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Interview with Orlando Redekopp

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Orlando Redekopp: Anti-Apartheid Activist
Transcription of taped interview. (Approx. 82 min.)

TAPE ONE (1)

BP: Ok this is Balin Pagadala recording for the interview for Orlando Redekopp

OR: yeah

BP: ok (l) pay, pay no mind to that I can edit. I can edit

OR: yeah

BP: anything out so,

OR: yeah when I pick my nose and all that (???)

BP: oh yeah I'll edit that out (l). Excellent

OR: alright we got that

BP: alright. So I guess for this (a?) I'll give a little introduction. My name is of course Balin Pagadala, with the oral history dept and your name?

OR: Orlando Redekopp

BP: ok. And, well, well I'm going to have to go through some of this bio

OR: lets do it.

BP: the bio-data, ok.

OR: no, no

BP: sure, great, um you're year of birth

OR: 1946

BP: ok um, your place of birth?

OR: Kansas

BP: ok. The place where you were raised?

OR: I was raised in Canada. Winnipeg, Canada.

BP: ok

OR: mmhmm.

BP: uh, your father's place of birth?

OR: Uh it was in Russia. Uh Ukraine some area, forgotten. And my mother's the same.

BP: ok, very cool. Well that takes care of that. And now, on to the interview

OR: ok

BP: so, Orlando, what is your earliest memory?

OR: (pauses) Oh my. My earliest memory. Uh. (pauses) it's uh, it's, I think one of those early memories or the earliest memory is sitting with my grandmother, who was really my father's step-mother. My father's mother died. And hearing stories about coming out of Russia, and particularly in the years just before coming out the, um, kind of gruesome, or scary stories about when the revolution was in process, the Russian revolution. And my, my ancestors lived on farms and uh, it was chaos and there'd be one group after another coming through and she would tell about people coming in for the horses, or for the food, hiding in the barn and stories like that. So I, yeah I remember those uh, yeah those were early, early. I was just a little kid

BP: ok, ok, I have similar family ancestry

OR: yeah

BP: (l)

OR: And there's always question that I've, we've never quite got answered and as (B right) you get older there are some that you wonder, why don't they talk about this. For example, rape. Rape and war go together, but there was never a word of like, the violation of women in this-

BP: of course

OR: troops coming to town and what they violated women, and later on we hear that, sure it happened, but you know, things it's bet- oh, we don't need to live there, lets go on and we don't need to talk about the past. So I don't know any personal stories, but that, that's a kind of dynamic that was always in the telling even that, or something, are all there but kids don't have ways to articulate it.

BP: right, rad, (l)

OR: um, but, so I was always aware that, even though I was born in Kansas, that was one year, that we were sort of, we had migrated. We were, we weren't from Winnipeg.

BP: oh!

OR: We weren't from here.

BP: ok, right, right.

OR: you know, my parents were (?? 2.53.15), and their first language was German, not English.

BP: ok

OR: and so, I would always ease a little bit, and then because of our Christian tradition there was always a little added theology too that we're not quite citizens here. There was always a tension.

BP: right, right

OR: ok, so

BP: (l) so, why did your family move?

OR: oh I think it was because, after the rev, revolution it wasn't clear what the future- I'm out of the group of Mennonites, who lived in more or less, like colonies in Russia and the Ukraine.

BP: sure

OR: and they got to Russia from the uh, from um, not Holland, but what was in Prussia, and part of it was because they were promised that they could farm, live peaceful lives, and not have to serve in the military.

BP: ok

OR: So when the revolution came, that was all up for grabs, and everything was thrown into chaos in terms of their perspective, and there was some attempt to think ok, how are we going to live a new in the uh, in this new era, once the revolution is finished, but my parents moved in twenty-four to nineteen-twenty-four, nineteen-twenty-five. And I think it was they moved because it was so uncertain and there was an invitation from other Mennonites, in Canada. Come on over here, and it's peaceful and quiet, and so there's one more in a, you might say over generations, one more move.

BP: right, right. And now why did they move from Kansas to Winnipeg?

OR: well my father, no, my parents moved to Canada. My father was only studying in Kansas.

BP: ohhhhh.

OR: so I came along in the, couple of years of study and then it was back.

BP: oh ok

OR: so it was just a, just a short trip for studies for a couple of years (b ok). I came along and went back. So

BP: yeah. Did, did you have problems with moving back, moving to Winnipeg, or?

OR: none. The biggest problem I had was in nineteen-sixty- in the draft era, because even though I was born in the U.S. I grew up in Canada. I always thought of myself as a Canadian, therefore, I crossed into the U.S. uh, I forgot, uh in sixty-eight or something, and uh, and it was sixty-seven maybe and it was, where you born? U.S. Where you live? Canada. Have you registered? No. Why not? Because I think I'm a Canadian. So six months later I got a letter you know it's illegal. So that was the only time I ever had to kind of figure out, or start thinking about which side of the border.

BP: right, right. ok

OR: those were good times. So until then I was, in my head I was always Canadian.

BP: mhmm.

OR: and, there was no other flight plan for life.

BP: right.

OR: Canada! (l)

BP: (l) excellent

OR: yeah

BP: so, in Winnipeg as a child, where were your favorite places to go, favorite things to do?

OR: um, I loved to, I m-, as a child, the Mennonites, kind of continuing this, the model in Russia were sort of living to themselves, religious kind of peaceful and quiet but different than the sort of non-Christian world and in this case that was mixed up between people who spoke English and since my parent's first language (??) time was German, I grew up with English, but, um, it was always a kind of thing. So it was within the Mennonite

world, but I're, I, eh, I liked sports and that (????) tension because, then sometimes you have to play on Sunday and then the parents had trouble with that.

BP: mmm. Right

OR: so um, boy I, childhood memories would always be within the church my father was a minister and so my social circle was, was the church as well so I grew up with friends uh, in the church. Life was primarily my social circle.

BP: oh ok

OR: my father's minister, meaning that there were richer kids in church and I always envied them. But I grew up. (l)

BP: yeah (l) so did you guys, was your family go on vacation when you were-

OR: yeah we went on a few vacations not too many. My father's first love was the church so to be honest, for the record, sure my parents are long gone but um, (tsk) there wasn't a lot of vacation time. Usually they were tied in with church events, like they'd be a church conference. So we would go somewhere because it was tied in with the church. Contra-beyond that I don't remember, I remember going to camp as a kid, but that wasn't as a family.

BP: right

OR: that was for our ages this, you know

BP: ok and-

OR: ages three, four and five and so on. Until high school

BP: was that a religious camp that you went to

OR: yup. It was a church camp.

BP: oh ok

OR: yeah, yeah it was all, very contained, and it, it, and that wasn't uh, clear interaction so I never knew a divorced person in my life growing up.

BP: right

OR: all the way through college. I mean, at least in our church circles that was always, out there.

BP: right, right

OR: and that's a sample of the kind of lines.

BP: ok

OR: that we grew up with uh, yeah.

BP: ok, very cool. Um, what was your favorite food as a child?

OR: oh I don't know sun-, as a child I think my mother's, my mother was a fabulous cook. She made these buns, Srivok. They were good. They were good. Anything she'd bake was good. That was good though. Uh, desserts, she always made rich desserts. Um so, the, the, you know, I think my, in those days we, my mother would mix, I don't know where it came from but would mix peanut butter and honey. And nothing like coming home with these buns, warm and just slathering on this mixture of peanut butter and a glass of milk. So that, that's sort of a, a comfort

BP: the bread gets crunchy from all the honey

OR: there you go, yes, yeah, yeah, right, right, that's it. Yeah. Uh I remember that. High school it was Sunday after church dinners. You name it. Chicken and, and, and, rich sort of uh, I talked it they were you know, certain, pastry and then strawberries,

BP: oh wow

OR: and then whipped cream on top

BP: yeah (l)

OR: you name it, so

BP: oh that's sounds excellent.

OR: uh, uh food was good.

BP: yeah.

OR: yeah, my parents lived through real rough times in, as children, and therefore my mother I think always thought, there was always more than enough food growing up. The, we were never told, you just take a small portion and that's all you eat. So we could always two, three helpings, while we were told they're, you don't throw any food away so we cleaned off our plates because there's millions starving in China. So it was like a, well it wasn't a tension then, but you know, today we look at it and see, more than you need all that you can. On the other hand you don't throw it away.

BP: right, of course (l). So now did, did you have, who were your role models when you were growing up?

OR: (sighs) Well um, realistic role models I guess were church folks, I mean some how. Although you know I was as, as an adolescent, I was clearly not going to go follow my father as a minister. That was clear. So in high school, I had one passion. Basketball. That's all I lived for even though in Canada we were just, you know, we, I don-, we, play any team in the U.S. we got slaughtered, but, but that's all that I lived for even though it wasn't the mo-, hockey was the sport in Canada. I listened to hockey night in Canada, you know I listened on the radio and on T.V. and so on. So um, (tsk) my role models in high school, this is, was uh, what's his name? He retired from the Boston Celtics. Bill, boy it just slipped me now. He played against Will Chamberlain. Bill Russell.

BP: ok

OR: and that was my hero. He was my hero. I would, could wax the olive, theological on Bill Russell,

BP: (l)

OR: but anyway he was my hero.

BP: awesome.

OR: I, I, I didn't really, I had no illusions of going into sports as a, as a lifetime but if I could get a hair cut like Bill Russell, and block like Bill Russell, and play like Bill Russell-

BP: oh yeah

OR: that was my life

BP: oh yeah

OR: and Will Chamberlain, every time they beat him it was great.

BP: yeah (l)

OR: so, even though all those games were, non of them were around, there never was. Saw one on T.V. Well maybe one or two in the year, on television, you know, it was dounce. But that's, that was, to be honest that was my passion. That's all I looked for especially in high school.

BP: ok, and did you, did you play on a team?

OR: uh, I went, when I played, yeah. I played uh, I played on junior varsity my uh, I think it was my ninth grade. I was on both the junior varsity and the varsity team.

BP: oh wow

OR: and so if I could play six days a week-. I went to a church high school we (??), we're not aloud to play there, like on Saturdays for some silly reason, no playing. But we would take the hinges off the doors and sneak in so we could play.

BP: oh wow

OR: yeah, we got caught a few times, and uh, nothing serious, but I mean just- so I would-

BP: that's passion

OR: It was the passion. That's all I lived for.

BP: ok. Um, what schools did you go to?

OR: Well I went through a couple of elementary schools. We moved when I was finishing fifth grade, so I went, I forgot the name, Princess Margaret School was my first school. Now Princess Margaret was sister to Queen Elizabeth, so the school was named after Queen Elizabeth. This is Canada after all-

BP: right

OR: so we still sang the national anthem, God Save Our Gracious Queen. Uh, so that was, and I forgot the name of this one year I was in sixth grade, and then all the way through high school, uh from seventh to twelfth, I went through a Mennonite, a church high schoo-, uh school. All the way, all those years.

BP: ok

OR: it was church all the way.

BP: and did you enjoy that?

OR: oh, listen. I'm, I, those were tough years because our generation, and our class was a good one. We just resisted all- they were pretty doctrinaire and dogmatic and hard lined, and we tested everything. Now I wasn't way out testing, but I was part of a generation testing. And so we resisted a lot of the rules that were set before us, because none of them made any sense to us.

BP: right

OR: so I enjoyed the basketball. I had some good teachers. Uh, and I was bothered by some of the more extreme testing but- so I'd say my high school experience was a good experience, but it was really quite mixed. Quite a mix

BP: ok, ok.

OR: uh, yeah.

BP: and did they change, uh, to the students needs at all or was it kind of this, this, this, hard-

OR: uh, they, they did change over the years I mean I grew up in a strict sort of, uh, no dancing, no smoking, no card playing, no drinking, none of those. Those kind of rules, and uh, uh, I think, but it was at least ten years before they had school dances and stuff like that. And that, that, uh, that, I don't know broke down, loosened up, another generation comes along, the old defenders aren't there anymore.

BP: right

OR: but I grew up with the defenders who said, we are a different people, here are the lines and-

BP: mhmm

OR: and we fought them.

BP: so you had that activism in you kind of

OR: well yeah you could say that, I think, I think the seeds of my life- I often like to think I'm sophisticated and very cool and all that, but uh, I grew up in a church where, the worship language was German. And in the high school they shifted to English. But it wasn't just the lang- it was the whole cultural uh, change and it had to do with faith and culture, all tied up and so, years later I'm reading about what was going on. I said, that's me. So, those seeds about culture and religion and how they're all tied up with each other um, I grew up with it, and our church was one of those churches that was you know, people were testing the limits and frustrated with the old ways, etcetera so-

BP: right

OR: um, that uh, so where I am today, I mean I'd like to say it was all me and my brilliance but really it was set back there.

BP: ok

OR: in many ways.

BP: very cool. Interesting. Um, so let's see now, you answered a lot of these questions and-

OR: well if I get, if I go off track, you just-

BP: oh no that's fine, that's fine

OR: I mean I, I do ramble.

BP: basically these questions are there for, if you know

OR: ok

BP: to go through if you don't have anything to say or you're talking very little, but if, if you know if you keep talking that's great because we're getting out a lot of the questions that I would be asking otherwise

OR: okay, okay. Alright.

BP: that's excellent. Um, so, wh, why did you decide to go to the University of Winnipeg?

OR: 'cause it was a local school. Um, in the Mennonite world uh, in the us, a lot of uh, people go to the church colleges. Where I went we just, it was never a question we would uh, go to the local University, whatever it was. In this case it was University of Winnipeg although, yeah, it was University of Manitoba, then it had a satellite, became independent and that's where I graduated from, but it was like that's where you go, and I lived at home. It wasn't a question of, do you go away to college. No, you just live at home and as a matter of fact you live at home until you're married. That was my mother's understanding.

BP: ok

OR: and I didn't live at home until I was married, but uh, I just, that's, that's it and uh, so college uh, cost for less. My parents never charged, you know, I didn't have to pay room and board while I was going to college. Um, now it meant that I was also, my life was still more circumspect, circumscribed-

BP: ok

OR: because it was still within the church and I'm off to college and so on, but uh, yeah I did go to uh, it just wasn't a question.

BP: ok

OR: I mean, that's where you went.

BP: right

OR: I don't know I can't think of any other you know, rational. It, eh, I think other alternatives were, were uh, prohibitive price wise. Except my oldest brother, really flunked his first year. And then, he, now that was the British system so he, he, was really had to repeat his whole year. But if he went down to the U of States and he went to a college a church college in Indiana, Goshen Indiana, I guess I don't know by Notre Dam. Uh he, he could get credit for the couple of courses he passed and he wouldn't have to repeat those, but if he stayed he'd have to repeat everything.

BP: woah

OR: yeah, so we had a little bit of a dismal view of going to the U.S. for education because that's, you know if you couldn't quite make it here you went there.

BP: right

OR: unfair, but (l)

BP: (l)

OR: anyway

BP: um, now how did uh, going to the University of Winnipeg kind of shape your career goals and aspirations? Or did it?

OR: that's a good question. I'm not sure. Um, I went in my first year, not knowing what to do. I had don't well in my last year in high school. I had done well in science, and math. I, I did, I got A's there. I think I got A's of course. And, so in my first year I took chemistry, physics and uh, I forgot what it was not statistics, something else- calculus. And then I took German and I forget what else. But I don't know why I took it cuz that, my best grades in high school were there, therefore here. And in my second year I transferred down to the down town campus where I took a course on religion and literature, and that grabbed me. That grabbed me. Now I still majored because I didn't really have a clear goal, in economics, and I minored in statistics. I have yet to use, that basic learning from that

BP: yeah (l)

OR: except in a very loose way, but that's where I was. But then I thought, I want to be a, I want to get my PHD and I want to be like Carl Red. Carl Red was my teacher he taught religion and literature. So we would look at religious themes and literature and I loved it.

BP: oh ok

OR: and I wanted, I talked to him and he, and I said I want to do this. How do I do it? And he said, well just take your time, I mean he was kind of wise, and you know you don't have to be a PHD because today you feel like one. So, he said, just take your time and think about it see where it leads you. If you want to go fine, but he didn't, he didn't add to my romanticism about this future.

BP: ok

OR: he just was a kind of wise teacher who listened and he said, well you just do what you have to do and that's how I remember him

BP: in turn that probably

OR: it was good

BP: helped you

OR: it was good. Yeah, yeah. It was a little you know. You know you fall in love with some stuff at that age. You're what? Twenty? And you know, you sort of think that's my life, my life trajectory. Well it wasn't.

BP: ok

OR: so

BP: yeah

OR: so, this is maybe another question, but my last year of college, I went to some church event and they called for people. You want to spend a couple of years in Christian service. Its like a, volunteer position. You can do teaching, and that was for me, I thought. So I signed up. And I was hoping to go to Japan because they had openings there, but they said no, we're inviting you to go to Columbia, South America. And so I said yes. Uh, and uh, I didn't know a word of Spanish when I said yes. And my last year, my last month in may uh, uh, and, or, and June, I was just terrified. I was terrified, and in my own religious thinking I thought, God, can you just do something because I'm too, I could never back out but I'm too scared. Could you just block it? Well nothing happened, nothing got blocked, and my first flight, in my lifetime was from Winnipeg to Vancouver to see my parents who had just moved, spend a week there, and then I was down to- When I got off the plane in Columbia, I did not know a word of Spanish. Not a single word. Um, and, I taught in English and took Spanish classes but that was my first-

BP: pretty big uh, cultural-

OR: It's very difficult. Two years, it was two years.

BP: oh wow.

OR: that was pre-email. That was pre-telephone. It was letters and it was uh, I had a friend we used to send each other these little cassettes. We would record and tell each other stories. But eh, it was that, that's where my first time, and that of course uh, opened my world. Didn't, it frustrated me more than that, but it opened my world because the questions there were, I'm teaching at a, at a, at a upper-class school. Rich kids. And here's this mass of Columbians, who are poor, who's educational opportunities are (nothing). Why am I doing that? And I'm thinking, don't we have, out of our faith have something to say to that and it was, well everybody needs Jesus and that was my answer and that was not adequate. But I didn't have anyway to articulate it or think about it, it just was- And I was lonely and afraid and completely lost in this new culture completely. So I spent two years there pining to get home. Ah, but it op- It said ok, now what do you do now? So, so, when, when you're back to Winnipeg, I, uh, I was really lost that year. I taught part time, and I took a course in literature, English literature, because I didn't know what else to- And then I went to seminary because I said, I've got to figure this stuff out. I've got to figure this stuff out in terms of like, sort of my theology and my, world view, this stuff about all this poverty and rich, and where are the U.S. people of faith living at? So, I'm jumping ahead you maybe have these questions.

BP: No, that's-

OR: so that my life trajectory and it was that seminary that a lot of things were, were sort of clarified. Uh, not career, but a lot of things were clarified, um, and I enjoyed it but it was mostly and academic one yet. It was uh, sort of youth study, theology, and you read history and you take Greek and you take Hebrew, and I enjoyed it. I enjoyed it.

BP: ok. So how did you first learn about apartheid?

OR: well, I went back after college to Winnipeg. I did two years of prison ministry, I'll cut it short because that's-

BP: (l)

OR: This is how- And one of the prison- In my last year at seminary I met wife, and we uh, uh, one year at prison ministry and then we got married

BP: ok

OR: and she moved up to Winnipeg, and my prison ministry thing wasn't really, (tsk) it was great work, but I worked, I had a, a supervisor who was burned out. And it was like, a good job but he was so burned out that, (sigh), you know I could feel really good one day and the next day he would be so depressed because, what it was, if you don't have a good way about thinking about working with prison ministry, you better get out of it, because these people are not going anywhere,

BP: right

OR: so you're not talking about getting out and a new life. So that kind of- And my wife said, you know I think it's time we went over seas again. Now she had been over seas before we were married, so we both had been elsewhere before. And we, we were going to go through the church, and we did, and we didn't know where to go. We thought, we could go to Nigeria. That's where she had been, but no, that's not fair and- So somewhere, Botswana showed up. South African refugees. And it just seemed right. So what? I mean there wasn't- And when we arrived, we arrived in July, and I forget when Steve Biko was killed in nineteen seventy seven, but we hadn't been there but a month, and Biko was killed. And so we were just there to do a school for refugees, South African refugees. So that's why we were there. But really not too- I read a little bit about Apartheid but not too much. Um, and Biko was killed so there was a memorial service, in the capital of Botswana, Cameroon. So we attended. And that was like, an immersion, because we were in this big auditorium with three, four, hundred South Africans. We were introduced to the freedom singing, toi-toing, fiery speeches, a couple of white people. I mean there were a few more than us but, my memory is my wife and I, we were the only white people in a sea of black faces. They were angry, and wow, this just- It didn't scare us, it was just like wow, this, this is a whole new world and this is like, you've got to get engaged with this. And so that was like a, just, you got to move with this. Something is going on here. I mean, bigger than we'd ever anticipated.

BP: right okay

OR: so,

BP: that's what really-

OR: that's- It was mostly sort of, arrived with that feet on the ground, that we really, uh, kind of connected. As a child I did remember this apartheid stuff, because Canada was part of the Common-wealth, South Africa had been and there was this sort of vague things, but nothing in a- I had a girlfriend for about a couple of weeks once, uh, and it was, she had, she had moved to Canada from South Africa so there- but nothing, no, no, I wouldn't draw any dots there so much as memories and then, landing there and

BP: right

OR: A memorial service for a black nationalist Epiko. That was pretty just-

BP: yeah

OR: and it was like, we better get to work.

BP: yeah?

OR: I mean, not just doing our job, we ran a school or had to set up a school but we better get to work to understand what we're in and, so we read and read and read and got the history and it (???) and so on.

BP: so how did you start- You were working at the school, how did you start working with the apartheid movement then?

OR: well, the school, there was no school.

BP: ok

OR: We're supposed to do something. Because all these South African refugees are there. Refugees are there. Many of them were in somewhere in high school, but it was the Bantu education so they weren't- So we thought, what are we going to do? So we set up a correspondence school. So, and my wife would um, I think, if I could tell the story while we were there, my wife was, is a teacher. Was a teacher, and, so she did the administration. I kind of did the PR work around town. We rented a couple of buildings, uh there's- But that was a time when money was flowing into an, into any of, from all over the world. We're a counsel of churches, other agencies, how much money you need? The U.N. gave us the money. First year we had, I don't know, eleven thousand. Half way through the year they said, here's another nine thousand. So there was more money than we could handle. So we bought books, and, and, then we started this course once, course- Then we realized that there were a lot of adult South Africans around. Some of whom had been teachers. And so we started develop- and then we said, we also need a board, to guide us, because we don't really know what we're doing.

BP: right

OR: so, it was in these interactions that the anti-apartheid stuff got into us. Uh, particularly (sighs), I would call it my religious conversion, but it was particularly the, the, the skin, the color of the skin opening up issues deep and deeper. Um, we had some friends visit us, um, they had a son, these friends had a son in Swazi-land. Because of him, then they came to visit us and they were just tourists. So they were with us and my wife was interviewing like you and I are talking, and she was interviewing this South African student. And I was sitting, and this friend was sitting besides this South African student and I was sitting there and this, you know, this uh, visitor, he sees a photo op. A photo. So he just reaches down into his- And this students is intently looking at my wife. And he reaches in and takes it- Slowly pulls out the camera and I just, I'm sitting there and I see it happening and it's like, this- I've got to stop it, but I couldn't stop it. And he pulls out his camera and he leans back and this student is so intense he doesn't see anything and he just clicks. And he- Student just hears the click, and he just snaps. And I though, we might as well go home, because, we're clearly spies. That's what this is about. So I said to my friend, our friend, I said, you've got to be- Those were the days of film you (l) - You've got to pull it out and, and destroy it in front of him, or, or we're finished. We spend half an hour in a conversation and finally the student said it's okay you don't need to worry about it. I mean he- You don't have to do that. But it was that

sense of- There isn't a single move here that doesn't effect how people relate to each other, and how deeply anti-aparth- Because we're only twelve miles from South African border, and there were agents that could be anywhere around. We could be agents, just cuz- And it was the issue, just because we got white skin, just because we mean well, that wasn't enough. There had to be a way of earning kind of, trust. And that was early on in that experience and that was, I would say, one of the root experiences of anti-apart- To be anti-apartheid uh, there's more here than a couple of years. So when our three years were up, we were at like a three year term, we, we really want to stay. But there was lots of other whites that wanted to stay. It was kind of a romantic view of anti- you know, Because we could go to South Africa and get around easy because we're white.

BP: of course

OR: and, so, we asked some people, what could we do if we stayed? And we kind of, we asked the wrong people. We asked the political people who said no, you really ought to go home and deal with the, with your end of the problem. So that was our message. You know, you really ought not to stay. You ought to go home, and deal with the dynamics that support apartheid from your end. That stuck, and we're still here. So that was the driving force to get involved in the anti-apartheid movement. That was the driving- You need to go home, and work at, at, at, the, the foundations that support apartheid. Business, economics, so now we're into- that opens up, okay divestment, and all those other issues that came later. Uh, but, it's a, that's what- And the church's with their pension funds, and all this stuff, it just said, that's where you got to go.

BP: wow. You're probably thinking that it's, the heart of the problem is hear lets stay and fix it here

OR: well

BP: when

OR: that's why I said this was a religious conversion. Because I realized that no matter how good I feel, how righteous I feel I am, and how well meaning I am, there are deeper issues here, and what, what South Africa did was it focused like a magnifying glass. Economics, race, um, violence, and I come out of a peace tradition. All this stuff is just like, focused here. You can just see it all, really close up in your face. Um, and so um, that was like, I, I, I'm a nice guy I think I am, but uh-uh, there's more work to be done. So going home, was the challenge. The challenge to deal with the stuff, and I don't think my wife and I have ever forgotten that. Go home, and do the work there.

BP: right

OR: It would have been great to stay. And people did stay and god bless them and all that stuff, but that was not the word we got. And so, uh, my first real act as an anti-apartheid activist uh, not real act but the one I remembered was when the Harold Washington days. We had a s- Uh, uh I don't know how I got connected with this group but there of- We

used to demonstrate in front of the, uh, consulate. But then I, then somebody approached me and said there's a bunch, a number of people who are going to be arrested at the sit in at the consulate. Do you want to join? I said yes I do. So we joined and we sat in and we were arrested, put in jail overnight. Um, and now, why, I think that was when my daughter was just a little- We only have one child, just a young girl and she went home crying that night, because she had heard the bible story about uh, Paul got thrown in jail and they whipped him. And so she thought that daddy was going to- (l)

BP: oh. (l)

OR: anyway but we- So out of that, and when Harold Washington, he kind of sent the message to the judges. To the judge, or system. Let this go to trial in the kind of, uh, the Nuremberg argument. We, we had to do, break a small wall to protest a bigger evil. So that went to court, and uh, I was the only one in- There were about- I'm trying to remember how many of us there were, actually put on trial. It was, it, I mean, we, sitting.

BP: right

OR: you know, there was no major penalty, but it was a public event. It was a great public, a Dennis Brutus, who was an exiled uh, poet, who taught here at Northwestern. He spoke in our- So we got in expert witnesses and all that. And without feeling, I mean I do feel like that was one of my times when I could say I did this, because when we were in South Africa they told us go home, and do this kind of stuff that is publicized and agitate against those foundations that support apartheid. And I felt like, I had a really good argument. And I was genuine, it came right from here and out of my own experience, so we were acquitted.

BP: right, okay

OR: uh, justifiable, I mean, it was a minor thing

BP: right

OR: but the argument convinced the jury. We had a jury trial too.

BP: right. Wow.

OR: So, that was great.

BP: now was that the, was that the same time when Prexy was there and Lisa Brach too? Or no?

OR: you know I, I can't- I, we first met Prexy in, when we were in Botswana, and he um, came through working for the program to combat racism with the world consulate church. We had a loose connection, we, he came over to our place we met, and so on.

And then when we came back he was still working with them, so I don't think it was then yet.

BP: okay

OR: it was after that, that we started the SAR. It was South African Rugby tour. At least, I think that's where I connected with Lisa first because we had these protests whenever they came with a rugby tours, and that's where the Lisa one was, and when Prexy moved back I don't remember which one it was, but he was obviously, picked up uh, where he left off as it were, because he's from Chicago.

BP: okay

OR: And so I don't remember the exact time we hooked up again, but we hooked up when he moved back to Chicago. I think he was still working with the program, uh, to combat racism for the first couple years that we were in Chicago.

BP: okay

OR: So

BP: So, now, who were some of the, some of the influential activists to you? (???) like activists who have really influenced your path?

OR: well, oh boy, (NAME 1, 36,50,20). Now BD is a uh, now I read about him and learned about him in South Africa. I mean in Botswana and- Now we spent a little time in South Africa too, which was through the little study about forced removal. Simply, black people are living in the wrong spot because it doesn't fit the map, so they're moving.

BP: right

OR: uh, but during that, those three years, I, we read a lot about, and heard about, uh, didn't meet Byers Anade. Byers Anade was born in the womb of the apartheid movement. He came out of the Dutch Reform Church, he was a minister, His father was a founder of the Bruder Band, which was the underground brotherhood that basically put their people in place of the power politically, and some where, he had this conversion experience, where he realized this things wrong. He had- I don't know if it was partly related to going to Europe and 've- And it just, and so he became a, he became an- For me he was one of the first kind of models. People who were born in the womb of the oppressive machine.

BP: right

OR: and it had religious justification. And believed it. Some how that broke open, and he became a leader for all of South Africa. They banned him. That means they shut him down for five years at a time, he was virtually under house arrest, he could never be with

more than two people at one time, so he and his wife could not have a visitor because that would be more than two people.

BP: right

OR: they had the secret police watching them all the time. Um, he was basically kicked out of his own church, so he joined the black, Dutch Reform Church, which, in apartheid era were separate bodies. Things like that. He uh, his org- he started a Christian institute which was shut down and uh, that was a model for me. There was somebody and he was tried on refusing to cooperate with some um, some, some, some, uh, investigation and he just said, listen the gospel says you don't hide anything. I refuse to cooperate because you're hiding what you're really about. And he never went to jail, but- And so he was, he was uh, he was um, he was one of the first ones. It was because I think I felt some connection as somebody caught up in the middle of the oppressive system. Advantaged, like me, myself as a white person, male, all that stuff.

BP: right

OR: I just felt like wow, this is the- you know, this happens once in a lifetime where you see and so to, observe them. There were other people. Some were black. Any of the black activists um, Frank Giccani, was very important. Um, uh, Tutu was to some extent but he was a little bit, little bit smooth at times. He um. Bika was new to me so I didn't- But he was also a black nationalist. I didn't feel he was quite the model, even though I admired him. And then, there were later on, there were some really strong South Africans in the city when we were doing the anti-apartheid work that really (???). Like Molefit Zeli, who is today, the South African Ambassador, to uh, I think the democratic republic of Congo.

BP: ok

OR: Donna Seed, and a colleague of his, Robin Peters, Peterson. These were two PHDs, THDs or theology students here, but they were they, they were tremendously helpful in our anti-apartheid work, because they can analyze stuff. Why the South African government is doing what. What they, what they see is happening. And so they were tremendous advisors to the anti apartheid movement here in Chicago. Really good.

BP: really? Ok. So I think we're going to have to change up the tape real quick.

OR: whatever

BP: uh, if you want to take a little break I have some peanuts, water and orange juice (l)

OR: you know,

(END RECORDING OF FIRST (1st) TAPE. WE CONTINUE TO TALK ABOUT HOW HE DOESN'T WANT TO DRINK OUT OF PLASTIC BECAUSE IT IS BAD FOR THE ENVIRONMENT, I AGREE.)

TAPE TWO (2) BEGIN

BP: very excellent. Um I think, so yeah, y, you were talking about- Now Chicago, your activism in Chicago. How did that begin? How did uh, you know.

OR: well I think that uh, I don't remember the first um, the first demonstration, but we would have been part of any that we knew of, and that demonstration at the consulate we're obviously were connected with a few people, so that I could be invited in to the sit-in. uh, then it, then came the rugby tours and my wife and I were very active, and somewhere there (tsk) now so from nine- We, eighty one. Nineteen eighty one to about eighty six, uh we, our activism grew, but towards the end of that, toward eighty five, eighty six, my wife was teaching at an alternative high school, and after about six years she left that. She was teaching English, and she went full time into organizing anti-apartheid work. So because of her work, she was in all of the committees on divestment, or the rugby tour, and um, we were kind of closely connected with it. Uh, so, uh we had a down state tour once on divestment and I remember going, I, I was paired with a uh, a woman who uh, bish- uh not bishop um, Albert Latooli who was the first South African to win a peace prize. Uh he, uh his daughter, she was already in exile in Atlanta, and so she and I were paired when we went all over the state. She and I went uh, I forgot where we went but we went for a couple of days downstate to argue for divestment uh, from um, any institutions. And the rugby tour, my, I'm not so great in memory on some of the details here. Then my, the other thing my wife did was in her anti-apartheid. Now this was about fifteen years because she did it through one organization, and then she moved to the Lutheran, had a Para-church organization called South African Network, where she worked very strongly for another bunch of years, and it was really the same work. And, but she al- organized um, I'm a pastor now, and uh, I'm a pastor in a mixed church but in an African American community in the west side.

BP: okay

OR: and partly because of that, and partly because, you know, she thought, you know how do we link up Martin Luther King and South Africa? So every Martin Luther King birthday, January fifteenth, she organized for about seven, eight years, and you know that's cold weather. Sing out against apartheid. So we would invite as many people as we could. We had, we often would bring a little kid's choir, so we would have six, eight, ten little kids, one of our adults would play the, you know I mean it's, it's pretty cold but playing guitar and singing some sort of civil rights song, and a bunch of others so it was all day it was about four, five hours and people would come and go. So that was a, annual thing for a number of years, um, that was, and that connected us and that connected a lot of us to each other in different ways. So the divestment, um, and the pinch fund- there was a season of the SIDSA, forget the, the history order there. The sing out, um, any time there was a rally ah, I mean a visiting speaker from South Africa, uh, this Molefitt Zeli and Robin Peterson they helped us a lot in organizing uh, just some sort of up-to-date seminar stuff like that. So more than it, and then, and then our church with- I grew up as a Mennonite I'm not a pastor in that denomination now but they had, because of there work

in Southern Africa, they had, they started a program called Servant Hood Sabbatical, which was church folks, caught up in the middle of the apartheid struggle. It was so intense that they funded a program where they could come to U.S. or Canada for six weeks, to kind of get an R and R, just to relax. So we had one couple with us for six weeks, uh, and we put them on a little local speaking tour, although, the, the point of that was not to have them speak too much because they're supposed to relax. But you know, we always fudged a little.

BP: (l)

OR: did what we could. And we hosted a couple of others, um, that is they were with us for a few days and then they'd go off for six weeks somewhere. They'd come through Chicago, it was a good city. Fly through. Things like that. So we connected, and got to know some new anti, sort of anti-apartheid South Africans who were coming here for a break. And hosted them, we took a couple of the down to uh, to City Hall to see events. We had a Church coalition. Had a big protest. They came there for that. And then we, would include the anti-apartheid component, things like that. And uh, so we, we kind of developed a larger network. Not just Marge and I but through this, with South Africans. Uh, I think that part of hosting the, the people coming through, or connecting with and when they came through was always one that re-energized us, because here we were, doing our thing, but um, we needed that sort of South African presence coming through every now and then. So there'd theology students, or there'd be an ac- this, we also hold a, uh, hosted um, I think his name was Moses Miyakeesle. He was from the, uh, uh, boy, not Soweto. I forgot the name. Alexander township which is the township of (???) Johannesburg. And they had a civic comity, and so he came here for a couple of weeks, and so we, uh, I, so somebody hosted him and he spoke at a number of places. So it was these South Africans coming through and as they talked about the kinds of ways in which they were working, um, knowing always that even when they spoke in public forms, there was always some South African Spy in that room, so that we had to be careful about, they had us be careful but um. Those are the, just the ways in which, uh, oh there's another component. This was really important. This was for us, as church people, because there was an organization called uh, the End Conscription Campaign. ECC. You see, in the South Africa, all white men were required to report for military- military duty for two years, uh, starting at eight-teen or so. That was required. All white men. And, we got to know a couple of people who decided, this was what made up the bulk, the, the, the, the core. The sort of, the certainly the officer core if not more, of the South African Army. This is the military that protects apartheid. So there were a couple of them that started, see it was against the law to council conscientious objection. It was against the law. If you did that, you would be thrown in jail. So one of them, Richard Steel never, he, we met him. He was a Baptist in South Africa. But he had got in touch with this, peace tradition out of our churches, and he realized he couldn't serve in the military. So he was going to become a conscientious obj- And would, he refused to register. And so he, and that campaign become another activity. They, they arrested him. They charged him and tried and sent him to a year in prison. Now, they sentenced him as a military prisoner. So when he got to prison, they gave him his military clothes. They're prison, military clothes, but he said, I'm sorry, I don't wear those. I'm not part of the military.

He refused to even, so there he was in shorts in the winter. Well then he was accused of disobeying a military order and thrown into solitary confinement. So he took there for a week or two, I don't w-, then he'd come out they'd say, here. No I don't do it, so back in. So they played with his mind. Now luckily he, he had prepared himself for, like, solitude and all these things. And his cousin, they were the two. That movement grew, and that was one we tried to publish, uh publicize here. That is, there were white, young, young white men who refused, and so the campaign was, not, was always, was always on that line about not breaking the law, but they counseled against , let's end the constriction uh, program. That wasn't deemed illegal.

BP: right

OR: so you had a growing number of people who refused to serve, and it was publicized, and of course, that was one of the scariest things for the South African Government, because the white man were the ones who would support this with the guns.

BP: right

OR: and if they wouldn't, what, what could you? So that grew, and that, there was one time where they had one hundred and fifty three people, refused to serve. Hundred and fifty three. Publicly. It was in the papers. And then of course they tried to shut down the papers but that kind of dynamic, you can see. So we um, we did everything we could to kind of publicize, especially for church folks, who should have some sort of theological empathy for this position. They're taking it out of their faith, that they would refuse to participate in defending apartheid. And they were conscientious objectors, at least in this case. Maybe not, you know, universal. There might be other cases but not in defending and supporting apartheid. So there was a Richard, uh Steel. Peter Molek's cousin, and after that it really grew and became a huge campaign, and of course, it was constantly under attack by the government. And, many of the were jailed. Richard went in-cognito for a couple of weeks when they were looking for him and other people. Stuff like that. But we, that was another component you might say, here that we would publicize, especially to the church.

BP: and what, what was your role in that?

OR: I was just a pastor in a little church on the west side supporting anti- I'm not a good organizer. My wife was the organizer.

BP: ok

OR: so she would do the organizing and I would do bit pieces. I, I was, I'm a, I'm a two-bit player on the organizing piece okay?

BP: (l)

OR: I know that. But um, uh, we would just be part of, and our little church was, I was surprised how supportive were, they never said too much over these years and they never resisted it. Never. But they never were really vocal, but they always supported like, I went to South Africa, well I sort of snuck in for about a month in eighty-three, and about eighty-seven went again, and in nineteen-ninety was there for the elections. I mean uh, not ninety. I was there for sabbatical. Ninety-four I was there for elections, and they always let me go for a month. Sabbatical was three months. Lectures was five weeks. Uh, but the elections, I realized how, I mean the church was just, just sort of goal man, goal. We're with you because you know, Mandela, it showed up first when Mandela was released. Nineteen-ninety. That, then I, then they, they cheered like we cheered.

BP: right

OR: and then I went for elections and they said, go, we bless you, go, and be a monitor, so I was one of the religious monitors. You know there were legal monitors labor u-Union monitors, everybody's, everybody was there.

BP: right

OR: for the elections. Uh,

BP: ok

OR: but I was in the, we had religious component. I was under that one. Uh, so that was the last, and on the day of elections my wife and a bunch of others had a big, sort of, pray in at the consulate. Like this is the day of elections. And so it was like, support the elections, and it was a great day. So

BP: that sounds awesome. Um, so

OR: I think I got off track there, but anyway.

BP: no I mean it's, it's all it's, it's, gold what you there. That's awesome. Um, how uh, how did you, how did your family support your activism?

OR: well my wife and daughter were, are, were very supportive. My w-, my daughter, I was twenty-one when I first got on an airplane. By the time my daughter hit twenty-one, she had been to, I think to Southern Africa maybe just once. Or twice. She's been there three times now.

BP: ok

OR: so, whatever we did, she didn't wanted to go on this uh, it wasn't really (???) on this sabbatical in nineteen-ninety. She would have been about, nineteen-ninety, she was born in eighty, so she would have been ten, you know. So she wanted to buy uh, sort of uh, not

quite seventeen, whatever the girls read just below seventeen. That kind of magazine she took it on the plane like

BP: sure

OR: but you know, um, she has be- (l), she went on a trip two years ago with Prexy to Southern Africa.

BP: ok

OR: and then she went on another one once. And the sabbatical. She's been to Southern Africa three times. Uh, she has embraced this. Now she's not um, uh, yeah she's embraced it, and my wife has embra- Ooh she embraced it too. She, so, it was, it became that it was more than anti-apartheid for us. It became um, trying to figure out how we can live good lives, in opposition to sort of, American Imperialism. So in the Ronald Regan era, the uh, she and I both- my daughter was this high when she and my wife stickered some stores with uh, for the E.R.A. to pass the equal rights amendment, and so

BP: (l)

OR: and I think I've got pictures. (l) And you know, so she was there from the beginning

BP: oh, ok. Excellent.

OR: and my wife uh, was arrested once for something on Central America, and uh, and my wife, and the judge asked her, well do you, do you do a lot of this demonstration, and my wife said, I hope my whole life is a demonstration.

BP: (l)

OR: so, it's, it's been a, yeah we're all, we're all in it together.

BP: ok, um, and now what, what, what conflicts, what hard, what, was hard about being activist? What conflicts did you run into?

OR: uh, I felt uh, one was um, I thought a lot of church people were pretty myopic. They didn't see very far beyond their own eyes. That was one thing. So when we did uh, divestment we went after, for example, are own church, ah, ah, our own denomination's pension funds. Is there anything in there that invests in companies in South Africa? And the managers here were pretty resistant. We have a fiduciary responsibility to get the highest return. And I thought, give me a break. So we fought that one. So that was a disappointment that church folks couldn't quite get it. Uh, and that raised larger issues because that probably means that your relationship with people of color in this country isn't very good either. I mean, it's not like a neat little category where you don't care about one little issue and otherwise. So that, I think that church participation, often at these meetings, these planning meanings, I'm not an organizer but I went to a lot of them.

I was the only pastor. I was the only pas- Often. Now some of the big churches, I was, I was disappointed in a lot of the big churches. I caught one of them, this isn't to names, but I, some of them either did their own thing, and sort of like, we're almost too big to bother with you little people. So they didn't get involved in the kind of. For me it was like the religious political thing was almost, you know, you just found your way in it.

BP: right

OR: uh, but um, some of them, and so, there was one church that keep on inviting even when this big political South African person was already kind of, got a little, kooky. They still invited this person over to speak and it was like hold it, hold it, hold it. Pay attention to time's change. And others just did their own thing, so it wasn't that they did bad things, but I felt like, that churches could have been more involved.

BP: ok

OR: and they were involved, but it was usually the high leadership and sometimes national leadership but you know, right at the congregational level. More of that, there could have been more.

BP: right

OR: uh, I wouldn't say extremely frustrating but I was a little disappointed.

BP: yeah. So, and now, how did, did you work at the First Church of the Brethren back then, when you were an, when you were active?

OR: uh, I, the whole time.

BP: the whole time, okay.

OR: when we came to Chicago, after our Southern Africa experience I was a pastor at a little Mennonite church, it took them three months to fire me. The I did little interim work for another couple of months, and then I started at the First Church of the Brethren in nineteen-eighty-two, in February. I've been there this whole time.

BP: ok

OR: so all this stuff I'm talking about in Chicago, was while I was there.

BP: oh ok. And how did they take on the apartheid iss- apartheid issue? Or did they?

OR: they never challenged me. I don't know um, I do remember one, one of the fir- When I got arrested that first time there was one member I overheard this, why would you do that? Why would you get arrested? They sort of like, no, no connection.

BP: right

OR: um, but I think the African American members, maybe they weren't that active politically themselves, but in their spirit they were supportive. I never ever felt that I was, that I had to fight for this, and that any, uh, uh, nobody was defensive on it like, are you sure you should be doing this? I just did it, and tried to link it in with local struggles etcetera, and uh, be a good pastor at the same time. Not abandon them

BP: right

OR: for this and never be around. So I just tried to integrate it and I don't know how I did, but I didn't feel like there was any strong resistance to it.

BP: that's good. Okay. Um, you got a lot of these questions without even me having to ask (l). That's awesome. Um, so, now how did the Chicago community treat your group? Or you know, just you and you know, who you were working with.

OR: well, I, I think it was um, in later years, while in the mid eighties I was involved as well in a coalition of churches on the west side, and there was a little bit of similarity between that and the p- anti-apartheid work. Um, it was, it was hard. They just couldn't see how this could, how, how apartheid could end. They just didn't have handles for it. Sort of like, aren't you wasting your time? I just, and, and so I, I remember once we had um, a couple of South African's here uh, one was a real black nationalist, and the other was an Indian, uh, background um, and they were both in the same page, generally, but not, one wasn't, the Indian guy wasn't nationalist. And they were just arguing about how this um, how this uh, how the struggle was to be lead. And, the Indian guy was saying, well you need these sort of, elites to lead it. Political leaders uh, I mean Mandela but I think more others, but more than middle class people. The people who got sort of, education, and that's what he was arguing, and this Black Nationalist he said, you know, the one thing about the middle class, they're not reliable. I've never forgotten that.

BP: (l)

OR: because they have too much divested interest in the status quo.

BP: true, so

OR: so that, and so I forgot why that story came to mind because that wasn't really your question, but

BP: that's interesting though

OR: uh, but it was, it's like these, but I think, I think its, people had a hard time seeing, I think that what I would say like is if you and I are talking and it would, lets say you're the speaker for tonight, from South Africa. We have ten people in the room, and they just can't see change. And I would say to them, but look. The kind of, the symbolic

representation of hope is the person right in front of you. The speaker. So if some how you can, recognize there are people like you or more like you, who are struggling against, that is the place you've got to put your hope. Don't look at a sort of uh, uh macro picture, uh with numbers and statistics, because there are some things going on behind the scenes that we'll find out later. I mean, now I'm speaking with hindsight now, but we'll find out later, so you kind of have to have a deep sort of inner kind of sense that this is the right thing, and you're not you know, there'll be set backs but it doesn't mean it's not the right thing.

BP: right

OR: uh, you don't go with it's the right thing because you succeed but it's the right thing.

BP: right

OR: um, and so uh, can I tell you a little story that we learned later but it just fit how I felt.

BP: certainly

OR: and Alice, boy I forgot his name. Alister Sparks. He's this white editor. Kind of a liberal guy. He wrote uh, uh, a journalist, and he wrote about, later after Mandela was released with the negotiations that led to his release, and subsequent events. And he said that Mandela had been on um, boy on the island forgot the name of the Island where, Robin Island. And then he was moved to Cape Town, but in prison. And while I was in prison um, there were secret negotiations started by the prime minister, and they were trying to see where they could get Mandela. Where he would agree on some stuff. And uh, boy I think it was uh, oh boy can't remember his name. Wasn't Declara, but anyway the prime minister said that um, ber, ber, Mandela should be brought to his residence and they were going to talk about some issues. And the prime minister was um, really meticulously dressed and so they get Mandela a brand new suite to go and visit. So they'd give him a nice suite and everything, put him in the car, and they drive in, enter the residence underground, and you take an elevator up. And when they got underground, parked the car, Mandela had been in prison for, now it was what? Twenty-six years instead of when he was just soon to be released. And they got out and they were going to go to the elevator, the guy that was him was like the foreign minister, Pit Bota I think, that's who it was. Bota, before Declara. Bota. Uh, he noticed that Mandela's shoe laces were untied. Mandela, you know on the Island when you're a prisoner you, so here in the basement, Pik Bota, foreign minister, gets on his knees before Mandela and ties his shoe laces, then they go up and talk. Now, if that isn't a symbol of who's bowing before whom. The, the captive, the, the, the captor bowing before the captive. Before the thing actually becomes a reality.

BP: right

OR: that's the stuff we didn't see going on behind. The weakness of the apartheid state as world wide pressure, but we couldn't see it all, but it's happening and so if you've got this deep inner conviction that this is the right thing, you don't always see the signals but there's more than you can see.

BP: right

OR: later on you realize, that eve- (l), even the apartheid regime bowed before Mandela

BP: (l)

OR: while he was still prisoner.

BP: (l) yeah. Wow.

OR: I mean it's just like, you know, if you can hold those with time, you hold those stories as representatives of doing the right thing, but you got to have a kind of a deep sense of integrity, that this is the right thing. Then you, then you get kind of a that long term you know, that commitment. That long term, you can stick with the course you don't-

BP: right

OR: you don't tire out or quite.

BP: right

OR: um, and that was sort of, just, that was it I just, just felt right and it had to be.

BP: right

OR: and, and, and the South African's who said it were the ones who represented for me, the reality that this is the right thing. I mean, those like, even Tutu and them and they just, it just was the right thing.

BP: yeah

OR: and we didn't know when it would, you know, sort of unfold and dismantle and so on.

BP: right. You feel you're working towards something and it feels good with you.

OR: yeah

BP: yeah

OR: and then you look back and say, man those were good days.

BP: yeah

OR: in spite of all the frustrations. I mean you know, when you would get there on the picket line and this and that and so on it was

BP: right

OR: uh, it's harder when you have arrived. And the first, I went to South Africa when, when was it? Ninety? Would have been ninety-four? Yeah ninety-four. I remember talking with some South Africans. They were, especially the church folks um, they were, all of them were a little concerned. What's next? Like we fought, and now the door's open. You're, you know for thirty years you've been banging on the door, now you have to develop some new techniques. No longer are you banging at the door now you're sitting at the table.

BP: right

OR: and that was like, what do we do? And so I think the Anti-Apartmeid Movement, not to criticize it because I'm part of it, we, I don't know, I mean, it's over. But there's still the legacy of apartheid sort of the structure is still there. So we, I think to this day I haven't quite figured out how to be supportive. People like Prexy still are doing it. I mean he's got something inside of him that just, just keeps on going.

BP: yeah

OR: and, and others. I think Lisa in her way has that too. Um, but it's, it's, it just, it's a new reality and so I think that this, the Anti-Apartheid Movement didn't fall apart, I think it just sort of, sat there, didn't know what to do and then people moved on with their lives and uh. But uh, We still get together you know. We were, we were here not so long ago for some event, I forgot what it was. Oh, Miriam Mikeeble. When she died,

BP: ok

OR: there was a big event here, and Jeremiah Wright the former pastor of Trinity spoke and there was a bunch of South Africans. I had a great time.

BP: yeah, (l)

OR: it was organized by Lisa. I mean, Lisa and other colleagues here at the school.

BP: yeah. Ok, um, so, lets see how much time we have. Ok, we have a little bit of time left, good, good. Um, what liberation movements did you support in South Africa?

OR: well we have supported uh, this was a good, it's a good question because we, coming out of the, we didn't, we don't support armed struggle. We support struggle,

BP: okay

OR: so that, that was a tricky one. When we were in Botswana we got to know ah, some, Zimbabweans who were part of um, um, oh forgot what it's called. It's was uh, Robin Mugave's party at that time. Zanu? Zapu. Zanu. So, in nineteen-eighty um, so if seventy-seven, seventy-eight we got to know these Zimbabweans, and they were part of the armed struggle. I mean they, he was, the man was teaching in uh, in Botswana. He was in exile, but they were part of, of the Zapu (???) front and supporting them. And so it was always a question like how do, how much are we supporting you to overthrow Ian Smith and that one, and then South Africa the same. So we felt that, for us the issue was, what is the moral equivalent of the armed struggle, in a peaceful way? So we, so that's where the divestment, all of those issues of rugby tours to put them down, public harassment if you will. Um all of those factors um, church struggles um, those were all legitimate because they were non-violent.

BP: right

OR: so we felt, we couldn't support the ANC by and large. The ANC, you know wasn't, wasn't quite the liberation uh, freedom movement, freedom fighters uh although many of them there were. They had camps and everything. I'm not naïve. I mean I know they had- And they did some terrible things in Angola within their camps. But uh, we supported the political struggle, the freedom struggle. We wouldn't necessarily finance the armed struggle.

BP: right

OR: so, at, at this end, in this country we can support divestment, sanctions, all those things, because they're all non-violent. There all put pressure on them without harming life.

BP: sure

OR: uh, that's why we were so glad to support the End Conscription Campaign. Here people refuse to take up the gun and defend the system. Those things, but um, it wasn't hard to support the ANC in that kind of mold. Uh, and even in the Zimbabwean struggle to support them, in that political one. I mean apartheid, Ian Smith's regime, they were just morally and politically wrong. Eh, we just felt like we could, we can work in certain spheres. But you know if, if soldiers risked their lives in the struggle to overthrow apartheid, we ought to be doing something parallel to that, if, if we're not going to take up arms. As risky as we might, I mean, whatever that would be. So there, and that's where going back to Byers Anada I mean here's a guy who committed himself. Everything but the gun. Although I talked to Prexy now he says, you know Prexy, Prexy

was uh, he was a member of the ANC all along. You know, I don't know whether he was or not.

BP: well he still had that, that non-violence in him so.

OR: yeah he did, and, but uh, but as a political party it wasn't hard to support them and I could see Byers Anade, and that supporting them politically but, you couldn't do it openly until after nineteen-ninety.

BP: right, okay

OR: because it was, it was a band organization. But he was an underground member, that's okay with me.

BP: did you ever feel like you were at risk in South Africa?

OR: no I don't think so. Uh, it was partly skin. We were careful. Um, and when, when I, when we were in Botswana I went to the South, went into South Africa a number of times. And I would go in, the ostensible reason was to buy books because they had a better purchase of books there for our scho- students. Um, correspondence course and that stuff. But I always stopped at the counsel of churches and got to know them. And we, and I would talk, I would, and then I would say that I know somebody and they want to know how this person is doing because know them. But we would walk out in the hall, and this isn't danger, but uh, uh, careful uh, we don't just speak as if there's no bugs in the room.

BP: spies

OR: yeah

BP: yeah, yeah. Okay

OR: so we would go to the hall or outside and talk a little bit and I would say, what, this person is fine. I'm not carrying any messages because that, I, I don't think we were close enough in that kind of way uh, to the struggle. We were, we never tried to get in, you know, it, it was, it was romantic in part but we didn't feel like we had to be involved at that level. That was South Africans. But we could carry messages, yeah, they're okay. You can tell them other that your son is okay. Stuff like that. Um, and uh, but they couldn't communicate because if they ever found out they'd beat the mother up or something. It was really horrible days, um.

BP: yeah

OR: So no I don't think so. We were stopped a couple of times. I drove, I drove in and a couple of times, you could, I, it was mostly dirt road, you come around a corner and suddenly there are these, out of the blue, to me, are these three South African police,

armed, and these Jeeps, and they're all armed and stop you, and they look for band literature and all that. I had some sometimes, but they never found it. Nothing serious but you know,

BP: right

OR: um, I think I came back, we left in mid eighty, and then I came back a couple of years later and I went to Botswana and I met an, a black nationalist who, who was exiled and he had never been part of our, our, our school, either as, but he, I talked to him a lot and I think, I, I just, this whole thing about, are you really a front for somebody or are, how do we know you're not. Uh, we just respected that people could think that so we didn't push. No really trust me (???). Harry Nemukuru, and we remember him sitting having coffee with him and he was, He s-, I said, what's happened to our center? I mean we had, we left it was still going when we left. He said oh, you did a great job. So, it had moved because of the changed political situation, and been moved out of the city, north, for Zimbabwe and Amibian refuges. So that was up there, but he said no, you did a great job, you. Still going you did the right thing. So those kind of conformations were always good to know that you kind of did your best, didn't know everything, or didn't want to know everything, because we you know, so um, I don't know how I got on that track.

BP: (l) um, well we have a couple minutes left I guess I'll rather get to the later questions. Uh-

OR: yeah

BP: so, how did you feel when apartheid ended?

OR: oh great. I, in Chicago when, when Mandela was released uh, I remember um, the, Molefit Zeli and a few of the other South Africans were here. (???) Molefi was here about five, six years studying, you know, so, and they had been our uh, is that the word? Interlocutor? Anyway they would you know, they were our, help us make sense of what our actions should be because you're South Africans. They weren't very clear. And so, I remember going over to his place for the party. It was just fabulous.

BP: yeah

OR: just dancing and, and then they had this song, I think uh, what's his name? The famous uh, uh, boy it'll just come to me I blanked out. Um, uh, trumpeter. But anyway he was exiled. South Africa. He had this song, uh, about Mandela. Come back. And they were playing it and it was just eerie. It was beautiful. And it was like, when are you coming back? And now he'd been released, and they were playing this song all night. And just to dance, oh it was a great time.

BP: wow

OR: so, that was probably the highlight. The other thing was to go for elections, and I had a good friend there, who uh, he had, he and his wife had been with us six weeks earlier in that sabbatical program. (cough) And I tried to be a monitor in his region, but they wouldn't let us, because they said, you can't know each other, and they said no. So, when the election time was over I went to, I went to visit him for a week, because he was just in another part of the country. I spent a week with him and his wife and kids, and it was just, it was wonderful, because I said to him, Albert, now he was one of these mixed race backgrounds, Albert. Albert and Rosemary. Whittles. I said Albert, it's just so good to be here with you because one, it's a, it's a, it's a miracle you're still alive, because he lead protests and he was at the front, and the government started shooting, and you know, once that happened, and I think twenty-nine people were killed, and we said, Albert was in that march, so we better call and find out if he's okay. So the next day we called, and we talked to him. He said, man I'm glad to hear your voice. Oh, he said those bullets were flying. So, those kinds of things were really, really uh, kind of a, the heart of it.

BP: yeah

OR: To talk to people who have been through this struggle, to monitor, to see people coming to vote. That was

BP: yeah

OR: you know, that was a highlight uh, one of the great highlights. That and the party when Mandela was released. I would say those two were the, really the quintessential experiences.

BP: ok

OR: uh

BP: that, that sounds excellent. Yeah. (l)

OR: you, you don't get those, if you get one in a lifetime, treasure them. That's, that's what I would, that's what I feel.

BP: yeah, oh definitely

OR: yeah

BP: so, what are um, w, w, let me think here. What eh, what are some of your fondest memories of you active, activism days?

OR: I think, testifying in court. It was great.

BP: yeah?

OR: yeah, because we were coached not what to say, but how to say it. In other words, look at the jury don't look at the lawyer. And I would talk to them and I, I, and the thing is I didn't have to make anything up. So that memory is great. That, that I'm speaking out of my own experience, what they told me. Go back, and so that's why I went, sat in there, spoke to them. So that kind of a thing um, I think the sing out against apartheids were always good. But you know, that whole experience was like, in our religious language, how long oh lord are we going to do this? You know just, got a little long sometimes. How long? Uh, and in the middle of the winter. Um, so they're fond memories but, they're tinged with, now they're fonder then they were then. You know?

BP: yeah (l)

OR: that kind of thing. When I see Lisa, I always have this little story and I, I won't say it on here because (l). But one of the first rugby tours, she, she had a little incident with the police by (???), completely unrelated. The knife.

BP: I heard it. Right, right. (l)

OR: and I said, Lisa you still got your knife with you? (l) But it's, it's just a fond memory of showing up for a demonstration, and I think, that period of, of, sort of like, eighty-two, eighty-three, all the way to about eighty-eight. And eighty-eight, eighty-seven, eighty-eight it was really hard times in South Africa. It was dangerous, because Bolta locked up thousands

BP: right

OR: of people. Thousands because it was really, the pressure was building. So all those, uh, those uh, demonstrations, and getting together with the people during those times, it was, it was, it was rich because it was, there was always some energy going. There was always a lot of (???), we, we got to keep doing this. This is, and you know you just feel alive. Uh, you feel like purpose and meaning and you know why you're doing what you're doing, so um, I don't' know how I, I, it's, later it will come to me, one or two more specifics. But the party of course was a great time and so on.

BP: yeah

OR: When Mandela was released. Um, visiting South Africa was always good. A few times I did, yeah. It was always a rich experience. So it was more cumulative than, than, while there were a couple of good ones, but it was very (???). I feel like, it was, it was a great time, but I think it would also make me a better person.

BP: yeah

OR: it helped me.

BP: yeah

OR: locally. And, it just you know, like I don't feel like I contributed so much as in being part of it I got caught up in something bigger than me. And so that's, that's one of the greatest experiences. It's not just what I did, or any of us did, but it was all of us together and it's just like, and I, and I miss that. I think I'm feeling a little, it's now fifteen years but I feel like- We had a coalition on the south, west side that, that self destructed after we got to success, at one time and I'm, I'm still feeling like, you know, struggle, struggle is a really important component of being alive. If you got too, if it's too easy, watch out. And I don't know, that message isn't flying well these days but uh,

BP: well I mean yeah. I mean certainly. I, have you, have you, have you tried to, is there anything else you've put in place of it at all or?

OR: no. uh, well, uh, the South Af- anti-apartheid and this coalition of churches were the two main ones. Um, I've tried a couple of times to uh, I've been part of smaller ones but nothing quite maybe it's when the side, the odds are so great, that's when you're most alive.

BP: yeah

OR: I can't see the end of this but, we got to go. Um, no I think, I think I feel like, I feel a little like, I should be, I'd like to find something but you know, I don't think I have. So we're talking over ten years now. I feel okay, it's not like, but um, maybe we're only blessed to have a couple of those experiences in life where you,

BP: if any.

OR: yeah, if any. Uh, so I feel like, I don't want to sit back in like a rocking chair, and I kind of look it, I'm getting close to retirement and I'm trying to think, I want to do something after retirement. Uh, not, but I don't see it necessarily in that political being, but I want to, I want to get engaged and energized by something bigger than me.

BP: right

OR: bigger than me. And, Obama was okay. I, I voted for Obama and I'm glad my wife was just, I, I, I wasn't quite as. But I, I, you know, you get a little bit.

END TAPE TWO (2). CONTINUE TO TALK ABOUT HIS PLANS FOR AFTER RETIREMENT, ABOUT RON PITTS, AND HIS DOCUMENTARY WORK TRYING TO SHED LIGHT ON THE EXTORTION OF INNER-CITY CHURCHES.