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Interview with Danny Davis

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1 Terence Sims: My name is Terence Sims and your name sir for the record.

2 Danny Davis: Danny middle initial K Davis.

3 TS: It is May 10th, 2010, the interview is being conducted at the Chicago office of Danny Davis.
4 What is your occupation sir?

5 DD: I am a member of the United States House of Representatives, so I guess if I had to list an
6 occupation technically, it would be politician. And if I wanted to try to dress it up a little bit I'd
7 probably say I was an elected official. But the reality is you don't get to be elected officials if
8 you don't do politics. So they kinda like love and marriage, they go together like a horse and
9 carriage.

10 TS: (laughs)

11 DD: And you can't have one without the other. I'm amazed, quite frankly, when I hear people
12 say well I'm not a politician, I'm an elected official, which is an indication that they think there
13 is something wrong with being a politician, and I feel quite sorry for them because it means they
14 don't really understand. We have one of the most civilized approaches to making public
15 decisions that exists on the face of the earth. And the fact that we can argue, and debate, and
16 discuss, and still make public decisions, and not kill each other and shoot each other, and
17 denigrate each other anymore than what we do, I think, is a real testament to our system of
18 politics and public policy decision making. So my colleagues who try to shy away from calling
19 themselves politicians—

20 TS: (laughs)

21 DD:—I, quite frankly, feel sorry for them. So I'm a politician—

22 TS: All right

23 DD: —and that's what I do

24 TS: Okay, how long have you held this position?

25 DD: I have been elected official now for 30 years. I first got elected in 1979, when I ran for
26 Chicago city council and was fortunate enough to bring my opponent, who was an incumbent, to
27 a run off. And then in the runoff election I got elected, and I've been elected to something ever
28 since.

29 TS: Okay

30 DD: Although, I've won offices, I've lost them, I've campaigned, I've spent a lot of money, I've
31 spent a lot of time, energy, and effort. I've neglected a lot of people that I love, I've neglected a
32 lot of people that I like and would love to have spent more time with them. But the necessities of

33 politics and the desire to do it kind of forced me to do what I do. So for the last 40 years I've
34 basically worked 60-70 hours a week. Uh, (phone rings) I don't know what an eight hour day is,
35 haven't known what that was in a long time.

36 TS: (laughs; phone rings)

37 DD: There's no such thing as an eight hour day in my life. I usually work from about eight
38 o'clock in the morning to nine or ten o'clock at night. And that's six, seven days a week every
39 week.

40 TS: Wow. And when did your activism begin?

41 DD: It really started in a real heavy way about 1968. I actually took a job, uh when I finished my
42 masters degree, as executive director of something called the Greater Lawndale Conservation
43 Commission, which was a community organization. From there one thing led to another, and so
44 it's been kind of a continuous merry go-round ever since.

45 TS: And how many years were you an, uh, anti-Apartheid activist?

46 DD: Well I'm still in anti-apartheid activism. We don't see apartheid being as pronounced as we
47 did, especially in relationship to south Africa. But South Africa wasn't the only place where
48 (phone rings) certain forms of apartheid existed. As a matter of fact, they exist in Chicago, they
49 exist in Illinois, they exist in Cook County, they exist in a pronounced way all over the unites
50 states of America. I mean, if you would consider the fact that we 100 members of the united
51 states senate, only one African American or black person, and at the end of the year we won't
52 have any. We will not have a single one. Or if you will consider the fact that Illinois is the only
53 state that has been able to elect a person to the most prestigious position except that of president
54 in the country, since the 1950's, I mean, that is a form of apartheid as far as I'm concerned.
55 When the senate meets and there a hundred people there, not a single solitary one of them will be
56 black. I think that's a system of apartheid. Or if you have Fortune (phone rings) 500 companies
57 and don't have a single black one (phone rings; both laugh) there. Or when you have some of the
58 many meetings and hearings and things that I go to (phone rings) on a daily basis, and sometimes
59 I'm the only black person there. Or if there 200, 300 people in the room, maybe five are African
60 American and the rest are white—

61 TS: Hmmm

62 DD:—umm, that is a form of apartheid. If I go to the black schools around here, where all of the
63 kids are black and most of the teachers are white, young, white people, I think that is a form of
64 apartheid. So if I go to (bumps the table) the banking institute, (phone rings) don't see any
65 African Americans there controlling any of the resources. (phone rings) Or I go to the hedge
66 funds to borrow some money, or I go to the motion (phone rings) picture industry to see who's

67 going to be—acting or in a movie or how much they gonna get. (phone rings) And I notice that
68 black people pretty much come like an old man’s teeth, few and far apart—

69 TS: (laughs)

70 DD: —or they have certain kinds of roles, then all of that to me is apartheid. And so the
71 apartheid movement still exists, and the anti-apartheid movement does not exist to the extent that
72 is should (phone rings) and need to, because the most basic of all human desires known to
73 mankind, or womankind, is the desire to be equal, to be treated, crea—treated equal. To have
74 equal protection under the law, equal opportunity, equal shot at the resources, and that of course
75 does not exist in the united states of America. Nor does it exist practically any place else in the
76 world. I mean, I’ve been to lots of places, not only have I been to South Africa, I’ve been to east
77 Africa, I’ve been to west Africa, I’ve been to the Middle East, I’ve been to the Far East, I’ve
78 been to Europe, I’ve been to a lot of places and I find (phone rings) that conditions are pretty
79 much the same, especially as it relates to people of color.

80 TS: Hmmm

81 DD: I thought the biggest housing projects that existed were in Chicago, Robert Taylor, Henry
82 Horner. I was in Amsterdam, and low and behold, damn, it was the biggest one I had ever seen,
83 (both laugh) so big that it went around.

84 TS: Wow.

85 DD: I’ve been to Europe where black communities have the same conversations, the same issues,
86 same concerns as black people do in the united states. The only difference is that these are black
87 people, or people of color, who migrated from Africa. Whereas you come to Chicago and most
88 of the people of color migrated from Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, wherever they came from
89 other than being anchored here, so the only difference is that rather than being afro-Americans,
90 or African Americans, they are actually European Africans, or people of African heritage who
91 live in Europe. And all the stuff is pretty much the same.

92 TS: Wow. So where would you say the majority of your activism has taken place?

93 DD: Oh, it, it, I mean I’ve spent more time in Chicago than I have any place else, so obviously
94 Chicago would have been the, the (phone rings) lynching pad, or the core place. Uh, (phone
95 rings) but I’ve been arrested in Washington [D.C.] for demonstrating (phone rings) out in front
96 of embassies and things like that. And (phone rings) I’ve been locked up, I remember we were
97 locked up in the South African consulate downtown. We went down there and wouldn’t leave,
98 me and a fellow named Allen Streeter, Charlie Hayes, Buzz Palmer, people I can think of who
99 were there at the time. So, um—it kinda becomes a way of life. It, I’m saying, there different
100 degrees, and, and, and there times when you do more, and there are times when you do less. But
101 once it becomes a part of you, then it is a part of who you are. It’s a part of what you do (phone

102 rings) and you don't need anything special to do it, or anything like that, you just (phone rings)
103 do it. (both laugh) And, and— and, and, and you, you know, we may never get back to, you
104 know, the glory days of free Nelson Mandela. You know, re—revenge Steve Biko, or do
105 whatever, but, you know, long as you know that you're on the track and you are pursuing
106 equality, equal justice, equal opportunity, equal protection, then you have a reason to live, there's
107 a—you have a reason to be. If you're not fighting for freedom and equality then I don't know,
108 what's the point of being here, you know what I mean? You're taking up the air, you're
109 breathing air that somebody else could have, and quite honestly there's no practical purpose for
110 your existence. (both laugh) Cause, I mean, if you are not trying make the world a better place in
111 which to live, I mean to me that's the purpose for living.

112 TS: So let's go back a little bit. In what year were you born?

113 DD: 1941

114 TS: And where were you born?

115 DD: Park Dale, Arkansas.

116 TS: Is that where you were raised?

117 DD: That's where I was raised, um-hm.

118 TS: Where was our mother born?

119 DD: Uh, Alabama

120 TS: And what about your father?

121 DD: Alabama. They and their families actually migrated from Alabama in the early 1900's,
122 because they too were farmers and where they lived the land had been over worked and worn
123 out. So they went to Arkansas looking for new ground, new land to, to cultivate. Uh, so they
124 were part of a migration from Alabama, which was the old southeast, to the southwest were they,
125 they, they—land was more fertile and had not been over used. And , uh, I that's how they all
126 came, and I guess they all settled in the same little town, and eventually, you know, my folks
127 grew up and all of that.

128 TS: Okay.

129 DD: Um-hm

130 TS: So what is your marital status?

131 DD: 40 years, Vera Davis.

132 TS: And do you have any children?

133 DD: Hold on a minute let me see I got (phone rings)—[interview stopped due to a disturbance
134 outside of the conference room where interview was taking place]

135 TS: All right, So how many children do you all have?

136 DD: Well I have, uh, two sons, (audio interference) Jonathan and Stacy, I have three
137 grandchildren, and a host of godchildren. Eons—

138 TS: (laughs)

139 DD: —more than I can name.

140 TS: Okay. What is your earliest memory?

141 DD: My earliest memories, probably would be, and, and some of it is kinda vague, and I would
142 imagine that some of it really has to do with conversation, but I do kinda remember my mother
143 (audio interference) turning around with a tea kettle of hot water. I was a little crawling baby,
144 and when she turned around I was right there and the water scalded me right here. (rubs
145 forehead) And, um, of course, uh, my grandmother was also living with us at that time, and so
146 there was just a big commotion in the house. Now, maybe I remember that— (both laugh) and
147 maybe I remember the conversation about it. Understand?

148 TS: Um-hm

149 DD: But, but that seems to be—and then quite frankly, I remember things like walking to school,
150 I was like five years old with my sisters (audio interference) because we lived quite a ways from
151 the school and there was only one way to get there and of course that was to walk. And they
152 started to take me (phone rings) when I was that age, and I can remember us walking down the
153 road and different things happening, uh, (phone rings) that was just part of the conversation.

154 TS: Okay. How many siblings do you have?

155 DD: I have ten brothers and sisters.

156 TS: Okay. And, so, what was growing up in your—

157 DD: It was—

158 TS:—what was it like growing up?

159 DD: —it was fun, lots of fun. We (audio interference) had a big family, big, big rambling house,
160 we worked hard. Uh, we were disciplined, we went to church we went to school (phone rings)
161 we had a lot of hope. We (phone rings) didn't have any money, but we had the idea that life was
162 going to be better than what it was. And so we grew up (phone rings) with that kinda feeling, as a
163 matter of fact, seven of us I think went to University of Arkansas-Pine Bluff. Let me see,

164 Elmarine went, Chris didn't go she got married, then I went, Ceola, Barbara Ann, Floretta, Jesse,
165 Willie, my two nephews who actually lived with us a while, so there were actually nine of us—

166 TS: Wow.

167 DD:—out of, out of my immediate family who went to University of Arkansas-Pine Bluff.

168 TS: Wow. So what was he neighborhood like?

169 DD: Neighborhood wasn't a neighborhood, we lived on a farm, which means that the closest
170 neighbors were half a mile, a mile away. But we lived in a community. The town was closely
171 knit, we went to church, uh, the little town had about 250 people in it, and that was the town.
172 (phone rings) And so you always looked forward to seeing kids when you were at school (phone
173 rings) cause you didn't see anybody if you didn't.

174 TS: (laughs)

175 DD: And you looked forward on the weekend, especially during the working season, because
176 you wouldn't—you would often go the whole week, or part of the week, and wouldn't come in
177 contact with anybody other (phone rings) than members of your family unless somebody came
178 by to borrow something or came to visit. But it was fine.(phone rings) I mean we thought it
179 wasn't at the time—

180 TS: (laughs)

181 DD: —but as it turned out it was fine. I had a pretty decent childhood, didn't get too many
182 lickings, nothing, and pretty much always was fairly reasonable.

183 TS: Okay. What kinda games did you and your siblings play?

184 DD: Everything. (audio interference) Different people played different things. I liked baseball,
185 basketball, softball, and those were the main things. My sister was a star, one of them, basketball
186 star. None of my brothers, we played, but none of us were superstars or anything. We, you know,
187 people went hunting and fishing, all that, and we were younger we played things like hide and
188 seek, honey and the bee ball I can't see y'all, (unintelligible)—

189 TS: (laughs)

190 DD: —so we, we were pretty normal.

191 TS: Okay

192 DD: Church, school (phone rings), community, those were the essence of our being. (phone
193 rings)

194 TS: What were some of your interests during your elementary years?

195 DD: Reading, I've always been interested in history, I've always been interested in knowing
196 things, and I've always been interested in the why of things. Uh, growing up as a kid I read every
197 moment that I could get. (phone rings) I read hundreds of books, we didn't even have books,
198 (phone rings) we wasn't reading books I'd read the Bible. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers,
199 Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Esther, Job, Ecclesiastes, Psalms, Songs of Solomon,
200 anything that I could get my hands on, newspapers. I used to work for a guy really because he
201 would save me his newspapers. And quite frankly, he didn't have to pay me I'd go clean his yard
202 and stuff like that, but the discovered that I liked to read and he'd save me his newspapers. Uh,
203 so I'd have a stack of newspapers to take home with me when I finished with his yard. Biggest
204 fight I ever had was a couple guys who lived not far from me, decided that they would tear up
205 my newspapers one Saturday when we were walking home. And quite frankly, I beat the hell out
206 of both of them, and on was actually bigger than I was and the other was my size.

207 TS: Hm

208 DD: I just became irate that they would tear up my newspapers, I couldn't believe it. But what
209 they were doing, they really called themselves attacking my value system. And it wasn't so much
210 just the newspaper, but I knew that they were attacking something that I believed in. And I
211 believed in reading and having knowledge, (phone rings) and knowing, and knowing what was
212 going on in the world beyond (phone rings) where we were. So reading has always been, you
213 know, (phone rings) the real deal with me. Music, you know, hey it's cool but (phone rings)
214 reading has really been the thing.

215 TS: All right. Uh, let's see , what path, uh, did you see yourself following once you graduated
216 high school?

217 DD: I knew I was going to college. I mean there wasn't much else for me to do at that particular
218 time except go to college. I went to college on my 16th birthday, so I couldn't go to the military, I
219 couldn't, I wasn't old enough, my mother wouldn't sign. (phone rings) I wasn't going to just
220 stick around doing nothing, doing farm work where I lived, so I knew I was going to college.

221 TS: So what kinda value did your parents place on formal education during your upbringing?

222 DD: Strong values, uh, hard work, anything worth having is worth working for, if you believe in
223 yourself you could accomplish whatever it is you set out to do, and that you ought to have faith
224 in some external force, something outside of yourself. And if you did that you'd be alright.

225 TS: And what were your feelings on education at the time?

226 DD: Same thing

227 TS: Okay

228 DD: I've been heavy in education as long as I can remember.

229 TS: All right. Who were some of your mentors growing up?

230 DD: Uh, same people that I mentioned before in terms of, uh , early interactions with all these
231 people. People at church, people at school, my uncle who was a school superintendent, my daddy
232 who was a great story teller, great reader, my mama who was just a precious woman, my aunt
233 who put on all the little programs at church that we used to be in, plays, I had a bunch of them .

234 TS: Okay. So how old were you when you first became aware of segregation in America?

235 DD: Um, I guess, five, two, whatever, soon as I knew white people went in one place, black
236 people went in the other one. Black people went to one school, black people drank out of one
237 fountain white people drank out of another one, so everything was segregated when I was kid
238 growing up.

239 TS: Uh, when did you first experience racism personally?

240 DD: Uh, in terms of remembering it, um, it's hard to say—it's hard to say—

241 TS: Okay

242 DD: —because I've always known that it existed. So trying to pinpoint some incident or so forth
243 is kinda hard.

244 TS: As a native of Arkansas how did the desegregation of Little Rock Central High affect your
245 life at the time?

246 DD: Well, it was very exciting because at the time Little Rock was being decentralized I was a
247 freshman in college. And of course I was only about 50 miles from Little Rock and so every day
248 that was the hot thing going on in our mind. We knew what was going on in Little Rock and we
249 could hardly wait to get to the news or to the radio or—see what was going on with Minniejean
250 Brown, Ernie Green, all of these people that I know. I didn't know them then, but we were all —
251 we've met and been in places together. Matter of fact, Ernie Green is a friend of mine.
252 Minniejean Brown and I spoke down at Southern Illinois University one year, cause she went to
253 Southern—SIU—in Carbondale—

254 TS: Okay.

255 DD: —after she left Arkansas. And I've been in places with several of the others and that kinda
256 thing. So they were contemporaries of mine, I was just a year beyond them because I was
257 freshman in college when they, uh, went to, uh, Little Rock Central.

258 TS: Wow.

259 DD: Um-hm.

260 TS: Wow. What kinda Civil Rights activism were you involved in at the time?

261 DD: We were just involved in (audio interference) student protests. We were, I mean, college
262 campuses were hotbeds of protest, we were involved where we were. Matter of fact, our college
263 president invited Rev. Martin Luther King to be our commencement speaker in 1958. And then
264 we had turmoil on the campus because the board of trustees and legislature were constantly
265 threatening to fire him for doing that—

266 TS: (laughs)

267 DD: —and eventually they did fire him. But we did all the regular stuff, we didn't have—our
268 stuff wasn't nearly as hot as it was in South Carolina, and Alabama, and Mississippi. Arkansas
269 was kind of a more moderate South.

270 TS: Oh okay.

271 DD: It was southwest, I was more fringe South than the southeast. So things weren't nearly as
272 bad, we interacted with white people when I was a kid. Even though we were segregated and
273 they went one way we went others, we had white people that we interacted with everyday,
274 worked with. We had one of the little white boys would come to our house all the time, John
275 David Gryce, who was, you know, just hung around our house all the time. His parents and my
276 daddy were good friends, even though my father was older (phone rings) than his father. And he
277 was kind of a mentor of types to them. So, you know, we, we, we did alright, every once in a
278 while there would be a little racial stuff flaring up, but not often. It generally centered around—
279 there's one black fellow in our town who didn't cotton to taking a backseat. And they kinda had
280 dusty roads and often times white people would pass black people on the roads, so if somebody
281 had to get dusty —

282 TS: (laughs)

283 DD:—black people (phone rings) was—Charlie would never let anybody pass him. Whether it
284 was in his car or in his wagon—

285 TS: (laughs)

286 DD: —you did now pass Mr. Charlie Lewis. Whether you was white, black, green, purple, polka
287 dot so once in a while there would be a little skirmish between Mr. Charlie and some white
288 person that tried to pass him. But aside from that, every once in a while, teenage boys may kinda
289 get into a little ruckus or something, and that would generally get talked out by our parents. And
290 so, besides that we didn't have any of the race kinda things, really, where I lived growing up.

291 TS: Okay. When did you first come to Chicago?

292 DD: Fresh out of college 1961.

293 TS: And what prompted you to move to Chicago?

294 DD: Job opportunity, family was here, and I didn't have any money but I had two sisters who
295 lived here and I knew I could live with them until I got a job, got some money, and that's what I
296 did.

297 TS: How was Chicago different from the Arkansas town you grew up in when you first arrived?

298 DD: Well there were obviously more people, but for me it wasn't to different because I had a
299 level of intelligence that I knew about (both laugh) what the big city was and how different it
300 was, and that kinda thing. So it was no more than what I expected. Uh, I think thing I had to get
301 used to the most was the fact that people would vamp on each other who were even—the notion
302 of taking advantage of each other was something that I (phone rings) was not accustomed to. I'm
303 saying where family members would take advantage (phone rings) of family members.

304 TS: Um-hm

305 DD: People who are supposed to be friends would take (phone rings) advantage of friends. And
306 it took a little getting used to from that vantage point, that's not something that (phone rings) we
307 did very much where I lived, it's not something that you saw. (phone rings)

308 TS: Okay. What was Chicago like during the Civil Rights Movement? (phone rings)

309 DD: Chicago was hot and heavy, heavy, it was interesting, it was exciting, you didn't want to go
310 to sleep at night because you might think you going to miss something. I mean, you liked
311 walking up and down the street listening to Martin Luther King's voice blaring out of the record
312 shops, and out of the—whatevers, where people—there were meetings going on all the time. Uh,
313 we tried to emulate speaking and talking like Dr. King, it was just a great place to be. We
314 participated in marches and demonstrations, we used to go to the meetings with Fred Hampton,
315 and Mark Clark, and, and, and the Panthers, and other groups that weren't as well known as the
316 Panthers. So it was a very exciting time. It was wonderful, magnificent.

317 TS: Uh, what effect did the Panthers have on the black community at the time?

318 DD: Oh, I think the Panthers helped to raise awareness and promote sense of urgency, and of
319 course, after Fred Hampton, Mark Clark, got killed it helped to politically organize the black
320 community in Cook County. Because we put out of office the, uh, State's Attorney who was a
321 Democrat, and actually elected a Republican and that was kinda like unheard of. We put
322 Hanrahan out of office and elected a Republican, I'm trying to think of his name right now, but,
323 that, that started, quite frankly the independent political movement in black life in Cook County.

324 TS: How did you hear of, uh, Fred Hampton's assassination?

325 DD: Uh, I was, uh—actually I knew Fred Hampton and, uh, I think it was in the winter time.
326 And I think uh—the news, we just heard on the news. Matter of fact I went over to the house the
327 next day. Me and a friend of mine, a fellow named Frank Lipscomb, after we got out of school. I

328 was teaching school at the time, and so Frank and I went over when we left school that day and
329 walked over and looked around, and saw the tape and all that stuff, and the mattresses with the
330 blood on them, all of that. That's—I mean, I was not a member of the Panthers but we were
331 going to meetings and that kind of thing at the time. And so, I kinda—we all liked to hear Fred
332 talk. Fred was a heavy rapper you know—

333 TS: (laughs)

334 DD: —and he often talked (phone rings) about the apparitionist business, greedy apparitionist
335 business people (both laugh). So that was kinda cool.

336 TS: Uh (phone rings), how did the, uh, assassination of Mart—uh, Mart—uh, excuse me of
337 Martin Luther King affect you?

338 DD: I couldn't believe it. Uh, we were teaching school, I was still teaching school at the time and
339 our kids would be restless, and we, you know, uh— but we couldn't believe it in terms of it
340 happening. It was shocking. It had a profound impact. I was uh—had mixed emotions about the
341 riots and about people tearing up things and burning them down. And, you know, whether I
342 wanted that to happen, or whether I wanted to try and convince people that that was not going to
343 solve the problem (phone rings). But, uh, it was very impactful—very impactful.

344 TS: Uh, what were you feelings on what transpired at the Democratic National Convention in
345 1968?

346 DD: Well, only thing I have a problem I had was that I wasn't down there—

347 TS: (laughs)

348 DD:—I mean, you couldn't hardly get down there, but I really wanted to be there every day
349 (both laugh)

350 TS: Can uh,—although you weren't down there can you describe uh, what your memories are of
351 it?

352 DD: Well, I—I mean I remember the whole thing and uh, the—I thought it was a good thing
353 that, that—because all of this was the way that I felt. And while there were some things that I
354 was not as into or immediately involved in, I was really just getting into it, you understand—

355 TS: Uh-huh

356 DD:—I was a young school teacher, finishing up graduate school, that kinda thing, and working
357 two, three jobs and all that kinda stuff all at the same time. So I didn't have as much time (audio
358 interference) to be engaged. Actually I had three jobs and was going to graduate school (audio
359 interference) and, but I was into what I could be into, and that was my crowd, that was my group.

360 TS: Uh, what subject did you teach?

361 DD: I taught, I've taught everything from kindergarten to graduate school. And in the Chicago
362 Public Schools I taught Social Studies and Language Arts.

363 TS: Okay—of the noted assassinations of the time, such as Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, the
364 Kennedy brothers, and Fred Hampton which assassination, uh, greatest—had the greatest affect
365 on you personally?

366 DD: Quite frankly, I think that Martin Luther King's assassination had the greatest impact, and
367 I'm gonna have to cut because I've gotta, I've gotta see some of these people who are out here
368 waiting. And then I've gotta fund raiser I've gotta get to at 5:30 downtown, but uh—(phone
369 rings) it was the Martin Luther King assassination that had the greatest impact. Because Dr. King
370 had reached a level of being, a level of prominence—(phone rings) uh, we had so much hope
371 placed (phone rings) in Dr. King in terms of what he was and what he meant and what he would
372 be. But quite frankly, all of them had profound impact on me and on the things I was involved in
373 and engaged in, and probably pushed my involvement to a greater level.

374 TS: Okay, uh, how much more time do you have?

375 DD: I will be able to take about five minutes.

376 TS: Okay, uh, let me see—when did you become interested in politics?

377 DD: I've always been interested in politics once I defined what politics was. I was not interested
378 in electoral politics, but once I studied political science in undergraduate school under one of the
379 most, uh, prolific political scientists in America. A guy named Adolf Reed, who at the time was
380 in Arkansas at Pine Bluff, but ultimately went over to the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville,
381 and when he died a few years ago, the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville had a big
382 memorial service for him and that kinda thing. And his son is also a political science professor,
383 and his grandson is also a political science professor, so they both followed in his footsteps.
384 One's down at Bloomington, at Northern, uh, down at Bloomington and the other one is at
385 Columbia. That is his son is at Columbia, his grandson— so I've had a pretty decent
386 understanding of politics for a long time. Politics in reality is all things, all beings, all purposes.
387 Uh, the only politicking doesn't go on is when two people agree all the time, and if two people
388 agree all the time one of them is unnecessary.

389 TS: (laughs)

390 DD: And so, politics is much more than electoral politics, who gets elected, and so on, and so on.
391 There's the politics of everything, politics of education, politics of who gets a kidney and who
392 does not, who gets a heart when there's a need for heart transplantation, who gets scholarships to
393 go to school, why is it some people can and other people can't. And so I've always been
394 interested in the whys of things, why are some people rich and other people poor? Why are some

395 population groups sick and other people seem to be healthy? The why of everything, and politics
396 answers the question of why in many instances. I used to think that public decisions were made
397 on the basis of what was right and what was wrong, what was good (phone rings) and what was
398 bad, but it just didn't seem to fit (both laugh). Then I started studying and trying to find out and I
399 thought that, you know, education would be a big factor and that if people stated goals and
400 objectives and then went in pursuit of those that that might answer some of the questions. And
401 that didn't answer the question for me either, and when I really started looking at politics and
402 discovered that most public policy decisions are made on the basis of what is socially,
403 economically, politically, and sometimes morally acceptable to whoever it is who has the power
404 and the will to decide (phone rings). No more, no less. And that's kinda the way I sum up politics
405 and so I've been interested in that but I was not interested in running for office. When I ran for
406 office I didn't intend to run then, I was chairman of a committee to find a candidate to run for
407 Alderman. We couldn't find anybody so the committee disbanded and uh, eventually I decided
408 so that our efforts wouldn't be in vain that I would run. And that's how I decided to run for
409 elected office and I've been running ever since.

410 TS: Well, all right—

411 DD: All right.

412 TS: That seems a good place—[recording stops]

413 TS: —Okay, lets dive back in. Okay so when did you first hear of Nelson Mandela?

414 DD: Oh I don't know, I've prob—(laughs)—to my recollection I've always known about Nelson
415 Mandela . I mean, I've known that Nelson Mandela was imprisoned and all of that, I guess, from
416 the time that he was imprisoned. I mean I've always been—I was actually a history major in
417 undergraduate school so world events and world history and all those things have always been,
418 you know, just a regular part of my being. So whenever it happened I'm sure I knew about it
419 (laughs).

420 TS: And what were your opinions of him at the time as he was going thru—

421 DD: Oh I thought he was an absolute freedom fighter, crusader, uh—did I necessarily have the
422 prognosis that he would be able to get out and apartheid would be halted to some degree, and
423 he'd become president of the country? No. I, you know, I mean I wasn't that optimistic.
424 Although people who struggle for change have to believe that change will occur and you don't
425 necessarily have a prognosis for when, ,and so you can't put a time frame on it but you always
426 feel that its gonna happen. I mean that's, that's what drives you, that's what keep s you moving,
427 that's what keeps you going. And so, I figured it would happen but I can't say that I knew it
428 would happen when it did or felt that it would. Same as I couldn't predict that Barack Obama
429 would be president, but I often felt that there would be a black person elected to president in this
430 country.

431 TS: Okay, uh when you became an anti-Apartheid activist , uh, what group did you join?

432 DD: Uh, I, I don't know that I was—well I guess I was probably apart of—oh I don't know what
433 the groups were being called or what group I was a member of but I was member.

434 TS: All right, uh, you've mentioned earlier about being arrested can you uh tell me about that
435 experience, about protesting outside the uh South African consulate?

436 DD: Well we were locked into—

437 TS: Oh locked into the—excuse me I'm sorry.

438 DD: —cause we wouldn't leave—

439 TS: Okay.

440 DD:—and uh I remember it was me Allen Streeter, a bunch of people but two people I remember
441 most prominently is Allen Streeter and Charlie Hayes. And, uh we just wouldn't leave (laughs),
442 and so they just locked us up in there. And then ultimately, after periods and periods of time,
443 different people would say ok we'll leave. And ultimately I think they actually — thank you Josie
444 I think I need another

445 Josie: I put one in there.

446 DD: Oh ok, all right cool—ultimately I think Allen Streeter did get, actually go to jail (sips tea)
447 an a few other people. Charlie and I didn't go to jail, we both said we had something else we had
448 to do and we hadn't come down to go to jail. But uh, we— we uh—you know we kinda, we knew
449 everything would be cool, that you know, eventually we was going to get out (sips tea).
450 Generally what they do, I mean like the last time I was arrested we were in front of the uh—oh
451 we were in front of the uh, I think it may have been the Sudanese embassy. And they put
452 handcuffs on us and they took us to jail , booked us, we sat in the cell for maybe an hour and
453 then they let us out. I mean that's kinda the way they do protester (sips tea).

454 TS: All right, uh, what affect did Harold Washington being elected have on the movement?

455 DD: (sips tea) Well the movement quite frankly was going before Harold Washington. The
456 movement drafted Harold Washington in a sense or coerced or embraced Harold Washington to
457 become mayor. And Harold was not necessarily the leader of the movement, uh, there were a
458 lot of different people who would've been instrumental in leading the movement. Lou Palmer
459 was absolutely a leader of the movement.. A woman named Nancy Jefferson was absolutely a
460 leader of the movement. Slim Coleman was absolutely a leader of the movement. Uh, Marion
461 Stamps was absolutely a leader of the movement. There've been different individuals, we had
462 very strong community activists, people like Moe Henry, Moe Fletcher, Illa Daggard, I could just
463 name a whole bunch of them . All of these people were all a part of the movement. The Jesse
464 Jackson piece of the movement. Jesse was a leader of the movement, uh (sips tea), and so the

465 movement was community activists from all over town. Leon Finney, people who said we want
466 something different. And we did a bunch of things then, we boycotted the Chicago fest. Uh, we
467 had meetings at Bethel A.M.E. church, almost every other Saturday we 'd fill the church up. And
468 the movement was looking for a candidate for mayor, as a matter of fact, me and Lou Palmer
469 went and got Mannford Byrd up one night out of the bed to talk to Mannford and ask him if he
470 would run. We asked uh, George Simms who was the superintendant of the police if he would
471 run. We speculated we speculated about a whole bunch of different people but we kinda knew
472 all along that our preferred candidate would be Harold Washington. Harold was the highest
473 profile Black elected official in the town at the time. Harold was a member of the United States
474 House of Representatives (sips tea), nobody else that we would consider had that status. So we
475 knew that Harold was who we wanted, we even had a plebiscite where we had all kinds of
476 people present and speech making and we'd have this all the time. And so, we ultimately got
477 Harold to be the candidate, and Harold ultimately also decided he wanted to be the candidate. So
478 Harold embraced the movement, stimulated the movement, activated the movement. Some
479 people felt that Harold, after he got elected, helped to dismantle the movement, because lots of
480 people now we got Harold we don't need to be part of the movement. That we got the mayor and
481 we don't need to be active, we don't need to be engaged, we don't need to do what we've been
482 doing. So (sips tea) Lou Palmer and a few people like that felt that Harold became a detriment to
483 the movement as opposed to being an asset to the movement.

484 TS: Okay, so where did you come down?

485 DD: (sips tea) I always figured that he was asset to the movement although I do agree with those
486 that suggested that people began to put so much focus on Harold, that many people forgot about
487 the movement. I'm saying after he got elected. It's kinda like in the Bible there's a piece of
488 scripture that says when King Ozai died first I saw the Lord, basically meaning that the people
489 was looking at the king—

490 TS: (laughs)

491 DD: — and overlooking the Lord. And so I think people was looking at Harold and overlooking
492 the movement.

493 TS: Okay

494 DD: Overlooking what it took to create and make Harold.

495 TS: UH, okay, when was your first trip to South Africa ?

496 DD:(sips tea) It was prob—to South Africa it was, I think it was actually in the 1990's. I t was
497 after I went to congress.

498 TS: Okay can you describe this trip for me and your feelings about it.?

499 DD: Oh, I was intrigued, I was uh, not mystified. Uh, the impact on me was about what I had
500 expected it to be., because even— you know if you 're engaged and involved then you kinda
501 know a great deal about things so you can't say that anything is shocking, and by the time I went
502 to South Africa I had been to other places. First place I went to in Africa was actually east
503 Africa, and I went to east Africa in 1975. And I actually spent 30 days in Nairobi, Kenya—
504 [Surveys the pictures on the wall]—I see somebody stole my picture I had of, of the president of
505 Kenya who had liberated Kenya. But there had been liberators before Nelson Mandela, uh,
506 Kenya was liberated. Julius Nyerere was the president of Tanzania, but uh the kinda apartheid
507 didn't exist in those countries that existed in uh Rhodesia, which you know—

508 TS: Yes.

509 DD:—became South Africa..

510 TS: Right. Uh, how did you participate in divestment?

511 DD: (sips tea) Lots of ways, uh, I actually introduced a resolution in the Chicago city council and
512 got it passed, that the city of Chicago would divest itself of doing business with any companies
513 that were doing business with the Apartheid government of South Africa, or with institutions that
514 were doing the same. So I was a uh, you know, anti-Apartheid activist before I got elected to the
515 city council, then after I got elected one of the first resolutions I think I introduced in the city
516 council had to do with the, I think, that the rugby team from South Africa, Reeboks [actually
517 referring to the South African rugby team the Springboks] uh was coming to town. I think
518 introduced a resolution that we shouldn't let them play in Chicago, that kinda stuff. But it was my
519 resolution, I mean it was my ordinance the divested the city of Chicago from doing business with
520 the apartheid government of South Africa. Yeah I was the principle introducer, I was the person
521 that introduced that order.(sips tea).

522 TS: What other South African Apartheid abolitionists have you met?

523 DD: Uh, well of course Bishop Tutu, Winnie Mandela, I've actually visited Winnie Mandela's
524 home, and had several interactions with uh Winnie Mandela. Uh, uh, Sisooli, uh, I've actually
525 visited the ANC Headquarters. And uh people were there, the old bunch, and of course Mbeki.
526 So a number of South Africans uh , whose names and so forth I wouldn't necessarily remember.
527 They were, you know, lesser figures in the government and the leadership of South Africa than
528 nelson Mandela or Mbeki , or Winnie Mandela, or whoever.

529 TS: Was this prior to the end of Apartheid or after?

530 DD: This was uh, during the process and after.

531 TS: Okay,—where were you when you heard Mandela was released from prison?

532 DD: I don't really remember.

533 TS: Uh, can you describe the feelings that you had—

534 DD: I felt uh, just ecstatic, I, I was just overjoyed, almost overwhelmed. Uh, yeah it was hard to
535 believe but it was a good feeling.

536 TS: What about your feelings when you saw him elected as president?

537 DD: Same thing, it was one of the most incredible turnarounds, I think, that uh historically I
538 knew anything about.

539 TS: Uh, how did you react to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report and its
540 conclusions?

541 DD: I thought that it was on target, that it made sense, that it was a good approach to trying to
542 deal with the truth or the reality of what had taken place, but at the same time effectuate some
543 form of reconciliation to the extent that people could still move towards a harmonized
544 relationship.

545 TS: Uh—looking now back what challenges does South Africa face today?

546 DD : Well I think that there are still large numbers of South Africans, especially Black South
547 Africans , who have not gotten filtered into the mainstream, who need opportunities to work, to
548 go to school, housing. So there's still a high level of inequality in South Africa, from an
549 economic vantage point. Uh, sure people are free, they're liberated, they can participate, they can
550 vote, but they don't have the economic freedom that is needed yet.

551 TS: What legislation have you been involved in that addresses these challenges?

552 DD: Well as I indicated earlier, I introduced the legislation in the Chicago city council, when I
553 was a member of the city council, to uh, bar the city from doing business with the apartheid
554 government of South Africa. I was the author of that legislation, that was mine that got passed,
555 and I was, uh, also, uh, supportive of other legislative enactments—I left the city council 1990
556 and went to the county board, which, which means that when the other piece of legislation
557 passed in the city council passed I was gone, I was no longer there, that Dorothy Till man
558 sponsored.

559 TS: Uh, what are some of the fondest memories that you have of the movement that we haven't
560 covered?

561 DD: Well, you know, we just , we participated —I participated in lots of marches and
562 demonstrations and rallies, and quite honestly all of them were, you know, great pieces
563 opportunity. But I think the fondest memories really were the two things in terms of , one the
564 release of Nelson Mandela, and two his being elected the president of the country of South
565 Africa.

566 TS: Uh, looking back would you have done anything differently?

567 DD: Nothing more than maybe spent more time, been more involved, been more engaged.

568 TS: And how has the relationships you formed during the uh—during your involvement in the
569 movement helped you become the person that you are today?

570 DD: Well the relationships were just great. I mean a number of different kinds of people that I
571 got to know and interact with who I probably never would have known had it not been for the
572 anti apartheid movement. Cause there 's some people involved in that who would not have been
573 involved in the anti housing discrimination, or the police brutality, or the push to get good
574 schools, or the push to equalize opportunities for African Americans. And there are some people
575 who were a part of all of them, but there were some people who war more into the whole notion
576 of , of liberation than they have been some the other socially relevant things that we did, so there
577 are people I would not have known nearly as well had not I been involved.

578 TS: All right—and lastly were there any drawbacks or consequences of being a part of the
579 Chicago anti apartheid movement?

580 DD: None that I can think of. Uh, you just kinda do what you do, and do what you feel that you
581 need and have to do, and want to do, so you just kinda go out and do it. I can't say that there has
582 been any kinda repercussions that I felt, uh, from being an activist. I'm sure that there have been
583 instances where I may have been in pursuit of say jobs or work opportunities where I didn't get
584 hired as a result of my activism. I mean nobody would necessarily say that, but, you know, you
585 just didn't get hired. Uh, so I'm sure that that has happened to me. I've been a professional for a
586 long time, in terms of work professional, who earned my last terminal degree in 1977. So I've
587 actually had a doctorate degree since 1977, as well as lots of different kinds of work experience
588 which means that there were probably some jobs that I applied for before becoming an elected
589 official that I didn't get. And probably the primary reason that I didn't get them probably had to
590 do with my social activism.

591 TS: Well thank you sir for your time and your recollections.

592 DD: Thank you, thank you, but it wasn't no big deal you jut kinda knew that they would hire
593 someone else before they would you. As a matter of fact, that's one reason that I ended up getting
594 a doctorate's degree was to not have to worry too much about finding a job and still being an
595 activist, you understand. No matter what you are you still got to eat, and you got to have a place
596 to hang your head—

597 TS: Yes you do

598 DD:—and so I decided— I'm certain one of the reason's I get a doctorate's degree was because of
599 that. I don't think I necessarily needed a doctorate's degree to do the kinda stuff that I did, you

600 know, but I just felt that it would make me more likely to be, you know, able to— [recording
601 stops]