

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

**Interview U-0563  
Ajamu Dillahunt  
December 9, 2009**

**Field Notes – 2  
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## FIELD NOTES: Ajamu Dillahunt

Interviewee: Ajamu Dillahunt  
 Interviewer: Bridgette Burge  
 Interview Dates: December 9, 2009  
 Locations: Interact, Raleigh, 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.

THE INTERVIEWEE: Ajamu Dillahunt joined the Justice Center in April of 2004 as the Outreach Coordinator for the Budget and Tax Center. Ajamu has been a tireless advocate for working families in North Carolina for over twenty-five years. For the 18 years, Ajamu served as President of the Raleigh Area Local of the American Postal Workers Union (APWU). He was Director of Research and Education for the North Carolina Council of the APWU during that period. Ajamu was a Labor Educator and Arbitration Advocate as well. He has done community organizing and training in various communities in N.C. He has a Masters Degree in African Studies and maintains an active interest in the African Diaspora, particularly in the Caribbean and Latin America.

### **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.

**TRANSCRIPT: AJAMU DILLAHUNT**

Interviewee: Ajamu Dillahunt  
Interviewer: Bridgette Burge  
Interview Date: December 9, 2009  
Location: Raleigh, North Carolina  
Length: 1 track; approximately 119 minutes

**START OF INTERVIEW**

AJAMU DILLAHUNT: [Recording begins mid-conversation] ...the interview shall be closed to researchers until the following day.

BRIDGETTE BURGE: So right now I'm just going to record a little--.

AD: Sound check?

BB: A little background noise that's quiet first.

AD: Background, okay.

BB: Yeah, it's not ideal when people are meeting in the next room, I can really hear it, but--.

AD: Oh, wow.

BB: When I first came in there—you might want to take off your bracelets because they'll clank, if you don't mind, or one of them.

AD: Yeah.

BB: So when nobody's in there, it sounds great. Thank you, okay. Yeah, good thinking. So the other two interviews are already transcribed and they look good. I reviewed them, so I can

either send them to you and let you read through them and review them now, or we can wait until we're done and I'll send you the whole small book. [Laughter]

AD: Probably better to do it that way.

BB: Okay.

AD: And so this is, we're going to back to square one, essentially, from? Sorry to bring it up, but--.

BB: No, I was going to bring it up, too. I think not totally square one. So we're going to hit on some highlights from the third interview that was erased.

AD: Oh, it was the third one, okay.

BB: Just the third, the other two were great and transcribed, so it's just the third.

[Laughter] Okay, let me get like a minute of silence first, ambient sound.

[Silence for about one minute]

BB: Sounds great. I could hear the--.

AD: Did you hear that?

BB: Yeah, sounds great. Okay, today is December 9, 2009, and this is actually the fourth interview with Ajamu Dillahunt, but to my deep mortification and sincere apologies, the third one was accidentally erased, the one that we recorded on June of '09. So we're going to go back and revisit some of those. This is Heirs to a Fighting Tradition Project and Bridgette Burge is the interviewer. So I suggest that we start—oh, and we're at the Oberlin Road Interact building that shares a lot of office space with some other great organizations, including the YWCA of the Greater Triangle, in Raleigh, North Carolina. So I think, this time I suggest we answer some of the big overarching questions that we ask everybody, so there's some broad questions like: How do you think change happens, and those sorts of things, and two quick reminders. If you could try to

remember to repeat the question in your answer for pod casting, so I'll say, "How do you think social change happens?"; "I think social change happens because--."

AD: Okay.

BB: And I'll try to remind you around that, too, but that helps. And this time if we could start with you saying your name and sort of describing yourself a little bit, demographically, kind of just some of the description of yourself.

AD: Sure, yeah. So I'm Ajamu Dillahunt, and I'm a sixty-four-year-old African American male, social justice activist living in the South now since 1978, working at an nonprofit organization that does social justice work through advocacy, and the General Assembly does research to support that work, does a little litigation on big kind of class-action issues that affect poor and working people, and also does community education and outreach, all kind of integrated strategies. I'm looking to retire maybe in a year or so and move on to the next adventure, not necessarily just straight up retirement. And I guess that's who I am, where I am right now.

BB: Great, thanks. So, what's your vision of a liberated world?

AD: Well, I guess I would have to say, as just a fundamental vision without all of the kind of deep nuanced thinking, is one where people have enough to eat--.

BB: Sorry, can you say, "My vision of a liberated world is--."

AD: Ah ha.

BB: [Laughter]

AD: So my vision of a liberated world, in a kind of fundamental way, is one where people have enough food to eat, have sufficient housing, have protection from the environment that could be harmful, from the harsh forms of nature that exist in many parts of the world or that show themselves in all parts of the world from time to time, where education is available to all for the

sake of human development, also I guess, freedom from the tyranny of the ugly side of human nature. And then, I guess I would say access to modernity in terms of technological advances that help people that support human growth and development, should people so choose to have it. I guess those are the kinds of basic things. And I would say, people don't usually put this in, and I made have said it in earlier interviews, but access to and the ability to create music, such an important part of, I think, human society, the ability to create it and share it, the joy that that develops in human beings, I think is really important.

So it's a kind of basic, fundamental agenda. I mean you can kind of tease out different areas, what it means in terms of shelter and protection from the environment, the right to have affordable housing, whatever that means in your own political context. So it might vary from Chicago to someplace in Cape Verde, but just something that people can afford that protects them, and likewise, education and health care may vary somewhat from place to place, but certainly those things that prevent, that give preventive forms of medicine and treatment being universal, available to everyone, and that includes the most modern advances in science and technology. There's just no reason why everyone can't have it, and those who want it, particularly. There's this question of the tension between people wanting some forms of modernity to be available to them and not. I think that's kind of like part of what this struggle is around, the challenges with Islam and the Middle East and those trying to keep out modernity.

BB: Thanks.

[Sound of person walking]

BB: I'm going to wait until "high heels" passes there.

AD: It's another reason why high heels are really annoying, unhealthy inventions of some woman-hating man.

BB: [Laughter] That's right.

AD: That has sold it as fashion.

BB: So how do you think lasting social change happens?

AD: Well, I think--. I'm not sure how lasting social change happens, with the emphasis on "lasting", because the social forces that exist in the world are constantly in contention with one another, and power shifts, and where people gain power, they're not always able to hold on to it. Sometimes the wrong forces, and of course I know "wrong" is a very subjective kind of category, but those who are pro-people and pro-social development can't always hold the forces. So, I mean in my current thinking I'm seeing a combination of social struggle by people in community organizations and workers' organizations and those kinds of formations that we broadly call the social movements that are pushing for power and are pushing in a number of different ways from the toolbox of social justice movements that we've had for, you know, maybe a century or so, that includes strikes and sit-ins and takeovers, and sometimes even a little hand-to-hand combat, some extreme forms of pushing and shoving and beyond, but also an engagement with policy and trying to move agendas on a local and state and national level that create policy that advances the conditions of people from wages to protections on the job and in the communities that protect the water and the environment, that prevent discrimination, all those kinds of things.

I think you've got to have the two levels. And I don't know that our movement has come around, as a whole, has really embraced the social, the policy fight as much as it needs to as a component of a transformative strategy. You know, some people, that's all they do. That's all they think about, and they see that and maybe elections as the only tools, and only see the kind of role of the masses as being supportive of that policy fight at the state Capitol or Capitol Hill or whatever, and not as being the essential actors that define what the fight is and actually prosecute the fight

right on up to the policy level. So that's a tension that exists and that's what people try to figure out the right combinations of those activities and so on, but I think they're all essential.

BB: It's so noisy. Hang on a second. Let's wait for that rolling thing to--.

AD: In that last answer, I didn't notice there was background stuff.

BB: A little bit, yeah. A couple loud, you can really hear those folks, only if they laugh loud or stuff like that.

AD: Okay.

BB: I can't remember the exact sentence, though, or I would go back. I try to either write down or remember the sentence with you, but it's okay. There was one point he laughed. I think it's okay though. It's definitely in the background. Do you think that there's a difference between activism and organizing?

AD: Hmmm. Maybe. Is there a difference between activism and organizing? I guess there may be. I've not thought about the difference, in terms of the way you've posed it. I mean I suppose that people define themselves as activists because they are engaged in a variety of activities, and some of that activity may not include what we commonly think of as organizing. So I guess if someone feels strongly about a social justice issue and maybe makes phone calls in support of legislation that would improve that issue, or is opposed to something and goes to a meeting, signs a petition, gathers up friends to talk about it, that certainly is an activist, but maybe not be organizing in the sense that we generally think of bringing people together and getting them to agree on a common agenda and strategy and tactics to carry that out. Maybe there's some difference there.

But I mean, of course, there's certainly overlap between the two. You know I think we see that more and more. We see that more and more in the recent period with the Obama election campaign maybe drew that out a lot, to maybe even generate this question. And then of course, the

aftermath, what are people doing post the Obama election? And all of the challenges that his administration faces vis-à-vis health care and job creation and all those kinds of things without a base that is really active and engaged in organizing, is something that we're facing right now, yeah.

BB: How do you think President Obama's doing in about a year into his administration, into his term?

AD: Well, an evaluation about a year in his term is kind of interesting. On the way over, listening to NPR [National Public Radio], there was a story about how the Congressional Black Caucus is evaluating his work, at least in terms of job creation and dealing with some other real critical problems that face the Black community, and how they've chosen, and I'm glad that they have, to kind of hold up the discussion on reform of financial administration and you know, finance reform, until there's some promise or some indication that some of these other questions around jobs and foreclosures are really (0:17:23). And I think the way people, some of the pundits have talked about it is, "The Black Caucus nipping at his heels" and that kind of thing—and good that they are doing that. I mean people understood from the outset, I think, those who were pretty clear on what limitations you could expect from him, given his history, who he is, a kind of moderate, not even kind of classic liberal, and I think the way people would assess him, clearly not progressive, but someone who I think, and many of us thought provided an essential alternative to McCain and anybody else, even within the Democratic Party, but at the same time, you're disappointed.

So let's take Afghanistan, for example. He never promised anything other than what he's doing now, in terms of Afghanistan. It was kind of framed as a good war. It was not like what was happening in Iraq with the occupation, an occupation generated by lies and mistrust and all of these kinds of things, but that needed immediate attention by the U.S. And that was his critique of

the Bush administration that the focus on Iraq took away from attention that was required in Afghanistan. And so he's doing it now, and it's bad. It's got all of the markings of what we've come to know as the kind of classic quagmire that we saw in Vietnam, a war that you can't win. The resistance there has shown itself to be just, you know, fierce, through this epic of their history, but going back generations whether it was resistance to the Soviets, resistance to the British, and it's likely to be the same time. So that's disappointing, and I think it's going to be part of his legacy.

The Black community is still in many ways, some sectors of it, still rooting for him, still talking about the situation that he inherited and needing more and more time to overcome this stuff, but at the same time, I think there's a sense that there's no discussion or indication that this sector of the American population suffers in specific and drastic ways, and that it needs attention. And you just don't get that, not in a kind of broad public way. I'm not certain what, I'm not sure what sectors of his administration say to different groups as they meet and talk about programs, but that's not a broad projection, that we need a set of policies that would help Black people. And he's kind of got this broad, "We lift up all the boats," that Black people will certainly benefit from that. I mean the health care debate certainly he hasn't been as assertive as he should've been in terms of the so-called public option. He just waffles. He's not pushing hard on that.

BB: Can you explain what the public option is?

AD: Well, just something, and the public option has a lot of different definitions, in terms of what people understand it, but some government intervention in the insurance, health insurance issue. So it could take a number of forms, whether it's a government-run program or within a kind of mall, shopping mall of insurance options that there'd be a government option that people could purchase and that it would be in competition with the other insurance carriers that are out there

providing health insurance, and thereby creating competition that would drive the price down that's charged by these other insurance carriers that are just killing the people now with high premiums, reduced coverage, and so on. And so that kind of push, and who knows where that will end up, but just his tendency to waver, to want to compromise, and not to push hard, that's there.

And then of course, I think the other thing I would speak on is jobs. He's slow coming out on that, although yesterday's announcement of a kind of jobs program that includes some refitting, weatherization of homes and that kind of thing could have some benefits, but I don't know if it's enough, if it goes deep enough and it's going to be fast enough. And it doesn't include a public community job program, which many people are calling for, a program that's very much like the [President Franklin Delano] Roosevelt New Deal programs that includes--. But he did mention infrastructure kinds of things, so I need to study that a little bit more, but you know, repairing roads and bridges, those kinds of things, cleaning up communities, building structures that are needed in the communities, just a whole wide array of community service projects would be important to not just as a way of enhancing community development and providing employment, and not something that replaces funding for public jobs that currently exist. The cities and states have been really hit during the recession, and so they've had to lay off people and they've had to reduce services. Well, of course we want to see that restored, but we need something that goes beyond that and that doesn't rely on the private sector to create the kind of jobs that are necessary, whether it's in manufacturing or small businesses, which there's been a great deal of focus on the small businesses.

So that's, I mean those of some the things that we think about in terms of how he's doing, but the expectations were, again, I didn't drink the Kool-Aid, as many people thought. A lot of progressives were accused of drinking the Kool-Aid, in terms of supporting him, thinking that

there was going to be all this kind of change and whatnot. But a good friend of mine and ours actually, Negro [Crossen] has said this. And I'm not sure if Negro thought of it or she got it from someone else. My sense was that it was a kind of emotion that hit her personally, but it was something to the effect that when Bush said these things, we were angry, we were outraged. And when Obama does the same ones, you know, we're hurt and disappointed because we would want more to come from a Black president. So I mean I think at the end of the day, what we've got in that election in 2008 and that inauguration in January of 2009 is a pretty severe blow against White supremacy and racism as it relates to people being in positions of power and a willingness of many White Americans to put aside race in terms of making this kind of decision, but probably not much more, not much more. So that's a good thing, but it's certainly not what we need to advance the society in a way that we need.

BB: So about White folks, in your experience over the years as an organizer and an activist, what have been some roles that White people, White allies, White groups have played that you've found more effective and empowering?

AD: Well, so what roles have White allies, White people played in terms of being supportive of Black folks?

BB: And what do you think is most helpful.

AD: What I think is most helpful-- Well actually, this morning when you were telling me about Ella [June Burge-Walz] hiding keys, I was just thinking I've got two White friends, progressives and allies who named their children after Ella Baker. I think that's a profound, you know, kind of thing, and I wondered how many others have done that. I'm sure that there are more, but at least I know two, anyway. So that's really good, and so that's even a kind of personal identification with the struggle of African-Americans, which is no small thing. And certainly if

you've done that in your personal life, then your political life is manifesting all kinds of other things. So I mean I think it varies from time to time about what people can do and what kind of work they can build in terms of organizational work and also maybe what I would call ideological work that people have to do with folks. So you know, the ability to at once organize amongst White communities to challenge both their own oppression, and particularly working-class communities, so here you're talking about jobs and housing and the basic kinds of things, but also from an anti-racist point of view, challenging the kind of prejudice and hatred that you find in White communities, kind of trying to chip away at the ideas of privilege, but at the same time—well, I mean I guess that's a combination of the kind of organizing in those communities, but also providing the ideological piece to always put that out there.

But at the same time, being supportive of Black and Latino and Asian and Native American organizing, providing support for that as well, with that understanding that these communities need to be empowered themselves. They need self-organization. They need to provide their own leadership. Probably what they lack most is resources, maybe in some cases training and experience, but that's usually not the case. It's usually more resources and support on their flanks and in their rear, and even sometimes in advance of them moving on something, some support from White allies with privilege and positioning to even help advance that. But that recognition of Black self-organization, you know, of Chicano self-organization, et cetera, all of that is important.

So playing both of those kind of roles is really important, and I think you see different forms of it over the last twenty and thirty years. I'm seeing—I haven't studied it real carefully, but I'm even seeing some people from the SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] experience, both African-American and White, still trying to sum that up and still not coming to an agreement on what was the impact of the Black Power movement on that organization and were

errors made and did the Black community benefit from it, all those kinds of things. I think the—I wouldn't argue that the jury is still out. I mean I've got my own opinion. I think things happened just as they should have, not necessarily without errors and some damage done to relationships, but certainly the assertion of the Black community and its own leadership I think was really important. None of this I think, though, precludes the building of multi-racial movements, but it's the way those movements are constructed and its leadership and all of that is very important.

BB: So a similar question about the role of men and male-identified people, so in the social justice context of movement building, what have you seen, what do you understand to be most helpful about roles that men and male-identified folks can take?

AD: So the role of men and male-identified folks, I mean it seems to me that they've got to have a particular role in dealing with questions of patriarchy and chauvinism. So I mean this is beyond just your role as a caring intellectually and politically and culturally engaged person, that there's a special—given the role of patriarchy in modern society that people have a kind of assignment to deal with that in a special way. And I mean this kind of goes back to the question of the role of Whites, and so that is that women and those who identify as women need to build their own strength and their own capacity to fight against patriarchy, but males need to be allies in that fight. And so in the same way, men taking up this question with men is really important, Men Against Rape Culture [MARC], our local group and whatnot. There are hundreds of groups I guess around the country that have emerged and are doing that kind of work, but again this is following the leadership of women that are fighting against patriarchy. I think it's really important. And then there's another role that men and those who identify as men in terms of children, raising children, and modeling these kinds of things. I think it's very important that that gets done in the kind of family and other kinds of social relationships, so that both young men and young women see

people who function in a way that's antithetical to patriarchy and that's important and to actually do that. So I think those are some of the things.

I've always had this kind of shorthand in terms of analyzing things, in terms of organizations and relationships and to kind of go down this list, you know, what about women and what about people of color, and what about gays and lesbians and what about—I mean to always kind of integrate that into our thinking as a kind of tool of analysis, whether it's on broader political and social questions or even if it's in just basic human interaction one on one to think about those things. And we're not socialized to do that. It's a real struggle to actually do it, and even I think if you're fortunate enough to be born into a family situation where the consciousness is there to do it, there's also this push from the outside, from your peers and others, and just wanting children to be accepted and seen as normal and not strange, but at the same time getting them to go against the kind of racist things that they hear, the sexist things that they hear, the anti-Muslim, anti-Latino, anti-gay things that they hear from their peers, to get them to be able to challenge that, but not feel strange and all of that. So those are super challenges for people. So it's on a kind of personal level, but also on a broader kind of social level.

BB: So this is probably a little forced, a little bit too much of an either/or question, but just to put it out there anyway, I'm really sort of challenged by, fascinated by, curious about why different long-time organizers or their difference of opinion around single-issue organizing and multi-issue organizing. Even in the ten Heirs that I've interviewed in North Carolina, there's a real array of opinion about the impact of that. So what are your thoughts or experiences around single-issue or multi-issue organizing?

AD: Hmm. Well, so single-issue organizing versus broader types of organizing and the differences in opinions, and I don't know, like you said, I don't know if it's either/or. I probably

would oppose the kind of one or the other. I think if we're looking at broad fundamental deep and wide, fundamental transformation, then you'd have to see the kind of multi-issue organizing as being necessary or many types of organizing. I get the sense, just my experience when people say, "We need a single-issue stuff, that that's the most effective way to make change," tend not to have the broader vision of a radical transformation of society, and they're more interested in reform, necessary reform, welcome reform, and reform that could be a part of a broader movement to make this kind of radical change, but it depends. So again, I mean I think those who think of the broader stuff, we see more coordination necessary, and this is where the big fights and differences around the need for a Party of some type or some broad organization that's fighting for fundamental change in this particular country or that country or whatever. That's where those differences come in, and I think those who think that we—and I happen to one who believes we need a kind of broad organization that's looking at all of it—understand that that organization then has components to it that do all the different stuff that focus on environmental issues, that focus on workers' rights and questions of gender and sexuality, and all of the different kind of subgroups. And so in that, and thinking of coordination of all of that, all of those kinds of things, I think coordination is important.

So is it important to have a group that's focusing on health care right now, and that's all? I think so. It's important. Should that group in some kind of way, depending on its resources and the level of struggle at any given time, coordinate with groups that are working on jobs and housing and a wide array of issues? I mean I think that's important.

I just came from a conference and we've been working on legislation both at the state level and the federal level to provide paid sick days for working people. Folks are amazed to know that over fifty percent of the workforce don't have some kind of paid sick days. If you have a union contract, maybe, if you're a municipal employee, state employee, maybe a federal employee, those

benefits are probably there, but in the private sector, without that contract they're almost non-existent. So there's been a push in maybe twelve, fourteen different states and a couple of cities there are these campaigns, but people talked about how culturally related this is to health care reform and the need to do that and the need to coordinate those efforts more and more. But that's just one example, an easy one to see of why you need coordinated kinds of things, but it goes in some ways I think to this single issue versus multi-issue kinds of organizations.

But at the end of the day, I think it relates to what resources are available, what's possible in your community. In some communities, a multi-issue group such as the Beloved Community Center [in Greensboro] for example, is possible and is necessary, and maybe in another situation, a group that focuses just on environmental justice, like that environmental justice network here in North Carolina, which incidentally includes many different groups, most of which focus on some aspect of environmental justice, but there are even some who are themselves multi-issue groups, but also see the need to be focused on environmental kinds of things. So that's a very convoluted answer. I don't know if I answered the question quite the way—but that's how I think about multi-issue...

And as we approach the Social Forum, the U.S. Social Forum in Detroit in 2010 in June, this question becomes very prominent. I think it's a question that's thought about, I think, a great deal within the social movements and has been since the evolution of the Social Forum movement, certainly here in the U.S., and the question of whether you exclude kind of party-type organizations from the mix, whether or not there should be some kind of program or project that comes out of the Social Forum, or is it just a way to talk about what we're doing, or even identifying what's the source of the problem. Is that enough or do we need more? Is it the resources and energy that go into showing up in Detroit or showing up in Atlanta as we did at the last one, is

that worth that kind of expenditure of human and other kinds of resources without coming up with something that moves us closer to power in this country?

BB: Yeah, it's a convoluted question, but I'm really interested in hearing different people's thinking about it, because I guess I consider myself an activist for let's see, well, seventeen years now, and I can't think of a campaign or a movement that I've been in which that hadn't been a big, deep struggle. And sometimes it's divisive, and it's not always named a single-issue versus multi-issue, but think about the fights and the hollering and people walking out on each other in the lead up to organizing the rally in Fayetteville against the war in Iraq, right? It was like people in Fayetteville saying, "You start talking social justice for gays and queers and workers rights, you're going to lose every person in Fayetteville." "Oh, we can't do it. It has to be a big picture if we're ever going to have fundamental change." And it seems that it's the same struggle kind of in every--.

AD: Okay, but what you raise are maybe a subset of questions around single-issue versus multi-issue in terms of organizing, which I don't think I really addressed, and that is when you're dealing with a specific issue, to what extent do you want to bring in all the broad social justice agenda? Okay, I was thinking more in terms of like how we organize ourselves and how we coordinate, but didn't take it deeper into specific projects where that comes in. And I'll be frank with you, Bridgette, I really think that that needs to be done on a case-by-case basis. And it's created multiple problems in the anti-war movement, but there are other examples of this as well, and people getting a sense of what kind of coalition you want to build. So when we leave aside the issue of rights for gays and lesbians in terms of the march that we tried to organize in Fayetteville, let's even go to: Are we trying to build a coalition that's based on anti-imperialist goals, that the U.S. is an imperialist government, represents this negative force around the globe and needs to be

taken down, its influence needs to be challenged across the globe? We need to highlight and expose the damage it has done in so many countries, to so many movements for change and so on, or do we want to gather as many people as we can in this country who are fundamentally opposed to this war because of a variety of reasons, anti-imperialist or, “I don’t want my son or daughter to have to go,” or even the resources needed to be used here to build bridges and schools? And so making that kind of decision and what’s going to be the most effective coalition to help us change?

And I think on the Left, the anti-imperialist Left, being flexible and nimble in terms of figuring out what do we need at a particular moment and understanding that they’re not throwing away their principles, their understanding of how this world actually works and their work to change it is really important. So maybe that’s a kind of side critique, back-door critique of the anti-war movement, but I mean that’s been part of the problem. I mean can you get as many people in the tent as possible or what? Even within the anti-imperialist community, should you be bringing up Afghanistan? That was one of the things, right? And that kind of goes to this, “Well, that’s a different kind of war.” Should we just be challenging the occupation in Iraq? Should we be raising the issue of Palestine? And that’s divisive and that’s something else. So that even goes beyond the other social questions, but just beyond U.S. foreign policy and militarism and so on, and do we extend it to the U.S. support for a backward Colombian government and Filipino--? You know, all of those kinds of questions are in there, and it’s a dilemma, but I think to the extent that people are not flexible in understanding how their principles can still be maintained, is a problem for us in terms of building an effective resistance movement.

BB: So for you personally, how have you thought about how you want to go about mentoring younger people to be engaged in the movement? How do you nurture, your strategies and tactics, or your approach to nurturing leadership development in folks who are coming up

behind you?

AD: So, what is my approach to nurturing new leaders, people that are coming up, and mentoring? I think it's changed over time. Right now, given my energy and other responsibilities and what I've learned, I think it's first and foremost being present, you know, just be there, and being willing to listen more than talk, and to give suggestions when asked as opposed to advice, particularly when it's unsolicited advice. I mean that's—it just drives me crazy what some of my age cohort veteran activists who really think that they're helping and want to help, but take up more space than they should and really drive people away. And I mean I think that the thing that--.

It's interesting, I made a comment about Ella Baker earlier and what her style was, and I mean this is clear when people have written and talked, people who've worked with her, people who've written about her are clear on this, and then I started reading this anthology that people put together for Amiri Baraka, a great cultural worker and revolutionary organizing African-American movement had a seventy-fifth anniversary two months ago, and on that occasion, people pulled together an anthology of poems and essays and observations about him. And someone mentioned this thing about him that's also consistent with Ella Baker, and that is asking questions in answer to questions that are being asked of you. I guess if we're thinking of just basic interviews by journalists and pundits, right, that don't work. You want questions answered by affirmative statements of things and whatnot, but in terms of political discussions and mentorship and developing leaders and whatnot, I think that form of asking questions, which allows people to really seek their own answers using their own resources and their own kind of native ability to analyze stuff, all of those kinds of things I think is a good way to do it. So I'm prone to that these days.

That's the way I see developing things, but also I've heard some questions, a number of

activists say here recently about, “We need to transfer some of these lessons to this new generation, and we need to get them to take our place.” And these are some people who are, again, my age cohort, and some of their best work and most dynamic and active work was twenty-five, thirty, forty years ago. And it almost suggests that nothing has happened since then, and that’s just a total—I mean it’s a distortion. It’s maybe a kind of, people have blinders on, or because the movement does not replicate what it is that they did or we did, that it’s not worthy of any praise or valuation or anything like that. I mean things have been going on for forty years.

I’m just thinking, this was the African-American, sorry, the Youth Organization for Black Unity and the Student Organization for Black Unity, along with Malcolm X Liberation University just had a forty-year reunion. And it specifically and very intentionally stayed away from an assessment, really, or an evaluation of what it is they did, in terms of, “this was good, this was bad,” or whatever. It was seen more as a reunion, like, “After forty years we’re coming together. We spent important time together during a really challenging and critical political period, and so let’s come together and share the stories and the love that we had for each other, and let’s talk about why we did what we did, and how it’s affected our lives.” And there was very little on the impact it had on society, because there then you start to get into your big differences about impact and whatnot, so no evaluation of errors and all that kind of stuff. So, I mean it was kind of healthy in that way, but in that conversation, some people were saying like, “We need to pass this stuff. We need to write this history up,” and all that, and I agree with that. That’s a period that hasn’t been studied a great deal in terms of movement histories. There have been some. Rod Bush, who was a part of that, he’s a political scientist at St. John’s University, he’s written somewhat, and there’ve been a number of others, but certainly not broad enough.

And those lessons maybe are not known to this current generation of activists, but the point

is that from the time that this formation existed forty years ago to now, there's certainly been activists and organizations and struggles and all of that. And so sometimes I think people forget that, and so I try to remember these other groups and learn about them and kind of point people in that direction as well, so that, to show--. Because I mean, if you're saying to young people today that nothing has happened since 1972 or whatever, right, that this was the high tide of struggle, which it was a high tide maybe in terms of the level of struggle, but to suggest that nothing has happened since then, right, brings them into a—I mean I think it doesn't encourage them, because why is it that it didn't happen? Or if they do decide to get involved that they dismiss maybe two, three, four decades of rich lessons as well. So that's important.

And the other thing I'm noticing, Bridgette, that I'd really like to think about this a little bit more, and it relates to the changing demographics of the country. When people talk about general demographics, they certainly always think of the increase of Latinos in the country in the South and both coasts and whatnot, and the kind of so-called "Black/Brown" configuration and colorization of America or the browning of America, those kinds of things, and what it means for the electorate and the citizens, all of those kinds of things, but I've also been thinking a lot about the social justice movement and the impact of South Asians in that. And it's just like wherever I go in terms of social justice kinds of stuff and the social movements, the workers centers, and labor union organizing, new young organizers, gender and sexuality organizing, and housing and whatnot, there's just a presence of all of these fierce South Asian men and women. And so I'm interested in that. It's very encouraging, but it has behind it a whole story of immigration and integration into the U.S., class, you know, gender, social change, all of those kinds of things. So I'm interested in that, too. I mean that's a little bit off of the mentoring kind of piece, but certainly engaged in that. And here in our own experience we've seen that here in the Triangle area as well,

but I mean I think it's a national phenomena.

BB: Who are some of those people who come to mind?

AD: Well, I mean here, Manju [Rajendran] kind of represents that group. And we've kind of talked about it actually over time, but there's a whole, in New York and Chicago and all over. And I'm curious about organizational forms beyond just the wonderful and powerful local groups that they have built and that work in, you know, work in the Miami Workers Center, in Right to the Cities, and POWER, and all these other groups. Their presence is certainly there. Restaurant organizing, what is it? Restaurant Opportunity Centers, ROC, organizing taxi drivers in New York City, engaged with the domestic workers organizing, just those are great examples of that.

BB: That's great. How are you doing?

AD: Yeah, I'm cool.

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

AD: I'm good.

BB: So hang on just a second. There's a vacuum cleaner going.

AD: [Laughter]

BB: I can hear it moving further away. [Laughter] I can really hear it. We've got to end definitely by twelve.

AD: Twelve, okay.

BB: Legal Aid is coming in to do something in this room.

AD: How are we in terms of the broad questions?

BB: We're doing great. We're almost done with the broad questions and then we can go back to the more specific moments in your trajectory, your life trajectory around places of work and those sorts of things. Does that feel okay to do it like that? Okay, so a little back and forth, but

yeah, making good progress.

AD: Yeah, it sounds like it's going to be a while.

BB: It does. Maybe we should just plug along. It's not bad. It's just--.

AD: Or do you want to even ask or that would just be getting too much--. It might annoy somebody who's doing it.

BB: Yeah, I feel bad about asking them to stop.

AD: Well, not to stop, just to ask, you know, how long, so we can figure out. Do you think that that would be too--?

BB: Yeah, let me push pause and see where they're at.

AD: Yeah.

[Tape is paused and then turned back on]

AD: The conversation that we had with her, I mean it's kind of like--.

BB: Who is she again?

AD: Sheebani Patel. She's an organizer and attorney with ROC. And we were talking about it. Some people have the stereotype of Indian immigrants being professionals, engineers, and so on, or business people or lawyers or whatnot. And there's certainly those immigrants that we see that come from that, but there are also plenty of workers that have come, and then they've got a whole legacy, at least the parents and grandparents of these young activists, of anti-colonial struggle against the British, in some cases that forced them into exile and so on. And so they come with that kind of history as well, and certainly folks that are in the restaurant industry now, where she actually works, people who drive cabs, just like anywhere else there is a working class, an Indian working class, and they immigrate as well. And so you've got that kind of class stratification even within those communities. And so all of that helps to I guess shape them and

whatnot, and you see that kind of struggle. So it's good. I really want to explore that some more, and I think people ought to write about that and understand that. At the same time, what about White activists coming forward in the same numbers they did two generations ago, what about African-Americans, what about Latinos, what about African immigrants, and so on? Those are all questions, but that one just stands out to me and I think it's something we ought to understand.

In fact, in terms of all immigrants, what is the source of their activism? What pushes them forward, their vision, their ideological framework, or what does it have to do with the conditions in their home countries that either they faced before coming here or that their relatives who are still there face? Those are important kinds of questions in terms of developing activism and learning. I think most of us would have to agree that some of the more profound lessons about social change and struggle and organizing are coming from these other areas, from these other countries, certainly from the South, what we generally call the Global South. That's where the progressive thrust for humanity is coming from, from there, as it should, as the victims of U.S. imperialism and oppression.

BB: So, if you had to try to--? I know these questions can be so hard—so I'm feeling sympathy—but maybe not for you. But if you had to sort of explain your ideological framework now and significant shifts in it over time and with your life as an activist and organizer, what would you highlight? How would you describe the framework and what would you highlight in terms of big shifts?

AD: So you want to know how would I describe my kind of ideological framework now and how it's shifted over time? And I'm wondering are you looking just for a label, how I would identify myself in one sentence or one word, and then an elaboration on that or what?

BB: Yeah, I think a few sentences now. Like, what do you think of, when you just said

that, what is their ideological framework, immigrants coming, what do you think of? Do you think of just a word or do you think of a description of how they orient toward power?

AD: Well, I mean I think of myself as an internationalist in that way. If you use the immigrant kind of situation, I think of it in a lot of different ways, two slogans that people use or anecdotes that people use, I think kind of highlight it for me. And of course the one that we hear oftentimes about the borders, where Mexican immigrants will say, "I didn't cross the border. The border crossed me." And that's not just a kind of cutesy kind of slogan. It's rich with the lessons of history, in terms of what did in fact happen, in terms of the U.S. prosecuting a war against Mexico and seizing this territory and what led to that and what's been the aftermath of that, and what kind of power relations have developed as a result in terms of Mexican autonomy and U.S. interference and all of those things, that's all there, but it's an important kind of phenomena, which unfortunately a lot of people don't think about that when they think about the relationship with Mexican immigrants.

But the other one that I've used and frankly I've used it as a kind of template to talk about immigration and citizenship, and I can't remember exactly where I got the quote from, so I've kind of massaged it a little bit to make it real, but it's this question of an immigrant who said, "I'm a citizen of any country that will allow me to work and earn a living to take care of my family." So it kind of pushes away all of these notions of nationalism and identity, country and place, and all of those things, and gets down to this kind of fundamental human need, I guess, that's been with us since we were back on the savannah. That's basically what it is, and I remember Marisol Jimenez [McGee] speaking at a conference that the Justice Center had one time, talking about immigration and whatnot, and she said, you know, that people do what they've been doing for thousands of years, and they follow the resources wherever they are, that primitive humankind did that, and

through all of the advances of society economically and technologically, that's been the case. You follow the resources, where it is you can find those things to keep you alive. And so I mean that's the kind of general framework.

How society organizes itself becomes fundamental to that question, and who has power and so on. And so in that respect, I would say I'm a socialist in my orientation, that the wealth that exists both developed and undeveloped should be a resource that's available to everyone on the planet and that no one class of people, no one family, no one corporation has the right to control that to their advantage to the extent that millions of people are impoverished and without the basic protections that they need to live, and that a handful live in opulence and have available to them far more than they can ever use, whether it's in terms of housing or food or whatever, those kinds of things. So I mean that's how I kind of understand it, and thus seek to see a society where those resources are shared in a kind of democratic way, and understand that the projects and experiments to kind of reach that goal haven't done as well as we would've liked them to do. But I kind of look at it this way that the current organization of capitalism with markets ruling and government intervening to make sure that it's just markets ruling, has been harmful to humankind and made many mistakes that have killed people, that have caused people to die and to languish in bad conditions. And so that a social experiment like socialism, which has seen some failures but also some advances, needs to be reexamined and refashioned and projected back out to the world to people.

And I think we're seeing that now again coming from the South, in Latin America in different kinds of ways, you know, Venezuela and Bolivia represent at least two examples of that. And leaving aside all of the criticisms from the opposition and so on, just the notion that in Venezuela they talk about a twenty-first century socialism, which suggests that twentieth-century

socialism had its problems and its drawbacks and we need one that fits the needs of this century and is certainly based on the conditions in particular countries, and their social structures, their history, their culture, and all of that, but again, it's based on the sharing of wealth and the wealth that's available being used for all of the people. That's the kind of society.

So if nothing else, it's ironic that the Right has taken this tactic of accusing Obama of being a socialist, which he's far from being a socialist. But I mean, I think it gives us an opportunity to talk about what socialism is and what it isn't and why it could be really the kind of liberating system that humankind really needs, if given a chance, if done democratically, and with an eye toward our own histories and our own trajectory.

BB: So, when you think about, it could be a campaign or maybe it's--

AD: Could I—but I don't think I answered the thing: How has that changed over time? I mean I wasn't born a proponent of Karl Marx or any other versions of social transformation, but I think in terms of the evolution, it kind of follows the developments of a movement, just not an individual. I mean individuals do relate to movements in their own peculiar kinds of ways, depending on your circumstances, how you're exposed to things, and so on. But I mean, just the kind of notion of democracy and civil rights as a goal through a kind of notion of Black Power as a way of freedom and humanization for Black people, and then a kind of Pan-Africanism that recognizes the condition of African descendants all over the world and a need for a movement that brings these folks together around the globe for the development of Africa through a kind of notion of self-determination and national liberation for people, both here in the U.S.—that would be African-Americans and Chicanos, and the Native peoples—but national liberation all over the globe, Nicaragua or Nepal, where people can control their own destinies and their own resources and build democratic and progressive governments.

And I think that's the kind of general framework that I've moved through and understanding that socialism could provide those kinds of alternatives, provide a society that would deal with those problems. And so it's been that kind of evolution, and I think sections of our movement, and particularly in my generation, have moved through that, those phases of development. Of course, many departed from that road and see capitalist development as the only way that humankind can develop, but I haven't. [Laughter] I haven't changed my thinking on that, and so it just becomes a part of our challenge to figure out how it is we achieve that, given what our current conditions are in this country and this world and who has power and the level of the consciousness of people, and what it takes to change that consciousness, and all of that, but I remain committed to that kind of classless society.

BB: That's right. Clearly you've thought a little bit about that.

AD: Yeah, yeah.

BB: When you think back to maybe different struggles or specific campaigns—or maybe you want it to be movement moments in general—is there a story that you can think of that really stands out around kind of the defeat and what are some key lessons learned from that about organizing? And of course, the next question will be a success that rises to the top when you think of some of the real lessons learned.

AD: Hmm. I'm trying to think whether it's something more recent or something that goes back or something that I was directly involved in or maybe a broader movement kind of piece.

BB: I think it'd be good to pick one you were directly involved with.

AD: Of course. [Laughter] I don't know, Bridgette. Let me pass on that one. Let me come back to thinking of some of that. I could elaborate on it a little bit or that makes sense as a good

example for me. Let me pass on both sets, the pro, the victory, the defeat, and the success.

BB: Those are big questions.

AD: Yeah, yeah.

BB: When you think about organizations that you've worked with, either loose networks or coalitions, whatever might come to mind, and I guess nonprofits, too, who are working for social justice, what do you think are some of their biggest challenges?

AD: So, what are the biggest challenges of organizations and coalitions that I work with? And I would have to say probably two or three challenges, one, not necessarily the most important, but certainly always there, is the resources to do the work. And that's both financial and human resources to be able to sustain the work, to be able to move people from place to place, to communicate with folks, to provide training for people, to sustain members in a way that they can both be part of an organization, but also take care of their personal lives. These are the challenges, to be able to get people to work through the victories and the defeats, to be a part of something that's got wonderful goals and visions, the prize that's identified is great, but yet can't get there right away, and to keep people's spirit and morale at a level that allows them to continue to participate. Those are some of the major challenges that you have.

And I think within that, too, and this is a thread throughout some of the other questions that you've asked, I mean I think this flexibility, and again I don't want that to be taken as being without principles, but to be able to adjust to changes in the objective conditions that you face, and to be able to use new tactics to modify strategy. All of those things are often impediments that we face. And then you'd have to argue that personality and just, you know, the kind of pain that we all cope with as humans in living in a society that's not structured in a way to really help us get through challenges, to help us to really grow and develop. All of this comes to the table when we

try to build organizations, and so things that are not essentially political differences or even strategic differences in approach end up becoming part of the organization's mix and prevents organizations from progressing, often helps to destroy them. People get frustrated and move away. So, we're still searching for ways to really help people deal with healing, but to keep them engaged in a way that doesn't prevent the entire process from unfolding.

I mean there's the backside of that. I think you and I have talked about that a lot, that there's a lot of discussion about healing and individual development that is prominent in movement circles these days among young people, which I think needs to be a little more in balance with collectivity and sacrifice. And what I mean by sacrifice, I mean people really putting organization and the movement in a more prominent role in their lives, with discipline and accountability, than I think that we actually see. And I think groups, you know like stone circles and others, I think they're trying to find that balance. And they're certainly open to hearing this critique that we have about finding that balance between the individual and the political, between the group and the personal.

BB: Are there things so far today that you've wanted to talk about, but I directed us away from with a question, or something, anything stirring?

AD: No, yeah, I think we're good.

BB: Okay.

AD: And you've given me enough room to kind of come back to stuff, so, yeah.

BB: All right, give me a second to catch up on my questions here. Okay, so someone asked me to ask you this question, and I can't remember who it is now because it was a while ago, but I liked it. What have you learned about how to best raise consciousness or engage or inspire non-activists?

AD: Hmm. So, what have I learned about ways to help raise consciousness and inspire people to become activists?

BB: Yeah, or to raise consciousness of people who aren't activists.

AD: Of people who aren't activists, yeah, how do we raise that. And I guess it's the idea again of being present and consistent. I mean certainly if these folks aren't activists, then they're not necessarily going to be in the same spaces with you all the time. So that means you've got to be where they are. So that's one prerequisite. Sometimes that's really hard, too, just depending on what kinds of things you're involved in, but it means I think always being prepared and on the lookout for engagement with people in everything you do so that you might be able to have a conversation with folks who are not activists and to talk about different kinds of things and to get a chance to have these conversations where you can share what it is you're doing and so on. And so the kind of consistency I think that we talk about and follow up, which follow up is really hard to do, I think, with a lot of people given the tasks that confront you in political work and organizational work and in your personal life, to really follow up with people. So sometimes if it isn't a natural kind of connection with people—again, we're talking about non-activist people, where you're going to see them every day or often where you can continue these conversations—if it's not that kind of dynamic, then being able to follow up really requires more effort and discipline and ingenuity to drive to-- How do you hook up schedules? And people are working at certain times or doing other kinds of things, to really, to be able to do that is a task and it requires a lot of creativity.

And the other thing is to encourage people to read and experience other kinds of stuff, to check out other resources out there. I always think about this thing, this quote, we talk about "read the book," and there's a tendency for people not to read as much, particularly among young

African-Americans. I mean I think it may be across the board and the use of the Internet and websites and You Tube and all that probably have had a—well, not probably, clearly have had a tremendous impact on people's reading of literature and materials—but I remember we took a group of youth to a conference in New York organized around Malcolm X probably in 1990, and Sister Souljah was there, a young activist who'd been active at Rutgers University and she's part of that group when I talked earlier before about there've certainly been folks in generations since the '60s and '70s that was, she was very active in the late '80s and '90s with folks from Howard University, Amiri Baraka's son Ras, and a few others, but anyway, in her talk to people, she's like a very good agitational political speaker. I can't remember the book that she was referring to, but in talking to the young people there to make a point, she was saying, "Read the book," in a very forceful and lyrical way. And I remember when we came back, and my daughters were part of that group. They actually formed a group called the Black Belt Youth Brigade, and one of the things they used to say, and I've thought about it a lot and use it myself now, was just like, "Read the book." And you've got to do that.

So I had a conversation with our good friend Brad Thompson, who was our City Council person and worked on John Edwards staff and was involved in coordinating the [NC] Black Elected Officials in the state, and he's a community development activist, and we were talking about how when we were coming up in the '60s and '70s, people always walking around with a book in their pocket. That was, you know, you could say on one hand, that was hipness to have a book. Some people walked around with record albums. I guess some of us did both. [Laughter] With record albums to show what you were listening to, but also always reading something, always reading, and that kind of thing is important now to read, to suggest interesting things for people to read, as an example. So those are ways to try to develop that, but that role model, that

example, the consistency, the openness to people who don't hold the same views, patience with folks, avoiding the tendency to want to really bring a heavy critique to their vision if it's different than yours, not to ridicule them, and to be patient.

BB: That's a great answer. Well, the next, I mean we really got through--.

AD: Oh, and just as I said, to be present, to give them opportunities to be with other folks, to be with other activists besides yourself, to introduce them to other people, that's important, even to bring them to travel, to events, and those kinds of things, that experiences is critical, and helps the buttress the relationship that you may develop with them, and to really develop their thinking some more beyond just the relationship you've developed with them.

BB: I've really found that piece to be pretty powerful, just even in high school, drawing in friends to different groups or clubs. In high school, it was the Peace Club, and so in college, graduate schools, those, and I think often drawing in friends to movement work was more about their attraction to the power of the sense of community and relationship that I have with people that felt so meaningful, and like the passion around working together toward a better society for everyone. There's something that felt meaningful and generous about that to people. So there's some sense of goodness that would attract people to it, even if the political analysis wasn't there.

AD: Right.

BB: So it's like a starting point, and that happened over and over and over. So I really value and hold in high esteem that attraction as an entry point to people of the movement work, just the power of relationships and the spirit of community. So I really appreciate your talking about giving people the opportunity to come to love the people you love.

AD: Right, right.

BB: And love the work that ya'll are working for together. I think there's something big,

something really big around that.

So the last few questions are a fun and awkward jump back to just looking at some of your employment path around the '70s and '80s. Are you up for that in the last fifteen minutes, just to go through a couple of those, or is there--? Do you want to go back to the success/defeat question?

AD: No, let's do that. We might have to do that in the next round. And I'm here thinking, "next round, god." Not that I'm against—it's just like are we ever going to finish and when can we do it again? I don't know.

BB: Yeah, I think these are the last few.

AD: Oh, oh. Okay. Oh, cool.

BB: We're doing good. [Laughter]

AD: Okay.

BB: That feels good to you. [Laughter]

AD: I'm glad I asked that. [Laughter]

BB: Give you another last boost of energy for the last fifteen minutes, maybe.

AD: Yeah.

BB: And if something huge occurs to you, we can always come over for half an hour and catch it.

AD: Okay, yeah.

BB: Let's talk about the years, like '72 to '76, this is part of the interview that we lost, which is why it sounds familiar to you, but when you were Associate Dean of Students at SUNY, right? And then Assistant Vice President of Student Affairs, what were some of the more exciting things that were happening politically on campus around that time? And how did you--? Well, let me ask one question at a time. So, what stands out for you about those years at SUNY?

AD: Well, they were very exciting years. So, during the time I worked at SUNY-New Paltz as an administrator, what were some of the exciting things that were going on, and I was responsible--. One of the jobs I had as associate dean was responsibility for housing. And I think, we had a director of housing, an assistant director, but that was the area that I kind of oversaw, and I was housed in the housing office. [Laughter] I had an office in the housing office. And that year, as soon as I came into that, there was a student takeover of the building. It wasn't just around housing. And I'm really not recalling all of the issues. Housing was part of it, and I think the housing demand that students had was the rescinding of a new policy that required freshmen to live on campus.

In previous years, because of the student movement, people had done away with a number of things. On the academic front, they had done away with what they called distributive requirements that required subjects that you had to take, except a very progressive requirement of six credits of non-Western that you had to take. So, people could take African Studies or Asian Studies courses or Black Studies courses. So that was very progressive, but the other math, language, foreign language, you know, some of the humanities and all that, that had been done away with, and so there was a push to try to bring those back in. And then on the kind of student life front, there was a requirement that people, if you lived on campus to eat, take the food plan and that freshman live on campus, and they had done away with that. And there was an effort to bring that back, and that really had to do with finances to pay off the bonds that had been floated to build these dorms. You had to have a certain level of occupancy to pay them off. So, it was the freshmen, and there were some other demands, too. Again, I'm not recalling all of them, but there was this takeover. And so I was like fine with it, you know? [Laughter] The students were really occupying, really asserting themselves and their rights, and I stayed with them for a while, and then I left, and

hoping nobody would destroy my office. I remember that, but I had not been identified as a bad guy, and at that time somewhat of an ally, although I had just started doing the job, but just remembering some of the discussions that went on among students and what they were looking to achieve. I remember one group of students talking about different trends within the socialist movement. "Which was better to link up with?" That was interesting to me to be part of that, and to see that they—there was some compromises that were made and students left after two or three days, and that was pretty good, but to be placed in that situation where I was part of the administration and did not want to be seen as the enemy, and didn't have much of a role in negotiating with the students. That was done, the president, the dean of students was involved in that, but certainly not seen as an impediment to those negotiations or whatever.

So that was kind of interesting in those days, and then to be involved with some study groups that students had. The sociology department had a study group, one of the faculty members in a nearby community with some workers, and I participated in that. I remember we studied John L. Lewis and the development of the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations]. That was an interesting piece. The other highlight, well a couple of highlights, but the president who hired me, John Nemier, was—in fact, he left right after I was hired, the next year. In fact, he left—I don't think I worked under him more than two or three months. But he was a socialist in his orientation, and I remember going to meetings at his house, along with his wife and a couple other faculty people and students and just talking about the events going on in the world and domestic policy and the socialist perspective, even had a meeting of the, then we called it the New America Movement, just kind of grew out of the Democratic Socialists. So to be a part of that was kind of interesting. I was also the president, well, I was vice president of student affairs for our union, the public employee's union, United University Professionals. And I represented—they had a faculty

representative, but I represented the administrative side and was involved in that and was a representative to the governance body on campus representing that as well.

BB: So, what was involved in the transition to Raleigh in 1978?

AD: Oh, a number of things. Felt politically, we wanted to be more engaged with the social movement, the workers movement, and the Black liberation movement. And the campus certainly didn't provide that, and the community that we were in, in upstate New York, certainly had working class communities around it, but no major employment centers, industry, anything like that. And we wanted to be in a place that was more alive with struggle and was located in a strategic place, in terms of the workers movement and the Black liberation movement. So we looked, along with some other friends, and thought North Carolina was a good place.

[Conversation in background]

BB: Hang on. Okay, so start that sentence, "We looked with some other friends."

AD: Well, along with some other friends, we looked at, who did political work with us, looked at a couple of areas in North Carolina made sense in terms of its political history, you know going back to, of course, to SNCC, the founding of SNCC, the sit-in movement, the Wilmington 10 and Charlotte 3 cases were here, the Joanne Little case, the African Liberation Support Committee had grown here. I mentioned earlier the Malcolm X Liberation University.

BB: The African Liberation Support--.

AD: African Liberation Support Committee, the Malcolm X Liberation University, which was founded in Durham, coming out of a struggle at Duke University, which my dear friend and comrade Ed Whitfield [one of the Heirs interviewed for this project] was a part of, and the Student Organization for Black Unity and Youth Organization for Black Unity was here. And then folks like Ed, knowing Ed, or knowing of Ed, and Nelson Johnson and others, there was activity

here, in terms of worker organizing in the textile plants and others. So that was the political involvement, to be here, to be in the Black Belt, and then on a personal side, my family, my mother and father had retired and moved to Virginia. And Rukiya had--. You know, she's from Charleston, South Carolina, so it was like in between the two states, so we would be closer to our folks, and our grandchildren would have an opportunity to spend some time with their grandparents. It's a lot easier than if they were in upstate New York. So that was the kind of combination of things that brought us to North Carolina.

BB: I love how much that says about you, all the political considerations and which state to choose. It's so reflective of so many things that you're most passionate about. [Laughter] Both family and politically, so it's a neat story.

AD: Oh yeah, but it was a political decision to do that, but again, I don't think we were alone. A lot of people have ended up where they are because of those decisions, political decisions, either as individuals or as collectives or even larger organizations to actually be somewhere. Again, there are probably a couple of other Heirs folks who've told stories about ending up here, if they weren't born here, ending up here for political reasons and whatnot.

[Sound interruption]

BB: Let's let that car pass.

AD: Yeah. I was just thinking, meeting Jim, like with Jim Lee, Jim was at one of our, was at one of the events, and I said, you know, Jim certainly is an Heir. And I just think about his work. He was kind of connected to the Duke [University] stuff and Malcolm X University and all of that wonderful work, the communications work, the media stuff, the radio station that they had, used to hear it. Even before we moved, we would travel through Durham and listen to the radio station, and they would be playing excerpts from Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael and others, and just

playing really good music, and the politics of it all. And then we came, you know, Jim was at WVSP. They had a new station in Warrenton. So all of this, North Carolina was a significant magnet to us politically.

BB: So I'm just going to mention that you, from '78 to '79, you were the director of a continuing education program in the Wake County schools, the Drug Action of Wake County, and you were a counselor for kids who were suspended, right, because of drug and alcohol abuse, right?

AD: Yeah, I was the director. I did some counseling.

BB: Oh, you were the director of that.

AD: And director, yeah, but for kids who were—this was I guess maybe the first year of the zero tolerance policy for drugs and alcohol and tobacco, I guess, and people were suspended, but there was a recognition right away that it wasn't a smart thing to have these young people sitting out a whole year for this kind of offense and what would happen to them and what kind of damage would it do, and particularly for those who didn't have resources to maybe go to some kind of private school or whatever. And so the Wake County schools, in partnership with Drug Action of Wake County, created this project that provided academic work, which was accepted by the schools, in English and Math. Those were the two areas, and I think we had a little bit of Social Studies, but English and Math was the main subjects, and then some counseling, decision making, critical analysis, those kinds of things, mediation, all of that. We did that for a year.

BB: And then of course a big chunk of your life in the South was working as a postal clerk and working with the union there. You started in 1981, right?

AD: Yeah, I started after I left Legal Services, I guess. Or did it--?

BB: Yeah, East Central Carolina Legal Services, you were about a year there, a paralegal

and community educator, right?

AD: Right, right.

BB: And then shifted pretty quick to being a postal clerk and getting involved with the American Postal Workers Union.

AD: Yeah, I think in between that I worked at. I was a machinist and then left there and went to, after a lay-off, lay-offs then, and went to Legal Services, and then to the post office. But yeah, the post office, I spent a big chunk of time.

BB: Until 2006, right?

AD: Yeah. No, no, no. 2004.

BB: Oh.

AD: 2004. That's when I retired.

BB: Okay. What was involved in that transition? How'd you choose becoming a postal clerk and getting involved with the union?

AD: Well, I mean again trying to figure out where to be strategically, in terms of organizing, and where could you make the most impact, and what kind of workplace had the most potential, and those kinds of things, and then the post office, of course. It was an organized work force, so it wasn't like you had to organize from scratch. I mean union representation had been won many, many years ago, and so there was already a kind of existing vehicle of the union. Whether it was progressive or not, it existed.

And the post office was a strategic sector, in terms of the economy and whatnot, in terms of communication. That's changed a whole lot since then. Even now, with the post office really shrinking and being under attack, in terms of privatization and de-funding, the whole communications system has changed significantly, so that--. I mean, long ago, personal mail

declined, in terms of just first-class letters and whatnot. And then bill paying and all of that has changed so much that people are doing stuff online and whatnot. And then with the serious slump in the economy even advertising, the kind of business mail volume has declined a whole lot. So there are attempts to close post offices all over the country, to consolidate them and so on. And the role that postal workers play in the economy, unlike in 1970 when they had the historic strike that shut down the system and forced—I won't say forced, but [President Richard] Nixon took the tactic of mobilizing the National Guard to try to move the mail, and I emphasize try, because they weren't able to do it—but that was a critical part of the economy. Leave aside the fact that it's illegal to do that now and the union's level of consciousness is such that that probably wouldn't happen, but even if it could, it's not likely to have the same impact that it had in 1970, because of those changes. But anyway, it was a strategic workplace to be in.

And then on the personal side, I mean wages were good and it's where, my dad had worked there all of his life. I guess he was out by the time I went in, but I had worked in the post office as a seasonal worker for a number of years when I was in school during the holidays. My brother had as well, and some other people. And then just kind of anecdotally, the post office is a place where Black radicals worked for a long time, for many, many years. There's always the thing, the film "Hollywood Shuffle," I think, Robert Townsend, and they talked about, the line was, "There's always work in the post office," but there's a whole lot of legacy to Black activists working in the post office. Black lawyers and other professionals who couldn't get work, they worked there, other radicals.

And in fact, there's a book called There's Always Work in the Post Office. Oh gosh, I'm blocking on the author. [Phil Rubio] He's a good friend. He was a former letter carrier, got his Ph.D. at Duke, and wrote this book, and now teaches at UNC-G or at A&T. I'll get his name in a

minute, but he interviewed me and did other postal workers, in terms of radicalism in the post office and whatnot, and he did this marvelous thing. I'm going to get off this, because I know you want to move, but in his research, he was researching the Black organizations. And one of them was the National Alliance of Postal and Federal Workers. And he was looking at the newsletter from a chapter in Brooklyn and found my father's name in one issue where he had recruited X number of people. They would list that in the newsletter, that so-and-so recruited these people and whatnot. And there's probably some kind of prize and whatnot. And I asked my father about it and he said, "Yeah," and he even remembered two of the people that he had recruited. And he wasn't a big activist. He was just a member. He knew he needed to be part of it and he was a real social person, as you know, so he brought other people in.

But that was kind of unique to see that connection, but that's the postal union work. And it led to other stuff. I became the president of the local. I became a state officer, and engaged a good deal in national APW [American Postal Workers Union] politics, well, politics and the organization. I did arbitrations and whatnot, but I was also a part of coalitions that tried to push for changes within the union, one coalition that tried to build a campaign to merge. It was called the Postal Workers for One Union, to bring together the four different unions. That was important work, an important highlight, and I might even come back to that, and the other thing.

BB: And the other thing? Oh, about the--.

AD: Yeah.

BB: Well, that's it. If you want to go back to those two questions about the history and defeat.

AD: It's five to twelve.

BB: Oh, is it five to twelve? Okay. So we can stop now and decide later if we want to do

another half hour one just for the last few questions. I mean it's really, it's those two questions, what you want to say more about the Postal Workers for One Union, and then kind of what's next for you in life, are the last few questions.

AD: Yeah, we need, we should do one more.

BB: Okay, good.

AD: We should do one more.

BB: I'm happy to hear you say that.

AD: But I'm trying to remember, I knew I'd asked you to come back to talking about my neighborhood, and did we do that?

BB: I think we did it on the interview that we lost. We spent a chunk of time talking about, that's right, talking about the neighborhood and how diverse it was, and how it was changing.

AD: Yeah.

BB: So, you'd like to capture that.

AD: Yeah, definitely.

BB: Definitely, great.

AD: But for two reasons, because I mean I hooked up with those folks two months ago for our reunion, and then my brother was in touch with an old, it wasn't actually his friend, but somebody who lived in the neighborhood who was a cousin of a friend of his, and just to hear him describe the neighborhood really conformed with my understanding of it, too. So it was kind of good to hear that. You know, he's not a scholar or anything like that. He's just a guy who lived there and remembered who lived there and the components, what they did, and all of that. So anyway, I'd like to revisit that, if I could.

BB: I'm happy to hear you say that because I know I'm wearing you out. [Laughter]

AD: No, no, no. I mean part of it is my fault because we couldn't get to do it, but yeah.

BB: That's great, well, we'll stop for today. Thank you so much, Ajamu.

AD: Yeah, it's good, and maybe during this next few weeks, we can get it in some kind of way, but you know what you need to look for besides the houses? I mean your house is one--. I think mine is probably not going to be good again. I tell you with Pop, he's got this thing where if I'm there, you know, he's calling me for just good reason or no reason.

BB: He's happy to have your attention in all sorts of ways.

AD: Yeah, and I mean even—I mean sometimes it undermines the care giving and all that, too, right? So I think not. Like you said, your house is a good possibility, but, well I guess this, you're about to work your way out of this project. I was going to say you, need to find like a kind of sound room studio type thing somewhere here in Raleigh where you could, better sound, but also this kind of privacy. And what about the library? Is there some--?

BB: I'll look into that. Cynthia [Brown] and I did it at the Durham library, but you hear traffic and I mean it's just--. CDS, Center for Documentary Studies, had some suggestions, but they've got a sound booth that's tiny, but it's always being used, and it's in Durham. So, it's just--.

AD: Okay, but think about Cameron Village.

BB: All right, the library there.

AD: Yeah, the library there.

BB: All right. They've got the sound, the listening booths, right?

AD: Yeah, they've got all, you know, there's some stuff there.

BB: All right, that's a good idea. All right, I'll look into that.

AD: That might be a possibility, you know?

BB: All right, let's end here.

**END OF INTERVIEW**