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Interview with Stan Willis

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Columbia College Chicago

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Transcript

Ricky Hughey interviewing Stan Willis

RH: Alright we're recording. Ok, so this is Richard Hughey from Columbia College, here with Stan Willis. Um, today's date is-the-April the twenty (whispers) what's today's date?

SW: Fifth

RH: Twenty fifth, two thousand ten. Uh, we are in Stan's office at thirty nine south Lasalle. Um- alright let's get started. Um-(moves microphone)- Let's start with some basic questions, um- what would the years of your anti-apartheid activism be, basically in a-

SW: Uh, I would say, (coughs), well- let me frame it this way: I got involved in an anti-colonial work I would say in the seventies while I was a student at University of Chicago. And it included anti-apartheid work, but it wasn't solely anti-apartheid work cause we began to uh, become aware of these struggles that were goin on in in, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Namibia um- you know of course South Africa. So all of those struggles to, uh, of Africans to free themselves from colonialism, we tried to play some active part in as early as I've said in the early 70s.

RH: Ok, um and the location of your activism specifically, what would you say?

SW: Most of the Chicago area at that time-um- I would say from 69 70 up to about 79 or 80, a lot of the activities were in and around (coughs) the the university because I was a student at the University of Chicago during that time period, and I was living in Hyde Park, so things that were going on were largely coming out of student community as a student activist. I was one of the (coughs) leaders of the Organization of Black Students at the University of Chicago. And we did things you know around uh around Africa liberation generally.

RH: Ok, um now we are going to do a little bit of biographical information um starting with your year of birth.

SW: I was born in August 16th, 1941.

RH: Your place of birth.

SW: Chicago

RH: Chicago. Uh basically where you were raised?

SW: Uh Chicago's west side, I grew up on the west side (coughs), I was born on the west side I was born in the county hospital. I grew up in the west side, I went to public schools, I went to Crane High School which still exists. Um, and then I moved to the south side um when I became a student at the University of Chicago and I was staying in Hyde Park for many years.

RH: Ok um-

47 SW: O by the way I did leave after high school and went into the United States Air Force. I spent
48 four years in the air force then returned to Chicago, became a bus driver.

49
50 RH: Your father's place of birth.

51
52 SW: Uh Arkansas.

53
54 RH: Arkansas and your mothers place of birth?

55
56 SW: Also Arkansas, in and around Forrest City Arkansas.

57
58 RH: Ok, um now we are going to dive back into our memory bank starting what is your earliest
59 memory?

60
61 SW: Of anything in particular?

62
63 RW: Any anything you can remember.

64
65 SW: I think my earliest memories would be um- when I was a child we lived-until I was about
66 four- we lived on the south side in a building called the Ellis building. E-L-L-I-S. (coughs), it
67 was somewhere around thirty five hundred thirty six hundred south on Ellis. So it was near um
68 Hyde Park. It was a little, little north of Hyde Park. (Coughs) and this building was a high rise-
69 um I think- and I don't know how I know this, probably somebody told me but I think it was an
70 eight floor high rise and we were on one of the top floors. And it was close enough to the lake
71 shore drive where I looked out the window and I could see cars going by and the cars looked like
72 they were about the size of- ants. And I remember I was so fascinated by seeing these things
73 movin around and I was just, so I had to be- two three or four years old. And I remember I
74 remember cause I was kinda, I think I was just kinda in awe and curious about being that high
75 above whatever else was goin on down on the ground. (Click)

76
77 RH: So you're pretty far south but still pretty far east, cause if you could see the-

78
79 SW: It was yea it was pretty far east. It wasn't that far south I mean thirty thirty some hundred
80 south yea but it wasn't that far. It wasn't as far as Hyde Park which is the fifty hundreds. But I
81 remember that it was pretty fascinating to me as a child seein the-

82
83 RH: Right. Um how would you describe the house you grew up in, or apartment I guess?

84
85 SW: The apartment? Well the one that I remember most was when we moved to the west side.
86 Uh we moved I guess I was four or five, we moved to the near west side- um- near Ashland and
87 Roosevelt, which is now ya know gentrified. Um, I think the hospital complex has you know
88 kinda grabbed up all the land so it's a whole gentrified area now. But when I grew up it was a
89 working class black community. Probably a low working class black community. Um we lived in
90 a basement apartment in the in the- the building was owned by a cousin and we lived in a
91 basement apartment. It was a little, lil bungalow but there was a basement apartment. It was a
92 very small apartment. Uh we had two small bedrooms, a living room, no dining room and a

kitchen. And um- it was a you know mom and dad would I was an only child for many years, my sister was born when I- uh- when I turned- seven. I was in my seventh year when she was born so I am seven years and some months older than my sister. So I was the only child for several years at least seven then my sister was born. And um- I you know I was responsible for taking care of her as she got older you know she's my baby sister which is drag.

RH: Ha

SW: Um, and the neighborhood- uh I went to church a lot as a child, my mom insisted and I kind of enjoyed it. Um- I also spent a fair amount of time in Paducah, Kentucky because theres my mother has a sister there and she would ship me off to spend time with my aunt and her husband. And I enjoyed it, he was a, he was a pastor of a church so I (cough) I became a pastor's son during that part of the year that I spent with them, which was probably- five six seven eight you know I was very young. Uh and then as I grew up the, I began to meet uh some other boys in the neighborhood, probably at age ten and eleven you know before I really kinda began to stretch out a little bit. And uh you know gangs began to emerge and I was a member of a gang- and we had gang fights- and um some of them were pretty violent-um- (clears throat). You know but I went to school because my mom and dad insisted that I go to school and come home at a certain time. Other other moms and dads, some of the kids didn't have a dad in the house, but I did. And my mom and dad were, ya know great moms and dads you know, they were not disciplinarians but they kept pretty strict control over me-um- but then not enough to keep me from being a member of a gang. And so it was good you know I mean some battles I lost- uh- one friend in particular was killed in a gang kind of conflict, shot to death. I think I was probably about twelve, thirteen, maybe fourteen you know, I remember that very well.

I also remember-the murder of Emmet Till. I was 12 and I think Emmet Till was twelve and I remember vividly because it was ah probably the most talked about event throughout the entire African American community during that time, but more importantly I remember it, I remember it because my mother was a friend of his grandmother, they went to church together, and my mother new his mother. And so it brought it closer to home, and I remember it also because my sister who was probably four or five-um- my dad made the mistake of taking her with him, cause he would take her with him all the time, that was she was a daddy's girl- he took her with him to, to the wake. And you know it was an open casket kind of wake and you know, she was horrified. And it impacted me because she I guess she learned that this kid who was so brutally um beaten and murdered was the same age as her brother. So she would get very uh- very uh afraid when I was out after dark. So it began to restrict my activities because my mom made me come home because my sister would be crying in the evenings so I wasn't too happy about that.

So but it was generally, you know it was a nice a, I enjoy it, my growing up in reflection was very positive.

RH: So you and your sister were pretty close?

SW: Yea we still are. She works here occasionally part time. Uh we had two other, my mom had two other children where I had two younger brothers you know after my sister. And we all we are a pretty close family. My mom and dad have passed but the siblings are very close.

139 RH: So uh I sorta have to ask um, why what were the main reasons you would say you kinda got
140 into, got into the gangs around your neighborhood.

141
142 SW: (clears throat) The gangs kind of emerged um- as part of young boys kinda hanging out you
143 know just like they do now; there are certain kids that for whatever reason enjoy hangin out with
144 each other, you know everybody has friends. And- sometimes those groups would be hangin out
145 or they would have, I could remember having these baseball games with other kids, and
146 sometimes the tensions of the baseball games would spill over and then there would fights and
147 arguing about you know was he safe on first base or not. And um if somebody let's say for
148 example let's say it's a baseball game, if there's a fight and this group of kids lives some place
149 else and theres a fight, then you got something that's going to resemble a certain group
150 cohesiveness in relation to this other group. And so that began to be gang rivalry because then
151 you couldn't go into their neighborhood because you've had a fight with them and, nah I don't
152 know exactly how it emerged but people startin naming themselves based on the guys that they
153 were, based on the guys that they hung out with. So there were several groups that had names,
154 and they would put their names on their little jackets. We were called the gents. G-E-N-T-S.
155 Because we thought we were gent gentlemen I guess. And then there were other groups had
156 other names. And sometimes if there is a fight between someone in your group then you would
157 step in to protect them or assist them. And that's kinda how it emerged, I don't think it was, I
158 don't think people were thinking lets organize a gang. There was no drugs.

159
160 RH: Right

161
162 SW: Like there is now where gangs are organized around drug distribution. There were people
163 for sure that were using- I think probably the worst thing that people, I remember people using
164 was marijuana. I don't remember anything about, anything about cocaine or heroin anything like
165 that. But it was marijuana. But nobody was selling it. There were no groups that were controlling
166 turf and all that like you have now, which you know creates a whole different kind of situation.
167 But we did have uh- territorial fights. So if you came into my neighborhood and you were from
168 any neighborhood, especially if we had had conflicts then that would create a gang rivalry and
169 gang fight. But it was strictly turf and I have no idea what turf emerged you know, I mean um
170 people tend to be organized around land I guess. You know tribal groups do it, national groups
171 do it. So we did it you know this is our neighborhood, don't come unless we give you
172 permission.

173 Um and then there would be fights. The weapons start coming in probably as we were
174 getting a little older, you sixteen, fifteen sixteen. There were some guys in the group- that I know
175 had guns. Not many not like it is today. I could I could remember who they were, and I can
176 almost remember how many there were. There was two or three, that I was aware of. And you
177 know they had nothing sophisticated you know sometimes a six shooter or something you know,
178 there were no automatic weapons in those days yea. And there were shooting, but most guys
179 relied on, and this you know might sound unbelievable in today's gang kinda culture: we did a
180 lot of fighting. We did literally fist fights.

181
182 RH: Fist fights yea.

184 SW: Yea so you learn how to fight, you learn how to box. Boxing doing, when I grew up was um
185 what a, prize fighting. Was a sport that was very very popular in many communities. Certainly
186 was popular in the African American community. Um because TVs were coming out and one of
187 the, the more popular uh TV show or sport was the fights. You know they came out there a
188 couple times a week. I can even remember who produced those: Gillette. The razor you know.

189
190 RH: Right

191
192 SW: And so you knew about, uh during my times you knew about Joe Lewis, you knew about
193 {name I cant make out}, you knew about Sugar Ray Robinson, and these were figures that were
194 as popular as the basketball stars are now. You know the Kobe Bryant, but we didn't have Kobe
195 Bryant cause we didn't have basketball. Blacks didn't play basketball in the NBA until later. Um
196 but we knew about the boxers. So we boxed and gang rivalry tended to end up with two or three
197 guys squarin off and just boxin and trying to beat the other one to a pulp. Very, very rarely did it
198 get beyond fist fights, you know maybe somebody pickin up a bat or creating some kind of
199 weapon, you know.

200
201 RH: Right

202
203 SW: Um and then you know there were a few guys that had guns and we knew that had guns but
204 primarily it was fist fights.

205
206 RH: So I guess um- a thing that is sorta different about gangs is you would say that a lot of gangs
207 back then started out because of something that started out innocent like baseball games.

208
209 SW: Mmhmm, mmhmm.

210
211 RH: And they moved to that something that ended up more violent.

212
213 SW: Yea they just, they they clearly, I know the gang that I was in started out as a social club.
214 You know I like these guys, we hang out together. We probably lived in the same block you
215 know. We knew each other's, parents knew this group of kids- um we knew the parents and we
216 saw the parents coming out on the street we were respectfully you know, how are you Mrs.
217 Smith? You know and if we were doing anything that was not permitted we would stop doing it.
218 Um and so that group of kids, those were my buddies and so if we gonna have something to
219 identify us as a group then that would become my gang. You know cause they were going to
220 protect me. We had you know we would get our little- well they weren't starter jackets but they
221 were like starter jackets and you would literally get some water colors you know paint. Not water
222 colors cause that would wash away but paint and somebody who was artistic enough would do
223 the name of social club on the back of the jacket.

224
225 RH: O wow.

226
227 SW: So then when you go to school everybody say you know he's in the Gents. And you know it
228 was, I think it was a way of setting yourself off, you know we didn't have boy scouts, we didn't

229 have those clubs or organizations that were organizing supervised by parents. You know poor
230 communities don't have that very often. So we had our own way of organizing ourselves.

231
232 RH: Was there almost a status symbol just to be just to be in a certain gang.

233
234 SW: Yea we thought it was. I don't know if it was then but we thought it was. We thought it set
235 us off, we thought it gave us a certain amount of recognition, a certain amount of respect. Cause
236 you did get respect if you were good in sports.

237
238 RH: Right

239
240 SW: You got respect if you were a good fighter, a good boxer. I was on the wrestling team. You
241 didn't get much respect for that but people didn't pay much attention to wrestling. But football
242 you know if you was popular; a good football/basketball player you know people admired you ya
243 know everyone wanted to be admired by their peers. And so putting on a gang; we didn't really
244 call it a gang, we called it a club. Put on a club jacket and so we all together, especially if you
245 had several guys in the same club like fifteen or twenty-

246
247 RH: Right

248
249 SW: And then you know we might be going down the street together you know fifteen twenty
250 guys, and people you hear people sayin those are the gents.

251
252 RH: Yea

253
254 SW: It was very uh very kind of gratifying. And if you somebody bothers you you obviously
255 have to protect your guys.

256
257 RH: Right

258
259 SW: And that's kinda how it spilled over. And typically it would be fights but there were some
260 violence and and there were, I can think of two deaths as I was growing up from gang violence,
261 but nothing related to drugs at all. In fact most of the guys I knew, they used marijuana
262 occasionally. I never used marijuana even as a kid which is kinda- different from-

263
264 RH: It's an important distinction

265
266 SW: kids that grew up later than me. But I didn't, I didn't use it because (clears throat) I was a
267 little different in that I grew up in and around the church. My mom kept me in church. And I
268 had- I guess adopted the values of the church so I didn't smoke, I didn't drink, I didn't use any
269 drugs, until I was probably about seventeen I started smoking.

270
271 RH: Cigarettes.

272
273 SW: Cigarettes. Yup nothing, nothing more than cigarettes. And around that time you know I
274 probably started drinking with the other guys but I would be around these guys and they would

275 be drinking, everybody smoked. Some guys would steal, little petty stuff goin to the store and
276 steal a cupcake and I would do that. I did nothing that was illegal or conflicted with the social
277 norms in my family. And they teased me about it but you know they respected me because I was
278 one of the leaders of the gang cause I could, I was a good fighter. And that was you know kind of
279 critical. And I was popular with the girls and you know that was pretty important for us. So even
280 if you didn't smoke or drink if you had those other thing goin on then you were still pretty
281 popular.

282
283 RH: One final thing about gangs: did you parents really know and if they did how did they react?
284

285 SW: I'm not sure that they knew, we never said anything about it. We tried to keep that sorta
286 thing from parents.

287
288 RH: Really?

289
290 SW: (laughs)

291
292 RH: (laughs)

293
294 SW: I don't really know what they would have done but I think they knew, she knew, my mom
295 who did more of the super- supervised me more than my dad cause dad was working all the time.
296 Mom knew that there were certain, dad did too but mom knew better than dad that there were
297 certain guys that I spent time with almost all the time and she knew them. She knew, she knew of
298 their parents, she didn't know their parents that well but she knew who they were. Uh like
299 parents should I think. So she might have surmised that I was in something you know I didn't try
300 to hide my jacket from her, but I don't think she thought much of it. I think she just thought you
301 know I think she thought that the guys I spent time with were good guys and they were. She
302 didn't have any problems with them, they didn't come around, they weren't cussing, getting into
303 any trouble that she was aware of. And so you know she thought that they was cool. Now I do
304 remember, uh I worked at a local laundry after school and I got into a fight with an older guy, at
305 the job. (Laughs) and he chased me out of the plant. And when I got home, cause he had hit me
306 and bust my lip or something, all the guys came to my house cause they were ready to go after
307 him and she told me your not goin out. So I couldn't go out. So I think she may have concluded
308 that there were guys that were very close to me and protect me. But she knew them all.

309
310 RH: Right

311
312 SW: But I think she also sensed that this was not a good thing for me since she knew that the guy
313 had hit me and my guys were coming to the house so she just said you aren't going out today.
314 And that was the end of that and I didn't go out.

315
316 RH: And so you kept your church values basically throughout your whole-

317
318 SW: I think I still have them, in one way or another, in terms of fair play. It may have dictated
319 um my going into civil rights law and it probably dictated my advocacy around human rights and
320 a lot of other stuff. I don't know I haven't analyzed it like that. But for sure that was the, the first

kind of cultural values that I had grew from the house like most people. And I know mine were greatly influenced by the church because my parents values were greatly influenced by the church and church ideas. I think many people are like that; they might not identify with the church but people tend to have church influence whether your Jew, Catholic whatever. And those values that you learn, cause church is, theology has a lot to do with values. And it's there and you know I think it's good cause it kept me from stealing, it may have kept me from using drugs and all that other stuff you know so that's cool.

RH: Yea. To segway into uh civil rights, when would you say you first witnessed an act that you considered violating someone's civil rights?

SW: (Clears throat) I don't know if I've very many-um- I knew of some. I mean I knew about Emmet Till. (Pause) I didn't know for example growing up, I wasn't, I didn't grow up thinking would be a lawyer. That wasn't an ambition of mine, and I didn't even have the ambition of going to college. Cause we didn't-many- going to college in the working class community wasn't always something that was considered likely or even desired. My parents cause they were-they were- they were from the south, and they had been-my father had been in the south as a share cropper. My mom was a-lived her parents had a small farm. Neither one of them finished high school. So thergo for me and the other children was that we would finish high school, and if we finished high school that they would believe that that would be sufficient for us to get a decent job and all the rest of it, get married and have children. Never do I recall my parents, either of them talking about college.

The college came when I uh, when I finished high school I went to junior college for a week or two and I dropped out and then I went into the military. And then in the military I began to encounter crystallized ideas of maybe I should go to college and didn't have a clue about how to do it. Really didn't know anybody who had gone to college. We didn't have college graduates that I was aware of in my neighborhood. And so I had to figure all that out. And I took a couple of courses while I was in the military at local community colleges. And when I came back I started driving a bus; I was married by then. I got married while I was in the military. I started driving a bus, and there were guys that were bus drivers that were fairly well educated. Well you know-bus driving was a job where you could get paid as though you-there was-there was- your pay was comparable to pay you would get if you were in a profession. Because there were guys who had college degrees, but because they were black they couldn't get in to certain sectors. So bus driver was a job you could get that would get-that you could be paid, you know, kind of a decent salary by driving a bus. So we had a lot of very smart bus drivers. A number of college graduates and some of them were actually teaching school while they were driving the buses. And so in in being in that company it helped me to kind of crystallize ideas of going to college with a reasonable expectation of finishing college. And I did I stayed with it-took a while-took me six years because I was in city college for three years and then I went to the University of Chicago. And then I went to graduate school. And my family used to tease me because it appeared to them that I was never going to finish school; I was constantly going to graduate school and law school and all this other stuff. But I enjoy school after I started going on a regular basis and started being successful

RH: Um to back track a little bit, um why in retrospect do you think you joined the armed forces?

SW: I think I joined the armed forces because in a working class community, certainly a black working class community, you don't have a lot of-you don't imagine a lot of options because you don't see them around you. There are no school teachers, there are doctors, there are no lawyers, there are really nobody but people going to jobs, mostly factory jobs. In Chicago the black middle class, the professional black middle class, largely lived on the south side. Nobody lived on the west side. West side was kind of considered not the place to live you know because the people-this is the way black people considered it I think.

RH: Right.

SW: If you were on the west side you know there was a lot more poverty, a lot more unruliness on the west side. So the people on the south side, the professionals, not only did they not live on the west side, they didn't come to the west side.

RH: At all.

SW: Hardly ever. And we didn't go to the south side either. Cause we thought they were stuck up and satiety and all of that. So the black doctors, the black lawyers, teachers, none of them lived on the west side so we didn't have any of these as role models. So I think that um just growing up you know you didn't have role models so you didn't-you didn't imagine certain things. See in a middle class house, because I have a middle class house and that I'm a middle class person, my kids as they grow up they are around books all the time. They are around people who can tutor them and insist that they do certain things, not only assist but can say let's sit down and do the algebra now. You know work through it. And the expectation in my household is that you are going to college. You know, you might not like the idea but you're going to college. And I think as they grow up the kids go, because all my children went to college. They are all affected by the expectations of the household, you know coming from the parents. Because their parents went to college, and very often their friends went to college So when they grow up they just- you know are automatically thinking about college and applying to colleges and all of that. That's not true in all com- that's not true in all classes. When I grew up there was no discussion about college theres no expectation about college. My parents are glad that I went, but they didn't plan for it, they didn't put money aside for it, none of that. Because it just wasn't part of working class culture, at least in my neighborhood. It might have been more a part of working class culture if you were on the south side because there was more of a mixture of working class people you know blacks working in factories like the steel mills and the meat packing industry. But they were also mixed up with the doctors and the lawyers. And my guess is that if we had been on the south side that the expectation may have been greater or different than you know than living on the west side.

So um, I don't know if that answered the question or not.

RH: Ha no its fine. It's not a big deal. So um how did you adjust to live when you came back from the service? Um

SW: O I know the question, how did I decide to go to the service I think it was. There were people who were friends of mine who, I had my best friend went to the military before I went to the military. And my second best friend went I think around the same time.

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RH: Ok

SW: So as we were finishing high school, there were guys who had gone to the military that we knew. Cousins or you know, just a little older, that were coming back with all these stories about the fun that they had and the women that they met and all of that. And since we didn't have all these other options, of college and you know expectations, military was a very natural outlet for us, a natural option because military wasn't competing with going to college because going to college wasn't on the table. So more of the working class kids go to the military more than probably the middle class kids, you know because this is a reasonable option. You go away at about the time you are 18, if you finish school, you know there is a void you know there's nothing to do because you're used to going to school and you know sometimes you go and hang out at the school which is not a good thing. So I would say many of the young men went off to the military or they got jobs right away. You know they feel like it was satisfactory and they didn't feel like they needed to go and play. And so it was- I think it was a quest for something new after high school. Something that I had heard about that sounded exciting to do-travel you know cause I heard at least if you go in the military during your first tour of duty you would go overseas at least once which was the rule. So you got a chance to go overseas and travel and all that. It's just exciting, it was different.

After high school I would say things were pretty boring, for lack of a better term. You know so the military seemed like a better way to do it. And I'm kinda glad I went, I had a good time in the military. I didn't go to Vietnam, I could have gone to Vietnam- it was during the Vietnam era, but I didn't go. I met some great guys from all over the country. So you know it was good, it was good for me. I don't advise or encourage people to go into the military now because I have a different view on the military but then it was a good way to get out of the neighborhood.

RH: Afterwards, um I know you talked a little bit about it already but why did you take the job as a bus driver?

SW: Um it was available. I was looking for a job. I had been trained in the military to be a communications operator- I was a teletype operator. And there weren't too many teletype jobs in the civilian sector, in fact the civilian jobs- the military jobs don't transfer to the civilian sector in the way the recruiters said they do. I mean they would say that because they were trying to get kids to join the military but they really don't. So I didn't have a job- I had applied to a couple things. I think I was going to apply to be an insurance agent you know selling insurance, but that seemed kinda boring to me. And uh I don't know who told me but you know the bus drivers- CTA was hiring and I applied and I passed the test and I got the job. And it was a good job, I enjoyed it. Driving the bus, meeting people, no real confining environment like when I worked at the laundry you know you go to this one plant and you you're here all day and its pretty boring. You're out and you never know what's going to happen from day to day you out on the bus you're meeting people, meeting a lot of girls, hitting on girls you know so it was a great job. You know and the pay was good.

RH: So at this point in your life what was your relationship like with your parents?

459 SW: Now?

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461 RH: At that point I'm saying when you were-

462

463 SW: O at that time my relationship was great with my parents. Um my father was very um- I
464 guess permissive is the word. My dad loved me like my mom did but he did not spend a lot of
465 time supervising me, my mom did the supervising. And he didn't spend hardly any time
466 disciplining me. My mom did a lot of that but you know he was around you know he would take
467 me with him you know sometimes if he had odd jobs he would take me. Very protective-um- so
468 my relationship was great with my parents. I had a child at a very early age so when I went to the
469 military before I finished high school I had a son that I had to take care of. And so when I got
470 back you know parents were glad cause my mom- my mother- um- took it kinda hard when I
471 joined the military because she was afraid I might not come back.

472

473 RH: Right

474

475 SW: Because she had a nephew that did not come back and I think that weighed heavy on her.
476 Cause this was right after- well this wasn't directly after world war two but it was not far away
477 for her. Because this was in-I joined the military in 1960. The war had ended you know almost
478 two decades earlier but it was very vivid in her mind and she lost a nephew I think in the Korean
479 war which was just a few years earlier in nineteen fif- Korean war was probably 51, 52, you
480 know during that time period.

481 So she was very very afraid of when I decided to go off to the air force-when they took
482 me to the airport you know to ship out to go to training it was pretty sad you know my mom was
483 crying, my girlfriend was crying, I was scared you know why did I decide to do this. I had never
484 been on an airplane before so it was a pretty dramatic event, getting on the plane and leaving my
485 family. But my relationship was good with my parents-it always had been.

486

487 RH: So after, or I guess why you were a bus driver you were still going to school at Crane
488 College?

489

490 SW: When I when I started driving a bus, as soon as I got a regular schedule because you don't
491 get a regular schedule right away your on what's called the board. They put your route up on a
492 daily basis because you don't have a regular route. As soon as you get a chance to pick, meaning
493 pick your own schedule- it wasn't the best schedule but it was a schedule that was predictable.
494 As soon as I got that I went and enrolled in school. And I think I was- I was probably taking
495 evening classes cause I don't think I was able to- um I may have been taking day classes cause I
496 think I was driving the bus in the evening. Because it's hard to get a bus route during the day
497 because the most senior drivers prefer to have the route during the day so they can go home at 4,
498 4 o'clock or earlier. So the rookies end up driving in the evening. So we were off during the day
499 and that was cool cause I think I enrolled in class during the day and I think if my schedule
500 changed I would switch around, might go in the evening.

501

502 RH: Right. So I read in part of your biography uh that you uh took part in a campaign to name the
503 new part of the college Malcolm X College.

504

505 SW: Mmhmm Mmhmm.

506

507 RH: How did you get involved in that and was that basically your first activist esqe- sort of-

508

509 SW: That was probably, that was probably um my second or third I was involved in for sure,
510 politically. I think the first one would have to be-I think some time in maybe 65- I was driving
511 from 64 to 68. There was on the news-Robert Kennedy had gone to the southern states to
512 investigate claims of-poverty and starvation in certain parts of the black community. And it made
513 the news and everyone was aware of it. And I was a bus driver and I remember reaching out to
514 one or two community groups that were organizing a campaign to ship goods- food goods and
515 other goods to the south to black people that were starving in the south. And I came back to the
516 station and organized a campaign at the bus depot to- for drivers to you know spend money or
517 donate money for canned goods you know all those canned goods and clothes were collected and
518 then they were shipped down to the southern states out of this local community group that I had
519 contact with. So I think that was the first kind of crystallization of me as a young black man
520 taking a responsibility to do something to help a black community that I had no direct contact
521 with and didn't know anyone in the community except I knew that there were black people there
522 starving based on the reports. So I think that's the early stages of developing this kind of
523 consciousness that doesn't require direct involved that can be distant like south Africa for
524 example.

525 And then when I went to school-probably uh I think I started school in 65 cause I came
526 home in 64- got the job in 64- and I think I had a schedule maybe by the end of 65. I think in 66
527 there was a historian that came on campus, a young white woman. And she was speaking on-she
528 was lecturing on negro history and I went to the lecture, it was a guest lecture. And I was amazed
529 that the negro, which is me, had such a great history. Because we weren't taught history in the
530 schools. There was no black history taught in any of the northern schools, I think it was taught in
531 the southern schools because the southern schools were segregated and the southern schools had
532 black teachers. We didn't have black teachers in the urban northern schools, not very many. And
533 even if we had some they weren't teaching black history. Um so black people were excluded
534 from the American history books except they were mentioning blacks that were slaves so you
535 entered the history as a slave and that's where they left you as a slave. So she was talking about
536 all the great things that black people had done. You know I think it was more- it wasn't a social
537 history it was more of a kind of typical chronological you know black people invented this and
538 did this. All the good things that showed that we had the same level of intellect of other people in
539 terms of industry ect. But I was fascinated I said my goodness because the only person I knew in
540 history was a book I had I think it's the only book I had on history-was up from slavery a history
541 of Booker T Washington. And I really admired him for what he did coming out of slavery. So I
542 as a result of that lecture in my- thirst for more of what she had given in her lecture, I organized
543 the Negro history club. And I don't remember how I organized I think I just I knew some student
544 by this time I think I just said lets start meeting and lets study or own history. And people were
545 you know people were respondent. And you know I think we would meet maybe once a week in
546 one of the classrooms. And there would be several students. We would find books and we would
547 read together and discuss them. And that's kind of how it got off the ground. And as a result of
548 that I became associated with the idea that we should be at least studying history and be
549 concerned with our own history. And at some point the student movement was developing
550 around us. Because what we were doing at Crane College was apparently happening at the other

colleges because there was a lot of stuff going on around the world. And at some point someone suggested that I run for student government because we were developing ideas about what black people should be doing. The nationalism was developing. In fact the Negro history club probably the end of that year or in early 67-we had changed the name to the Afro-American History club, which suggested a change in our thinking about ourselves. We were no longer identifying as negros. And um somebody suggested I run for the student government as student government president so we could have more influence in the student population and maybe convince the other students, cause you know it's a predominantly black school, to study history or be concerned about issues that relate to black people. And I did. We had a very vigorous campaign. I had a vice president a presidential candidate, a secretary and a treasurer. And they all campaign similarly. And I think our campaign was called the progressive party and they were called something else. And uh this was the fall of 67 and we won. And so I became the leader of the student body. And they gave me an office in the building.

RH: With a window?

SW: Yea with a window. And I promptly put up a big picture of Malcolm X. I don't have the picture here but there's Malcolm back there in the corner. This is a big-it's like a poster. Because we were very much- admired Malcolm X and so we would listen to his records of speeches. And we would listen to them in the student day room where there were other students because we wanted other students to hear the speeches as well. So we were really trying to educate the other students by bringing these speeches in and having these discussions you know. And I think it was working to a great extent. But there was a reaction. And the reaction came from- partly from the some of the white faculty didn't understand but in particular the white woman who was like the faculty member of the student newspaper. And she had um-

RH: She did not understand.

SW: She did not understand. And the newspaper- some of the articles were attack articles. I still have a lot of this stuff. Because they thought that I didn't like- I was trying to alienate or didn't represent the white students. There weren't that many white students. But we didn't really care about the white students in terms of alienating them. We were really trying to focus on our history and what we should be doing as black students. And then in March of the next year, we learned that the national guards in South Carolina - at the university of South Carolina, they had murdered students on campus- they had shot students on campus because there was a peaceful protest. This was in Orangeburg South Carolina. And we were outraged by it so we decided to have a demonstration. And we- one of the members of the group his uncle had owned a local funeral home so we asked him to ask his uncle if he would loan us a casket and we were going to take the coffin and march through the community to symbolize the death of these students. He couldn't loan us a coffin because they were too expensive but he gave us the container that the coffin came in and it looked like a coffin. So we marched through the community with what looked like a coffin. And it was very dramatic. So the newspaper got a picture of me marching with the coffin surrounded by not just students but faculty. And they criticized they attacked me. I didn't care. But it just showed that we were very strong. I mean we were developing a very strong cohesive student group that included faculty supporters that included staff people like the secretaries the people that work in the engineering room. And had a fair amount of support from

the administration because we were not on the attack we were really trying to rebuild the sense of self esteem with a group of students that didn't have a lot of it. But trying to help them understand that there was a responsibility that they had to try to uplift the community. And I think most people at some point begin to get it. Because we- the support we got eventually from the faculty was great.

So it was during that time I would say- in fact I know for sure cause I did research recently. Someone asked me to write a section of a book on this. And I started researching on this, but i didn't do the writing. But I drafted a letter to the president of the school and to the faculty. And in that letter demands were made, many of them had to do with student involvement. You know in the whole school. To integrate students into the school's decision making. But there was one demand that was made that school-the new school cause we knew that there was a new school gonna be built-that the new school be named after Malcolm X. So we started the struggle around the student demands but we focused a lot on fighting for- and I think we also demanded that the new president of the school that they make an active effort to recruit a black person to be president of the school. And that they have more black faculty. All of that was in the demand. But that was very common throughout the black student world. All of over the country people were doing that. And so eventually the name after a lot of struggle, decided to the name the school Malcolm X. I think it had a lot to do with the fact that our base was so solid. It wasn't just a few radical students. It was you know support coming from like I said faculty and administration exedra You know. And it was even more amazing because Malcolm X had been assassinated only 2 and a half before we started advancing his name. And Malcolm was not very popular- he was not popular in the white community at all because they feared him. But he wasn't that popular in the black community. So to put his name out there to name a school was pretty bold for these students to do that. Given Malcolm's reputation you know they didn't have the Malcolm X movie that came out much later and all that. So he was really feared by many black people. So I think many black people probably in the communities probably thought we losing our minds, but you know the school is named Malcolm X.

RH: Right it still is. So that was basically your first organization that you sort of recruited for and kind of started-

SW: Yea but at the same time this was 67, I went into government in 68- we were really organizing hard because Dr. King was assassinated a month after we had the demonstration in March he was assassinated in April, so all hell broke loose. But at the same time during that same year in 67 going to 68 I was working at the buses and I think in late 67 we had had a wild cat strike at the bus depot and I was part of that wild cat strike. Because there was a controversy about one of our drivers, they had fire one of our drivers and we told them we wouldn't till they hired him and we didn't and they hired him back. And then later in 60- later in 68 we were having all these conflicts with the-not with the company, not with CTA so much but with our union. You know the union was-the union itself the union officials were all white. The demographics of the drivers was rapidly changing. We were probably at least 50% of the population but the union was all white so what the union officials did is they allowed white drivers-white retired drivers to vote at the union hall on the issues that we thought were important. So this was their mechanism of keeping the black vote diluted. And you know we were just outraged by that. And so we end up on going a wild cat strike during the summer of 68 at the same time we were engaged in the battle of naming the college. And I was one of the

643 organizers of that strike. And that strike lasted most of the summer. It was a huge strike. It closed
644 down the west and south side of Chicago completely. We tried to close down the north side but
645 the north side was- there weren't that many black communities on the north side. When we
646 would go to the station on the north side we just weren't as successful. And we would get
647 arrested you know just going up in those white neighborhoods. But we closed down the city-

648
649 RH: Just for being there?

650
651 SW: Yea yea. I mean we go down to set up a picket, police come right away. You know you
652 leave or we arrest you. And so it was supported around the communities so it was very difficult.
653 So the strike lasted and this is on the present mayor's father, and during that same year, I mean
654 that same summer, we eventually convinced the L drivers to go on strike. So they went on strike
655 for a period of time, not like they didn't strike long. And the cab drivers went out on strike
656 during the same period. So transportation was like stopped.

657
658 RH: Wow

659
660 SW: And it was on the eve of the democratic national convention that was going to be held in
661 Chicago-

662
663 RH: O wow.

664
665 SW: And so I'm sure it freaked the mayor out because he was a big time old bosses. So then of
666 course the-what we know about that-what most people know about that period is that the
667 democratic national convention a lot of the radical white students came into town because the
668 war was heating up. And there was these anti war demonstrations and the Chicago police reacted
669 to them and beat up a lot of them-

670
671 RH: Right right

672
673 SW: So many people think 68 is the time the white radical students were attacked by the police
674 but the other important thing that happened was that the black bus drivers had closed the city
675 down prior to the white students getting here. Probably pissed the mayor off. So when the white
676 kids got here he was so angry. Because many of the white students came to us to help us with the
677 strike, to their credit. And so we asked them to go up north and man the picket lines and they did
678 and they weren't arrested so they were helpful in that regard. And that was their way of showing
679 solidarity which was good. So I was organizing on two fronts: I was organizing in the work place
680 with the bus drivers and I was organizing more with the student organizers- more my organizing.

681
682 RH: Right

683
684 SW: The bus drivers I was organizing with other people. Kind of taking leadership on some parts
685 of it but not all of it. But in the student community I was considered the leader of the student
686 during that time period and-I accepted that responsibility and we moved forward. That was the
687 same time that Fred Hampton came on campus in 67. And so there developed some-at least in
688 some people's minds competition for leadership cause I didn't realize at the time but Fred and

Bobby Rush came on campus to organize because this school had a reputation for having very militant students. And I so I saw them on campus-I just assumed they were there taking classes but as I learned later they weren't there taking classes they were there to organize. And when I left in 68 I graduated and went to the University of Chicago uh they apparently stepped up their organizing cause many of my followers either didn't join the party or did join the party.

RH: Right

SW: So many of them did join the party after I left. And so the student movement as such really just kinda went away because the leadership-I left and then many of the leaders that were with me joined the Black Panther party. And that kinda ended that for a long spell.

RH: So when you went to the University of Chicago is that when you sorta learned about the South Africa conflict?

SW: Well I knew about it- I don't think we did very much organizing around that- we knew about it if there was organizing- the organizing was I think largely learning more about it studying- we certainly were studying as much as we could about Africa generally, because we had not done that. But it was- once I went to the University of Chicago there was much more organized efforts around the anti-colonial movement. I don't think we made a distinction because the Portuguese colonies were fighting for liberation and South Africa and Namibia what was called South West Africa. So I don't think we made the distinction that we were just focusing on apartheid. Now after the Portuguese colonies got independence, after Angola, Mozambique, and after Guinea-Bissau got independence which was in probably the late 70s the early 80s then we- the only country left was South Africa, then all the focus was on South Africa. But before then I would say throughout the 70s we were you know like I said Prexy had headed the Mozambique Support Committee. So we were more spread out because there were I guess 5 or 6 countries that had not gotten independence. All the French and the English countries had gotten independence in 1960. Um the Portuguese for a lot of reasons: one they had a dictator, Salazar, 2 they were a very backwards economy compared to the British and French, so they felt they really needed their colonies, they couldn't survive without their colonies at least that was their few. And the movement in Portugal was slowly developing; you know it wasn't a strong progressive movement until later. And maybe the resistance in the colonies the helped strengthen the movement in the homeland. So I think after Guinea-Bissau put up such a strong resistance in Guinea, little small small Guinea, it really broke the back of the Portuguese suppression, and the movements in Portugal were gaining and they kicked Salazar out. Right after that the Portuguese control just diminished in Mozambique, Angola and Guinea-Bissau got their independence. So then we were able to focus just on South Africa.

RH: So when you were at the University of Chicago during the 70s was there a specific organization you joined that was specifically devoted to the anti-colonialism or was there-

SW: No it was just the Organization of Black Students.

RH: Just black students-

SW: You know we did various things. You know I can remember having different-periodically different protests cause they would emerge. You know there might a campaign against shell oil or there might be a campaign against various things that we thought would help you know support these movements. So we would join those, you know the black students would and many of the white students were slowly doing it, you know like SDS and all those they were joining as well. But a lot of focus obviously was on the- especially as you get into the late 70s-the war became a main focus so many of the progressive groups. Somebody would have been within the context of the Organization of Black Students on campus at the University of Chicago that I did all the work at that time.

RH: Did you have like a specific role that you kinda did, like a certain specific thing within the organization or it was just kinda whatever needed-

SW: No it was just whatever came up that was supportive we would try to get students to join. I was one of the leaders of the Organization of Black Students. All the students weren't as political-the student-black student body wasn't that great-I mean wasn't that large. But many of them were you know. I think if you gave leadership people would you know-if it was reasonable they would join. So we had a lot of activities going on around different things related to the-and we had a little core group that studied together. You know these are the more progressive black students. You know we studied you now Marxism, Leninism, there all socialist thoughts. We studied the thoughts of African socialists like Incruma, Sacuta Raymond and then the socialist thinking in the African context. We were following developments in Cuba. You know so we were well aware of what was going on with Cuba and Seguvara and Fidel Castro. And so we knew what was going on in all of these regions, and if something came up like theres a speaker on campus. I remember meeting more than once with Della Omar. And Della Omar was a South African lawyer who was representing the ANC.

RH: OK

SW: And he would come to the United States seeking support you know and giving reports on what was happening. And that was probably as we were focusing more on South Africa. That was probably the late 70s early 80s you know when he would come. You know I think he became chief justice or something in the government. I don't know what he's doing now. So when people would come in we would-because we were-people knew we were progressive around these issues it was easy to get an audience with you know Chris Honey who was the head of the armed department for struggle. And then we would act accordingly. Very often the action would be having a demonstration at the Consulate, you know right down here on Michigan. I remember spending many days doing that. Or it might be something that just depending on you know if the rugby team was coming, and people you know if we knew about it, if people brought it to campus we might organize a delegation to go out and protest that. So we did things kinda as they developed. But we didn't have anything as ongoing like Prexy had like the Mozambique Support Committee. You know his mission was- his office was providing literature and ongoing and 24 7 work around it, we didn't do that. Because we were a student group I mean we had other stuff we were working on as well. Because you know we were fighting to get administration to get more black professors and trying to get more black students at to- you know all that so we had all those tasks that we undertook as students, and the South African- the anti-

colonial movement was one of the things that was international. And of all the international things we spent more time on Africa, the continent of issues than we did on for example things that happened in the Caribbean you know where there were struggles going on or things that were happening in Cuba. We knew about it but I don't think there was a great deal of organizing around it.

RH: So was there a time that focus ever shifted to a specific like South Africa- towards the end of the 70s or early 80s?

SW: I think so I think probably I don't know exactly when but I think after the Portuguese collapsed I think the anti colonial movement in the United States shifted to South Africa.

RH: And for you personally like-

SW: Yea. But I don't-the work I think the shift was probably for me and as a student was work around again around OBS, Organization of Black Students, and a lot of that had to do with picketing around the Consulate. And then that shifted in 83 when I became a lawyer so I wasn't working so much with-I started doing things in a legal capacities. So I would do things-I became a member of the-I organized a chapter of National Conference of Black lawyers probably in 86 87. And then we started doing things as NCBL. So our shift then was more as an organization. We had delegations going to different conferences. I didn't go to conferences. What I did locally-what all the chapters did-we took the responsibility to go to particularly pickets at the Consulate and maybe other gatherings around South Africa, anti apartheid gatherings. Our responsibility shifted to being there and being able to defend people.

RH: Right

SW: And that's what we did I mean-

RH: That's an important role.

SW: Yea it was a critical role. And we did that I know um in looking at some of the notes that our Boston chapter you know got several people out of jail. We didn't have that many attacks here I'm not sure-I can't explain why. But in other cities picketing around the Consulate led to arrests. It didn't lead to a lot of arrests here; at least I don't recall a lot of arrests. But we were always there to you know support and defend and if necessary go to court and go to trial if necessary.

RH: Right

SW: To defend people who were demonstrating. So my role shifted I would say considerably from the time I was at U of C as a student to when I became a lawyer because I had I had other tools at my disposal. Now I could defend and still do the things that I was doing. I could demonstrate but there's always been a feeling in the community that lawyers should be cautious about demonstrating-

827 RH: Right

828

829 SW: Because if they get arrested there is nobody to protect the rest of them.

830

831 RH: Of course

832

833 SW: I didn't necessarily agree with that, but it made sense. I kinda thought that was a comp out
834 in some ways. If I a lawyer says that I can't do the demonstration because I gotta protect people.
835 So I would do demonstrations and you know try to not get arrested because you know I didn't
836 want to not be available to somebody. You know needing a lawyer to appear with them and
837 defend them. So National Conference of Black Lawyers, you know our chapter, we did a lot of
838 that but a lot of chapters were doing that. We didn't have a lot of chapters- well we had a
839 significant number in those days. But we had a an organization we were involved with you know
840 like uh Linux Hines one of our members in New York, he was actually representing the ANC
841 here in the United States. And so we did a lot of that cause we were very-NCBL was very well
842 respected in the progressive movement. And so we ended representing you know like Angela
843 Davis and a lot of high profile people because people trusted us. And so that's kinda-as a lawyer
844 you move to-you tend to move to defending more than just organizing protests like you would do
845 if you're not a lawyer. And so I think we did that throughout I mean for example when Mandela
846 got out of prison we sent a delegation to help ensure fair elections. We sent um Shanora Gilbert
847 and Hayward Burns and I think there may have been others. But Shanora Gilbert Hayward Burns
848 were in a fatal car accident while they were in South Africa to protect the elections. So we lost
849 two of our very important members. Shanora was out of the New York Chapter. Hayward Burns
850 was actually one of the founders of the NCBL. So we always had somebody there you know to
851 uh carry out the struggle and at that point the struggle was to make sure the elections were fair so
852 we had people there. But we were on several fronts I mean Africa is just one. I mean we had
853 people that were going to the Middle East that were going as observers and sometimes
854 supporting the Palestinian struggle. We had people going to some parts of the Caribbean during
855 the Grenada attack by the United States; you know monitoring and supporting those struggles.
856 So NCBL has been kinda at the forefront of lawyers because we define ourselves differently.

857

858 RH: Right

859

860 SW: So I would say after I became a lawyer everything changed. My whole posture has changed
861 pretty significantly. And it still has. I still protect but I unlike most lawyers I still organize as
862 well I still think that's important. So I go in the community around organize around certain
863 issues and particularly issues around police.

864

865 RH: To back track a little how did you react to the election of Ronald Reagan and his policies uh
866 in 82 or uh in 80.

867

868 SW: I think I reacted like everybody else did or people of color. I don't think we understand the
869 significance of Ronald Reagan. We picked up on some of it because immediately he talked about
870 developing-I don't know if he used these words he may have- developing black capitalism and
871 sending money into the community as a way of solving problems in the black community while
872 wiping out the kind of social net that had developed during the Roosevelt era where people could

survive I mean public aid, general assistance all of that. His philosophy was that government should stay out of people's lives so it meant that the government should stay out of working people's lives but they should not stay out of the corporate community's lives as long as they were supporting capitalism and allowing the corporations to do what they want to do. And we began to see that and we started talking about- our group was always very cautious about any support of the notion of black capitalism. .

RH: Because it was farfetched or because it just you didn't think it was going to happen?

SW: For both. It was farfetched because one we were at a different stage of capitalism. We were in monopoly capitalism. And very few companies were going to emerge that were going to be labor intensive enough to hire black workers for example.

RH: Right

SW: Most of the big companies had emerged already. Now this is before the high tech companies but it applies even there. High tech companies aren't very labor intensive like going to the steel mill.

RH: Right

SW: Um so we knew the statistics you know and there were people in the progressive black community and non black community that were making their arguments that black capitalism didn't have the capacity. If you took all the black businesses and put them together, statistics show that they only hire you know less than 1% of the black workers for example. So how do you develop black businesses where there gonna hire even 5% of the black workers. It was absurd and what it meant and you know the advantage of developing a kind of international perspective you learn to look at other countries and you learn in many countries- South Africa- not South Africa- but African countries , Asian countries, and Latin American countries, South American countries as well. And what the big monopolies do and the big imperialist countries would do is try to develop a class within those countries that acts as a conduit for American corporations. We called them comprador classes. And we saw that this call for black capitalism was an attempt to develop this comprador class within the black community that the Reagans and others can point to and give support to and that group would began to articulate a whole different ideology about our liberation. And we see a lot of this now. You know these black business people that are republicans and they have these whole different notions about liberation you know they believe in privatizing everything and the civil rights movement is a waste of time and all that. We are totally opposed to that. They don't want public schools, they want private schooling, they support the privatization movements going on in different parts of the country. And so we saw-we begin to see that as a tactic to develop these black business communities, these black business leaders as such, by putting money into the community directed at them rather than putting money into the community directed at the working class generally. Putting money into public schools, putting money into health care put money to job development and on and on and on.

So they become the leaders of our community or at least a counter leadership to offset the-what I would consider the more progressive leaders that had developed around the labor

919 movement and the civil rights movement and others. They would become the tools of the
920 expansion of capitalism and more importantly they would become the tools of a whole new
921 ideology about that we should move as working people. No longer would we move in
922 conjunction with other working people because we have all this in common we would move to
923 try to develop what I heard Rev. Jackson said "Black wall street" which suggest that he is buying
924 into it as well. So we were opposed to that and I think Reagan was the first to kind of articulate
925 that and uh we didn't understand right away but it became pretty clear after a while. You know
926 he started wiping out all these other supports that are necessary in a capitalist system and that
927 most capitalist systems have are ways that people can survive and still support themselves and
928 get back into mainstream as possible. And that's how I kinda began to see Reagan after a while.
929 You know I think his administration changed the whole course of history in terms of social
930 progress. So I think he was-I know a lot of people who think he is the greatest thing since uh you
931 now since Lincoln I guess but I ' know I don't feel that way and I don't think statistics support it
932 in terms of working people.

933
934 RH: Um how did you stay informed about South Africa and the conflict in general during that
935 time-during the 80's?

936
937 SW: Well during the 80s-well- I think I read-I read about it, I mean there were- I don't think
938 New Africa was out then. There's a publication that I subscribe to now and I think it may have
939 been out. There were publications around you know we didn't have the internet so we couldn't
940 go online and check stuff. But there were publications, there were people travelling like I was
941 saying Della Omar were coming and there were many others that came in. Because they
942 couldn't- they were banned from South Africa

943
944 RH: Right

945
946 SW: So they came in. There were students you know South African students that were kinda in
947 the mix. So I think the network was strong enough-then at-once the American anti-apartheid
948 movement began to really develop which was mid to late 80s, there was a lot of information
949 because we were taking more of an initiative you know then you started hearing about things that
950 Randall Robinson, you now that that group was doing. And you know a lot of groups were doing
951 a lot of things-trying to pressure this government to isolate South Africa you know so after a
952 while it wasn't difficult to get information because the movement-there was a movement. There
953 was a very strong movement. Initially I would say the movement was-in the 70s, particularly in
954 the anti colonial movement, which included South Africa, was probably more in the black
955 community than other communities. I don't think it was mainstream like because people were so
956 bogged down with the anti war work.

957
958
959 RH: Right

960 SW: But I think by mid 80s it had begin to shift because you began to see a lot of people who
961 probably have spent a lot of time in the-and I don't know this I haven't done the statistics of the
962 study but my guess is a lot of people who had been spending a lot of time trying to close down
963 the war many of them probably joined the anti apartheid movement in the mid to late 80s you
964 know and the forces were pretty strong. Particularly those forces to impose a very strict embargo

965 against South Africa because other countries had begin to do it and the United States was late
966 because they supported South Africa to the bitter end.

967 So I think that's what happened so just a lot of people. So news and the word and
968 publications were pretty readily available.

969
970 RH: Right

971
972 SW: And then the other part of it-we moved-my family moved out of Hyde Park in 1980. My
973 wife went to medical school. As soon as she finished medical school in 80 we moved to Oak
974 Park. But the Hyde Park community has always had a lot of information floating around. So
975 when we were over there was always stuff you know information there was no drought. Cause
976 professors-there were professors that were involved in different movements. You find that in
977 university communities you know university communities are always very enlightened
978 communities to be in. I enjoy being in around the university community.

979
980 RH: Right

981
982 SW: So it wasn't difficult to get information. And once I guess coming out of University of
983 Chicago and developing networks with people I never had difficulty. Because like I said Prexy
984 reached out to me when he had this young lady from Mozambique that needed some place to
985 stay. We were living in Oak Park then raising our daughters. And then after Mandela was free
986 they sent out delegations of people to study governments because they were trying to figure out
987 you know what form the new South Africa yea. And I remember this young man came from the
988 Alexandra community which is part of Johannesburg and he didn't have a place to stay and he
989 stayed with us for two months.

990
991 RH: O wow.

992
993 SW: Yea he just became part of the family. But that was after the election. This is probably 91,
994 92, 93 something like that. But you know after you become a part of that network you always got
995 information because people are always letting you know what's going on. And that was before
996 the internet of course I mean before the internet was so popular. Now you know if I turn on my
997 computer now, if it was working, I'm sure I would be getting stuff about some of everything
998 that's going on right now. It's a lot easier so it's in some ways a whole new day in terms of
999 information that we have to learn to use effectively.

1000
1001 RH: So in the late 80s when you were getting all this information, how would you say you used
1002 all this information either defending people or otherwise in the way-just in general.

1003
1004 SW: I think I just used it to stay informed. In some ways you know you evolve you don't stay the
1005 same. So by the 80s- the mid 80s-I'm a lawyer now-you know mid 80s-

1006 RH: Right

1007
1008 SW: I have two daughters so I use this information you know to try to pass it on to kids you
1009 know get them informed. You might be doing some discussions and forums you know which is
1010 for people that are involved you know it's always constant. For example I was on the-today

1011 although I was supposed to be doing this project and spending time with you then I had before I
1012 got here I had to spend time with the expert and before I got to him I was on the radio in New
1013 York.

1014
1015 RH: O really

1016
1017 SW: Yea so-

1018
1019 RH: Busy man

1020
1021 SW: Yea you know when you involved like that there is always stuff to do. I was on the radio
1022 talking about the recent filing of the petition around political prisoners-

1023
1024 RH: Right

1025
1026 SW: And this guy had read the paper and invited me join him so I did. So there's always stuff-
1027 you almost have to just say you know can't do it, too busy. Like tomorrow for example I was
1028 supposed to do deps. in the morning so I think I am going to have my associate do it because at 3
1029 o'clock I promised a professor friend of mine at the University of Chicago, Susan Gzesh that I
1030 would come and make a presentation to her class, cause she has the human rights group at the
1031 University of Chicago.

1032
1033 RH: Ok

1034
1035 SW: So she has this class and she wants them-she wants me to talk about you can begin to bring
1036 human rights home you know into your local communities. So I'll be out there at 3 o'clock
1037 tomorrow even though I should be doing a lot other stuff like finishing this project.

1038
1039 RH: So you were doing a lot of spreading the word almost at that point?

1040
1041 SW: I think I have forever yea I mean-

1042
1043 RH: That was one of your main goals?

1044
1045 SW: Yea always I mean you always you know as a lawyer you know you- I was a civil rights
1046 lawyer right away because I started working at the Peoples' Law Office. So you have to do your
1047 civil rights lawyering-it takes a lot of time. So you don't have a lot of time to do anything other
1048 than if you're fortunate enough like I was fortunate-the work that you were doing was movement
1049 work because we were filing lawsuits against police and organizing against police and the bird
1050 torture cases came up and they came up in our office first. So you're doing that and then other
1051 things you kinda fit in. So I wasn't doing a lot of-not a huge amount of anti apartheid work. If
1052 something came along you know if there's a demonstration or if I knew about a demonstration
1053 and people needed lawyers to come to the Consulate you know then I very likely go to the
1054 Consulate. But not a lot more than that because as a civil rights lawyer you find yourself very
1055 busy advancing civil rights you know filing lawsuits and all of that.

1056

1057 RH: At this time you were participating in divestment?

1058

1059 SW: Yea the divestment movement was going on. That was probably mid 80s I think.

1060

1061 RH: How were you involved? Were you like just-

1062

1063 SW: Probably not a lot. I certainly wasn't organizing anything. I'm sure I was on panels you
1064 know periodically. But still the divestment movements had demonstrations many of them were at
1065 the consulate-so we were always dispatched to do that. Sometimes if they were bigger
1066 demonstrations you know we would be involved in that and I remember you know on several
1067 occasions being at the Consulate. So I would say I spent a lot of time in the late 80s just being
1068 available to defend people that were doing demonstrations. I wasn't doing a lot of
1069 demonstrations. It's a little harder to do them even if you're not down defending people it's a lot
1070 harder to do demonstrations, organizing them and going to the meetings to organize them when
1071 you're trying to practice law. I found practicing law is pretty demanding.

1072

1073 RH: It seems like it.

1074

1075 SW: Yea so I wasn't doing a lot of that at that time. But being available I think the movements
1076 felt that having the few progressive lawyers that would available to defend was pretty important
1077 so. I did it you know my office did it, People's Law Office did it, we did it. We made a
1078 commitment to do it. I think there were 7 of us I think at the time which is more than most
1079 offices that would make a commitment to do things like that. Lawyer's guild, National Lawyers
1080 Guild did a lot of work around that.

1081 So I would say for the most part-became a lawyer in 83 and except for Consulate work
1082 you know forums periodically and just staying advised and trying to get- I spoke to a lot of
1083 students during that time, you know I don't do as much, but I still do quite a bit, particularly law
1084 students. You know and I could remember having discussions about Africa and the movement
1085 trying to get them involved. But I would say the work around apartheid 90% was more
1086 protecting demonstrators and that kind of stuff. And of course the 80s also for me was the time
1087 of Harold Washington's administration.

1088

1089 RH: Right

1090

1091 SW: And when I-

1092

1093 RH: How did you react when he was elected?

1094

1095 SW: I was part of uh- well when he was elected-the first election I was in law school and so we
1096 tried to help out as law students. You know you're limited as law students because it's such an
1097 intense program.

1098 RH: Right

1099

1100 SW: But we brought-I don't think he came on campus, but we brought somebody from the
1101 campaign. We had literature all over campus and discussions and all that. I got out of law school
1102 in 83 so I got directly involved in the reelection campaign. And I became one of the coordinators

1103 of the Lawyers for Washington, which is some huge number of lawyers I think we had about
1104 twelve hundred lawyers committed to defending Harold. And they had to be coordinated. So that
1105 meant that we had to identify lawyers who could go to court-who had the ability to go to court,
1106 cause there was always something in court.

1107
1108 RH: Right

1109
1110 SW: And we had to have the resources. So we found firms you know that had lawyers that had
1111 the resources and you know sit down with them and got a commitment from them to go to court
1112 on election day or before election day. Then we had to have lawyers to guard the polling places
1113 all over-not all over the city but all over the parts of the city that we considered would be
1114 Harold's votes. Because there were parts of the city that we knew Harold wasn't getting any
1115 votes so there was no point in defending those. But we didn't want to lose Harold's votes.

1116
1117 RH: Right

1118
1119 SW: So we had to do that. And we had to have lawyers do research on various issues. And we
1120 didn't have cell phones, we had walkie-talkies. So we on election day we had lawyers all over
1121 the city, some lawyers in areas where we didn't expect Harold to get a lot of votes but we wanted
1122 to have somebody there for the few votes. But in the areas where he got votes, we had lawyers
1123 available and at the precinct level, which is unheard of, not just at the ward level but the precinct
1124 level-available to immediately go in to resolve issues related to polling if we thought it was
1125 something that might take away votes from Harold.

1126
1127 RH: Like unfair or unjust-

1128
1129 SW: Yea well polling places opening late.

1130
1131 RH: Right o ok.

1132
1133 SW: Polling places are supposed to open at 6 or 7. If they open at 9 and there in Harold's district
1134 then that's a problem because you just lost a bunch of folks who would have voted on their way
1135 to work.

1136
1137 RH: Right

1138
1139 SW: So then we-we had a command post. Somewhere downtown we had rented this big office
1140 space. And we were in touch with all these lawyers all over the city by walkie-talkie because we
1141 didn't have cell phones. And so we would get on the walkie-talkie and say precinct and such and
1142 such a precinct and such and such a ward reports that the polling place did not open until 10 o
1143 clock, we need you to go to court and get an order-order that polling place to stay open, instead
1144 of closing at 7, stay open till 10 o clock. (Snaps) Done.

1145
1146 RH: Nice

1147

1148 SW: And they would go down there and they had an order. And if we saw something that looked
1149 like a pattern and it was, I can't remember what it was but we were getting reports that
1150 something was happening that was unusual. And if it was, we would send somebody to court you
1151 know we don't like the way it looks.

1152
1153 RH: Right (laughs)

1154
1155 SW: So you know lots of stuff was happening you know I mean South Africa was still very
1156 important but we had a black empowerment-political empowerment movement in Chicago. You
1157 know that many of us got actively involved in. I spent more time doing that then I was at my new
1158 office but I had a good group of partners and they understood so it was ok. But I still had
1159 responsibilities you know I still had to go to court and file stuff and had to do trials and all that.
1160 But I just kinda you know me and Lauren H.D. Saucemam, we just kinda took over the
1161 coordination because we found a lot of the lawyers were-black lawyers and white lawyers were
1162 just there because they were trying to get city business and so they wanted to impress upon
1163 Harold that they were helping to get him reelected because they wanted city business. But we
1164 weren't trying to get city business, in fact we had a struggle internally about city business and we
1165 decided we wouldn't because we thought that if we got city business and if the Harold
1166 administration-if the Washington administration was not doing what we thought was responsible
1167 particularly as it relates to police and all that then we would have to call them out and we thought
1168 it would be difficult to call them out if they are paying us at the same time.(Laughs)

1169
1170 RH :(Laughs) Right that's true. That's a good point.

1171
1172 SW: So we decided we wouldn't do city business. So many lawyers did get city business because
1173 it's very attractive to get city business because now you got a contract and you know you're
1174 gonna get paid you know cause you got the largest corporation-at least one of the largest
1175 corporations in the city which is the city of Chicago.

1176
1177 RH: Right yea

1178
1179 SW: But we said no we can't do that. So there's a lot of stuff going on you know I mean you do-
1180 you do it enough to satisfy your sense that you're being responsible and you're trying to still
1181 move things along at the anti apartheid level. You know I think what I did, and like many others
1182 we pretty much decided that our work should be defending demonstrations when we knew about
1183 them. But you know we realistically couldn't do much more than that.

1184
1185 RH: So by the end of the 80s and early 90s that was basically the whole-it you were involved in
1186 the anti apartheid movement it was defending demonstrations-

1187
1188 SW: Demonstrations. And many times at the Consulate, and demonstrating at the Consulate
1189 because I didn't accept the idea that I just had to step back and defend.

1190
1191 RH: Right even towards the end.

1192

1193 SW: Yea if there was a demonstration I would and walk the picket line. Now if someone got
1194 arrested then I would go you know head over to the jail. So it was kinda double duty you know,
1195 but I still feel like I could demonstrate. And we did. I don't remember very many arrests you
1196 know it was-not at the Consulate. There may have been arrests you know at the bigger
1197 demonstrations and all that but not at the Consulate. I think the Consulate to the extent to that
1198 they had any control over it made the decision they didn't want to get involved in that they just
1199 wanted to be quiet.

1200

1201 RH: Right

1202

1203 SW: You know because if they arrest somebody then that's a news item you know then we are
1204 gonna raise hell about that. And I think they decided no let's don't arrest nobody. In fact I think
1205 they there were occasions where they just closed down the Consulate early and went home and
1206 let us demonstrate.

1207

1208 RH: That's funny

1209

1210 SW: Cause they didn't want the bad publicity.

1211

1212 RH: So how did you react to the official ending of apartheid that was-

1213

1214 SW: I was like everybody else-I was very elated. I was- I was reflective, you know it had been a
1215 long struggle-many people had died you know. I didn't know a lot of them but I knew they had
1216 died because I had kept up with what was happening on the ground quite a bit through various
1217 sources. You know that I was reflective in terms of the sacrifice that the South African people
1218 had made you know you think about Mandela doing two decades plus in prison and all that and
1219 makes you very reflective. But I was just very happy you know very happy. It brought tears to
1220 my eyes just the idea that Mandela was getting out and the South African people were going to
1221 get elections. I didn't at the time have any idea, nobody else did, that even after the elections
1222 that the people of South Africa, South African workers were still- that the white South Africans
1223 were still going to control 87% of the most arable land productive land and that large numbers
1224 of African people would still be locked out of you know their own economy. Because when I
1225 went to South Africa in 2001-I went to Durbin- and we went out-outside of Durbin they had
1226 these shanty towns with no plumbing no nothing just people out there because they were close
1227 to Durbin and I guess they could come into town to try find work to survive but there was
1228 nothing in these homesteads. So I had no way of foreseeing that so I was just elated because I
1229 thought finally the people South Africa after all these decades would just have a new day you
1230 know. And to some extent they do but to in another sense they don't because they are still
1231 suffering tremendously after all that struggle.

1232

1233 RH: Right. And you reacted the same way when Mandela was elected president?

1234

1235 SW: Yea. Except we heard about the deaths of Shanora and Hayward Burns I mean that put a
1236 damper on it but I mean we were very happy. I mean we knew he would be elected. And then
1237 the other damper of course, prior to the elections, weeks prior to the elections-there was an
1238 attempt by the right-to disrupt the elections and to force the South African- to force the ANC in
1239 particular in to reacting to various acts of violence. You know trying to-

1240

1241 RH: Trying to draw them out?

1242

1243 SW: Well trying to provoke a civil war, that's what they were trying to do.

1244

1245 RH: Right

1246

1247 SW: To divert and to undermine the upcoming election. So we were concerned about that
1248 because there were various acts of violence around. And the one that stands out obviously is
1249 the murder of Chris Honey. Chris had been thought of as the successor to Mandela because he
1250 led the armed struggle part of the-he was a member of the communist party but he was also a
1251 member of the ANC. And to kill Chris-appeared would plunge South Africa into a civil war so we
1252 were very concerned about that as we were moving towards the election and we knew about it
1253 I mean you know we stayed in touch with what was going on in South Africa on almost a daily
1254 basis. So once the election was done and Mandela won and the country did not go into civil
1255 war, the Baltilucy (spelling?) people out of Encata which was the Zulu part of the population
1256 and the leadership out of that group was pretty reactionary-they were anti ANC because you
1257 know they worked with the South African apartheid government against the ANC and all that.

1258

1259 RH: Right

1260

1261 SW: So we were concerned that that might be a problem. So when the election happened and
1262 he was elected and you know sworn in and there was no Encata creating stuff of any
1263 significance-there's no civil war, we had lost Chris you know in the murder- assassination but it

1264 didn't stop any thing it didn't plunge-I think largely due to Mandela's being able to control
1265 things. So it was you know it was kind of bitter sweet in a sense that even after he gets out of
1266 prison the people of South Africa still struggling to get to the point where they can say they
1267 have a government, they have a president that they chose because there were still reactionary
1268 forces to stop that. So you always kind of waiting to exhale. And I mean you exhaled after he
1269 was sworn in. And then they had the Truth and Reconciliation and there was all the questions
1270 about it-

1271

1272 RH: How did you react to that?

1273

1274 SW: I don't know you know I kinda understood it but I didn't like it. I didn't like the idea that
1275 these racists were going to be able to just admit to their violence and racism and just walk
1276 away. I thought it was unfair you know because there was a lot of people that were murdered
1277 by the apartheid regime and just let them walk away like that. But I understood in the context
1278 of the overall international scene at the time because unlike the anti apartheid struggles in the
1279 70s and 80s, there was another force that was available and that was the Soviet Union and the
1280 Soviet Block. But the Soviet Union didn't exist anymore with Mandela. And so the only blocks
1281 was the NATO and the western blocks. And so everything changed. If South Africa had taken a
1282 stronger position and said we're gonna you know prosecute all these guys it would have
1283 offended the western block because the western block supported apartheid.

1284

1285 RH: Right

1286

1287 SW: So they had to factor all that in. So I you know I had to understand that it was their
1288 decisions-we supported the movement but it wasn't our movement it was their movement.

1289

1290 RH: Right

1291 SW: So you kinda have to let them make decisions about how they proceed and they have to
1292 take a lot of stuff into consideration. So you just live with that.

1293

1294 RH: Reflecting do you think there is anything you would have done differently?

1295

1296 SW: In terms of what?

1297

1298 RH: In terms of the whole movement in general. Or I mean-you would have approached it
1299 differently or any-

1300

1301 SW: I don't know I think uh- I'm pretty satisfied with where I am now. I think I'm a late bloomer.
1302 You know I didn't go to college till late I didn't finish college till late. If I had-when I was raising
1303 my daughters and then my son came and my wife and I at the time were working very hard, I
1304 was trying to develop a private practice, she was trying to develop as a doctor, we always
1305 talked about traveling and going to Africa and maybe getting involved at a different level but
1306 we just didn't have that option. We didn't have the money, we couldn't take the kids out of
1307 school. I would have liked to for example-I went into a PHD program in Latin American studies
1308 at the University of Chicago, the first Latin American studies they had, that they developed.
1309 And-you know there were times where I regretted not being able to do like the other students
1310 who were single that didn't have responsibilities that I had- they after the first summer after
1311 the first year the first summer we had-I think all of them went to Mexico and studied language
1312 all summer. And so when they came back in the fall they were all speaking very well. I didn't
1313 have those options, I had to work, I had children.

1314

1315 RH: Well you have priorities.

1316

1317 SW: Yea and so I couldn't do all that. So I guess if I could change that I wouldn't change that by
1318 getting rid of my children but it would have made things different cause I would of-I would be
1319 speaking Spanish now. And if I was speaking Spanish now I would probably be spending some
1320 time-organizing a viable connection between the African American community and least parts of
1321 the Latino community because I think there are some areas in common. I think that could-I think
1322 I would able to facilitate that better if I was speaking Spanish. And I took time off, me and my
1323 son took a class a couple summers ago but it just wasn't enough and I couldn't get into it because
1324 I was too busy with my practice. So I always wished I could speak Spanish because I know a lot
1325 of people-progressives in the Latino community but it ain't the same if you can go into a
1326 community. Because it gives you a certain level of authenticity if you can speak the language.

1327

1328 RH: Right

1329

1330 SW: So you know I regret not being able to spend more time- because in the Latin American
1331 studies program you had to- to get your masters you had to pass a language exam which I did but
1332 that was all reading-

1333

1334 RH: O ok.

1335

1336 SW: But it was not speaking. And if I had had more time and I didn't have so many
1337 responsibilities I would have definitely- my daughter Akiza when she went to Columbia-she
1338 went to Columbus-Columbia. You know I told you we had this student from Columbia,
1339 Colleque, Columbia.

1340

1341 RH: Right

1342

1343 SW: She went the next summer. When she came back she was speaking Spanish fluently. But we
1344 had had her in classes since she was probably in the first grade, Spanish class. I remember
1345 having her in the summer-in language-seeing my other daughter in a language camp. So they had
1346 all those advantages that we gave them. And I think she still does. It's been many many years
1347 ago but she says she still hears Spanish she doesn't speak it that well because she doesn't use it
1348 but she still hears it.

1349 So I would have done that differently. I think the longer shorter I would have done more
1350 to- be more involved in other parts of the movement by learning the language-and I think I
1351 would have-if I had more time I would study more. You know when I was at U of C I studied a
1352 lot more than I study now. And you have to study if you're involved in a movement. You know
1353 especially if you are part of the leadership- you have to study to help people- you see in my
1354 community I know for sure that I am seen as a progressive lawyer who has a certain amount of
1355 respect in other communities. You know in the progressive white community, the Palestinian
1356 community, the Puerto Rican community, to some extent some parts of the Mexican community.
1357 So unlike many I have an international base in that sense. It would be a deeper base and it would
1358 be a base that I can probably help my community to understand better and maybe adopt in some
1359 ways if I had more time to study. You know struggle and study goes hand in hand. You know I
1360 got many books but I just don't ever have time to study. I would like to know more about for

1361 example the whole immigration issue. I would like to more about it-I have the books if I read
1362 them-I would like to know more about it. I would like to argue on behalf of immigration, but I
1363 would like to be able to argue some of the economic issues that relate to immigration that I know
1364 exist that I just don't know how to study. You know I know the immigration policies of the
1365 United States have affected certain sectors in Mexico that has made it very difficult for Mexican
1366 workers to work because of the trade policies. And it has forced Mexicans out of certain sectors
1367 because there are no jobs. Now you know if many people understood those dynamics they might
1368 see the immigration issue a little differently because to some extent we helped cause it.

1369 I would like to study and know more about the whole Palestinian/Israeli issues. I know a
1370 lot but I don't know enough. You know and I have books that if I took time to study I would
1371 know more so I can be clearer on some of the issues and be able to articulate them. Because I see
1372 myself as one that helps bring information to my community so I would do more of that but this
1373 law office keeps me very busy, more than I want to be. I don't particularly enjoy being busy with
1374 law. I mean it's what I do, I'm pretty good at it but it doesn't excite me, it never has that much
1375 just doing the research and the briefs-

1376

1377 RH: For individual cases and stuff like that?

1378

1379 SW: No it's not that it's just that I can't- I went to school to be a historian-I like history. I love to
1380 get a history book and just spend a weekend reading it. But I'm so bogged down with keeping
1381 the law practice going and reading law and making arguments and appellate briefs and all this
1382 stuff, which I have to do. I don't do it with a great deal of excitement because I think I'm
1383 historian by-I wouldn't say by nature but by training. I love history. And it reinforces my
1384 political work you know. But if you gotta run a practice you gotta run a practice. So if I could do
1385 that over again somehow if I wasn't so tied down with the legal work and I could do more
1386 thinking, more writing. I was asked to write a section of a book that I alluded to earlier and the
1387 book was gonna be published by Third World Press and it was gonna be about black activism in
1388 Chicago from 1960 to 75 and I was asked to write a section. Like a personal political biography.
1389 And I was exciting about it and I started researching meaning going into my own personal
1390 archives, digging out stuff but I just didn't have the time. You know I pulled out a lot of stuff,
1391 did a little writing and then I just ran out of time. And I haven't been able to get back to it. But I
1392 was excited about doing that, I enjoy doing it. So if I had more time to do it I think I would love
1393 to do it but I don't see the time right now-no time soon. Because I've got trials every month this
1394 year except July-the month of July. So it's a lot.

1395

1396 RH: Um to keep reflecting, how has being an activist changed you as a person over the course of
1397 I guess your activism years?

1398

1399 SW: I don't remember otherwise I guess I've been an activist so long. (Pause) For sure two
1400 things changed me. Two streams of thought. One stream of thought is black nationalism. That
1401 stream of thought gave me a different view of myself as a black man, as a member of the black
1402 community, as a member of the human family-coming out of with my origins in Africa. And
1403 that's a positive thought, it's something that I have embraced, it's caused me to study Africa and
1404 see the African world probably differently than most people. So that's the first school of thought.
1405 Another school of thought is the thinking of my connection with other working people. You
1406 know the connection that I developed as I studied you know socialism, socialist ideas and stuff
1407 like that. And that's very important too. Both of those are very strong. One gives me the ability
1408 to understand and examine things-phenomenal-social phenomena by looking at classes and
1409 looking at class kind of conflicts. And the other one gives me a very different and the same
1410 perspective in looking at the issues of race you know and how race plays its way out through
1411 everything in the United States. So the combination of the two I think gives me a balance. And I
1412 didn't have that as I was growing up. I didn't develop that until I became an activist. So as an
1413 activist now having all that and the experience that I've had, I know I'll die as an activist. I know
1414 I won't retire because it's not something you retire from.

1415

1416 RH: Right

1417

1418 SW: You know you keep pushing and you keep organizing you keep doing what you do until
1419 you can't do it no more because that's your life. So that how it changes-you are transformed over
1420 a period of time and you don't go back. I don't see how you could go back. I've been doing what
1421 I do since I first organized that little drive in 1965 to feed people in the south. And that's been
1422 many many years-that was before most of my kids were born and all of that. And so you
1423 transform and I like who I am because I know-because I see how other people are and don't
1424 particularly like who they are. You know I see people who have distanced themselves from any
1425 struggle. I see people who like lawyers for example are just trying to practice law because they
1426 hope they can get rich one day. They don't want to have anything to do with anybody's struggle.
1427 They don't want have anything to do with anything except trying to posture-you know to be
1428 successful and wealthy one day. So you can't even talk to them about struggle-they don't have a
1429 clue. I'm not that and I would not be happy being that kind of person. So I am glad of who I am.
1430 I'm different and I know it and they know it because I hear it all the time, but that's alright you
1431 know. I'm pretty comfortable in my difference. I make a lot of sacrifices but I think that's what's
1432 you're supposed to do.

1433 So the movement has- the struggle involvement has changed me you know I have a good
1434 sense of what's going on in my community, outside of my community-outside the community
1435 you know in different parts of the world. Sometimes if I'm just in the community-I might be
1436 walking down the street- it's not uncommon for somebody to stop me and say aren't you Stan
1437 Willis? And I say yea and I say who are you, and we you know shake hands and-

1438

1439 RH: Celebrity.

1440

1441 SW: Yea yea well I guess you can call it that but I think it's just the recognition that here's
1442 somebody that we know is fighting on our behalf. I think that's how they see that. And
1443 sometimes they just say god bless you keep doing what you're doing. And I like that. And I like
1444 to be that kind of person that's the kind of person I want to be. And you know that's the kind of
1445 person I intend to always be. I can't see anything that would drastically change that. I think I
1446 rather be that person than one who is in this office now who is just trying to scrape out and find a
1447 way to find great wealth one day. Because you gotta look at yourself in the mirror you know.
1448 You know all these problems are going on. You know there are people starving in the United
1449 States, you walk out of here you are going to see homeless people, you know that children are
1450 not being educated in the city of Chicago, you know that the prisons are filling up with black
1451 men and Latino men and if you're not doing anything about it then I think that's a problem. I
1452 really do. I mean we are all connected.

1453 So I think my involvement has changed me forever. And I'm glad of it you know.

1454

1455 RH: What would you say you are most proud of on that note?

1456

1457 SW: Most proud of?

1458

1459 RH: Yea

1460

1461 SW: (Pause) I don't know really. I think I'm proud that uh-I'm proud to be here. I'm proud that I
1462 went through what I've gone through in terms of the work I've done. Some of it has been done
1463 very well, I've learned a lot. I've learned a lot by myself. I've learned about how to be healthy
1464 which I think is critical. I don't know very many to be quite frank-I don't know too many-very

1465 many 68 year old men or women for that matter who get up every morning, rain, shine, snow or
1466 sleet, and run a mile or two every morning, who is very careful about what they and careful
1467 about getting sleep and all that. And it's not a fad it's just the way I live, I've been living this
1468 way for a while. And I'm pretty healthy you know I lift-I do my work out in the morning.
1469 Typically my workout is -right now because it changes it evolves-I usually do 20 sit-ups or more.
1470 I do 50-right now 50 to 60 sometimes 70 pushups.

1471

1472 RH: I couldn't even do that many.

1473

1474 SW: Most people can't. That's what I'm saying. And then I do some yoga stuff you know
1475 stretching and breathing. And I lift some light weights just for muscle development-15 bar bells
1476 that kind of stuff. And then I go and run every morning. And I like being that way. And then I'm
1477 careful about food. I cook my own food typically; I hardly ever buy anything from restaurants.
1478 You saw me eat that sandwich that's not common with me. I typical cook because my son is at
1479 home and he cooks a little bit and I cook for both of us. And I like it like that. My food-
1480 vegetables, fish, you know poultry I buy at whole foods so I don't absorb chemicals you know I
1481 think that's important.

1482 So I think you know I have evolved to be close to the person-you know there is still a lot
1483 of work to do but in some ways I'm pretty close to the person that I think I should be you know
1484 in terms of how I eat, how I sleep. My relationships with people are pretty wholesome. My
1485 children are-my relationship with my children is very solid. I am very supportive. They are very
1486 supportive of me. My daughter Akiza is pretty political, my daughter Eisha is not. You know
1487 that's fine. My fiancé is very political, very supportive and I'm very supportive. So things are
1488 pretty good. But it's you know there's still politics and struggle you know it's a lifestyle. You
1489 know even the food you eat I think -the fact that you decide that you want to find a way to
1490 contribute to a better environment. So I had this discussion with my son about how can we do
1491 that. Let's start getting rid of some of this plastic you know start bringing-you know that kind of
1492 stuff. I think that's part of-people who have been in the struggle evolve to try to live for the
1493 future, try to contribute to the future. And I like that about myself and I'm glad that I did that and
1494 I'm glad I am who I am right now.

1495

1496 RH: That's cool. Um two more questions actually: what event or person was the most influential
1497 in your experience as an activist?

1498

1499 SW: Uh two people. No event that I can think of. One person: Malcolm X. Very important, his
1500 speeches, his persona, his commitment to the struggle, his outlook about-especially after he left
1501 the nation of Islam he talked about the world struggle, he talked about the world revolution
1502 which you know was realistic. And he died as a result of it. I think history maybe at some point
1503 will figure out the connection between his death and the United States government. And then the
1504 other person was a friend of mine. His name is Bob Rhoads. Bob Rhoads introduced me to
1505 socialist thought. He was a theoretician. He was-we met at the University of Chicago. He was
1506 studying philosophy. And we had these classes and we studied because we all were activists.
1507 And he was the person who led the classes-he was the one who really understood the theory and
1508 attempt to explain it. We are still friends. We were together last weekend. And so he took me in a
1509 whole different direction. As a working class young man, to know that there-theoretical-social
1510 theoretical ways of looking at myself as part of a working class community. You know and that
1511 also feeds into one's way of struggling. I didn't know that-it was new. He was very good-he was
1512 very helpful.

1513 So those two people I would say contributed more to my outlook, because there's a
1514 nationalist part of it comes from Malcolm and then you know kind of international outlook that I
1515 am embracing now through the human rights movement. And then there was Bob Rhoads who
1516 introduced another layer on that and that's the layer of class struggle and working class people.
1517 In fact I was honored last night at the Coalition of Black Trade Unionist had their annual banquet
1518 and I was given an award as a-they give a community service-most of the awards they give are to
1519 people in the trade union movement and they had this one award that they give to someone they
1520 think is contributing to the community- community service award. And they honored me by
1521 giving me the community service award last night at a banquet. So that was a nice gesture, good
1522 feeling. So those are the two I would say that had the greatest influence you know then anybody.

1523

1524 RH: Um ok last question that I have written down, what do you still think needs to be done in
1525 South Africa?

1526

1527 SW: I think there has to be a way, hopefully a non violent way- I don't know if it's possible-that
1528 the people who fought for a new South Africa are able to participate in a new South Africa-that
1529 is the mass of people who are still living in these shanty towns- I think there has to be some form
1530 of land distribution-redistribution. It's unfair that the people who benefitted from apartheid still
1531 benefit from apartheid you know from their relationship. Now for sure there are some black
1532 people and some who were part of the anti apartheid movement who have become very well off
1533 because they were able to get in, they had contacts with the ANC and they started businesses.
1534 And that's fine, I think that's fair. But it's unfair that the land is not redistributed, that the masses
1535 of black Africans are still really struggling after going through an anti apartheid movement and

1536 it's going to resolve itself in some way. There have been more people focused on Zimbabwe
1537 because of land distribution which I think is unfair. But there have been more white farmers
1538 killed in South Africa than there have even close to Zimbabwe. There have been over 100
1539 (unknown word) over the land. In Zimbabwe I think there have been probably 3 or 4. But the
1540 western world has decided to attack Zimbabwe I think largely because of the land distribution.
1541 And they don't want to see that as a pattern, because if you distribute land without a reaction to
1542 the western world, then you might decide to distribute or take over the oil and the box site and all
1543 these other resources. So I think they are sending this message because there's no other reason.
1544 Cause you can say well Mugabe has been in office 25 years. Well so have three or four other
1545 leaders on the continent but they are not attacking them. So I think it's just focused on the whole
1546 land thing. And they never talk about the land they talk about president Mugabe took the land
1547 from the white farmers but they don't talk about where the white farmers got the land from. And
1548 of course they took it from the African people so it's unfair. But the reason Mugabe is supported
1549 by the leadership of almost-all over the continent is because they know it's unfair. And they
1550 know that land should be redistributed you know. And it would have been if the west had
1551 committed more resources in this case in Zimbabwe.

1552 So I would like to see the people in South Africa benefit from the resources in South Africa
1553 and they're not, not the black South Africans. And that's what the whole fight was about. So
1554 until it happens-I would rather see it not happen as a result of civil war but I think that's more up
1555 to the people who are controlling the land and these western powers who could very easily say
1556 ok let's intervene in some way and work with the South African government and try to figure out
1557 a way to help assist to avoid a civil war. They could do that but they don't. So we'll see. But
1558 that's the sad commentary that we at this point after all this struggle-but of course Americans
1559 never were supporting the anti apartheid movement you know the government was forced. So, so
1560 that's what I would like to see. I don't know how that could happen yet but uh-it might end up
1561 with a lot of violence and a lot of people dying you know that don't have to die if there was more
1562 proactivity on part of the western countries. Because they ultimately are the countries that
1563 benefitted at least the corporations benefitted, not working people so much in the western
1564 countries. Well-

1565

1566 RH: Is there anything else you would like to add at the end of this interview?

1567

1568 SW: No I don't think so. It was some thought provoking questions. Did you come up with that
1569 all by yourself?

1570

1571 RH: Ha some of them yes.

1572

1573 SW: That was very thought provoking.

1574

1575 RH: I'm not as dumb as I look.

1576

1577 SW: No you don't look dumb I mean I know a little bit about your school, you came from a good
1578 school and um-so tell me about your jazz, how did you get into jazz?

1579

1580 RH: We will talk about that right-

1581

1582 SW: After you turn off the tape recorder.