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Fall 2009

Interview with Cheryl Johnson-Odim

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Recommended Citation
Armbruster, Carrie. "Interview with Cheryl Johnson-Odim" (Fall2009). Oral Histories, Chicago Anti-Apartheid Collection, College Archives & Special Collections, Columbia College Chicago. http://digitalcommons.colum.edu/cadc_caam_oralhistories/9

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Cheryl Johnson-Odim Interview
[Full Source Transcript]

1 KA: Okay, my name is Kerry Armbruster. Can you please tell me
2 your name and then spell it?

3 CJO: My name is CHERYL JOHNSON-ODIM, c-h-e-r-y-l j-o-
4 h-n-s-o-n hyphen o-d-i-m.

5 KA: Okay, today's date is December 4th, 2009, and the interview is taking
6 place in Cheryl's office at Dominican University. What years were you active
7 in the anti-apartheid movement?

8 CJO: Well that depends on how we want to define active. I was introduced
9 to the anti-apartheid movement really in the 1960's, and I was—am I talking loud
10 enough?

11 KA: [Checking levels on recording] Oh I'm just—nope you're great.

12 CJO: Okay. I was introduced to the anti-apartheid movement in the 1960's,
11 actually in the early 1960's when I was in junior high school. And I was a little
13 bit active then, but I'd say that the period of my—my greatest direct sort of
14 aggressive activity was the 1980's.

15 KA: And then where were you located during the years of your activism?

16 CJO: Well in the 1960's I was located in New York; that's were I grew up. And
17 then in the 1980's I was in Chicago slash Evanston.

18 KA: What year were you born?

19 CJO: 1948.

20 KA: And, where—

21 CJO: Same year apartheid was actually instituted as a formal policy.

22 KA: Where were you born?

23 CJO: In Ohio.

24 KA: Okay. And then you were raised in New York?

25 CJO: Yeah, we moved to New York when I was seven years old, and I lived in
26 New York from the time I was seven till I was twenty-two.

27 KA: Great. What was your earliest mem—er, what is your earliest memory?

28 CJO: My earliest memory of apartheid is in 1963. And we had a music teacher,
29 his name was S. Carol Buchanan, at junior high school 59 in Springfield
30 Gardens, Queens, New York, and he was very good friends with the musical
31 director for Harry Belafonte. And Harry Belafonte has, you know, famously
32 been, very involved in progressive social movements. And that early
33 period he was already involved in the anti-apartheid movement. And my music
34 teacher took some of us to- to try out, to audition, to sing on an album with
35 Harry Belafonte called "The Streets I've Walked," and it was an album that he
36 made in which he sang a lot of songs with children. And so I was one of the
37 people who was chosen to sing on this album, and when we went to tape the
38 album and to tape at Bell Telephone Hour – it was like, I don't know, Ed Sullivan
39 you know, in the 1960's- and he had brought a troop of South African dancers
40 to New York, and he was taking them around the country and they were
41 performing to raise money for the anti-apartheid struggle. And, you know, this
42 was—these were the years of the Rivonia Trials and so forth, and so they were
43 called the South African Boot Dancers. And so he took the children—you know
44 we were in junior high school—who were singing on the album with him to see
45 one of these performances. And, not only was the performance unbelievable,
46 they talked to us about apartheid. And that was my introduction to apartheid.

47 KA: Oh, wow. Bringing you back a bit, what was your favorite thing to do
48 with your father growing up?

49 CJO: My parents divorced when I was very young, although I did spend time
50 with my dad and his family, and probably—I had two favorite things to do with
51 him. One of them was to ride around in his car. He had a really old DeSoto
52 (laughs)- they don't even make DeSotos anymore! Those were the days of no
53 seat belts, and so my dad used to let me stand up in the front seat! Can
54 you believe how dangerous that was?! And the other thing was he used to
55 take me to sort of, um, fairs, and ride on the Ferris wheel. So, I would say those
56 were my two favorite things to do with him.

57 KA: Great. When did you first experience or witness treatment that was,
58 unjust or unfair?

59 CJO: When I was in the first grade. You know, having been born black
60 in the United States in the 1940's, clearly I think that most African Americans
61 in this country lived under some system of apartheid post civil war up until,
62 you know, at least the passage of the civil rights and the voting rights acts.
63 That at least gave a kind of a- a legal equality, but I attended a Catholic school-
64 this is just before me moved to New York. It was call St. Patrick's, and my
65 family were the only black people in the whole school—me and a couple of my
66 cousins. (Deep breathe) And I remember being in the first grade and having a
67 student stand up and, you know, all I remember her saying is something about

68 niggers this and niggers that. And I was sitting there, of course the only black
69 child in the whole room, and I looked to the nun because I suddenly felt afraid,
70 and I thought that the nun was going to say something to her, and the nun didn't
71 say anything to her. And so then I felt truly alone (voice trembling) and
72 completely unprotected. I didn't know, like, what could happen. I remember
73 going home and telling my grandmother, who came up the next day and raised
74 absolute hell. But the point is that it was a real wake up call for me because there
75 I was in this sea of white faces and the only adult in the room was not acting in a
76 way that I considered to be protective of me. So I'd say that was the first time.

77 KA: Growing up, what were your family members' attitudes toward the political
78 movements happening in the US?

79 CJO: Yeah. My family, you know, was very supportive of the civil rights
80 struggle, and, you know, had been all of my life. Both my mother and
81 my aunt had been involved with CORE: the Congress of Racial Equality, and
82 you know, my grandmother had grown up in the south, and actually
83 graduated from Atlanta University in 1918, and she taught school in the south
84 because it was a segregated public school system. When her family relocated to
85 the Midwest she could not get a job teaching school even though (coughs) she had
86 a degree. And many of the people teaching in the public schools only had like
87 normal school certificates. Because she was black, and even though education
88 was segregated in the Midwest, it was segregated in a different way than in the
89 south. In the Midwest people went to the same schools, but you sat in the back of
90 the room, or, you know, you couldn't- let's say- use the swimming pool or
91 something like that. But, they- they didn't economically often separate
92 students in the way in the south you went to a totally black school. So, she
93 couldn't teach because they weren't going to allow her to teach in a- an integrated
94 classroom. Ah, so, you know, that really politicized her, as well as own
95 background. So, you know, I—I sort of always was aware of progressive
96 social movements.

97 KA: Okay. So, where did you go to college?

98 CJO: I went my first two years at City College of New York- C-C-N-Y, which is
99 actually located in Harlem. And that was a—you know, I started college
100 in 1966, which was a highly politicized time. So I was, you know, very
101 involved in a lot of things that were going on in New York with Friends of
102 SNICK, and I remember when Preston Wilcox came through when I was actually
103 in the tenth grade. It was in 1964—that was summer when they were
104 recruiting a lot of northern college students to go to the south to register people to
105 vote, to teach at freedom schools, and I tried to go, but when he found out that I
106 was sixteen (laughs) they wouldn't take me. But, you know. So, I went to
107 CCNY for two years, and then I actually dropped out of school for two years.
108 I thought the revolution was imminent, had been very involved in the black

109 power movement, and didn't think I needed to finish school, and then I ended
\110 up going back later to Youngstown State University because I left New York one
111 step ahead of the posse (laughs), and went to Ohio where my grandmother was.
112 So, I went back to school there. And then I went to Northwestern University-
113 that's what brought me to Chicago. I came to Northwestern to do graduate work.

114 KA: Oh, and what was your field of study?

115 CJO: History.

116 KA: History.

117 CJO: African history actually.

118 KA: So, is that how you chose to study abroad in Nigeria?

119 CJO: Yeah, I went to Nigeria. I got a Fulbright Fellowship, and I went to
120 Nigeria to work on my dissertation, and, yeah- that's how I got there. (pages
121 crinkling) That was 1976. 75-76 cause I was there a little over a year.

122 KA: Okay. So you said you participated in the civil rights movement.
123 How—how were you active in that?

124 CJO: Well, I was active first with a group called Friends of SNICK, and that's
125 actually how I met Preston Wilcox—when he came through and the in the Spring
126 of 1964, recruiting for the summer of '64 that they often called 'Freedom
127 Summer'. So, I worked raising money for Friends of SNICK, and then later I
128 became involved with a group called the Democratic Liberation Party, and a
129 group called NBAWADU, which was the national black anti-war, anti-draft
130 union. And so, you know, was involved in some teaching in what
131 we called Saturday Freedom Schools, you know, and raising money for the
132 struggle in the south and in other ways like that. (Clears throat).

133 KA: Great (whisper).

134 CJO: I also became involved really at that time say in the women's movement
135 because in the civil rights movement, but particularly in the black power
136 movement—and I did go to- to Georgia during part of that time, but was not
137 really out in the rural areas, you know. I was just too young, and people just
138 wouldn't—not that there weren't young people in the south doing it, but
139 when people being brought down from the north, you know, they wanted them to
140 sign things, and you know—But in any case there—there were a lot of
141 issues that arose in the civil rights movement (voice starting to strain)
142 and in the black power movement that had to do with the role of women. And so
143 this was a period of time when—some people call it the second wave of
144 feminism—and you know it was—it was a delicate and- and balanced issue

145 particularly for black women. You know, because we can't disaggregate being
146 black from being women. And it was also a period of time, particularly
147 in the black power movement, when- when black men were sort of—you
148 know, often times—because they had felt hammered or battered historically,
149 were sort of trying to reassert their manhood in a certain was that was
150 chauvinistic, and so black women had a hard time during that time.

151 KA: So how did you start getting involved in the anti-apartheid
152 movement?

153 CJO: Well, as I said, my introduction was in 1963 through Harry Belafonte, and
154 you know, I was astounded- actually we all were- because even though we all
155 were very aware of what was, you know, really a kind of system of apartheid in
156 the United States because, you know, I mean as I was growing up there were
157 places where black people could not legally go. You know, when my first son
158 was born in 1968 there were still sixteen states in which blacks and whites could
159 not legally marry. So, it isn't like we were not aware. You know, and there
160 were signs all over the South; you know, 'Colored' and 'White', and so forth, just
161 like, you know, in South Africa. But, looking at the situation in South Africa
162 where the level of oppression and the level of conditions in a majority
163 population in their own country- you know- was just astounding to
164 me. And s—and that was one of the things that got me really interested in
165 African history, and was one of the reasons that when I- I went to school, I
166 decided to major in history, and then when I got my PhD I decided to do it on
167 African History. So, you know, we raised funds, we educated people, we used to,
168 you know, teach on Saturdays, you know, younger students, and
169 educate them about what was going on. There also were, you know, African
170 solidarity events that happened in New York frequently. I began to read a lot
171 of African literature. There were African solidarity events, you know, that people
172 went to that you supported in that kind of a way. So, there wasn't a—a formal
173 organization I belonged to that was only anti-apartheid, but even in the civil rights
174 movement, and there were organizations that I worked with in the civil rights
175 movement, the organizations I worked with in the women's movement, and the
176 black power organizations, you know, not only were people talking about
177 civil rights of people of color in the United States, but all over the world. And
178 certainly South Africa was- was just a major place. I remember in the 60's when
179 we were boycotting lobster tails from South Africa. You know, boycotting
180 Krugerrands, you know, boycotting, you know, all kinds of things, you know,
181 grapes from California (laughs) because of Hugo Chavez. So, you know, those
182 were the kinds of ways that—that I was engaged.

183 KA: Okay. How did your parents respond to your involvement in the anti-
184 apartheid movement?

185 CJO: My mother was very supportive, as I said, my family was- was a fairly
186 politicized family. And so, my mother, my aunt, my grandmother- You

187 know, my dad was a little less politicized. He was more concerned about the
188 conditions of black people in the United States, but you know, he was certainly
189 supportive. But I wouldn't say that he was as knowledgeable about what was
190 going on in South Africa as- as my mother and my grandmother and my aunt.

191 KA: Tell me about the first protest or demonstration you participated in.

192 CJO: Oh, geese, I'm trying to (laughing)—What was the first? Geese, I don't
193 know! Probably the first, major demonstration I participated in was maybe in
194 1964 or 5, which was a – an anti-Vietnam war protest. And, you know, I
195 didn't—I did not go although I had wanted to go to the march on
196 Washington. So I would say that the anti-war protest was probably the first
197 major protest that I've participated in, but later, probably around '64 as well, I
198 also protested in picketing some stores at- in New Yor- I trying to think
199 this chain of drug stores. You know, I keep wanting to say Walgreens, but of
200 course it was not—

201 KA: Woolworth?

202 CJO: Yes! Woolworths! (laughing) It was Woolworths! Why can't I think
203 of that? It's were they sat in in- ah- Greensborough. You know, picketing
204 Woolworth's in New York because of what was going on in the south, you know,
205 after the- after the sit ins. So, you know, I was doing that in '64 and '65 as well.
206 In '65 really. I think Woolworth's was '65, and I started doing that in '66,
207 and '65 was when I was working with Friends of SNICK. So I'd say those were
208 probably the first: both the anti-Vietnam thing and the- and the- picketing of
209 Woolworths. Yeah.

210 KA: Mkay. Can you tell me about your experience during the Soweto
211 Uprising, when you were in Nigeria?

212 CJO: Yeah, you know, it was really interesting. There's nothing like being
213 outside of this country, and having a major- you know, international event
214 happen, and it's just very different. I was in Nigeria when Soweto
215 happened, and you know, so, actually one of the first places that I read about-
216 I mean- people were talking about it. It was, you know, on the
217 news in Nigeria, on the radio, on—even on TV. There was very limited TV,
218 but it was on TV. And I remember reading an international version of Time
219 magazine- because later I was to see the US version of Time magazine- and it was
220 different. It just seemed very different in the way that it covered Soweto,
221 but you know, being in a black country, you know, an African country, and
222 having Soweto happen—I mean people were just up in arms. You know, people
223 were absolutely up in arms. And—and the thing was that everybody knew about
224 it and people had a kind of depth of knowledge about apartheid that people in this
225 country did not have. I remember when Soweto happened that a couple of my

226 friends, you know people I had grown up with but that I- I hadn't really—that I
227 grew up with, that I knew from Ohio, who were old family friends, wrote to
228 me and said, you know, "I hope- you know- you're not too close." I'm thinking
229 to myself, "My God! Do they know where South Africa is?!" You know,
230 compared to Nigeria?! So I was just thinking about how I think—first of all, that
231 Soweto did not get the kind of coverage here that it got in Nigeria, or in many
232 many other countries outside the United States. And second of all, that the public
233 that received it in Nigeria already knew what was going on in South Africa, and
234 that I think much of the public that received here—that that began to be their
235 education about what was going on in South Africa. You know, so- so it was- it
236 was very different, and every place I turned I felt that there were people of like
237 mind, you know, who I could talk to- emote- protest with, you know,
238 about what was going on in Soweto. You know, just to—certainly a depth of
239 knowledge and commitment to that struggle that I- I would not have found, except
240 in certain communities in the United States.

241 KA: So how—Did you feel a certain responsibility when you came back to the
242 US?

243 CJO: Oh yeah! I mean, I had already been involved in some African Liberation
244 Day activities here in Chicago. I came to the Chicago area in 1972, as I said to go
245 to graduate school at Northwestern, and so, Northwestern had a- and still
246 has- an internationally renowned program of African studies. So, I was
247 doing a PhD in history, but the program of African studies coordinated, you
248 know, a lot of the things that went on about Africa at Northwestern, and
249 Northwestern in the 70's had a huge population of African students. I'd say
250 that of the maybe couple of hundred people who were studying Africa in different
251 disciplines, you know: political science, anthropology, history, you know,
252 linguistics, etcetera—that about half of them were African. And they were from
253 all over the continent, you know. And so there was a very vibrant and robust
254 African community there. In addition to that, Chicago has a long history of, you
255 know, being involved in African liberation struggles, and so there was an African
256 Liberation Solidarity community in Chicago, you know, and every year there used
257 to be an African Liberation Solidarity day. So, you know, certainly
258 I was involved in activities at Northwestern, and then also involved in the
259 activities in the- in the Chicago area. It was very shortly after that in
260 fact that Northwestern hosted—I believe it was 1981—a major conference about
261 South Africa. It was not a particularly progressive conference, so there were a lot
262 of us who protested it on campus. It was- it was a conference I think
263 sponsored by the Ford Foundation because I—at that time I had gone away to
264 Loyola. I was still- I mean- living in Chicago, and was in the history
265 department at Loyola for two years, and I went back in 1980 to Northwestern as
266 assistant director of the program of African Studies. So, in 1981 when this
267 conference—it wasn't hosted by the program of African studies by any means. It
268 was hosted by the university as a whole, and it was a response to a movement at
269 Northwestern to get it to divest from South Africa. So Northwestern's response

270 was, “Well, we’re not going to divest, but we’ll host this conference.” And so the
271 Ford Foundation brought in all these people, and, you know, people who were
272 talking on both sides of the issue, about- you know- divestment and—So there
273 were a number of us that boycotted the conference. I remember the graduate
274 dean- Clarence Ver Steeg was his name—the dean of the graduate school
275 came to me because I was assistant director to the program of African Studies—
276 trying to beg me to control the students (laughing). And, you know, I mean I- I-
277 you know; I was egging them on (laughing) as opposed to controlling them! I
278 was letting students, for instance, use the Xerox machine at the program of
279 African Studies to Xerox all kinds of stuff. You know, I’d open it up at 6 or 7
280 o’clock at night when nobody was there and let them, you know, use, you know,
281 boxes of Xerox paper and Xerox all these things, and then, you know, lock the
282 door back. And I’d let them hold meetings there, like 10- 11 o’clock at night. So,
283 you know all this was going on. Students built a shantytown at Northwestern. I
284 remember contributing to the shantytown. And, you know- and then as I said,
285 many of us protested the conference and refused to go. So, you know, I became
286 very involved, you know, particularly in the- in the early 80’s as the divestment
287 movement really, you know, sort of started to ramp up, and that’s around the
288 time we founded CIDSA- in 1983. Yeah.

289 KA: Can you tell me a little bit about the formation of CIDSA?

290 CJO: Yeah. You know, it was a- a whole group of people. Blacks and
291 whites, which was very interesting because even though Chicago had a long
292 history of African solidarity work- anti-apartheid work- civil rights work—you
293 know Chicago is—had a—of course there were many people in Chicago who
294 were not progressive, but they had had a strong progressive community here.
295 Still, often that community was divided along, you know, racial lines,
296 even though they sometimes worked together. And, you know, CIDSA was
297 actually founded by a multi-racial group of people. When we had the early, initial
298 people who met- there were probably like 8 or 9 of us, there was Prexy, me,
299 Carole and Kevin Thompson, Sharon Pitts, Ora Schub, (long pause)
300 golly- I know I’m forgetting some people. There were a couple of other people.
301 And so—I believe it was the spring of 1983 that we founded CIDSA, which
302 was- you know- Coalition for Illinois Divestment from South Africa. And at
303 that time our aim was to work for divestment in a number of different arenas: to
304 work for divestment at the state level, you know, in terms of large state pension
305 funds, and you know- in the importation of products from South Africa,
306 particularly steel, and other things. I remember there was steel being
307 imported to build—what was the new— there was a new building downtown.
308 It was a—State of Illinois building or something like that. ‘Cause I
309 remember, you know, going down for many protests because some of the steel
310 being used to build that was being imported from South Africa. And so that
311 was—you know, that was our idea. Our idea was one- to educate people about
312 the issue in South Africa. To that end we traveled all over the state, I mean, I
313 remember driving all over the state, you know, going on the radio and, you

314 know—We worked with some very progressive legislatures, too in Illinois.
315 Charlie Hayes, who was a Congressman—who had been a longtime union
316 worker. I remember being on some radio programs with him, and people
317 calling in, telling us we were communists, and—and then Carol Moseley Braun
318 actually, for awhile was very progressive, and was, you know, a friend to us, and
319 she was a state legislator at that time. So we were trying to get the state to
320 divest, we were trying to get the city to divest, and we were also working with
321 a number of other groups around the state—different universities, like, you know,
322 Northwestern, University of Illinois in Champagne, etcetera- UIC- you
323 know. There were student groups at all these universities that were trying to get
324 the universities to pull funds out of investment in South Africa, so—That was
325 our—you know, education and divestment were- were the two sort of signal
326 arms of CIDSA.

327 KA: Great. Let's see—going back a little bit, what was your reaction to
328 Reagan's election in 1980?

329 CJO: Oh my God! (Laughs) I was absolutely sick. You know? And, he
330 didn't disappoint. (Laughs) He was- he was everything I thought he would be as
331 a president. You know, I just never could understand his seeming popularity
332 with such a large, you know, number of people in this country. I mean, it
333 was just—You know, I thought he was a duplicitous, evil man (laughing) and—
334 and- and not all that bright, you know? Perhaps not as simplistic as W., but
335 you know, pretty close. You know, and it was just a tremendous disappointment
336 to me. I remember—that was just later. Anyway, it was a tremendous
337 disappointment to me.

338 KA: How did you feel about his administration policies towards South
339 Africa?

340 CJO: Oh- oh it was just ridiculous. It was, you know, it was nothing but a
341 disguise for- for supporting, you know, apartheid. You know, Reagan's whole
342 foreign policy was basically a narrowly construed foreign policy that was, you
343 know, in the best interest of US capitol. You know, and so to that end, you know,
344 he pursued what for him would have been a very logical South African policy.
345 You know, the whole argument that, you know, sanctions would hurt people
346 in South Africa, the whole notion that, you know, they would backfire. You
347 know, we could have sanctions against everybody else, you know. We could
348 have sanctions against Libya, or we could have sanctions against—But you know,
349 no sanctions against—Somehow, South Africa was, you know, different.
250 (Sarcastic) Sanctions weren't going to work there. I thought it was, you
351 know, it was just duplicitous, you know. I remember Chester Crocker- you
352 know- was his person at state—because at that time—because I was assistant
353 director to the program of African Studies at Northwestern—we used to go every
354 year to have a meeting of African Studies directors from around the country to

355 DC. And so, we would meet with people from the administration. I remember
356 they used to always send Chester Crocker. You know, it was this beety eyed, you
357 know, apologist for apartheid. And so, that's what I thought of Reagan
358 and his policies (laughing).

359 KA: (softly) Let me see the time. Okay, how about—this is jumping back
360 ahead—how did you— how did your group participate- CIDSA- participate in
361 divestment specifically?

362 CJO: Yeah. Well, as I said, one of the things that we did is we used to go
363 around and visit, you know, churches, union meetings, schools, go on the
364 radio, you know, go and give talks, at, you know, various places and universities,
365 educating people about apartheid, and about divestment, and about why we
366 needed to divest—all over the state. So, that was one of the things that we
367 did. We used to hold, you know, conferences and workshops. We worked
368 with legislators. As I said, we worked with Charlie Hayes, who was a member of
369 the congressional black caucus. We worked with Carol Moseley Braun, who was
370 in the—a state senator. You know, we worked with people in—in the city,
371 and- and what do you call it? What do you call— (pause) the aldermen.
372 (laughs) You know we used to work city aldermen in an attempt to, you know, to
373 get the city to divest. So, you know, we- we put together packets of
374 information, you know, talking points for state legislators, for aldermen, you
375 know, for Congress people from Illinois so that, you know, they would have
376 the background research to support why we needed to divest. We worked
377 with union groups- AFSCME—uh, you know the American Federation of—
378 What is it? County and Municipal Employees? State County and Municipal
379 Employees. Oh, with SAIU. And then, you know, when the Free South
380 Africa movement happened, CIDSA was a main component in the Free South
381 Africa movement. We used to publish a newsletter, you know, we used to host
382 groups from South Africa, you know, political people from South Africa,
383 people representing the ANC, you know, sometimes people representing the
384 PAC, you know, people from Namibia. So we would host people who would,
385 you know, we would take them places to talk, introduce them to people so that
386 they could, you know, very ably represent themselves. So, we did, you know, all
387 kinds of things like that.

388 KA: How did you succeed in your divestment as a group?

389 CJO: Well, you know, it was rocky (laughs). You know? And there were a
390 couple of times- as I recall- that one of the first pieces of divestment
391 legislation I believe was defeated. Maybe it was 1986—87. But eventually
392 we were able to have some limited success in getting the state— trying to
393 reconstruct all of this, but as I recall to agree not to import steel from South
394 Africa. It was—we never did get the state to agree to divest all of its funds and
395 penchant funds from South Africa, but we had limited success in getting some

396 divestment legislation passed at both the state and the city level. But, you know,
397 it was a long, hard road, and there were, you know, people that we had to—that
398 we worked with, you know, aldermen and state legislators to—you know, to
399 provide them information, to get to develop enough of a ground- of a
400 grassroots swell that people would write and say we support this, you know, so,
401 to educate the public so that the public would support it. So, you know, in
402 1987 we were able to have some limited success in getting legislation passed. I'd
403 actually have to look up the names of the bills and all that. I don't have that at the
404 top of my head anymore. That was like—I don't know—twenty some years ago,
405 you know, unfortunately. But, you know, it's easily a part of the public record,
406 and so there- there was some success. One of the—one big piece of national
407 success here in Illinois actually came out of the Free South Africa movement,
408 uh, which began in 1984, and as I said CIDSA formed a core of that. I was
409 —at the time I worked with a group called TransAfrica, and I was the
410 Tran Africa sommittee—committee—Tran Africa was a national
411 organization in DC. So- and you know, apartheid became one of its signal
412 efforts. And, TransAfrica formed what they called support committees around the
414 country, and so the support committee in Chicago was a committee that I chaired.
415 And, in addition to that, then I became chair of the national TransAfrica
416 support committee group, and so when the Free South Africa movement
417 happened—and I'll talk about that in a minute—because I was both co-chair
418 of CIDSA and chair of the TransAfrica support committees, you know,
419 CIDSA became a very active participant in the Free South Africa movement.
420 And in Chicago we had the first trial- the first national trial of people who sat
421 in. We didn't have an embassy here, obviously, but we had a consulate on
422 Michigan Avenue, and so people sat in at the consulate. And so, we had the first
423 trial of people that sat in at the consulate, and they used what was called a
424 necessity defense, and it was written up in the New York Times because they
425 got off! And so, it was— you know, it was a pretty big deal in terms of,
426 you know, sort of lending high moral profile to—to the movement. So I
427 could talk about how the Free South Africa movement got started, or—or—shall
428 I? Or—

429 KA: Yeah, that would be great.

430 CJO: Well, the day before Thanksgiving in 1984—I remember it
431 very distinctly— I got this phone call from Salih Booker, and Salih
432 Booker was one of the people—he worked at TransAfrica in DC, and he was
433 the liaison from TransAfrica of all the TransAfrica support committees in all the
434 cities, so, as I said, I was chair of the Chicago TransAfrica support committee,
435 but also head of the national committees. And so he called me, and he said,
436 "Cheryl—you know—you gotta get something going!" I said, "What happened?"
437 And he said, well, Randall Robinson, Mary Francis Berry, and I forgot who
438 the third person was—was it William Fauntleroy? May have been. –Went into
439 the South African embassy and have refused to leave, and they've been arrested.
440 And I said, "Oh my God!" And he said, "Yeah, so—and, you know you gotta get

441 something going." You know? (laughs) So, the next day was Thanksgiving, the
442 day after that I started calling people. So, you know I met with people from
443 CIDSA, I met with some people from the— I believe it's a branch of the
444 City University system called the Center for Inner City Studies, but the Center for
445 Inner City Studies had a number of sort of- you know- black, old hands in
446 both African Liberation Solidarity work and anti-apartheid work, like Conrad
447 Woorill and- geese—Bob Starks, and—Oh! I'm just—the names—but
448 anyway, Bob Starks and Conrad Woorill particularly, but there were others as
449 well. And my friend Alice Palmer, you know, who—who also had been a
450 long—and later Alice Palmer actually was a New York state—a New York
451 state?!—An *Illinois* state senator. She' somebody you really should talk to,
452 too. I don't know if she's been— interviewed for this, but she- she really
453 should be interviewed for it. Anyway, so I met with a lot of people, and then
454 we decided that we were going to have a major organizing meeting, and we
455 were going to hold it at the Center for Inner City Studies. In fact, this is written
456 up in the- oh my God—um, (long pause)—What's the name of the black
457 newspaper in Chicago? I cannot—I cannot believe this—I really think I'm pre-
458 Alzheimer's. Take this part out (laughing)!

459 KA: Is it the Defender? Or—

460 CJO: The Defender. The Chicago Defender! There's a big story about this
461 first organizing meeting that we had in the Chicago Defender. I may have a copy
462 of it if you'd like. I think I sent Lisa a copy of it because it's got this picture
463 of me with my mouth wide open, and because I chaired the meeting. And so, we
464 were—you know, we had this meeting at the Center for Inner Studies, we had
465 hundreds of people come, and we talked about what had happe—by that time it
466 had hit the news, and they were already calling it the Free South Africa
467 movement. And so we talked about what had happened, and so this was a
468 meeting at which I was hoping to organize a protest outside of the South African
469 consulate, just like the ones outside of the South African embassy. And so, you
470 know, what happened is that a whole coalition of people from, you know, really
471 a very diverse- an eclectic group of activists came together to support this.
472 So there were—as I said, you know, old hand African Solidarity workers,
473 people from the civil rights movement, people from the anti-apartheid movement,
474 people from the union movement, people from the women's movement—you
475 know, just all kinds of people came together. So, you know, the other piece I
476 shouldn't leave out is that a very active part of the Free South Africa movement
477 became Trinity United Church of Christ. You know, one of the things Trinity
478 United Church of Christ on West 95th Street is most well known for now is the
479 fact that that was Jeremiah Wright's church, and then subsequently Barack and
480 Michelle Obama's church. And Jeremiah Wright was the pastor then, and
481 Jeremiah Wright was—his church was the first church in all of Chicago—and
482 Illinois, really—that had a Free South Africa sign. He had put out a Free South
483 Africa sign you know—I don't know—sometime in the 1970's. And so they
484 had these hu—not Free South Africa—Yeah! It said Free South Africa! And

485 so Jeremiah Wright's church— Trinity United—also had a very active- what
486 they call a Church and Society committee. And so that Church and Society
487 committee—because Randall Robinson, who was the head of TransAfrica, also
488 knew Jeremiah Wright, and so he actually introduced me to Jeremiah Wright
489 when he asked me to head the Chic—the TransAfrica support committee here.
490 And so I got to know Jeremiah as a very progressive minister, and so his
491 Church and Society committee really worked with me and the TransAfrica
492 support committee. So they were very active in putting this together, too. So they
493 were represented there. So—anyway, we worked for about a week, and it was
494 either December 3rd or December 4th or 5th we had a huge demonstration outside
495 the South African consulate on Michigan Avenue. There must have been a
496 thousand people. It was one of the coldest days of they year. I mean, literally- it
497 was below zero with the wind chill factor. And of course we were walking
498 around, you know, with these megaphones and, you know- And then as we had
499 chosen a certain number of people, and they went upstairs and went into the
500 consulate, and they were arrested. And one of them was Jesse Jackson's
501 wife, Jacqueline Jackson. And, I mean, they were let out a couple of
502 hours later, but they were charged with trespassing, and that was the trial that,
503 you know, went to trial as a necessity defense. But, you know, it was just a—it
504 was an incredible outpouring of a very diverse community in Chicago, many of
505 whom had been long term activists in various movements, and some of whom
506 were completely new to the movement—you know, high school students, and you
507 know, college students who were completely new to the movement. But it
508 was—it was just a very impressive turn out. I remember that Alice Palmer and I
509 met—we were—I think the thing was supposed to happen around 8:30 in the
510 morning. We met like 6:30 or something at this hotel that was right—I think the
511 consulate was at 444 North Michigan Avenue, and we met at this hotel
512 right across the street at 6:30, and you know we were planning and— You
513 know, it was—it was really quite interesting, so—

514 KA: How did it feel when you showed up at the consulate, and all those groups
515 were there supporting—

516 CJO: It felt wonderful because we weren't sure what to expect. I mean it was a
517 terribly cold day. It was very early in the morning. Even though we'd had a
518 couple of hundred people at the organizing meeting at the Center for Inner City
519 Studies, it—you know, seeing all those people turn out and stay—You know, it
520 was just—It reminded me of things that went on in the 60's, you know. It just
521 reminded me of doing things in the 60's. It was just so gratifying, and just so—
522 You know, it just- it just made you feel like change could be made. You know?
523 That change- change could happen, and I mean I already knew that. I'd seen so
524 much change in my lifetime. And I knew the kind of sacrifice that it- it took
525 to make change, but you know it was just—it was just incredible. Really.

526 KA: So how during your activism did you stay informed on what was going on in
527 South Africa?

528 CJO: Yeah. Well, you know, it's so funny. In the 60's when I was involved in
529 the you know, sort of civil rights and black power movements we used to have
530 education sessions. There were two kinds of sessions we used to have.
531 You know, we—we—you know, it's constantly necessary to keep yourself
532 educated, and you know, it's difficult in this country to be—to be educated.
533 (Laughs) I know that sounds kind of crazy, but this is a place that, honestly, even
534 though we're one of the most industrialized nations in the world, I find
535 people are, at least in my travels and my experience, the least knowledgeable
536 about things that happen outside of this country. It's just amazing to me. I can go
537 into a village in Nigeria, and find people who know more about what's going on
538 in the rest of the world than people who have college degrees, you know, in the
539 United States. So, you have to hunt information in the United States. You
540 can't—you listen to the 6 o'clock news or the- you know- you are going to hear
541 more about the latest fire on the west side than you are going to hear about what's
542 going on in the world. So, you have to listen to the BBC, you have to you know,
543 read the international Tribune, you have to really hunt- you know- information. I
544 mean, in those days there was no internet, you know? So you didn't just go on
545 the internet and find things. Now, of course- you know- you can. So, you
546 know people brought the—I remember in the 60's reading things that people had
547 smuggled in the country. I mean, you know—seriously, like Robert Williams is
548 somebody you wouldn't have heard of, but he was a—an African American man
549 who was very active in the south and South Carolina. Anyway, he ended up
550 having to leave, and he was in China for a long time. And he used to publish this
551 newsletter from China, and people used to smuggle it back in the United States.
552 So, you know, we got together and educated ourselves. The other thing we used
553 to do is have criticism and self criticism sessions—that is that once you had gone
554 out on a- a protest or some particular kind of action that people would get back
555 together, whether it was after getting out of jail or, you know, leaving the protest,
556 and debrief: What went right? What went wrong? What should we do
557 differently next time, you know? Where do we go from here? So it was a
558 whole sort of criticism and self-criticism session. So, you know, we also—it—
559 it's very important, particularly in dealing with an issue like apartheid, to make
560 sure that you are in contact with people who are there. You know? And that
561 you're not just here- you know- trying to educate yourself, deciding what
562 you should do, and making stuff up, you know? (Laughs) I mean, you need to be
563 in contact with people who are on the front line. You know, you need to be in
564 contact with people who are in the organizations and leading the organizations
565 that, you know, have the reality check of what's going on on the ground. So,
566 another thing that I think we took great care to do in the 1980's and the anti-
567 apartheid struggle was to make sure that- that we hosted people who were either
568 from South Africa, living in South Africa, or people who had been—were in
569 exile, but were in contact with people in South Africa who were the leaders of the
570 movement there because we had to in some ways take our cue from them,
571 you know. And we had to know what the reality was on the ground, so that was
572 another way of educating ourselves, really. And of course people used to- to

573 travel to, you know—outside of this country to go and visit with other
574 anti-apartheid movements, etcetera. You know, I—one of the reasons I
575 haven't been to South Africa is because for most of that time most people
576 were boycotting travel to South Africa. I—I forgot to mention one other thing
577 when I was—that happened when I was in Nigeria because this was a very
578 interesting later development. Arthur Ash came to Nigeria to play in a tennis
579 tournament, and he was on a way to a tournament in South Africa. He had played
580 in South Africa several times. And so I was introduced to him at a party at the
581 ambassador's house—it's a long story about how I got there: There was a guy
582 who was gay, who was on the staff, and he didn't want anybody to know he was
583 gay, and so I used to accompany him (laughs) to, you know, various things as his
584 sort of—his woman interest. It was all completely made up, but, you know I
585 didn't care that he was gay; I've never been homophobic. So, you know, so—I
586 got to do a lot of great things in Nigeria (laughing) because I was, you know,
587 escort—you know, he was my escort. That's how I met Arthur Ash. So, anyway,
588 we were riding in a limousine, and we were talking at this little cocktail party, and
589 I was having this huge debate with Arthur Ash about his going to South Africa to
590 be in this tennis tournament. And he was defending it like hell! You know, and I
591 remember at the end this guy was saying to me, "Boy, you shouldn't have been
592 talking to him like that." I was like, "I don't give a damn" (laughing). But you
593 know, this hug—this huge debate. Four years later, Arthur Ash was one of the
594 founding members of Athletes and Artists Against Apartheid, and I thought about
595 that so many times (laughing). I thought of that so many times. It was such an
596 interesting—you know what I mean?

597 KA: Mmhmm.

598 CJO: So, you know, I'm not taking any credit for that, but I'm saying I'm sure he
599 ran into a lot of people who gradually educated him. And then you—he came
600 round to be one of the founders of Athletes and Artists Against Apartheid, so, you
601 know, it works! (Laughing) It works to educate people.

602 KA: Just planting the seed. Let's see—Can you tell me a little bit about
603 CCISSA?

604 CJO: Yeah, and you know, I was not that actively involved in CCISSA. What
605 happened is that once we had achieved what we thought we could achieve in
606 CIDSA in terms of divestment and, you know, as- as the movement
607 began more and more to even take a broader turn, then, you know, CIDSA sort
608 of decided to dissolve itself, and to recreate itself as CCISSA. You know: the
609 Chicago Committee in Solidarity with Southern Africa. Because, you know, it
610 began to be a broader struggle, you know, and also because, you know, there
611 were—there were larger issues too, other issues. And so, I think CCISSA begins
612 in like 1987 or 1988, right around the time that CIDSA dissolves. Now, I was on
613 the board of CCISSA. I had almost forgotten that. And I was downloading some
614 stuff because my daughter was doing a thesis at Wesleyan University on the

615 anti-apartheid movement in Chicago so—So, I was getting some
616 materials together for her, and I ran across this old CCISSA newsletter, and it,
617 you know, listed the Board of Directors. And so I said, "Oh yeah, that's right! I
618 was on the Board of Directors for awhile." So, I was only on the board of
619 directors for a little while. I had had a baby in 1988, and you know, just a bunch
620 of stuff started happening, and so, you know, I really can't talk to you too
621 much about CCISSA except to say that CCISSA also began to draw in, you
622 know, a lot of other people who began to come into CCISSA. Basil Clunie was
623 very active in CCISSA, Lisa Brock was very active in CCISSA, Rachel Rubin
624 was very active in CCISSA, and CCISSA really sort of was still in existence,
625 you know, when Nelson Mandela was released from- from prison. And
626 that was the start of a whole new set of challenges for South Africa.

627 KA: So, what were you—What were you doing when you head Nelson
628 Mandela was being released?

629 CJO: Oh, my God. You know, I was nursing my baby (laughing). [Cheryl later
630 informs me she has misremembered this detail, and was not nursing her baby
631 when she heard of Mandela's release.] And, I—I remember—I just, you know—
632 Nelson Mandela's release, even though it began to be suspected that was going to
633 happen, to me was sort of like Barack Obama's election: Two things that I did
634 not think I'd live to see. You know, I actually thought Nelson Mandela would die
635 in prison. You know? And I never though Barack Obama would be elected.
636 Now, I'm not equating them, you know, as—as men in struggle or anything
637 like that. I mean, Nelson Mandela—his credentials are impeccable, and you
638 know, Barack has credentials, but they're not Nelson Mandela's credentials!
639 and I'm probably substantially to the left of Barack, although I- I support many
640 things—not this war in Afghanistan, but that's another story. But, you know, it
641 was just—it was just a stunning development. First of all, that he lived. You
642 know, thirty years in prison! Second of all, that then he was—he was released,
643 you know, and then that he—I mean, his release was not only real change, but it
645 was also symbolic change. You know, it was both sort of simultaneously. It was
646 just a—quite an amazing thing, just an amazing thing. And even though, you
647 know—clearly I know and I've often heard Prexy say this too—that you know, I
648 think it was in Mozambique- as opposed to Angola- but they used to say that, you
649 know, "A luta continua, vitoria e certa"- "The struggle continues, victory
650 is certain". But after independence, they said, "Vitoria continua a luta e certa
651 "Victory continues, the struggle is certain". So, clearly, you know, the release of
652 Nelson Mandela, the end of formal apartheid, you know, the enfranchisement of
653 the African majority was a stunning development. But, it was the beginning
654 of another kind of struggle. You know, the end of one kind of struggle, but the
655 struggle clearly continues, and so I think none of us thought this was a magic
656 bullet. You know, it was a wonderful thing symbolically and for real. For Nelson
657 Mandela to be released from prison—but not a magic bullet—it was the beginning
658 of work. You know, the beginning of nation building, and it- it continues.
659 You know, it continues. So.

660 KA: What challenges do you see facing South Africa today?

661 CJO: Oh my God, you know, I—When we think of a country like South Africa,
662 or any developing quote-unquote nation, or underdeveloped- if we use that as a
663 a verb—What we see is not only—it's very complex relationship between their
664 internal challenges and the rest of the world. It's like whe—when people look at
665 a country—developing nation, they say, "Well, you know, look what's happening
666 there." They say it almost as if it has no—it's economy, or it's political issues
667 have no relationship with the rest of the world. And they do, you know. I think
668 about South Africa, for instance—one of the biggest challenges for South Africa
669 internally is the redistribution of land. l mean, you know, like—it's just a huge
670 challenge, and consequently the redistribution of wealth. You know the—
671 there's still the Afrikaner community, the white community, still controls vast
672 majority of the wealth in South Africa, and it controls, you know, a majority of
673 the land. And, you know, when you have a situation like that- political control
674 is—is just the tip of the iceberg. You know, I mean you—it—it's really just the
675 of the iceberg. You know, you've got a black person in office, well you know,
676 maybe you have black people in parliament, I mean—it's just the tip of the
677 iceberg. You have to control the resources in order to make real change in the
678 real lives of real people. So, I think a way to deal with controlling some of the
679 resources of South Africa—redistributing some of the resources of South
680 Africa— those include things like access to education, access to health care,
681 production, you know, natural resources, you know, like gold and diamonds, and
682 you know- other things- land- you know. That's the big challenge ahead for
683 South Africa. That's the very big challenge. You know, I think the other thing is
684 that those resources in South Africa are connected and intertwined with
685 global capital. You know, and so it's not so easy, you know, to just take
686 them over because you know—they're the outside, you know. They're
687 the United States, you know, or other countries like that. Also, you know,
688 whatever they say out of one side of their mouth about, you know, the moral
689 imperative of- of having ended apartheid, and you know, changing the lives
690 and conditions of the people in South Africa—there's also the interest of global
691 capital, you know, which has no interest in redistributing the wealth in
692 South Africa. And so, you know, that- that poses another very difficult
693 challenge, that kind of external internal slash challenge. So I think those are the
694 biggest challenges. Now, there are also smaller, more manageable challenges.
695 I think that South Africa has begun to develop greater access to education
696 because, you know, you need a—an educated and trained population of people
697 color, particularly the African population. You know, in order to be able to
698 develop the kind of innovative leadership that will be able to confront
699 some of the more intractable problems that South Africa has. I
700 think some of that is happening. I think that there are—as there would be
701 any place—you know, during the period of apartheid it was them and us you

702 know, but part of the them and us, part of the way that apartheid worked was by
703 dividing up the black population; by dividing the Xhosa from the Zulu from the
704 Pedi, you know. And you know—and also, I mean people had histories that
705 predated apartheid where they were—had their own nations. So, you have this
706 country that is manufactured by colonialisms. And, so now, you
707 know, you do have coming out of the woodwork as one would expect, you know,
708 internal issues between various people in South Africa. You know, black South
709 Africans are not just black South Africans. They're—they're Xhosu, Xhosa, Osa
710 (??), and Zulu. And you—I mean—and so there are some of those issues that are
711 beginning to raise their heads. And, of course, there are some people who—there
712 are some class issues that are beginning to develop, you know, as you begin to
713 develop a middle class, you know, or an upper class. You know, it's—it's
714 difficult sometimes for people to understand their own interests. You know?
715 And they begin to develop strange bedfellows, you know. People began
716 to align across race, along class lines. And then that has the potential to-
717 to relegate a vast majority of the African population, South Africa in particular,
718 to you know— being— continuing to be an oppressed population.
719 So, there are—there's a hard road ahead.

720 KA: Yeah. Have you continued on as an activist?

721 CJO: You know, I would say not in the way that I used to be. I—I mean I don't
722 go out and march and protest. I haven't marched in a protest in years. Well—
723 yeah, years. It hasn't been ten years, but years. But, I do continue to be active in
724 various other kinds of ways. I'm on the board of the Public Square, and,
725 you know—which is ah, an organization that, you know, seeks again to sort of
726 educate the ordinary public about things that are going on. You know, I'm on
727 the board of the Black Metropolis Research Consortium, you know, which is
728 seeking to- to develop access to materials about the black experience.
729 You know, I'm working to develop a black world studies department
730 here. And there are—there are several other boards and things—I'm on the
731 board of the Institute for the study of Women and Gender at—at Columbia, which
732 just did a very interesting traveling exhibit about the horrible situation in
733 Congo, you know. Particularly about the rape of women in Congo, and so we
734 were able to take it to the United Nations. It's traveled all over the country. You
735 know, it's traveling different places in the world, so I guess that's the kind of
736 activism that I engage in now, which I think is a very important activism,
737 you know, don't get me wrong. But, for instance, when there was a
738 march downtown Chicago against the war, I didn't go. So—yeah.

739 KA: Looking back on your work with the apartheid moveme—anti-apartheid
740 movement, what are you most proud of?

741 CJO: I think my involvement as a whole. I mean, I—I suppose for me one
742 of the things that stands out— although I think that everything that we do in
743 progressive struggles is important no matter how small—maybe the thing that

744 stands out is the leadership that I gave to the Free South Africa movement.
745 You know, because of my relationship with Tran Africa—you know,
746 being the person who- who got the call and feeling that responsibility, you know,
747 to call that first meeting, to develop that first protest outside of the consulate,
748 etcetera. So, I would probably say, you know, that was one of the most important
749 things I did in terms of accepting the responsibility of that call from Salhi
750 Booker. But, you know, I would say, you know, I'm proud of everything I
751 guess, you know. And I'm also proud that I've raised children who (laughs)
752 you know—just the fact that my daughter is doing her senior thesis on the anti-
753 apartheid movement— You know, I've raised children who have some idea of
754 of history and progressive struggles, so.

755 KA: Great. Let's see the time (softly). Is there anything else you want to add?

756 CJO: No, except to say that I'm really happy to see you doing something like
757 this. I'm always happy to see young people, you know because there is a lot
758 of struggle left to wage. And I'm really happy to see young people educating
759 themselves about past struggles, and- and embracing the challenges of the
760 future because we have them. (Laughs) So, thank you.