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Interview with Tim Wright

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1 JONATHAN VOGEL:

2 My name is Jonathan Vogel J-O-N-A-T-H-A-N V-O-G-E-L I'm interviewing
3 Tim Wright T-I-M W-R-I-G-H-T, it's November 25th, and the location of the interview is
4 Mr. Wright's office on East Wacker Drive. So I'd like to start by just asking you when
5 you started your anti apartheid
6
7

8 TIMOTHY WRIGHT: Honestly I don't know when. I think I had an um I had an
9 awareness from um high school. Ya know I tend to kind of reflect on people like Patrice
10 Lumumba and I don't know where it really came from. It was just an interest that I had
11 and it certainly hadn't matriculated itself into anything like, formed itself into anything as
12 clear as anti-apartheid or divestment movement. But I think it kind of came out of the
13 injustice that I saw growing up being black in America. You know I grew up next door to
14 Watts and in fact my grandmother lived in Watts. And so all these incidents that I saw
15 related even to Watts riots I was at the park when that stuff jumped off. I was playing
16 baseball and I saw what took place and the reactions. And even more important than that
17 I saw how they treated my father.

18 I remember one incident we went to Chinatown to eat. We were all in the station
19 and we were pulled over. They made him lay on the grounds as they checked. They
20 didn't have any warrants or anything. Just the abuse that came out. And seeing that grow
21 up, growing up I kinda had a umm I guess you know . It was clear I wasn't from there
22 even though I was a foreigner. It was clear (unintelligible). The focus then kind of turned
23 to Africa and so it was just something that I was distinctly aware of at an early age. So
24 that didn't really manifest itself into any potential stuff to South Africam maybe you
25 know high school subject of studies, you know book reports- stuff like that. And my first
26 heightened awareness took any kind of significant action was probably about college.
27
28

29 JV: So where did the bulk of your anti-apartheid activism take place?
30
31

32 TW: Where did the bulk of it take place?
33
34

35 JV: Mmhmm.
36
37

38 TW: professors who were aware of this stuff, like Angela Davis, like Dr. James Garrett. I
39 think my freshman year I got involved in a group- that was I got involved in a group that
40 was trying to insure that the CIA stayed out of Angola and that so called civil war
41 between the fractions. And so. It was at that time that I took on some role of activism
42 dealing with what you would call apartheid. It was actually taking place in Angola at the
43 time and the South African government was supporting UNITA in their efforts to
44 dominate the sub-saharan African continent.
45
46

47 JV: And so I will start with some more biographical questions. What year were you born?

48

49

50 TW: Fifty Five.

51

52

53 JV: Where were born?

54

55

56 TW: Los Angeles.

57

58

59 JV: Where were you raised?

60

61

62 TW: Compton.

63

64

65 JV: Where was your father born?

66

67

68 TW: Vernon, Oklahoma.

69

70

71 JV: And how about your mother?

72

73

74 TW: LA.

75

76

77 JV: And so how did you get your name?

78

79

80 TW: Well, my name was named after my father after my grandfather after his father and

81 after their father. My grandfather was a Chock Indian and his name was Timothy W.

82 Wright. His father's name was Timothy W. Wright except they didn't count back then.

83 So it was assumed.

84

85

86 JV: What is your earliest memory?

87

88

89 TW: Probably being a toddler. And interacting with my mother. Throwing her pins

90 around while she was making a dress. Walking her outside of the door. Is maybe my

91 earliest memory.

92

93 JV: What did your mother do?

94

95 TW: My mother did a lot of different things. She was an athlete. She went to school with
96 Tom Bradley at Jefferson High School. She was known as downtown maple brown. She
97 was I guess a professional baseball player. She was a singer, she was a dancer. She was a
98 uh, she did a lot of political work and she became, she settled down, she raised all the
99 kids. She used to be a nurse for quite a while. And then she became what is called a key
100 punch operator. I think that is what ultimately where she retired from.

101

102

103 JV: Would you say that her political work influenced some of your activism?

104

105

106 TW: Ahh, I wasn't that aware of it. I knew that uhh every time we had an election our
107 house would be set up as a polling place. And I knew that uhh she would - and I met like
108 the first black mayor of Compton who was (unintelligible). But I was just, I probably
109 more aware looking back now then I was then looking at what she was doing.

110

111

112 JV: Right. Can you tell me what your neighborhood was like growing up?

113

114

115 TW: My neighborhood was uhh, typical Compton neighborhood. You know when you're
116 poor you don't know you're poor, but we wasn't poor. I had a father who worked and
117 mother who didn't have to work and then she would work. But then we would have the
118 basic kind of necessities, but we didn't have uhh a whole lot. It was a typical lower
119 middle class neighborhood where every person on the block, every household on the
120 block, you knew. And every household on the block you know- uhh the parents in that
121 house had the ability to parent you too. And so the whole notion that it takes a village to
122 raise a child was certainly alive and well there. And so they're some of the fondest
123 memories of my life but I also, umm you know things changed and there were gangs and
124 shootings and killings, and I was shot and stabbed myself before I got out of high school.
125 We had to arm ourselves and protect ourselves while were in high school, getting an
126 education.

127 But the other part of my life was sports. Compton where I grew up just had a reputation
128 for incredible sports. In terms of football, baseball, basketball, track, uhh we had
129 probably more Olympians come out of Compton than anywhere else in the nation. We've
130 had more football players in the NFL and so, the other side is that it was just a hotbed of
131 athleticism and I was an athlete. I was in my element so to speak. But you know, all in
132 all, I think it was positive, certainly the issue of gangs and the killings and all the stuff
133 was tough. We didn't know if we would survive it- when you don't know that you will
134 live you know beyond the age of eighteen and twenty or something like that it gives you
135 a different perspective on your life . And so ummm those are, it was good bad, it was
136 good and bad and ummm, you know we'll see. I mean I think there are some incredible
137 lessons learned. It certainly had an incredible impact on my life. And certainly helped me
138 survive in Africa too. But anyway.

139

140 JV: So at the time did you say you had professional ambitions or whwt were you looking
141 forward to?

142

143

144 TW: I had ambitions from early on. I didn't know what they were I thought I would
145 probably be a professional athlete. I always wanted to be a lawyer. Even though I was the
146 first in my family to ever go to college. So it wasn't as if I had folk who had brought me
147 along but I had folk who were pushing me to get there. So you know I was uhh, I was you
148 know I was always fairly intelligent I did a lot of reading and so there was always a
149 sense, I made good grades. Most folks you saw me on the street wouldn't know that, but I
150 did. You know when when I played football I was a Nations Scholar Athlete. Pretty much
151 a straight A student.

152

153

154 JV: So which sport did you play?

155

156

157 TW: Football. Or baseball.

158

159

160 JV: What positions did you play?

161

162

163 TW: Fullback. Linebacker. Defensive end. Umm, early on when I was a kid I played on
164 the line. Then of course baseball I played center field or left field. Sometimes first base.

165

166

167 JV: So how did you decide to go to Claremont Men's College?

168

169

170 TW: Well, I didn't really, but I did. Umm, you know I was being recruited by a bunch of
171 different football schools because of my grades. I was also recruited by Harvard,
172 Claremont, Stanford but Stanford I didn't view them as a football school anyway. So I
173 thought I probably, I wanted to go to SC. I decided to stay in California, and I decided,
174 after back and forth, I was recruited at UCLA. So I decided I was going to go to UCLA
175 and play football and go to school. So that was my decision. And that was where I
176 expressed my intentions, I made a commitment to go. But a couple of things happened.
177 One was I tore up my knee during the end of the year. Umm, and you know tore it up
178 again in the summer. So I didn't think based on that that I would have a real shot (phone
179 **rings**) of playing, I didn't think I would have a real shot playing professionally playing at
180 the college level. To play professionally. So I started thinking about the education I was
181 getting. So what I wanted to do was quote unquote get out of the ghetto. Make some
182 money. Take the next step. (Coughs). And so umm, umm, and so umm, so I started
183 thinking about like Harvard and some of the other schools. In fact I met with the coach of
184 Harvard and flew out there and it was snowing out there and I said, now look, and then

185 the coach at Claremont was real hot on me coming out. And I did a recruiting visit after
186 the fact, I was with Ricky Bell, Robin Cole, Danny Benson, all three of those players
187 went to the NFL. So anyway we went out, and it was pretty cool, but what I liked the
188 most was, the coach gave me a room to stay over overnight, and then I could keep a key
189 (coughs) had a lunchcard, so I would like, and then find out, at Claremeont, there were
190 these beautiful women. So I went to a couple of parties and said man, this is pretty cool.
191 So I would go back out over the weekend and stay in the dorm and go into the cafeteria to
192 eat and like, enjoy the weekend. And I said I kinda like this. So I ended up changing up
193 my school and decided to go to Claremont. So that's how I got there.

194

195

196 JV: So what did you study there?

197

198

199 TW: Well I studied economics and political science. So I came out with a dual degree, a
200 dual bachelor's degree. Umm, but I started off in math. I did some engineering work.
201 Cough. Claremont was a difficult place because of the struggles as it pertained to students
202 of color you know black students on campus it wasn't easy. I had like three or four
203 classmates, you know three or four other blacks in my class. I was told by one professor
204 they should have never allowed blacks to come to that school and he told me that I would
205 probably have never graduated from Claremont. And these were advisors. So it was a
206 challenge. I would be in all white classes, and I would ask questions, and everybody
207 would start laughing and the professor would say I don't understand what you're saying.
208 Growing up in Compton, you grow up with a whole nother kind of vernacular, I say I
209 learned how t become bilingual. I spent too much time at Claremont, and I would come
210 home and the brothers in the hood would say, man what are you saying. I don't know
211 what you're talking about. So I got to speak both languages so to speak.
212 So Claremont, in its efforts, we had a black studies center, they were always trying to cut
213 it back. We hired Angela Davis they tried to fire her. I remember my president, Jack
214 Stark, once told me that we were fire insurance. Meaning that we were allowed to come
215 into the school so that they wouldn't burn it down. So anyway.

216

217

218 JV: That's intense. So how did you get to go to Angola out of the Claremont Men's
219 College?

220

221

222 TW: Well, two ways. One I didn't even know about. One was from Angela Davis and a
223 book she was writing. I was her research assistant. (Coughs). And ultimately I wrote my
224 senior thesis on the Angolan economy, indicators of underdevelopment, the subtitle being
225 the prospect of transformation to a world economy. On the theory that most of the
226 colonial places that had been colonized in Africa only had extractive economies or
227 infrastructures, where they were pulling out wealth. And there was no finishing or
228 processing that took place. And finishing and processing is how wealth is created, how
229 wages are created and so on and so forth. But for example they are fishing out Walters
230 Bay in Angola and processing the fish up in Portugal. You know, and so, there was, that

231 was where the value was being created. So, anyway, [Phone Rings, Mr. Wright takes the
232 call, recording is turned off]

233

234 [Recording begins again]

235

236

237 TW: No I'm fine go ahead.

238

239

240 JV: So you were talking a little about Angola and the work you were doing for Angela
241 Davis. Can you talk a little about what you were doing with her or what was the intention
242 of the trip or your experiences there?

243

244

245 TW: Well, what was I doing with her- just going to Africa with her. I was her research
246 assistant so I would uhh research for our, it was just an opportunity to take a trip. I had
247 never been out of the country. Um and so really it was a series of meetings that she had
248 and I remember flying to South Africa, flying to Angola, and I met Dr. Augustine Onito
249 of the NPLA. You know I just became acutely aware from the discussions that were
250 taking about what the conflict was really about and it was ultimately really about South
251 Africa.

252

253

254 JV: Mmmhmm.

255

256

257 TW: Even with the Portuguese abandoning, with the Portuguese giving up Angola, just
258 saw what they did when they left, in terms of pouring cement into the sewer system and
259 stuff like that. Just anal stuff. Just angry stuff. As they had to leave Angola. And so, uhm,
260 it was a series of meeting and talking and visits looking at sites and so forth.

261

262

263 JV: And so umm, how did you become involved in your first anti-apartheid group?

264

265

266 TW: Well, again, what it was being able to see first hand what was taking place as
267 opposed to what was opposed to on the papers and knowing that I was very very different
268 and then trying to talk to people about that and get that information out. Umm I don't
269 know who ultimately, Graylon Davis comes to mind, he was a uhhhh schoolmate of mine
270 at Claremont, and I don't know who else but we started to talk about forcing universities
271 from supporting these companies who were ummm essentially supporting this South
272 African government and the apartheid regime. First was the talk about the atrocities
273 taking place, stuff that we actually saw, stuff that wasn't being communicated by the
274 media. So I think it began with some awareness campaigns and being able to talk to
275 someone. It then turned into action (Coughs). And I think the divestment movement
276 began at UCLA. Uh, and then began to took around to some of the other colleges and

277 ultimately became full force. I remember being involved in that when I was in law school
278 at UCLA and the divestment movement at UCLA to get the law school and universities
279 from putting their money in the conflict and doing business there as a way of forcing
280 some change.

281 Umm I know after law school I was working with Carol Mosley Braun who was in the
282 state representative to draft legislation divestment legislation for the state of Illinois. And
283 then we did that and it was passed. With Baldman and others were involved but I was a
284 principal drafter in that. Then it was connecting up with other players like Prexy. I think I
285 met Prexy at the point that we were involved in advocacy around Angola. Umm and that
286 would have been 74, 75. Right around there. And then I think, then having come to
287 Chicago, after law school, which would have been 83, 82, 83, I reconnected back with
288 Prexy and got involved you know the ongoing activity. Also I was a member of the
289 National Lawyers Guild. Cough. And through the National Lawyers Guild I got engaged
290 in volunteering time to be involved in some of these efforts that were taking place. Where
291 they was going to South Africa and doing affidavits of detainees. Uhhh, some you know
292 got involved in council for Namibia and the remnants of the Committee Against
293 Apartheid. So anyway.

294

295

296 JV: So it was a pretty wide. So how did your family react when they understood you were
297 becoming heavily involved in the activist movement?

298

299

300 TW: You know, no major reaction. I didn't- My mother always worried about my safety.
301 But other than that, my politics were mine.

302

303

304 JV: And so when were you talking about the divestment movement at UCLA, did you
305 find that there was a great deal of support among your peers or was it something more
306 struggling?

307

308

309 TW: I think it built a momentum. It was something that uhmm people were very
310 cognizent of. For me it was always that connection (Coughs). Because I felt that until
311 umm Africans were free in their homes I couldn't be free in mine. You know I saw a
312 direct correlation between how I was treated in this country versus you know in what was
313 happening in that country. The similarities, the strife so I felt that the battle had to be
314 fought there and that the implications of that battle or the ramifications of that battle
315 would have impact here. I mean I saw, understanding being in California gives me a
316 unique viewpoint particularly with respect to Japan. And Japanese and Japanese-
317 Americans who had been incarcerated during the war uhmm and the status of Japanese of
318 American, Japanese-Americans and I saw that as Japan kind of shrugged off its defeat
319 and decided to engage in the economic market and became strong, as Japan became
320 strong so did the fortunes of the Japanese increase. And Japanese Americans here. And
321 their status, and ultimately so I saw that in a similar vein in respect to Africa. It hasn't
322 worked quite yet but it's still on its way.

323

324 JV: Right. That's interesting I've never thought about that. And so umm, let's see, can
325 you describe some your closest friends in the movement, especially when you first started
326 in it?

327

328

329 TW: Well I think it would have been Prexy Nesbit, Sharon Pitts, Basil Clunie, Steve
330 Cough. Haywood Burns. Umm you know there was so many out there. Graylon Davis as
331 I mentioned earlier. Umm I guess just tons of people.

332

333

334 JV: And, uh can you describe sort of tensions in between activist groups, like any conflict
335 between groups that were occurring when you were in the movement?

336

337

338 TW: Yea, I mean, I don't particularly remember any. It doesn't really kinda come out and
339 uhh hit me. But you had a lot of groups and most were cooperative. You know same
340 issues, but they had a different strength. Maybe this group (Coughs) was about Namibia,
341 this group was about Mozambique, this group, but they were all fighting the same issue
342 for the most part. So I didn't pick up a whole lot of tension for the most part. There might
343 have been some old Cold War kind of Communist kind of stuff happening with one
344 group as opposed to another group, ideologues, this or that wasn't nothing.

345

346

347 JV: Mmhmm. Can you describe for yourself a little bit about the relationships in the
348 different African countries you visited and how it sort of impacted you, how you visited
349 so many different places in Africa and how you feel that sort of travel impacted you?

350

351

352 TW: I've been able to see the real stuff. I've been able to experience the real stuff. I've
353 been in Zimbabwe, I've been in Namibia, I've been in Mozambique, I've been in Zambia
354 I've been in South Africa. All these different places, they're different people, you know
355 (Coughs), it's always incredibly interesting just to see how people cultures so forth so on.
356 You know I guess if I was to step back a bit and say that what I have most appreciated is
357 what I saw twenty five, thirty years and what I seen today. And to see that progress has
358 taken place. Even looking at all the skirmishes on the planet. On the continent and how
359 have they really become a few. Look at the modernization that has taken place and it
360 gives you a sense of how that in fact ultimately umm Africa is going to be just integral,
361 uhh to the world's economy and full part and parcel and their governments will be, will
362 reflect that and umm uhh it will be an interesting day. But this is you appreciate your
363 culture, it also makes you appreciate the economic strength of this country and uhh you
364 know your hopes that some of that can be created there.

365

366

367 JV: Mmhmm, To keep jumping around a little bit, can you describe how became
368 involved in Harold Washington's administration when you came to Chicago?

369
370 TW: (Coughs) Actually I became involved in Harold in LA. They did a fundraiser out
371 there and I think I was an intern for Willy Brown at the time and I had volunteered to go
372 there because I wanted to meet this guy Harold Washington. I was taking a civil rights
373 course at the law school and Harold was carrying the civil rights bill in '82, '81 whatever
374 it was. Therefore I remember going back there and going to this thing and kind of
375 meeting Harold. And being enthralled with him. He and Tom Bradley was there. And
376 Tom Bradley was always Tom Bradley who I thought was a candidate of the Jewish West
377 Side Community in LA and not necessarily being of the black community. And in that
378 sense kind of umm I heard Harold speak, and I'm like saying this is the real stuff. This is
379 what we have to be. And the kind of progressive issues he was talking about and the way
380 he dealt with the issue of color.
381 And so I decided that I wanted to help out, we talked and I took home some callbacks in
382 Chicago I would come out here and work in some menial job passing out fliers just doing
383 whatever volunteers did. And so that's how I got involved, and then I decided to come to
384 Chicago after law school and clerk I worked at Bpi, Business Profession People for
385 Public Interest I was a public interest lawyer got involved in some stuff with Harold. And
386 so I would be seen as somebody here. But at one point back in '83, '84 they tried to kick
387 Harold out of office because of the ethics statement. So I got involved in that and
388 essentially researched it and provided a memo to the corporation council and he looked it
389 over and he thought it was it. He used it- I was in court that day with him. We won, you
390 know a couple months later they invited me over so the mayor could thank me and my
391 partner (Coughs).
392 And he did and he says, "Son do I know you from somewhere." And I say, "Well we met
393 in LA." And so I think after that umm they made me an offer. I think we did park district
394 and then Harold made me an offer to come in inside and I turned him down but he had
395 other plans. And so he prevailed. And I started working with him. I started as the
396 assistant to the chief of staff and I was deputy director of intergovernmental affairs, and I
397 director of intergovernmental affairs, and I was special council to the mayor and then I
398 was the commissioner of economic development for the city. But Harold and I were
399 extremely close and you know I ran city council. I did some other things for me. He was
400 my mentor. He taught me politics. So that's the story. I ran city council, that's it in the
401 middle [Mr. Wright points to picture on wall].

402

403

404 JV: That's incredible. Do you have any favorite memories from working under Harold
405 Washington?

406

407

408 TW: Oh tons of them.

409

410

411 JV: Tons of them?

412

413

414 TW: Just tons of them. You know from the twenty nine-twenty one city council and uh
415 council wars quote unquote to the White Sox stadium to any interactions around that and
416 we got it done. That was a story every day. So very, very fond memories. Umm, stuff that
417 I would never talk about, but umm good stuff.

418
419

420 JV: Right, and was anti-apartheid activism a topic that came up in the administration, or
421 how was that?

422
423

424 TW: Oh sure. Harold was very much supportive of that. In fact when ummm Toyota
425 Toybil (coughs) was the first head of Spabo and was in prison on Robbins Island with
426 Mandela. And when he was released from Robbins Island one of the first places he came
427 was Chicago. And Harold Washington gave him the key to the city. Umm Harold knew
428 of my work in South Africa and was very much supportive of it. In fact it was under
429 Harold that umm the city prosecuted those seventeen defendants of the criminal trespass
430 and it was somewhat cooperative that most of the jurisdictions should have been
431 dismissed charges so they would just go away. Under Harold they maintained the charges
432 so the issues could be confronted.

433
434

435 JV: And so how did you get involved in that case, can you talk a little about how that
436 case started?

437
438

439 TW: Man you have to be pulling my memory like I dunno- Well you know people got
440 arrested at a protest and I was called in ahead of time, early to bail them out to get them
441 out of jail and I did that. And so we had bail money and all kind of stuff you do around
442 action like that. And so got em out, and you know proceeded to prepare. Uhhh the
443 defense I represented 17 defenders so I put together a team of lawyers on the other side to
444 represent some of the top kawyers in the city. And I coordinated and wrote the bench
445 brief, which you saw. So you know, in fact, I was teaching at Columbia College.
446 And I was teaching a class called Law and Society. And I did- that became a project for
447 my class was the preperation of the defense of those 17 defendants including Jackie
448 Jackson, uhhh Dick Newhouse, Alice Palmer, uhhh you know all the ones that, Alice
449 Streeter, so we prepared the examination the cross examinations of the officers we
450 prepared the direct examinations of all the witnesses that we would have and we had just
451 a ton of witnesses (cough). I think ranging from Ted Kennedy to Charley Hayes to
452 Margerie Bantiff to Prexy Nesbitt to- and we just put on a trial.
453 And the trial and in a sense uhh, while we had utilized these defenses that we thought
454 would be available to us through the supremacy clause- in fact that these treaties and laws
455 of the UN were being violated in South Africa. So we also chose some local common
456 law, which was necessity. And so we had to show on the necessity defense all these
457 atrocities were being committed and weren't being addressed and that you know under
458 the necessity defense allows you to address a wrong to break a minor law in order to
459 prevent a greater crime from occurring. And that's essentially what we had to show. So it

460 was an extraordinary trial I think that those young Columbia students got the thrill of
461 their lives because that was their assignment to come in there every day.

462

463

464 JV: That's great.

465

466

467 TW: And writing on that. But they were able to develop defense work through the theory
468 you know, and to prepare the witnesses and all these kind of things, I think that was the
469 last time I taught it. And then we had the trial.. Trial was about a week long we had
470 maybe 117 countries represented by press.

471

472

473 JV: Wow.

474

475

476 TW: I mean it was pretty huge. We did this and at the end the jurors came back with a not
477 guilty for each person and then they read a statement and they asked to join the Free
478 South Africa movement. (laughs) After demonstrating all of that. And so I mean it was an
479 interesting, an interesting piece.

480

481

482 JV-Did that bring a lot of awareness to the-

483

484

485 TW- It sure did.

486

487

488 JV- Mmhm. And jumping ahead a little bit again, can you describe your reaction when
489 Ronald Reagan was elected?

490

491

492 TW- Well you know Ronald Reagan was from California. And my reaction was, "Damn,
493 they let him out." Well yall in trouble now because yall don't know Ronald Reagan.
494 Ronald Reagan and Samuel Highcower were always these conservative folk out of
495 California and Richard Milhouse Nixon was too. Umm but, umm, Milhouse was smart,
496 Reagan was not (coughs). And so I don't know. My reaction was I hope we can survive-
497 we survived Hitler we survived other players we have to survive this too. But it wasn't a
498 good reaction because I knew we'd be in for hell. I knew he'd be the kind of guy that
499 would support South Africa and the white regime.

500

501

502 JV-Did that sort of change the work you were doing here about apartheid or-

503

504

505 TW-No. it just- you just had to redouble your efforts. But it didn't happen. I mean there
506 were always opposition to it, you know. There was Kennedy, he was supporting these
507 folks. So it was the same stuff.

508

509

510 JV-Mmhm. Can you describe some of your visits to South Africa during this period and
511 how you had the opportunity to do that?

512

513

514 TW- Mostly it was through the National Lawyer's Guild or through something else, some
515 kind of seminar going on over there and we would utilize it to go over. You know back in
516 those days you had to be an honorary, you had to have a visa, and so you had to be an
517 honorary white person in order to get the visa. As you could well imagine after I did that
518 trial I was never able to get another visa. And so ummm but most of these trips were trips
519 where we were doing legal work or having conferences over working for example Odessa
520 with the national lawyers guild sent some lawyers out to help the antina government
521 when they were working on reforms to the constitution, so we got involved in that way.
522 And there were trips when we had to bring information back to the UN that the South
523 Africans didn't want us to do. And so we had to play a little cloak and dagger and stuff in
524 order to accomplish that. Or kind of we went into like, when they were protesting at
525 Crossroads and the South African government was bulldozing those homes and it was
526 illegal for us to be there at Crossroads and helping to organize those residents but we
527 were doing it anyway.

528

529

530 JV- Can you describe some of the conditions you saw when you were in South Africa?

531

532

533 TW- I saw al little bit of everything man. You know the squalor, the shanty shacks, you
534 know like you see right up there in that top picture where they got the eggs up there
535 [points to picture]. They were voting. I mean that's what people lived in. No plumbing.
536 None of the stuff. The passbook laws and having the areas and how restricted and policed
537 it was, militarize. In Soweto- Soweto was cool back then particularly back then because
538 everywhere had to live there. Tutu lived there, Mandela lived there. Everyone had to live
539 there. It was kinda like Compton under these restrictive racial covenants when you could
540 live in certain places. In America we had doctors, we had lawyers, because they could
541 only live in Compton . We had baseball players, we had a uhh, a mix economically
542 ummm, and that's how Soweto was back then. So there would be some very poor there
543 would also be some very nice, well off, they had some nice houses. (coughs). But, you
544 know, once people were liberated and lived where they wanted to live that leads to where
545 the poor can't leave the certain place and conditions becomes even more squalor, crime
546 becomes rampant, and particularly if there are no jobs, in an apartheid system, umm,
547 there thing was to keep a pool of ready labor, it was meant to- they didn't have jobs
548 except for certain- and they kept people poor. They could not accumulate wealth.

549

550

551 JV- Can you describe for me what a turning point for you was in the movement?

552

553

554 TW- What do you mean a turning point?

555

556 JV- When you felt that your activism, that the activism, in South Africa and would lead
557 to the downfall-

558

559

560 TW- I had a vision one day. It was in 1985, I was in South America. I just met one of my
561 close friends, whose now ambassador for South Africa Doume Matabate (??), he was the
562 ANC's rep in Washington, Johnny Macatin was ANCS rep in New York but I met with
563 Doi in South America in Georgetown. I think Prexy was there too. But anyway. So we
564 were staying at a hotel down from the conference and you know I told him, we were
565 sitting there with some guys from Nicaragua and Sandanistas so they say. And some
566 Cubans. And umm these were the outcasts. And so we were sitting with them and
567 drinking some rum and eating some fish and smoking some Cuban cigars and I told
568 Doume, "Man I see it brother." He says, "You see what?" I said, "I see uhh a Free South
569 Africa." I said I can see it right now. He thought I was crazy. He said, "Man these boys
570 will never give up South Africa. There's gonna be blood in the streets." And I said, "No
571 man. I said I see a change taking place." [Phone rings, Mr. Wright takes call, recording
572 stopped]

573

574

575 [Recording continues]

576

577

578 JV-So I guess you were speaking a little about when you were in South America, talking
579 about what you saw as the future of South Africa?

580

581

582 TW- Yea, so, I told Dumi, Botomome I said Dumi I said in ten years I said within ten
583 years we're going to be sitting, we're going to be standing at, we'll be staying at the
584 finest hotel in all of Johannessburg, drinking the finest cognac (phone rings) and we'll be
585 saluting a free South Africa. And then he says, "Man are you crazy" (laughs), but anyway
586 that was in 1985. I think Dumi hadn't been home. He was in the armed, well, he was in
587 the armed forces [Mr. Wright checks e-mail, long pause] Sorry there was a flight-

588

589

590 So, umm, so anyway so Dumi hadn't been back and ummm, you know fast forward to
591 ummm I started going over there I guess in, I started going back over there in I guess like
592 '90, no '88, '89, something like that when the discussions had begun and they were
593 Kadessa was focused on Declerq and he done what he had done. And I think I had went
594 over there with the national lawyer's guild. So, you know, I didn't know when this stuff
595 was going to pop but then in the early 90's it became clear that this was about to pop and
596 so I remember what it was in like 94, umm, I sent Dumi back, I bought his airline ticket,

597 or helped him buy it. He had gone back home because when they declared the amnesty
598 against ANC, might have been in like '92 or '93, I'm not sure. And then so Dumi went
599 back home, so, first time in 20 years. So when I go out there, I go out to do the election in
600 94. I think that's the next time I saw Dumi. The next time I was in South Africa, I think
601 that's correct, because I did Bill Clinton's campaign, I was his director of domestic
602 policy. And so that would have been '91, '92 and I worked the transition team. But so
603 anyway it was after that that I worked back out to South Africa, to work the election, and
604 I was picked up at the airport by Dumi and his nephew, and I was staying at Carlton hotel
605 which was one of the finest hotels in Johannesburg and I had bought this bottle of cognac
606 from the plane, you know in the free, whatever they call it, in those little things they had.
607 I bought this very nice bottle of cognac and we were up in my room and I had a balcony,
608 looking out on to whatever street we were on. So I said to Dumi, I said, we grabbed a
609 couple glasses, I said, "Brother, remember when I told you when we were in the jungles
610 of South America, and I told you that within ten years we would be sitting in the finest
611 hotel in Johannesburg drinking the finest cognac. I says so lets do it." (laughs). So we
612 toasted to a free South Africa. And so but anyway we showed up at the hotel on the
613 election night because we were working out in the field I was in the Western Cape I don't
614 know where Dumi was. All this stuff when it was a little tenuous we were out in the field,
615 and that's when that picture was taken right there, with Dinkens (points to picture), and
616 that's when these pictures were taken when we were out there. And so, but anyway, that
617 night they had three nights of voting, three days of voting, just some incredible stuff. Just
618 brought tears to my eyes, just to watch this occur. And to know this was happening. And
619 finally, that night, I went in to see, oh I was going in, I had to leave because I had to get
620 back for some reason. So on the last night I had to go. And it was clear that Mandela had
621 won. And so as I was walking downstairs, going downstairs, I ran into Thabo Nbikee,
622 that's him in that shot now. Beneath Harold. (points to picture) So I run into Thabo. He
623 says, "Man what are you doing. He says where are you going?" I says, "I gotta go man." I
624 says, "I gotta go back." He says, "You haven't even you enjoyed the celebration." I says,
625 "Victory is the celebration." He says, "Do you want to see the old man before you go." I
626 said, "I would like to say congratulations to him." He says OK, so we go up to the suite
627 and he goes in and they open the door. As I walk into the suite, there's this room and this
628 couch and this coffee table, and there was Coretta Scott King and Mandela, you know, he
629 got up and greeted me and we hugged and he thanked me, and I said (??) this king. But
630 that was probably uhmm, that was an image there that could never, ever, ever be erased.
631 It was just an incredible- It was a confirmation of all that I have thought in terms of even
632 sitting in high school and understanding the relationship between the two peoples and the
633 two places and the two movements and the oneness of all that struggle brought that home
634 in terms of that picture. So it was an incredible piece.

635

636

637 JV- That is pretty incredible. So going ahead to some reflection questions, about the
638 whole activism history, so how do you feel about South Africa and what's going on there
639 today?

640

641

642 TW- You know what, I lived there, I lived there for three years. I was there from 2003 to
643 2006. And I still keep a home there in Fumalong, outside the cities. You know I think,
644 that the struggle continues louta kouta (??) no, out there, I thought the peace when Mbike
645 was outsed and Zumi, I thought it threatened but you know, I keep, we gotta create some
646 jobs, I think the economic issues. You know its one thing to have fought for regime
647 change and to have fought for empowerment and to fight for you know the right to uhh,
648 lead yourselves without having these imposed minorities backed by guns, but that's one
649 thing to get into office. But the fight is not yet won. The fight has to be won
650 economically. It has to be won when we have created jobs, when you've created
651 economies, when you've done these kind of things, when you're allowed to operate
652 freely in the world market. When you know your focus is on education and development
653 and so that's the next stage that we have to get to. South Africa is in the lead, they're not
654 by themselves, Angola's there, Zimbambe, I mean not Zimbabwe, well Zimbabwe was
655 there, Zimbabwe was one of the best economies in Sub-Saharan Africa before Mugabe
656 began to destroy it. And others, it's not just Mugabe. But, so, you know, that battle has to
657 be fought and the battle of access to capital, the battle of development and businesses and
658 so forth, and of running water, and of railroads that work, and that connect, and all those
659 battles are still being fought and ultimately before there's real freedom they have to be
660 won.

661

662

663 JV- Right. And so why do you think the movement to end apartheid was successful?

664

665

666 TW- Why was it successful? Because God had ordained it and it was supposed to happen.
667 These people were not supposed to be in this situation, subjugated in the way that they
668 were. You know I think that in this way of things, it was supposed to occur. And I think
669 that you know we can take some credit for it, I think all the credit for it belongs to God. I
670 mean, those changes had to occur. I think that we were simply instrumentalities of that
671 process. That's how history works. That's how life works.

672

673

674 JV- So how would you describe your biggest contribution to the movement?

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676

677 TW- ust being foots on the ground when necessary. Being an advocate. Doing what's
678 right. You know, being of a right heart and trying to make a difference in other peoples
679 lives. And, you know, but it's me, me, and others like me. You know, who've made that
680 difference. It's not one of us. But it's doing what right's in this life to make a difference
681 in lives without fear or concern. Now, I certainly fear, you know, of being harmed but
682 you know what, I have no fear with respect to it. I mean death's a possibility that's how
683 we live. But that's what this life's all about.

684

685

686 JV- So if Mandela was here right now, what would you say to him?

687

688

689 TW- You know what couldn't you say, amagandi (??), go well. You've done well,
690 you've lived a good life, you've made a difference. You have struggled for what is right
691 and your struggles have been rewarded. It's not that the struggle is over but we certainly
692 have made progress. I think you know Mandela is by no means perfect. There are issues,
693 but you know what, it doesn't matter because he's an important call that has turned. And
694 we can only be so lucky to be able to do that. You know he has the wisdom of God in
695 him. And, he's stuck by that. And that's a blessing.

696

697

698 JV- So my last question is, what do you hope your legacy will be?

699

700

701 TW-You know what, I wanna be like Harold. I wanna say if they talked about me, they
702 say that he tried to help make this a better place. You know, he was, he had his flaws, he
703 had his issues, but you know what, on the whole, he tried to make a difference for other
704 people. And particularly those who couldn't make a difference for themselves. That's it.
705 Hopefully my kids will go well and do well, you know, and I've been able to push them a
706 little further. Umm, but you know, this is what us souls are here for. This is what we do.
707 And, you know, it just helps to bring forth I think the kingdom.

708

709

710 JV- Allrighty, I guess that's it.

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712

713 TW-OK.

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715