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Interview with Willie Williamson

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Lisa Duke
Oral history

Transcription: Willie Williamson

Lisa Duke: Okay this is Lisa Duke and we are with?

Willie Williamson: Willie Williamson

LD: Today is November 21st um at 11:31 and we are at a Borders in Hyde Park. Could you please state how many years you have been involved with the movement?

WW: About 20 years.

LD:20 years. Could you also tell us where most of your activism took place?

WW: Most my activism was here in the city of Chicago.

LD: Great. What year were you born in?

WW: I was born in 1948.

LD: and where were you raised?

WW: I was born in Grenada, Mississippi. A little town about 100 miles south of Memphis.

LD: And where were you raised?

WW: I was actually raised in Mississippi. Same town up until my 18th birthday and that's about it.

LD: 18th birthday um where was your father born?

WW: He was born in Mississippi as well. Montgomery county.

LD What year was your father born?

WW: 1912

LD : Where was your mother born

WW: I believe she was born in Mississippi as well but I can't really confirm where or if she was born in Mississippi but I know that she was raised in Mississippi.

LD: And what year was your mother born?

WW: About 1915. I'm not exactly sure if that is the correct year.

LD: But you were saying that she, you know, that she was Native American.

WW: Yes. Um She does have Native American blood. Um she had several last names. The first last name that I know of was Hiblet. Hiblet was her last name before she moved in with the family that raised her and the family that raised her their last name was Applewhite.

LD: Okay. Alright. So how did you get your name?

WW: My mother named me. Um I know that my middle name comes from the husband of the first (family) that raised her. His first name was Joe and my middle name is Joe. And I guess that was my mother's way of honoring um the person that raised her. By giving part of his name to me.

LD: So you don't know or do you know where Willie came from?

WW: No I really don't know where Willie comes from. When it comes to my family I know that Willie is often times confused with William and often times people would call me William.

LD: People would call you William Williamson?

WW: People would call me William Williamson but that is not my name. My birth name is Willie. People think they are doing me a favor by calling me William but that's not it.

LD: No. What is your earliest memory?

WW: My earliest memory is actually me being very sick. Ill. And uh I was a toddler and my mother was trying to coax me to actually stand up cause I guess she was worried about me. and I remember her giving me something called schuck tea. And what was in Schuck tea other than cornhusks is beyond me. But it didn't taste very well. But she did get it me to drink it. Afterwards I did feel a little better and I started moving around and I could see that she was very happy about it. I was very young. But um when my mother was alive I tried to get her to remember that and even she couldn't remember that. But it did happen.

LD: Could you tell me about your neighborhood growing up?

WW: uh my neighborhood was like a little area. Just. Um. It was near a plant called Copper's Company. And Copper's company was where most of the people actually worked. The neighborhood had little homes. Little green houses. That they were all painted a strange-looking green color. And most of the people worked at Copper's Company. Copper's is and still is to this day responsible for telephone poles uh fencing poles. They treat a lot of lumber. They are also responsible for railroad tires that go under train tracks and that was actually what they were actually noted for at the time. Treating lumber with creosote. And I might add they are under suit now because we learned recently that creosote is a carcinogen that most of the people in that area were exposed to it.

LD: Could you spell that toxin? Do you know how to…

WW: Creosote?

LD: Creosote

WW: C-R-E-S no C-R-E-O-S-O-T-E-S-

LD: Okay um How did you spend your weekends when you were a kid?

WW: Uh mostly playing. Um but there were times I would guess like on Easter Sundays we were expected to go to Sunday school but most of us spent a lot time playing base ball. Or we wouldn't have baseballs but the little rubber balls and we would have little sticks to hit the ball with and that was mostly what we would do. And sometimes we had little games and they were noticed by our parents. Most of them liked baseball as well. So It was baseball in May.

LD: What role did religion play in your childhood?

WW: it was very important. Um religion um when we were growing up we used to have like um my mother and father used to have like little prayer meetings on Sunday evenings in the house and um each child was responsible for saying something about becoming a better person and um that was sort of like an ongoing thing for us up until I would guess my eighth or ninth year. It was something that was very, very serious. And it was something that a lot of other people in the area thought a little strange.

LD: Why did they think it was strange?

WW: Well it was out of the norm. When I say it was out of the norm. There were a lot of people who witnessed my family move into that area. I had to be a baby at the time. And it was a long time before my family was accepted, welcomed in. There were a lot of fights among the younger people. And they would see that um prayer meeting thing as being something to make jokes about. And it was something that no other family in the area actually practiced in a sense so it was strange and not normal for a lot of people so they made jokes about it.

LD: Who was your favorite teacher and why?

WW: My favorite teacher. In grammar school it was Vernon Quinn. Vernon Quinn was my seventh grade science teacher. And He did not have children. He married very late.

And often times during the Summer months we would like hang out together. During that time I was blossoming as a pretty good baseball player and he loved baseball and he was kind of my coach in the off season or when we weren't going to school. And He would take me fishing. He would take to areas or places in Mississippi that I didn't even know they were there. And he took me to an all black town. I learned a few years ago that I had cousins living there. In this little town. Mandayou Mississippi. That was actually set up and built by former slaves.

LD: Oh Really?

WW: And we played baseball there and we played a night game. And it was the very first night game I ever played in. And we won. And celebrated at an all black bar. And all of this stuff was very, very new and strange to me and I didn't know it actually existed until he, Vernon Quinn, actually introduced me to it. He did things for me like a father would do. And I always appreciated him for that. My father, of course, couldn't do it. There was nine of us. And um

LD: There was nine?

WW: nine of us. Yes. I was often told by my siblings that I was the quote unquote chosen one you know, among both of my parents. And I didn't agree with that but you know,I could see that there were sometimes that I would be called to do things more than the others.

LD: So who made the rules of the house?

WW: When my mother and father were absent it was my older sister. She was just like another parent. If you stepped out of line-- if we were too big for her to spank. She would report us to my mother and father and if we deserved something we got it. So That's the way it was.

LD: What rules of behavior did you have to follow?

WW: Well course being a religious person, my father, um would often use his teachings that he learned as a boy to sort of guide and teach us how to do certain things and um we were often, you know, told to be Christ like you know and with that and the teachings you got in Sunday school you knew exactly what you were supposed to do. You know No stealing, no lying, treat people the way you want to be treated, excetra, excetra. And that's what he looked for and he was not a person, well neither of my parents were persons of a lot of words. They would just look at you, you know, and you would know why they were looking at you. Because you had stepped over some line that they told you not to step over and when you'd that you would self correct and the stare would go away or the gaze would go away. So that's just the way it was.

LD: Could you also talk about the rules of behavior that you had to follow growing up in the south during such- -

WW: The Jim Crowe?

LD: Mhmm. Yeah

WW: There were a lot of stories that my parents, both mother and father, would relate to us about the dangers of growing up under Jim Crowe. And um some things or some lines that you just automatically didn't cross. I mean Even if no one came up and said to you you don't cross that lines because of Jim Crowe. The rules were there and sometimes they were in clear view like signs colered, whites only, coloreds and they were very, very visible. Even in places like truck stops. where truckers would stop to have lunch. All of the hired help would be black but in the dining areas no person of color was allowed in the dining areas. If you wanted something from the truck stop you would go all the way to the back and there was like a window and you'd still be standing outside placing an order. There was no place for you to sit and wait. You would have to stand and wait. That was even true for um places like if you wanted a shake, or a malt, or a scoop of ice cream. The colored window was off to the side and the white window was huge you know that could accommodate several people at one time but off to the side there was just one little window. And in grocery stores or in the company store if a person of color was being waited on and if a white person came in. You were put—the person of color was like similarly pushed aside and the white person was waited on first and then they would come back to you. There were instances where I could see my father and my mother addressing very, very young whites as mister and miss, misses but they were always Edgar and Mary. And um growing up watching that it was um it was something that

would make you look and actually become very, very angry. Because you respect your parents and you want everyone else to do the same thing. And it was not like that um you could actually see these younger whites growing up and at the time they were someone to be patted on the head you know, and when they reach a certain age it was like a line drawn there and you can't pat them on the head anymore and He's mister and she's miss. Yeah I witnessed all of that.

LD: When did you first learn of Apartheid?

WW: I was a grown, married man. Living in Hyde Park. Where we are right now. Um I was um listening to a broadcast I believe at um Operation Push and um there was a drive to get food for I think it was South African Refugees and my wife and I went to a meeting. This was before Operation Push became Operation Push I believe it was Operation Bread Basket at the time. And we were concerned about becoming apart of um something. I mean, Here we are—students at the time.

LD: Where were you going at this time?

WW: We were at Malcolm X- both of us started at Malcolm X College.

LD: Kay

WW: And we wanted to get some canned goods together and then we went to a meeting and we found there was a petition being circulated to expel South Africa from the UN. And we sort of immersed ourselves into learning more about this and as a result of learning more about it we decided, that um my wife and I decided, that we needed to become apart of this effort and um in doing so it was a great eye opener to what had actually been going on years, years and years but because of our ignorance we knew nothing about it. And um it was something that would make you stop in your tracks and go why. Not to say that we didn't know the answers it was just that um it was so blatant and so brutal. Although we had seen, I had seen blatant and brutal before. But you would also revert back to where is this sense of fairness? So um it was something that um sort of arrested us and made us think and what to be a part of it. And we just jumped in.

LD: You said that you went to a meeting? Now what meeting was that exactly?

WW: There was um a conference actually. I believe that was called in 1972, '73. And at that conference we met some people. Met one of my best friends even to this day. Renall Mustin. I believe I mentioned his name—

LD: You did.

WW: Um even to this day. We sort of met at a conference that um had as a keynote speaker Angela Davis and a keynote speaker from South Africa I believe it was Oliver Tumball. I believe it was Oliver Tumball and I didn't know what to expect when I heard him speak but um he was a very, very convincing and dynamic speaker. Along with Angela Davis. And we just said well we need to be around these people more because

they seem to have their finger on the pulse that um makes sense so um and we sort of said well we want to keep in touch and out of that came an organization. Out of that conference came an organization and the acronym NAIMSAL. We talked about that name even after it was long established. And said well this is a strange name and we need to shorten it somewhat and we would argue and argue and we'd wind up keeping the name. NAIMSAL that was an acronym for National anti-imperialist movement in Solidarity with African Liberation. And um it stood up until the late 1980's, I believe. And um was responsible for getting the political education of a lot of people just by holding regular meetings and discussing the things that were going on in South Africa. And and um having little things that we would do when were requested to do. But often times we had like regular or annual dinners and often times we got some very, very influential people to come.

LD: So how did you meet your wife?

WW: (Laughs) Oh I met my wife, I was home on leave from Vietnam I had just come back home from the war. And um I was set to complete my military years at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. And I was going to be leaving Chicago and going to Fort Jackson just before Christmas when my aunt, my father's sister called and said she wanted me to come over to this party and I said No I don't think so I'm going to rest and leave tomorrow and that's going to be it. So she said oh come on Willie, there's going to be a very,very nice young lady here and I said Mhmm you know I'm just thinking about these eight- teen months I have to put in before I get out of the military. And my sister

said come on you can go, come one, go with us. So I went. And there was a nice looking young lady and we started talking right away. This was 1969 yes this was wait a minute no it was ’68. I believe it was around November of ’68. After that, that little party. I was gone and we would write ever so often. We would just start writing and you know, things got a little more interesting. (both laugh) And I agreed to come back to see her when I came home on leave and we did and we just sort of hit it off from there.

LD: That’s great. What made you decide to join the military?

WW: I was dead set on getting away from my little hometown.

LD: In Grenada?

WW: yes. There was a recruiter that came into my high school and said that I could join the army and I could get the career of my choice and I could go in with friends of mine and wouldn’t have to worry about being split off from them. So I said well that sounds really really good. So all of us wanted to get out of our hometown because it was sort of a dead end. You know either you would go to work for Copper’s company, a meat packing plant, or a air conditioner or a refrigerator plant and that was pretty much all people had to do in terms of making sure their livelihood was taken care of. But most of us wanted to see a little more and do a little more. So we joined the army and most of us no all of us, all of us were acclimated to the sense of war. Um I think one of the persons- there were six of us- I think one person out of the six of us actually got what they signed up for. We

all signed up for motor vehicle something I don't remember the exact name. but um we did sign up for that and well one person actually got it and the rest of us were 11b, infantry. So we had to do that tour. And uh I think of the six of us maybe one was actually wounded the rest of us were pretty, pretty lucky coming out of there.

LD: So um Why did you become an activist?

WW: I became an activist because in looking at Jim Crowe in the South and looking at Apartheid. And one of the reasons I really, really decided that the army wasn't for me was because I experienced some of the same stuff in the military that I had experienced in the south and looking at all of this there were some very, very graphic pictures of um some things that were going on in South Africa that one of the real things that caused me think a little long and hard about why this was necessary is when I was in the war Dr. King was assassinated and when we got the news most of the guys I was in the war with we were just recently brought in from the woods to take a break and when we got the news one of the guys, he was white, when we got the news he was very very addoment in expressing his displeasure with Dr. King. And he used the four letter F word to express that. And I thought it was odd that he would say that about a person who had sort of made it his life to struggle and fight for things that were just. And it wasn't until I came home from the war that I actually learned that Dr. King had spoken out against the war . And it wasn't until I came home that I learned that there were a lot of people expressing that same displeasure. And at the same time I noticed people wanting a parade. I didn't want a parade. I was-- To be honest with you I was embarrassed because of my ignorance and I

didn't know what I spent a whole year fighting for. I didn't know. And that bothered me for a long time but some people I grew up with actually said well you were tricked into going and I didn't buy that at the time. But I did came to say to myself, you know, I was tricked. I was tricked because I didn't know any better so I need to know better. So I started reading and like I said at the time I was a very,very angry man, and a lot of people could not talk to me. Even when I wasn't reading I was thinking, you know, about things that had gone on and how to things better in terms how I need to be and in thinking like that some of the bitterness finally subsided. And I realized that it would consume if I would continued like that so I had to change and in reading people like Paul Robeson. In reading people like Herbert Epbelker and Claude Lightfoot. Even books written by very,very strong South African writers. Um I realized that I needed to change and um if I was going to be a part of anything in a positive movement. I had to know what was going, I had to know the history, I had to know the current thinking of what was going on. So I changed.

LD: So other than reading these books by all these great South African writers, how else did you stay informed?

WW: Well um I was a person who was definitely uh thinking about uh what it is, what is the crux of uh problems that we were actually faced with and in listening to a person like Angela Davis, Henry Winston, Claude Lightfoot, Slyvia Woods, Ishmael Cory, Let's see who am I leaving out? Cleave Robinson, Charles Hayes, Former Congressman Charles Hayes, He is now deceased. Um Harold Rogers, Otis Cunningham that's uh Lisa's

Husband, Linda Murray. All of these people were left, they were on the left. And we were saying hm that's different, you know, so my wife and I got to learn what these people were actually doing. So we started going to what we called Club meetings. People on the left who were definitely different and they all read and knew history and Peter Oris is another one. Peter is in a position just as Linda is. All of them had be participating years before I sort of finally found our what was going on. Peter Oris, he was apart of that freedom riot group that went to even my home state and I didn't know it. I learned a lot from them so um people like that are very instrumental in sort of giving me and my wife a little boost on some things we had missed and some things that we had definitely had to look into. If we were going to be a part of addressing the problems that we're faced with. So in a nutshell most of them felt that it was our present economic system that was the main culprit. And um people like say Henry Winston, who was blind by the way. And who also said to me after a brief conversaton "You've have a lot to say." And so most likely yes I do but I'm still sort of developing. But most of them felt that it was our economic system that was a part of the problem and they wanted to see all of that changed.

LD: Um how did you parents respond to your involvement in the Anti-Apartheid movement?

WW: They um my mother had more questions than my father. After I came home from the war, of course um my father was relieved, well both of them were relieved that I came back in one piece. And um they knew that I had become a very angry person and

my mother would always ask me questions about what I was doing and I would be really, really glad to discuss it with them and in doing so um she was supportive, very supportive of me and understood why I felt it necessary to be a part of that. My father never really had much to say not that he disagreed or anything. As a matter of fact I think he was a little proud that I was doing something like that because often times we would discuss his background and growing up in the south and what it was like. And how things had sort of changed since his youth, since MY youth and we would sort of like compare and contrast that sometimes and we would often sort of say you know boy if this had been years ago you know what would probably happen, etc.,etc.etc, Of course me being angry at the time you know, no you know—

LD:Right.

WW: I was very,very convinced that I was really, really going the right way and that I had to stay that course but they really didn't disagree with me.

LD: um We are running a little short on time.

WW: Mhmm.

LD: um What other movements did you participate in?

WW: You know um when I mentioned that um NAIMSAL sort of lasted all the way to the end of the 80's and that was about the time the Harold- Washington campaign for mayor came into being and that was a time that people on the left had been discussing independent politics. And I had briefly ran into um Congressman Metcalf who had um expressed his displeasure with Old Man Daily when it came to police brutality. And he and Daily had fallen out and I was circulating a petition against South Africa and I ran into and I asked him to sign it and he said " Hell Yeah, I'll sign it." Which was very, very different. So we saw that um that um that independent political movement could actually grow and when we finally got to the Washington campaign. Of course, we knew Harold-Washington because some of those dinners that NAIMSAL had put on he would be invited as a speaker. And he did come along with Gus Savage, Carol Mosley Blann, some speakers from South Africa including MasaKayla's sister. Masakayla's a famous jazz artist from South Africa, his sister. Um They— I'm sorry.

LD: I'm sorry we are going to have to move along, I'm sorry to interrupt you. Now, just for the records what group did you join? Could you state that again.

WW: NAIMSAL

LD: Okay and that stands for the National anti-imperialist movement in solidarity with African Liberation.

WW: Yes.

LD: Um could you describe the structure of the organization.

WW: um we had a recording secretary. Well we had a chairperson we had a vice chairperson. That chairperson was Ranell Mustin. I was more like a um I really couldn't describe my title. I was sort of like a resource person. The recording secretary at the time was a lady named Leona Cummins and of course our whole set up involved actual meetings where we kept minutes. I meant to bring something today and I forgot it—

LD: Oh Yeah? What was that?

WW: It was some photos. That we had taken over the years. I will get that to Lisa and maybe you can have a look at it. But um we immersed ourselves in things from food drives to clothing drives and sometimes if it involved little children it was diapers. We even got involved in that. That entire structure was designed to support so that's mainly what we did.

LD: Okay, so my next question was what was your role in the organization? (both laugh) But you don't necessarily know what you would have called yourself.

WW: Well, let me see. We used to have like cookouts. Of course I was the main cook when it came to designing programs I would design programs and we would design them put them together for distribution. When it came to leaflets I would design leaflets. It was

just a whole roll of things. It would be hard for me to say I was this because it sort of ran across little other lines.

LD: What made you choose NAIMSAL over other groups?

WW: I didn't know of any other groups actually. Well I did know of Operation Push's drive to secure some food items. But We sort of- my wife and I decided very early that wasn't strong enough for us. We needed something a little more aggressive. Because we felt that if we had just said okay get some canned goods you know, send the canned goods and that's it. That wouldn't have really, really satisfied either of us in terms of how it would make us feel afterwards. So.

LD: What were your reactions to Reagan's election in 1980?

WW: I was horrified.

LD: Oh really?

WW: Yes. I was horrified. Because it was um something that I think a lot of people had not really quite gathered. Me being from Mississippi I understood why he started his campaign in Philadelphia, Mississippi. Philadelphia, MS Is were Goodman, Chaney and Schwerner were murdered and Reagan campaigned on a stage right platform and in doing so he was kind of giving southern states the okay to turn back the clock and he had

already made that platform pretty pretty powerful. And afterwards the repercussions of Raegan saw where to put it in the words of Jesse Jackson Boll Weevil democrats wound up as republicans which is the switch that we are witnessing even now because of Reagan. Yeah I was actually horrified by Reagan.

LD: How did you feel about Reagan- about the Reagan administration's policies towards South Africa?

WW: I think they were very, very horrible.

LD: Yeah.

WW: That was um the time I believe of Chester Crocker. Crocker made excuses from South African policies. It was something that we knew was definitely from the hip kind of racism and that sort of made people fight a little bit harder in terms of understanding that you can't claim democracy and support fascism. It's just something that runs counter to freedom in democracy either you have it or you don't. and you can't talk out of both sides of your mouth to support a government that has suppressed 87% of the people. And have placed them on 13% of the land and called it democracy. I mean, there was just no way you could do that but with the Reagan group it was like that was just the way it is so um why is that the way it is? And the question of why was a big one for a lot of people. And whereas I think a lot of people understood where Reagan was coming from um I think the manner in which he would sell things to people was very, very potent and

powerful. It was like well this is the way it is, you know. And a lot of people would just say " well he's the great communicator". And of course me cringing hearing that. What is he communicating? I mean, I was just baffled by it and horrified at the same time. But you know when you see things like that you see a real picture of how things are and where we're going.

LD: Could you tell me about the first protest or demonstration you participated in?

WW: Let me see. I think I was at um I think I think it was a United Farm Workers. United Farm Workers. Yes. Um There was a picket line. No there was a rally. Held in the downtown area. As a matter of fact I walked that picket line with Henry Winston. I was his leader-- Henry Winston was blind and he was holding on to me and he said he wanted to be a part of that picket. So we got out of the car and just sort of marched with then and showed some support at the time there was a protest against scab grapes and lettuce. Scab grapes and lettuce. You know what a scab is right?

LD: Well somebody who crosses a picket line.

WW: Right, right, right. Okay. So um at the time the farm workers were very much concerned about this being allowed to happen because they did have a contract and they saw this as being something that was running counter to what shouldn't have been so they had a huge picket line. So that was one of the first protest things that I was in.

LD: And how did you participate in divestment?

WW: Divestment. (coughs) excuse me. We had to come up with the facts sheet on um what really sort of spelled out what South Africa was all about. And At the time we had this campaign against Chester Crocker. As I said earlier Chester Crocker was that ambassador for South Africa who was constantly apologizing and we sort of knew that if we got a list of people, companies, that had been a part of propping up the South African government we could get at them by exposing their companies and letting shareholders know that if you have an interest in these companies and they are involved in South Africa then this is what you're doing. So we would have these fact sheets along with how a lot of this stuff is unfair. And of course Crocker's position was if you got rid of a lot of these companies then you would cause the problem to get even worse. That was his position. And of course being in contact with um some of the apartheid leadership—anti-apartheid leadership in South Africa they would say " Well it can't get worse than it already is." So they would say continue the struggle for divestment. There were a lot of universities and companies that said " Yes that has to stop" but they had people like the Reverend Leon Suliivan here who was against it and um actively campaigned against it and um well I think our voices were a little more powerful than his because a lot of what was going on in South Africa was coming more and more to the fore front. And people were able to actually see it and when it happened people would raise a lot of questions and when they would raise the questions the answers you know they were given just didn't hold water.

LD: Um. Alright so uh what were your feelings about Harold- Washington being elected?

WW: I think when Harold was elected um he um really, really made people see what the possibilities were in terms of addressing—one thing people always put out front, Chicago's not ready for black mayor. And this word: qualified. Is he qualified? And looking at Harold, I had heard Harold speak before and I knew he was a very brilliant politician. He was a scholar, actually. I had heard him address problems. But it was- it was something to watch him on television with young Dailey and Jane Bryne discussing the issues or debating the issues. I had never seen a more aggressive debater than Harold-Washington. Harold knew the ins and out of both city government and state government. And of course Bryne and Dailey were just hanging on so with Harold it was like "hmm I guess he is qualified." You know, so threw that out the window. Of course he's qualified. Is the city ready? Well when we looked at what happened after the debates, and after Bryne and Dailey were defeated. When we looked at what happened with Epton. That of course left the city with a huge black eye because some of the same things happened during the campaign for Washington that happened with Barack Obama for president. Umm a lot of people, whites, came out and said "well I can't vote for him because he's black, not because he;s not qualified, it's because he's black." Of course with Epton, there was a huge turn out with Epton democrats who crossed the line rather than vote for Harold. So huge black eye. And with that that made the victory for Washington even better because you are going to some people's doors who are white some of them actually said well I've been a democrat all my life and I'm not going to stop being a democrat. He's got my vote. So it wasn't all bad. To hear that it would give you a sense of hope and that change is possible.

LD: What happened in 1987 that made you decide to stop being active with the movement?

WW: ’87 was a time when um I think a lot of us um I won’t say we had sort of gotten ourselves worked to the point where we got too tired to be a part of it. It was just at the time, my son, I think he was in high school at the time. Working, you know sometimes twelve hours a day. You realize they’re going to be gone after awhile. And what will be my role because We used to run from one end of the country to the next and sometimes we’d take him with us. And my daughter was born in 1980 and we just sort of realized somebody’s got to stay here. You know, and then for a long time, you know, we just sort of, I won’t say didn’t put them first but um for a long time either they were with us and we weren’t doing the kinds of things that we needed to do with them for a long time that sort of went around in my head and I’m going well I got to slow down. After ’87 when Harold passed away we had already sort of traded in the anti-apartheid movement for the independent movement and local politics and sometimes politics had had national repercussions. We continued to monitor South Africa. There was a huge trade union meeting in Cuba. I got a chance to go to Cuba to actually witness this. I had never seen anything like this in my life. There were trade unionists there from all over the world and I had never really to witness Cubans in contact with other people but there, there were South Africans, black South Africans, um there people there from the Middle East, there were people there from all of South Ameica, Mexico. And just to witness it was truly something that would make you stand up and think what is it their saying that is going against what we’re doing in the US and of course, we got an ear full and getting that

earful you sort of realize well we need to take a second long hard look at how we need to work. It was something that um I still think about and in doing that I realize now that I'm much older you know can't get out like I used to. (laughs) but nevertheless, I can still be active.

LD: Absolutely. Um so if you were to go back and change anything about your anti-apartheid activism what would it be and why? Why is that?

WW: I would probably speak a little more. I've never been a person who wanted to be in the front to speak. Often times I would be like that background. The person in the background to speak or to help another person line up the way they should speak. I also had to play a role in telling my good friend, Ranell, to make himself a little less visible. Which was painful but he understood it.

LD: Why-why did you have to do that?

WW: Well because there was a woman that wanted to speak and he felt as chairperson he should not not speak you know. And we had (laughs) a long discussion on the 47 el platform and it lasted about two hours. And um afterwards, we both went home and a few hours later he called and said "Now, how did I get to be that way? (laughs) clearly, I'm wrong about this." And he said he was sorry. And the person the woman who wanted to speak did speak because it was important for us to get it right.

LD: And who was that woman- if you don't

WW: I believe it was Leona Cummins. I think it was Leona Cummins and it was kind of a I won't say bad blood but it was something that could have turned out to be a little bitter if we hadn't corrected it so we did and of course, we got to doing things the way we normally did.

LD: How do you think your activism affected your married life?

WW: (laughs) I think it supported it to the max because both of us got in at the same time and both of us sort of realized that we had to do more than just watch it on T.V. or read about it in the paper. Uh we had to be a part of it. Both of us sort of realized that we got more uh of an education as activists than we did when we were going to school. Because often times we would say and do things in school that we had already thought through, been through. Even when it came to writing papers. All of that stuff came in very,very handy. And we even saw that as a part of being active because what we write- what we wrote was read by our professors then um they would probably have some thinking on it also. So and that was also part of the movement. (laughs)

LD: Yeah that actually brings me to my next question how did your education affect your activism as well?

WW: um I always say to people that when I final got my education- well the extent of my education as it is now. I saw it as a lot of fun and me being able to speak to younger people, even in the classroom setting and to offer my experience as being someone who's been out there and meeting and doing and talking to people probably more so than a lot of younger people and to sort of use that as a way of saying to them you know it's one thing to be human but it's another thing to express your humane side. And to be humane is the ultimate goal. And you really have to see it that way cause if you don't see it that way then it's like cheating in a sense. You know, I mean you go to school and you become and you do all of these things and is it just for personal growth or is it for human growth? so that's the way I would see it.

LD: How do you think your activism has affected your life today?

WW: Today I'm not as angry as I was. Um I'm very ,very pleased with the way I carry myself as a human. Which is something that I think allowed me to read more and to understand that um it's for-for-for-for- peace of mind it's to look at the world as it is and to be able to interpret it and um understand not that you're going to go out there and change it over night. It's something that had driven a lot people to an early grave. Um it's one thing to see it and it's another thing to understand just how much of it you are going to change. Especially, in a classroom with a bunch of middle school students you have to pick and choose your fights and you have to be very strategic because if you, for lack of a better phrase, if you shoot from the hip you may not get the effect that you want so you have to really, really be careful with it. And me being an activist over the years has sort

of allowed me to understand that just because there's truth doesn't mean you can make it happen you know over night. I mean, Truth? There's a lot of truths out there. Just as there are people who are fighting for the truth there are a lot of crooks in the world and they're just as crooked now as ever have been. So you have to be really, really careful out there. You really do.

LD: Um where were you and how did you feel when Mandela was released?

WW: I was probably in front of my television waiting to see him actually walk free. I do remember watching him walk with a group of people when he was released. And thinking back on that petition campaign to free Nelson Mandela. Thinking back on that petition campaign to expel South Africa from the UN. And thinking back on all of those things I'd done with NAIMSAL and realizing that all of that was a part of his release and feeling pretty good about it. But I was most likely watching this on television. I didn't get to see him until he actually came here. And um

LD: And did you go to see him?

WW: mhmm yeah. He spoke here at Plumber's Union Hall. I didn't go to the big meeting in Detroit. My wife did. Um and um a lot of my friends went to that. I'm still sort of a little apprehensive about large crowds. I don't really like very, very large crowds. If necessary I can brave large crowds but I didn't have to. So I got a chance to see him when he was here.

LD: Why didn't you ever go to South Africa?

WW: I'd always wanted to go to South Africa. As a matter of fact, when my wife went she was trying to talk me into going. I had always said that I wanted to go to Africa um but I think I was a little tired at the time I had been places and maybe it was the plane rides. I think the last long plane ride I did was to Hawaii. And that plane ride really really made me kind of tired of travel.

LD: Why did you go to Hawaii?

WW: Oh! That's a good one!

Both laugh

WW: um Lisa and some friends of ours-

LD: Lisa Brock?

WW: Lisa Brock. Yes. Um got together and decided since my wife and I had been so active we had never had a honeymoon. And it was our 25th anniversary and they got together and raised some money and told us "have a honeymoon".

LD: Aw, that's sweet.

WW: You know so we went to Hawaii. Ran into some friends there, didn't know they were there. But we had a chance to talk to them. It was pretty interesting. Pretty interesting.

LD: How did your activism affect your social life?

WW: Uh (laughs) it. We found ways to be social with people who were a part of the movement I'll say. Often times, we would realize and sort of just say hey we need to sort of have a get together here. For those backyard picnics that we used to have for South Africa in the name of NAIMSAL we drew um a lot of um elected officials who really didn't come to speak but who to come to give their support. People like, Senator Simon, Carol Braun, Danny Davis, Chewey Garcia. They would come you know and realize that well this is a group that is doing work around South Africa. They wouldn't come and give us a whole bunch of speeches they would just come and grab some food. I'd be submerged in smoke. I was the cook. (Laughs) That was a part of our social life. I mean We would have people from I think it was Actor's Equity?

LD: Actor's Equity. Sure.

WW: People who were actors and actresses, some people who were singers they would come by to entertain us. Had huge dinners. We used to have dinners at this place let me see we had at this little place called Venzance I think Venzance is something else now. Um It's a nice place. But um we used to have annual dinners and we would socialize at

those. but um Often times, when we would have conferences we would find ways to go to local bars. To laugh and talk with international guests sometimes. One such guest Lisa called her Lindaway. Lindaway I believe was the ambassador to some I believe it may be Germany. I'm not sure but Lindaway I believe she taught somewhere in Ohio. She's from South Africa. She would often ask to go places, when she would come in. We would take them out to little Juke Joints. You know. Laugh and talk and reminisce about some things. We found ways to be sociable. Sometimes it was just someone's house. We would put on some music but at the time there was a big thing about big risk. That was a card game. And I was dying to learn to play the game and as soon as I learned how to play the game they stopped playing it. So I didn't get a chance to actually show my skills. So um yeah we were sociable.

LD: Sounds like it. So who were some of the people that you became friends with in the movement hat you still keep in contact with today? Obviously Renall is uh

WW: Oh yeah. Frank Chapman. Frank Chapman. It was so funny dealing with Frank. Frank grew up I believe it was St. Louis. When we got to know- when we first met him. He was coming to Chicago for a dinner for NAIMSAL as a matter of fact. And he came with about 14 people. And at the time we had just moved into our house and we didn't have a lot of furniture and so most of the people he brought just sort of slept on our floor. And um yeah he's in some of those pictures that I have. And we're still friends as a matter of fact I just called him this week. He's in St. Louis visiting his mother. So um he's one. Of course Charlene Mitchell, Angela Davis. Some have passed away like Henry

Winston, Claude Lightfoot, Sylvia Woods they've passed away, Ishmael Florey he passed away. Ishmael- I believe he was 95 when he passed away. But um very,very strong person and really, really kept everyone focused. You couldn't be in the same room with him and not be focused. That was him.

LD: Um so is there anything else that you would like to share with the archives? Any personal story that you have in regards to the movement that you think that archives would like to hear about?

WW: Well we often look back on the times when we first became active. And one of the things that concerns me now is that we tend to not have the kind of activisms that we had years ago. And often times when I speak to people that I grew up in the movement with they are often saying that if we had a movement a lot of what we're facing now would get the proper- I mean, people would actually focus on it and actually try to find answers to those problems. Often times when we think about the problems that we're facing. Of course jobs, unemployment is something that was always a part of our discussions and today it just seems like the ball has been dropped. And if the ball has been dropped those who will continue turning the clock back will see it as a time to actually to continue turning the clocks back and of course we have high hopes that the younger generation of people sees a lot of this. And where as they are not as active, visibly active, as a lot of us when we were growing up, they do have a sense of what needs to be done and um a sense of what's fair. And saying that, I think that there's one word tends to bare it all and that's environmentalism. I think the younger people today are more concerned, and rightfully

so, that the environmentalist movement has to become a reality because if it doesn't then all of what we've fought for is not going to mean anything. It's just going to be a part of what's going to be on the trash heap. That is it.

LD: Alright well that's about it for our time.

Both laugh.

WW: Alright.

LD: But thank you. you're great. I really appreciate it. I'm just going to turn this off now.