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Interview with Funeka Sihlali

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Interview Transcription
Ranell B. Shubert

Okay- let's see just for safekeepings.

1. Ranell Shubert: Okay- let's see just for safekeepings. Okay my name is Ranell
2. Shubert. It's December 1st 2009. We're located at 624 South Michigan the Ca-
3. Columbia Library. This is Funeka. I'm gonna have you go ahead and pronounce your
4. full name for, for the tape.

5. Funeka Sihlali: Hi I'm Funeka Sihlali

6. RS: Okay. I'm gonna go ahead and just start the interview and I'll ask you a couple
7. questions. What is your year of birth?

8. FS: 1948

9. RS: And your place of birth?

10. FS: King Williams Town in South Africa

11. RS: And is that the, you were raised there also or?

12. FS: I was raised there but my father my father worked for the government and
13. therefore he was transferred

14. RS: And your father's place of birth?

15. FS: Tarkastad in South Africa

16. RS: And your mother's place of birth

17. FS: Peddie in South Africa

18. RS: Let's go ahead, what was your first memory?

19. FS: The house we lived in, in a, in a Ginsberg location in King Williams Town. I
20. don't know what was happening but there were some renovations so we had to move
21. to one section of the house. Which was very small. Government houses for Africans
22. were very small. I think all we had were two bedrooms. A living room ,
23. dining room served as everything. A kitchen and a room you could convert it into a
24. bathroom if you had money or it was a store room or a shed but it was part of the
25. house with no windows so. And the bathroom, no the toilet, or the lavatory as we
26. called it, was outside shared by four families, four houses. That's my first memory. I
27. don't know I think so.

28. RS: No that's great thank you. So you said your father was a government worker-
29. FS: He was a Civil Servant.
30. RS: Civil Servant, what exactly did he did he do?
31. FS: He worked in Buntu affairs. (laughs) Which is, which was all departments of
32. government you could- you could say it was city hall in some ways. You could say
33. it was foreign affairs. It was everything. So as far as I can remember he was the only
34. black person in that office building with an office.
35. RS: And you mother, did did she-
36. FS: My mother worked in the hospital.
37. RS: Okay. What sort of activities did you guys do that brought you guys together?
38. FS: As a family?
39. RS: Yeah.
40. FS: We traveled together, we went to church together, umm circus- everything that
41. we could do, merry go round which came around maybe once every two years where
42. we were. Visited other families. Families visiting each other that was a big thing.
43. What would be equal to family reunions here in America and games. Playing games
44. together.
45. RS: Des- so who not only-
46. FS: Storytelling was a big part. Night time stories which were full of morals and
47. what you would call here night- bedtime stories but our stories really had to have a
48. meaning. At that time I didn't know that but later on I got to understand if they
49. wanted to teach you something they would tell you a story and you'd get to
50. understand the meaning repeatedly. You know some would have scary endings
51. others would have that punch line but story telling was a big thing.
52. RS: Can you remember one that effected you the most?
53. FS: Yes there is one that I still remember and I tell a lot of people. My parents loved
54. to share sometimes I would get upset. People would come and they would eat with
55. people and we had to give to- we were not, we were not by any means rich, even
56. middleclass. Though they worked. And I remember this story of a um- a young
57. woman was married to a merchant, a nomadic merchant. And she was told as a bride
58. that because of her location of her house she had to share food with travelers
59. whenever people stopped, remember there were- either people used horses, mules
60. There very few Africans with cars if your going to talk about the stories olden,

61. olden day stories and they used to tell us one of the stories was about this woman
 62. who was left at home husband was a merchant so she was told all travelers going
 63. past her house she must feed them. And her husband would be gone for long periods
 64. of time and she got tired of this frequent traveler who'd stop at her house and
 65. she decided because her husband was always gone also. So she decided she was
 66. going to poison him so that he doesn't come back. She did and then the following
 67. day the husband came home and he said this time I almost run out of food because
 68. there weren't to many people- you know people where nomadic and people had
 69. moved. The route he had taken the houses were- the safe houses where he used to
 70. stop were gone and he met the traveler and he knew this traveler also. He said
 71. were it not for so and so I would have starved to death but I ate- he gave me- he
 72. shared his food with me and then she remembered that she had tried to- she had
 73. poisoned that man. Thus she was poisoning her husband because they other traveler
 74. shared with her husband and the moral of the story is whatever good you do it comes
 75. back to you. What goes around come around. She thought she was destroying that
 76. man- and she killed her husband . So that's you know the colloquial sayings when
 77. you dig a grave dig two. Dig one for the other person and dig for yourself. The
 78. man died because he ate the food, of course we are not sure he died but the husband
 79. in the story died. So she could not reverse that. Whatever we do we always have to
 80. be mindful those stories like that.

81. RS: How long did your family live in that house?

82. FS: The first nine and half years of my life we lived in that house.

83. RS: You spoke about going to church with your family-

84. FS: Yes.

85. RS: How much did religion play apart in your upbringing?

86. FS: Oh when your young- religion was influenced by colon- colo- colonizers ya
 87. know and therefore there was tinge of hey I' m going to church to have fun. As kids
 88. I was from a religious family I think (laughs) and therefore I went to church for fun
 89. because I remember my grandmother on my father's side was known as the Sunday
 90. schoolteacher. So I had fun at church because I knew all the books of the bible, I 91.
 don't remember them now. I knew all the questions you know I knew her favorite
 92. verses so I knew what she was going to ask and therefore always- I was able to
 93. answer all questions and get candy or money. So church was fun. And they sang
 94. well. I love the music because I can't sing so I used to go to church to sing and most
 95. of our preachers were not trained preachers. They were lay preachers so now when I
 96. look back some of the lessons were not so good and not so accurate, but it was still
 97. fine. Not all of them depending on where you were. Some were just screaming and
 98. hollering but it was good. Until that- I would like to know what drove my father

99. away from the church I think something happened. He was still spiritual he gave at
100. Thanksgiving but he used to work at his garden on Sundays and he would say he is
101. nearer to his God working the soil then going to church. Somehow it was never
102. discussed why he stopped going to church.

103. RS: Now is it still apart of your life today?

104. FS: Oh I go to church I love church

105. RS: Yeah.

106. FS: I, I consider myself a practicing Christian (laughs) I go to church and I do things
107. with fellow Christians at church and outside the church.

108. RS: Can you think about what was your most precious object as a child?

109. FS I- my parents, my family. I always knew I belonged and I felt loved. It wasn't
110. some thing it was always people.

111. RS: What kind of hobbies did you have as a young child or as a young person.

112. FS: I ran and talked and played and got into mischief. Those were my hobbies.

113. (laughs) I think yeah-

114. RS: So you have to tell me about something mischievous you did because that
115. interests me.

116. FS: Why, mischievous?

117. RS (laughs) It's an interesting hobby lets just put it that way.

118. FS: (Laughs) Well I always managed to get by- I remember parents- remember we
119. had no phones and I remember parents would write our parents or the elders would
120. write to each other even if you were going maybe twenty blocks away and you
121. would walk. So- I would leave my house and I would walk slowly and as soon as I
122. turned the corner I would run because I know I am going to get somewhere and find
123. other kids and play. And then you have to be sure the note is safe and then play and
124. take the note and come back and play again. It's forgetting where you left the note
125. because sometimes your clothes don't have pockets and you have to try and
126. reconstruct your whole trip. Sometimes you are lucky and you found your note and
127. sometimes didn't and you lost it. So you had to make the trip again or get a
128. whipping. That's all I can remember.

129. RS: Can you sort of talk about the dynamic of the neighborhood that you grew up?

130. FS: I grew up the first nine years I- nine and a half years- in fact on the very next
 131. street Steve Biko- do you know Steve Biko? Oh okay. Steve Biko lived on the very
 132. next street. Hard working black people all kinds of people- there were teachers. Our
 133. neighbors Mr.—(??) was a school inspector. And on the other side was a court
 134. interpreter and on the next or south to us I don't know what he did. I think he- he
 135. worked somewhere downtown but wore a nice sports jacket. He was not- I don't
 136. think he was a laborer. And at night some men came and practiced band players at
 137. his house so we could go out after dinner and all children from the street could go
 138. out and dance in the street. And the next-door neighbors were the Monahan's, she
 139. was a school teacher. And across the street- Mr. Pumbelo was a policeman and ----
 140. (??) was across the street from us also worked in another government office and so
 141. you know- oh and Mr. Imjamba up the street. There were quite a few people as
 142. school teacher. I think same street as Steve Biko, Vincent... who later went to Cape
 143. Town. A few people.

144. RS: Tell me, tell me you asked me if I knew Steve—

145. FS: Steve Biko?

146. RS: Yeah tell me about him.

147. FS: Steve Biko was the founder of one of the Black Students Organizations. He's a
 148. leader who ended up being killed and they said he committed suicide.

149. RS: Yes I know---(??)

150. FS: Yes. In fact when I came to one of the memories I have of their mother I suspect
 151. their father- was it in maybe 56- 1956 57 and their mother always wore black. I
 152. suspect their father had just died and next to her front door was a tree with hot
 153. pepper. She used to cook good food that lady. I remember that and there were two
 154. girls and two boys. I think today only the youngest girl is alive. Nobandile.

155. RS: Well you just brought up food-

156. FS Yeah

157. RS: So what kind of stuff did you- what was your favorite stuff when you were
 158. younger to eat or does your-

159. FS: Oh just loved food. I was thin then I didn't eat a lot. I wanted to eat all the time
 160. which is what we should do today. But my parents especial my father was always
 161. health oriented. Fresh vegetables, small amounts, colorful food. He knew the
 162. pyramid before I knew what it was all about- the food pyramid. So we ate
 163. everything. We didn't eat candy. We didn't have a lot of candy. We always made
 164. our bread, brown bread, which is wheat bread. He didn't like processed totally
 165. processed food. We you know African kids when your parents go away and the

166. come home they bring something. My father or my parents would bring fruit,
 167. peanuts, and popcorn. We didn't- kids didn't drink tea and coffee in my family
 168. because of the caffeine. We'd go crazy and I would have gone crazy I was already
 169. spastic. We didn't drink pop. So we ate healthy.

170. RS: You talked a little about in Church you liked the music in church you said you
 171. had a neighbor who played . What other sort of ways did music play apart in your
 172. life or do you remember the stuff that you liked back then?

173. FS: I always loved music and I was always aware I couldn't sing. My sister could
 174. sing. I think two of us in the family really could not sing. I loved playing- I loved
 175. getting involved in debates. Arguing about stuff. That how I learned about most
 176. stuff because as you know maybe as children you get convinced of something and
 177. really it's the wrong conviction or unfounded conviction. So that's how you learn by
 178. debating or talking with people. So I always like to be involved in some kind of
 179. debate. That's how I learned besides reading and I loved reading. I would hide to
 180. read. Anywhere I can find a quiet corner I would hide and read.

181. RS: What was a favorite- what was a book that you were-

182. FS: Something that looks like a *Cosmopolitan* it was *My Fair Lady* in South Africa I
 183. used to read that. I have forgotten the other book but it had an insert and the inset
 184. had like love stories. My mother used to take that out. And I would say I want to
 185. read this too why can't I- she was like no this complicated English you won't
 186. understand it. Only because it had love stories, adult love stories. Nothing obscene.
 187. Nothing obscene but parents you know would like to keep our eyes and your ears as
 188. virgin as possible for as long as possible.

189. RS: So what was primarily spoken in your house?

190. FS: Xhosa. But most of the time the radio if you wanted to listen to the news the
 191. radio was in English. Only at certain times of the day could you listen to Xhosa
 192. programs but we always got the *Daily Dispatch* which was the paper that was
 193. circulate- that was in circulation at that time. So very early- my mother was a
 194. schoolteacher before she started working in the hospital and both of them would
 195. make us- would encourage us to read the English newspaper. So hmm I don't even
 196. know what my- how they tease me because everybody else had a word- had a name
 197. like my brother couldn't say church. It was chook so things like that. But what my
 198. father hated was the mixing of languages not just dialects languages. If you speak in
 199. Xhosa stick to Xhosa. If you speaking English speak- stick to English. So we sort of
 200. learned English early and the fact that if they wanted to talk about us they would
 201. speak in English we wanted to know what they were saying. You know parents have
 202. their codes. So they would go into that and I was like no I've got to understand what
 203. they are saying about me . So I had to learn English quickly.

204. RS: You know I am going to ask you at what age did you become aware of the

205. apartheid and what was happening?

206. FS: You couldn't help but be aware of the tension because even if you were down
 207. town there were areas that were white by night. Even when you were traveling you
 208. knew you had to time your traveling. We had to get out of here at a certain time and
 209. my parents I remember being taught a double standard from the home. For instance
 210. to be respectful towards African elders you don't look them in the eye and that is
 211. very awkward when you come to the West. People think you shiftless- mischievous-
 212. you- when you avoid to hold a stare but it's a form of respect and it puts people in
 213. an awkward position. But I had to be taught from home that you stare at white
 214. people as much as you can. As much as you are not used to it if you can't look at
 215. them here right between their brow. They won't know but don't do that with black
 216. people. You do not look at black elders. You do not stare them in the eye. So we had
 217. to understand why that they are going to call you names. If you don't feel safe and
 218. there are no elders or older people with you, you can cuss at them under your breath.
 219. Don't let them call you a monkey. You can call them a baboon too. And I remember
 220. being taught by my parents to accept things from white people with one hand. Only
 221. when it is really heavier than twenty pounds will I use- but I must always try to
 222. except it with one hand and only transfer it to two hands later. Just to be as cheeky
 223. as you can be within the law and know your surroundings, know how safe you are.
 224. So you got to understand the white houses and the white neighborhoods were nicer
 225. and our houses were smaller. So you end up asking questions and little by little your
 226. parents make you understand.

227. RS: Do you remember the first time you experience something that was- you knew
 228. was not right and unjust?

229. FS: Well I told you my father in that particular office at that time- we knew when
 230. we walked into the office his office mate were nice to us but all of the sudden if we
 231. met them in the street they just wave and would not talk and I was not 10 yet so. I
 232. had to ask why are they nice when were in the office and my father had to explain
 233. why.

234. RS: Lets talk about your education-sort of like your beginning education and what
 235. that was like.

236. FS: Okay. I was fortunate because my mother was a schoolteacher. Married woman
 237. could not teach fulltime Elementary education unless they had degrees and my
 238. mother did not have a degree. So she taught part time when there wasn't a fulltime
 239. teacher. That was good for us because number one we were able to be accepted in
 240. school without Christian names. Both my names are African names. That one school
 241. I think was progressive enough that they did not force people to only register their
 242. kids if they have what was called Christian names or what were called Christian
 243. names at that time. So my mother was there and most of the teachers were people I
 244. knew. Excuse me. So school in early stages was very nice to me. I remember one of
 245. the teachers was Mrs. Fletcher she was Mrs.- she was the wife of the minister at the

246. church we went to. Mrs. Dubela, Miss Marlowe, I remember those people. And I
247. knew them so to me it was informal school as such. I just went there and then I- at
248. that time I didn't feel I was challenged enough. I liked being sick (laughs). Call- I'd
249. lie and say I'm sick and my father would take me to the doctor which I hated so I
250. would get well.

251. RS: I can see the mischievousness coming out.

252. FS: Sometimes

253. RS: So how, how did you get to school? Was it far? Was it near?

254. FS: Oh walk it wasn't far. Maybe elementary was maybe twenty blocks and that
255. wasn't- or less so people walked that was no big deal. And then its when we moved
256. to the transgate to ---(??) That we started walking and there were- it was a weird
257. situation for us because in King Williams Town we were sort of in the city, in town.
258. That was a town that's still not a city. Then we moved to a village town, we were
259. maybe two and a half miles out of town next to a forest and a quarry and there were
260. only four houses for African civil servants. The schools were in the villages. When
261. we first got there we used to walk maybe four miles, that was too much for us
262. coming from the city and we crossed two rivers. My parents didn't feel safe- there
263. were bridges, we didn't wade in the water we crossed over the river but there were
264. deserted roads and then my parents changed schools for us at least we didn't have to
265. cross rivers but it was a long distance. Then we moved again and by then I was in
266. boarding school. So when you're in a boarding school you live on campus so it was
267. different.

268. RS: So is there, is there a reason sent you to a boarding school?

269. FS: Oh no no no no it's a different

270. RS: Sure, explain that us.

271. FS: It's a different approach. In fact it's the opposite of what I've been told here in
272. America. Most people think that a child is naughty or unruly especially a girl to be
273. sent to boarding school. That is not what it was for us. It's to make sure your child is
274. safe and to increase their chances of networking and better exposure away from the
275. elements of if you want to call it ghetto life or location life.

276. RS: Now was this-

277. FS: I was not the only one. Most people- those- most people tried hard to send their
278. kids to boarding school because they were safe especially if it was a girl's school
279. there were no boys to distract you from your studies. So it wasn't punishment or
280. anything like that. I was a wild kid but I was a good girl.

281. RS: Was it difficult to get into one of those schools or-

282. FS: Not really, not if you apply on time and you pay school fee, boarding fees. No.

283. RS: Can you think of an important figure in your education. Somebody who has
284. made some sort of-

285. FS: Mrs. Fusahni, (laughs) Mrs. Fusahni was this lady who taught us English and
286. Latin and um in some ways I think she liked me though she was hard on me because
287. her husband was in the political movement with my uncle. So she knew my family
288. and oh she was hard on me. She made me work hard but I liked her and she taught
289. me enough subjects that appreciated her.

290. RS: So in high school after you studied- what did you continue to study after-

291. FS: After high school?

292. RS: Yes.

293. FS: I would have loved to to get to to take medicine but I knew my parents didn't
294. have money so I had to look into nursing and that's what I did after working for
295. maybe a year or so.

296. RS: What age is that?

297. FS: 18 or 19

298. RS: Why did you join the A-N-C African National Congress?

299. FS: I didn't formally join the A-N-C. Members of my family were A-N-C members
300. but at that time people were not formally joining the A-N-C because it was banned
301. when I was coming up. There's the group ahead of us that had formally joined and
302. then when it came to us you just became- your affinity was defined by what you did
303. and your beliefs. Does that make sense? I mean if you grow up in a family that is
304. democratic you think you are a democrat even before actually sign. Now if that can
305. be banned then you are still calling yourself a democrat and that's what happened
306. and when I left South Africa thirty years ago the A-N-C was still banned. And I
307. have- well you. know I haven't lived there. Every time I say I am going to be a card
308. carrying member but members of my family are.

309. RS: So at that time there was no sort of real structure-?

310. FS: There was structures there was work to be done, underground work. Yes.

311. RS: Did you have any part of that structure or did you remain just-

312. FS: Well I remember writing letters. I had a cousin Owen Vana who was a reporter
313. for the *Daily Dispatch*, worked with Donald Woods, he would come to our house on
314. Sundays and we would go to-uh what we called the outside room. I think it was an
315. extension of our house and he would dictate to me. I remember thinking that I could
316. get away with it. I wouldn't touch the paper and I would write with a pen and we
317. would wear gloves and put the mail- the letters in envelopes and he would find a
318. way of sending them to a certain---(??) shop in Johannesburg who would then fly
319. out of the country with them and then they- the police apparently were watching him
320. because they approached my father and told him that my association with Owen
321. was- at first they thought we had a sexual relationship but he was a cousin. Because
322. we would go to this room and close (laughs) the door and right no body would know
323. what we were doing. So my father explained that we were cousins and nothing of
324. the sort but he asked me if I was doing anything with him political. I just denied it.
325. So he went to jail a few times but they never pinned me down for anything as far as
326. that is concerned and that is when I was still staying at home. And then I went to
327. Johannesburg. We used to have prepare for- after 76 because I was still in
328. Johannesburg we were with a group of guys who were helping kids go to school and
329. helping some who wanted to leave the country. And then I came to Chicago.

330. RS: Now you said that you didn't – your father asked you if you were doing
331. anything and you said no.

332. FS: I said no. The less people involved we knew that was better because you don't-
333. even now when you follow the history of the A-N-C you will find out somebody is
334. in charge of multiple groups. Sometimes people in the same cell don't know each
335. other or don't know that they are all managed by the same person or recruited by the
336. same person. So the best thing was not to tell because if I tell me father- what if he
337. breaks down and pleads for me and say take me but don't take my daughter. So they
338. believed my father ran a straight house and it was better not to tell him. His brother
339. had already been in jail. Had been in and out of Robin Island and I didn't necessarily
340. want to expose him to unnecessary pain. See families sacrificed sometimes one
341. brother would be deeply involved and then the other brother or sister would sort of
342. be responsible for holding the base together or keep the fires burning.

343. RS: Was there anyone else in your family who was involved besides your cousin?

344. FS: Yes my little brother he used to drive people across to Lasutu. He even went
345. into exile. He's not little anymore (laughs). And my sister oh lord. My sister was
346. involved with someone who now works for the current president and she used to
347. travel back and forth to Lasutu to see him. She tells me she used to carry grenades.
348. She used to do a lot of things.

349. RS: So you never- everything you did was sort of secret never apart in any activities
350. that were public?

351. FS: Oh demonstrations we did attend demonstrations that vets in the locations. In
 352. meetings, planning strategies but our- it was weird we would go to these things and
 353. you'd come out of the meetings and by then the police would be there. You would
 354. have to run fast- find a way. You didn't get go there cute. You didn't wear high
 355. heels going there. You had to have flat shoes because- and scout how you going to
 356. get out of there because police would be there. I don't know why they would be late,
 357. excuse me, I suppose they knew that meetings were legal to some extent. So they
 358. would catch people on their way out. So if you left immediately you could get away
 359. and they would find a way of provoking people then people would protest.

360. RS: So you never found yourself in any of those difficult situations?

361. FS: Yes you did. You ran. You jumped. Nobody wants to go to jail. I mean if you
 362. went to jail once they got hold of you, you were in deep trouble. I think it was
 363. always the strategy that not all of us are always going to go to jail. Struggle is fought
 364. at different fronts. It is not fought from one street corner. Other people bake bread
 365. and fed the protestors. Others teach them. Others sow clothes. So there was always
 366. that division of labor that was understood. For instance some people were against
 367. shebeen but that is where ideas were being discussed. That's where money changed
 368. hands. That's where trips were planned so everybody played a part. Do you know
 369. what a shebeen is? A shebeen is sort of a private tavern. You can have a shebeen at
 370. your house. They were illegal. We had no outlets. We had no ways of entertaining
 371. people. So in the evening everybody would lets say come to your house and you
 372. would sell liquor. That's illegal but you would get it at a certain price. Have it
 373. delivered and sell it and sometimes not keep all of it here. Keep it at different house
 374. because when the police come they would just come and smash bottles and pour it
 375. out and that's money lost, that revenue. So everybody played a part think of the
 376. people who were storing the liquor for the shebeen queens and you know make the
 377. lookouts for the police. So that if the police come it would be like no we are not
 378. selling liquor we are just having a party. Get rid of that liquor. Take it next door-
 379. find ways. So everybody- most people played a part in the struggle and they did not
 380. have to belong to any organization because oppression was just everywhere.

381. RS: Talked a little bit about problems with police and resistance, were there other
 382. local authorities that sort of came down on people besides?

383. FS: Yep. They were exceptionally hard on men. For instance if we had been to a
 384. party remember people were not rich. They had no resources. So we would all use
 385. the same car and there would be eight to ten people in one car. They would pick on
 386. men. I remember a guy the guys used to called Baby Elephant. In fact these
 387. professional men were also activists I'm talking about used to send young to school
 388. to college and they used to call this guy Baby Elephant. He was big. He was like
 389. Shaq. He had big hair and whenever the police got hold of him they kicked his butt.
 390. I think they just hated big strong huge black man. So it wasn't safe for them to be
 391. out. That's one of the reasons number one we didn't have cars to if- to go home. If

392. you've been at a party until midnight so everybody stayed there but the other thing
393. was the threat and violence of police.

394. RS: How did you stay informed about what was happening?

395. FS: The grapevine, the bush telephone. People had ways. People had ways. But
396. remember in spite of that there was censorship. Extreme censorship.

397. RS: What was a- can you think of something a moment in your activism in South
398. Africa that you won't- that you just can't forget?--- We can come back to that if you
399. want.

400. FS: okay

401. RS: So it was a community wide involvement in the movement correct?

402. FS: It was but you also had to be careful because there were informers. There always
403. informers who are paid. Who might be caught in compromised situations and
404. therefore they have to talk or they are just bought, plain bought. And therefore they
405. had to- we had to be careful of people like that. And usually it would be somebody
406. who just tries to get involved from nowhere. You know you had to be introduced.
407. Your credentials depended on the previous person. Like I said my cousin. Well
408. people knew my cousin wrote for the paper and they knew his articles. So if I'm
409. brought by him there is some element of credibility to there because he's going to be
410. blamed if I do nothing or if I mess up. So some people could get in and be so good
411. and yet they're informers or they are careless or they just like to brag. Yeah we're
412. going to bring this house down. Yeah we're going to plant a bomb. And people
413. would do that so you had to be careful when it came to elements like that.

414. RS: Did you ever feel like that there were directions that the movement in Africa
415. was taking that you didn't agree with or were you just-

416. FS: At that time you were just so steeped in anger that whatever can be done-
417. because one thing the South African intelligence was outstanding. It's as if they
418. anticipated moves or they had such good informers that they could reconstruct what
419. has happened and leave you no alternative but to say yes or no. So whatever you
420. could do whenever you could do it, you did it and sometimes when orders came like
421. that people followed through. You know sometimes you- like nurses you were
422. considered safe and there were white people who would- who were sympathizers
423. with the movement and some of them would have lets say patients, a sick person,
424. and as a nurse you think you are going to take care of a patient but really you're
425. carrying messages. So there were lots of ways of bypassing things but you just had
426. to be safe because they watched everyone.

427. RS: So you talked a little bit- what sort of nursing jobs did you take after you
428. finished?

429. FS: This was interesting because we had protested something as nurses and we were
 430. the first group that graduated general training in midwifing and did not have
 431. vacancies at Baragwanath which is now Chris Hani and they told use that we have
 432. no vacancies on Wednesday afternoon after we wrote the first part of the exam. I
 433. think they wanted us to fail the second part. So there we were with no money and all
 434. of us had to end up doing private duty, most of us. I think from our group of more
 435. Than fifty people they only took four or something like that. So the rest of us were
 436. left without jobs and we couldn't- after our parents had help us go through school go
 437. home with no jobs, no money. So for some of us what was open was private duty
 438. and who had money to employ us in private duty was white people. Oh my God, talk
 439. about conflict. I so hated white people that in spite of knowing that we all human
 440. and our temperature was ninety-eight four I felt like if I touched- this doesn't have
 441. to make sense okay- if I touched white people they would be like jelly and cold.
 442. That's what I had made up in my mind but the very first patient I had was this
 443. English family. I think the husband had been a professor and the wi- where were
 444. they- maybe they----- (??) I'm not sure but the wife was so nice. A now a smack in
 445. my face and here I am anger as hell and here is this woman nice as all get go. She
 446. was so nice. She would give us extra money. She would- everyday you would take
 447. care of her husband she thanked you. She gave us little gifts. That wasn't going to
 448. undo apartheid but you get to a point where you look at a person as a person more
 449. than a perpetrator of every act of apartheid. And that was amazing because most of
 450. us did not want to take private duty jobs but we ended up taking those jobs and
 451. that's were we could make money. So.

452. RS: Now I know it wasn't what you exactly wanted to do but can you think of
 453. anything you did enjoy about these jobs?

454. FS: It's all- you know once you are trained as a nurse, I hate trained but that is what
 455. we say in nursing training, you enjoy helping people and I soon realized that I am
 456. better off taking care of white kids than adults because adults maybe I was still
 457. going to be angry and I wanted to believe the kids were innocent enough and were
 458. not going to talk back or call me names. So I ended up having kids especially Jewish
 459. boys- bris specializing in that and its nice to see- making somebody else comfortable.
 460. It rewarding. You just don't do it for yourself. Remember my story whatever you do
 461. for others you are doing for yourself, so.

462. RS: I am going to ask you what were your feelings about in 76 about what
 463. happened in Soweto.

464. FS: I was on a assignment out of town. I think I was in Benoni taking care of some
 465. babies and I watched TV and I saw fire in Soweto. I could not believe it. I was in
 466. Benoni for maybe two weeks (phone rings once) and I had to call back and call
 467. Soweto and find out what was going on. That was amazing be- I know I am one of
 468. those people who did not expect that at that time but we knew how to manage it
 469. when you were in Soweto but if a riot broke out and you were not there it was

450. difficult to- the the the press the media would paint such gory pictures but if you
451. were there, there would most of the time be word. You knew how to maneuver how
452. to stay away from certain areas depending on your responsibilities and where to be
453. involved. I had fr- as a nurse I had friends who were doctors and sometimes they
454. would be called- we would be called to come and take care some of people. So, it
455. wasn't always all bad. You just be driving down street- I don't drive so I be in some
456. bodies car and it be like these cars can't go through but you go through because you
457. going to help so and so and so this. We have come casualties down the street so
458. some of the things- some things like that would happen and you just have to work.
459. Those days we were not so scared of AIDS you just worked. Today I don't know
460. how I would.

461. RS: Did you know anyone who was-

462. FS: Killed?

463. RS: lost, yeah. Or did-

464. FS: I did, I did there were kids you know when you lived in Soweto you know
465. some- you may not know them personally but you know a kid has been lost in that
466. house or oh that kid who used to go past here in the morning there gone. Yes you get
467. to know people. Yeah and even if you don't know personally it's a loss to the nation
468. so everybody felt it all the time. In Africa you don't go to a funeral because you
469. know the person personally one a one to one basis. You-and individual and with the
470. things they've done they deserve to be- to to- they deserve to have a nice send off.
471. It's like it's like a thank you for your contribution to the struggle.

472. RS: So you came to Chicago in 79.

473. FS: Yes I did.

474. RS: What brought you to Chicago?

475. FS: Oh the family whiles I was doing private duty the family I worked for he was
476. still is American and she was South African. He felt the political climate was
477. explosive and at that time he just asked me to help his wife bring the kids- the two
478. kids over to America because one of the kids was young. And I thought I wasn't
479. going to stay but when I got there I was like they let me go? Why not stay and go to
480. school and then my family started telling me- the summer before that I had traveled
481. across South Africa with a girlfriend of mine and then they started reconstructing
482. my whole trip. The police did and visiting everybody I had visited to question them.
483. That scared, that scared me I said I shouldn't go back there because they'll throw me
484. in jail. We had done nothing. It was a summer vacation but I think they thought we
485. were caring information from place to place but we were really partying with peela
486. (laughs) it was nothing political. You know that's the other thing South Africans in

487. those days were able to balance lives. The terrible political situation in their lives.

488. We manage to leave and enjoy life to some extent.

489. RS: So when you arrived- who came with you when you arrived?

490. FS: The family I was working for we had just- I told you I used to be the nurse for
491. Jewish kids when they had their bris and this family I stayed with them for three
492. months and I suppose it was his plan that they should keep me so that I would-
493. because the child was not sick really but they had money. Those days childbirth for
494. white woman who had money they felt they had done a lot of work for nine months
495. having been pregnant so if they could afford a nurse they asked for a nurse and if
496. you stayed with them six weeks then you started taking the kid for shots. And that's
497. what I would do and you know they become cranky the first few days after you they
498. have had their shots and I would be there. And sometimes I would be there when
499. they start teething because their parents would want to sleep all night and that's
500. basically what I did. There are rewards that's working with a white family.

501. RS: What- how did you communicate with people back home in Africa?

502. FS: I wrote a lot of letters because calling was very expensive, still is. So I still have
503. some letters from my parents.

504. RS: Did you have any plans- were plans for yourself when you arrived or just-

505. FS: My goal was to stay and go to school, which I later did. It took me some time
506. but I did it.

507. RS: And why?

508. FS: Because I didn't understand this system I thought the system here was similar to
509. ours at home but you had to go to school all year round and I always used to think
510. what if I have to go home. Not understanding you could skip a semester maybe. And
511. then I also needed funds. School is expensive of course and being I would have to
512. pay out of state out of country fees. And just being scared because people would
513. say- of course I still have an accent and I want to keep it but a lot of times people
514. will say they don't understand you. And that's very awkward when you are in a
515. classroom. I suppose that I was not- con- convinced enough that I could make it. So
516. I was building up to it money, time, resources, confidence, and just working on my
517. immigration status that's very important to go to school. So those are just some of
518. the factors I had to think about.

519. RS: So after you've graduated here you continued working in the medical field.

520. FS: Yes.

521. RS: How is it different- how was it different in Chicago compared to back in South
522. Africa?

523. FS: In South Africa if people eventually got to treatment they were very very
524. compliant. The system had beaten them down that they would take medication as
525. ordered most of the time. But in Chicago they're quite a few people would challenge
526. the doctors, or let me say in America, and that's good to be part of your treatment.
527. To be informed about why you are doing certain things. And that one of- you know
528. there's pros and cons on each side. People participating in their care. Say well I have
529. alternatives what if we don't do this but do this. Because there was a time I was
530. doing midwifing and late on I found out some private doctors came only on Fridays
531. because they could make money and do surgery on woman even if they didn't
532. deserve surgery but they the doctors would be paid they do a cesarean section. I've
533. forgotten her name. There was this sister in charge she could stand up to them. She
534. was good. I wonder who she was. I wish I could go back and- she could she would
535. stand up to them. We worked at night and when they would come and do surgeries
536. Friday and Saturday night. We would crank them, we would crank them and people
537. wouldn't question it. So.

538. RS: Let's move to- when did you first become aware there was a anti apartheid
539. movement here in Chicago?

540. FS: Africans are never alone somehow you get to find people- we find each other.
541. And I can't say I know a time when I did not know. As soon as I found other South
542. Africans here they take you and introduce you to other people. So as soon as I got
543. here I found a lot sophisticated activists who knew sometimes a lot about South
544. Africa. Things I didn't even know because of censorship. So I can't say I was here
545. for a long time before I knew about activists. Most of the activists I know from then
546. are still my friends and I just can't imagine Chicago without them.

547. RS: How did you make people aware of what was happening in South Africa?

548. FS: The debates, the talks when I go home people will ask you what's going on
549. because still the press puts a twist on things and sometimes what will be reported is
550. what has been observed in either with the poorest or with the elitist. So by being
551. South African I think I can bring a different twist. For instance one of the professors
552. here is a friend of mine and we used to talk about the folks who were in exile as they
553. went back what happened with them and I still feel there was a sector that is
554. neglected the people who were left home, their losses. Who lost sons they cannot
555. trace. They don't know where they were and what about them. What about their
556. struggle keeping the fires burning waiting for that husband that never comes back.
557. Waiting for the sun and daughter that never came back or somebody that comes
558. back shell-shocked by- well it doesn't have to be grenades but just the losses of just
559. being tossed from one country to another country. Of being raped- woman have to
560. put up with that. When you have no accommodations as a woman you a lot of things
561. happen to you. When you hungry a lot of things happen. Situations are created so

562. what about those people who waited and waited. And what about those that came
 563. back and have never had recognition or compensation. Because some have not had
 564. compensation. They- all of a sudden now they have to prove in the gaps in their
 565. political resume they have been out of the country. So- because at that time there
 566. wasn't- I cant – I was not out of the country like that but I don't believe there were
 567. records kept and what if your upstream comrades are dead that means there is no
 568. one to vouch for you that you were out in exile. You can't put it on pa paper now.
 569. So there are lots of gaps- I wish all of those could be corrected.

570. RS: What do you mean by political resume?

571. FS: Your CV they're people who just got swept and left the country and maybe they
 572. did not know who to report to or maybe they knew who to report to but they're
 573. upstream. Lets say a person dies and they get adopted into another cell (button noise
 574. from cell) and that one gets promoted because some of them when they were in exile
 575. they had to use different names so that they could not be traced and their families
 576. could not be tortured as I said there were informers. So what if an informer
 577. infiltrates and says oh Ranell is here. Ranell that is an odd name and they connect
 578. with you're with your last name. it's rare that there are going to be two Ranell
 579. Schuster?

580. RS: Shubert.

581. FS: Shubert, Shubert and that's easy they go home and they say we can get you your
 582. daughter back if you do this and this and this. Those are the kinds of things they did.
 583. They would black mail families and families would try to get you back. So those
 584. who were outside were all of a sudden you would change your name and you would
 585. not be Ranell Shubert you would find something else. you know so there have been
 586. a lot of losses. It's going to take a few generations but more than anything to me are
 587. the people who actually went out and intensified the struggle outside- but we cannot
 588. forget those who were inside. We cannot forget those. They did their part to. Other
 589. wise what would people go back to if those- the others hadn't stayed behind. I don't
 590. think those everybody chose to stay behind but they did and everybody should be
 591. recognized not just one sector. We were all in this together as I said from the
 592. beginning the struggle is not fought on one front. There were mothers who were
 593. baking cakes and cookies everyday to feed these kids. There were people who
 594. provided safe houses and looked like nothing. Just had blank faces in the morning.
 595. There were people who collected food to give provision and money to give
 596. provision to these kids when they left the country. So we are never going to cover
 597. everybody but some losses are more than others and if a person is asking for help I
 598. think they should get compensation.

599. RS: Here in Chicago can you talk about maybe some of the things you did with the
 600. organizations here?

601. FS: The organization C-I-S-S-A Committee of Solidarity with South Africa, have
602. you heard of C-I-S-S-A?

603. RS: Yes

604. FS: C-I-S-S-A used to collect money and they would hold rallies and you know toyi-
605. toyi?

606. It's the dance like a war dance in front of South African Consulate on the other side
607. of the bridge. And then on this side they moved without telling people. You had to
608. look for the South African Consulate. It was very hard to go there. Made people
609. aware. Go to people's houses and they would talk about the situation, the strategy-
610. excuse me universities used to hold these debates. Functions would be held at
611. Malcolm X. We used to walk Trinity United Church of Christ under Reverend Dr.
612. Jeremiah Wright used to give us a place so that we could start walking form there
613. and come back there. There were other churches I think the third (rod ??) but
614. Reverend Dr. Jeremiah Wright always had a sign outside his church that said free
615. South Africa from 1979 oh my goodness until he moved into this new church and
616. that's when somebody stole it outside but he has always been an advocate for our
617. freedom and equality. Visitors from South Africa were always welcome there
618. allowed to tell their story to somebody who is very understanding. you know
619. because some people are just there fly by night and he understands the African and
620. South African story. He's well read and whenever he could and he still does he talks
621. about South Africa. So there have been lots of things where we could participate.

622. RS: What do you think as someone who came from South Africa what kind of
623. things do think you contributed that made the difference?

624. FS: It's explaining the small details. You know being outside sometimes people
625. want to help they may not know what you need and what you want. People can say-
626. lets say an African comes here with no money and people say oh you need a car. It
627. may not be what you need because you don't have enough resources for your
628. background. I think one of the things I was able to- one of the areas was to
629. explaining basics. Sometimes people need basic resources so that they can stand up
630. on their own feet. Don't give them a mansion when they don't have a job. It- do you
631. see? That's the best example I can tell you. You give them a mansion you say live
632. here. Then they have to pay for electricity. Then they have to pay for all utilities and
633. the the mansion is in Winnetka, that will never happen, but it's in Winnetka. How
634. they going to get back and forth and then your going to think they ungrateful 635.
635. because you gave them what they didn't need. You didn't sit down with them to
636. understand exactly what they would like to have and what they need. So I think I
637. was able to I've been able to contribute by explaining the culture not saying I'll give
638. you this. Understand people want to know you. You can't just give people stuff.
639. People want to know you. I can't- it's subservient always having to say thank you
640. when I don't grow. Help me grow and develop and that's what's important. Its
641. another way of endorsing- do you understand anything about public aid public
642. assistance?

643. RS: A little bit yeah.

644. FS: Okay public assistance as far as I am concerned that people who deserve it but
645. most people if you said for the next four years I will help you go to school so that
646. you can get a job that is before this whole thing but if you did that you will have
647. done them a favor and I think sometimes that is what we have to do with Africa.
648. You have a piece of land I'll help you till it. I can't always bring you cabbage and
649. potatoes. I'll do that for you for six months and in the meantime I am going to bring
650. you seeds and water. And you get up and work that land and I think that's were I've
651. been able to come in. Just small- I'm not a big project person. Its like little things I
652. understand this. These are people. These are human beings give them back their
653. self-confidence and their self-esteem.

654. RS: Can you think of somebody you worked with your activism in Chicago- here in
655. Chicago that really made-

656. FS: Dr Jeremiah Wright, Dr Lisa Brock, Harold Rogers, Prexy Nesbitt.

657. RS: Why? Why some of these people? Tell me more.

658. FS: Those people they will not be moved they know what they know about South
659. Africa and they know what they want to do with and for South Africans. Mind you
660. with. They are people who do things very abstract and- you know in in ways the-
661. they know how to get down and work with people. Those stand out in my mind. I
662. have a lot of people that disappointed I didn't mention their names but those four.

663. RS: Now- any- did you- tell me about some maybe some marches or demonstration
664. that you did here in Chicago.

665. FS: In front of the consulate- we would go. You'd be told that something is going to
666. happen and you'd go there. As South Africans we would go in smaller number most
667. of us when we come here we have double responsibility in that we still responsible
668. for out families at home so we would be in school. We would be working. We'd go
669. to these demonstrations. We'd go to the walks but we still had to know that we had
670. responsibility at home and we would sing songs. Police would come and take some
671. people and throw then in the van but as a African fortunately I have never been
672. caught. I got a job early in 80 and most of the time I worked at night so I would
673. work at night and sleep during the day. If I'd go maybe I'd go early and then leave
674. because I have to go to work. And I had to have a way of earning my immigration
675. status because if I messed up at that time I would be thrown back to South Africa.
676. So you always have to know the lay of land. I wasn't gong to play careless---- (??)
677. and allow myself to be caught. So most of the time we got away.

678. RS: How do you compare the resistance you experience here to South Africa?

679. FS: When I first came here at times I would be upset because in South Africa you
 680. know it was the law here it was not the law and people would tell oh no we- racism
 681. is dead in America everybody can do everything and the minute like I said the
 682. minute I opened my mouth, the minute people see my hair, the minute I have
 683. different needs you would know. You would know. And it hurts because people say
 684. anything is possible in America, it is not. And those people I work with someone
 685. who denies there is racism and maintains that sometimes minorities exaggerate it's
 686. just that the person who exercises racism is incompetent anyways. That's amazing to
 687. me they could be racist- they could be incompetent only with minorities but not
 688. incompetent with other people. so um it's that kind of denial that hurts. Because
 689. when you experience nobody wants to go around inviting abuse but when it comes
 690. and then somebody says you don't understand you are not being abused it makes
 691. you- it reduces your thought process. That person is saying you don't think. You
 692. don't know. You don't understand. Mean while they are enjoying all the privileges.
 693. That's very inconsiderate and still enjoying the privilege of being white and saying
 694. no there is no racism it's just an incompetent person. So it can be annoying at least
 695. in South Africa you knew what was what, what to expect. It was wrong mind you it
 696. was wrong but you knew what to expect. Here you could deceive yourself into
 697. saying oh no racism it's illegal and wham you get it. We see it all the time.

698. RS: What sort of actions did you take to participate in divestment?

699. FS: Identifying what companies were doing in South Africa. What they were
 700. investing in. How they treated people in South Africa and also communicating with
 701. the people back home on how not to participate with or buy certain products. And
 702. here we would be inva- in on panels to talk about divestment and boycott those
 703. institutions because most institutions would claim that they did not know. You're in
 704. the 70's and 80's when this was at it's height people would say no we didn't know
 705. and really once they feel the pressure- whenever you hit people in their pocket they
 706. would react. It would take time but they would react and I think that's one of the
 707. variables used in to to bring down apartheid. In that people were told that we're not
 708. going to send out kids here this school- we will tug at this school for because- some
 709. universities for their insur- for their insurance and they are retirement they invested
 710. in South Africa so little by little they had to pull out. And some are going back.
 711. Others are not because too many things were in play here. The health system for
 712. blacks was not good but once they pulled out people didn't have jobs and therefore
 713. they were not eating well and therefore their immune systems were challenged. And
 714. then we had another apartheid in the form of HIV AIDS so all the confluence of all
 715. these factors was rough and still is rough on the country.

716. RS: I am going to do some of these reflection questions

717. FS: Yes.

718. RS: And I- there is so many I wan to ask you that I won't have time for. What do
 719. you think is the biggest challenge that South Africa faces today.

720. FS: Health, understanding that their health is their wealth and do you stay healthy. I
 721. think by being safe and I think by eating well. Okay that sounds very simplistic. So
 723. housing has to improve in South Africa. Agriculture has to be upgraded. There is a
 724. lot of land in South Africa that lays feral. When things sometimes are not done
 725. gradually there's always a vacuum. Land was occupied by skilled white farmers
 726. who had laborers even if they were not skilled they had lot of laborers. So there was
 727. enough labor and they could control labor so they were able to be productive and
 728. they were supported by the government. Now some farms are taken over by blacks
 729. but they don't have some don't have the skill and they don't have the labor. So now
 730. there is a vacuum there and there isn't enough food to feed people. There's I I think
 731. it's easy to have three points every time you approach from my- remember I said
 732. I'm a small project person. I would say safety. Have housing, nutrition, health,
 733. nutrition, land those go together. Education and jobs so is there a way I'd group
 734. those things. Safety goes with housing. Everybody must have decent housing. Health
 735. I would go to nutrition and agriculture. And what's the other thing I said? Jobs and
 736. Education. That's how I would approach- that's the challenge and I think if people
 737. feel safe they're prepared to be productive and therefore they will work in the land
 738. and therefore they will send their kids to school and- because they are so many
 739. resources in South Africa and South Africa has to learn how to take care of it's
 740. base. Take care of home.

741. RS: What was your reaction to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report and
 742. it's conclusions?

743. FS: It was that truth but I don't know if there was reconciliation because most of the
 744. people who ended up- the white policeman who confessed were insulated. There
 745. families were safe. They were already let out of the country. There were rumors that
 746. they were compensated. They were givin lots and lots of money. They still had
 747. families where as the people- the children they killed, the folks they killed were
 748. gone forever. Reconciliation I don't know if you have to pay people for their pain
 749. more than you have to be honest and say sorry in a meaningful manner. I suspect
 750. that was not done and culturally I think when those woman cried I don't think it
 751. touched- those black woman cried I don't think it touched those white policemen the
 752. same way it would have touched black man. So there's still a gap I feel exists. I
 753. don't think there was a lot of reconciliation there. There was a little bit of close sure.
 754. My child died why did you have to do that? What do I get for my loss? For
 755. wondering for ten, twelve, fifteen, twenty years where's my child and then I find out
 756. you shot my child like a dog. You set my child on fire. Why? And then what do you
 757. expect me to do now? And remember those are people whose children mean wealth.
 758. These are the kids who have did- would have been working for them. So they have
 759. lost on so many fronts. Stress from loss of their children, stress from not knowing,
 760. stress from not having children to work and take care of them. So what do you give
 761. them and then your still protected. I don't know how much reconciliation- it's a step.
 762. A lot of people say it's a step at least they know its partial closure but there are

763. people who don't recover from that kind of hurt. I don't know if I would. I don't
 764. know if I would. So I think we should sure hope they took it seriously but I think
 765. there are people who were able to literally dodge the bullet. All they had to do was
 766. just appear there in a crumpled suit or polyester suit and say what they wanted to say
 767. and it's easy to say I am sorry. And then go home and go- I wish I never heard of a
 768. single one that committed suicide after a confession to show remorse. That's not
 769. Christian like. That's not good but I want to see one of them that cannot live with
 770. himself. I feel so bad I am so depressed I'll kill myself. Not one. I haven't heard. So
 771. it's its' sad I don't know- I think it left people hanging. There's still more to come?
 772. What else? What else? And then it's like okay that's it. It's over folks. I don't know.

773. RS: For you what is something that your you've accomplished that your most proud
 774. of?

775. FS: I'm proud of the fact that I got here and got my education. I'm proud of the fact
 776. that any South African who came here if I could I helped. I helped them walk the
 777. corridors. I've helped them transition and I have helped them make a life of their
 778. own and I am still working with my family back home. I'd like to do more at home.
 779. I might retire. Hopefully I will retire and do more but the the most interesting thing
 780. for me at home I'd like to do is focus on health that is in contact with agriculture.
 781. Feed the people. I feel like if you feed the people the rest will happen

782. RS: Is there anything in your life wish you would have done differently

783. FS: I would have started the feed the people notion earlier and I would have
 784. approached it differently. I would have funders. Do you have money?

785. RS: I'm a college student (laughs).

786. FS (laughs) I want really I want the land in South Africa to be utilized productively.
 787. South Africans shouldn't starve. South Africans shouldn't starve. Male, female
 789. everybody nobody should starve. Lets just use the land. It sounds like- give the
 790. people water and seeds and feed them for a limited period then they feed
 791. themselves. Make them proud. That's all I want. And then if I can do that for 5 years
 792. the next 5 years I'll make sure everybody- now- we'll all work towards educating
 793. people making them understand they have resources, jobs, and all of that.

794. RS: It's easy to see why that story of that you remember has influence your life.
 795. Easy to that. Okay I think were doing really- were going to go ahead and just finish
 796. here.

797. FS: Okay

