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Interview with Elizabeth Benson

Micah Ariel James

Columbia College Chicago

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1 MICAH ARIEL JAMES: Okay, so what is your full name?
2
3 BETTY BENSON: Elizabeth Irene Benson.
4
5 MJ: Okay, and so, my name is Micah Ariel James. Today is—
6
7 BB: Micah?
8
9 MJ: Yeah, M-I-C-A-H.
10
11 BB: Nahum.
12
13 MJ: Yeah. (laughs) Today is April 11.
14
15 BB: Unh-hunh.
16
17 MJ: 2010.
18
19 BB: Unh-hunh.
20
21 MJ: And what's the name of the church?
22
23 BB: Wellington Avenue United Church of Christ.
24
25 MJ: Okay. Um, so during which years were you an active member of the anti-apartheid
26 movement?
27
28 BB: I've never been a really active member of anything.
29
30 MJ: Well what years were you involved with the—
31
32 BB: Well I was talking to, um—I can't even think of his name. Anyway, I was talking to
33 a young man over the phone and he said it was the early eighties.
34
35 MJ: Okay. Um, through the end of it?
36
37 BB: Pardon?
38
39 MJ: Through the end of apartheid?
40
41 BB: Up to the point where South Africa changed government.
42
43 MJ: Unh-hunh. Okay. Um, and where was your activism based?
44
45 BB: It was—It was, uh, at the corner of Adams and Michigan, on the Southwest corner.
46 That's where the Consulate was. And then for some reason or other, they moved over to,

47 close to the Wrigley Building on the other side of the river and I was going to ask, um,
48 Norm [a fellow anti-apartheid activist to whom Ms. Benson referred prior to the start of
49 the interview]—I was going to ask why, why was it was moved over there? I think it
50 must—the consulate must have moved over there because I know there was a lot of—I
51 don't think it was for the um, uh, for the um— I can't even think—the money—the, uh,
52 what was it? What was—what was the, uh, money that we were—? I can't even
53 remember what we were— The names don't come to me, but I don't— I don't think it
54 was the Consulate, but we all moved over there across the river for a while. And then I
55 think we moved back again. So, I don't— I don't know why.

56

57 MJ: Okay. Um. So, but it was in Chicago the whole time?

58

59 BB: Uh, yeah.

60

61 MJ: Okay. Okay. Um, so what year were you born?

62

63 BB: Sixteen.

64

65 MJ: Okay. Um, and where were you born?

66

67 BB: Des Moines.

68

69 MJ: And where did you grow up?

70

71 BB: Uh— Chicago, Kansas City— Uh, probably Des Moines, Kansas City, Chicago.
72 Mostly Chicago from the time I was four years old.

73

74 MJ: Um, where did you— Oh, what is your father's name?

75

76 BB: Clarence.

77

78 MJ: And where was he born?

79

80 BB: Iowa.

81

82 MJ: And, ah, do you know where he grew up? Where did he grow up?

83

84 BB: Iowa.

85

86 MJ: And what was your mother's name?

87

88 BB: Leon Francis Hall Benson.

89

90 MJ: Where was she born?

91

92 BB: St. Louis.

93

94 MJ: And where did she grow up?

95

96 BB: Well probably— probably Missouri and, and Iowa.

97

98 MJ: Okay. Um, so now we're going to go, go back a little. What's your earliest childhood
99 memory?

100

101 BB: I remember Christmas at 8810 South Carpenter Street. Ahead of that, we were in
102 Iowa. And I just don't remember. I remember when I was five-years-old, I was too big to
103 believe in Santa Clause. And, um, my cousin was— I think was three at that time. I—
104 When I was four— When I was four, we lived in Kansas City. I remember that. And, um,
105 we had— I— We had, um— My father had rabbits and we'd go out and feed the rabbits
106 every morning. We lived in a little bungalow. Not too far from the zoo—Kansas City
107 Zoo. And my mother said we used to be able to hear the lions roaring from where we
108 were.

109

110 MJ: Hm.

111

112 BB: Uh, and then we went to visit my—her, her mother and her sister. And we were
113 gone— I don't, I don't know, uh, exactly when it was. It would have been, uh, around
114 April 1920. And, um, my father decided while we were gone— He was, he was working
115 for a— he was in, working for a— insurance company, I think. And he decided when,
116 when we were gone that he'd, he'd have a c— he'd have an operation, get it over with
117 before we got back again as a surprise. So I don't remember whether it was kidney stones
118 or gallstones. Then my mother began receiving letters written one day a week, one,
119 once— He'd write a letter, a group of letters, and mail them—have somebody mail them
120 everyday while he was in the hospital. And, uh, we got one of those letters after he had
121 died. He died, uh—what— They said they couldn't get the doctor— They couldn't get
122 the surgeon because he was on a golf course. They didn't have cell phones then. And,
123 um, so he— So she got the letter— She got word. I don't know, probably telegram, after
124 he had died. And then she—next day, she got a letter from him.

125

126 MJ: Oh, wow. And how old were you at that point?

127

128 BB: Four.

129

130 MJ: Okay. Um, did you have brothers and sisters? Only child?

131

132 BB: They're all— They aren't all gone; they never were.

133

134 MJ: Ha. Um, what sorts of rules did you have?

135

136 BB: "What sort of—"

137

138 MJ: Rules did you have as a child?

139

140 BB: I don't— I don't remember any rules.

141

142 MJ: Okay. Um, what was your favorite place to play?

143

144 BB: I don't know. Just played at home, that's all.

145

146 MJ: Inside or outside?

147

148 BB: Well, when I was on Carpenter Street, I was four-years-old, four, when we were
149 visiting, but then we didn't live there more than several months. We went—lived in—
150 moved to Beverly Hills in, in Chicago. So it was in our yard and inside.

151

152 MJ: Um. Did you have any chores when you were growing up?

153

154 BB: I suppose I did. I don't remember. I know I was, had to sweep the sidewalk, but I
155 don't remember anything more than that.

156

157 MJ: Okay. As a child, what type of student were you?

158

159 BB: What—*what*?

160

161 MJ: What type of student were you?

162

163 BB: Ordinary. Nothing, nothing outstanding. I did okay, but nothing outstanding.

164

165 MJ: Right. Um, what sorts of activities did you do with your family?

166

167 BB: What sort of activities—*what*?

168

169 MJ: —Did you do with your family?

170

171 BB: With my family? Well my grandfather—my, my, my maternal great-grandfather
172 lived with us. In Beverly Hills. He also lived for a time down at 8810 South Carpenter,
173 which is in the Gresham area. So, um, my grandmother—his daughter—one of his two
174 daughters, uh, lived with us. And my mother went back to teaching school. And, um,
175 she— I—I know that, um, my grandmother took us down to Field Museum for the
176 morning *and* afternoon lectures they had with my—oh, and my cousin came—my little
177 cousin came to live with us. Um, her mother was, her mother was working. And, um, we
178 went to the— I don't know that she went to the symphony, Chicago Symphony
179 Orchestra, or not, but I went to children's concerts when I was, uh—and my
180 grandmother, uh, went with us. We got a—afternoon off from school which was pretty
181 great. (laughs) And then I studied the violin, played violin, and practiced— I can't
182 remember whether I played the piano— Yeah, I played the piano, too. That's, that's,
183 that's about it. We had— We played with neighborhood kids, but not too much.

184

185 MJ: Um, so what was your favorite after-school activity?
186
187 BB: Raking leaves, I guess. (laughs)
188
189 MJ: You— You enjoyed raking the leaves?
190
191 BB: And practicing and doing homework is about all that I remember.
192
193 MJ: Um. So you moved to Chicago when you were four, you said? Okay, why did you
194 move to Chicago?
195
196 BB: Why did I leave Chicago?
197
198 MJ: Or why did you move to Chicago?
199
200 BB: My father died and we moved— My mother— We lived in Gresh— in Gresham for
201 a while and my mother bought a house. In Beverly Hills.
202
203 MJ: Okay. Um, what, uh, what college did you attend?
204
205 BB: University of Chicago.
206
207 MJ: And, um, why did you choose— Why did you choose the University of Chicago?
208
209 BB: I don't really know. My mother had gone there, uh, part-time. And I guess that
210 was— I think it was probably her decision.
211
212 MJ: Um, what degree did you receive?
213
214 BB: Uh, BA.
215
216 MJ: In?
217
218 BB: French and minor in Spanish.
219
220 MJ: Okay. Um, what sorts of jobs did you hold following college?
221
222 BB: What?
223
224 MJ: What sorts of jobs did you hold following college?
225
226 BB: What kind of jobs?
227
228 MJ: Unh-hunh.
229

230 BB: Well I worked, um, uh, for the University of Chicago Libraries. Uh, couple of years.
231 And I also studied— I didn't get a—didn't get a Master's Degree, but I went to school
232 *and* worked at the same time. In fact, I did that through college. Through the college,
233 worked part-time. And I don't know what all I did after that. I know I worked for
234 Encyclopedia Britannica. Uh, I know I had a whole lot of jobs.

235

236 MJ: Um, what was— That was your first job, was working at the Libraries? In the
237 Libraries?

238

239 BB: No. I taught school for— After I got out of, uh— After I stopped going to the
240 University, I taught, um, school down in Benton, Illinois.

241

242 MJ: Um, elementary school?

243

244 BB: High school.

245

246 MJ: Um, what other— What other jobs did you do?

247

248 BB: Isn't that awful? I can't even remember. I can't even remember. I had— I know
249 there were other jobs, but I can't even remember. I—after I, uh— Oh, I—I worked for
250 the, uh—I worked in the, in the, um, for the US, um— I worked for the US Government.
251 Censorship. I worked for US Censorship, uh, during World War II. Then I had to work
252 for the Encyclopedia Britannica. Then, of course, when I—when we moved to Se—when
253 I moved to S—when *we* moved to—when I moved to overseas and I worked for the US
254 Army, uh, from '54 to '60. And I came back. I worked for, um, Bureau of Indiana
255 Affairs and the Department, uh, and Bureau of Commercial Fisheries. And, uh, what
256 else? Oh, I know when I was in Chicago, um, back in the late '40s, I was Secretary of the,
257 of the, uh, Hyde Park Baptist Church. I can't— I can't remember anything else.

258

259 MJ: Yeah, where— Where overseas did you live?

260

261 BB: Pardon?

262

263 MJ: Where overseas did you live?

264

265 BB: Uh— Jargeau. J-A-R-G-E-A-U. Jargeau, France. And Olivet—uh, or, eh— We lived
266 in Olivet and worked in F— That was when we—I was working for the army. And then
267 in Munich. [Unclear due to background interference...] Um—Hei—Oh, no. One other
268 place in Germany, then in Heidelberg. In Heidelberg. In Germany.

269

270 MJ: And— And that was for six years?

271

272 BB: France and Germany was from '54 to—June '54 to January '60.

273

274 MJ: Okay. Um, and so where did you live—? Did you come back to Chicago when you
275 left—?

276

277 BB: Uh, no. We went to Seattle. My mother retired in '54 and—from teaching. She
278 taught in Harvey, Illinois. And then we moved— Then we, um, went to, um, Seattle.
279 Lived there for four years. And then came back and lived in South Shore, uh, Prarie
280 Shores. Uh, after that, we went to, um— Then my mother died. Sh— Uh, then I moved in
281 '87 to, um, where I live now. To Rogers Park.

282

283 MJ: Okay. Um, so now to kind of get into a bit of the activism. Um, what was your
284 relationship— Like, describe your relationship to activism prior to your involvement with
285 the movement.

286

287 BB: When we lived in Prarie Shores, I—I really wasn't active very much. But it was back
288 in the—probably in the '70s that uh, a friend, a *neighbor* in Prarie Shores— You know
289 where Prarie Shores is? On the Near Southside. Michael Reese Hospital used to be there.
290 I don't think there's a Michael Reese Hospital anymore. But, um, she gave me a
291 membership to Common Cause. And at that time, I began to get active. She was not
292 active. But, uh, then I began to, um, get active in the Common Cause—had a local
293 affiliate—and, uh, visit, um, politicians, and—

294

295 [Volume of conversation in kitchen begins to rise.]

296

297 BB: I can't remember what else we did.

298

299 [Staff pass through from kitchen to exit—speaking loudly.]

300

301 BB: Uh, then after that, I— I don't remember how— I— When I came to this church, I
302 was active with Citizens Alert, which will probably cease to exist in—this coming June.
303 And, um, and of course— In the '80s, I think, we—it was when, uh, began picketing for
304 the, um— Can't even think of the name of the, of the gold piece—the, um, money—the,
305 uh— I can't even think of that. I'll think of it when I go—when I, when we leave. And
306 then it worked into picketing the South African Consulate. And there was a weekly—
307 There was a weekly vigil, for probably several years.

308

309 MJ: Okay, um. Talk a little more about Common Cause. What— What was that exactly?

310

311 BB: Well it still exists. It's for good—good government. And it's— It's, uh—uh— They
312 always campaign for good government. It's not a— It's nothing deductible. They— Or
313 you— If you give to them, it's not deductible because any—uh, working for a change of
314 law, you can— Do you have a computer at home?

315

316 MJ: Mm-hm.

317

318 BB: And internet?

319

320 MJ: Mm-Hm.

321

322 BB: Look up Common Cause on the computer.

323

324 MJ: Okay.

325

326 BB: It's still a— It's still active. But I think they're mostly— They're not so much by
327 mail. See, I— My career was mostly non-computer. Typewriter.

328

329 MJ: Right.

330

331 BB: And writing a lot of letters. On the typewriter. Um, so, now everything is—from
332 high school, maybe grade school up, it's computer, you know. I had a part-time job in
333 Chicago, too. I worked— I worked for a young woman that turned out to be a crook.
334 (laughs) Loaned her money, she never paid it back.

335

336 MJ: Aw—

337

338 BB: But, and, and I never got any money. I didn't go for money. Oh, I had a friend who
339 now has dementia. I guess. She—she's lost her mind. And she— I worked for her for
340 free. I don't think I ever got paid from her. Maybe I did. I don't— I don't think so. Um—
341 probably a couple of years. The other— The crook I worked for, probably about five
342 years. She had a ware— He had a— She and her husband had a good business, uh, on
343 18th and Michigan and did very well financially. Good wi— And after her husband died,
344 she kept— She kept, uh— She kept working. Uh, she kept the business. But then her
345 friend told me that one day she had a check in front of her and she didn't know what to
346 do with it. That was the point where her mind began to—had, had begun to fail. I wasn't
347 working for her at that, at that time. So she's in a— She's in probably a—a—where— I
348 can't even think of it. She's— She's in a nursing home. Been in a nursing home.
349 Physically, she looks good; she's fine. But, uh, mentally she's somewhere off—
350 somewhere else.

351

352 MJ: Um. So where were you employed when, when you became involved—

353

354 BB: Where was I—

355

356 MJ: Where were you employed when you became involved with the—

357

358 BB: Uh—

359

360 MJ: —movement?

361

362 BB: I think I was working for Mary Louise. The one who has—whose mind is gone now.
363 I don't kn— I don't even know.

364

365 MJ: Okay. Um, how did those who were closest with you react to your being involved in
366 that kind of activism?

367

368 BB: Well, uh, it was—except in this church where everybody’s an activist, almost—uh,
369 what, the people that I know—my, my good friends—thought I was—that was special. I
370 felt it was part of being a citizen. But, uh, they, they thought it was— They, they
371 themselves were, were not activists.

372

373 MJ: So did they— Did they have— They just— Did they have an opinion of it, of your
374 activism?

375

376 BB: No, I don’t think so.

377

378 MJ: They just themselves weren’t involved. Yeah. Um, how did you first learn about
379 apartheid?

380

381 BB: I think it was when I was— I mentioned a Norm Watkins [a fellow anti-apartheid
382 activist to whom Betty referred prior to the start of the interview]. And that was one of
383 the organizations I belonged to. I don’t know what I did for it. I wrote letters, attended
384 meetings. Uh— Well, Common Cause, I was active—I was active with. And then, uh, I
385 think they encouraged, uh, people to— I wish I could think of the money. The gold, the
386 gold, uh— We, we’d, um, picket banks for— Maybe I’ll think of it pretty soon. So it
387 was—It was with, um, Clergy and Laity Concerned. And they— They no long exist. Uh,
388 that was during—I think that was during some, some—one of our wars. I wish I could
389 think of the gold piece. I can’t remember— We picketed the, uh, First National Bank, I
390 know. It was—had to do with Africa—some union in South Africa. I can’t think of it. If I
391 think of it after you turn your paper in, I’ll let you know.

392

393 MJ: Um, how did you come into contact with Clergy and Laity Concerned?

394

395 BB: Well, let’s see. It was an Af— It was a Nicaragua Organization I belonged to. I don’t
396 really know.

397

398 MJ: Do you know when you joined the movement?

399

400 BB: Joined—?

401

402 MJ: The—like the Clergy and Laity Concerned.

403

404 BB: Probably, probably in the ‘80s. I don’t even know.

405

406 MJ: Um, what made you decide to become a part of an actual organization?

407

408 BB: When I got the membership to Common Cause.

409

410 MJ: So you go the membership and—

411

412 BB: Then they had a local affiliate and I began attending meetings and I suppose writing
413 letters. I don’t know.

414

415 MJ: Um, and so, so the one that you joined was Clergy and Laity Concerned. Um—
416 what—? Talk a little about the relationship between your religion and your activism.

417

418 BB: Religion and Activism? Not—there wasn't any connection as far as I could do.
419 You're about ten years too late.

420

421 MJ: What do— What do you mean?

422

423 BB: Asking questions. (laughs)

424

425 MJ: Oh.

426

427 BB: I could have given you answers ten years ago.

428

429 MJ: Um, what other work did Clergy and Laity Concerned do?

430

431 BB: It was mil—mainly against, against the war. And concerned about the war, I th— I
432 s— I suppose that was the Vietnam War. I suppose. I don't even remember.

433

434 MJ: Okay. Um, and so were there—there were events that, that Clergy and Laity
435 Concerned would put on?

436

437 BB: Probably. I know there were meetings. Oh and then, uh, another group that, um, that
438 I was, uh, active with was, uh—Oh it was, it was—One time it was SANE. It was
439 Illinois— It was FREEZE. It was called FREEZE. And then there was SANE. Meaning
440 freeze nuclear weapons. Illinois Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign or something like
441 that. That became— That joined with another group and it was SANE FREEZE. And we
442 used to, um, uh, be a part of a annual march in—on the near Southside. And then it
443 became the—then it became the Illinois Peace Action. And it's still a— It's not active,
444 but the, uh, the national organization is active, is very active. The Illinois Peace Action is
445 still— It would be on your, on the website. And the one who was the, uh, who was very
446 active in Illinois SANE FREEZE is now the head of Illinois—head of the Peace Action.
447 Uh, U— Peace Action. It was—US Peace Action. Oh, it's just Peace Action, I think it is
448 now. Which is national.

449

450 MJ: Um, how—how did you stay informed during your time in activism?

451

452 BB: How do?

453

454 MJ: How did you stay informed?

455

456 BB: At that time, it was not email. There was no email. And I didn't have email for a
457 very long anyway. I couldn't keep up with it. It was always mail and, and I suppose
458 telephone. And I, when I was, and I, when I worked for Citizens Alert, I— I think I

459 became a member of Citizens Alert when—or active Citizens Alert—when I came to this
460 church which was in, which was in October '87. And then I was active a long time.

461
462 MJ: So were they—were there mailing lists?

463
464 BB: Mail, yeah.

465
466 MJ: Um, so, like you would put your name on something and they would send it you?

467
468 BB: Yeah.

469
470 MJ: Okay. Um, did you at all follow the news?

471
472 BB: Do what?

473
474 MJ: Did you follow the news?

475
476 BB: I used to. I don't anymore, at all, because I'm trying to clear my apartment of all the
477 stuff I collected all the years I was active.

478
479 MJ: Ah. What sort of attention did the, did the movement, um, receive from Chicago
480 officials?

481
482 BB: Sort of— What kind of response did, did the—? Well, I— All I know is what— All I
483 know even a little bit about is what happened in this church, because this church turns out
484 for the Peace Actions against war. They, um— I, I don't go down to Columbia. I've
485 never belonged to Christian Peace Makers. But, uh, these people here have accompanied
486 people in Gaza, in Palestine, in, uh, El Salvador. Our minister lived in El Salvador for a
487 while, while they were busy killing, killing, uh, people there. He was—I think he was
488 there when, when— He was the only one that, I think, survived. Uh, and they not only go
489 once; they go more than once. They accompany, uh, immigrants that are coming over the
490 border or— There are a lot, there are a lot of undocumented immigrants—maybe a
491 million in the United States. And they're, they're working to help those people so that
492 they don't get, uh, jailed, um, and, uh, sent out of the country. They— They're— Right
493 now— I went out two or three times to Broadview, Illinois, and, uh, they bring them all
494 over from—I don't know if it was just Illinois or the middle states. They bring them to,
495 um—they detain them—and then they bring them down to Broadview, Illinois, put them
496 on a bus, and send them out of the country. Sometimes they keep them for— Well in—
497 The United States is keeping people for months and years that are undocumented, and,
498 uh, it's wrong what they're doing. And people here have been active. There are a couple
499 of Sisters. Uh, nuns who, uh, have been taking on the cause of, of, uh, undocumented
500 people. And finally, we weren't—when we were there, we weren't allowed to see them at
501 all. They were—We saw them on a bus way out there waiting to go, be deported. But, uh,
502 they, they got (clears throat)—They have, and supporters have gotten them, uh, the
503 authorities, uh (clears throat), people in charge— One of the members of the, of the same
504 church that this nun belongs to, I think, got so they could get onboard, and, uh, the bus,

505 and, uh, pray with them, and, uh, help with their families. Uh, that meets—I think it's just
506 once a month, that group. And they, people come from all over. Our pastor always goes
507 there. Uh, and his daughter is the head of an organization, uh, in Chicago, that works with
508 undocumented, undocumented people. This, uh, this is a wonderful church to, to try to
509 help people. People with beyond, almost beyond help as far as the national government is
510 concerned.

511

512 MJ: Yeah, what was— Um, was the— How did the national government react, um, do
513 you feel, um, to, to the anti-apartheid movement?

514

515 BB: Anti-apartheid? Well— Krugerrand!

516

517 MJ: Krugerrand? Oh.

518

519 BB: Krugerrand. That's why we were picketing the First National Bank. And other cities,
520 too, picketing banks that uh, um, sold the Krugerrand to help the South African
521 government, you know. So, um— Of course that— I don't, I don't know whether people
522 were imprisoned or not, but I know— I know that that's why, what we— We went
523 down— I remember going downtown on a Saturday, when everything is dead, and we,
524 um, picketed the South—the, um, First National Bank. Nobody was down there. No, no,
525 notoriety. No, no, uh—nothing, nothing in the news about it. Nobody was down—just,
526 just the people that were picketing. So, uh, I don't know whether there was any reaction
527 from the US Government at all. There had to be something, but I don't remember what it
528 was.

529

530 MJ: Okay. Um, so more on the, on the local level, um, how did you react to Harold
531 Washington's—

532

533 BB: React to what?

534

535 MJ: Harold Washington's 1983 election?

536

537 BB: Well, it was a big tragedy that, that—and I, I still, I still don't think we have the
538 story of how he died. I, I still don't. Even though people say that it was natural cause, I
539 don't, I don't know. But, um, actually, it's kind of interesting. The son of the—one of the
540 white, um—probably it was a Republican—uh, when it was rai—uh, was, um, running
541 for mayor— I haven't heard of him for a long time, but he became an activist for—not
542 for all these white Republican organizations, you know. But he became an activist. I can't
543 remember what organization it was, but he was—and he lived over in Bridgeport, and I
544 don't—I haven't heard of him for years. It was a great, it was a great triumph when
545 Harold Washington was elected.

546

547 MJ: What impact did his election have on the anti-apartheid movement?

548

549 BB: I don't really know. I don't know. One of the meetings I attended, and I don't
550 remember what it was, Harold Washington was there when he was running for mayor. I

551 know it was a house meeting and it was over in, probably close to Rogers Park. I
552 remember, I remember that. I don't remember much about the meeting.
553
554 MJ: Um, how did you feel about Desmond Tutu being awarded the Nobel Prize for his
555 work in, in—
556
557 BB: Yeah, I don't, I don't—I don't know much. I don't know much about him.
558
559 MJ: Um, how did, how did the movement attempt to involve Chicagoans who maybe
560 weren't activists in the movement?
561
562 BB: For, uh, for "Free South Africa," you mean?
563
564 MJ: Uhn-hunh.
565
566 BB: I don't. I don't know. I know that—
567
568 MJ: I mean you, you talked a bit about, about writing letters—
569
570 BB: Yeah. Always writing letters about everything. Um, I don't know.
571
572 MJ: What, what sort of letters did you write?
573
574 BB: Always write on behalf of what, whatever, whatever is the, uh, liberal side. I don't—
575 I've written so many letters; I've thrown away so many letters.
576
577 MJ: What sort of attention did the movement get from the people of Chicago?
578
579 BB: Don't know. I don't know. I don't know.
580
581 MJ: Um, how did you react when you, when you learned that Nelson Mandela had been
582 released from prison?
583
584 BB: Well I know one thing that, um, I was invited to the banquet when he was, when he
585 was here. It wasn't just—It wasn't just because of me, but there were hundreds of people.
586 And I know we went to a celebration, but I can't remember anything about it at all.
587
588 MJ: Um, did you, did you follow that case a lot?
589
590 BB: I don't think so.
591
592 MJ: Um, how did react to the official, legal end of apartheid?
593
594 BB: The, the what?
595
596 MJ: The official, legal end of apartheid?

597

598 BB: Legal end of the apartheid. Well— Oh, I'm glad you asked me that. Uh, I have a
599 picture— It was a Soweto Day Celebration in front of the Art Institute, and has, uh—oh,
600 it's about this big—and has a lot of the, um, people used to picket pictured. Remind me to
601 give that to you, because it's up in the, uh, up in the balcony area.

602

603 MJ: Sure.

604

605 BB: And that— The— When the, um—When the election—When the election was on
606 for Nelson Mandela, people came from a certain region to vote, came to, in Chicago to
607 vote. And, um, I guess that was one of the loveliest days of my life when I, when I saw.
608 And American Friends Service Community— Are you familiar with them, who they are?

609

610 MJ: Um—

611

612 BB: American Friends Service Community. Quakers.

613

614 MJ: Okay.

615

616 BB: They, um, they still—They have an office. Their office was on Dearborn, I think it
617 was. I can't remember where it was then, but they invited people who came to vote—the
618 South Africans who came to vote—they invited them afterwards for coffee or whatever,
619 rest, whatever. But they had— They came from var—several different states, and it was
620 really one of the happiest days of my life. I think it was so beautiful. Um— Can't, I can't
621 remember. I know— No, the weather was nice. The people were outside. I don't
622 remember much more.

623

624 MJ: What was it about that day that was so special?

625

626 BB: Because everybody was really upbeat. Really positive. Really happy. You know, it
627 was a great, it was a great day.

628

629 MJ: So who, um— You said that there were a lot of, um, activists or people who were
630 apart of it in, in this picture—

631

632 BB: Yeah, it was about— It was several years after the, uh— It was— I don't even
633 remember whether we met up in the South African Consul—uh, Consulate or not. I can't
634 remember. But kind of, one kind of thing that was kind of interesting—Elaine, whom was
635 here in church today, was, uh, had a group of, uh, people who had been active in the, uh,
636 anti-apartheid movement. They were invited—I suppose the South African new
637 government had something to do with that—but everybody who had—not everybody—
638 but a lot of—*many* people who had been active in other ways than just picketing, other
639 ways than just protesting—I mean, people who had probably given money— And she
640 had them in her apartment which, at that time was on, uh, Lakeshore Drive— And I, and
641 I know I was there. And, um— What was I going to tell you? It was, it was— Oh. One of
642 the people who had worked for the old South African government in the, in the Con—in

643 Chicago Consulate and was hold-over from the, with the new South African Consulate
 644 told me that, uh, the Consul General used to come to the window and look down and he
 645 saw me, because I think I was the last one to picket the South African Consulate. Uh, we
 646 used to have—there used to be several, several of us. Um, there was—a lot of— There
 647 used to be a—going a cir—a long line of people going round and round and round and
 648 front at Adams and Michigan, across from the Art Institute. And, um, he told me that the
 649 Consul General used to look down and see me and was really kind of afraid of what I was
 650 doing. (laughs) And I thought, how can he be afraid? But he said he was. And I think, and
 651 he reported to Washington. Um, there was another person down there that came down
 652 there at the same time I was. And he's, uh, he's still around. I saw him at the, at the, uh,
 653 Eight Day Center, um, Good Friday Walk. And, um, he's a—he's probably the only
 654 black, um—oh, what do I want to say there?—black—I can't even think of the word, but
 655 one who was against government period. He's—only one in Chicago. And he used to
 656 come and distribute his leaflets, his, uh, fliers. And I, I got one the other day, and I didn't
 657 understand all of it. But then the Jewish people— We were near the, where, the, um,
 658 Chicago Symphony Friday—uh, Wednesday?—Wednesday, um, atten—concert
 659 attenders, uh, would, would pass us and some of the Jewish people thought that this, that,
 660 uh, Jer—, that black man and I were working together against, uh, Jews. And, uh, he was
 661 anti-Byron—anti-Zionist. He said he's never been against Jews, but just against, um, the
 662 Zionist movement. And so, they would—they really didn't like me at all. And I realized
 663 that I'd have to choose a different day when, uh, he, when the black man wasn't there.
 664 Very nice person, but he's—that's his one— It's like Johnny One-Note. All he has is one
 665 note. And, um, he was the one— Actually, he was the one that—one of the three people
 666 who helped me move from Prairie Sh— Where in the dickens was it? Prairie Shore.
 667 Yeah, from Prairie Shores to, um, where I live now. Really nice person. (clears throat)
 668 What'd I start to say? It was— I can't even remember what it was. Anyway, when I
 669 dissociated myself from him at the same time, then it was all right. Um, but he's been
 670 doing this for years. He's been brief with me; he hasn't (_____??). He— It was four
 671 sheets. I don't know where he gets his money to do all that. I can't—I can't remember
 672 anything else.

673
 674 MJ: You said there were times when you were the only person?

675
 676 BB: Toward the very end of the end—just toward the very end of the end, of the, uh,
 677 apartheid. Yeah, I was the only one.

678
 679 MJ: And why was that, do you think?

680
 681 BB: I don't know they diminished. I had— We used to say, uh— We had chants that, that
 682 we would say, but I don't know why it go— why it boiled down. Well, of course one
 683 reason I was the only one was I chose a different day from the regular, regular day. Uh, I
 684 know one time the Consul General came down, invited me to go up for tea to get warm
 685 because it was a cold day. And, um, I said no. No, thank you. Uh, and I know Consul
 686 General—I think he introduced me to his sister. And she came down and talked to me. I
 687 was very rude. I said to her, “Love the—,” “We love the sinner, but we hate the sin.”
 688 (laughs) That was very rude. (laughs)

689

690 MJ: And, and, what did she say?

691

692 BB: Pardon?

693

694 MJ: What did she say?

695

696 BB: I don't— She saw anything—said anything at all.

697

698 MJ: So what, what sort of— You had mentioned before about the, about being involved
699 with the undocumented—

700

701 BB: With the what?

702

703 MJ: Undocumented people.

704

705 BB: I'm not really involved with them other than that I attended a couple of the, uh, of
706 the monthly, uh, um, times when they, when they, uh, send people out of the country.
707 They're on, they're on the bus and the relatives come down there and there's a— It's a—
708 Do you drive? You don't drive. No. It's out in Broadview and I don't drive either. I
709 don't, I don't go out anymore, uh, there. But these two sisters, these two nuns, are still
710 very active, um, in getting—being able to speak to people and being involved and I don't
711 know whether they are involved in doing anything, helping their families or not, that are
712 left. Because sometimes the mothers are sent out—deported. Sometimes the fathers are
713 deported. And it's a very bad situation. But, uh, Jenny and this, uh, pastor's daughter is,
714 uh, a Christian—is in the office of the Christian Religious Leadership Network. And she
715 has her own desk and she is actively involved. She's, she's accompanied people out in
716 Arizona and she's a wonderful young woman. I c— I can't think of anything else.

717

718 MJ: Um, well what other type of activism were you involved in per—post-apartheid?

719

720 BB: Well very much involved in Citizens Alert, which is, uh, on police accountability.
721 It's, um— The, the, uh, one who, uh, has been active in it, has been—kept it going for I
722 think thirty-five years now—is about four years younger than I am. And she's, she's not
723 able to carry on, uh, and there's nobody to take over who has any experience, so— Uh, I
724 was active in that. That would have been since I came to this church, which would've
725 been eighty—nineteen— I came here in the fall of '87. So, um, it's maybe about five
726 years ago I was—I became inactive. And then, of course, I've—I was—I've been—
727 About ten years, part-time, I worked at the church files which were in boxes and bags and
728 I got them organized into the files and— And that was done about two years ago, and, uh,
729 almost three years ago now. And there's nobody to take over, but I'm not— I'm not
730 going to continue with that. That took a lot of time and I just don't have the energy or the
731 time. I have, I have to focus on clearing my apartment now. That's my main focus. And,
732 of course, I've been going—since the, '91—no, no, no, couldn't have been '91—since
733 the United States became involved with Iraq—maybe seven years ago—I've been
734 attending the weekly vigils. Except this winter, I did not go down when it was very cold,

735 but I've been going back again. As long as I have energy, I'll keep the Peace—go down
 736 for the Peace Vigils. There's a Cath—Eighth Day Center for Justice. And, um, I think
 737 there are about twenty Catholic organizations—uh, nuns and priests—who support the
 738 Eight Day Center for Justice. But our church had a Station of the Cross. Do you know
 739 what a Station of the Cross is? Well, when Jesus went to, was to be executed, they made
 740 him carry a cross. And (clears throat), and there were various places where something
 741 happened. You might look that up on the, on the, uh, the website, on the Eighth Day
 742 Center— I—Do I have?—I have an ex— Actually, I have an extra book at home. Maybe
 743 I could send it to you. But certain things happen. Somebody, uh— Certain actions happen
 744 at var—, ten places on the way to be executed. And, uh, this is an annual
 745 commemoration—Eighth Day Center Good Friday Walk—and annual commemoration
 746 of Jesus', um, execution, and the way to execution.

747

748 (Sirens from outside.)

749

750 BB: And instead of quoting the Bible, you quote what's going on today this is still, that is
 751 still, um, making—is still evil, that is still evil. And they go down to, they go down to,
 752 uh, various government organizations where, where things are going on which are wrong.
 753 Like, like for the undocumented or people or organizations that are, are, um, treating
 754 people—gays, lesbians, uh, heterosexual, whoever—treating them wrong. And they, and
 755 then our church had the second Station of the Cross, I think it was. I went down there as I
 756 said, uh, on Good Friday, and then I realized I didn't have any energy to do it and I went
 757 right back home and—first time for years I haven't gone on the Good Friday Walk. But
 758 there are hundreds of people that go on that walk. To commemorate the wrong doings
 759 that are against everything that Jesus stood for.

760

761 MJ: So, looking back, um, what is your, what is your strongest memory of your
 762 involvement with the Chicago—like, with the anti-apartheid movement?

763

764 BB: I suppose the picketing. The picketing. That went on, I think, for several years, once
 765 a week.

766

767 MJ: Is there like a particular moment? Like a particular—

768

769 BB: No. It was just that, whatever the weather was—That was the time I didn't pay any
 770 attention to the weather. I went, went every week. But I don't, uh—I don't have any
 771 special, um— The present— The last Consul General— Let's see— Land had one party.
 772 I think Elaine had two parties at her house for people that were active, who gave money,
 773 and for—active in other ways than, than just picketing. And he— And I've been to—I
 774 was to a banquet where I was invited. I mean there were a lot of people there. And I
 775 would be active now except I asked them to take me off the list because I can't be active
 776 anymore. But, uh, when you're with—I don't know how it is with you—but when I'm
 777 with somebody that, with other people that have the same views, that want justice where
 778 there is injustice, that's, that's a wonderful, that's a wonderful experience. But you can't
 779 stay there all the time just with your own, with your people that believe like you because
 780 that way nobody else is going to have any change, change in, in what they're doing—stay

781 the same old way. But, um, even, even if— But it's really nice to be with people that you,
782 that you respect. But it's always a ha—, it's always a happy experience, you know, when,
783 when you don't have to say, Well, no you sh—, we shouldn't be doing this. Because they
784 all say, they all say the same thing: We should be doing better; we're not doing well. So
785 you don't have to convince anybody. They're already convinced. (laughs)

786

787 MJ: Yeah.

788

789 BB: Like-minded.

790

791 MJ: What, what did you learn from your involvement with the movement?

792

793 BB: What did I learn with the involvement? Well, I learned one thing, I think, is that, uh,
794 you think you're alone on some viewpoints and you find that there're a lot of people that
795 think like you. So you're not the only one. I think, I think that's, that's wonderful. It's
796 strengthening to know that you don't have to, uh, that you don't have to be on the
797 defensive all of the time. That there— It was the same thing Saturday, yesterday. Had
798 nothing to do with apartheid. But, uh, Joe Moore is our Alderman, 49th Ward, and he had
799 (clears throat) a vote, voting—it's been going on for days— Uh, anybody who was
800 sixteen or over and a resident of the 49th Ward—you had to be sure you were a resident,
801 uh—can vote, could vote in this participatory, um, uh, balloting. Not balloting.
802 Participatory vote. And, um, I thought there might be two or three people on there on
803 Saturday. There were hundreds of people. And he's, he's a member of the, our church
804 here. And it was, I know it was very gratifying to him because I—he's not one of Mayor
805 Dailey's favorite people. He bucks. He bucks a lot of times. He's against Mayor Dailey.
806 One time he had the sp— Mayor Dailey had the speaker turned off so he couldn't present
807 his, his view on one vote that was coming up. I, I think it's good— I think the best thing
808 is if you can find friends who are—uh, to work with who are like-minded. I think that's
809 the best. That's the, that's a, uh, a wonderful thing. Because a lot of people, you— You
810 could go to Cubs Park and not find one soul that would be interested in what you're
811 interested in. Sox, or whatever it is. Or you could listen to all of the goofy stuff on TV
812 and, and not find anybody that—not find somebody who is serious enough about issues.
813 Our world's going down to hell in a hand basket and, and you can watch TV or— I have
814 a friend who, whose world is TV. She doesn't think— I don't, I don't know what she
815 thinks or what she doesn't think, but to my— In my opinion, if she lost TV, she'd lose
816 the whole world. Because her life had been, has been unpleasant in many respects. And
817 so she really drowns herself in, in TV, so she doesn't have to think about the problems
818 which she has.

819

820 MJ: What do you regret—

821

822 BB: What do I—?

823

824 MJ: What do you regret most about your, your activism?

825

826 BB: Well, I think—I think that I haven't been active long enough. And when I was
 827 (clears throat), when I studying, I studied. I didn't—I'm not a great—I'm not a scholar,
 828 by any, by any means. So whatever I, whatever I did, I did all right. But whatever I did
 829 wasn't anything great and it wasn't easy. So I, uh, I regret that I didn't start being active
 830 when I was five-years-old. You know. My mother was a teacher; she had to grade papers.
 831 There was— That was her life. And she supported my, my grandmoth—her mother, her
 832 sister's child, her great—her grandfather, her maternal grandfather, and me. And she had
 833 her— She had her, uh— She had hard time during the depression, when everybody
 834 else—when not everybody else—when a lot of people were committing suicide, jumping
 835 out of high buildings. This was in the Depression of '28, '29, right in there. We had
 836 overdrawn in our bank account about by maybe ten or fifteen dollars or something. We
 837 didn't lose any, anything like that. She got paid in gas coupons during the Depression and
 838 we didn't have a car. She had to sell the coupons and—at a discount. So it wasn't, it
 839 wasn't— She did, she did not have an easy life. And her childhood, her young
 840 womanhood was not easy because her parents were divorced and it was hard to get
 841 money from her father to go to, to continue in college. So, uh— Then, I— Then, of
 842 course, I worked part-time when I, when I was in college. I think all four, probably all
 843 four years of college. And it was hard during that time. We had to pay a hundred dollars a
 844 quarter. That was very hard. Now it would be a snap. But then, going to the bursar and
 845 asking to have a delay in payment or something like that, it was, it was hard for me,
 846 because, uh— And he was a member— Eventually, after I was out of college, he became
 847 a member of Hyde Park Baptist, uh, Church. So, uh, but I hate— *Please, please, I don't*
 848 *want to go to Mr. Cotton.* No, it was Mr. Mather I didn't want to go to. There were two
 849 bursars at the University. *Please, please, I don't want to go to Mr. Mather.* Mr. Mather
 850 also became a member of our church after I left. And, oh, I was so glad it was Mr.
 851 Cotton, because he wasn't sarcastic about not being able to pay, uh, immediately, you
 852 know. So I had other things and I can only, I could only do so much and it wasn't, it
 853 wasn't enough. And even after I retired, of course— After I retired and really didn't work
 854 for either the crook or my nice friend, I don't know why I wasn't more active. Then of
 855 course when mother was ill, that was something different. I think, uh, I think these
 856 parents, young parents here that have kids that are active in whatever the parents are
 857 active in, I think that's, that's wonderful. My mother didn't have time to be active in
 858 anything. Just active supporting the family.

859
 860 MJ: So did, did your mother's history contribute to your going into activism?
 861

862 BB: No, I—I don't know. Except that she was a very good teacher and she was— That
 863 was in the days when the teachers visited the parents, when the kids were, when they're
 864 not in school and they're supposed to be. And so she had a very good relationship with
 865 the, uh, with, uh, the parents. Now that's unheard of, you know, by and large, I think.
 866 Maybe private schools, but not public schools. So she—the kids liked her. She was kind
 867 of hard on them. She didn't, uh, she didn't cater to them. And I remember a few years
 868 after she retired that one of her, uh, co-teachers, co-workers said that, uh, when she went
 869 to a school to substitute—she had also, she had also, um, uh, retired—the kids would tell
 870 the teacher what they were going to do. The teacher would tell them what we're—*Today*
 871 *we're going to do... No, we aren't. Today we aren't going to do that.*—kids. And, um,

872 she wasn't that kind of teacher. But it was a different school. It wasn't the same school.
873 Sometimes I hear kids telling teacher—hearing about kids telling the teacher what they
874 will do and what they will not do. And getting physically—physically aggressive toward
875 the teacher.

876
877 MJ: Of what are you most proud?

878
879 BB: I'm proud that I get out of bed every day and put my feet on the floor. (laughs)

880
881 MJ: That's great. Ha. Um, do you, do you have a moment from your activism or from
882 your life in general that makes you most proud?

883
884 BB: Makes me more proud? I can't think of anything I'm proud of doing, no. I'm trying
885 to help people. I may get into trouble with it. I have a (clears throat)—I have a friend
886 across the, down the street that told me last May, I guess it was, that she was, her
887 business had been sold and she was, and pay had been cut. She's a waitress. And, uh, she
888 didn't know what she was going to do, how to pay the rent or anything. So I've been
889 helping her in little ways that way. And, um, she has—she's going to be—she is sixty-
890 three now, this month—April. No, was it April? March. So she'll be getting, she will be
891 getting Social Security. So it'll be a little bit easier for her. They are sexually, and, uh—
892 There was ageism involved, sexism involved, uh, and she does not, um—She's not, she's
893 not, uh, timid when she, when they, when they, uh, are doing the wrong thing. She lets
894 them know. But they've cut her—not only her pay—but they've cut how many days a
895 week she can work. And they give her the worst part of the restaurant where she doesn't
896 get much in the way of tips. Uh, and, uh, they add—they've cut it down to three days a
897 week. And she can hardly pay the rent. And the other person I've been helping in minor
898 ways for quite a few years, um—people that are on Public Aid. And I didn't realize that if
899 you, if people that are on Public Aid get, uh, help from the outside, they are taken off
900 Public Aid. (coughs) Nobody told me until just the end of last month. (coughs) She told
901 me—this one person I've been helping for a few months now. But she still wants the
902 help, wants me to help, and I, I want to help, but I don't want to get her in trouble and I
903 don't want to get me in trouble. So I got to figure that one out. I don't know how to do it.
904 She wrote a letter, what she needs. Uh, so I have—That's one things I have to do when I
905 get home besides doing the laundry. Um, that's a challenge that I hate to figure out. I
906 don't want to ask my minister what I should do because I don't want to say well go—
907 expect him to say well go ahead and do it anyway. I don't want, I don't want to put him
908 on the spot. So I know somebody—I think I know two people from the Eight Day
909 Vigil—who, um, worked for Public Aid. And, uh, I haven't been able to get the rules so I
910 could read them so I'm going to ask them where on the internet should I, uh, should I—I
911 can ask my friend Jackie who was down here asking about eggs. I can ask her, uh, to look
912 up on the Internet what the rules are because she cannot get the—she does not seem to be
913 able to get the rules for Public Aid. And I want to see it in writing before I go ahead. So,
914 that, that is a challenge. I've given her quite a little bit of money. She needs—She has to
915 have all of her teeth pulled out including—well, the last teeth that haven't fallen out or
916 had to be pulled out. There are seven more teeth to go. And, um, she can't—She's a
917 subway musician. She plays the violin, she tap dances, and she whistles. Now with her

918 teeth all out, she has to have dentures. She has to learn how to whistle all over again and
919 she can't be working. I said to her, doesn't whatever you get in the subway—doesn't that
920 count? Does Public Aid know about that? And I don't think so. She got real excited, uh—
921 I was going to have— My minister's interested in her, too, and want, wants to—maybe
922 the church can help. But she got all excited about that because she called him a busybody.
923 I said, he's not the busybody. I'm the one that wanted to help—have him help. So she
924 wrote a letter. I haven't read it yet. Then she needed eyeglasses. She lost her eyeglasses
925 three years ago. She couldn't read anything. She couldn't read musician—uh, music—
926 and she has a piano at home. I talked to her the other day. Can you read music, your
927 music now? She said well glasses are wonderful. So that was one thing. I don't know
928 whether, uh, I'm supposed to do that or not, but I don't think I'm going to find out. I
929 don't think I'm going to inquire. Um, so those are main things. One of the, one of the
930 people in the Citizens Alert where I volunteered for years, uh, were let go by the
931 Jewish—Jewish—Jewish— Oh, what do they call it? It's an organization, places people
932 in, in other, in non-profit organizations for work. And she's worked there about four
933 years. And now they let her go, need somebody else to have, have a chance to do it. She
934 hasn't got a job yet. So she hasn't got a job. She's seventy. Seventy-something-or-other.
935 And I, I did help her a little bit, but haven't continued. She has a family. The other two
936 people I'm helping now have no families, no— No I thought—I keep hearing kids. I,
937 uh—

938

939 [Loud voices in the background as a family enters the kitchen next to the fellowship area
940 of the church where the interview is being held.]

941

942 BB: He works on recycling. He and his wife and, uh, their son work on recycling every
943 Sunday after, after church. Because this is a, this is a—during the week, this is a Jewish
944 Daycare Center. And they have recycling—

945

946 MJ: Okay.

947

948 BB: Need to be done. Needs to be done.

949

950 [Following the interview, Ms. Benson referred to the members of the family of volunteers
951 as “the real activists”.]

952

953 BB: I guess. I guess that's all I can think of.

954

955 MJ: Um, what— What lasting impact would you say being a part of the anti-apartheid
956 movement has had on you?

957

958 BB: Has had on me? Well, I think— Again, I think it's a blessing to know there are other
959 people who have the same ideas and not everybody is nuts on that subject, you know.

960

961 MJ: So just the, the sense that, that there are others?

962

963 BB: Yeah, a personal— It's comforting to know that when you take a stand that a lot of
 964 other people won't take a stand—that they're all out there. It's like yesterday. Yesterday,
 965 that great big school. I don't know that you've seen it or not. Probably not. You haven't
 966 been out as far as, uh— Oh, what's—? Uh, well it's beyond south—north of Devon.
 967 You— Have you ever been north of Devon? No. Well, it's a big, it was a big shopping
 968 mall. It was a huge shopping mall. It was closed. All these little businesses had to go
 969 elsewhere to find, find a place. I don't know what they did. I felt bad about that. But now
 970 it's a school. And lovely school. It's a long, long building. And that's where the
 971 participatory voting took place yesterday. For all the 49th Ward. Whether they were
 972 registered voters, whether they were citizens, whether they were— They were just, had to
 973 be old enough and res—, sixteen and above and residents of the 49th Ward. So a lot of
 974 people— It was a lovely occasion. I know Joe was really please—the alderman. So there
 975 are happy occasions, and those you do remember. Now, he—the next vote's coming up
 976 on the fourteenth. And this is a vote that only citizens, uh, of Chicago can vote—to close
 977 the, uh, coal, the coal plants on the, uh, think it's south, southwest side that produce so
 978 much pollution. And uh, and of course, the organiza—the, uh—the companies, the
 979 industry are all on one side. And the people that are breathing the pollution are on the
 980 other side. And they don't, they don't have, uh, a lot of money. People don't want to be,
 981 don't want to be sickened and killed by air pollution. Not the ones that have the money.
 982 The ones that are making the pollution are the ones that have plenty of money. And
 983 money is what rules our country now. So we'll see what, how that comes out. I don't
 984 know whether I'll go down there or not. Probably not. I need to— I need to save my
 985 energy so that I—by December 14th of this year—I can have everything cleared out,
 986 including books and files, everything cleared out of my apartment. December 14th is my
 987 date, so I have to concentrate on that.

988

989 MJ: Um, do you think you'll ever stop being an activist?

990

991 BB: Well, the day I die. (laughs) But I, I'm not really, I'm really not an activist now. I'm
 992 really not. I mean, I do little things. But I can't do anything, can't do anything
 993 consistently. I go down to a vigil one hour a week, and—if it isn't too cold. I'm through
 994 upstairs, all I can do with the files. If nobody takes over, nobody takes over. That's why
 995 every—, I think, one of the main reasons why we got the mess in the first place was that
 996 everybody's an activist. And nobody has time to do anything silly like keeping the files.
 997 Except when the hundredth anniversary comes along, which is this year for this church.
 998 Then the files become very useful. But after the hundredth anniversary, you might have
 999 to wait until the hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary before the files get sorted out
 1000 again. (laughs)

1001

1002 MJ: Well, is there anything else you wanted to add for the interview?

1003

1004 BB: Are you an activist?

1005

1006 MJ: Um—

1007

1008 BB: Will you be when you get out of school and don't have all the books and papers to
1009 do?
1010
1011 MJ: I think— I think I would love that.
1012
1013 BB: Yeah.
1014
1015 MJ: I mean—
1016
1017 BB: Yeah.
1018
1019 MJ: Yeah.
1020
1021 BB: And I think that's what is inspiring— Is that Jackie?
1022
1023 [Ms. Benson's friend Jackie passes through the room with two small dogs.]
1024
1025 BB: Oh, yeah, that's Jackie. With her two babies.
1026
1027 MJ: Ha.
1028
1029 BB: Um, I think that that's what is hopeful and inspiring. Because the city budget—
1030 down. Everything—down. I don't know whether they have a saying for this time, kind of
1031 life or not—this kind, time of life or not. But during the war, you go in—during World
1032 War II—you go into the store and, Do you have such-and-such. No we don't have— Did
1033 you know there's a war going on!? So I haven't heard anything similar to that. But, um, I
1034 know that our, our public facilities, our library—all the things that are useful and helpful
1035 to citizens, uh, are not getting the funding. They, they're cutting down. They don't know
1036 how much money they're going to be getting. And I think, I think that— One of, one of
1037 the things that I think is, I will always remember, I hope, if I always remember
1038 everything—anything, uh, anything. Uh, our minister used to say that you don't do
1039 something because you expect something out of it, uh, personally. You don't do things
1040 because— You do things because they should be done, not because you're expecting
1041 anything out of it, any reward, anything special. You don't do things because you know
1042 it's going to win, because a lot of times you don't know if what you want to do is going
1043 to win. Possibly won't win. But you still go ahead and do it.
1044
1045 MJ: Is that what you lived by for all these years?
1046
1047 BB: Sorry?
1048
1049 MJ: Is that what you've lived for all these years?
1050
1051 BB: Oh, I don't, I don't know. I'm not consistently living by anything. But, um, anyways,
1052 I think that's a hopeful kind of thing. That when you write a letter to some schnuck—
1053 some white, Republican schnuck— (laughs) They aren't all bad, right? We had a, we had

1054 a wonderful, uh— When I lived in Prairie Shores, we had, uh, Susan Catania who was a
 1055 Republican representative. Wonderful person. Now that does—it sound like an
 1056 oxymoron. But she was great. But, uh, most of the things the Republicans are doing these
 1057 days are not helpful. And there are a lot of Democrats that are siding with— That's why
 1058 we're in a mess now. We have the Democrats check their spines in the checkroom, you
 1059 know. So it isn't a lot— I— One, yeah, one thing I regret the most, probably, is that I
 1060 didn't start out voting for the Green Party. But Joe, Joe is Democrat. He isn't always— I
 1061 haven't always liked what he did. But he's more appropriate than some of the Democrats.
 1062 Jankowski is, uh, very much pro-Israel. She votes great on other things. But as far as
 1063 funding Israel, she's, she's great on that. And I very— In fact, I've stopped giving,
 1064 making my little contributions to her because I don't like— But then you get a
 1065 Republican who couldn't do anything right, you know, running against her, so devil in
 1066 the deep blue sea. I mean, voting Green Party may, may be fine if the world's still around
 1067 in, uh, a few years. Maybe people will say, oh there's a Green Party? Oh, I didn't know
 1068 that. Maybe start voting for the Green Party. But, uh, I, I should have been doing that a
 1069 long time ago. But the thing that amazes me is that there are still people like that goofy
 1070 Alaskan governor that (laughs), that people, uh, approve of and are, and are enthusiastic
 1071 about. I— I don't understand. And even Bush, if we're with Bush— And I, and one of
 1072 the things that I've been doing for years—and I'll never know whether it's—until I can, if
 1073 I'm up, up high and can look down at the quilt or the jigsaw puzzle or whatever it is—
 1074 Oh, yeah. Oh, that's a piece that I put in. But I'll, I'll never know. But I've been writing,
 1075 uh— Arkansas tomorrow has an execution coming up. And, uh, I write the governors. I
 1076 have been doing it until we can— The office— Citizen's Alert, where I, where I could,
 1077 uh, fax my letters, is closed. And I can't get any information because I don't have
 1078 internet. Uh—

1079

1080 [An unclear distraction.]

1081

1082 BB: Who's going down by Cain? I don't know who that is. —Um, I used to be able to get
 1083 information on the Internet, but a lot of times, the National Coalition to Abolish the
 1084 Death Penalty does not have information on these people. They used to have, but they
 1085 don't give it anymore. So if there are mitigating circumstances—like he was brought up
 1086 by parents that were physically abusive, or brought up in a household where drugs were
 1087 being, drugs that were being, uh, used, and, uh, where he, uh, he had—he, usually he—
 1088 ran away because things were so miserable at home. And he, and he starts, uh, doing the
 1089 wrong things and there's nobody there to stand up for him. Or he gets hurt in Iraq. He
 1090 gets to, he gets, he learned how to— The big thing in the Army is to kill, kill, kill. That's
 1091 what they're trained for, not— So, it means he's become—sometimes, often—he
 1092 becomes abusive. He kills. He continues killing because he's, that's what he's learned.
 1093 Then he goes to death row. Then he gets executed. I mean, uh, and there's no excuse for
 1094 it. No excuse for it. He's horrible. He's mean. He's terrible. He's done bad things. Out.
 1095 Off with his head. And there's no, um— The mitigating circumstances— Like with
 1096 Governor Nixon in, uh, Missouri— He's never seen anybody on death row that he didn't
 1097 want to kill. I mean, there— I think, and I can't help but think that there's a, that there's a
 1098 pleasure, there's a satisfaction in being able to, legally, to kill people. I, I can't— I mean,
 1099 there, there— People, uh— The board to pardon paroles in Texas never meet. They never

1100 meet together. How they get, come to come to their decisions from various parts of
1101 Texas, whether one person says this is what we're going to do and they all say, Yes, we,
1102 he should be executed— Texas is great on executions. I think Arkansas is not good. Um,
1103 Missouri's not good. I had a friend on death row in Missouri, and um— He used, I used
1104 to send him money. I'd say— And then he had cancer of the throat. And I said, I didn't
1105 send money to you to smoke. Well, at the latter part of his life, he was using cigarettes to
1106 barter people to get other things done. And that's a no-no. You don't do that in, in— And
1107 when I'd phone to find out how his, about his treatment— You cut me off whenever you
1108 want to, because I know it's a long time.

1109

1110 MJ: No, no. You're fine.

1111

1112 BB: Um, and I'd talk to somebody on the nursing staff or medical unit and he'd say,
1113 Well, you should look at what he's been buying. He's been buying cigarettes. I couldn't
1114 say, Well he doesn't smoke anymore. And then he got, uh, he got throat cancer. And, uh,
1115 it so happened in Missouri that the per—, the doctor who was in charge of, of the lethal
1116 dosage for the people who were to be executed, uh, had something wrong. I don't—
1117 something wrong with his eyes. He didn't always use a, use the same lethal dosage. He'd
1118 been on that— He'd been doing that, I think, for eighteen years. And nobody— The
1119 governor apparently knew it, about it. Other people in charge apparently knew. But
1120 somehow it got out that, uh, he was, he was not doing, giving the dosage that was
1121 prescribed. Not that that was any better. But he didn't, he really didn't have— There was
1122 nobody in charge. So all these people, all these people being killed and possibly with pain
1123 that they should nev—, they never should have had. I mean, it's bad. There's no such
1124 thing as a kind execution. Uh, kind, and gentle, and humane. There's no such thing. Uh,
1125 so, I, I just— I can see people around, uh, in, in ancient days—early, early days of so-
1126 called civilization—sitting around a bonfire. And some interloper comes along and they
1127 all chase after him with clubs and beat him to death. And that's what we're doing now.
1128 These are white men sitting around at the table, and maybe women. I saw a, uh—I saw a,
1129 uh, documentary on what happens up at Tulsie where my friend was. And, uh, right up to
1130 the time of the execution, I— Sad, sad, sad. But, uh, I think it's nice—dressed nicely and
1131 say, He is one to be killed. I think it's somebody nicely— Must give them pleasure. He's
1132 bad. He's no good. Kill him. Any sol— Anything that we have, any big problem in the
1133 nation (human??)— It's their fault. They have the gold. They have the resources. They
1134 have no right to them. We are the ones that need them. So we get all our brave young
1135 men who can't find jobs and put them in the Army. And, uh, they aren't treated
1136 (____?) maybe. Or they learn their killing vocation too well. They did that and they
1137 come back and they can't be perfect citizens anymore. Maybe they weren't perfect
1138 citizens before they left, but when they come back, they're not perfect citizens. So,
1139 mitigating circumstances. Who cares about mitigating circumstances? No pity. But I, I
1140 think that that's what our civilization is. And we're sitting around a table instead of a
1141 bonfire and deciding who is worthy to live and who is not worthy to live. I am worthy to
1142 live. You are not. You've done bad things. The fact that people are CEOs, are making
1143 millions of dollars off of, off of munitions, off of whatever they manufacture, you know.
1144 Uh, that's okay. That's okay for them. It's okay for CEOs to earn ten, fifteen, twenty,
1145 however many times their employees earn—much money, I mean. I, I— So I write

1146 letters. I don't know whether it does any good or not. I think it, I think it's, they have a
1147 yes column and a no column. Yes, execute him. Save him. No. Wastebasket. That's the
1148 end of my sermon.

1149
1150 MJ: That's great. Well, I just want to thank you for, for doing this interview.

1151
1152 BB: Well I hope you, hope you can make something out of that mess.

1153
1154 MJ: No, it's been very fantastic.

1155
1156 BB: And I want to give you that picture before we go.

1157
1158 MJ: Okay.

1159
1160 BB: Yeah.