.

LP: Quaker House is an organization that's been in Fayetteville since the late 1960s. The original Quaker House was located on Rae Avenue across the street from the USO, which is the United Service Organization that helps soldiers with all kinds of different things and it burned down about four days after a famous antiwar demonstration in the [19]60s where Jane Fonda and Donald Sutherland were here as part of their FTA, which stands for Fuck The Army, tour. It's been here ever since. Its primary mission is to offer counseling services to members of the military who want to get out and to that end, it's part of the GI Rights Hotline. It's also the home of the Society of Friends Quaker meeting for Fayetteville. Its paid director is Chuck Fager and he's been active in peace work in Fayetteville. It's been the site of a lot of press conferences and other peace actions and it's right behind the park where these demonstrations have been held =. We'll probably talk more about Chuck and Quaker House later on.

This is the police waiting to search us with all kinds of police cars lined up and this is another shot of Tracey Campbell, who was the guy I went to high school with.

BB: Have y'all talked about this?

LP: Yeah. Whenever I see Tracey, his brother's name is Leslie, and he tells me where Leslie is at the current time. Because Tracey was a year behind me and Leslie and I were in the same grade and had a lot of the same classes. Whenever I've been at demonstrations when someone on the other side has gotten out of hand, screaming or getting out of their vehicle to come up and confront someone, I just start yelling, "Tracey!" Because he's one of these people who understands, I guess since he's known me for so long, that we're not some outsiders with some mysterious agenda. He's always very polite and remains my friends. We don't go to each other's house to eat or anything but--. Fayetteville in a lot of ways is a small town. There's a lot of people who live here, but it's a very transient community. So people who have been here for a long time know each other.

BB: Those are your parrots in the background, huh? I'm glad we're catching their noise...

LP: Right now? Yeah. Besides trying to save the world from the Bush administration, I also save parrots. This is an event that I did with Iraq Occupation Focus, which is a group in London. I went on a trip with Michael Hoffman in December of 2004 specifically to meet with British military veterans and military families in Great Britain and we did a speaking tour and organizing trip.

This is a picture of the Iraq Veterans Against the War banner hanging in front of the stage. I'm sitting beside an Italian activist named Paola Gasparelli, who later hosted me on a trip to Italy in 2006 to do a lot of the same things with Italian military families and veterans.

That's just a shot of me in Leeds. This is another program in Leeds and it's Leeds Coalition Against War, "No to war, No to racism, Defend civil liberties" in this really beautiful town hall. And that's Michael Hoffman from Iraq Veterans Against the War and I

at about eleven thirty at night in the home of our host for the evening, tired but kind of exhilarated.

That's me. This woman's name that I'm looking at, she's holding a pamphlet that says "This war is wrong" is named Rose Gentle and she's the Cindy Sheehan of Great Britain. Her son was the last soldier killed before sovereignty was returned to Iraq. He was in the British Army. He had been in Iraq three weeks and he was killed by a bomb near Basra. Rose is constantly in demand to speak at rallies and stuff. She's from Glasgow. She's got this really thick Glaswegian accent and if you can look at her face and get all the non-verbal cues when she's speaking, you can understand what she's got to say, but for me to hear her speak at a rally, I couldn't understand a damn thing. But just to be in her presence, it was even more touching for me than it was to be with Cindy.

These two folks are members of Scottish Parliament and they met Michael and Rose and I at the train station in Edinburgh to talk to us about the movement. They're Socialist members of Parliament.

This is Michael Hoffman, Rose Gentle, and I, and Rose had a scrapbook of her son's life with baby pictures and pictures of the service and she's holding an American Iraq Veterans Against the War button. This is a woman who doesn't have a lot of education, who's lived almost her entire life in, they call them "council flats," public housing, who's dealt with all the things that poor people in western countries have to deal with and who just rose to the occasion to participate in the antiwar movement.

BB: Her son's name is Gordon Campbell Gentle.

LP: Yes. This is a Veterans for Peace banner at a march in Fayetteville and those are the end of the pictures.

BB: Thanks for sharing those, Lou. Those are beautiful.

LP: You're welcome. We sure did talk about a lot of people. (laughs)

BB: We did, that's great, that's great, yeah. So you were born in Pinehurst, North Carolina.

[break in conversation]

BB: So you were born in Pinehurst, North Carolina, February twenty-first, 1965?

LP: That's right.

BB: That's true. How long did you live there?

LP: Never lived there. It's just, it's the only hospital in Moore County. My mom and my daughter were also born in the same hospital. After I was born, we lived in the community of Ashley Heights, which is a railroad crossing in the western part of Hoke County.

BB: Your parents were young when you were born, right? Teenagers?

LP: Yeah. My mom got pregnant the night of her junior prom and so my parents were seventeen when I was born.

BB: What's your mom's name and your dad's name?

LP: My mom's name is Brenda and her last name is Knelson. And my dad's name is John Plummer, although he signs it the Rev. Doctor John Plummer.

BB: What's that about?

LP: My dad has been a Methodist minister for the last seventeen years and he's got a PhD in church history and he's pretentious; so that's what that's about.

BB: That fits. When your parents, at seventeen and expecting you, did they have a lot of support from extended family?

LP: Yes.

BB: They did?

LP: Yeah, you know, when I was an infant toddler, they lived with both sets of grandparents. When my dad went to tell my grandfather that my mother was pregnant, he went and said, "You know, Dad, Brenda's pregnant and we're going to get married." And my grandfather's response was, "Of course you are."

BB: What's his name? What are your grandparents' names?

LP: My paternal grandparents were Ralph and Louise Plummer and my maternal grandparents were Lee and Kate Strother.

BB: Were they also both all born in North Carolina?

LP: Yeah. Both sets of grandparents lived in Hoke County. My paternal grandmother was born in Scotland County and my paternal grandfather was born in Randolph County, but it's all kind of central Piedmont kind of places.

BB: How far back do you know your ancestry?

LP: I mean, bits and pieces. I couldn't recite my family tree, but Plummer is an Irish name. I get these fliers in the mail sometimes: "The return of the Plummers to Ireland." And it was O'Plummer to begin with and Plummer is like carpenter; it's a person who plumbed walls and that's where it comes from. So I just know that that part of the family was Irish immigrants. My grandmother's last name was McFaden, which is a Scottish name and I know that at least her part of the family goes back in this area of the highland Scots of the Cape Fear region back to the 1700s. I had an ancestor on my mom's side who was part of a regiment of the Confederate Army. That's kind of like a relic that they bring out at family reunions to show the roster of that company with his name on it. So parts of my family have

been here prior to the Revolutionary War, parts were part of the Irish immigration, and that's what I know. My great-grandfather was still alive when I was born. I have a four-generation picture with him and my grandfather and my dad and me.

BB: What's your great-grandfather's name?

LP: John Henry Plummer.

BB: John Henry. Did you have aunts and uncles around when you were young?

LP: Yeah. I have an aunt; I was born on her tenth birthday and so we've always been close. In ninth grade when the people in my junior high school objected to me smoking marijuana at school, I got to go live with my dad's brother for the remainder of high school. He's a big influence on my life. He was a farmer and so my whole high school life, I lived on a farm and worked with livestock and tractors. It really gave me an appreciation for work because once I went through ninety-hour work weeks in the hot summer of Fayetteville, North Carolina, I pretty much knew that I could do any kind of work that anybody ever asked me to, which is important to me.

BB: What was your class background growing up?

LP: My dad was an army officer, but it was during Vietnam and the pay wasn't substantial. But I didn't have any kind of feeling of being poor until my parents got divorced and all the way through school, my family was always eligible for free lunch and my brother and my sister and myself didn't want to get free lunch and we would never give my mom the paperwork to fill out. I went to thirteen different schools. So living in small towns, there really never was this feeling of being poor. I know one year we lived in a house in Angier that didn't have heat. So there was just a wood stove in the kitchen and I just thought it was cool because you could go outside and split firewood. You'd get up in the morning and you'd

run to the kitchen to get dressed beside the stove. But we always had a car, someone in my house had a job, and it wasn't until we started living in some larger towns—I remember when we moved to Gastonia, I was in the seventh grade and that was the first time I'd ever been made fun of because I wore hand-me-downs and I didn't wear cool shoes. Then we moved from there to Jacksonville and there was even a greater sense of not having the things that the more wealthy kids had, but I worked and earned money and started buying my own clothes and so that's kind of how I dealt with that.

BB: You were pretty young when your dad became an army officer, right? He served in Vietnam two years?

LP: Yeah. My dad got commissioned as a second lieutenant when he was nineteen and he went to Vietnam in '70 and '71 as an armor officer; he was in the Fourth Calvary Division. He was an armored calv platoon leader and then he came back and went to flight school at Camp Walters, Texas and Fort Rucker, Alabama, and as soon as he graduated from flight school, he went back to Vietnam as a helicopter pilot with the Ninth Armored Calvary Regiment. He and my mother had made the decision to split up before he left to go to Vietnam for the second time.

BB: Did he ever talk about being in Vietnam?

LP: Every conversation that I ever had with him, at some point that war comes up. It's one of the things that I've mentioned when I've spoken about being a part of a military family is how it changes you. My dad's had a pretty successful life post-military. He got, they call it RIFT; it stands for Reduction In Force. After the war in Vietnam was over, there wasn't a demand for as many helicopter pilots and my dad didn't have a college education at that point and so they were reducing all the officers who didn't have an education. So he got

kicked out of the Army basically. They just said, “There’s no more positions for you.” And that was a big deal to him. I remember when the war in Israel in ’73, the Yom Kippur War, the news about that came on and my dad just kind of freaked out. Everybody had to be quiet and he put his chair right in front of the TV because he was thinking it might be an opportunity for him to go back into the Army if it blew up and became some kind of big conflict. He’s talked about Vietnam for years and years and it’s just a huge part of his life. He’s part of the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association.

One of the things that really was a turning point in my dad’s life and really a hurtful thing to him, in 1996—he’s a chaplain at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial because he’s a Methodist minister and that’s just the kind of ministry he likes to do—he went to a program on Veterans’ Day at the Wall and Kim Phuc came to speak. Kim, she’s my age, but she’s the person that everyone knows as the little girl running down the road with the napalm burns. My dad was peripherally involved in the napalm being dropped on the village where Kim lived. Kind of the way it worked is that there were Vietnamese soldiers in the village of Trang Bang in South Vietnam who requested that napalm be dropped. So they called on the radio to the tactical operations center where my dad worked and it was his job to make sure that there were no friendly people in the area where the napalm was going to be dropped. So he asked and they said, “No, there’s no friendly people.” So he relayed the message to the South Vietnamese Air Force and they flew the mission into Trang Bang and dropped the napalm. But the problem was that there were friendly people there and that’s when Kim got burned.

So my dad communicated with Kim that day and said that he’d been involved in it and it was a big deal. They were on the cover of the little *Christian Guidepost* magazine

together and they were in *Reader's Digest* together. I had known that Dad had been involved in that in some way since I was in high school, but it was such a kind of a newsworthy story and my dad got kind of carried away with the notoriety of that. A lot of American Vietnam veterans were really angry because for years they'd said—you know, that picture was this propaganda piece against American involvement and people had always said that Americans didn't play any part in that, that it was South Vietnamese Air Force and that the mission had been requested by the South Vietnamese—which was all true and my dad's involvement in it was very peripheral, but it got pretty venomous towards him and people said that he was a liar. I never heard him say anything about the whole thing that was untrue. It's just it made me uncomfortable the way he seemed to enjoy being part of the story. They were going to make a movie about it and it was just nuts.

And to meet Kim, who I've met on a couple of occasions; she's a wonderful woman. She's got a really neat story herself. She defected from—she was used as a propaganda tool by the Vietnamese government for years. They sent her to Cuba and they sent her to Russia and other Communist countries and she was coming back from Russia, she was in medical school, and she got off a plane in Gander, Newfoundland and asked for asylum. So I've met her and her son and her husband. Her and my dad are still friends, but a lot of people in the Vietnam veterans movement really have a lot of hard feelings against my dad for that whole scenario.

BB: And do you think your dad telling lots of stories or talking often about his service, is it because it was simply such a huge part of his life? Is it out of pride? Is he trying to work it out? Why do you think that he holds onto the...

LP: I think he's really proud at having been in the Army. My grandfather was in World War II. As a matter of fact, my grandfather was in the National Guard in the 30s in Hoke County, North Carolina, when his unit—this was years before Pearl Harbor, like in '37 or '38—was activated and sent to Trinidad. They were a coastal artillery unit. So he was on active duty when Pearl Harbor happened and he ended up going to Europe and landing in France, not in D-Day, but later, and going across France and Germany and he actually met the Russians at the Elbe River, which was the end of land combat in World War II; so that had been a big deal.

My dad had grown up around all these men in Raeford who were World War II veterans and they talked about it a lot. My dad had volunteered to go to flight school and it's a big deal to be commissioned as an officer when you're a teenager. My dad is a bright, capable guy and I think just he took a lot of pride in having served his country and fought for freedom and all the propaganda stuff that we hear. It's so weird to watch him now because I think he recognizes that a lot of that stuff is bullshit about fighting for freedom and yet to sign onto the fact that it's propaganda kind of to him invalidates this important part of his life and he's really conflicted about it.

This year in 2007, Rolling Thunder and a bunch of people had a demonstration at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on March seventeenth, eighteenth, whatever day, the Saturday of the anniversary when there were big antiwar demos all over the country. My dad was one of these people who went to the Wall to protect it against antiwar demonstrators, which he knows is bullshit. He sent a letter to my uncle about it and I couldn't speak to him for months after that. I went to Washington a couple years ago to speak at a school up there and my dad came to hear me speak and I gave the same talk about "bring them home now" and kind of

my perspective on the war and my history. He listened to the whole thing, he listened to the question and answer afterwards, and then after it was done, he said, "You know, I didn't disagree with anything that you said but one thing," and it was I said that Bush and Rumsfeld have contempt for our troops because of the way that they treat them and he said that he didn't believe that they were contemptuous of the troops. But this whole rundown of the war and he didn't disagree with any of it and then to come up and participate in this "protect the Wall" thing on the anniversary of the war day was, is, it makes it hard to trust him. It comes out of both sides of his mouth.

BB: Did you talk about it?

LP: Not yet.

BB: Have you talked since then?

LP: I've emailed him. I haven't talked to him on the telephone, but I have emailed him. And part of it, I feel really bad about...his best friend, a guy he had flown with in the Army, died of leukemia about a month after this happened and I just couldn't bring myself to write to my dad. I was just so angry about what had gone on.

BB: Did he support you in your activism when you first...activism specifically against the war?

LP: I remember calling him right after the war in Afghanistan started just raging about "How do you have a war against terrorism?" and just making this factual argument. I said, "Israel's been fighting terrorism since 1947 and it doesn't work. People want vengeance. They don't want justice." And talking to him and he went into this whole ministerial counseling mode about "emotions are high and you just have to let this die down and things will be okay," and of course, they haven't been okay since then. Emotions haven't

died down, because the American public has been so manipulated by the government and a media that goes along with what the government has to say. My dad, one time he made the comment that I was one of the leading figures in the antiwar movement in the United States and I said, “Dad, that’s not what I am,” but I’m sure he was like googling my name and stuff. So I think he thought it was cool that I had stuff published on the internet and like I said, he came to hear me speak at George Washington. But as far as support like, “Hey Lou, you need to read this article in the *Nation*,” I haven’t gotten any of that.” (laughs)

BB: Your parents, what were their political leanings, if any, when you were young?

LP: My dad’s always been a Republican and my mother, which is so interesting...you know, I was seven years old in 1972 when Watergate broke loose and so from seven to nine or ten when they were having the hearings on television and it was so consuming in the news, I remember my mother just despising Richard Nixon and when Jesse Helms first got elected about how horrible that was. My mom’s second husband was a really strong antiracist. He had been a schoolteacher during the time of integration and had been fired from schoolteaching jobs for helping black kids and for speaking out against racist stuff. And so during the time that he and my mother were married, which was basically from the second grade until I moved out of the house in the ninth grade, I was raised in a very antiracist home.

To me, it just seems like there’s more racism today than there was when I was growing up. I went to a high school here in Fayetteville and everything in my high school was integrated, the sports teams, the cheerleading teams, the clubs, the classes, and when my kids were in high school here, which was up until just a couple of years ago, when I would go to the schools—and my cousin graduated from high school the same place I went and there were only three white kids on the football team. My daughter went to high school at

Terry Sandford and they didn't have any black cheerleaders. I've been race conscious since I was a first grader.

BB: What's your mom's second husband's name?

LP: Her second husband was named John Burns. But getting back to my mom, her third husband is an evangelical Christian who's a member of the Episcopalian Church and I love him. His name is Dr. John Knelsen. He's a pediatrician. But they belong to this Episcopalian Church in Morehead City that withdrew from the Eastern Diocese of North Carolina because the Episcopalians weren't hard enough, weren't anti-homosexual enough. Their church became affiliated with the Anglican Diocese of Rwanda. Their bishop is a Rwandan bishop and they've been to Rwanda several times. My mother's a nurse and like I said, my stepfather is a pediatrician. They've been over there a lot to do medical work and my stepfather teaches in the medical school. But since my mother's been married to him, which they've been married for twenty-five years, she's very much right-wing...and it's the whole social conservatism against homosexuality and abortion kind of defines her world. When we have discussions about the war, within thirty seconds, she says, "Mass graves, Saddam's mass graves," and really can't move beyond that point.

Last time I was there, she said, "The Koran says," and it was something about "kill the infidels." I said, "Well, Mom, the Bible says 'stone your kids if they talk shit to you,'" and she says, "Well, that's in the Old Testament and that's out of context." I said, "Well, I know that because I know the Bible and I know that Christians today don't stone children, but you don't know the Koran and so you don't know that this part that you're quoting me, whether it's out of context or if that's what mainstream Islam believes. I think it's kind of

racist to try to use that in an argument as to why we should kill Muslims.” And she started crying.

BB: She did?

LP: Yeah. And Tina really starts kicking me around family if I start talking politics, but those are the people that I love and the people that I most want to share my worldview with and it's hard.

BB: Were your parents involved in any political organizations when you were young?

LP: No.

BB: What about later?

LP: There's no political organizations. My dad and my grandfather and even me were Freemasons. I'm no longer a Freemason. When I realized that they had white lodges and black lodges and that we couldn't have black people in the lodge that I was in, I stopped paying my dues. If you don't pay your dues, then you're not a Mason anymore. But just not a lot of political talk. I grew up hearing my dad say stuff like, “Pinko liberal bedwetting commies.” Or anything bad, he would always say, “It's a Communist plot to overthrow the government,” jokingly, but that's the kind of stuff he came from. And my mom was just, she never watched television for the news. We always took the newspaper, but we just didn't have political discussions. Then by the time I was a freshman in high school, I lived with my uncle on his farm, but we just talked about the price of diesel fuel and stuff like that, no politics.

BB: Let me go back and get a couple names. Your aunt's name that was just ten years older or is just ten years older than you?

LP: Her name is Becky Rutland.

BB: And your siblings' names?

LP: I have a brother named Todd Plummer. My sister's name is Mitsy Johnson and then I have a half-brother whose name is Matt Plummer.

BB: Are you particularly close to any of them politically, or politically likeminded?

LP: Todd is liberal and he is a wildlife biologist. So he's very environmentally conscious. He right now is working for an NGO in California, or a non-profit, that advocates for technology for the handicapped or disabled. And he doesn't like our government, but he tends to not have too many problems with the two-party system. When I was in Freedom Road [Freedom Road Socialist Organization] and we did a fundraiser, he sent me a check for a hundred bucks, which is really interesting because Becky Rutland, her husband, who's actually her ex-husband, who's a retired sergeant major who served in Afghanistan, sent me a hundred bucks for Freedom Road. The letter that I wrote to them is on the CD that I gave you where I was asking for money. So those people have been supportive of my politics. My sister, she lives in Cary and her and her husband make big bucks and she doesn't like President Bush, but she's not political; it's just not what she thinks about.

BB: Name the places that you lived when your dad, you were moved around so much starting right when you were born.

LP: Yeah. In North Carolina, I've lived in the little community of Ashley Heights and Raeford, North Carolina; and Hope Mills, North Carolina; and Fort Bragg, North Carolina; Fort Knox, Kentucky; Camp Walters, Texas; Fort Rucker, Alabama; Southern Pines, North Carolina; Raleigh, North Carolina; Cary, North Carolina; Dothen, Alabama; Angier, North Carolina; Lillington, North Carolina; New Bern, North Carolina; Gastonia, North Carolina; Jacksonville, North Carolina. And then when I was in the military, I was stationed at Fort

Jackson, South Carolina; Fort Benning, Georgia; Fort Hood, Texas. And then I've also lived in Carthage and Fayetteville.

BB: Carthage?

LP: North Carolina.

BB: Was it hard when you were young moving around a lot?

LP: It was all I knew. So it wasn't like I got to live someplace for five years and then had to move. I think that's harder on people. I did really dig being able to live in Fayetteville all the way through high school. It was a treat. I consider Fayetteville to be my home. People talk a lot of shit about Fayetteville because of the military and stuff, but to me, it's a pretty decent place to live. It certainly has been the place where I was supposed to be to do activism; I know that. But yeah, going to two schools a year, I never had any sense of permanence and didn't get to keep friends and never stayed in contact with people because I was young. As I mentioned earlier, you get to a certain age and clothes and shoes and those kinds of things begin to be important. That was hard. But my family, my extended family has always been close. Even after my parents got divorced, my paternal grandmother and grandfather considered my mother to be their daughter to the day they died. It was even in the program at their funerals. When it listed their children, they listed my mom along with my dad and my aunts and uncles and no other daughter- or son-in-laws; just my mom.

BB: Woo! So your parents divorced in 1971, but you still kept moving around a lot.

LP: My mom's second husband was a journalist. So he worked for the *Garner News* and the *Cary News* and the *Harnett County News* and the *Angier Independent*, *New Bern Sun Journal*, *Gastonia Gazette*, *Jacksonville Daily News*. At that point in ninth grade, he and my mom split up and my mother graduated from nursing school in her early thirties and moved

to Morehead City. So she's been there since 1980 without moving. My brother and sister kind of consider that to be their hometown. She was married to John from '72 to '79 and then my dad got married again in '73 and he stayed married to his second wife until '79.

BB: Did you tell me her name already?

LP: Her name is Judy, my stepmother Judy Miller.

BB: Okay.

LP: And that's my half-brother's mom.

BB: That's—

LP: Matt. Matt is a physician's assistant. He lives in Daphne, Alabama. He was in the Alabama National Guard on September eleventh and got pulled out of grad school to go stand in the front gate of Fort Gordon, Georgia for a year checking ID cards, which was really a waste of his talents.

BB: Was it hard when your parents got divorced? Do you remember much about it?

LP: Well, my dad was never around that much, in Vietnam and flight school and different military schools. I can still remember the day they told us that they were splitting up. But I was kind of fond of my stepfather to an extent and I actually went to go live with my dad for a couple of years. I had a lot of emotional problems when I was a kid and then when I was a teenager and then when I was a young adult and then as an older adult [laughter]. I don't know how many of those are pathological, just because of being bipolar, and how many of them were because of the upheaval and the moves and that kind of stuff. I didn't have the kinds of dreams that a lot of divorced kids have: I wanted my parents to get back together and I wanted everything to be like it used to be, just because with all of the moves and stuff, I was just used to my life being different a lot.

BB: When did that start, you having a hard time emotionally when you were young?

Do you remember specific...

LP: First grade.

BB: Really?

LP: I remember in first grade, my dad was in Vietnam and my parents had just told us they were getting divorced and my mother was having a difficult time herself. I'd have these three-hour crying spells at school and just a whole lot of anger issues and stuff. I'd really get frustrated really easily. I remember the next year in second grade I was going to some school in Raleigh and just falling apart because I didn't know how to do my math. Then the next year, we were in Cary and that's when they thought maybe I'd be happier if I went to go live with my dad and his new wife in Alabama. So I went there and that was a whole different world living in Alabama. This was in like '73 and there was only one black kid in our whole school and his mother was a teacher and she was real strict. They put me in her classroom and I couldn't handle—I was used to teachers who loved you and called you “honey” and stuff and she wasn't about calling a bunch of white kids “honey”—and freaking out about that.

BB: How old were you then when you moved to—

LP: Third grade.

BB: Third grade.

LP: So I was like eight. Luckily, for the next few years, and this was something I had fortunate all through school were to have teachers who kind of like fell in love with me and just really, you know, I had fond relationships and it went above and beyond school. So in

fourth grade I had this teacher who just really was really sensitive to the kind of kid that I was.

BB: Do you remember your teacher's name?

LP: Yeah, her name was Mrs. Wells. She taught at Cloverdale Elementary School in Dothen, Alabama.

BB: In what ways did she support you and love you?

LP: I loved to read up until about five minutes ago. More than anything in the world, I just loved to read. I'd always gotten in trouble in school for reading too much and she was just, as long as I did my work, it was cool. She realized that if I was reading a book, it meant that I was done. She would give me rides home from school or if I was having a bad day, she would take me out in the hall and give me a hug and just really helped me out. It was the first time I'd really had a teacher to give me that kind of help. And I don't know what; I'm not special, I just had a lot of difficulty in school. The teacher I had in fifth grade—I work in that school system now where I went to school when I was in the fifth and sixth grade—that teacher just retired last year. When I first went to work in that system was in 2000. So it had been twenty-four years since I had seen her and I walked into her class as a professional in that system and she saw me and she immediately recognized me.

BB: What's her name?

LP: Her name is Cynthia McPhail. That's where I got my first antidrug lecture was from her when I was in fifth grade. I'd probably smoked two Salem cigarettes in my life. She just knew what was coming.

BB: She caught you?

LP: No, she just kept me after school one day and was like, “You’re a very curious person, Louis.” That was the other thing, my name changed. My middle name is Kimbal and so my parents called me Kim all up until second or third grade. And then Kim was a girl’s name, so I wanted to be Kimbal and that’s about the time that Kimby’s diapers came out and I was prone to hitting people who made me mad and so we had to do something about that. So then I changed to Louis, which then at some point in my life got shortened to Lou. But anyway, Ms. Long, or Ms. McPhail took me outside and actually kept me after school and said that I was very curious and that people who were curious like to experiment with stuff, but that drugs were bad and I should never do them and that alcohol was a drug and I never should do that. It’s just really funny with my later struggles with substance abuse that that’s where the first lecture came from, from my fifth grade teacher out of nowhere.

BB: Do you remember what you were thinking when she was—

LP: I was wondering why she was talking to me about that because my parents didn’t get high. They might buy a pint of bourbon at Christmas that would last all year long. So yeah, I was just like, “This is weird.” And then I was thinking, “Maybe my mom put her up to this,” because my mom was just a compulsive worrier; I don’t know.

BB: Interesting. Were there other people when you were young who were mentors or sources of support for you that really stand out?

LP: My junior English teacher’s name was Charles Stanton.

BB: Junior high school?

LP: No, junior in high school. I went to Westover High School here in Fayetteville and Mr. Stanton was just cool. I started writing poetry around that time and he thought I was the greatest high school poet that he’d ever met. He used to just give me blank paper and

these special fine-tip black pens to write with. He treated me cool too. In the middle of English class, he and I used to go down to the teacher's lounge and get cups of coffee together and stand in the hall and drink coffee and talk about poetry while everybody else was reading *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* by John Edwards or whoever.

BB: (laughs)

LP: And I stayed in contact with him until he died.

BB: Do you have any of those old poems that you like from that year?

LP: Yeah, I've got some.

BB: I'd love to see some.

LP: Okay, well I'll make a note to give them to you.

BB: So you'd met your first wife that year, right?

LP: Yeah.

BB: In his class, is that right?

LP: The first day of junior English class, I walk in and there's this tall blonde person and I went and sat beside her and bugged her and she gave me one date during the year and it didn't work out real good and then at the end of that year, I asked her on another date—June 11, 1982, and we were inseparable—until she left my ass! (laughs)

BB: What's her name?

LP: Her name is Carolyn Albert. I just saw her last week at my daughter's college graduation. She's still tall and she's still blonde. She got pregnant around November of our senior year. So she had a maternity graduation gown. I left for basic training nine or ten days after we graduated. So Drew was actually born while I was in basic training at Fort Jackson. We lived like poor people. We lived in a trailer park here in Fayetteville and I was working

at Shoney's for minimum wage. Then we moved to Carthage and I cleaned carpets and did construction work for the next couple of years. Then we moved to Raeford and I went on active duty with the National Guard. There's people who do National Guard just on weekends and they have full-time employees and I was a full-time employee. I did that for most of a year or so and that's when we split up. Anna was born in the meantime. Drew was—

BB: Two, right?

LP: Let's see. That was in July of '86, so Drew was almost three and Anna was a year and a half.

BB: So how was that? Was that like a big scandal for a seventeen-year-old to be pregnant or was teen pregnancy more common then?

LP: No, I mean, Carolyn was the only white girl that got pregnant and stayed in school. My graduating class was about three hundred people and, you know, Carolyn was super duper smart. She was in advanced placement classes and all the higher-level classes and there certainly was no other kids, college-prep kids getting pregnant. People said stuff. I remember just getting irate at people making comments about that. I was young and dumb and still had in my head that I'd be able to go to college and be married and have a baby and went ahead and applied to State and got accepted.

BB: Fayetteville State?

LP: NC State in Raleigh. But my uncle that I'd been living with since ninth grade and I kind of fell out over her being pregnant and so I ended up graduating from high school and sleeping in a friend's bedroom here in Fayetteville and joined the National Guard. That was

hard because I went to National Guard drill on weekends and went to school all day and then I worked at night at Shoney's. So my senior year was pretty tough.

BB: What was involved in your decision to join the National Guard?

LP: My dad and my grandfather had both been in the same unit and I had kind of a romantic notion of military service. I thought that it was manly. I thought it would help me pay for college. I thought that shooting guns and blowing stuff up sounded like great fun. It was extra money. It really wasn't a well thought out, or any kind of political thinking at all went into it. At that point in my life, I thought every time that the US military had ever been used, that it was for might and right and freedom and, go team. I remember being at Fort Hood, Texas in 1986 and walking by this infantry company. They had a sign out in front that said: "Daniel Ortega's Doom." Daniel Ortega, of course, was the president of Nicaragua—the democratically elected president of Nicaragua, the Sandinista—and just not even having a second thought about that sign. After I left active duty with the National Guard, that was on a Friday and the following Monday, I went to work as a correctional officer in a prison in North Carolina where I worked for the next seven years. Kind of that's where I began to change politically was there.

BB: Before we get there, can we go back a little bit?

LP: Yeah.

BB: Do you need a break or are you doing okay?

LP: Let me check on the dogs.

BB: Yeah, sure.

[break in conversation]

BB: Okay, we're back. So I wanted to ask what Carolyn thought about you joining the National Guard.

LP: I don't really remember us having that many discussions about the long term. I mean, you've got to remember, we were seventeen- and eighteen-year-old kids. The only part she didn't like was having to be gone one weekend a month because at that point, she was pregnant and did not have a particularly supportive family. Her dad was kind of abusive about the whole thing. Later, once we got married, it was cool to have the money coming in because we struggled. Carolyn worked in a convenience store for a while and then she did some secretarial work and I was doing construction work, which doesn't particularly pay good and has no security. If it rains two days this week, there's forty percent of your paycheck you don't get because you don't work. So it was always good to have extra bucks and that's kind of...we didn't have; I mean politics was not a part of my life until my thirties.

BB: And so you and Carolyn were together. What year was Anna born?

LP: Anna was born April nineteenth, 1985.

BB: Anna Lee, right?

LP: Mmm hmm.

BB: Her last name is Roberts, Plummer-Roberts?

LP: Plummer-Roberts.

BB: Where did the Roberts come from?

LP: She's married.

BB: Oh.

LP: Anna got married in 2006 to a nice young man named Matt Roberts, who is an engineer, works for a company that does NASCAR transmissions. Anna will be working at

Baptist Children's Hospital in the neonatal intensive care unit starting next month. She's a registered nurse.

BB: Wow.

LP: Pending her state boards, but she's great. Anna was president of her nursing class at UNC-Greensboro and she's a real high-achieving kid.

BB: And she kept the Plummer name there too.

LP: Yeah. I never even talked to her about it, but Anna and I are pretty close. She calls me a couple of times a week and we talk. I know what's going on her life, which is cool.

BB: Now when did you and Carolyn—well, you separated for a while first and then you divorced.

LP: Well, we separated once and then she was pregnant with Anna, so she came back and then we separated again in July of 1986 and got divorced in 1988. And then in 1991, I got custody of Drew and Anna and kept that. They never lived with her again.

BB: What happened there?

LP: Carolyn just had some issues. She met this guy who she's still with today, Chuck Albert, and I think the kids being there caused some tension in their relationship. Carolyn wasn't at that time particularly stable with jobs and emotional and financial stuff. I had just gotten married to my second wife and owned my own home and had this state job that I'd had for four or five years and was stable and Carolyn just thought it would be best for the kids. It ended up being like a lot of mixed families. It didn't work out real well with my second wife with the children being there. Our relationship wasn't that good. Carolyn didn't

pay child support for a long time. So I ended up splitting up with my second wife. The kids went to live with my mom for three years.

BB: What year was that, that you split up with your second wife?

LP: '93, I split up with her in '93. Then Tina and I got married in '95 and the kids came to live with us.

BB: So there was some back and forth for them too.

LP: Yeah. They went from living with me and Carolyn, to Carolyn, to me and Cathy, to my mom, to me and Tina.

BB: Cathy's your second wife's name?

LP: Yes.

BB: Why did you and Carolyn split eventually?

LP: I think that my drinking played a part in that at that time. We were twenty-one and we'd been together since we were seventeen and we were just growing in two different directions. I've always been happy to live in North Carolina. I've never aspired to go to college or have a college education. I just want to make enough money to live comfortably. I don't want to have a vacation home and that kind of stuff. I like to travel, but it's not like I feel like my life's incomplete if I don't travel. And Carolyn wanted to go to college and didn't particularly like living in Raeford, North Carolina, and, you know, our lives went in two different directions. And it broke my heart; I mean it really did for a long time.

There was some bitterness as the kids got older and she didn't pay child support and then one day, I saw this ad on the internet that's like, "We'll give you fifty dollars to fill out this form if you'll let us try to collect your back child support." Because we had court agreement, right. So I thought, "Well, hell, this is fifty bucks. I'll fill this out." So I filled it

out and sent it off and then that company, because they recover your back child support in exchange for thirty percent of what they recover, so they sent me back a bunch of paperwork and I had to go down to the courthouse. Well, I happened to run into the best child support collection agent in the world, Stella Hanson, and she said, “You don’t need to pay this company anything. This is my job and by the way, did you know that your ex-wife made eighty thousand dollars last year?” I didn’t know that and Carolyn had this real high-powered good-paying job. So we were able to go to court and she was ordered to pay child support—which to her credit, in the end, she ended up paying every dime plus back support. She and her husband paid for Anna’s wedding and we don’t have any conflicts anymore. I look forward to seeing her. Her and Tina get along just fine. In the end—it’s not the end, you know. Up until today, it’s cool. Like my second wife, who I don’t really want to talk about that much, I haven’t seen her since the day I walked out of that house and we met in alcohol rehab. But neither one of us drank the entire time that we were married or dating, but it was just two people going through a tough time in their life and it didn’t end nicely.

BB: Do you mind saying her last name?

LP: Alexander.

BB: Did you start drinking pretty young then?

LP: Yeah, I started drinking heavily the summer between ninth grade and tenth grade.

BB: So you were about—how old is a ninth grader?

LP: I was fifteen. I got my first DUI before I got my driver’s license.

BB: Bad start.

LP: Yeah, I was fifteen. Oh, I’ve gotten lots of bad starts. First time I drank and drove, I got a DUI.

BB: First time?

LP: First time. First time I ever bought a marijuana cigarette, I got caught and kicked out of school. And the first time I ever sold a marijuana cigarette—matter of fact, the only time I ever sold a marijuana cigarette, I got caught and had to manipulate the hell out of my high school assistant principal to keep from—god knows—I would have ended up in foster care if that had happened.

BB: That is some shit luck.

LP: (laughs)

BB: Do you remember the circumstances of your first--? Were you with buddies?
What was it?

LP: What, drinking?

BB: Yeah, drinking when you were fifteen.

LP: Yeah, I was living with my uncle at that time on his farm and it was guys that worked on the farm with me. At that time, we're talking the summer of '80, the drinking age in North Carolina was eighteen. When I was in the seventh grade, I was six foot tall and weighed a hundred and seventy-five pounds. So I was a big guy, starting shaving in the ninth grade, and I could just walk into any store in Fayetteville and buy beer. And so after a sixteen-hour day working on the farm, we would go get some Miller High Life and drive to Hughtaff Lake, which is located on Fort Bragg, and drink beer.

BB: So tell me—what's your uncle's name? I want to hear about what life was like those few years.

LP: Well, his name is Fred Plummer. He currently works at Fort Bragg in civil service as a building inspector. He's about eleven months older than my dad and they were in

the same grade in high school because my dad and my brother's birthday is October fifteenth. That's the cutoff date. If you're on October sixteenth, you have to wait until next year to go to school. So they were in the same class.

BB: Eleven months older, oh your poor grandmother.

LP: Like I said, my family's always been close. In '79, my mom and stepfather, it was at the end of their marriage and I'd gotten in trouble at junior high school for possession of marijuana. So I'd already worked one summer with my uncle on his farm just as a summertime project and I liked it. I just got so much self-esteem by being able to work like a man when I was in high school and knowing that I was working like a man. We'd get up whenever the sun came up, so in June and July, you're talking between five thirty and six and it was what we call a truck farm, which are vegetables. My job would be to pick tomatoes. We'd have two thousand tomato plants at a time and an acre of okra that had to be cut every other day and two or three acres of cucumbers, a half acre of squash, ten acres of sweet corn, and the traditional row crops: butter beans, snap beans, field peas. We did pick your own so that I didn't have to pick those everyday.

BB: And that means that people who wanted to buy them would come pick their own and buy them from you?

LP: Yeah, that's right. The stuff that we had to pick, you'd gather that in the morning. The middle of the day would be sometimes just sitting in the shade under a tobacco barn, but sometimes it would be hoeing or cultivating, pulling weeds. There's a lot of maintenance work on a farm, repairing buildings and dog pens and that kind of stuff. Then in the evening, you'd have another rush of people when it started to cool off coming in to buy vegetables and

pick vegetables and that kind of stuff. My uncle was a fox hunter and he had forty or fifty dogs at any given time.

BB: Hounds?

LP: Yeah, fox hounds, Virginia Walkers mostly. Part of my job was to take care of those. We had twenty-five or thirty cows that mostly ate in the pasture, that wasn't a whole lot of work, but they would get out in the middle of the night and that kind of stuff. What was really interesting is that we were one of the last farms. We were surrounded on three sides by housing developments and our farm was only three miles from the mall here in Fayetteville and there was just me and one other kid in my whole high school, not just my class, who lived on farms. So that part of it was interesting. Everybody knew where I lived and it was cool. In the winter, we sold firewood, lots and lots and lots and lots of firewood. So everyday after school unless I was involved in, because I played football and I was in the drama club, so I had some chances to do extracurricular stuff, but if I wasn't involved in something, then afternoons consisted of splitting firewood or delivering firewood. Saturdays were almost always you might deliver six, seven, eight cords of firewood, which is really tiring because it's heavy. And so I did that for four summers, the farming stuff, and I lived with him full-time from November of '79 up through January or February of '83.

BB: Was he married?

LP: Yeah, married to my aunt, Mary Plummer, and they had two sons who were like my little brothers at that time, John and William.

BB: How many other guys worked on the farm? How many workers were you?

LP: We had one tenant family who lived on the farm. Kind of their heritage, at its heyday, the farm was a couple thousand acres. It was down to sixty acres when I lived there,

but this family had been—this was a white family—had been the farm manager because it was Mary's dad's land and her dad was the kind of farmer who wore a fedora and a necktie to work.

BB: What's a fedora?

LP: A hat like Tom Landry used to wear. So he didn't drive tractors and get dirty. So his farm manager lived on the farm and so they still lived there. So there was an older guy there who helped us and then all kinds of high school kids. Girls I dated, guys I played football with would work there for different periods of time. And one particular guy, James Hall, who right now is a chaplain for the first infantry division in Iraq, probably my best friend from high school, he worked there for several years with me.

BB: Wow, his life has got to be intense.

LP: Well, it's interesting what happened to James. His dad's a retired army officer. He had one older brother who went to Wake Forest on an ROTC scholarship; another brother, who I went to high school with too, who went to West Point. James went to NC State on a ROTC scholarship and when he got out, he was a field artillery officer and was stationed at Fort Hood and Fort Sill and ended up in Hawaii with the Army. And he joined the Seventh Day Adventist Church, which is a pacifist church, and resigned his commission and went into business; his college degree was in business. So after eight years in the Army, he resigned his commission and went into working for Sylvania and other companies. And about five years ago, he had always been very active in the Adventist Church, he heard the Lord's call and went to seminary and when he graduated from seminary, felt like it was God's will for him to join the Army again. He's forty-two years old and he's a battalion

chaplain for an infantry battalion. So he's ministering to people in their twenties and he goes out and does PT with them.

BB: PT?

LP: Physical training. So he goes like five mile runs and forced marches with rucksacks. He says he fills his rucksack full of candy to give to the soldiers. But he knew immediately upon getting his assignment when he was assigned to that battalion that he'd be going to Iraq and he left in March for a year. So his wife, Stephanie, is with their three children who she home schools in Manhattan, Kansas, a town that she only lived in two or three months before James went to Iraq. James's parents still live here in town and I still talk to them. They go to church with my aunt and uncle. James went to church with me. Church was a big part of my life in high school. I went to McPherson Presbyterian.

BB: With your uncle?

LP: Yeah, with my aunt and uncle. That was the church where she'd grown up in and where they'd gotten married. So yeah, I went to youth fellowship every Sunday night and went on trips to the beach with the youth group and all that kind of stuff. It was important for me socially. Church, I've tried my whole life to believe in God and I just finally had to decide that I just don't. I feel bad about that and my dad being a minister and my mom being all into her church. We sent, Anna and Amber went to church school, church private school that we paid for. Tina was really into church for the five years prior to September eleventh, but really, September eleventh kind of is what turned Tina away from church. It wasn't so much about God. I mean, that's her personal stuff and I don't know exactly where she stands. I don't know. I guess I'm agnostic, I'm unconvinced.

BB: So not an atheist, but agnostic?

LP: Yeah.

BB: What's the hesitation?

LP: I guess when you're an atheist, that means that you know there's no God and I'm not sure that I know that there's no God, but I don't believe in heaven and hell and an afterlife and a lot of the things that are typically associated with religion in general and Christianity in specific. The other day when my brother was here, we went to the grocery store. There was this ludicrous bumper sticker that says, "Abortion kills four hundred babies a minute every day, all day," which if you do the math on that, the whole world would be dead. And my brother goes, "Well, what about all the babies that God kills?" And see, that's the kind of stuff when you say it to a religious person, they don't want to talk to you anymore. Because religion is illogical because it's faith-based. I don't go around finding religious people to get into arguments with them; that's rude and it's not right. But it's like in AA [Alcoholic Anonymous], which is a religious program, people can tell you that, "Oh, it's not religious; it's spiritual," which George Carlin does a really good rap on that. But it's like the last time I really got into AA was in 2004 and then the tsunami happened that December and I'm like—

BB: The tsunami in Indonesia?

LP: Yeah, and so I said at an AA meeting one day, "Look, God lets a quarter of a million people die in a tsunami in fifteen minutes and y'all want me to believe that the same God who let that happen cares enough about Lou Plummer to come down here today to keep me from drinking a beer? That doesn't make any sense." That's when kind of the cultish part of AA comes across, the part where they tell you, "Don't ask any questions," which AA is

not a cult; it's just got some cultish tendencies. So yeah, that's my lifelong struggle is trying to find God.

BB: When you were in high school, did you have misgivings or doubts?

LP: I never felt a connection. I heard this great story one time about Mother Theresa where someone went to talk to her and they're like, "Mother, do you ever have doubts?" And she's like, "Well, yeah, I do." And I'm like, "Oh fuck, if Mother Theresa has doubts!" [Laughter.] You know, I tried. I've been to different churches and got shelves full of books on religion and have looked into Zen and Buddhism and Christianity and the Seventh Day Adventist Church, which is a real literal, bible-following church. One, I never feel the connection, and two, it just doesn't make sense. It even ties into politics because you can take people who are stone Communists and they think that the answer, whatever the question is, the answer is in something that Marx wrote and you can find it. And then you get Christians and whatever the question is, the answer is in the Bible. Then you get people in Alcoholics Anonymous and whatever the question is, it's in the Big Book. To me, the truth is all the answers aren't in any one place and there's plenty of stuff to which there is no answer and learning to live with that peacefully is kind of what my goal is, to realize there's just not an answer, not everything's got a solution, some stuff just is that's the way it is.

BB: Do you practice anything that you consider spiritual?

LP: I'm nice to old people. [Laughter] No, I don't pray. Sometimes I kind of do the Thich Nat Hahn "Be in the moment, the miracle of mindfulness." I don't consider that to be religious. It's just a way of looking at the world that works sometimes for me.

BB: I don't know if I can articulate a decent question here, but there's something—I guess I'm asking because my path has been real similar. Well, one, for me, I felt a lot of

sadness around it, like moving beyond Catholicism, feeling like I was lied to and betrayed and being disappointed in people I loved and admired, like my father, who I thought gave me half-truths when I really admired him so much; I felt kind of duped. But I also feel a real sense of loss and sadness to not have this being who knows everything about me and my life, loves me, provides meaning, especially around things for suffering, and just to be able to let go and say, "Well, there's some meaning for this great suffering in the world and it's beyond me, but someone with a brain and divine wisdom--." There was some comfort in that. So now it's hard to find meaning in deep suffering. You've struggled a lot and done a lot of soul-searching and dealing with the pain from the war and substance abuse and all that. What helps you find a sense of meaning in life?

LP: People. The greatest privilege in my life has been the imperfect, perfect people: my wife, who I admire for just so many different reasons, and people who, like I said, they're imperfect people. Bryan Proffitt is an imperfect man who I would go to the ends of the earth for, and Chip Smith and Bridgette Burge and Ajamu Dillahunt and a whole long list of people who do so many things and work so hard. Because I think in the end, it really is up to us to change things. I don't even know if "make things better" is the right way to say it because all those people I just mentioned are not about getting rich and they're not about hurting anybody. I don't know what kind of meetings counter-protestors have before their demos, but I don't think they have peacekeeper training and that kind of stuff. That's just the faith that I have is that there's wonderful people in the world.

It's like my whole love/hate relationship with AA. I don't buy into twelve-step theology, but some of the most giving people that I know in the world are people who are recovering alcoholics and addicts who, no matter how many times I tell them, "I don't

believe this shit,” will be like, “Well, just come to a meeting anyways or come eat breakfast with me.” So that’s, my faith is that there’s enough people out there who have enough love and enough compassion and enough energy to change things. That’s where I’m at.

BB: When did you first go into AA or first give it a shot?

LP: August twenty-third, 1987 was when I went to my first meeting and picked up my first white chip and did that and I didn’t take another drink for almost nine years. I stayed sober almost all the way through my twenties. And since then, that was in ’95, and so for the last twelve years, I’ve gone two years one time, eighteen months another time, six months here or there. A lot of it, it wasn’t until the late 90s that I really found a physician who was pretty good at treating the variety of mental illnesses that they say I’ve got. But, you know, she’s not a moneygrubber and she’s not a guru and she just has really been effective at that. The thing about bipolar disease is that it’s chronic and progressive. So it’s always there and it’s always getting worse. So I deal with that and I’ve got—basically it’s called a chronic anxiety. It’s not the kind that you can take a Valium and chill out with. It’s just another kind of neurotransmitter disorder that luckily the medicine is getting so good for these days. I take two different anti-seizure medications that are for mood stabilization, not so much—because I don’t have seizures, but I take so much Wellbutrin, I mean I take twice the therapeutic dose, and that can cause seizures. I’ve alluded before to having this really bad temper; I mean, I don’t beat up people in the grocery store or stuff like that—a lot of my anger tends to be verbal, but those anti-seizure medications help with keeping that in check. That’s really caused me a lot of problems all my life, these sudden anger bursts. That’s caused problems in activism and politics and at work and in my family life. So, kind of a combination of help through pharmacology—which I joke about, but I don’t know where I’d be if it weren’t for

that. Like I said, none of these are stuff that I could sell on the street corner to a junkie. And recognizing that I'm allergic to alcohol and I'm allergic to cocaine, I'm allergic to marijuana.

BB: What do you mean "allergic to it"?

LP: It makes me break out of jail. (laughs) It's just, you know, I mean I am a person who's always had problems with substance abuse. The problem with AA is they want you to base your whole life, that success means I didn't take a drink today and even though I lost my job and my wife left me and I don't have any money in the bank, I'm still a winner because I didn't have a beer; you know, fuck that. It's just difficult because so much of treatment for substance disorders in this country is twelve-step based, which means that it's religious. For example, in North Carolina, there are no treatment centers that aren't twelve-step based. So if you want to get non-religious substance abuse treatment, it's not available here.

But I don't really know how much more I could learn about alcoholism. I've got shelves of books about it and have read and have been to thousands of AA meetings and have spent of thousands of hours with alcoholics. I've talked to people in the movement about it, old heads from back in the day when drugs were a lot more prevalent in society who had to struggle with brothers and sisters who got high a lot and lost their effectiveness as activists. My friend, Dennis O'Neill, who lives in New York talked to me about it. He's not a person with a history of problems, but he's been around politics since the 60s and has seen a lot of people come and go.

BB: Do you think it's pretty prevalent in activist circles then and even today?

LP: The romantic notion of people back in the 60s and 70s is that everybody was dropping acid and smoking weed. Based on the reading that I've done, our problem today is

no worse than it was at that time. The fact is that most people who drink aren't alcoholics and most people who smoke grass don't get addicted to it and most people don't do cocaine and most people don't drop acid. So I don't think there's a whole lot of difference. I don't really want to talk about this anymore.

BB: Okay, you're over this.

LP: Yeah.

BB: Let's see. Do you want to take a minute?

LP: No, I'm cool.

BB: Where'd I put my questions? So overall you really liked being on the farm?

LP: I did, and part of me wanted to farm. If my uncle and I hadn't had that falling out when Carolyn got pregnant, I probably would have stayed there and farmed. That falling out didn't last for a really long time, but it was in such a critical period of my life that I had to make other decisions and move on to other things.

BB: So from '83 to '86, you were talking about working a variety of construction jobs and y'all were just trying to make ends meet and get by, so it was whatever you could do. In 1986, how did you come to get a job as a correctional officer? Because it was the NC Department of Correction in Hoke County, is that what it was called?

LP: Hoke Correctional Institution is where I worked. There was a man in my National Guard unit who was the superintendent of a prison in Hoke County. It was McCain Correctional Hospital and he knew that there was two job openings at two prisons close to Raeford where I lived. North Carolina has more prisons than any state in the country. We don't have more inmates, but we have more prisons. What happened—during the Depression, it was a Works Progress Administration project to build a prison in every county

in North Carolina. So there was a hundred counties, so there's a lot of prisons here. There were a couple of job openings that this lieutenant colonel told me about and so I went and interviewed for them. Because I was working full-time for the National Guard, but those were contract jobs that you had to renew every three months and so it wasn't really wasn't necessarily this long-term prospect for employment. I had a high school education and working at a state job offered both security, health insurance, vacation, sick leave, paid holidays, all the stuff that was difficult to get. I was twenty-one years old and I'd already had Drew and Anna and they'd never had health insurance. So I thought that I would be able to use my skills that I had in the military in working in a prison environment. I would just go in and treat these prisoners like you'd treat privates or like I had been treated as a private. I kind of didn't take into consideration that none of them volunteered to be there. So I got disabused of that rather quickly. My first few years as a correctional officer, you know, it was kind of a...I don't how to really put it, but it was like I felt better than the inmates. I felt like I was something above what they were even though I was smoking grass and there were people in there for selling grass. When I worked—yeah, we probably won't be putting this in—but like when I worked at Hoke, there were eighteen correctional officers on third shift and thirteen of them got high. I got a DUI the first year after I worked there and I would get off work in my correctional officer uniform to go see my probation officer; I had federal probation.

BB: So talk about cognitive dissonance there.

LP: [laughs] I still had this kind of military mentality and I volunteered to be on the prison emergency response team. And I was good at that stuff. When we had escapes being able to coordinate where people were, the operations side of it, who's here and who needs to go there, and how does this that happened over here relate to what's going on, and where do

we need to send people. I was just, I had a knack for that kind of stuff and felt good about the praise and things. That was the most paramilitary part of working in the prison. You got extra uniforms. You got to shoot your gun more. And then kind of like overnight, I'm like, "I don't want any part of that. This is where I come to earn a paycheck. This isn't who I am; this is just what I do." It started really bothering me, the racial makeup of the prison. Because I'd kind of looked at it and seen it and not thought about it, but I started thinking about hey, this prison is eighty percent black. Then I started looking at people I knew in prison that I'd known outside of prison and they were people just like I was. As many times as I'd driven my car drunk and as many times as I had bought drugs, that it's just, you know...

We did processing so we'd have a jail bus come in from Durham County or Mecklenberg County. Fifty people, and forty-nine of them had public defenders; forty of them were black. Forty-five of them were drug-related because drug-related means either you sold drugs, you possessed drugs, you got high and did something, or you stole something so that you could buy drugs. And when you take those four categories, there's not much left. My favorite all-time prison offense was a guy who's in prison for poaching oysters as a parole violation; that was weird.

It became evident when I stopped and thought about it for a minute that our criminal justice system is racist and it's fucked up and I was raised in an antiracist family. I had discussions about sociology with people who, I remember this guy taught me that any bureaucracy loses within a short period of time its original goal and its goal becomes to be self-perpetuating. He said, "Like the March of Dimes was founded to find a cure for polio and they did it and instead of saying, 'Yay us, see you at the reunion!' they decided to work on birth defects." Well, as long as the sun continues to mutate genes, there's gonna' be birth

defects. And I'm working in this prison and the prison is there to be self-perpetuating, to create more jobs. And we don't need a criminal justice system that's a jobs program; we need one that's going to make society better. Any time you work in a prison, you're going to have people there on the staff who are racist, who are borderline psychopaths, who are abusive. Any kid that wants to grow up and be a prison guard is a sick kid because that's just not a job that you should aspire to have. Basically, my attitude got so bad there that I kind of quit before I got fired.

It was really weird because I had always, always, always thought that the death penalty was wrong, just instinctively. Now I would carry a gun to carry someone who's in prison for writing bad checks to the hospital, knowing that if they ran I was going to shoot them, and then on the other side of my brain thinking, "You shouldn't kill people." I'm not a Quaker pacifist; I mean, I don't think violence is the way to handle society's problems. I'm not the kind of pacifist who's going to lay down and get kicked if we get attacked by the Klan tomorrow. I just couldn't understand it. And then when I went to Central Prison, where I went many, many times, and saw people who wore these—in Central Prison in Raleigh, if you wear a red jumpsuit, it means you're on death row. So you see those people in the medical clinics or walking down the hall that the state's going to murder. Some human being who works for the same department that I work for is going to kill that guy as cold-bloodedly as you can...and shortly...I quit that job in the fall of 2003 and I met Tina a few months later. That's when I started to understand that you can actually do something about what you believe in. I mean, here's this woman working at a factory for seven, eight bucks an hour who donates money to Greenpeace and World Wildlife Fund. I'd never donated money to charity in my life, maybe United Way five dollars a month or ten bucks in the church

collection plate, but this was someone who was actually making a sacrifice to these organizations that she believed in; it blew my mind. Our very first conversation was about Leonard Peltier, who's this Native American man who's been in prison since the 70s because he was convicted of shooting two FBI agents. Most people don't think he did it. It was the very first conversation we ever had—and this is in the Westinghouse factory in Fayetteville, North Carolina. I didn't know people like that existed and that's, Tina said, the way she felt.

BB: Did she bring it up or how did the conversation start?

LP: I was at my little workplace and she came up to use this computer terminal that was right behind my workplace and she had this folder and I said, "What's in the folder?" And she said, "I'm writing letters to,"—I don't know who it was—"for Leonard Peltier." And I said, "The Indian guy that's in prison?" She was like, "You know who that is?" I'm like, "Who are you writing letters to?" And that's how it started. Then she used to write letters a lot for Amnesty International. A couple of our first dates were sitting at her kitchen table writing these letters to the president of Nepal or whoever.

She's just amazing. We're working in this factory for low wage, repetitive manufacturing work, and she was getting ready to go on a trip to Peru with the World Wildlife Fund to spend a week in the Amazon river basin and then a week in the Andes and going to Machu Pichu. And I'm serious, and people were saying, [he uses a deep southern accent], "You could go to Myrtle Beach and get some bedroom furniture for that money. Ain't you afraid of snakes?" Tina would be like, "I hope I do see a snake!"

That's kind of where I started taking these baby steps into activism. Unfortunately, around that time is when my anxiety got so bad that for several years all I did was go to work and I'd come home and I never went anywhere. I couldn't go into restaurants or fairs or

parties. I wouldn't go anywhere with Tina. I could go to my family and stuff, but just the thought of being around people I didn't know, I mean, I couldn't order pizza on the telephone because I'd have to talk to somebody I didn't know, which is all kind of weird, but it's the way I was. Then I went to the library one day to get something to read because that's how I maintained my sanity was by reading and there was a flier on a bulletin board for People of Faith Against the Death Penalty. I still considered myself to be a nominal Christian at that point and so I thought, "This is a good meeting for Tina to go to." [laughter] So I sent her to this meeting or she wanted to go, I didn't send her, and she came back and gave me a report on all the weirdoes that were there. She met this couple and they had been to these anti-nuke marches in the 70s and this guy who just moved here from Philadelphia who's super smart and this big guy from Fayetteville who knows everything there is to know about the death penalty. She was talking about my friends, John and Anne Ashford, and Chip Smith and Nick Hopkins, who has since died.

So shortly thereafter, I went to a meeting of People of Faith Against the Death Penalty and that was kind of what started the ball rolling into being an active member of a group trying to change society and being involved in doing that—this is early 2001—almost instantly did away with this chronic anxiety that I'd had about being around people. I went from not being able to order a pizza on the telephone to speaking to a crowd of fifty thousand people in Rome a few years later. To this day, I don't have this kind of crowd phobia anymore and can go anywhere in the world and do whatever I feel like I need to do.

BB: Do you attribute it fully to the meaningfulness of being involved in an organization?

LP: The short answer, yeah, I do. I think a whole lot of our health has to do with stuff that goes on inside of our body, but I think the external things around us can make those changes. Exercising and laughing and having some raucous sex can really change your endorphin level. I don't want to get too new-agey sounding, but I think that's the truth. And I think I get such a rush out of being around good people and having good conversation that it changes stuff inside of me, and so I can do that.

BB: Let's back up some. Tell me about your roles in the National Guard, specifically around what skills that you learned and had and practiced? But I need to break.

LP: Okay.

[break in conversation]

BB: Okay, so some skills that you learned in the National Guard?

LP: When I initially enlisted, I was sent to mortar gunner school, which is part of the infantry school at Fort Benning. So I learned how to fire mortars and that's what I did the first couple years I was in the National Guard. Then they had a need within my unit for someone who calls artillery and mortar fire, which basically you look and see where the mortars and the artillery shells fall and you talk on the radio to the people that are firing them and you adjust where they are falling so that you can hit the target that you're aiming at. So those were the military jobs that I had. Then when I actually worked full-time for them, I worked in the operations center where I did things like organize Family Day and help keep records. So it's kind of like secretarial work on one hand and a little bit of community relations stuff on the other hand. Those were skills that I've used later as an activist. I used to joke about when I first got into organizing I thought all we did was march in the streets and

shout “Power to the people!” That’s the way I felt into I started ordering port-a-potties and looking for food vendors for demos.

BB: That shit’s some work!

LP: It is, it is. And I was in the National Guard in the late 80s and I didn’t know anyone my age certainly who’d ever been activated as part of the National Guard. There were still some old soldiers in the National Guard who had been activated for Civil Rights riots of the late 1960s. And that was some pretty racist stuff to hear them talk about what they did because in Vietnam, the National Guard wasn’t integrated. There was a rule against allowing black people in, but a lot of people who didn’t want to go to Vietnam tried to get into the National Guard because that would fulfill their military obligation and keep them from going to Vietnam. So the spots were reserved, especially in the South, for white people. So listening to some of these white guys who are my father’s age and remember my dad’s only seventeen years older than me, so it wasn’t like a huge generation gap, to listen to them talk about doing things like driving armored personnel carriers through black neighborhoods in Wilmington, having contests to see who could knock down the most clotheslines and stuff like that, I didn’t like it. It was very distasteful to me, especially since in ’83, ’84, ’85, the unit was predominately people of color.

It’s really interesting. My National Guard unit, being in Raeford, which Hoke County is next to Robeson County, there’s a significant Native American presence. A lot of Lumbee Indians have very similar last names: Locklear, Oxendine, Chavis, Lowrey, and Dial. Between those five names, you get two-thirds of the Lumbee Indians and we had some trainers come in from Fort Hood one time. They were there when we had row call and it was like, “Sergeant Locklear, Sergeant Locklear, Sergeant Locklear, Private Locklear,” and this

guy thought this entire family had enlisted. We had to tell him that most people from over, they're named Locklear, Oxendine, Chavis, Lowrey, or Dial.

But I was in the National Guard with people who were sheriff's deputies, building contractors, people who worked in textile mills, people who worked at the Converse Shoe factory, the Campbell's Soup plant, mostly manufacturing jobs. Our battalion commander owned a sign company. One of the company commanders was an attorney, but several of the company commanders had gone to OCS, Officer Candidate School, so they were not college-trained or certainly not West Point-trained officers. I did not want to go to war with those people. I was all about, if you had called, I'd have answered the horn, but I just didn't want to go with these bozos.

It ended up, I made connections. It's kind of a crass way to put it, but jobs that I had later in life and opportunities I had to do other things were through people that I met in the National Guard. But when my time was up, I never thought about reenlisting. Because I worked at a prison, I only got one weekend off a month anyway, and to use that one weekend to go to National Guard drill when I didn't have custody of my children at that time and it made it really difficult to see them because I had to drive to Pennsylvania where Carolyn lived with the kids was just a nightmare.

BB: Have there been some books in your life that have been—I'm making the assumption that books have changed your life, but they've been a huge part of your life since you were little. Are there a few books in your mind that stand out as particularly life-changing for you?

LP: *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

BB: Why?

LP: Well, my mother always encouraged us to read adult books and sometimes she'd pick out some stuff that wasn't that great or I would be kind of standoffish. But she followed us around the house to the point of standing outside the bathroom reading about Atticus Finch and Scout and Boo Radley. So to make her leave me alone, I started reading it—and it's a great book on any level. I had been listening to my stepfather talk about what it was like during integration and really getting an understanding a little bit about racial attitudes. I think most kids are really concerned about stuff being fair. I know mine were. And working in the school system, I hear the "it's not fair" a hundred times a day. The bottom message to me in *To Kill a Mockingbird* is about fairness. Justice and fairness are the same thing. I think all of us activists want things to be fair, right, however we have to get fairness. So *To Kill a Mockingbird* was really important to me.

The second book, one that really educated me—this is a little bit of background. I went to a Black Workers for Justice banquet with Chip Smith and his wife, Kim Koo, and this professor from Fayetteville State, which is a historically black college and this happened to be a white woman named Susan Franzblau, and I was still at this point really naive to American imperialism—

BB: About what year is this, the banquet?

LP: This was probably in 2001.

BB: Say a little bit about Black Workers for Justice.

LP: Black Workers for Justice is an organization in North Carolina that has got some really experienced activists on its board, people like Ajamu and Rukiya Dillahunt, Saladin Muhammed, and has done a lot of work for individuals who have suffered personal injustices

in their jobs. A lot of the people who are involved in it have a history in leftist organizations. I don't really know what else to go into.

BB: And Chip was involved with Black Workers for Justice. You had been involved with Chip through PFADP.

LP: Right.

BB: Did Chip invite you to this?

BB: Yeah, Chip sold me two twenty-five-dollar tickets. I don't remember if it was the first banquet I went to or the second, I've been to several, but this one drew a huge crowd because Danny Glover came to speak and in our cult of celebrity in this country, people wanted to see Danny Glover. We had this conversation on the way back about certain US military actions and I didn't know much. I mean I was still...I didn't know the history of—even though I love history, what I had was textbook history, which is full of mistruths and half-truths and stuff left out. I was defending some US military action that had happened and Susan Franzblau told me about this book called *A People's History of the United States*. And I read that and it blew my mind. I began to read Noam Chomsky, more books by Howard Zinn, who's of course the author of *A People's History of the United States*, and that kind of turned me on to the real history and I began to understand more about US imperialism.

I actually bought this pamphlet from Jews for Justice about a history of Israel and Palestine, which was totally footnoted, totally researched, that made me realize that being Jewish doesn't always mean that you're righteous; neither does Palestinian mean that you're righteous. It's a complicated place in the world with a complicated history. But I began to understand some of the inherent problems in Zionism and still can't really wrap my mind

around what it means to be Palestinian and to be my age and to have lived your whole life in a refugee camp and how that must feel and how I would feel, how I would act.

Just a footnote and I'm going to say it even though it's pretentious. Howard Zinn and man who is my friend, Anthony Arnove, did a book a couple years ago called *Voices of a People's History of the United States*. What's really cool is because the original book really just educated me to history, I helped Dr. Zinn and Anthony get some information. It's actually a letter from Camillo Mejia's mom. Camillo was a National Guard soldier from Florida, an infantry staff sergeant who went to prison for refusing to go back to Iraq, and through my membership in Military Families Speak Out, I had connections with Camillo's mother—who by the way was a Sandinista from Nicaragua. And Dr. Zinn and Anthony put me in their acknowledgements, their thank you's. It says "Lou Plummer" in this book about the people's history of the United States and just one of the coolest things that ever happened to me was getting my name in that book, even though just peripherally, it was cool.

BB: Wow. You're also in Chip's acknowledgements...

LP: I am in Chip's.

BB: ...for *The Cost of Privilege*, probably one of the most brilliant books I have read in years, I think.

LP: And Chip wrote that book in a way that really reflects his personality. Chip can take the most vitriolic conversation and calm it down. And some of the examples that he gave in the book—the one that I like the most is, well two trains of thought. One is that most people individually don't act racist because we live in an integrated society and we most often interact with people who aren't of our own race in a work environment where you have to get along because you're there to do a job. And so racism isn't always or is very seldom

part of a workplace and interpersonal relationships. It's more of this systemic racism. And so being able to start a conversation with someone who doesn't have any sort of antiracist education, hasn't thought about it, with this statement that most people don't act racist and explaining that and then going into the part that I like to use is: you've got two GI's coming home from World War II back to Philadelphia. They both get VA loans to buy a house. One guy gets a loan on the white side of town; one guy gets a loan on the black side of town. The white guy's house develops equity, which he's able to borrow against to send his kids to college, while the guy who lives on the black side of town doesn't get that and he doesn't have that equity and even though they fought in the same war and were given the same loan, this institutional racism lifts one guy up and keeps the other guy down.

BB: Not mention redlining and all the other things that happened...oh, the color of wealth, huh?

LP: I sat at a table at a restaurant here close to the house with a friend of mine who was getting ready to leave for Iraq, who's a staff sergeant in a special operations unit, and another friend of mine who's a master sergeant in a special operations unit, both white guys. One of them said one time, "I wish those people wouldn't listen to rap music. I wish they would listen to regular American music." And with that kind of thinking and to be able to have a conversation with those two things and have them agreeing with it and seeing it and I told Chip, I couldn't wait to get home, and call him and say, "Man, let me tell you what I just talked about from the book!" And being Chip's friend from around the time he first started to write the book until it got published was...I had many long van rides back from Raleigh and Knightdale and Durham and other places talking about that.

BB: Well, I interrupted you, but the second book you mentioned was *A People's History of the United States*. Are there others that rise to the top?

LP: It wasn't just books. I remember the first time I bought a copy of the *Nation*. My parents subscribed to the *New Republic*, my mother and stepfather, back when it was still a left magazine. So I was used to seeing that as a kid and it was over my head. But being someone who lives in this age, it wasn't just books, it was also the Internet and running into websites like antiwar.com, truthout, the *Progressive* magazine and their website were other pieces of writing that I liked. There was a book that I read called *An American Insurrection*. It was about when James Meredith enrolled at Ole Miss and basically how fifty US Marshals fought off hundreds and hundreds of racist students and agitators the night that Meredith enrolled. I like history a lot and so that kind of stuff in a historical context. So I've done a lot of reading about Schwerner, Cheney, and Goodman [three civil rights activists murdered in Mississippi in 1963] and about the trial of the sheriff's deputies from Philadelphia County, Mississippi and them being acquitted.

I tried to read the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* a couple of times and couldn't do it; I don't know why. It's written by Alex Haley and that's something I really ought to tackle again. I'm just not real sure why I couldn't get through that.

BB: Hey, I just finished it a few months ago and I had the same thing, I don't know, the first fifty pages or something; I don't know why. And then when Bryan Proffitt was having his class read it and we rented the movie with Denzel Washington again, it's pretty amazing if you can get into it.

LP: I read *The Greatest*, which was the autobiography of Muhammed Ali, and the most memorable part of that book was he won a gold medal in the Rome Olympics in 1960

and he wore the gold medal until the gold started wearing off the edges and the lead underneath it started showing. And he went back to Louisville, Kentucky where he was from and was denied some service and he stood on a bridge over the river and threw his gold medal into the river because he didn't want it; he didn't want to represent a country that saw him as nothing but an entertainer and didn't give him the rights of a citizen. There's a book called *Brothers*, which is an oral history of the Vietnam War by black men. And I remember reading *The Good War*, Stud Terkel's book, and the black men and women who are interviewed in there. [pause]

BB: Why don't we stop here for today? Are you up for another interview tomorrow?

LP: Sure.

BB: Same place, same time.

LP: Sure.

BB: Great, all right, let's stop.