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Interview with Willie Williamson

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1 **Lisa Duke**
2 **Oral history**

3

4

5

Transcription: Willie Williamson

6

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

8 Willie Williamson: Willie Williamson

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

11 WW: About 20 years.

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

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

14 LD: Great. What year were you born in?

15 WW: I was born in 1948.

16 LD: and where were you raised?

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

19 LD: And where were you raised?

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

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

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

24 LD What year was your father born?

25 WW: 1912

26 LD : Where was your mother born

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

29

30 LD: And what year was your mother born?

31

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

33

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

35 WW: Yes. Um She does have Native American blood. Um she had several last names.

36 The first last name that I know of was Hiblet. Hiblet was her last name before she moved

37 in with the family that raised her and the family that raised her their last name was

38 Applewhite.

39

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

41

42 WW: My mother named me. Um I know that my middle name comes from the husband

43 of the first (family) that raised her. His first name was Joe and my middle name is Joe.

44 And I guess that was my mother's way of honoring um the person that raised her. By

45 giving part of his name to me.

46

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

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

51

52 LD: People would call you William Williamson?

53

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

56

57 LD: No. What is your earliest memory?

58

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

67

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

69

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

80

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

82 WW: Creosote?

83 LD: Creosote

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

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

86

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

93 LD: What role did religion play in your childhood?

94

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

101

102 LD: Why did they think it was strange?

103

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

111

112 LD: Who was your favorite teacher and why?

113

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

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

123

124 LD: Oh Really?

125

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

132

133 LD: There was nine?

134

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

139 LD: So who made the rules of the house?

140

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

145

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

147

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

158

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

161

162 WW: The Jim Crowe?

163

164 LD: Mhmm. Yeah

165

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

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

191

192 LD: When did you first learn of Apartheid?

193

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

200

201 LD: Where were you going at this time?

202

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

204

205 LD: Kay

206

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

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

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

222

223 LD: You did.

224

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

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

242

243 LD: So how did you meet your wife?

244

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

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

259

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

261

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

263

264 LD: In Grenada?

265

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

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

280

281 LD: So um Why did you become an activist?

282

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

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

313

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

316

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

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

338

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

341

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

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

355

356 LD:Right.

357

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

360

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

362

363 WW: Mhmm.

364

365 LD: um What other movements did you participate in?

366

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

380

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

383

384 WW: NAIMSAL

385

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

388

389 WW: Yes.

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

391

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

397

398 LD: Oh Yeah? What was that?

399

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

405

406 LD: Okay, so my next question was what was your role in the organization? (both laugh)

407 But you don't necessarily know what you would have called yourself.

408

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

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

414

415 LD: What made you choose NAIMSAL over other groups?

416

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

423

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

425

426 WW: I was horrified.

427

428 LD: Oh really?

429

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

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

439

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

442

443 WW: I think they were very, very horrible.

444

445 LD: Yeah.

446

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

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

463

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

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

472

473 LD: Well somebody who crosses a picket line.

474

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

479

480 LD: And how did you participate in divestment?

481

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

502

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

504 WW: I think when Harold was elected um he um really, really made people see what the
505 possibilities were in terms of addressing—one thing people always put out front,
506 Chicago's not ready for black mayor. And this word: qualified. Is he qualified? And
507 looking at Harold, I had heard Harold speak before and I knew he was a very brilliant
508 politician. He was a scholar, actually. I had heard him address problems. But it was- it
509 was something to watch him on television with young Dailey and Jane Bryne discussing
510 the issues or debating the issues. I had never seen a more aggressive debater than Harold-
511 Washington. Harold knew the ins and out of both city government and state government.
512 And of course Bryne and Dailey were just hanging on so with Harold it was like “hmm I
513 guess he is qualified.” You know, so threw that out the window. Of course he's qualified.
514 Is the city ready? Well when we looked at what happened after the debates, and after
515 Bryne and Dailey were defeated. When we looked at what happened with Epton. That of
516 course left the city with a huge black eye because some of the same things happened
517 during the campaign for Washington that happened with Barack Obama for president.
518 Umm a lot of people, whites, came out and said “well I can't vote for him because he's
519 black, not because he;s not qualified, it's because he's black.” Of course with Epton,
520 there was a huge turn out with Epton democrats who crossed the line rather than vote for
521 Harold. So huge black eye. And with that that made the victory for Washington even
522 better because you are going to some people's doors who are white some of them actually
523 said well I've been a democrat all my life and I'm not going to stop being a democrat.
524 He's got my vote. So it wasn't all bad. To hear that it would give you a sense of hope and
525 that change is possible.
526

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

529

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

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

554

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

557

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

563

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

565

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

572

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

574

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

579

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

581

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

591

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

594

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

605

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

607

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

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

623

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

625

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

633

634 LD: And did you go to see him?

635

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

641

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

643

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

649

650 LD: Why did you go to Hawaii?

651

652 WW: Oh! That's a good one!

653 Both laugh

654 WW: um Lisa and some friends of ours-

655

656 LD: Lisa Brock?

657

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

661

662 LD: Aw, that's sweet.

663

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

667

668 LD: How did your activism affect your social life?

669

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

680

681 LD: Actor's Equity. Sure.

682

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

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

698

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

701

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

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

714

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

718

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

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

736

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

738 Both laugh.

739 WW: Alright.

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

741