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

Interview U-0553
Cynthia Brown
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TRANSCRIPT: CYNTHIA BROWN

Interviewee: Cynthia Brown

Interviewer: Bridgette Burge

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START OF INTERVIEW

CB: And that's the way I feel about it.

BB: You feel like you've done so little with your life?

CB: Yes, because there's so many people I think who do much more powerful stuff than I do. I think I understand that there's value to what I've done. It's not that I don't think it's valuable. But when I think about people like Donna Dudley Latimer, who has built her own organization, people who have been on the ground. When I think about Donna or people who built these enduring organizations from the ground up…I do training with people to help them strengthen those organizations and to operate them. I worked for a long time with Southerners for Economic Justice, but I didn't start that organization. So there are a lot of things that I still yet want to do. But when I think about things like the—what is that fellowship that people get that is for organizers who have been out here for a long time?

BB: Mandy Carter just applied. She didn't get it, but is it for organizers of color specifically?

CB: Uh huh.

BB: Yeah, I can't remember; I'll look that up. [The Charles Bannerman Fellowship]

CB: I can't even remember the name of it, but when I think about that, I won't apply because I always say I haven't done enough. So I don't think it's a sense of a lack of self worth. It's a consciousness about how people value what folks do and that's really why I feel honored that there's somebody who sees value in the things that I've done. The other thing is that it gets real tricky because my feet have been in electoral politics and in grassroots activism, and it's hard for people to wrap their brain around somebody who does both. (laughter)

BB: I think you're a rare bird. (laughter) Yeah, well let me just for the context, before I started recording, I thanked Cynthia for doing this with me. And she said, "Well, I don't know why you chose me. So many others have done so much more." So then the lead ended just as she was explaining what she meant by that. But let's back up a little. We're at the Durham Public Library in the conference room today. Today is the twentieth, right, of February 2006, with Cynthia Denise Brown. Is that your middle name? Yeah. So we're going to just plug along on our oral history here. So thanks again.

CB: Well let me just say this, and it's going to sound weird, but it really is typical of my life and my family of origin. My name is actually Denise Brown, and it's not Cynthia Brown. I was sixteen years old before I discovered that, because I was at the Department of Motor Vehicles to get my license and when I sat down to sign the paper for my learner's permit, I signed Cynthia Denise Brown. The license examiner said, "Who is that?" I said, "That's me." He said, "That's not what your birth certificate says." My mother looks at me and she puts her hands on my hand and she says, "I'll tell you about it when we get outside." (laughter)

BB: What is the story?

CB: So when I got outside, she explained to me that I was born in New York in a Catholic hospital and that the hospital workers came to her and asked her what was my name. She said, "I don't know what I want to name her. I'll name her something Denise or Denise something." They said, "Well, if you let us go down with this information, when you decide what it is that you want to name her, just let us know." So when she decided the next morning she wanted my name to be Cynthia Denise Brown, she told them. They said they wanted to charge her one hundred dollars to add Cynthia, because they said they had already typed up the birth certificate, and by adding Cynthia, it would be just like making a legal name change. So they wanted to charge her a hundred dollars. She never told anybody that story until I was sixteen and she was telling me. She sent out every birth announcement, every school record, everything that had anything to do with me had all three names on it. But she never told anybody that on my birth certificate there was one name, until she told me that story.

BB: That's interesting.

CB: Which really was a real story about being reared by a woman who just did things her way. (laughter) And it was a story about the fact that I held onto that because, I mean as far as I'm concerned, that's who I am.

BB: So tell me your parents' names. And you're the oldest of six, that's right?

CB: I'm the oldest of six. My mother, who was deceased in March of 1986, she was named Louise Laverne Broadnax, but she never used Louise. I mean, I was an adult probably when I knew her first name was Louise. She always went by Laverne Broadnax. My father was Robert Brown. The Broadnax is her second marriage. My father and she were married, Robert Brown. My mother actually went to New York the summer after her sophomore year

at Bennett College, met my father before she was scheduled to come back and go to school, married him, and called back to tell my family after they kept harassing her to come back to go to school, and told them, “I’m married and I’m not coming back.” And she and my father were together for about a year before she had me. I mean, she was actually twenty-one when she had me. He died when I was four, and that’s how I ended up coming to North Carolina to be reared most of my life as a school-aged child in Reidsville, North Carolina, which is about twenty-nine miles north of Greensboro.

BB: Wow, your dad died when you were young.

CB: He died when I was four.

BB: I’m sorry.

CB: So what are your siblings’ names?

BB: I’m the oldest. Barbara is my sister, who is next to me. Donna and Eric—actually there was a brother who came in between Donna and Eric, but he died of crib death. His name was Reginald. He died at six months of crib death and then Eric was born, Lisa, and then Christopher. And Christopher was my youngest brother, who was killed in the military. He was working in military intelligence in Panama and on Memorial Day we got word that he had been shot in his head. They said he committed suicide, but there are a lot of questions about whether or not that’s true.

BB: What year did he die?

CB: It was right after the Gulf War, because he participated in the Gulf War and so I think it was ’91 or ’92.

BB: You've had some big losses already in your immediate family. So what's the story of you getting from New York to Reidsville? Was it your mom finished college and then your dad died and you moved?

CB: No, my mom went up there the summer after her sophomore year. They got married. They were rearing a family. They had "stair steps," and that's just a way of saying I was born eleven months later; my sister was born a year later; after that, another sister; a year after that, another sister. Actually, it was the first three of us and then when my father died, I was about four. My father died and right after my father's funeral, my mother found out shortly thereafter that she was pregnant again with the baby brother who I said died of crib death. That's the one named Reginald.

BB: What a year for your mom.

CB: Imagine, imagine.

BB: What did you call it, "staff steps"?

CB: I said "stair steps."

BB: "Stair steps," okay, okay.

CB: You know, people talk about children who come right behind each other. So she found out she was pregnant with my stepbrother, I mean with my actual whole brother, realized she was pregnant with him. But I think she probably was back in North Carolina by the time she realized that, shortly after my father's death, because it wasn't long after his funeral that my grandparents came and brought all of us back to North Carolina. So we were living in North Carolina and that's where we stayed all of our life. I think for a brief period when my mother remarried, we may have gone to New York, probably not even a year, and it couldn't have been a year, and it wasn't long after my father died, because I hadn't started

school, so it was a couple of years and she ended up remarrying, went up to New York for a brief period, then brought us back to North Carolina and that's where we stayed until I was an adult and had graduated from college.

BB: Who did she remarry and what year was that?

CB: I don't know what year. I mean, I would really have to do some family research, but I can only assume that if I did the math and I was born in '58 and my father died in '62, sometime between '64 and '65, my mom probably married my stepfather. His name was James Willard Broadnax.

BB: So why Reidsville? Is that where your parents were from?

CB: That's where my mother was from; that was home for her.

BB: And that's where your grandparents—

CB: That's where my grandparents were, exactly.

BB: What did your grandparents do?

CB: My grandmother was a former worker in the American Tobacco Factory, but she also did domestic work, and she was a cook when she retired at the country club in Reidsville. My grandfather always, as long as I can remember, had three jobs. My grandfather, when I knew anything about his work life, worked for American Tobacco Factory. He worked in the union hall cleaning up, because he was a member of the Tobacco Workers Union and the Black Tobacco Workers Union. And he worked as a bartender at the country club.

BB: Hard workers.

CB: Mmm hmm.

BB: Did your mom have any kids with James, your stepdad?

CB: Two of those children that I named, Lisa—actually, Lisa, Eric, and Chris.

BB: "Chris" is what he goes by. Were your parents politically active in any way when you were growing up?

CB: Well, it's interesting you should say that, because I didn't realize that my mother was. I don't remember my stepfather being, and actually, my stepfather was killed when I was in the ninth grade. My mother and my stepfather separated probably when I was in about the seventh grade. They were considering reconciling when I was in the ninth grade, and prior to their reconciliation, he was killed. I don't remember anything about him being active, but my mother was very active in her union. So to the extent that she spent time—and I can remember her talking about how important it was for workers to be organized and I know that her activism grew only in part from the fact that my grandfather was active in his union. I know he was a member. I don't know how active he was, but I know he was a member; he participated faithfully. But I know that his motivation for being involved and his willingness to trust that it was a good thing grew from the activism and the leadership of my Uncle Joe, who was my grandfather's brother-in-law, Joe Wright. Uncle Joe was like the vice president of the union.

I did kind of like an oral history project. I have these tapes that still need to be transcribed where I talked to a lot of people about what did they see as the changes that happened over the last thirty years in Reidsville and has it been beneficial to African-Americans or has it been something that has not been so beneficial. I wanted them to answer the question why they felt it had been a good thing or a bad thing, the desegregation and the various changes that had happened in the black community. It was during that time that I really learned about Uncle Joe and how active he was. He really was a leader, I mean the vice

president of the union in the American Tobacco Company, with what was the first union in American Tobacco; it was the black union. It was not until black workers had organized and formed their own union that white workers saw that unionizing could improve their working conditions, that they then formed a white union. Uncle Joe was one of the leaders that helped formulate that union. He was a leader in that union and he interacted with union workers not only in Reidsville, but in the American Tobacco Factories in Durham and in Richmond, Virginia.

So I then began to understand in retrospect why my mother was so motivated, because she and my Uncle Joe were very close and he was very informative. He informed her about the importance of being organized as a worker. Back in the day, when my mother was always talking about how important it was for workers to be organized, she was advising people in the workplace about what their rights were. I don't know that she ever held a formal position as a shop steward, but I am very clear that she was a real advocate for workers in the workplace around the union.

BB: Was your mom in the same union?

CB: She was in the same union—not in the American Tobacco factory. Her work, I think the first and only place I remember her being in a union and probably because so many of the other workplaces where she worked didn't have unions and were small places, like a couple of employee shops within the American Clothing and Textile Workers Union. She was very involved in the union through Fieldcrest Mills.

BB: Fieldcrest Mills?

CB: Fieldcrest Textile Mills.

BB: About what year was it that your Uncle Joe started to get real involved? What year was it that the American Tobacco Factory—

CB: I really don't know. I don't know because see, that would have been during my childhood and before my birth. All of that would have been—I mean I was born in '58. It could have been my early years, because I just don't know what years they were in the factory. Like I said, I was born in '58, so it could have been around the time I was born or it could have been even before that. I just don't know. I have no idea when the American Tobacco Factory Black Union was formed.

BB: It could have even been the 20s, 30s, 40s. Yeah, we'll have to look that up to see when that was.

CB: I have no idea.

BB: So was your mom involved in political stuff in any other way?

CB: I would say that she voted and she probably encouraged other people to vote, but in terms of seeing her actively involved in campaigns and that kind of thing, I don't recall that at all.

BB: Did she always stick with a certain party? Political party?

CB: I would assume, and I can only assume because I don't know that we ever talked about it, that she was a Democrat because, to tell you the truth about it, I don't remember what made me a Democrat and it had to be because she was. (laughter) Because I became a Democrat when I first registered to vote and I probably registered to vote at eighteen or nineteen, and I would have registered, I don't even remember, so I'd just assume my mother had to have told me that.

BB: Was spirituality a part of your childhood? Did y'all go to church or practice some other type of spirituality?

CB: Almost every Sunday, almost every Sunday. I mean, we grew up in what was the black Methodist Church and I remember vaguely the merger of the Methodist Church between the white and the black churches, when they created the United Methodist Church. But I grew up in the United Methodist Church and I was an adult living here in Durham before I joined the C.M.E. Church, which is the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. But I actually can remember being very active in the church. We were in the children's choir every holiday just about. From Easter to Christmas, you were doing a speech at the front of the church. And it's interesting because I was speaking at a church yesterday because it's Black History Month and they had children at the front of the church reading their reports about various African-American historical figures. I congratulated the church for having their young people coming to the front of the room to speak, because I am clear that part of my formative years when I was having to do speeches and memorizing—because see at church, a lot of people could read their speeches, but in my family, that wasn't allowed. You had to learn your speech and say it by heart. That created a certain discipline around public speaking and around memorizing things that you have to say in public. That has really been instrumental to me probably to this day, not to mention the oratorical contests my mother had me in. But even before there were oratorical contests, there were these programs in the church where we had these speeches and different cantatas. It was a lot of activity in the church, vacation bible school in the summertime.

So church was an important part of our life. My grandfather and my grandmother, more than my mother, because my mother, sometimes she would go to church, sometimes

she didn't. She always made sure we were there, but my grandparents went to church every Sunday. And it was a very important part of my life, one, because my granddaddy saw the church as a very central part of our life and he was very active in many roles, from the Board of Trustees to the head of the Sunday school, Deacon Board, and a whole lot of active leadership roles in the church. But not only that, my granddaddy was the person, when he died a few years ago, I think it's about seven or eight years ago now, at his funeral, people talked about the fact that every plant that's on the grounds of the church was planted by my granddaddy. And it know it to be the truth because I was with him some of the times when he was doing that planting, because he loved horticulture, agriculture and all kinds of things like that.

My grandmother was the person who was on the United Methodist Women's Committee and traveled around to various Methodist women's conferences and meetings the whole time I was growing up. She was the person who would call the people in the church to have them know what to bring or to try to find out what they were going to bring to serve respite, the meal after the funeral, and that kind of thing. So church was real important for us growing up.

BB: You said a cantata, what's a cantata?

CB: Girl, the first time and only time I ever remember hearing that word when I young was at Christmas time and they called it a Christmas cantata. It was a musical program that was usually about the birth of Christ. I don't know if cantata means musical program or if it's a specific musical program about the birth of Jesus.

BB: So you said you were pretty young when the church integrated, became black and white?

CB: Oh yeah, very young. I don't remember anything about that, except that I can remember people talking about some of the meetings and stuff that they would go to were racially integrated at that point. But I don't remember anything significant about that.

BB: So probably in the 60s then, early—

CB: I would definitely say in the 60s, oh yeah.

BB: That'd be interesting to talk to some church elders about what that was like.

CB: Exactly. I don't remember a whole lot about the merger of the church, but I can tell you what I remember. Remember I told you that Uncle Joe was the vice president. Well, when I did the oral history interviews that I did, I interviewed the gentleman who was the president and he was the one telling me about Uncle Joe and his level of involvement and the fact that he was his vice president. What he talked about was a real resentment he had and that most African-Americans had who were involved in the union, when the merger of the two unions happened, the white union and the black union. He talked about how he never talked about it as a merger, but he talked about the elimination of the black union, because he said when that merger happened, they took down whatever the charter is for the black union and replaced it with this other one. And it was as if with that merger, a lot of leadership was eliminated in the black union and there was just a lot of loss that the black union experienced, that did not for him feel like that was an equal kind of partnership that was created. So for him, it wasn't a merger as much as it was an elimination of the black union.

BB: What was his name, the president?

CB: I can't remember. I want to say it's Reverend [Sturgess]—I could find out from my grandmother, but I can't remember his name. He was a minister and he passed away shortly…actually, most of the people I interviewed for that process are deceased now, with

the exception of my grandmother and Mrs. [Margaret] Brown, two people out of about ten or eleven people.

BB: Mrs. Brown?

CB: That's a neighbor of my grandmother who was interviewed during that process.

BB: Wow, we've got to figure out a way to help you get that transcribed and what to do with that.

BC: I know, absolutely. Well, I want to write a book about black leadership, because when you hear about the history of Reidsville, you don't very often hear about African-American leadership and to the extent that you do, it's usually this minister I was telling you about, but he's one of the few. Sometimes Rev. Kirby gets mentioned, but other than those two ministers--. I ended up hearing about a tremendous number of people and they are important people that I think that young people throughout Reidsville ought to know about, that adults ought to know about. And I have that oral history in those tapes and I just haven't had them transcribed, but I hold onto them because I know I want to write a book about that.

BB: That sounds so worthwhile and rich.

CB: Absolutely.

BB: Were you close to your paternal grandparents at all?

CB: Actually, I did not know anybody except my grandmother, my father's mother, and we never saw her growing up. We had a telephone relationship with her. I can remember her, literally, I can still remember her from those earliest years. I don't remember my father, but I very much remember my grandmother, his mother. I think that my memories primarily are from that period after he died and we moved back to New York for that brief time. I remember that she was Catholic, which was the first time I had known anything about

Catholicism. I can remember us going to her church and we would stop at this font, I think it's what they call it, but it's like a sink with nothing in it, but I would assume that it's holy water that is imaginary. (laughter) That's the impression I got. She would put her hand in and she would put the sign of the cross on our head. Then she would cross her chest. Then she would sit us on the back row of the church and she would genuflect, is the word I've discovered. All I know is she was stooping down and praying at it seemed like every pew. But I understand that's called genuflecting. (laughter) Anyway, then she'd go to the front and talk to the priest or somebody, I guess, sit up there and pray. And then we'd leave. That's the extent of what I remember, other than the fact that she cooked great waffles, she was sweet as candy, and she loved us to death.

When we were growing up, even though we did not ever go back to New York to see her, she never came to see us, we had a few times when she said she was coming to see us. And the house would get cleaned up immaculately and we would be pristine and we'd be waiting for her, and then we'd get a call that she wasn't coming. I don't ever really know what it was that kept her from actually coming, but she always sent these boxes of clothes, brand-new clothes for me and my two sisters. I never was clear that this woman wasn't rich, which is what was so conflicting for me about why we never saw her, because I'm figuring somebody that's rich enough to send us all these clothes and stuff ought to be in shape to be able to come see us. What I didn't know was that not only was she not rich, she was a domestic with various white folks. But I remember in particular one time she used to work for the owner of Macy's. So as the owner of Macy's, he had children who had clothes that even when they outgrew them, they were still like new. So I would assume that some of what we got were their hand-me-downs. But she also had access to brand-new things at Macy's at

a discount because she worked for this family. So it was an interesting revelation when we got older.

But she was actually declining in health and I was in my twenties and my sisters, I think we were all probably in our twenties and thirties, when her health declined and she started developing dementia. We had to go to New York and get her and bring her to North Carolina. I just literally in this brief period described the nature of our relationship growing up. Unfortunately, the reality is because that was the nature of our relationship and the fact that my father died when I was so young, I don't know any of my father's people, not a single one of his relatives other than his mother.

BB: Does that feel like a hole in your life?

CB: No, because I've had a very full life. At this point, when I understand the importance of roots and history, it is a curiosity in my life. I was able to ask her a number of questions and names of people. So I have some clues but no real concretes and I've not been able to explore it. But I was able to ask her some concrete names, some things about where she came from, so that I could explore that side of the family. But you know, I'm more inclined right now to document more fully that part of the family that I spent the majority of time with. But just for the fuller picture and the fuller context of who my family is, at least in terms of my mother and my father, I one day want to be able to explore it more deeply and kind of find out more about his family. The other thing is that I got that information from my father's mother at a time when I'm not clear that she wasn't developing dementia at that time. So I don't even know how accurate everything is that she gave me. But I'm assuming since dementia usually impacts more your short-term memory than your long-term memory, that a lot of what she gave me would be more inclined to be accurate.

BB: What's her name?

CB: Beatrice Oaks.

BB: Is she still alive?

CB: No, she passed away probably within a year or two of coming to North Carolina.

BB: Where in New York were you born? Is this the same place that your dad's family lived?

CB: I would say that I was born in Manhattan. I was, I was born in Manhattan. I know that when my grandmother was living, a large part of her life was in Harlem and that's where she was when we moved her to North Carolina for the first time.

BB: Your paternal grandmother?

CB: My paternal grandmother. My maternal grandparents are in Reidsville, in Rockingham County in Reidsville, North Carolina, where they have been in the same house as long as I've been here, forty-seven years, definitely more than forty-seven years, because I'm forty-seven and they were there when I was born.

BB: Wow, you can imagine the story Mrs. Oakes would have had about living and growing up in Harlem in the middle of the twentieth century?

CB: Well, you know what's interesting? She's from Georgia, but I can imagine the kind of stories she could have told about actually living there all those years. And she loved New York. I understand that she's from Georgia and I want to say a place called Peach Tree, Georgia, if there's such a place. But it seems like to me that's what she said, that she was from Peach Tree, Georgia.

BB: So what was your class background growing up?

CB: Working class and poor. And it's interesting, I always tell people my family--.

First of all, let me just be clear that I've come to understand that there are only two classes. There is a working class and there's poor; I mean, working class and there's owning class. You are either working class or owning class, because if you don't own the means of production, then you are working for somebody. If your ability to survive depends on working for somebody else, you're working class. I think it is a way of confusing the masses and the people who are in the working class by creating a middle class, which really is about income, which is about how much money you make. So to the extent that I ever use the term middle class at this point, I'm really talking about people who are more middle income, who are at the higher end of the working class. But they're working class nonetheless, because they can go in at any given point to a job and they can find out that they don't have a job, because they don't control the means of their work.

I often say that I certainly absolutely grew up working class and poor. But so many of my family members were more upper middle income, just by virtue of the fact that they either worked a lot of jobs and made good money, or they were educated and therefore had access to higher income jobs. My mother was the oldest of six. All six of my grandparents' children went to college. When I grew up, because all six of them went to college, I never knew that it was an option not to go to college. I understood that school wasn't finished until you finished college. Well, my mother dropped out because she married my father. My mother's brother, who was next to the youngest, dropped out after going a year at North Carolina Central University, and went to the Vietnam War.

But the other four not only attended college, but they all finished. So my mother and her younger brother were the only two who didn't finish. He did a year at North Carolina Central University; she did two at Bennett College. Both of them were smart as they could be

and could have finished, but because of life choices they made, they didn't. Because all of them finished college, they were all educators and they all, even though they weren't extravagant, I mean they didn't make enormous wages, they definitely made more money than the average worker in the community. That meant they had a lot of different privileges that were afforded them that people who made lower incomes did not.

My mother, who worked a lot of jobs that were what we now call "pink-collar ghetto jobs," secretary jobs with a funeral home, she was a kindergarten teacher, especially the first year that I went to kindergarten and I went to kindergarten right at five. So kindergarten teacher, what else did she do? I remember her working at one time at Sylvania and Chase Bag, which were plants. But it seems to me that she would go back and forth between small factory jobs and these pink-collar ghetto jobs, and then ultimately recognizing that she had to make the higher wages. Those kind of pink-collar ghetto jobs were not paying the kind of money that the factories were. So she ended up working for Fieldcrest Mills until she died actually.

BB: What is Fieldcrest Mills?

CB: Fieldcrest Mills is, I don't even know if it still exists; it probably doesn't exist. Actually, it may exist but it's outside, it has gone to another country. But they made spreads, towels, sheets, all those kind of bed linens. Actually I don't know, Fieldcrest may have even made rugs. But it was a textile plant that made blankets, spreads, sheets, and those kinds of bed linens and linens for your house.

BB: What did your mom do?

CB: She was a sewer. She sewed, I want to say, blanket finishing. That's exactly, she did the blanket finishing. So you know when you have a blanket that has that silky kind of

end on the bottom and on the top? I think that's what she did. But I know that she was real good at what she did, because they dealt with a lot of her stuff and all her different individual needs and her advocating for working folk because she made them a bunch of money, because of how fast she worked. She made production and above all the time. That's the stories that you would hear. And I'm saying that because I'm thinking about the fact that my mother was very hot natured. They would actually turn off the heat in her department so she would be comfortable to accommodate her when everybody else was around complaining about how cold it was in the plant, basically trying to accommodate her so she'd be comfortable, because she was being so productive.

BB: So do you think it's all about how productive she was or do you think she had some other leadership qualities that kind of made the bosses sort of defer—

CB: That's an interesting question. That's a very interesting question and I have no idea. I mean, I think it's a good assumption, but I also think that it really was about making her comfortable in her work spot. But it definitely could have been the other.

BB: She sounds like a fascinating woman.

CB: Honey, to say the least, to say the least. (laughter) And to be honest with you, I don't know how long it took me to figure it out, but I am my mother's child. So much of the activism that I exhibit grows right out of one, her sense of activism, but also I think it's two things. It's one, me being the oldest of these six children and I just think that the oldest child or children in families tend to be leaders because they are born into that role. But it is also a mother who didn't take no mess, who spoke her mind, and who believed that there was a certain way that you did things, but that you spoke up for yourself, and that you spoke up for other people who couldn't speak up for themselves. Now she was socializing me to do that

long before I had a clue. And it took a period of reflection as an adult to recognize all the places where those qualities were being instilled in me. Because I didn't know it was happening as I was growing up, even though as I grew up, I was exhibiting those things. And those were the things that she felt good about when I was doing them.

BB: Did you start working early?

CB: See, that's an interesting question, because the question assumes work outside of the house, I would assume, based on the way you asked it. But I did start working early. I started working at six years old, but I was working in the house. Because my mother was married and then my father died and then my stepfather left. Actually, the truth of the matter is they ended up separating because my stepfather, and now I'm hesitating, because I'm trying to figure out do I want to tell this? What the heck. My stepfather ended up killing somebody in a weekend, I want to say brawl, but I don't even know how to describe it, because nobody ever talked to me about it. We heard that he and this man got into some kind of conflict and he shot the man. He got arrested, ended up being incarcerated. He didn't get due process, so on a technicality he was released a year or two later. So it was during that period that they were separated and then they were considering this reconciliation when he ended up getting killed in a totally unrelated incident.

But from the time I was a little girl, I used to start out standing on the stove to help wash dishes or to cook. I just always was doing stuff and whenever I would do it, it would become my job. Because I was the oldest of six and these other siblings were coming along, I was helping to take care of my siblings. So when you asked the question did I work when I was younger, I worked inside the house to help supplement the kind of work that my mother had to do outside of the home as a working mother and part of the time, a single mother, to

make sure things ran at home as I got older and she could work outside of the house and she didn't have to worry about a babysitter because I was taking care of things at home.

But my first real paid job was one that I was dying to have as a babysitter, as a teenager, just to get out of the house and just to be able to have a different place to hang out. I mean, I loved babysitting and my girlfriends and I used to baby-sit in some of the same families and then we'd have fun together. But my first paid job outside of the house was probably the summer after, the first real paid job outside of babysitting— well, I did have a summer job. I want to say probably the summer after my senior year or maybe my junior year in high school, when I worked one of those teenager youth job programs where I actually provided transportation and help at a senior site where they would go for lunchtime meals. So there's these places where you have public-funded feeding sites, where seniors come together as a way to interact with each other and be able to get food. And then you also deliver some of these meals to homebound seniors. Anyway, I would provide transportation. I would help provide the meal and then help with cleanup and help take people back. So that was one of my first paid jobs. None of those jobs would I assume in retrospect paid enough money for me to be really helping out. Maybe it might have helped me get some stuff on my own that my mama wouldn't have had to get. But frankly, I don't think I made a whole lot of money and it was just something to just kind of develop a work ethic in me, probably.

I tell you what though, for a lot of years, since I was doing this work around workers' rights, workers' health and safety kind of issues, I didn't remember that I was a former textile worker. I'm telling you that that was a very compelling experience in my life, because the summer after my freshman year in college, a girlfriend of mine and I, Stephanie Roberts, she's Stephanie Spellman now, but Stephanie Roberts and I worked at this textile plant. She

had attended Saint Aug[ustine] University and I was at Bennett College, and when we came back home, we both knew we needed a summer job. So we went to, I can't remember the name of it, but it was a textile plant up in Martinsville, Virginia. And Martinsville, Virginia is literally, at certain points in Eden, because Eden borders Virginia, there are certain places in Eden where you can cross the street in Eden and be in Virginia. And Martinsville is probably fifteen, twenty minutes up the street from Eden. Anyway, that was the only place that we could go and find a job that summer.

I'll never forget walking in that plant. First of all, we were so excited that we were going to get this job that it was almost like we could have been doing anything and we would have taken it. When we got in there, I remember seeing all of these rows and rows of sewing machines with women working at them. There were elderly white and elderly black women who had been working there like twenty and thirty years. These women were sewing so fast that literally, they moved so fast you could almost not distinguish their features. They would bzzz, bzzz, bzzzz, just buzzing through.

What we were doing in this plant was that we sewed warm-up clothes. So there was a warm-up jacket, let's say that it was a warm-up jacket like this. There was a cuff on the sleeves of each jacket. They were nylon warm-up suits. Now what I specifically had to do in my department was you had to do twenty-two bundles a day. Each bundle of jackets that you had to do had twelve jackets in it. So whatever twelve times twenty-two, that's how many jackets. But in addition to having to sew these jackets, you had cuffs for each one. So you had a sleeve where you had to sew the sleeve up the side, then you had to sew the cuff up the side, then you had to attach the cuff one way, flip it over—no actually, you had to sew the cuff, flip it inside-out, put it in there, sew it on here, flip it back out, and then you had to

attach it to the jacket. So you got one thing putting the seam in the cuff, folding it, sewing the sleeve, attaching it here; so that's three different functions you have to do and the fourth function is to put it in the sleeve of the jacket. Then you've got that to do on both sides of the jacket.

All of that is twenty-two bundles, twelve jackets a day, two cuffs on each jacket. So that's a lot of action and this is what you had to do in eight hours to make rate. That was to make the minimum amount. Then to make any money above that, you had to do more jackets than that. I can remember seeing folks moving so fast, who had been there so long that they were setting the standard. So you coming in fresh off the street, sometimes you may not know how to sew. Well, I did know how to sew, but I mean sewing for yourself for leisure and sewing for production in a factory is two different things.

I can remember the kind of injuries that people experienced. One day I heard this woman screaming to the top of her lungs. What had happened was that she was moving so fast, she sewed her hand and the needle had gotten stuck in her hand. There was another time when this guy had gotten cut because they not only did the sewing of the jackets, you had these huge, huge machines with these sharp blades on it where you cut the fabric. So these jackets that we're sewing, somebody's cutting them out over here with these huge machines. You're cutting out probably hundreds of jackets at one time by following the guide and using this huge blade. So somebody got cut real bad one day on that.

It's interesting because I actually had lived in Lexington, Kentucky from '86 to '90 and then I came back and started working with Southerners for Economic Justice as a temporary worker taking Leah Wise's place. She was the director and she was taking a six-month sabbatical—Charles Bannerman Fellowship, that's what it was. The Charles

Bannerman Fellowship is what she had. Remember I was saying that I won't apply for that fellowship and I couldn't think of the name of it? It was the Charles Bannerman Fellowship, because she was going to take a six-month sabbatical and they needed a temporary director. So that's how I ended up at Southerners for Economic Justice.

BB: Hang on. Let me flip the tape, okay?

CB: Okay.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

BB: Okay, so while Leah Wise was on sabbatical—

CB: So while she was on sabbatical, I ended up coming—now I actually have to back up, because I want you to understand why I was back in Reidsville in the first place and how interesting it is to me that I ended up at an organization that was working on workers' rights, workers' health and safety, and poor people's issues and working class people's issues. I actually had been working in Lexington, Kentucky. The organization that I was working for was relocating to Georgia and in the process of that relocation, I also ended up applying for a fellowship with the Kellogg Foundation, received the fellowship, and decided that while I was pursuing the fellowship, I also wanted to start my own non-profit in North Carolina because it was my experience with that organization that I started understanding something about this issue of community organizing.

BB: Let me get my time line straight. So this is after the factory?

CB: After the factory, because see the factory—

BB: You were in high school.

CB: Okay the factory, I'm in the summer after my freshman year in college.

BB: Oh, college, okay.

CB: So the summer after my freshman year in college, I end up going back to college. And actually, if I finish that story, you can bring me back to all of these things I'm talking about. So to finish the story about the factory, I worked there the summer after my freshman year. While I am in this factory, these people are getting injured. I'm clear when I go to get this job, I'm going back to college. But to get the job, I had to tell them I was not going back to college. If for some reason I had not planned to go back to college, I would have decided to go back to college after this experience. But I came in understanding and lying, readily lying to say, because I needed the job and I knew they wouldn't give it to me if I said I was going back. So I said that I'm not going back to college.

BB: A summer job is what—

CB: A summer job was what I wanted. They wanted a permanent employee. But I'm sitting there and I'm recognizing how grueling this work is, how much these people in management don't respect the folk that work there, and so I'm back there complaining, "I can't wait until school starts. I am not thinking about this." So the workers who are around me, who see it as their lot in life and resent the fact that I'm in here on a temporary basis or that I even have another choice, they tell management. So management calls me in, because for a period of time when you start, they know you're not going to be able to make rates. You're not going to be able to meet this twenty-two-bundle-a-day rate. So they're paying you a set amount that you're really not earning. It's kind of like a training wage, I guess. Anyway, they tell me after a few weeks that I have to make rates by the end of that week.

First of all, they ask me, “Are you going back to college?” “Oh no, I’m not going back to college.” They said, “Are you sure you’re not going back to college?” I said, “No, I’m not going back to college. I didn’t like school.” So then they say, “Well, you know you’ve been here for a couple of weeks and you haven’t made rates, but by the end of the week, you need to make twenty-two bundles.” So I say, “Okay.” So I go back and I know immediately that I’ve got to start saving tickets, which is against the rules. So the way that they tell that you have done twenty-two bundles is every bundle is tied together and has a ticket on it. You have to take that ticket off and tape it on your sheet for that day. So I might sew fast and I may get fifteen bundles a day, but I’m only going to turn in thirteen so I can keep two tickets for the next day. They have no way of knowing whether or not I’m keeping tickets. If they monitor it closely they’ll know, but if they’re not monitoring it closely--. So I’m saving two tickets a day, two or three tickets the next day, so when I do fifteen bundles on Friday, I got those fifteen bundles’ tickets plus the ones I’ve been saving for days. So on that Friday, I turned in twenty-two so I could get a few more weeks to work for them, maybe making rates, maybe not. But at least I made it on the day that they were going to check me. So I mean, my thing is that I realized that the way that--.

So I tell you that experience, even without me knowing it, taught me a lot about the psychology of somebody working in a plant who’s been treated like a dog. You get treated a certain kind of way and you understand that you better outsmart them or you’re going to be unemployed. That ended up being something I did for most of that summer, but I ended up leaving before the summer was over and moving in with my grandmother before I went back to college. It just was a summer job that ended up teaching me a whole lot.

BB: Why’d you leave?

CB: Just conflict at home, just really wanting to be with my grandmother, where I knew that things would be a lot less conflictual and I'd be going back to school shortly thereafter. So, go ahead.

BB: Do you remember what the training wage amount was, about how much it was?

CB: No girl, I don't have a clue, but it was minimum wage, whatever minimum wage was that year. So it would have been in—when was it? Because see, I'm telling you that it essentially functioned as a training wage since you were making the minimum even though you weren't earning it. So I'm saying that once you make rates and above, then that becomes something more than just that minimum wage.

BB: And you don't remember the name of the factory?

CB: If I think about it long enough, but I can probably call my sister and ask her.

BB: I'll get back to you about it.

CB: Yeah, do. But anyway, I was telling you about that and I was just saying that my later work with Southerners for Economic Justice, at a time when it wasn't even in my head that I was a former textile worker, it was interesting that I was doing this work, this activist kind of work. Well, I was saying to you that I had worked in Kentucky from '86 to '90. My mother died in March of '86. In August of '86—and this is significantly after I finished undergrad and graduate, because I went on to get a masters at UNC-G [Greensboro] from '81 to '83. So between '83 and '86, I was working in the battered women's movement in a battered women's shelter and it was in '86 that I was really burnt out in working in the battered women's movement and working directly in the shelter doing direct service.

I was on the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence Board of Directors. While I was on that board, I knew a woman named Susan Pharr, who was working in a

women's project down in Little Rock, Arkansas, and I said to her, "I am really burnt out. I need a job doing something else." Well, she was serving on the Board of Directors of Southeast Women's Employment Coalition and because she was serving on that Board of Directors, she was aware that they were trying to hire a program director and she told me about that job and suggested that I interview for it. So it was that suggestion that led me to be in Kentucky from '86 to '90.

During that period was, I think, the first time I understood or heard about community organizing. And I thought it was the best thing since sliced bread and I certainly thought Reidsville in Rockingham County could use it. So it was in '90 when I was making a decision to relocate to North Carolina to start some kind of community organizing group, do some kind of organizing work, that I came back. But I didn't think about, first of all, I didn't have enough understanding of organizational development to know the kind of lag time that would exist trying to build this organization in '90 when I came home. So when I started thinking about my car payment coming due, I was thinking, "I need a job while I think about how to build this organization, what it's going to focus on and what I can do to make this organization happen."

Well, within days of getting home, Christina Davis McCoy, who's a real good friend of mine at this point, but somebody I didn't even really know that well at that time, Christina called me and she said, "Cynthia, SEJ is looking for an executive director. I think you should interview for it." So at her suggestion, I ended up applying to SEJ and got the job. But it really was about a job to make an income while I finished up my fellowship with Kellogg and while I tried to figure out what would it take for me to build an organization to do community organizing in North Carolina.

BB: So can we back way up for a little bit?

CB: Yeah, because I just fast forwarded through a whole—

BB: Like a decade. (laughter)

CB: I know, right, because everything felt connected to each other, you know. But anyway, yeah, definitely back me up.

BB: All right, so leaving high school, what was the name of your high school? I forgot to ask.

CB: Morehead Senior High School.

BB: Morehead Senior High School, and that was in Reidsville.

CB: That was in Eden.

BB: Oh, Eden, okay.

CB: Because I was in Reidsville in the first through the eighth grade. Then I began the ninth grade in Eden when my mother bought a house to be closer to the plant where she worked. Because even though we were living in Reidsville, she was commuting to Eden every day, which was exactly ten miles away. When transportation got bad, she would literally have to walk to work. And on her way to work, she might catch a ride, but she started out walking unless she could get a ride, and would be walking that ten miles to get to the plant. So ultimately, when she got enough money to buy a house, she bought one in the town where she was working, which was really devastating, if I might tell you. Because I loved the ground my grandparents walked on and still love the ground my grandmother walks on, and the idea that we would live in a town that was not a town where my grandparents lived was really devastating to me.

You know what? I know this has nothing to do with what you were going to ask me (laughter), but I want to tell you a little bit about the impact of that move on me personally, because I grew up in a town where everybody knew my family, because my grandparents were so well-known and so popular, not just in the black community, but in the black and the white community, in part because in the white community—I'm not talking about the working-class white community—because my grandmother being a domestic and my grandfather working in American Tobacco Factory, it was like they knew all the white big shots in town. All of them knew them and respected them, I mean to the extent that you respect people who are domestic workers.

And I guess it's even more than that, because to be honest with you, I see white folks now and it trips me out when they see my grandparents and they greet them and talk to them on the street because they really like them. I'm talking about people like—she talks about this banker and this is a weird dynamic for me, given the kind of resentment I have about white supremacy and about the behavior and attitudes of some small-town white people, particularly when you look at the fact that a lot of the people in Rockingham County are people who are big supporters of Jesse Helms (a five-term Republican Senator from North Carolina).

This is also the town, though, where my aunt was elected to the school board as the first black female to the school board. Her name is Lucy Bolden. She was selected as the first African-American to the school board in Rockingham County. And in part, that success of her selection wasn't just, even though she had the educational background, the character, the level of social accomplishment and professional accomplishment, it was in part because my grandparents were so plugged into the white community because of their involvement with

the country club in town, their involvement with American Tobacco Factory, and their relationship to people who my grandmother had done domestic work for. Because those folks ended up being very prominent people, whenever my grandparents signed their name at the bottom of a letter and they saw that name, it was enough for them to know that it was something that was good that they should support. So that was an interesting thing, but oh girl, I'm running around.

BB: So the move—

CB: So the move. So bear in mind that I'm saying that I live in a town where all the black folk in town--. The two biggest churches in the black community in Reidsville are First Baptist Church and St. Paul United Methodist Church, at that time St. Paul Methodist Church. Both of these churches are where I would say the majority of the black folks in town back in those days attended. There were other churches that were smaller, but I would say those were the two largest. So because my grandmother grew up in that church and my grandfather grew up in the Methodist Church, even though my grandmother joined the Methodist Church after she and my grandfather married, the two of them were just very highly respected in town. There was nowhere that you went where somebody didn't know you or know somebody connected to you. Therefore, there was a certain expectation they had of you in terms of your ability to accomplish and just their confidence in your ability to do things.

But then we moved to Eden where nobody knew us, in a school system that was racist to the core, where they really, I mean, I'm going to tell you the honest-to-God truth. I went to a high school where nobody in the counseling department ever said a word to me about college. If it had not been that my aunts and uncles, college-educated aunts and uncles said to

me, “When are you taking the SAT? Where have you done any applications for school?,” blah blah blah, it wouldn’t have happened or I would have ended up doing stuff in a delayed manner. But worse than that, they talked about the—I went to school in Eden in the ninth grade, so in the ninth grade when I got there, I overheard my mother say that if I didn’t adjust well that I could go back and live in Reidsville at my grandparents. Well, for a child who cherished the ground her grandparents walked on, that’s all I needed to hear. So I went there in the ninth grade falling asleep in class. I would literally go to my classroom and I would put my head on my desk and I would go to sleep.

BB: And this is Morehead?

CB: No, actually I haven’t made it to Morehead yet.

BB: Oh, okay.

CB: I go into Eden in James R. Holmes Junior High. So I come to Eden in junior high. In the ninth grade, this is the last year of junior high and then I’m over to the high school, tenth through the twelfth. But in that grade is where I started falling asleep in class because I’m thinking this is my way back to my grandmother’s. After I have messed up my grade point average and made some major mistakes in my grades, nobody waking me up until class is over because their expectation is zero of me.

Now, what I’m always struck by when I think about this in retrospect is why is it that nobody, one, cared enough or was curious enough about what kind of student is this that has come into this school and just keeps going to sleep? The assumption is I’m a trifling student who doesn’t accomplish anything, who is not a good student. So if she’s sleeping, then let her sleep. “I don’t care whether she accomplishes or not.” This is in a school where not only do people not know me, but these are mostly white teachers. All of the teachers that I was

having when I was in Reidsville were black teachers. So I'm looking that there's a relationship between the race of these people who teach me and the expectation, as well as the relationship of these people to the rest of the people in my family and their expectation of me and my performance.

So I'm in school with these folks letting me sleep. My grades are slacking off. Nobody's looked to see that I'm an A/B student and that something's got to be wrong with me for me to be coming to class sleeping and not doing my work. So in addition to that decline in my grades, I start to hear my mother talking to somebody saying, "Well, if she can't adjust here, then when she goes off to school, she'll be like…" and they name a relative who went to college and couldn't adjust to being in college and came back home. "So when she goes to school, we want her to be able to make it. So we're not going to let her go to Reidsville." And first of all, I'm amazed again in retrospect, that I heard both of these conversations, because they both directly impacted my understanding about my choices. I got a choice that if I don't do well, I can go back and so I'm not going to do well. I got no choice about going back, because they're going to make me stay here either way. And now, I've got to hustle and get my grades together.

But I have to say that one of the most disappointing things for me in high school, even though I began to improve my grades in the tenth grade—because I've already ruined the ninth grade. I didn't flunk, I wasn't doing that bad, but I was doing bad enough that my grade point average, once averaged with the ninth grade, ended up keeping me out of the National Honor Society. Now when you're that young, you don't know that who cares. Back then I was devastated, because I knew I was smart enough to be in there and that there was no way I could get in there because I had messed up my grade point average. But that is the

kind of impact that people outside of me, and I mean literally, don't know that that move had an impact on me in that kind of way.

Well, there were other kind of emotional issues too, because there was a way that if you wanted to run away from home, you had to walk ten miles versus a half a mile around the corner to your grandmother's. So I had a lot of turbulent stuff that was going on too with me in terms of being the oldest of six children and having conflict with my mother on occasion because of the fact that sometimes I was like her helpmate, in terms of helping to rear the children, and sometimes she was my mama, and sometimes we were more like sisters. That's a very difficult conflictual kind of relationship to be in with a parent that goes up and down. So anyway, I know you asked me something else totally different, but I don't know, when you said something about moving, that just opened up a whole 'nother thing. When you think about it in retrospect, you begin to recognize how those things shape you. So anyway, did you forget what you were going to ask?

BB: No, I've got my little list.

CB: Okay. (laughter)

BB: So tenth through twelfth grade at Morehead.

CB: Right.

BB: Which was also in Eden, so you did stay.

CB: Yes.

BB: And you did a lot better.

CB: Yes.

BB: Were you involved in anything political in your high school years?

CB: Nothing real political, but I'm going to tell you one thing that I remember, in part because everybody who knows me, every time they see me and we reflect on high school, this is one of the things that I remember. There are a couple of things I remember, not political, but being an outspoken leader in the school, despite the fact that I was the oldest of six and therefore at home a lot of the time. Like I wasn't real active in school stuff like school clubs and that kind of thing, because I had to get home to help take care of my sisters and brothers. But I remember a movie being shown and I can't remember the name of the movie. But it was a movie that ticked off racial conflict in schools all over the place. It was something that was highly racially charged. I remember the next day standing outside the cafeteria and people running, I mean, black folks were so infuriated, they were getting into fights with whites all over the schools. There was all this turbulence in the school and people were running here and there and yonder.

I just remember standing there, hearing somebody saying, "I don't know what's going on, but I'm going. Come on." And I just ended up being one of the leaders in the school who ended up being called in by the principal to help squelch the conflict. We ended up having an assembly where I was the main speaker. People were saying to me when I graduated how much they appreciated the role that I played, adults and the students. Because one of the things I was saying was that, "I understand people's anger, but we shouldn't be just getting into these fights just because it's something popular to do and because everybody's doing it." I just remember thinking how bizarre it was that I actually heard people saying that they were just going to fight just because other people were, and that that wasn't connected to anything but a bunch of anger and mob mentality. I'm sure I didn't use that word back then, but that's basically what I remember describing.

Anyway, that's the kind of stuff that I was involved in. So even though I didn't have the academic achievement that I wanted, it was clear to me that I had a voice that people would listen to in high school. It was never anything that was politically grounded. It wasn't anything that had any analysis to it. It just was common sense stuff to me. I wasn't in any organized group doing it. It really was about just expressing a perspective that people listened to.

BB: Do you remember at all what that movie was about?

CB: I want to tell you that it probably—I don't know. I can visualize some stuff, but I just remember it was racial tension in the South. Which one of those movies it would have been, I don't have a clue, because you know you've seen a million of them at this point. (laughter) And I remember probably, I want to say a lynching or a killing of a high school student, but it was something along those lines. But I don't remember. If we went back to that year, we probably could figure it out, but I don't know.

BB: So what was involved in deciding to go to Bennett College? It was a women's college, right?

CB: Bennett College was a family tradition. My grandfather's father went to Bennett when it was coed. My mother and all her sisters went to Bennett. My cousins went to Bennett. And so it just was a family tradition. And the interesting thing is I didn't want to go. I was determined. I even said something as ignorant as the fact that only losers go to Bennett. But when I said that, I was just as dumb—you know when you're young, you are foolish. I didn't even think when I said that. I was just looking at these really homely women, looked like homely women in this yearbook, the yearbook my mama was probably in or my aunt was in. But I wasn't thinking about the fact that if you say that, that means you're talking

about your family members. All I could think about was I was just saying something trite and dismissive because I didn't want to go. Because I really wanted to go to Howard University or Johnson C. Smith [College]. But honey, I tell you Bennett College was the most powerful and awesome experience of my life. It was a wonderful, wonderful experience and I have such pride in having been a Bennett Belle and continuing a family tradition of attending that college. So it's funny. You just think about how silly you are when you're young and how much you think you know.

The funny thing is that I think I applied to Howard and Johnson C. Smith and I was waiting to hear from them and they had a college fair in high school and I happened to go. Now while the counseling office never told me anything about college, they had a school fair that everybody attended. So what I knew about different colleges, I learned from that. And I told my mom I seen one of our close family friends who attended church with us at the college fair, because she worked in recruitment at Bennett College. Mama said, "I want you to apply to Bennett." I said, "But I don't want to go to Bennett." She said, "Just apply and see if you get accepted." And I'll never forget it as long as I am black, breathing, and alive. My mother was going to work at Fieldcrest Mills on second shift. The mail came in that day and my acceptance letter to Bennett came. She opened it, she read it, she got dressed to go to work, she was on her way out the door, and she said, "You got accepted to Bennett. You're going," and threw the acceptance letter to me and walked out the door. There was no discussion. There was going to be no discussion. And I was denying I was going to Bennett until the day she left me there on the first day of college and she was depositing me in my dorm. (laughter) "I ain't going to Bennett." But God, I loved Bennett! So it wasn't like I had a choice. That's the bottom line answer. (laughter)

BB: Why'd you choose to study political science?

CB: You know, there's almost nothing that I've ever studied that was a conscious choice on my own. Somebody said to me, "What do you plan to be when you grow up? What do you want to do when you graduate?" I said, "I want to be in Congress." So when I said I wanted to be in Congress, she said, "Well, a good thing to study would be political science." That's how I ended up studying political science. And I didn't have a clue, I didn't have a clue about really what politics was about and that it really probably almost didn't matter what I studied in terms of trying to pursue politics. But somebody said political science would be a good thing to do. That's how I majored in political science. When I did my undergraduate internship at the Human Relations Commission, I said I wanted to be in Congress and the person said, "Well, you should get a masters in public affairs." She also was encouraging me to go to law school and thought that a public affairs degree and a law degree together would make a good educational foundation for somebody who's pursuing Congress and public life. So once again, she said public administration, I had done political science, I saw the connection, "Cool, I'll do it." I later discovered that I did not want to be in law. I mean, that was just not my thing. And I also began to understand how politics really work and base building and money in politics and I mean, early on, before I understood it in the way that I do now, but I just started understanding--.

You know, I'll tell you what happened. I was in graduate school, finished graduate school, and I started working in a battered women's shelter. As a result of nobody wanting to attend the Domestic Violence Association meeting, I ended up going to this statewide Domestic Violence Association meeting to represent the agency where I was working in the battered women's shelter. Which I started working in, by the way, because while I was in

grad school, I worked as a volunteer in that very same shelter. Once I finished my masters, I got hired as assistant director. So in that role as assistant director of the battered women's shelter, I went to a meeting and they started talking about changing the association into a coalition. At the time, I didn't have a clue what the difference was really, but it was like a professional association versus this coalition of activists doing more of an activist agenda. While I was involved in that coalition, though, I ended up being elected to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. So I co-chaired the state coalition and represented North Carolina in the national coalition.

BB: So this is about what year?

CB: This is '83—

BB: To '86.

CB: To '86, yeah. Actually, I go in all these circles that explain all these different connections. I'm trying to figure out the point I was trying to make when I got into this coalition. What was the last question you asked me? Because you asked me something about Bennett and then I went off on all of this.

BB: Well, you were talking about why did you choose political science, why you chose your public affairs.

CB: Oh, I started telling you about how I ended up really understanding about politics—that had nothing to do with the masters in public affairs or the political science degree. While I was in the State Coalition Against Domestic Violence, there was an effort on the part of the dispute settlement centers throughout North Carolina to get the courts to transfer domestic violence cases out of the courts, to relieve the pressure on the courts, into dispute settlement centers, which would have increased their workload, but it would have

devastated the lives of women who were being battered. Because what we understood in the Domestic Violence Coalition was that for people to be in a dispute resolution process, they had to have equal power, and in a relationship where somebody's battering the other person, they don't have equal power. The other thing was that a dispute resolution is not legally binding and so if two people decide not to continue to abide by the agreement, then who would be at the disadvantage but the woman who was already being abused?

So at the very last minute, we found out that this legislation was being proposed and so a lot of us who were in the Domestic Violence Coalition went over to Raleigh to participate in the subcommittee where this new law was being discussed. Once we learned that the dispute settlement center wanted to do this and we were opposed to it, we came to be on record, to provide testimony in a public hearing that they were having that day. So we get over there and were able to squelch it.

But this is the first time that I remember being in the state legislature when I wasn't on a tour with a high school class, and that I could see all these representatives running around like chickens with their heads cut off, making major decisions about stuff they don't know very much about. The very fact that they were contemplating taking these cases and putting them in dispute settlement centers was so bizarre to me, that that really emphasized to me how a lot of decisions end up getting made, because one person supports something because somebody else says, "If you support this, I'll support this." There's not a lot of real integrity, in my mind, going into this decision-making. So I actually got very disillusioned about electoral politics and decided that I wasn't interested in it at all, and that I really just wanted to stick with being a community activist to help people be better informed at the base about what was happening in electoral circles, so that they could then participate in a

meaningful way. Because what that experience taught me was if you're not here to speak for yourself, you don't end up with your interests being met.

So it was a real life experience with elected officials at the state level that started me doubting whether or not I wanted to be a part of that process. It was over time that I started to realize that it wasn't an either/or situation. People at the grassroots level need to be engaged in pressing the people who they elect to be accountable around the issues that they're concerned about. But you also need good people in those elective offices to be able to get access to that process and to know what's happening inside of it, whether it's at the local to the federal level.

BB: So let me back up a little bit. Do you remember the bill number?

CB: Girl, you have got--. It was a subcommittee and I don't know. I would assume that it was in the House because it starts out in the House unless--. So it was probably in the House, I don't remember, but that would probably be easy enough to find. But then again, the fact that it didn't get out of committee means that you may not be able to track it down. I just don't know.

BB: Why did you decide to first volunteer at that domestic violence shelter?

CB: That's a very good question. This is so wild because it really was this intellectual approach to politics. I don't know why at the time that I felt like elected officials didn't have a clear sense about the issues facing people in community, even before the experience I just described. I don't know that I as much felt people were not plugged in. I think that my thinking was if I'm going to represent people in Congress—I had totally bypassed local and state election processes. And the Congress thing, I tell people I think grew from my earliest years with my grandfather watching the news and knowing about the Civil Rights Act of

1964 being decided in Congress. So somewhere I think back in those days that I did pursue being in Congress, where important decisions that affect black people happen, is where that seed got planted. I ain't even thinking about the possibility of getting elected and working my way through the ranks. I'm just thinking this is an important place to be. So I am thinking that I am going to one day be in elected office. I need to be clear about the issues facing the community. So one of the best ways in my mind, at that time, to do that was to be a volunteer.

So I went to the volunteer center and some bright person who sat and interviewed me, talked about my interests and blah blah blah. I don't have a clue what I said to them, but they sent me two places as a result of that conversation. One was to a crisis day care nursery where parents who didn't have the resources to get childcare, but needed the respite from their children during the day, could drop off their children for free crisis intervention, so they could help them out. Then the second was the battered women's shelter. Well, it was just too chaotic and too much going on at the crisis day care nursery, even though the crisis day care nursery was directly connected to the shelter, because the children in the shelter could also be dropped for free daycare while parents pursued housing and education and that kind of thing, and trying to find a job.

BB: Both in Eden?

CB: No, both of these are in Greensboro. I'm in grad school at UNC-G at this point.

BB: Oh, I'm sorry. So this is not college anymore.

CB: I'm in '81.

BB: So your first volunteer with the shelter was actually in grad school, not college?

CB: In grad school, yes.

BB: Okay, thanks.

CB: I'm in grad school. I'm in probably the last year of grad school and I am living in Greensboro off-campus. I'm pursuing this conscious decision. I'm mean, there's nothing methodical or educational—what is it when it's in your head? Intellectual exercise. In some ways, this preparation is an intellectual exercise in preparing myself to be an elected official, knowing more about the community. So like I said, they send me to the crisis nursery and they send me to the shelter. The sister who was in the shelter was so awesome. Her name was Cheryl Cooper. Cheryl could do ten things at one time. She multitasked in a way that multitasks don't even intend to describe. She could do three or four things at one time and she loved working in that shelter. She inspired me to want to work there and so that's where I did my volunteer experience. Then after I did my volunteer experience, the assistant director's position came open and I applied for it and got it, right as I was coming out of grad school.

BB: And you were there as assistant director for how long?

CB: I would say since I got it right in '83, just as I got out of grad school, it was probably only for about a year, a year and a half. Because right after that, I became the director of a shelter over in High Point, North Carolina, right outside of Greensboro in the same county. I worked there until '86 when I went to Kentucky.

BB: So that's the first time I heard you refer to yourself as an activist was in graduate school when you started getting involved. Is that when you really sort of—

CB: I probably never would have described myself as an activist up until I came to Durham, but I really was, because that--. You know, it's interesting because I'll tell you what I started to understand during that period. When I was working in the non-profit, which was a

United Way agency, I always felt a sense of conflict, because there was such a disempowering way of working with battered women through those United Way agencies that I ended up having verified as a problem, or I had a consciousness about why I found it problematic once I was in the state and national coalition. More the national than the state, because there were real conversations that were happening within the state and national coalition about people having the power to participate in being advocates for their own interests. That was when the first notion of people being their own advocates, participating in addressing their own oppression, so that in a United Way direct service kind of way, this notion of battered women being treated as something that's broken and they're the problem, somehow they're in these battered women's shelters and they can't go to the door and answer the door; they don't get the jobs working in the shelter programs; they're not being recruited to serve in these direct service agencies' Board of Directors because they're looking for the junior-leaguer types to be on the board. They're looking for people who can access money and there's no real consciousness at that level, in those kinds of agencies, about the primary central role that battered women as the victims of this violence [have] in being the leaders of a movement to challenge this violence.

It was during that period that I begin to understand this notion of activism as a way to challenge the status quo, where you're not just trying to make nice and provide a service to battered women, but you're trying to change the conditions that are contributing to the violence in women's lives. I was emerging as an activist in this battered women's movement. And the thing that I really appreciate about that period of my life, it was also during this time that I met Susan Pharr and other activists in the western part of the country and the northern part of the country, where they were talking about the relationship of women's oppression

and the economy and race and class and homophobia. I mean, my God, that was first time I even knew that there was a term called homophobia. I tell people the story about the fact that back in those days, when I first heard of people being homosexual or gay, I really had heard only those terms in the slang terms, you know, fag or gay—or not gay; I know I hadn't heard the term gay—fag and some other more disparaging terms, but usually in whispers. Actually, it was more like "sweet", "they sweet," or people would shake their hand, you know, as if to indicate somebody's who gay.

So it was real interesting to be in a setting like in the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. I'll never forget, my very first meeting was in California and I facilitated a meeting where the women of color---. First of all, coming from North Carolina, when you say a "women of color" caucus, I was going to a women of color caucus that only had black women in it. There were Native American women, probably an emerging population of Latino women, but not very many, but at least Native American or Latino women who could have been a part of it, but it was primarily African-American. So I wasn't even thinking in terms of other ethnic groups.

When I went to my first national meeting, first of all, I walked in there and there were people who looked like they were white, who I ultimately learned were Native American. There were people in there who were Asian, Caribbean, Latino, I mean every rainbow of woman of color that you can imagine. I was absolutely amazed. The biggest thing was these women that looked like white women and I'm trying to say, "Okay, now I'm a little southern, ignorant girl at my first national meeting." And I'm saying, "What do 'women of color' mean and who can I ask without sounding real retarded?" Then I discovered that these women are Native American and then I'm like, "Okay, I'm with you now. I got that." So that

first meeting, I was tapped to be the facilitator. The reason I was tapped was because I didn't have any investment in anybody and I had no connections. So I could be much more objective. The focus of the meeting, the first women of color meeting I attend, was women of color who feel alienated in the women of color caucus because of homophobia and who feel alienated in the lesbian caucus because of racism. And the women of color caucus took that up in there.

BB: So this is the first national meeting of the NC Coalition Against Domestic Violence?

CB: The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

BB: Okay, the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. In what year was that and what city?

CB: That was in Vero Beach—wait a minute, hold on, because Vero Beach is in Florida. This was in one of those places that's got a "V" at the beginning and "beach" at the end, but it's in California. I want to say Vero Beach, California. It may be. But anyway, it's in California and it's my first national meeting and it's the first time that I'm learning about what the full range of what women of color can mean, the power of women being in women-only space, the consciousness around issues facing lesbians and lesbians of color in particular, and issues related to homophobia and privilege of heterosexuals in this society.

To be honest with you, I'll tell you another thing because see, since this about activism, I mean I'm really having an opportunity to reflect in this conversation on the kinds of things that have shaped who I am as a leader. One of the other things that happened as a part of this experience was I saw for the first time during this period the power of the Right, that was nowhere near as powerful as it is now, but it was emerging right at that time. Phyllis

Schlafly, I don't know if you've ever heard of her, Phyllis Schlafly and the Eagle Forum. The Eagle Forum was a right-wing, white women's organization that was intent on undermining the work of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. That's the only way I can describe it.

As my memory serves, I remember that the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence had been awarded a grant by the Department of Justice to publish a directory of all the shelters in the country and to initiate its first 1-800 free phone line to call in, a hotline from all over the country. There were a number of other kind of projects that we were getting, but the grant was almost a million dollars. It was six hundred and some thousand dollars, well maybe a little over half a million. Six hundred and some thousand dollars, that was more than I had ever heard of in a grant, because I was used to much smaller grants. What had happened was—

BB: You've got to hold on. I've got to flip it, okay.

CB: As long as you stay with Phyllis Schlafly. No, I can remember.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

START OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

BB: All right, so tape 2, side A. We're back and you were telling the story of you got the big grant, trying to get this directory of shelters done.

CB: Okay, so first of all, we had received this grant. We had all these things that were described that we were going to do as a national coalition. What happened was Phyllis Schlafly and the Eagle Forum began to blast the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence as men-hating lesbians who were in existence to break up families. I don't know all of the critique, but that was the thing I remember. There were articles in like major

newspapers like the *Washington Times* and *Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, those things. It was a big deal because it was of a national magnitude that this attack on the national coalition happened. The goal was to get the government to take back the grant and not award it to this group by discrediting us. I can remember being at the national meeting and Susan Pharr and several of the leaders, who were there, who had been long-time leaders, going off to meet with government representatives about this grant. What had been initially a grant got changed. They didn't take it back, but they turned it into like some kind of consent agreement, which meant that nothing could be produced by this grant that they didn't approve first. That meant that when you wanted to do a directory that indicated that lesbians could be served by a shelter, when lesbians were in violent relationships, there was nothing that you could say about "we accept and are open to accepting lesbians or victims of gay violence." So that was one of the things that they required. But it was like even documents that were being written, they wanted to approve them. As far as I know and as far as I had heard then, that was the first time that that had ever happened, when the government had already given a grant and then took it back and changed the terms of it for you to receive it.

But I think that at that point, one of the things that I also learned was the value of people who are organizing together to be real clear about their value systems and what unites them, so that they are not split apart by attacks from the outside. Because what happened was this attack really opened up a serious breach in the organization, because there were people there who had these feelings of homophobia, who had these attitudes of homophobia, who really wanted lesbians within the ranks to just be silent and go away so we can get the money and that we won't be--. And here you are with a structure that is designed so that it values the input of lesbians in the group, and now at the risk of losing money, people are

saying, “Well, why won’t you dress down? Why won’t you act different? Why won’t you be somebody else while we go and negotiate with the government so that we can--?”

And then there’s also this whole fear that people have that gets created when--. I mean, some of the most powerful work that I’ve seen women do in the community has been broken apart when women have been threatened with or accused of being gay or lesbian—being lesbians. So it’s a way of disarming and breaking up women’s work that I’ve observed at the most local level all the way up to now the national level. It just was a powerful experience in terms of what kind of things are important when you build alliances across organizations at any level, and the kinds of commitment, the kind of values and principles and programs you have to be committed to. When you haven’t done that work, it makes it real easy for people to break you apart, because you haven’t confronted it within the group before the attack comes from outside.

To be honest with you, I don’t think that the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence has ever recovered from that attack. I don’t think it’s ever been as powerful as it was before that, because a lot of people split off, a lot of people stopped participating, a lot of people just kind of dug their heels in. And some people just fell off, because they started to see that it wasn’t as strong as they had thought, I think, initially.

BB: I think you were really clear about why, that’s a great example of why it’s so important for groups to get clear on their values and principles. So what are some effective ways for groups to go about that? How do groups get clear about that?

CB: First of all, I think that there is no way to avoid having to talk about the tough stuff that nobody wants to talk about. There’s no way to avoid talking about it and there’s no way to avoid accepting the differences that exist within groups and having the ability to

accept and respect people's different points of view, despite the fact that you don't share them. I mean, I think that part of the deal is that we have to get some core things we can agree on and accept that there are going to be things that we are absolutely opposite about, because we understand the power of our alliance is greater than the differences that we have.

So I'm not suggesting that we have this homogenized, "we all agree on this and then you've got to give up everything else," because I think that that's what makes people unwilling to participate in these partnerships with folks or in alliances across race and class and all those other kinds of lines. It's because somehow or another, you are being expected, if you participate in this group, to give up your values that are unlike those things that are there. I'm thinking about people who are pacifists, who don't want to be violent, trying to work with people who use violence as a means of defending themselves. It's like if we have some values that we share, don't expect me to try to give up using or having a gun to defend my family and my community. If I am willing to sit at the table with you around health care issues, around education issues; if I'm willing to sit around with you around trying to get certain folks elected, don't expect me to give up being a pacifist. Because I'm not getting ready to do that and if that's going to be a requirement of being at the table, then we lose the energy of us working together on these issues. So part of it is this idea that people are talking about those things.

But I also think that there is a way that we have got to figure out how to bridge this gap between people who are from different economic backgrounds. I'm saying forget the owning and working class, I'm saying within the working class, regardless to your income. But I'm particularly concerned about the folk who are at the lowest income ranks, because so many of our organizations are headed by people who are in the middle income and they want

to do work with people who they can talk to without having through the stress of trying to break down the information. Or they want to do it where they have people who talk nice and act nice. A lot of the people who are low income are not going to talk nice and act nice, because they're angry as heck. They are pissed off and they don't need to be nice to people just because they're going to pretend like, somehow or another, they're not angry and legitimately frustrated about the way that they're being treated in their workplace and in their community. So this way of figuring out how do we toughen up our skin in one instance, and soften up our skin in other instances, so that we can be in relationship with each other without just shutting down and walking away from each other because we're pissed off or we're too sensitive. It's a range of things in my mind.

I don't know how this happens, but there is a way that we have to do relationship-building and education in a way that people get the kind of real—I don't know. I guess where I'm trying to come from is that there's a way that people really get the common interests that they share, because of the kind of attack that our communities are under. There's a way that we can, without preaching to people, doing lectures to people, help people start to see that there's a way that we have to be doing some certain kind of work together.

I keep seeing people who want to take the easy way out. I mean, you look at people who are doing electoral politics and they're trying to run the numbers and they're just trying to get mass numbers to the polls, but they don't want to build no real relationship and have no real dialogue with folk. To me, that is insane and it obviously is not working, so why the heck do people keep trying to refine those strategies? It don't make good sense to me. I don't have the answer, but I know that what they're doing ain't working. You're looking at people in these activist organizations and they are isolating stuff in the issues that make sense to

them intellectually, but it don't have nothing to do nor match up closely with what folks in the street day-to-day are dealing with around gangs, around the loss of jobs, around drugs in their community. It's like how do you get folk in those kinds of devastated communities to be a part of a mass movement? I know that everybody's not going to be on board, but you certainly got to have more folk than these handful of activists who are out here being a part of these organizations.

I tell you the other thing is that we got to figure out that if we're talking about transforming our communities, that we can't expect that grants are going to pay for it and non-profit organizations are going to take care of it. There has to be a movement that's grounded in people's willingness to do this work, whether they're getting paid or not. For so many people, starting these non-profits, working in these non-profits, doing this work is about a paycheck, and they move on to something else when that check is ended. And that is not how you make change in community, because there's a bunch of folk in Palestine, in Iraq, and a whole bunch of these places, that's giving up their lifeblood. They're giving up their lifeblood and everything that they have ever thought was their own to be able to transform their communities and to be liberated and to be free. There's so much stuff, material stuff, money included, that we are wed to, that challenges our willingness to go up against this system, but the system is what's got us all tied down.

BB: What do you mean by the system?

CB: I'm saying formal structures, formal institutions: the government, the economic structure, the jobs that we're in, the different institutions that we participate in, the churches and the different organizations. All of those systems have a certain status quo that people are expected to be a part of to be able to be accepted in those institutions. I'm saying that, if we

want to not be tied down, to operate outside of our own interests--. Let me just say that I'm talking about an economic system that has gotten to the point where everything is about big box development, so that if you're going to get low wages and therefore shop in Wal-Mart, that you are perpetuating your own oppression because Wal-Mart and all this big box development is about concentrating wealth, getting people less and less jobs in their community, closing up mom-and-pop shops, locally-owned businesses, and therefore, decreasing people's income and their resources, so that they are required by virtue of their need for cheap prices to keep supporting Wal-Mart.

I'm saying that to keep talking about voting in a system where you got a two-party system that is reflective of each other, that is not about the masses of people, but because you want to be a good citizen, you say everybody should vote. And so we're all going around voting and talking junk about the people who are not voting, who understand clearly that it ain't in my interest to vote for real. That whether the Democrats or the Republicans win, there's very little that's changing about the lives of working people around health insurance, around housing costs, around the wages we earn. I mean there's a way that our true liberation is going to be accomplished by us being willing to sacrifice and go against the grain. And some of that consciousness for me—I'm going to have to go in just a second—some of that consciousness for me gets raised around the kind of responses I heard when I was running for U.S. Senate. But let's end it now and then you can figure out where we're going to pick up. Because I know if you talk about what were the kinds of things that got raised for me about how people will not step over the line of convention into something that's real, to be supportive of something that can serve their interest, like somebody saying to me, "You can't get elected so I can't support you, but you're the best thing going out here. I know that what

you're saying makes sense, but we got to go with what we think we can win." People doing stuff that's winnable, but it's like how do you define winning if who you are getting into office, the only thing that you can get from them is something that's consistent with what the mainstream is allowed?

BB: It's a lesser of evil, but still evil as hell. Like what have we really won?

CB: There you go. There you go. Yeah.

BB: All right, let's stop and we'll set up another time to finish up.

CB: And because I left my organizer at home, you're going to have to just call me and we can figure it out. But I got quite a bit of flexibility.

BB: Good.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Emily Baran, March 2006.