

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

**Interview U-0581
Bryan Proffitt
July 22, 2008**

**Field Notes – 2
Transcript – 4**

FIELD NOTES- Bryan David Proffitt

Interviewee: Bryan David Proffitt

Interviewer: Bridgette Burge

Interview Dates: July 22, 2008 (Second of Three Interviews)

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

Locations: Bridgette's home, Knightdale, NC

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

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

Heirs to a Fighting Tradition was formerly a project of the North Carolina Peace and Justice Coalition. Since NCPJC has not been functioning actively as an organization for over a year, in July of 2008 Bridgette changed the name of her sole proprietorship from “North Carolina Peace and Justice Coalition” to “The Heirs Project” on our bank account and with the NC Secretary of State’s assumed name for sole proprietorships.

THE INTERVIEWEE: Bryan Proffitt is a white, Hip-Hop generation organizer, public school teacher, and writer living in Durham, NC at the time of this interview. He was born in Woodbridge, VA in 1978. His father served in the military and he moved frequently when he was young through his high school years. He a bachelor’s degree in microbiology with a minor in film studies from North Carolina State University in 2001 and a master’s degree in liberal studies and a secondary social studies teaching certification in 2004. He is a founding member of Men Against Rape Culture (MARC) and has been affiliated with Hip Hop Against Racist War, United for Peace and Justice, and the North Carolina Peace and Justice Coalition, among other organizations.

THE INTERVIEWER: Bridgette Burge graduated from Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee in 1995 with a degree in Anthropology/Sociology and a semester of intensive study of oral history theory and methodology. In 1995 and 1996, Burge and a colleague conducted fieldwork in Honduras, Central America collecting the oral histories of six Honduran women. She earned her master's degree in Anthropology from the University of Memphis in 1998. In 1999, she moved to North Carolina and served as North Carolina Peace Action's state coordinator, and later as North Carolina Peace Action Education Fund's executive director. In 2005, Burge began her own consulting company to provide training, facilitation and planning to social change organizations. The same year, with the support of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Burge launched the project "Heirs to a Fighting Tradition: Oral Histories of North Carolina Social Justice Activists." The interviews from this project are archived at the Southern Historical Collection in the Wilson Library at UNC-Chapel Hill.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW: July 22, 2008, We recorded in my family room again. The only difference this time is that I placed the Shure lapel mic up higher on top of a CD stand and pinned it to a stuffed kitten's ear. It was a bit higher and so closer to his mouth. We ran out of space on the 1GB flashcard I used after about 2.5 hours or so and I had to use a backup card for the end of the interview.

Another difference was that my 7-year old son, Jacob, was here. He hung in there quietly upstairs in his room for most of it, but there are a few interruptions. I left the recorder on for most of them.

Bryan asked me to pause the recording at one point. He was talking about his work supporting survivors of sexual abuse and he wanted to check in with me to see if I felt okay hearing him talk about it. A classic walk-the-talk moment so very like him.

A final difference today was that I jotted down times and snippets of what I thought might be good quotes

We didn't finish yet and didn't want to rush, so we'll set up a third interview.

TRANSCRIPT– BRYAN PROFFITT

Interviewee: Bryan Proffitt

Interviewer: Bridgette Burge

Interview date: July 22, 2008 (2 of 3)

Location: Home of Bridgette Burge, Knightdale, NC

Length: 1 disc, approximately 183 minutes

START OF INTERVIEW

BRIDGETTE BURGE: Let me get just about thirty seconds of ambience, sound
(0:00:08)

BRYAN PROFFITT: Gotcha.

[Pause]

BB: Okay. Today is Tuesday, July 22, 2008. This is the second interview in a series with Mr. Bryan David Proffitt in the Heirs to a Fighting Tradition oral history of North Carolina social justice activists' collection. We are again recording at my house. Bridgette Burge is the interviewer, in Knightdale, North Carolina, Wake County. And it's about 9:45 in the morning on a hot ass, supposed to be a hundred degrees.

BP: They say a hundred degrees today.

BB: But we're in the air conditioning. Oh, the privileges of air conditioning. So, okay, let's start with, how about how lofty worldview questions first? Are you up for it?

BP: Wow.

BB: [Laughter]

BP: Sure.

BB: Okay, Bryan Proffitt. And remember to try to answer by starting--. Yeah, you remember.

BP: Sure.

BB: So what's your vision of a liberated world?

BP: My vision of a liberated world is one in which people, I mean at minimum people have what they need. People don't have to struggle to get food. People don't have to struggle to have access to education. Water is clean. Air is clean. So that's minimum. You know, clothes on your back, health care, all that. But I think that we can also have a vision beyond that that says that people can create. People can generate. People can have their talents nurtured. People can be free to explore their interests. We have work that's meaningful to us and meaningful to the society around us. And that doesn't necessarily mean that every single job that gets done is something that's like amazingly personally fulfilling, but that we don't have kind of a stratification in terms of people, certain people have to do certain kinds of jobs that everybody devalues and other people do work that--. Or other people don't have to work and are fine. I think the stuff that we do is directly connected to what we want and what we need, not connected to somebody else getting rich.

I think it would also take into account people who, because of life experiences, mental illness, physical illness, have considerations made for what their capacity to work and live and exist are. I mean the reality is that for some people, getting out of bed every day is just a struggle, and so I think that if we were creative enough and collective enough and that when we thought about who does what and how it all gets valued that we'd see that certain

people--. Everybody has different needs. I suppose it would be a little Commie of me to say the whole edict, but of course it comes from the Bible, is well, that from each according to his ability and to each according to his need. So, yeah, I mean people get what they want and we look out for each other. We respect one another and practice love, and not in some kind of sentimental, romantic, give each other valentines kind of way, though that would be cool, too, that people respect the integrity of one another's humanity and that everybody has value and everybody has worth and that we honor that.

And probably we'd all get to do a little bit of traveling and get to see this world because it's hard to understand the challenges of the world and understand yourself as a citizen of the world, rather than just some particular state, if you've never been anywhere else. It's hard to envision yourself as a citizen of a particular state if you've never even seen but a small portion of that state itself. So kids, high school kids would travel all over the world. Elementary kids would travel all over the world and build relationships with people so that they could understand the humanity that is bigger than a block or a language group or a particular affinity for a sports team or something. These ways in which we organize our relationships these days, I think we'd have to re-imagine those. I think that we'd have to--.

It's ambitious, but we've got a lot of work to do to unpack the political and economic, but even deeper, the social implications of this race structure that we've set up, this gender structure that we've set up. And just imagine that people just get to be and get to define themselves how they choose. Unfortunately, I'm not sure that world's right around the corner. I think we've got a little bit more to go. And I think that increasingly the challenge is ecology. A liberated world is one that we can, like, breathe. So I think that's the one that's starting to feel real pressing. It should have felt pressing, I think, for some time now,

but we're kind of late to it. I think that's primary among the challenges, but I don't think it's disconnected from the others. I mean the class structure that capitalism sets up is a consequence, just like the ecological crisis is a consequence of capitalism. So we have some work to do.

BB: Have there been times in history that you think we were closer to a liberated world, moments in history, certain communities in history?

BP: Oh yeah.

BB: What are some examples that pop to mind for you?

BP: Sure. Well I've been reading, as of late, this book by a guy named Max Elbaum, who I had the great fortune of meeting. He talks about--. The book is about--. He calls them the 1968 radicals. He writes about the New Communist Movement. So he kind of starts the book by talking about the context that leads up to '68 and then looking at '68 as this global phenomenon, all of the African liberation movements, the Cubans, and the Cubans inspiring people throughout Latin America, the Vietnamese fighting, and just all over the world, the Chinese and the Cultural Revolution, which of course, was a complicated affair but was inspiring a lot of people at the time. And even in the United States in 1968, in the best, in the one that is the most consolidated, there were really people who had legitimate notions that we can move towards something.

I mean again, I don't think that there's anything that I can think of, like maybe post-industrial revolution, that comes anywhere close to describing the kind of place that I was saying was ideal, the ideal liberated places. But I think that there's some moments where the project had a potential to go one way or the other. So like Reconstruction, right? I think that there was the possibility of reinventing the U.S. South and a reinvented U.S. South goes a

long way towards a reinvented United States and a reinvented United States goes a long way towards a reinvented world. So I think that that was a pretty, a moment that was full of a lot of potential. Again, a lot of this for me is sort of United States based, though I know that--. I mean, right now in Latin America, right? So in Venezuela there's this potential where they're making all these changes. In 1994, with the Zapatista uprising, there's all this potential for changes. In Paris in 1968 when the students and the workers take over the city and almost overthrow the government, there's this potential.

But I think a lot of the stuff that I think about in terms of the United States has a lot to do with the relationship between race and class in particular. So the turn of the twentieth century when you have these Fusion movements throughout the South where white Populist farmers and black Republicans are building political power, bases of political power throughout the U.S. South. I mean that would have been unbelievable if that thing would've been carried out to a, if its movement would have been allowed to continue, but of course the story is that white violence ends it every time. Stories about Irish immigrants who switched sides during the Mexican American War and fight with the Mexicans. I mean that's a moment of potential where people who have been subjects of seven hundred years of colonialism and were being asked to buy into a project of a couple of hundred years of colonialism, and refused to participate, and in fact, actively fought against it and switched alliances. So I think that those histories, you know, Bacon's Rebellion, which is complicated because it's rooted in a further effort to drive American Indians to the West, steal more land, et cetera, but there's this momentary alliance between African workers and European workers that maybe could have just blown the whole race project up before it even started.

BB: What was the trick of that shift and those unlikely alliances?

BP: Well, the trick to breaking them is the system of white supremacy. The trick to breaking them is give these European workers the same identity as their European bosses and consolidate that through table scraps, hand over miniscule but real privileges to those European workers in an effort to make them think they're on the same team as their bosses rather than being on the same team as the Africans, who they'd been fighting with and living with and getting beat with and having families with for close to a hundred years at that point. So I think for me as a history teacher those are the moments. It's like, man, this thing is not inevitable. What if the workers and the students keep Paris in 1968? Who knows what this world looks like? Who knows what this world looks like? I mean if the Vietnamese had not defeated the United States, like, god, that's a whole different set of circumstances we're dealing with now, but they did. And so, there's a watershed moment. It's up in the air and future's not inevitable.

I think part of the way that we teach history--. And again, I'm not--. I couldn't speak to how it's taught anywhere else, but part of the way that we teach history in a United States system is that there's kind of this inevitable progression. It's a journey towards--. Words like destiny are used. Manifest Destiny was used in the 1840s and we still talk about this destiny of the Project for a New American Century. So like the twenty-first century, it's inevitable that it's an American century, when if you looked around the world, evidence suggests that that's ridiculous to think that the twenty-first century is going to be American-dominated. It's probably not going to go down like that, but we use this language that suggests it's like a done deal. God figured this out whenever ago and now we're all just kind of like doing our little part. So if we talk about these moments when things could've been a little bit different--. What if the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party had been seated at

the convention in 1964 in Atlantic City? Man, that changes things. So there's all of these moments when we can talk about something going one way or the other. And it's not a simple construction and so, yeah, it's a long answer, but that's why I think history's so important because there's this vision of a liberatory world that we can all start to imagine, and then imagine that it's everyday kinds of things that we have to do to get there. We can't just wait for some lightning bolt to strike, though there may need to be a lightning bolt that strikes that kind of helps things out along the way. And some of that we don't have control over.

BB: So let's just stick with the theme about teaching for a while and jump way ahead in your life and we'll go back. So you've been teaching at Hillside now for--. Is this your third year?

BP: This is my first year at Hillside. I've taught one year at Hillside. I taught three years at Apex High School.

BB: Okay, so say a little bit about how you came into teaching and what it's been like for you. We'll start with those two questions.

BP: Well, we talked a little bit last night about the career decision of teaching, but I think the career decision of teaching kind of goes lockstep with a lifetime of an interest in teaching and an engagement with teaching in one form or another. So you can look at teaching as like, wow, if I was really good at calculus and a kid next to me was struggling with something, did I have the ability or had I developed the skill set where I could help him or her to get that problem right. That was something that was kind of happening from a pretty young age. The more you do that, the more you, the better you get at it. And in fact, you realize that the more you're teaching, the better you're learning. And

so when the political stuff started to, when I started to get a little bit more politicized when I was in college, and then immediately afterwards when I was organizing, it involved a lot of workshops. So I don't know how I came to be seen as somebody who had an analysis around race and anti-racism or organizing and organizing skills, and then could translate that into something that people would be able to use, but I don't even remember when that moment happened, but it happened. And so I started being asked to kind of lead discussions or create workshops around questions like that. And then I got involved in campus stuff around violence against women and in particular playing a role with men in ending violence.

BB: Why did you get involved with that? What triggered that?

BP: It's interesting. There's a couple of key moments I think. I can remember a conversation my freshman year with these two women that were a year older than me that were in the same scholarship program that I was in, so I met them through that. And we were at lunch and there was a Take Back the Night march coming up and I think one of them was playing kind of a role in it or speaking at it or something like that. And she said, "Oh, hey. You should come out." I'm grateful that it happened to be those two folks at that particular moment and they were in a space to do it because I kind of floated some pretty backwards ideas, I'm sure, about sexual violence. And there's this sort of like, "Well, why can't women just do this? How does sexual violence even happen?" And they were real patient with me and they were just sort of like, "Well, why don't you come check this thing out?" and challenged some of the ideas that I think had been put in my head by society that kind of says sexual violence doesn't exist. And so I remember going out to that.

I remember being impacted more by that conversation than I was necessarily by that particular march, though I do remember going probably every year when I was in college and

we'd march around campus. And it was better organized than ones that I've seen at other campuses because since, I've been asked to go speak at ones at other campuses or go attend ones at other campuses. And they used to be big things. We'd have two marches, each of them several hundred people. They'd converge in the main public area on campus. We'd get these great speakers, this amazing energy, people crying, just unbelievable. But I can remember we'd walk by some of the dorms and there'd be guys yelling out the window, I mean just repulsive, threatening, violent kind of things, and just being really struck by, "Wow, what is that?" I didn't understand this and I had some resistance to it, but I'm not leaning out the window and yelling stuff at people. And so I think that was a bit of it.

And then what kind of really put me over the edge, I think, was being in a relationship with somebody who came to identify herself as a survivor in the course of our relationship, something that had happened prior to us being together. So being the only person who knew for about six months was deep. It was deep. And ultimately it ended up kind of eating our relationship. Her struggle to heal and the hard struggle to kind of exist normally through that proved to be too consuming. But that process and being the sole support on-call basically twenty-four hours a day anytime there's a collapse, which there were lots of, and encouraging her to get support beyond me, encouraging myself to get support in what I was doing, so a lot of that. And then the more you talk about it, the more folks say, "Oh, yeah, me, too." And then you talk about it, and folks say, "Oh yeah, me, too." And as I looked around, it was like everybody I know. I mean the numbers are right, like one in four is like--. The estimates say like one in three to one in eight. In my life, it's like three of four, easy, people that are close to me. So it was just like, well damn, white boy. You've been talking all this stuff about race, turns out there's some other stuff. I was reading

a lot of--. I was being influenced both through reading and then through interactions with black feminism at the time, which is all about these intersections. So it was like, "Well, I guess I better start talking about that, too." And kind of just got involved as a volunteer, I think, in stuff around campus while I was still there.

And then when I went back to school to get certified to teach, I just needed a job, and through relationships that I had made with that particular--movement's kind of a lofty word for I think what existed on campus--but the energy on campus around anti-violence stuff. I got a job that enabled me to teach this course to train men to be peer educators with other men, and go out and do workshops. And so I walked in the first day for the interview and it was somebody I had a relationship with. And I said, "Look, I can't--. I can't do this work unless I look at sexual violence as a symptom of white supremacy." Probably at the time I said white supremacy and patriarchy, you know, male domination and this system of white domination, which later on, through this organization called Men Against Rape Culture, which we started, the analysis broadened a little bit to include capitalism and heterosexism as being the real sources of violence. So I just kind of went in dumbly, I'm sure, at the time like, "Oh, yeah. I can't do this job unless I can look at it this way," but I think I was kind of the best. I had a lot of relationships on campus. They knew me, and they said, "Sure." So I got hired to do this job and that was really, that was the first formal teaching I think I ever did. And it was like test by fire because it was a three-credit college course. Thankfully there wasn't a lot of oversight. [Laughter] Because I don't know what that thing would've looked like. It wouldn't have lasted long. I can tell you that.

So I add this course that had like one person signed up for it. So, your task is to develop a curriculum for this course, find students for this course, and teach this course. And

it's like July, maybe June, and the course starts first of August, second week of August. So again, I was an organizer, so I looked at teaching as that was part of the task. So I just started tapping men that I knew from the work we'd been doing on campus. So I start pulling in all these guys that I already had relationships with. I think I found six guys for the first class. And they handed me a box of literature. "Here's what exists." And I'm like, "Are you kidding me?" So I just started looking at different programs around the country, looking at stuff that I'd been developing, and developed what I think was a pretty unique course, but had a lot of shortcomings. So we tried it out with these six guys and developed this workshop, tried the workshop out a few times. Next time we taught the course--. And all this back and forth. "Well, what do you think about what we just did?" So teaching as this process of constantly getting feedback, constantly trying to check stuff out.

Again at the expense of being a little Communist here, there's an idea that Mao, Mao Tse-Tung, developed in China called the Mass Line and the idea with the Mass Line is that in the masses, among the people, that the ideas for what we need already exist, but they're kind of scattered and not really--. They're not connected. They're not focused. If one person's thinking about something in a really sharp way, there's somebody else who's thinking about something totally different, but they're not thinking that they're connected to each other. And so the task of the organizer is to go out, collect all the ideas, and put it together into something coherent and then go back and say, "Here's what we heard you say." Or, "Here's the program." And if people respond to it, then you did it correctly, then you summed up the ideas correctly, but if people don't respond to it, then you've got to go back and do it again. So teaching is like a practice in Mass Line. I've got to know what's out there with my students, and in this case, my friends, really, with the course at NC State. I got to know

what's out here, take all those ideas in, add some of my own ideas and then spit it back and then just kind of look, like, "Well, what do ya'll think?"

And people were really, really amazing. One of the first people that I pulled into the work was a friend Dasan, Chris Massenberg. So Dasan was somebody who'd been around, who'd done some organizing with us around racial justice issues on campus, again, even though he wasn't somebody who was on campus. He went to St. Augustine College. I pulled him in and he was real instrumental. He engaged in it pretty fully and we developed a lot of the stuff together. So teaching is sort of a collective practice, as well, something we were kind of all experimenting with. And then we just started doing these workshops and through the workshops we'd get more kids interested and they'd come in and sign up and take the class. So, over the course of those two years, I taught the class four times and it changed pretty dramatically each time. We probably did fifty, sixty workshops on campus, probably every dorm on campus, a hundred uniformed Air Force ROTC cadets, maybe a hundred and twenty. That one was rough. Whew. The basketball team, freshman, football players, a number of the fraternities, a number of student organizations, so it was a pretty--. It was a lot of practice. Some weeks we were doing three workshops a week and so it was like I learned how to teach by just doing it. And at the same time I'm learning more formalized practical pieces about teaching through the School of Ed [Education], through the classes I was taking to get certified to teach. But I think the fall of my second year back in graduate school--.

BB: So this is 2002?

BP: No, it was '03. Yeah, the fall of '03, I was student teaching. So I was a full-time teacher, essentially, for most of the semester. I was taking two classes. I was

teaching the men's class and coordinating the men's program at about ten to fifteen hours a week. So it was just like--. If you want to learn how to do something, just do it all day long. [Laughter] And you learn how to do it. So I think a lot of my skills as a teacher really got sharpened in those spaces. And then we began to be invited to give these workshops with community groups, organizations around the state. Since then I've been invited to either speak or do workshops with organizations around the country. So, a lot of it just comes through the doing. It's hard, As a teacher, as a classroom teacher, I know some folks that, they'll have lesson plans sketched out two, three weeks ahead of time. And for me, I think that was intimidating at first, that there might be some expectation that that would be what I would do, too, because it doesn't work like that for me. And it's been a task to figure out how it works for me and just be okay with that. So I have to make lesson plans for tomorrow. That's it. I can have a sketch for what two weeks looks like or what a unit of study looks like, but I can't adequately prepare for tomorrow's lesson before about today. And I have to just be okay with that because for me, teaching is a very in the moment kind of experience. I have to be prepared going in. I have to be ready. I have to have it all mapped out. And it's the same--.

Again, it's a lot of the same principles of organizing. I have to know what I'm doing before I walk in the room, have my goals in my head about what it is I want to get out of a thing, and then know that when I walk in there, every single one of those goals may go out the window, and that's okay. So teaching and organizing for me have this dialectic relationship. There's this back and forth that is kind of a spontaneous process. There's a lot of preparation that goes into it, but it's also something where there's a lot of spontaneity and a lot of reliance on your ability to think on your feet and move kind of quick and readjust and

be satisfied with what happens and not be satisfied with what happens and go back and try it all over again. So I think that that's a lot of the teaching stuff.

I don't know if I mentioned this the other day when we were talking about why teaching, but I think the other reason why I went into teaching beyond just an interest in education and an interest in the process of learning, is to organize teachers as a group of workers, which is hard because in the United States I think, just like with a lot of work that we do in the United States, there's not much of a class consciousness. So teachers, because we have degrees and many of us advanced degrees, we bought into this idea that we're professionals, that we're these upper-class kind of people, when the reality is that I don't know many groups of workers who are more dissatisfied than teachers are. On a day-to-day basis, teachers are just frustrated and anxious and broken down all the time, overworked, underpaid. And I think it's difficult because you don't--. There's not the same kind of class structure. You're not looking at a boss who's making money, necessarily, off of exploiting your work. It looks different in the service sector or the public sector, but there's still a lot there. And if you look around the world, there's movements. Teachers are organized all over the world and are at some of the forefront of really amazing class-based, community-based, nationalism-based kind of struggles. Teachers are right in the thick of things, organized groups of teachers. And so for me one of the really key pieces of going into education is to organize teachers and not just in terms of bread and butter, let's get better salaries, better benefits, all that, but to look at transformation and to look at--. We and our students and our students' parents are the stakeholders. We're the ones who have this real central role in creating curriculum and creating school policy. What's more fundamental to the course of how things go in the world than education, than what our kids learn? And so

teachers should play a role in that. Teachers should play the key role in that, fighting alongside our students, fighting alongside parents to say, “No, hey. Oh my god, there’s an ecological crisis. We’d better start learning about how to eat and how to reclaim water sources and all that.” So I think if that’s going to change, teachers are going to have to play a role in changing it.

BB: Let me go back. What was the name of the course that you taught for men? Did you have a title for it?

BP: Yeah, man, I don’t even remember. I could probably find it and send it to you.

BB: Okay. Tell me why that workshop with the ROTC group of guys was particularly difficult. What’s the story there?

BP: Sure. So it was two hours, where most of our stuff was normally one hour. I don’t think we had adequately prepared. We did a lot of our training of guys to be workshop facilitators through, again, just through doing it. So you take the course once and you attend and observe three workshops and then after you’ve done that, you can maybe start to play--. You get a small piece of the workshop, just one section that’s really easy to facilitate. See how that goes. Do really intense debriefing afterwards to learn from the experience and do it again, do it again, do it again, do it again. Maybe you get another part of the workshop next time and kind of build people up like that. So we were always having our less experienced folks do small parts of the workshop. There were about five or six of us co-facilitating this workshop that I don’t think we’d adequately planned for. And then, and I don’t--. I’m not saying that there was something unique about them.

There was one piece that was unique about the group, the culture of being Air Force cadets that made it a difficult experience. It's not that I think that somehow Air Force cadets or people in the military are inherently backwards on these questions or inherently more violent as men. I think that there's been some research that looks at basic training spaces and the level of homophobia and the level of violence inherent in them and what impact that has. But these were just college kids. I don't have any notion that just because they wanted to be in the Air Force, they were bad on these questions, but the one piece I would say about the culture of the group that was difficult were that their commanders were in there. And so a lot of the strength of the workshop traditionally relied on being able to speak really freely and people being able to challenge each other really freely, so that we could try to rely on the group to take--. If one guy has a bad perspective in a group, there's probably somebody else who has a good perspective. And if we can create this space for him to challenge it, then we don't have to do the teaching. They can do it. But I think the commanding officers being there created a bit of a silence in the room that was hard. And then there was a couple of expressions of really horrible ideas that we were not surprised by or not caught off guard by, but I think the dynamics of two hundred or like a hundred, hundred twenty people at once, the new guys. I think there was just of experiences that sort of rolled into why that was tough. So I think it was just the combination of a number of tough things at once.

BB: And so sticking with the teaching piece a little more, say a little bit about the differences between Apex and Hillside.

BP: Sure. Yeah, they're different. They're different and they're the same. I guess first I want to say that they're the same because kids are kids. Kids are asking the tough questions. They're trying to figure out who the hell they are. They're tortured by a

break-up. They're struggling with their parents. I mean these are sixteen-year-olds, seventeen-year-olds, eighteen-year-olds. They don't know what they want to do next. There's alcohol. There's drugs. There's sex. There's fashion. There's just all this stuff that makes being a kid really, really hard. And I think across the board, being a kid is hard, being a teenager is hard. So I think that that's something that as I sort of butt up against the differences, the similarities are really helpful to hold. Like, "Oh, man. These kids at this school are having these kinds of problems." If I sit back and think about it, I say, "Well, they were having the same problems at the other place, too. It just, it looked a little different."

That said, Apex is different. Apex was huge. There were twenty-four hundred kids there. I taught classes with thirty-three students in them, people sitting in the windowsill. So the size of it was one thing that was interesting, but it's one of the top-ranked public high schools in the state. And I think that that has--. You know the kind of rankings that they use are based on measures like test scores, measures like college acceptance, things like that, that are not, do not emerge independent from social, political, economic, cultural phenomenon. So I think to say that Apex is one of the highest ranking schools in the state is to say that on all these measures that really are geared towards what the kids at that school already are going to know how to do pretty well, they do pretty well. I mean there's a lot of schools that have the same class and racial makeup as Apex that don't perform as well. There's a lot of schools that are a lot of white kids who come from pretty economically comfortable places with parents who are college educated, parents who know how to teach you how to do your homework right, know how to help you organize your life right and help you organize your finances right and things like that. And you live in neighborhoods where you're not confronting dysfunction. You're not confronting violence. You're not confronting

unemployment. You're not confronting drugs. You're not having the system sort of divest in your life through divesting in your community every day. So there's a lot of places that are like that that don't do as well as Apex.

So I think that Apex is--. It's very well administered. There's a really strong administration that has a vision for what they want to do. There's a really great set of teachers who are very committed. These are people who live in Apex who, that's their lives and they're good at what they do. Now, Hillside--. And that was a good experience for me at Apex because I was afforded a lot of space. Again, just like at NC State, if I closed the classroom and just kind of teach what I need to teach, it was okay, because I wasn't teaching one of the courses that had an end-of-course test, these standardized tests, because I never taught any of those courses at Apex. I started off teaching remedial math actually, because I couldn't get a social studies job. So I just got in the school teaching that. So I was kind of identified from the start as somebody who was going to work with kids who were at the margin of this greatness that was Apex High. And so I taught remedial math and then they gave me world history courses, which is a course you have to take to graduate, of kids who had already failed it, kids who were repeating world history.

So my class, which I did share a classroom with somebody for a year, the rest of the time I was kind of mobile, backpacking it around the school, so whatever space it was that I was in, my office, my classroom, my multitude of classrooms depending on which semester we were in, kind of became these spaces for the kids who didn't fit at Apex. A lot of the young black guys that had a tough time there found their way to my space. I think they, through relating to me, had gotten the sense that I was going to help them navigate how the

school went. I was going to provide some space where they could be them. And some of kids that just didn't do well, the white kids that didn't do well, other kids of color that weren't black that didn't do well, a couple of girls who came out to me as survivors because of me talking about my own experiences in relating to sexual violence. They kind of gravitated to me. So I was able to have this mobile space at Apex High that could kind of provide some space for kids that weren't getting space otherwise. So that taught me a lot about how to do that, and it taught me also about-- I got a couple of elective courses my last year there in sociology and psychology and a class called Lessons of the Vietnam War. And those classes were populated almost entirely by college-bound, class privileged white kids, a lot of guys in both of them. And I learned a lot about how I could really get in their heads and how to challenge them on a lot of notions that they had about the world, a lot of assumptions that they made about the world. And I think that, anecdotally, just experiences with how some of them, where their trajectories have gone, as well as just things that they've said to me afterwards, kind of make me believe that I did get in their heads a little bit. So that was a good experience to have.

BB: Like what? What were some of the things they said, some memorable things?

BP: Yeah, I just ran into one of the kids, one of the white kids that was in my sociology class, at their graduation just a couple months ago, last month I guess.

BB: Their college graduation?

BP: Their high school graduation. They were juniors my last year there and then they graduated this last year. I was walking around before they went into the gym for their graduation, just because I wanted to say, "Hey." I hadn't seen a lot of them since I'd

left. This kid came up to me and he said, "Oh, Mr. P! It's so good to see you." We just kind of said, "Hey, how're you doing? Where are you going to school next year?" whatever. And then he said, "Man, we had this guy who taught this class on conversations in diversity, and man, he sucked, Mr. P. He was always kind of talking about, well, me as a white Christian male and he was like--. And he just didn't put stuff the way that you did or didn't challenge us the way that you did," or something like that. So it was really affirming to have this kid, a year later--I hadn't seen him in a whole year--just come up and say, "Man, you really messed with us."

And his class was one in particular where I'd really done my best to knock them off kilter. We were talking about race and I brought in five women, four of whom were women of color that I kind of roll with, and just asked them to have a conversation with each other about race in front of my students. Man, I've never faced that much ire. The next time I got back to class, I felt like I was in an alley with the two or three black kids in class behind me and like one white kid or two white kids behind me throwing a couple punches, while thirty white kids are sort of coming at us, trying to, just angry, angry and confused and knocked completely off their spiritual and moral centers. That was good. It was hard and it was scary and I probably could've done a little bit more to support them through that experience, but that experience came like halfway through the class. So we were fine. They still trusted me. They still loved me. It was like, "Don't let them back in, these women who came and talked. But we're cool." So it was sort of a back and forth. I have to love you and relate to you in terms that are comfortable for you, and I also have to come at you in a language that you have no idea what it means and see what happens, and go back and forth. So I learned a lot about that there. Didn't have much in the way of connections with other faculty members,

felt really isolated, kind of, I think, self-righteously isolated myself. “Oh, you all are teaching this backwards history,” and all this kind of stuff, but nobody was real anxious to check in with me, either. I mean there was a handful of folks that I felt like really had my back, but for the most part, it was just sort of like, go to work, be with your kids, and then go home.

Problem was, it was like thirty-five minutes away from home, so I didn't have much in the way of a relationship with kids outside of school. Yeah, I mean even going to a basketball game or something like that was just tedious. It was just hard to do. So I decided that for that reason I wanted to teach in Durham because my body doesn't handle that much car time very well and because I wanted to teach in Durham so that I could live in the same place that I taught and be able to cultivate more of a relationship to the community that I taught in, and then also this experience of having taught the kids at the margins of Apex High and been able to make a lot of progress with them and been able to support a lot of them in ways that they needed support and inspire a lot of them to think past what they were kind of taught to think of themselves as being. I thought, well, let me try a place where those kids aren't at the margin. The kids at the margins of the society are the kids that populate the school.

So I was really interested in Hillside High. Hillside has this history as, before desegregation, being kind of like the heart of black Durham. A degree means something. And then much like the story of--. And I'm not sure about the particulars, but it's not a unique situation where after desegregation that school kind of gets torn apart. That school falls under misadministration. That school's funding comes under challenge. That school's teachers get pulled away. I mean just a lot of challenges and a lot of tax over the years that

make those schools now the ones that they want to take over, the ones they want to get rid of. And so that's the state that Hillside is in, which through a well-intentioned court decision called Leandro that says that the practice of resourcing schools according to property taxes-- this is one part of the decision--is unfair because then schools that are in wealthier communities have more resources. So Leandro says that's not okay and Leandro says that all kids in North Carolina deserve the same quality of education. And so because of Leandro there's a judge who has identified a handful of schools around the state.

BB: Judge Manning?

BP: Judge Manning. I can't remember his first name. He's identified a handful of schools around the state that are low-performing schools. And that's according to these standardized tests that were given. I think it's--. What is it? The big five or the big six or something like that. There's five or six courses that have these high stakes. Now, starting this year, you cannot pass the class unless you get a three or a four on this test. You get scored as a one, a two, a three, or a four. And you have to get a three in order to pass the class now, for every single one of these courses.

BB: I saw in today's paper twenty-five schools, forty-five schools didn't or something.

BP: Wow.

BB: It's some big--. It's front-page news in the News & Observer.

BP: Well, it's a crisis. It is. There is a loophole, that if a student passes your course and fails the test--. They get three administrations of the test. If they fail all three--. And of course, all three of those are happening within a span of maybe five or six days, maybe eight at the most. So the likelihood that somebody's going to fail the first time and

pass the second or third time is pretty low, but if they do pass your class, but fail those tests, you can submit a portfolio of their work. Problem is, it's the end of the semester. Kids are leaving. Teachers haven't been keeping these portfolios because the kids need their work in order to be able to have it to study with and all that. And so there's this whole new layer now of work for students and teachers to compile these portfolios that may or may not ultimately get even approved. We're going to see a backlog and in particular in social studies because social studies tests, the civics and economics tests--. There's two social studies courses that are tested: Civics and Economics, which is the tenth-grade course, and United States History, which is the eleventh grade course. Those tests are phenomenally awful. The U.S. History test has a hundred questions on it, multiple choice. Two of the questions on the test this last year--and I probably shouldn't be putting this into a public record because I'm not even supposed to be looking at the test--but two of the questions on the test this last year related to a topic that I had never even heard of in my own study of United States history, which was pretty thorough prior to having taught. And the only reason that I even know that this thing exists is because of the test the previous semester when I saw in on there, and I was like, "What is that?"

BB: What was it?

BP: I probably legally shouldn't say that, but it's--. So, two questions out of a hundred were on this thing that's so insignificant. I mean even if it were something that was widely understood, the impact it had on the course of United States history is completely negligible. So under this, if I have ninety days in a semester, two of the questions out of a hundred are going to be on this one topic, I should probably spend a class and three-quarters of a class on this topic, according to this test. And so the problem is that these tests are on

garbage, I would argue, just in terms of what gets emphasized and what doesn't. They don't really fairly represent what people and events have impacted U.S. history.

[Interruption due to conversation with interviewer's son]

BP: I'm going to go to the bathroom.

BB: Sure. We'll take a break.

[Additional conversation between interviewer and interviewer's son]

BP: So there's these tests, you know, are a.) on what I and probably a lot of history teachers would argue, a lot of insignificant things being tested on and a lot of significant things not being tested on. But further, the language of the tests is--. I mean even the notion of standardization--. I can appreciate where No Child Left Behind and where the Leandro case come from in that the historical phenomenon is that kids in low-income schools were not getting quality teachers. They were not getting taught the right material. They weren't getting taught much of anything. They were sort of--. In lots of places and pockets here and there, just sort of like, "Well, these kids can't do well anyway. We're not going to really invest much in them." So I can appreciate the notion that you need to hold people accountable. However, the notion of standardization--. And I'm not even opposed to having a curriculum that says, "These are the things that once we leave a U.S. history course, kids should be able to know."

But we don't have standardized kids, and we have a standardized test, right? And so the language that's used on these tests is bewildering for kids who haven't been exposed to that language very much. And the task of a teacher is to expose them to as much of that language as possible. I want my kids to leave my class with great vocabularies. That's one of my roles as a teacher. But if I have to go through from Washington to Bush in ninety

days, eight of them taken up by tests the county wants me to, ten of them taken up by tests that the county wants me to give, four or five days to review for the end-of-course test, and about two or three of those ninety days being allotted to the actual administration of the test, maybe even more, I'm looking at somewhere in the range of seventy-something days to teach from Washington to Bush. So I've got to do that and I've got to teach vocabulary that kids aren't living with every day. This is college-educated people vocabulary that they're looking at. A lot of kids aren't around college-educated people using college-educated vocabulary every day. You have different cultural traditions that are not represented on these tests. And so that's not to say that kids who aren't around that can't learn that stuff and can't do it, but it just means that if that's the sole criteria by which they pass a course or fail a course, then we're doing them a disservice. So we've got to do all that. Plus, we've got to deal with kid stuff, fights and drama and boyfriends and girlfriends and jobs. A lot of my kids at Hillside work a lot. They sleep in class because they work late. So it's a challenge. It's a challenging space and the problem with these laws and the now even higher stakes tests is that there's going to be a logjam. So a lot of kids aren't going to pass Civics. So if they don't pass Civics, they've got to take Civics again. Well, they're supposed to take History their junior year, U.S. History their junior year, but if they can't take it because they have to take Civics again, then they may have to wait until their senior year to take History. Now a lot of them are probably going to fail the U.S. History class because they can't pass the test. So they'll have to take that again. So it's a nightmare. There's only three social studies courses, but two of them that you need to graduate are going just be backing kids up. And the social studies tests in particular, the Civics test and the U.S. History test. Kids pass them-

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I mean we got our scores at Hillside up to thirty-seven or thirty-eight percent proficient, and that was applauded by the county, because we made about a twelve or thirteen percent jump from the first semester to the second of this last year. Thirty-seven, thirty-eight percent, and nobody looks at that and says, "Well, hmmm. Maybe the test is the problem." They blame the kids. They blame the teachers. They blame the schools. If you have a test that only thirty-seven percent of the people can pass, and they're smart kids, chances are something's wrong with your test. So that's one of the biggest challenges at Hillside is because if we don't improve our test scores, there's this threat of takeover. What that looks like, I don't know.

I was actually just reading this morning about a program in Chicago that is going along with their gentrification of the city is doing these overhauls of schools where they bring in totally new--. They fire everybody, bring in a new administration and then allow people to reapply for their own jobs back, but there's no guarantee that they'd actually get them. And I'm not arguing that there shouldn't be teachers at my school that ought to be fired, because there should. There's also teachers at my school that need a lot of help, that could be great, but could just use a little bit more support than they get. There's also teachers at my school that are brilliant and are some of the most talented people I've ever seen, but the problem is because there's so much focus at Hillside on test score, test score, test score, test score, we're losing the forest for this little test score tree because there's so many other issues that our kids are dealing with on a day-to-day basis that prevent them from doing well in society that we just have to ignore and act as those test scores are somehow a separate phenomenon. We can just train them to do well on the test score and then that training for this test is going to generate the solutions to these problems that we have in society. It's

absurd. Rather than say, "I bet if we address these kids' whole situations, then maybe their test scores would come up as a result." It's a complete one-eighty. So that's hard, and there's a lot of infiltration of gangs in the neighborhoods that my kids come from. There's a lot of gangs at school.

BB: What gangs?

BP: Mostly Bloods and Crips, but there's so many sub-divisions and something that kind of emerged indigenously in Durham that kind of becomes an affiliate of one of the two. For the most part, those are the ones that kind of dominate the school. And there's not a whole lot of violence that happens at school as a result of that, to be honest, but some of it is. But I think that there's a--. Right now, there's a lot of low expectations about the school. There's a lot of talk about, "We'll get test scores up," but not a lot of talk about how capable our kids are and how to help them envision how they can be successful. It's just sort of like, "Get these test scores up." And it's hard. It's a hard place to be with respect to that because you watch the kids suffering. And there's a lot of challenges with the overall culture of the school and accountability. Like I said, there's a lot of teachers that just probably ought to be let go, but they're not being let go. And so what does that say to our kids? Or there's a lot of teachers that are talented teachers that can't last there because the environment is really rough, and they don't feel adequately supported, so they leave.

What does that tell our kids? And at the end of the day, the administrators can leave and the teachers can leave. The kids are stuck. They've got to go there. And so that's hard to be a part of as well, but I will say that there are--just like kids are kids--there are so many funny kids and smart kids and musically gifted kids and kids that are great artists and kids that are poets and kids that are little mini-philosophizers and--. Philosophizers?

Philosophers? Philosophizing is not a word. Philosophers. And the teachers there have each other's back in a way that I never imagined I'd be a part of. I had always kind of thought, because of my experience at the school that I student taught at, Clayton High out in Clayton, and at Apex High, I had always kind of thought that I'd just work in isolation. And so I was trying to figure out how the hell I was going to organize teachers when I didn't want to talk to other teachers, but at Hillside, man, people--. There's a really supportive atmosphere.

BB: What accounts for the difference?

BP: [Sighs] I don't really know. I think in some ways it's sort of like, "Well, we're all here and we've got to have each other's back because nobody else is gonna." I think that's part of it. And cultures of places change from one year to the next, but the culture of that place is that teachers are going to relate to each other. And there's new instructional models that are actually pushing more and more relationships. There's a thing called Professional Learning Communities, PLC, which is the big model now. It's not a prescription. It's not like, "This is how you have to teach." It's more that when teachers have time to collaborate with each other and plan with each other, then schools improve, and it's really as simple as that. So there's a lot more emphasis on relationship building that pushes an already sort of togetherness that's there. And I also know that not everybody at my school experiences that in the same way that I have. I happen to be in a department that is really big on that, in the social studies department, a lot because of the leadership of our department chair. I'm on a hallway with a number of teachers that are young and energetic and ready to be connecting with each other. I don't think everybody has the same experience that I do, but I do know that it's more of a community than what I'd been a part of historically.

BB: What's the name of your department chair?

BP: Her name is Courtney Waite and she is one of my co-conspirators in the organizing work that we've kind of started over there.

BB: What's the organizing work looking like at this early stage?

BP: Yeah, well, I haven't thought it through very well, but my initial notion was that I'd be there for a year and kind of lay low and just sort of figure the place out and then start to feel things out, but I made it to October on the laying low, didn't really get very far.

BB: A whole eight weeks? [Laughter]

BP: [Laughter] Well, I was proud for my restraint. We started doing this thing, because a lot of the ways that teachers get together and connect with each other is to vent. Again, like I've said, it's a really dissatisfied workforce. So people come together to say, "Aw, the principal sucks" or, "This kid's a jerk," or, "I kicked this kid out," or, "We're never going to pass these tests," or, "This parent's an asshole," or whatever. So there's a lot of that. So I think people either a.) engage in a lot of that or b.) stay away from spaces with other teachers because they don't want to be a part of that. And so when people think about getting teachers together in a room, they think about it being a gripe session. So there's not a lot of investment unless you're one of the folks who really wants to gripe and is really interested in that. So we were kind of thinking that one of the challenges to getting teachers in a room with each other was that people have this notion that that's what's going to happen. So we thought--.

It kind of came out of this interaction that I had with another teacher where she just had a rough week and I ended up in her room. And I was like, "Man, what's one good thing

that happened this week? What's one win, one victory?" And she was like, "Oh, such and such." So I thought, "Okay." That was cool, and we kind of started with each other. She'd walk by me at the end of the day and she'd say, "What was your victory today?" And I was teaching about World War Two at the time and the "Double V," African American soldiers talking about victory for democracy in Europe against fascism and victory for democracy at home against racism. And then victory gardens. There's this whole notion of community organizing around victory. So we sat down, myself and Courtney and one other teacher and we talked about, "Well, what would it take to get teachers on the same page at Hillside?"

BB: What's the other teacher's name?

BP: Her name is Nancy Galman. She's actually not teaching at Hillside anymore. She just left. But we sat down on a Friday afternoon over some beers and just talked about what it would take to get some more unity, and then maybe if we could get that accomplished, then maybe looking at some strategies for change and all that. So we said, "Well, let's just start slow. Let's just get teachers in a room with each other." So we started this thing called Victory Fridays. The first one was hosted in my room and then we kind of rotated responsibilities. And it really, really just started off as, come into a room on a Friday afternoon. There's going to be some food. There's going to be some music. We might have some little icebreaker thing. And then you're just going to say one thing that was a win for the week, and it was phenomenal to watch the way people responded to it. The first one we had, there was like thirty, thirty-five people came in and out, just like, "Aw, yeah. I'd like to do this. I'd like to see other teachers." So we just said, "We're going to do this every week, every week, every week, every week." And for two, three, four months, we're not going to talk about how to fix anything. We're just going to do this, create a space where we can see

each other and see each other's humanity, get to know each other better, and talk about stuff that's good. At the first meeting, there's thirty. Then there's twenty. You know, it's the up and down and up and down. There were, probably, I would say over the course of the year, there were two-thirds of the staff that made their way into one of those Victory Fridays.

And then naturally, or because we pushed it, because that was our plan all along, the conversation began to shift a little bit into like, "Well, what could we--? What do we want to do to make this place a better place?" Our goal by the end of the year was really to get the Victory Friday thing, so that teachers felt more united and more connected with each other, and to kind of have one little campaign on an issue to see if we could make an improvement in something. So the thing that people identified was that the hallways are a mess. The hallways are like a mall. I've never seen a place like this. When the bell rings to be in class, two hundred kids in the hallway, some of them walking in the direction of their class, most of them not. And at any point during class, there might be forty or fifty people out in the hallway just hanging out, doing whatever. I don't know. It's kind of hard to learn about a curriculum when you're in the hallway. I'm not saying that there's not valuable learning going on in the hallway, but it's not the same learning that we're responsible for.

So, the challenge was, "All right, can we clean up the hallways?" So we came up with this thing called spring cleaning, for like three or four weeks before spring break, where we set up a schedule--. Because everybody's supposed to be doing hall duty, which I'm almost certain is illegal because we're supposed to have a duty-free planning period. Every teacher is supposed to have a duty-free planning period and a duty-free lunch. Now, at Apex, they broke that and they acknowledged that they were breaking that by setting up a rotation where a teacher would have one week each semester where they would monitor a particular

part of the school during lunch, never had to give up my planning period for anything. And if I did give up my planning period to help sub for a teacher that they couldn't find a sub for, I was compensated with a little pass. And if I got enough of the passes, then I could take a workday off and not have it count against my days.

But at Hillside, the notion is that we were assigned forty-five minutes of our planning period every day for a week every other week. So nobody did it. I mean it happened for a while. Some teachers are really--. It's really spotty. Some teachers that saw the value in it and understood why it was happening, committed to it and did it, but it was a losing fight because everybody wasn't doing it. And so the hallways were just a mess and the people who were doing it were getting frustrated and angry with other teachers who weren't doing it. Teachers who weren't doing it were just like, "Why should I do it? It's not going to work." The administration doesn't have any consequences for the folks who don't do it. They don't even know who does and who doesn't do it. So it's just a mess.

So we said, "All right. We'll make this thing voluntary." And we never even spoke to the administration really about how broken their system was, but we said, "What if we set up a system ourselves? Allow people to pick the time they're going to do it. Pick a buddy to do it with, a partner, and pick a part of the building that they feel particularly is important or connected to. Let's try it that way and see if we can do it." So people signed up. They got a buddy. We did a training, made green spring cleaning buttons that everybody could wear, neon green buttons with a little broom on it, and just got out in the hallways, just harassed kids, followed them. "You don't want to go to class? Fine. Where are we going? I'm going with you everywhere you go." All over school, just audacious. For like the three or four weeks before spring break, we did it. And it really made a difference, and people were

looking around and they were seeing other people with the green buttons on, and pointing at the green buttons and saying, "Aw, you're spring cleaning, too?" The kids were like, "Man, when's this spring cleaning going to end?" And we were like, "Never." And so it was cool, but that was kind of--.

I think all organizing has two pieces that are required of it. One, there's a self-help piece. And I'm inspired a lot by the Black Panther Party with this stuff. There's a self-help piece, right? You've got to be able to feed the people in your neighborhood. You've got to police the police. You've got to find out if the kids need shoes. If the kid needs shoes, you get them. So there's one piece that's about, you win the support of people by organizing to get people's needs met. That's good and that's important, but that doesn't necessarily distinguish you very much from the Red Cross or the Boys & Girls Club or something like that. The other piece is you need to make demands on the system itself to change their situations so that you don't even have those needs in the first place, so that your needs are getting met, or you have the opportunity to have your needs met without some kind of grand organizational scheme.

And so it was like let's do this self-help organizing because that's probably all we can get people to go for right now because putting a demand on the administration, people didn't have any confidence that they could win it. People didn't have any confidence that the administration would respond. People were fearful that they would have job repercussions or whatever. So we said, "Okay, let's do a self-help kind of thing." And there was a core of about five or six teachers that were really--. They kind of became like the Victory Friday core. And then the Victory Friday core became the core that organized spring cleaning and now is becoming the core of what we're going to start to try to turn into a school-wide

organization that is democratic in its desire to create space for teachers and other staff members to articulate what we want and what we need and what's going to make our school better. And then have some real representation of our voices from that democratic conversation that happens on a regular basis, hopefully, as we envision it, have some representation that goes and meets with the administration and demands a role in decision making, which is going to be uphill because we're facing the same challenges. We're facing a set of folks who are scared about their jobs, a set of folks who are cynical about the administration, whether or not they'll change anything, set of folks that are cynical about whether or not ordinary people can change anything anyway, a set of folks who are satisfied, a set of folks, in particular older teachers, who think that teachers really shouldn't have a voice anyway because we have way more voice than they used to and so this is better, or what are we griping about? So there's still a lot of the same challenges for anybody who's trying to organize. Anybody who's trying to organize faces a lot of those same challenges. So, I don't know. We'll see. I mean it's different to organize your workplace. That's a different situation than any that I've been in before, but it feels more likely to be meaningful than any organization I've ever done before, have ever had before.

BB: So who are those five core people, their names?

BP: Courtney Waite is one of them. There's a woman named Rhonda Bullock, Yolanda Whitted, Holly Jordan, and that's kind of the inner core. And then there's layers from there. There's a woman named Caroline Snipes who has been involved with the teachers' union, the North Carolina Association of Educators, which is an affiliate of the NEA, the National Education Association, which is the largest teachers' union in the country. She's been involved in NCAE and the Durham local, which is called DAE, Durham

Association of Educators, for a long time. And Ms. Snipes is kind of a key figure in any change that happens in the school. And then there's people who are less active, but are really strong supporters.

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

BP: I'm good.

BB: Okay. So, how about we go back and talk about--. Is it true that the first kind of political organization you felt like you were involved with was in college?

BP: Mmm-hmm.

BB: And so you've talked about some of those, so what are some other really meaningful political organizations that you've been involved with?

BP: Okay, so I guess I'll go maybe first, and talk about Men Against Rape Culture, MARC, which was--. Our idea with the work at North Carolina State, the anti-violence work, was--. You know, there's always this inside outside kind of strategy. So we knew that our program for ending violence on campus or educating around ending violence on campus was different than that of the office that housed our program, which was the Office of Student Health Promotion, which had a very alcohol-centric kind of approach. If you reduce drinking, then you'll reduce sexual violence because of the connection between the two. We also argued that that was not going to cut it, that it wasn't alcohol that raped people.

So, we always knew that, and so we said, "Well, chances are, either the University or this office is going to cut us off at some point. So we have to build an independent base." Our idea was to take the guys that we worked with in this workshop that we were developing, and help them to develop a level of organization that, if they fired me, we could still run it

without the office. And so we called that Men Against Rape Culture. We did a number of different things that were pushing our politics, but still using the resources of the office while we had them. One was we brought Aishah Shahidah Simmons to campus with her film, "No!" "No!" is about sexual violence inside of black communities. Our work at State was very centered on men of color and in particular, black men being kind of at the center of our analysis of leadership. So, we brought that film, and that started a relationship, a friendship that I have Aishah and I've worked with her over the years since. We did that. We did the workshops. We hosted one-day kind of special workshops where we'd do a whole set of programs around things. [Laughter]

And then ultimately, they did get rid of me. I was having trouble getting a teaching job and so I actually applied to be part of the process to find my replacement. So I had begun the process by interviewing people for my job, and then when the first round or two of people didn't work out and I still didn't have a job, I applied for my old job back, and was given a pretty strong impression that I would get it. I think that had to do with a dearth of other candidates at the time. And then when somebody else emerged that came out of the same model, this kind of health promotion, public health background, they quickly moved me aside.

So, our analysis was right. Our timing was off. I think if we had had one more year, Men Against Rape Culture could have sustained itself on that campus. As it was, the organization disappeared because the next person who came in wasn't hip to what we were doing. Men Against Rape Culture became Dasan and I, just being asked to do workshops here and there. We weren't really actively doing much of anything. We'd built up relationships through the North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault and the North

Carolina Coalition Against Domestic Violence, and they hooked us up with community agencies who had heard us talk at--. They'd invite us to their yearly conference and we'd give a workshop or we'd give a talk and then we'd meet other people and they'd have us come down to their local agencies and do a workshop or do a talk. So, for a while, it was like, if people invited us, we'd go. And it was an opportunity to make some money because people would pay us to go. That sounds crass, but it wasn't something that was really on our organizational radar at the time that we could handle. Then we moved to Durham from Raleigh, and we decided, "Well, what would it look like to have a community base and do this work on a community level?" And so, same kind of thing, pulled together a group of guys who we knew from organizing work that we'd gotten hooked up through people who we knew through organizing work.

BB: Who are some of those guys, originally?

BP: Well, I'll name the guys who stuck with it because there was originally a group of about fourteen or fifteen. The idea being that we were going to have a six-month curriculum that I would lead, and then those guys would go out into the community, do workshops, find more guys, do another--. You know, go out, do stuff, come in, train. Go out, do stuff, come in, train. It ended up being about eight guys that met weekly for two years and those guys were: Keith McAdoo, Theo Leubke, Sam Hummel, Tony Macias, Aiden Graham, Nick Shepard, Phoenix Brangman, who goes by Elias now, actually, I'm sure what Elias, what last name he uses.

BB: Phoenix what?

BP: Brangman. B-R-A-N-G-M-A-N. And Bob Pleasance. I think that's everybody. People came into that work for a variety of different reasons. Some people

wanted a community of men to be in relationship with. Some people wanted some friends. Some people wanted to use it as a political base to do anti-violence work among men. Some people wanted to have a community that they were accountable to to challenge their own ideas around violence and patriarchy and racism, et cetera. And so, the idea was, again, those folks would become this political organization, would go out and do political education, then maybe even develop kind of campaign-based sort of stuff. In some ways it worked out. In some ways it didn't. There was increased activity going out and doing workshops over those two years from what Dasan and I had been doing prior, but because people went into it for such a variety of reasons, it became a support group, it became--. There was a lot of tug in different directions around what people wanted and needed from the space. So, it was a journey, and the transformation that people underwent, a personal transformation that people underwent and our collective transformation around race, around gender, around sexual orientation, around violence, around class, I mean we just, we went into it. We told our stories. We argued with each other. We walked out on each other. We came back in. It was intense. It was an intense two years.

I think politically one of most important things that happened as a result of it was that when, in 2006, a black woman who was a student at North Carolina Central University and was making a living as a stripper, was invited to a party with the Duke [University] lacrosse team, or a number of members of the Duke lacrosse team, and left the party alleging that she had been racially harassed and sexually assaulted, there was a community--. There was a nationwide response.

BB: Hold on just a second. Let that siren pass, okay.

BP: Can we--? Is it possible to stop this for a second?

BB: Yes.

[RECORDER IS TURNED OFF AND BACK ON]

BP: So, there was a national response and actually an international response, and Durham became this sort of media center of the world for a short period of time. And it was just this cauldron of every conversation around race, class, gender, history, violence, Duke, Durham, North Carolina Central. I mean it was like the perfect storm. It was unbelievable how all of these different factors came together.

BB: Okay, will you say that part again? It was the piece about the perfect storm and listed the things, sorry.

BP: Yeah, so, it was conversation we'd all been waiting for. It was race. It was class. It was gender. It was sex work. It was Duke. It was Durham. It was North Carolina Central. It was violence. God, it was literally everything at once. And without a response from community members, the thing might've stayed real quiet, but community members, which included some of the folks who were alumni from Hip Hop Against Racist War, which I'll talk more about in a second, but I think we've already mentioned it. So, people like Manju Rajendran and some others, Dannette Sharpley, were some of the people that were really instrumental in calling the thing out and calling attention to it, this woman's allegations that they were attempting to essentially sweep under the rug. And then, also part of--.

[Brief interruption due to conversation between interviewer and interviewer's son]

BB: Attempting to sweep under the rug?

BP: Sure. So, they were attempting to sweep the conversation under the rug and because of some of those folks who'd built relationships with through a variety of

different work over the years, called it out, called a number of other community members to join in that response. And also, in the first couple of days, people that were really key parts of pulling this thing into the national limelight were guys that were members of MARC, in particular, Sam Hummel and Theo Leubke were really at the center of that conversation. Dasan was, as well. And so after a couple of days, there became a call for a woman of color-centered and, you know, essentially black woman-centered, but that was one of the challenges of what this group became, a group called UBUNTU, which was the name--. It's a southern African Bantu language group word that essentially means. "I am because you are." This notion of reciprocity, of accountability, that we're all tied to each other inextricably, that was given to the process of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, post-apartheid, was the name chosen for this group. And so when UBUNTU, well, what would become UBUNTU, came together, the guys from this weekly group, this MARC group, played a pretty big role in helping that thing happen. And I'm pretty proud of that, that we had gotten to this point where this group of guys, who at that point was majority white, even though the group didn't start off that way, was able to play this role and support role in helping to develop this women of color-centered organization and do it, you know, with mistakes, but appropriately, I think.

So, MARC and UBUNTU kind of worked hand-in-hand. A of MARC guys were in UBUNTU and we did programming together. We upped our level of activity. We did more writing. We did more workshops. We did more speaking. We developed--. There was a pamphlet that we'd been working on over a couple of years that had started off with Dasan and I about, that was based out of our experiences and our analysis around supporting people who were survivors of sexual violence. We'd kind of put together this document and we

ended up sharing it with UBUNTU folks and refining it and re-editing it and going back and forth and ended up with this really great pamphlet that we use as a resource today. “Man, you’re in a relationship with somebody’s who’s a survivor? Boom. Here you go. Here’s some things to think about.”

BB: What’s the name of the pamphlet?

BP: I think it’s just called “Tips for Supporting a Survivor of Sexual Violence.”

BB: Hang on a second. Okay.

BP: Yeah, so I’m really proud of that. And the weekly group, a number of the members moved, and there were some tough things that we needed to step away from each other on for a little bit. So, the weekly group doesn’t exist anymore. MARC doesn’t necessarily function that strongly these days or much at all. I got a request to speak at this program they have at UNC. So I just got an email request the other day for some program to come speak about gender at some diversity program at UNC just the other day, so it exists in that other people can use it as a resource. Maybe one day it’ll find some legs and find a purpose again, but I’ve kind of given up as that being a central core part of the work that I do, and not because I think it’s unimportant, but because I think that, in terms of, I think that there has to be really active, anti-violence organization among women happening, and have a men’s group be accountable to that group and be developing strategic campaigns around issues and not just an education group. In order to invest my energy in it, that’s kind of what I’d be interested in, and that’s not really what’s happening right now. For the time being, MARC is sort of on the shelf, but the changes and the influences that it had on all us and the

relationships that we all still have with each other are not going anywhere. So, MARC is (0:44:16, second file).

BB: As in they're staying, as in not progressing, but as in they're tight.

BP: Yeah, yeah, and progressing in different ways, but yeah. If something went down again, we'd find each other. If there was a reason for us to exist as an entity again, we'd find each other and we'd make it happen.

BB: A reason to exist as what? An entity, I get it, okay.

BP: Yeah.

BB: How did MARC and UBUNTU deal with the challenges of the woman's story and how some things that she alleged seemed perhaps not to have taken place and others did? Because that's the grand critique nationally. So where did you all land? As details changed, how did you all respond?

BP: We stayed out of it. To be honest, it was like people wanted to make the conversation about what had happened or not happened in Durham somehow unique, somehow exceptional. And our goal was to say, "No. This is not unique. This is not exceptional. This relationship, this relationship that has been alleged here, between white men and black women is as old as African women being kidnapped and brought to the Americas." That was our thing, to put this in an historical context, a. B, to say, irrespective of details changing, this testimony, that testimony, when people say they've been sexually assaulted, they are to be believed. And so, yeah, as the story changed, folks would then--. UBUNTU's circle's say, "Man, I don't know. I'm not sure if I believe this story anymore or this changed or--." And the way that we kind of held unity through that was, it doesn't matter. This case is not the case. This case was the--.

I'm searching for the right metaphor but it's escaping me, but this case is kind of like the one that we're all seeing. It's the tip of the iceberg, but our goal is to go down underneath and pull the whole iceberg up and say, "You know what? We can't talk about the tip without talking about the whole iceberg." And so that was our program, was to talk about the iceberg, to talk about the relationship of white supremacy to sexual violence and gendered violence, because there was also a pretty powerful challenge that came from within the ranks of UBUNTU to explore gender in a way that was, I think, challenging to the dominant paradigm around how anti-violence conversations work. Anti-violence conversations work in the United States in this very flattened, men rape women. Biologically born and lived men rape biologically born and lived women, and that's it. And the challenge is to complicate without holding, without changing that that's the central reality. So the central reality is that what I've just said is true, and that sexual violence is predominately a tool that biologically born and identified males rape biologically born and identified females, and it's a tool of patriarchy. However, transgender people's experience with violence is off the charts and is unique and needs to be explored in ways that are frightening to the traditional women's movement and the anti-violence movement. Men rape men, and homophobia obscures that, and patriarchy obscures that, and the prison system obscures that, and violence against children obscures that. Women commit violence against men. Women commit violence against women. All of these things, right? That was one of the biggest challenges.

So when transgender people from within the ranks of UBUNTU started to say, "Hey, ya'll need to check this out," it was hard because a lot of the people weren't ready to let go of this central reality of men and women in these sort of traditionally held senses of that's how

violence goes down, while there were other folks that were really ready to broaden the conversation and say, “Hey, if we’re talking about race as a complicating factor in sexual violence, then why not gender?” And then there were some people that weren’t even ready to complicate the conversation around race. So this case was about a black woman and white men, and can we really talk about black men and black women? Can we talk about Latina women’s experiences? Can we talk about Indian women’s experiences? There was just, I mean challenges from every quarter. What does this look like for lesbian women? What does this look like for gay men? Everywhere, sex work. How is the economy structured that this women ends up doing this work in the first place? How does that make her more vulnerable? Why do a lot of transgender and queer people get pushed into that kind of work? Man, that thing was just dense. I don’t even remember what the hell the question was that you asked that got me on this.

BB: I was just asking about the--.

BP: Oh, the case, the case, right. So, our whole goal was to say, “We’re not talking about the case. We’re talking about the experiences of black women in this country. We’re talking about the experiences of people who are marginalized, and we’re talking about the ways that sexual violence is used to continue to marginalize people and re-create systems of oppression.” So, a lot of people weren’t real excited about that. Even people that were allies of ours wanted to talk about the case, wanted to demand prosecution and even imprisonment, which is deep, because some of the folks in UBUNTU are prison abolitionists and would say, “Absolutely not. Prison is where sexual violence happens. So sending someone to prison, where sexual violence happens, is not an answer for ending sexual violence.” And then, oh, man, it was complicated, complicated, complicated, complicated.

There were a lot of folks on the outside that I don't think got what we were trying to do, some because they didn't want to, and some because they weren't there for the intensity of this.

And this thing was intense. It was people re-living their own experiences as survivors, people having to confront their experiences as people who have perpetrated some form of violence or another, and that wasn't just men that were in the room. That was women that were in the room, too. Crying, and fighting, and shit-talking. It was, man--. But that's a community that, it was sort of forged by fire, and so again, just like with MARC, people came to it for a lot of different reasons. Some folks wanted to heal and healing looked like lots of different things. Some folks wanted to organize and organizing looked like a lot of different things. Some folks wanted to make art and that looked like a lot of different things. People wanted to educate and that looked like a lot of different things. And so, essentially, the decentralization and the competing interests, I think that we never were able to talk about how they could all fit together, and people could move strategically forward together in an accountable way, kind of led to the demise of UBUNTU as something that existed as a regularly meeting, functioning, programming body. But again, that's our family in Durham. The UBUNTU folks, that's our folks. And whether we still call them UBUNTU or whatever, that's who we party with. That's who, when we talk about political organizing we want to do, that's the people we talk about being at the core of it. That's the people who we rely on to hold us down when shit gets hard. I'm moving this week. It's going to be UBUNTU folks that were involved in UBUNTU that are going to help me move. Same thing as MARC. When you go through that much with folks, that doesn't disappear.

That doesn't disappear. It gets complicated. It gets muddy, and it gets angry. There's unprincipled shit that happens, but that's your family.

BB: So, what about some other organizations that have been really meaningful to you?

BP: Well, there's Hip Hop Against Racist War, which was kind of an outgrowth of our work at North Carolina State of the folks who came together to do some of the work around racism on campus. Again, this was Yolanda, and Dasan, and Angela, and I. And then, starting to connect after September 11th with some other folks, like Stanley Richards and Manju once again, and Snehal Patel and Tsahai Tafari and Denise Vandacruz and a whole set of folks that were in Durham, working with artists like Shirlette Ammons, and even people that we had just developed relationships with as being hip-hop heads that'd been living in Raleigh for a long time and just going to the spots and knowing this guy who's the MC and this guy who's the DJ and, "Hey, we're doing this event. Will you bring your turntables out and play some records at it?" "Hey, we're doing this thing. Can you come out? And we're going to have a freestyle battle about oil and we want you to judge it," or something like that. It was kind of this way to popularize the work that we were doing through the cultural spaces that we existed in.

BB: Hang on a second.

[Interruption due to conversation between interviewer and interviewer's child]

BB: Okay, so, cultural spaces.

BP: Right. I think we were kind of--. Well, I'll speak for myself. I was really inspired by the historical example of the work against Prop [Proposition] 21 in California, which was, what was it called? Like the youth something. It was about the

furthering of these really repressive three strikes laws and anti-gang stuff and it was kind of a continuation of this process of turning California from what had been the most impressive educational institution in the world to the most impressive penal institution in the world. The organizing around that had taken this form of guerrilla hip-hop, roll up into somebody's community with a truck, some turntables on the back, pick up a mic, throw some records on, people come around, and you start talking about what Prop 21 is, and how you need to fight against it.

We had done a lot of that style of organizing when we'd been organizing around racial justice stuff. We'd pull a truck up onto the Brickyard [at NCSU], park it under a building where there were classes going on and start playing records, and the cops would come. We'd want the cops to come, because if the cops came, then more kids would come to see what we were doing. And while we're standing there talking to the cops, they're telling us we've got to turn the record off. We're turning it down a little bit, passing out flyers, telling people what's going on, the cop will be trying, "Back up," pass out some more flyers, and the cop comes and kick us off. So we'd go, we'd leave, go someplace else. This kind of tradition of organizing that developed out of a hip-hop generation of folks in California had served as the basis for a lot of what we were doing. And then we went to this big anti-war demonstration in D.C. in January of 2003, before the invasion of Iraq. So we'd been doing this stuff, and actually we had a show. The name came from a show that we did on a campus, I think maybe right after September 11th, or it was somewhere in the midst of post-Afghanistan invasion, pre-Iraq War invasion, we did a show. We called it Hip-Hop Against Racist War because we had found ourselves in a lot of organizing spaces. A lot of the really early, post-September 11th organizing in the Triangle was popping off in Chapel Hill. And I

was driving out there every day, thirty minutes, every day, to be in these meetings, rooms full of really smart, talented, well-meaning white people who just were not making any connections, were not understanding the need to have this conversation be about something a little bit broader than just the invasion of Afghanistan. Who would this have implications for? Where was the real foundation of this happening from? And every day since, facing these challenges around race, around gender, and having this group of people marginalize us, tell us we were causing trouble, ignore us, get mad at us. Finally it was like, look, I can't--. We can't keep going back to this well. We need to be organizing the people that we're around, organizing the communities that we're in, the people that we spend our time with.

BB: And what were those organizations on the UNC campus at that time?

There was North Carolinians Against the War.

BP: There was the campaign--. This thing became the foundations of the Campaign to End the Cycle of Violence [CECV]. This is probably the week after September 11th, and so it was impressive, the quickness with which these folks moved. And again, no hard feelings against these folks. I think that they stepped into a vacuum. I think a lot of people were unsure about how to proceed and how to fight what was coming. And they bravely stepped out. I mean I would argue that their bravery was enhanced by a lot of protection of privilege that they enjoyed.

BB: What do you mean by that protection of privilege?

BP: They were students in Chapel Hill or they were people who worked as staff in progressive non-profit organizations. They weren't going to get kicked out of school. They weren't going to lose those their jobs, because this work was connected to their jobs, was part of an analysis that their jobs would've shared. They weren't--. They had time to be

doing organizing. A lot of the students weren't the kind of students that are working forty hours a week and going to school. So, a lot of class, a lot of space within their work, and then ultimately, the way that whiteness interacts with all that. In this country, whiteness often equates into a relative class privilege, so that was kind of what this crew looked like. So, they kind of stepped out and created a context in which a lot of people could follow, but it wasn't a context that was going to work for us at NC State. It wasn't the kind of folks that we were around, and so we started our own thing. At the demonstration in D.C. that was put on, god, that must have been five hundred thousand people there. I mean that thing was unbelievable. We brought a bus up of students from NC State because we had had this event called Hip Hop Against Racist War, and our thing was like, "Let's get kids of color, let's get working class kids, let's get hip-hop kids from campus to go to this demonstration," because that's not who anybody else was targeting. And we filled up a whole bus.

BB: And you say "we," this is you, Dasan, and Yolanda, mostly, Manju?

BP: Manju, Angela. I mean Manju was in Durham, and I think maybe at the time was going to Chapel Hill, so she was a little bit--. We weren't working directly with her at this point on some of that stuff. If my memory's correct, this was very NC State focused and Raleigh focused. So, we brought this bus up. And Ajamu Dillahunt and Rakiya Dillahunt were on the bus and a couple of other folks from the community in Raleigh, but for the most part, it was NC State students who had never been to a demonstration before, would've never thought they were going to be doing something like this. And so, we got up there and we're waiting, and oh, god, it's frigid. It was so cold that day, and so we were waiting for the speeches to start, the rally to start, the beginning of the thing. People just started, just got in a circle and just started freestyling about the war. If somebody laid down

a beat, then people just started tossing stuff in. And there were kids walking by. There was this kid from D.C. and he stepped in and he started rhyming, and then we were done, he was like, "Aw, man. I never thought I'd hear somebody rapping at a political rally. I'm from D.C. and this thing never happens." So he hung out with us for the rest of the day, and other people that we met hung out with us for the rest of the day.

And then we're sort of marching, and there's just this, like, "No justice, no peace. No justice, no peace," and it doesn't match up with how you're even walking. And then, "The people divided will never be defeated," or whatever, or, "united will never be divided," and it's just like, ugh, god. And looking around at these kids that are with us who are just like, "This is boring." So we just started walking along and we were like, "Oh." We'd take a George Clinton song, like "Atomic Dog," and we'd say, the lyrics say, "Why must I be like that? Why must I chase the cat? Ain't nothing but the dog in me." So we'd kind of be walking along, saying, "Why must I be like that? Why must I--?" And we're sort of trying to walk to it, as we're doing it, like five or ten of us. And then we'd said, "Why must Bush be like that? Why must he attack Iraq?" So, "Why must Bush be like that? Why must he attack Iraq?" And then everyone's like, "Oh, ain't nothing but the Bush in him." So we say, "Why must Bush be like that? Why must he attack Iraq? Ain't nothing but the Bush in him." And so now we're walking to this cadence, and so we'd do that for a while, and then there's some young folks that are over here and they start walking with us. And they were digging it. And there were some older people who would kind of smile at us, and they knew some George Clinton songs. They'd kind of give us the thumbs up. They were bored by the rest of the shit, too, so they start walking with us. And then it'd be a Black Star song, or

then--. I mean we even did J Lo [Jennifer Lopez] songs. [Laughter] We just had fun with it, and it made it a much more meaningful experience for us.

Again, no pretense that we were the only people in the world doing that, because it was hip-hop generation kids who were bored with the other shit, and punk rock kids that were bored with the other shit. They were doing it all over the country. And we even--. Turns out, Stanley Richards, who was a friend of ours who was living in Chapel Hill at the time or Durham at the time, he was with another crew of folks that was doing the same thing in D.C. on the same day, but wasn't with us. It was just kind of this thing that was happening around the time period. So then we came back and we started trying to organize as a group of folks. The Durham folks and the folks from Raleigh got hooked up with each other and started to organize together and started to participate in the North Carolina Peace and Justice Coalition, which is another thing I'll talk about in a second. And so, February 15, which was like this worldwide day of protests against the invasion of Iraq, trying to stop the invasion of Iraq, in fact, I think worldwide put something like eight to ten million people on the streets.

BB: February?

BP: Fifteenth.

BB: Fifteenth. 2000 and--?

BP: 2003, because the invasion was March 19, I think.

BB: And this is, "The World Says No to War," was the name of the--.

BP: Right, and so there was a big--. The North Carolina Peace and Justice Coalition organized this big demonstration to be held in Raleigh as the North Carolina expression of this worldwide movement. And I wasn't really involved with the coalition much at that point. There was really smart folks, like Bridgette Burge, Mandy Carter,

Andrew Pearson, Barbara Zelter I think was probably involved at that point. I know Ajamu Dillahunt was involved at that point, Ed Whitfield. I know Theresa El-Amin, I don't know if she was involved at that point or whether came a little bit later, but Theresa became somebody who was involved in that. I'm sure there's tons of names that I'm forgetting right now, but those were the folks that kind of bottom-lined that demonstration.

So we said, "Okay, let's do the same thing. Let's have a march that goes from NC State to downtown," because people were supposed to meet downtown and then have a march. So, young folks, we've always got to have our own thing, so we said, "All right, yeah, we're going to participate, but we want to march down there ourselves and bring some folks from our campus down there." So, Stanley and I made a little mix tape and we wrote some chants and put the chants down on some paper and played the mix tape so that people would know the songs, if they didn't know the songs already. We kind of grafittied up the whole march route that we were going to take, so that as we're walking along, people could look down and say, "Aw, yeah, these are hip-hop kids doing this."

We almost had a little showdown with the police, and we kind of went back. We kind of danced with the police a little bit. They wanted to change our march route because there was this nationalist gathering that was kind of like a "support the war" thing that was happening, and they wanted to limit the amount of interaction that happened between the anti-war folks and the folks that were looking for the invasion, under--. I'm not really sure what the terms were that those folks were projecting, but of course, we wanted to interact with those folks. [Laughter] And the police didn't want us to. They tried to change our march route and we'd kind of go a different road than they wanted us to take, and we'd finally got down to this one street corner and it was like, "Man, do we do this? Do we go at

‘em?’” Because they were all on horses, blocking the street, and all this kind of stuff, and we just decided, “Now let’s go join the rest of march.”

Went down and it’s like eight thousand people in downtown Raleigh. It’s like the most unbelievable thing I’ve ever seen. Yeah, it was phenomenal. We all wore red shirts, so this was kind of like the birth, in a real way, of Hip Hop Against Racist War as an organization. We spent the next couple of years participating in the North Carolina Peace and Justice Coalition, helping to build the North Carolina Peace and Justice Coalition, participating in United for Peace & Justice, which was at the time, and I’m sure still, although it’s lost a lot of energy, the largest national anti-war coalition that existed. I was actually a representative of Hip Hop Against Racist War on the national steering committee for a period of probably two, two-and-a-half years. And we participated at the first national conference of UFPJ as an organization. So we were trying to put our politics--.

BB: Hang on a second.

BP: Yeah.

[Brief interruption due to conversation between interviewer and interviewer’s child]

BP: So we were trying to bring our cultural stuff and our politics, which was explicitly anti-racist, anti-imperialist, feminist, to the anti-war movement. And I think in some ways, we were pretty successful in shifting the conversation. We weren’t doing it alone. There was a number of folks that were doing the same thing that we were working in alliance with, both at the local and at the national level, but I think we were able to participate in moving that conversation significantly. And then as young people tend to do, we kind of lost our strategic focus sometimes. We had all kinds of personal drama with each other, and we ended up going our separate ways, but again, that’s family. That’s folks that

we will always look to to support one another, and some of those same folks became the folks that were in MARC, that were in UBUNTU.

The North Carolina Peace & Justice Coalition was really instrumental for me, in terms of learning coalition politics, and learning how to try to balance sometimes competing perspectives in a room. I think that the North Carolina Peace & Justice Coalition was a really instrumental part of the national anti-war conversation, just like Hip Hop Against Racist War was impacting, in terms of introducing anti-imperialist politics and anti-racist stuff, and shifting the conversation culturally. I think the North Carolina Peace & Justice Coalition was really instrumental in developing and supporting the development of a military personnel-focused wing of the anti-war movement, because North Carolina is this kind of haven for the military.

We've got all these great big bases, the two big Marine bases down by the coast, and the great big Army base, and the great big Air Force base. We decided that were go into Fayetteville and we were going to have our big yearly, annual demonstrations to mark the invasion of Iraq in Fayetteville, I think in 2004 and 2005 and I think they've had demonstrations there since. But 2004, 2005 were the big ones. I participated in the development of that coalition over those couple of years, sometimes in a fairly minor way and sometimes in a pretty significant way. I was one of the two co-chairs of the 2005 demonstration that became a national demonstration. My role as the co-chair in that process, as I saw it, was to tie in the national piece because I was on the steering committee of United for Peace & Justice, really pushed hard. Try to develop a Southern-based politics and then push kind of a working-class base within the anti-war movement by focusing on military personnel. We worked with Military Families Speak Out. We worked with Veterans for

Peace, and then the movement of folks, which became, in Fayetteville actually, Iraq Veterans Against the War to say, "Let's make Fayetteville be a national demonstration and let's really focus on getting resources there and people there to support the fact that this is movement that exists within the military, as well as folks connected to the military."

And again, that was a tremendous learning experience. Folks who wanted to go into a military town and have one of the major slogans of the campaign be, "Support the Iraqi resistance," which was hard to try to beat back because we felt like it was inappropriate, but at the same time, pushing folks in the military town to not just have this fairly patriotic, nationalist, kind of "Support our troops, bring them home," to push their program a little bit that and to a more anti-imperialist kind of realm. And then, how do we work a critique around the military and gender into it? We ended up having this drag queen troupe perform because one of their members was a transgender man who'd just recently come out of the Air Force.

BB: The Cuntry Kings.

BP: The Cuntry Kings. And there was a struggle to get some of the more conservative elements in the coalition to support that. So, yeah, it was just a lot of back and forth, a lot of long days and nights. I think phone bills for those couple of months--. I think I had to like double my minutes that I was getting, and I still ended up with phone bills like in the four or five hundred dollar range. And I was doing this while I was teaching full-time. Yeah, but working with Ed Whitfield was great. Ed was the other co-facilitator of the progress, co-chair of the process, and he just has this real slow, even wit and wisdom about him that's really, that I learned a lot from, because I tend to get anxious and I tend to get kind of excitable. And so I'd call, "Oh, my god." At base, I'm a drama queen, sort of a gossip,

so something would go on between two people and it'd be a problem. And I'd call Ed, and I'd say, "Oh, Ed. This is terrible, such-and-such." Ed would just kind of say, "Well," and then he'd sort of lay out something.

I think the quote from Ed that I'll never forget was--. There was another member of the coalition who I had a difficult time relating to, and she made a comment to me one night in the middle of a criticism about my style. Well, she said, "Well, you know, Bryan, this is organizing. It's not rocket science." And it's funny because Ed is this physicist and a mathematician and probably one of the smartest people I've ever been around. You'd sit down for dinner and he's showing you how to prove the Pythagorean theorem with a napkin. So I called up Ed, and I said, "Oh, Ed. Here's what this person said to me, said, 'Organizing's not a rocket science.' And I'm just so dismayed." And he just kind of paused and he said, "Well, Bryan, this person you were talking to was right. Organizing is not rocket science. Rocket science is easy, and if organizing was rocket science, we'd have won by now." It was funny because it was just sort of this perspective, you know, but also this perspective coming from somebody who I know could do rocket science, which is not what he was implying. He was implying that people have figured rocket science out, but he's actually figured rocket science out. So it was just like, damn. He just brought this extra piece to it, his whole humanity to the picture.

BB: He says that in his oral history. He talks about it, physics and astrophysics. I can remember him saying that, "Organizing, that's the hardest of them, to deal with the depths and complexities of humanity and change. That's the stuff."

BP: Yeah, and it's so reassuring to be a twenty-five-year-old kid or however old I was at the time, maybe twenty-four, and just be working with this guy who has seen all

this stuff and who just says smart shit like that, and just says, “Bryan, we’ll get there.” And Andrew Pearson, who was on some a hundred and twenty hour work weeks at the time, that dude was sort of breakneck, and I’m a bit of workaholic myself, so it was really important to have a partner in that. And then, I don’t know if the mic is going to reflect the color change in the cheeks, but working with you, working with Bridgette Burge, and just like--. Bridgette was always--. Should I be talking be talking about you as Bridgette or should I be talking about you as you?

BB: [Laughter] I don’t know.

BP: You’re like, “Neither, please.” [Laughter] But to work with you and really learn this patience and this, “Yeah, what that person did was messed up, but let’s think about where that might’ve been coming from or how to deal with that from a different place because we’ve got to be together at the end of this thing.” I learned a lot from that. I can remember--. I don’t even remember what it was we talked about, but I remember sitting on the street with our backs against the wall in Fayetteville the day after the demonstration, running down something, just sitting there for like a half an hour talking and just feeling like it was one of the most important conversations I’d have that whole weekend, of just getting some perspective from you. So those I think are kind of the big things in terms of what people would call social movement organizations.

And then, of course, this is the area of the tape where things get maybe complicated. So if you’re someone who’s a representative of Durham public schools or any other North Carolina public institution, go ahead and turn off the tape now, but I’m also a member--. And all of this happened organically in the same way that MARC has a relationship to the North Carolina Peace and Justice Coalition, which has a relationship to Hip Hop Against

Racist War, which has a relationship to UBUNTU. I also became a member of Freedom Road Socialist Organization [FRSO], which is a national socialist organization that has its root in a couple of different trends within, that came out of it the fractures of the New Communist movement in the '70s and in the '80s.

So it comes out of a trend that really prioritizes what's called "The National Question," in communist terms, so this notion of oppressed nationalities, different groups of people inside of states. So as the United States developed as a state, there were different nationalities of people, American Indian people that were part of that state, but not part of that state, that were second-class citizens within that state, same thing with African people, same thing with Mexican people as the United States snatched up half of what used to be Mexico, or the state of Hawaii, indigenous Hawaiians as imperialism swallowed up, so emphasizing that you need to hold "The National Question" central, which a lot of socialists and communists and anarchist organizations and movements have sort of said, "Oh, well, questions of race or nationality obfuscate the central question, which is class." And so, Freedom Road comes out of a trend that says, "No, it doesn't. These things are inextricable and you have to talk about them together. And in fact, you also have to talk about patriarchy and you have to talk about how these things intersect with each other and interact with each other." And so, that's one trend that comes out of--.

And another trend is of--. I have to sneeze. [Sneezes] Is of something called (0:27:16, third file) foundation, which is the notion that there are people inside of the organization--. The organization's belief is that there needs to be a political apparatus in order to make the transition into a revolutionary period, that we're going to need a political party or an organization, whatever the language that you look at. And that's up for debate,

but the idea that you need a political apparatus, one that might elect people, one that might work to get people elected, but one that also supports and sustains the development of theory, the development of mass movements, the development of revolutionary leadership in those mass movements. And that kind of becomes a clearinghouse, a space for revolutionary people to develop a long-term strategic program to win, because ultimately we're not fighting, at least I'm not, I'm not fighting to change the discourse. I'm not fighting to express my righteous anger. I'm fighting to win.

BB: What does "win" mean?

BP: Win means the kind of world that we talked about in the beginning where people who do the work decide, make the decisions about the resources and the work, that people who live on the land decide how the land gets used, justice. So winning is people have the shit they need. So I'm not fighting just to be mad. I'm not fighting just because I'm disaffected by my bourgeoisie white upbringing and I just need to rebel or some shit. You know what I mean? That's not why I'm in this. I'm in this to win, and so the idea that we need a political apparatus to make that win possible and that Freedom Road is not that political apparatus, is not that party, but that we can play a role in helping to build that party or those parties that will work together. And so, out of the mess of the '70s and the '80s and Communist movements going from two hundred members to ten members to five groups that each have two people in it all saying that they are the revolutionary party, that they are the vanguard. Freedom Road would say that we are an organization that is focused on helping to make the transition happen. And that it's not enough to just take the existing socialist groups, combine them together, and say, "Now we have a party," but that we actually have to transform those organizations and our own organization in the process. So these

organizations need to be working class-led, majority women, majority people of color, oppressed nationalities, so that in this process of bringing these groups together to form a new Left, that you have to transform who's at the center of that. And so, those are the kinds of trends out of which Freedom Road comes in the '80s.

I get to Freedom Road through just some folks that I worked with that were around that said, "Hey, what do you think about socialism?" And so I asked them to tell me what socialism was, and they were saying things like, "Well, that we want a world where the people who do the work get to decide about it." So, "Okay, I like that." "That we think that there's going to have to be some social transformation so that black people can see justice in the United States or that American Indian people can see justice or that women have these human rights that should be respected." "So, okay, that all sounds good." "And that we don't think that we're going to get there spontaneously, that there's probably going to have to be some kind of state that serves as a transition before we can get to that point." I said, "Okay, because I can't imagine how we can get to that point from where we are right now without some kind of real concentrated transition, so all right, yeah, I'm a socialist." It was really like that.

Like I said, I didn't sit down and read Marx and then go out looking for a communist organization. It was relationships. It was my family. It was my folks that I was working with that kind of just kept putting this stuff in my hand and saying, "What'd you think about this?" And then when they got me to say, "Yeah, I probably am a communist, right?" And then they said, "Well, an independent communist is a contradiction in terms." "Well, you're right." And they said, "Well, why don't you be part of an organization?" I said, "Okay." And so, it really happened as simply as that. Again, going back all the way to growing up on

a military base and kind of feeling what a socialist state might look like, in a much scarier way than what I would actually envision it being, but getting to know what some of the basics would be, and just this lifetime of experiences that had prepared me to say, “Yeah, that makes sense.” It wasn’t a deep, profound thing for me to say, “Yeah, I’m a revolutionary.”

BB: So it sounds like you use the terms socialist, communist, and revolutionary sort of interchangeably just in the last couple minutes.

BP: I actually--. Okay, so do you want me to repeat that question?

BB: Yes, or let me ask one, I guess, and then you can. Do you see a difference between socialism, communism, being a revolutionary? What are the distinctions for you? Because it sounded like you were using those terms interchangeably.

BP: Okay, so the distinctions that I would make between the language of socialist, communist, and revolutionary, in some contexts, I wouldn’t make a distinction. There’s not like some litmus test. Somebody says one thing and I assume they mean this, and so they’re my enemy or--. You know what I mean? Or they’re in a different place than I am. I think we get in trouble a lot with language and assuming what other people mean about it, so it’s probably good that you asked that. I think that when I say revolutionary, I mean somebody who doesn’t think that we can change the society using it as it exists, so that we can make a nicer, kinder capitalism. Yeah, we probably can.

In Europe, they have these social democracies and they have capitalism, and people are better cared for, but people are still getting exploited. People still don’t have access to all the things that they need, and the fundamental piece that there is somebody making money off of some work that I do and they didn’t do. And the only difference between me and that person is that they own something and I don’t. That’s wrong. And so, I’m not a Social

Democrat. I'm a revolutionary because I think that capitalism has to go. White supremacy--. We can't make a nicer, more diverse society without eliminating white supremacy. We're not going to end violence against women until we end a system called patriarchy that says that men are more valuable than women, and that there are only two boxes of genders and that everybody has to fit into one or the other. We're not going to reform that. To build a revolutionary party, we're going to have to reform a lot of that stuff along the way. That's the stuff we fight against right now because we're not in a revolutionary period. We're in like the exact opposite right now. So yeah, we're going to have to fight against some of those, get a law changed here and there to win something to make people's lives easier, but that's not the end. I'm a revolutionary because that stuff has to go, so that's revolutionary.

Communist because I believe in the end product and this idea that we don't necessarily need this thing called a state to mediate how we relate to one another, that we can respect one another; we can love one another; we can respect the earth; we can have meaningful work. All of the stuff that I said in the beginning, that we can have that for ourselves and we don't need somebody to tell us how to do it, that we can mediate our own conflicts, and that we can exist as human beings, as human beings ought to exist in concert with an environment that sustains and nurtures us and that we don't destroy.

I say socialist because the other competing, or some would say competing or whatever, but the other sort of dominant revolutionary ideology would be anarchism, and anarchism says that you can go from where we are right now to what I just described as communism, and that the buying in in any way to the notion of a revolutionary state, of a state as a process that could help that transition, is not correct, because when you have the state, you reinforce a hierarchy that says that some people have control and some people

don't. And you can't make--. A revolutionary state isn't real because it's not actually revolutionary because it's just replacing one system of power with another. And I'm probably simplifying that, but for me, I don't see how it's possible for us to go from here to there without some kind of intermediary state, and so I use the language of socialism, because socialism is that state. Socialism is a state that is organized to put power in the hands of working-class people, and in the kind of state that I'm talking about, that would be working-class people, women, people of color, to create the kinds of conditions where we can begin to make that transformation, where we don't have to rely on some corporation to give us our food, where the state can utilize its resources to help us learn how to grow the food that we need and distribute the food that we need, and then give us the reins that we can do it on our own.

Again, it's not like some benevolent people someplace else. A revolutionary state, in my mind, is us. We participate in the process. Like in Venezuela, they're creating these local units where people are deciding on local budgets, where there's a participation of all the people in a place in what the budget of that place looks like. And these are people who'd never had the right to do that in the previous Venezuelan state, but now they get to do that. Again, a Zapatista may frown on this, but they've created these good government juntas, where local people are participating. Everybody participates in the creation of the policies and the rules. And I think it's those kinds of institutions, those pre-revolutionary, we create the kinds of conditions that we need, that we need to start developing, and in my mind, in the United States of America, that's going to require some kind of state apparatus because there's so much to undo.

And the other piece that sort of concerns me about anarchist stuff is, well if you kick the corporation out of this community and there's no instrument of power like a state that's on your team, what keeps the corporation from coming back in and taking over all over again? So that's why I use the language of socialism, but I'm down with anarchists who are about organization. I'm not down with a lot of socialists who about a lot of hierarchy, and so I usually use the language for myself of communism because my thing is the end, the end product, but I think it's gonna--. We're a long way away from the end product.

BB: Jacob, Jake, come here, honey. I always forget to take a couple pictures that he takes. (0:41:45) I'm going to get him to take a couple of us while we finish up here, because I've got to get him to the doctor soon. And then we do need to do a third one because I still have a--. I think it'll be short.

BP: Because I talk too much.

BB: No. Because it's great. [Talking to Jacob Burge] Will you take a couple pictures of us? I always forget to take pictures during the interview. Chocolate, evidence, evidence. [Laughter]

JACOB BURGE: That's ravioli.

BB: Oh, okay. The digital camera's by the computer.

JB: Can I put it on record?

BB: No, let's not do video. Let's do, just un-zoom it a little bit, too, so you can get both of us, but not close-ups of me. Un-zoom it. Okay, all right. [Speaking to Bryan Proffitt] So what's the worry about being known--?

JB: It's not. You can't zoom in or around.

BB: Un-zoom.

JB: Oh.

BB: Push the zoom the other way. Yeah, there you go. And come from a couple angles, like come from behind me.

JB: I got both of us, just that I'm leaving out your ear.

BB: Ear?

BP: I don't need my ear.

BB: [Laughter]

JB: Okay, now I've got it.

BP: That's not my good ear, anyway.

BB: [Laughter] Yeah, you've got to show your battle scar. Yeah, go ahead.

JB: There you go. Oh, I missed it.

BB: That's okay. Stand in some other areas. [Speaking to Bryan Proffitt] I'll ask you the question as soon as Jake's done taking pictures. [Speaking to Jacob Burge] No, not me, not me, just come over here and get the kitty cat, and the microphone, and Bryan.

JB: No way, I want to--.

BB: Okay.

JB: Zoom it to--. [Sound of camera] Got it. Oh, that's cold.

BB: Okay, here, let me see it.

JB: No, I want to take another picture.

BB: Okay, let me do a couple real quick because we've got to go soon, so I need to hurry.

JB: Okay, I'm going to go up in my room.

BB: All right, thanks.

JB: You're not welcome.

BB: What'd he do? [Sound of camera] There we go.

BP: I should just act like I'm talking.

BB: Yeah. [Laughter] That's good.

BP: Does the kitty cat need to be moved back to where it was?

BB: I'll put her back, yeah.

BP: So, yeah, Bridgette.

BB: [Laughter] All right, let me fix her. All right, I think that's good. Let's see what we did, and do the playback real quick. Yeah, that's perfect. Okay, so what's the worry about being identified with Freedom Road?

BP: Sure, well as a student of history, the United States has a fairly unpleasant history as it comes to the respect for the civil and, in some cases, human rights of people who identify themselves as communists, and in particular, the region of the country that we live in. The U.S. South has a particularly nasty history of imprisoning, of firing from jobs, of running people out of communities, and ultimately of killing people who identify themselves as communists. So I tend to be careful about who knows what about me and my particular political affiliations. And fortunately, Freedom Road is an organization that allows me, that is sympathetic to those challenges, and in fact encourages me to be a little bit quieter about it than I might tend to be on my own. So yeah, that's the concern. We live in a state where, in 1979, people were killed in the Greensboro Massacre for, maybe because they were communists or maybe because they were taking on the Klu Klux Klan, but certainly the fact that they were communists had a lot to do with the fact that the state did nothing to protect them or give justice.

BB: Who have been some mentors for you or people who have really helped shape your life politically? This is an important one to say, “Some mentors for me have been--.” [Laughter]

BP: Oh, right, right, right, right. Some mentors for me have been--. I think in a slightly unconventional way, my partner Rebecca Silver, who’s not somebody who is an activist or an organizer, but who challenges me to think. You know, I’m very prone to think very systemically about problems, and she challenges me to think about the ways that these systems interact with individuals. And so to hold onto people’s individuality and humanity in the center of a lot of this stuff has been really important. And then also just to kind of be supported and understood by her, I think it a lot of what helps me to be able to do what I do. And then I feel like I could go back through a lot of the names of the people whose names have come up a dozen times already in this. So, people that have been mentors to me include: my high school history teacher Howard Matthews; Easter Maynard, who was my supervisor, my boss at Reciprocity; Janie Musgrave, who was a mentor of mine at NC State; Floyd Hayes, the third, I believe he is, who was a mentor of mine at NC State; Craig Brookins, who was a mentor of mine at NC State, a professor in Africana Studies; Francis Graham, who was the director of the Women’s Center when I was at NC State; Michael Schwalbe, who was a sociologist and a professor of mine at NC State, had been doing activist work on campus for years; Dasan; Yolanda; Angela; Manju; my early Hip Hop Against Racist War crew.

BB: Maybe, like the last couple people, what is it about them that you value or cherish or gained?

BP: Yeah, I think that we all just came at the work from very different perspectives, and we all had a lot to offer. And we all live very different lives. So always pushing on me and pushing on each other to relate to one another's experiences and to not have our ideological analysis be one that's exclusive in some way, that it really considers the way people's lives are different, and pushing a lot on race and class and gender boundaries with the three and four of them.

God, I've always felt like I've wanted to do, like at the end of a book where you list out all the people, but it's something that you want to take weeks to do, so you make sure that you don't leave anybody out. I think with the North Carolina Peace and Justice folks, you, I think Ed Whitfield, I learned a lot from during that process. Through the UBUNTU stuff, Kai Barrow is somebody whose been a mentor of mine and a friend of mine in a lot of different ways; Nia Wilson, as part of the UBUNTU process; some of the MARC guys; Aiden Graham; I've learned a lot from Phoenix Brangman; I've learned a lot from Nick Shepard, who's like my little brother, but is also a mentor to me; Katie Hayworth and Josh Reynolds are folks that have just been friends and teachers of mine over the years; I mean Mom and Dad are Ajamu and Rukiya Dillahunt, that's who I really turn to when I need some guidance; Ray Eurguhart and Chip Smith are both people who have pushed me politically a lot and really supported me as a person a lot. Chip's a Buddhist, so he's always really thinking about how to be centered and how to understand and take people for where they are, which I think is really cool. Yeah, I've learned a lot from Bill Fletcher, who is a nationally known author and activist and organizer. I mean I think, in terms of my mentors who I never met, Malcolm X, people who taught me--. Anne Braden, who I did actually meet.

BB: Shit. [Addressing Jacob Burge] Will you get a towel for me, babe? A towel from the bathroom and can you go and step on that for me?

JB: Step on it?

BB: Yeah. I think we're at the end of our thing here today. [Laughter]

BP: That's all right.

BB: But I want to pick up, in case there's more you want to say about that next time.

BP: That gives me some time to think about the rest of the folks.

BB: It's about 12:45 and we're going to stop here. We'll do a third interview, if that's cool. Thank you, Bryan.

END OF INTERVIEW