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Interview with Carol Thompson

Marcia Monaco
Columbia College - Chicago

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Marcia Monaco
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MARCIA MONACO: Hello, my name is Marcia Monaco, and this is my interviewee, Carol Thompson. The date is April 16 and the time is 10:05 AM. So, thank you for coming here today Carol and agreeing with meeting with me. Um, I’m going to start the interview by asking you a few introductory questions about your background, life and then we will move into your activism and then some reflective.

CAROL THOMPSON: Ok

MM: So, to start off, where were you born?
CT: Uh, I was born in, in Chicago.

MM: And where, whose gave you your birth name?
CT: Um, my parents.

MM: And where were you raised?
CT: In, um, in Chicago, until uh, 1959. We moved out to Palatine as a part of white flight, uh, situation in Chicago where there was a lot of changing neighborhoods.

MM: Great, and, where was your father’s place of birth?
CT: He was born in Chicago, uh, on the west side of the city.

MM: And your mother’s place of birth?
CT: And my mother is also born in Chicago. And she is from the south side.

MM: And what nationality, nationalities is your father?
CT: Uh, his parents were both, uh from Czechoslovakia, and they were immigrants here, so he was first generation.

MM: What nationalities is your mother?
CT: And my mother’s, uh, family were, her mother was German, she was, came from Germany and her father was Irish, but he was born here in Chicago as well, so his, he was second generation.
MM: What was your

CT: She, she was second generation on her father’s side.

MM: And what was you earliest memory?

CT: Earliest memory. Gee, I don’t know. I suppose uh, just living, we lived in a two flat on the west side of Chicago, I just, just suppose I remember the house, my parents. I mean, you know, nothing distinctive.

MM: Who influenced you the most growing up?

CT: Um, I suppose you know, the parents influence you quite a bit, you know when you are very young. And then uh, they use school; I went to a Catholic grammar school. Um, I don’t remember to much about my school in Chicago but once I moved out to Palatine, I remember, you know, going, going to school there. I was seven, at that point. Um, and teachers, the nuns who taught me there. You know, I suppose uh, instilled some sort of moral, uh, structure to how we think about your life. And whatnot. And that was, that was formative in those early, early years. And then in high school, I think it more, more specific, at points.

MM: Who did you dream you would be when you grew up?

CT: I really, I really had no idea. I mean, I, I, it was still a time when girls were pretty much raised to become mothers and raise kids and that was kinda the role model. Although, I always had the nuns as an alternative, [light laughter] And that was oddly, was not a negative so for so many people that’s a negative influence, but for me, it really, really there was an alternative that you could see women being teachers and um, uh— and committing their lives to something they believed in.

MM: Tell me about your favorite subject in school.

CT: I don’t know if I had, really had a favorite subject, I think um, uh, in terms of school uh—I mean I, I enjoyed Social Studies kinda more than Math, although I was ok with Math actually. Uh, in theater, in mean a, high school I got really involved in theater and that’s what I wanted to accomplish.

MM: Tell me about your first major academic or extra circular accomplishment in high school.

CT: Well, in high school I got very involved with the, with the theater there. And, and uh, then also other extra circular things and became uh, one of the student council student of the month, I guess that was uh, uh, an accomplishment and member of what they call a thespian society which was a, a high school theater association.
MM: Why did you decide to apply for North-Northern Illinois University?

CT: Well, I was the first person on either side of my family to go to college. And um, for my parents, it, they, there were six children and it was sort of why wouldn’t you go to the school closest to home? And um, and that was the one that was closest to home. (laughter) And they didn’t have money to think about private colleges, state colleges, why would you do anything else, you know? (light laughter) Because they really didn’t have any perspective on that. So that’s where I landed.

MM: How did attending Northern Illinois University influence your academic or social life?

CT: Well, um, as a theater major, I mean, you spent a lot of time in the theater at the same time that was right toward the end of the Vietnam War, and so there were some demonstrations on our campuses. It wasn’t a particularly politically active campus but there were some. I also was very interested in politics at the time uh, and was involved with some of the discussion groups with the libertarian society, which is more of a right wing group. But very kinda, um classical liberal kind of a on social, social issues. And um, so I was involved in those discussion groups and we caught a little action right at the end of the war of are demonstrations on campus. And so, um, we were appos to the war in general but coming more from a right wing angle than a left wing angle. Than later in life I kinda made a 180-degree political turn, but you know, but I was interested in those, in those things.

MM: What year did you graduate from college?

CT: Uh, 1973

MM: What was your dream job fresh out of college?

CT: I had no clue. By the time I graduated, in fact, I spent my last semester in Europe, uh, because my boyfr, then boyfriend now husband, was drafted in the very last Vietnam draft class and he was expected to go into the military and then due to some paper work snafus he didn’t go and they called off the draft before he was called again. So um, and he graduated a year ahead of me. So, I signed up for a study a broad um, in, in Austria. Um, and graduated already not thinking I was going particularly do something in theater, I did, I had no clue. I really didn’t.

MM: Where did your life lead you after college but before your involvement with Anti-Apartheid Movement?

CT: Well, I had done that study abroad, that last semester and because um, Kevin didn’t get drafted, he came over Europe and we ending up working for um, the US Army in hotels they had a recreation center in Germany. Um, so it was an interesting way to get to know about the military without having to be in it and that was interesting um, that went to Kevin taking a job with American Express bank, in Frankford, which did the military
banking. And the, the important connection there is that while working at that bank, he
met a woman from Baltimore, an African-American women, who, who was married to a
German um-uh seminary student who was studying to be a Lutheran Pastor and, um, they
were very progressive. And um, after we got married I came back to the states for a year, 
and then we, I got married and we went back, I went back, to Germany for a couple of 
years and we got involved with them socially and met a lot of other students in Germany 
and that was part of our whole political transformation, was um, being involved with 
them. Um, he was studding uh, black liberation theology, although he’s white, uh, 
German student. And he had come to Baltimore as part of a um, uh, his a selective 
service here, off his alternative service because he, he claimed to be pacifist, and so 
therefore he, he could avoid military service by working in Baltimore, where he met this 
African-American women, and so anyways, we got involved with a lot of uh that kinda 
of, those kind of ideas and ideals and uh, were able, while through that relationship to 
also go to uh, Switzerland to the World Council of Churches for uh, seminars and on 
Orthodox Theology and some different things, so it kinda took us into the, into the realm 
of kinda political um, religious political activism. Which was uh, kinda the core element 
for our future.

MM: How did you first learn about Apartheid?

CT: Um—I suppose, if, if, hum—I don’t know exactly. I mean we, I remember talking
about it in Europe, at that time, that being one of the, one of their interests. Were as in, in, 
because of close encounters, these friends in Germany and their, their interest in racial 
politics and racial, uh, issues. And getting out of the United States I mean, you know, I, 
your education in the United States is so insular that you could, at, at that time, that you
really didn’t know much about the rest of the world. Other than, I mean, going back to 
World War II, perhaps you knew some of that, but you didn’t know anything I mean, 
that, and you didn’t have the kind of communications you have today with the internet 
and uh stuff like that, where you might stumble onto (light laughter) more um, interaction 
with the rest of the world. I mean, you, it really was much more insulated. So living in 
Europe really made a big difference because you, you had just a totally different 
perspective on the world. And uh, and through these friendships and through their 
interests, I think that’s where I might have first heard about it but, we, they were not 
active, they uh, they were still students, I mean, on the student level themselves, 
essentially. And um, uh, this women was actually a, a singer, she was practiced singing 
opera singing, it was very complex relationship we had with them because we had that in 
common, an interest in, in classical music and so on. And uh, and but, through those 
relationships we explored, began to explore, some of our own racial politics, personal 
politics. And, and I think that, that was formative and then uh, I, I think when I went to 
Switzerland, actually I met some, uh, students from, they weren’t from South Africa, but 
some African students, there, and just, they enriched that, that whole discussion and ideas 
in our heads. I wasn’t particularly involved in South Africa then.

MM: What was your first reaction to knowing about the issue of Apartheid in South 
Africa? If you can’t recall a first reaction, just something along your first thoughts
CT: Well, I, I, yea

MM: of Apartheid

CT: I didn’t really, you know, I mean like I said, I really didn’t learn about it in school, but it’s kinda like, I was always amazed that, I went almost all the way through college never knowing that there had been Japanese Internment Camps here in the United States during World War II. And, and even though I went even as a Girl Scout to camp, a camp that had been a German Concentration, er not a Concentration Camp, but a German Internment Camp, here in Illinois. I mean, then they were used as Girl Scout Camps afterwards. Um, but, never really understood the full implications of that. Um, uh, but my growing up, it, I mean, Apartheid was very familiar to me once I learned about it. Because of my background, um, in Chicago, and, and um, my mother’s family in particular, I mean, my father didn’t haven extended family in Chicago, but my mother’s family from the south side lived in a neighborhood that was white and very hostile to neighboring black community. And when they build uh, the projects in the fifty’s, sixty’s mostly in the sixty’s, uh, along the expressway on the south side, they lived on one side of the expressway. And it was a very clear demarcation and um, and a lot of racial fear and um, uh animosity. But then I, that was the atmosphere, at that time that I grew up in. And particularly when I visited that neighborhood, and I spent a lot of time there. I was the older grandchild; my mother was the oldest of seven children and so my grandmother still lived in that neighborhood for many, many years. And I kinda grew up spending a lot of time there. And, and um, where, when they, they built the um, projects on along the expressway, they ripped up the viaducts and built parks there, so, that you know, people couldn’t come through. And, I grew up playing in those parks. And knowing that that’s why those, you know, those streets have been blocked off is to keep black people out of there. I grew up in that pretty hostile area when uh, when Martin Luther King was in Chicago. Uh, my experience, I mean when he was here and doing some fare housing work and stuff like that. I mean, I know more about it historically than, now, than I did at the time. But all I knew, I mean that was a big bugaboo, (light laughter) you know, a big scary thing that you were suppose to be afraid of. And, and I know once I started learning about Apartheid, all those things were ringing true in my mind, I mean, understanding the injusticeses of it, having kinda lived that out. Always knowing there was something wrong with that. Now, I’m going back to a pretty early childhood. And, and just having experienced that. I lived in Palatine, it was all white, there were no black people at my school, I had no interaction with black people whatsoever. Um, when I got to college, I had a black friend in college; a girl in the dorm. And not that it was uh, it wasn’t a, a big deal, but it’s just that, you know, learning about Apartheid, I understood that apartness from my own experience. And I understood that sort of bitterness of racial division having experienced that in my family. Uh, I mean, hearing it all my life. The word nigger was common, in my family. There was no high-mindedness about (light laughter) when it came to racial stuff. And yet, I knew that there was always something wrong with it. I mean, it was, and whether that was, came from the Catholic nuns who had a little more high-minded notions or whatever, um, you know, that was there. Um, and in high-school I had a, actually it was my drama coach, who was also my social studies professor, who got me reading King, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X and stuff like that. Which, my
parents were ok about it, but my grandparents, thought this was horrible, (light laughter) you know what I mean, that I was reading this stuff. And yet, so that, all that was formative. Um, but you know, always on the back burner of my life, it wasn’t really on the front burner. Um, until we came back from Europe, and I think that that was pretty much

MM: What key events lead you towards apartheid activism?

CT: Well, its actually very, just a very conscious movement when we moved back from um, from Germany, we move, one of the reasons we moved back, is that it was not easy for an American to become politically involved in Europe. At least at that time, or for us, you know. And because we were working for the army there was just, it wasn’t, it wasn’t like it wasn’t allowed or anything like that. It just, it wasn’t natural. It wasn’t a natural thing to be at. When we didn’t speak German, we spoke German well enough to live there, but not well enough to become fluently involved. When we came back to the states, we um, we were, wanted to make a conscious effort to become more politically involved in, in the world. We mostly got involved with a group called Christians for socialism which is um, uh, which was uh at the time was organized mostly by people who had come out of central America, the central America experience and um, were involved with these base communities, who were doing um, sort of like reflecting on the bible and in terms of current political involvements there. Particularly, in El Salvador and uh, coming out of, of, the experience in Chile and um, at the time, which was, which was very hot politically. And, and a lot of these friends, continued to work on that, I didn’t have that orientations toward central America, but my, I became, began to look for ways to be involved in multi-racial um, activities in Chicago. I was a little to young for the Civil Rights Movement, especially living in a white suburb. And, I mean I, kids didn’t have the interaction in the movement they have today as much then as far as a high school student. So, I was, um, but I, I was a little young for the Civil Rights Movement, but I kinda studied it through this professor in high-school. And um, that was always interesting to me and especially based on my childhood experiences. So coming back to the states after having had other relationships in Europe, um, that you know, I wanted to be involved, find a way to be involved in a multi-racial uh, activity in Chicago. Er, er issue in Chicago. It not as easy as it sounds. There isn’t, there wasn’t that much, those boundaries are very difficult to overcome, uh, it’s a very segregated city. So at, at the time I got involved with coming back with um, clergy and ______________ in Chicago. Which came actually, was partly started by Martin Luther King um, coming out of the housing, fare housing work. But, but it kinda took on the uh, the anti-war element that King was into at the end of his life. And it kinda took a back, more than anything, um, I don’t know how I stumbled on it, on to it, through like this, you know, Christian Socialist stuff which was much more radical than clergy __________ they were more of a liberal group. Um, but, you know some good books, and one of the things they were doing at the time were they were demonstrating, at the conciliate once a week, for years. You know, um, two, three, four people with flyers or with just a poster, whatever, um, and studying about what was going on in South Africa, and that was my interest. And I did that for a couple of years, um, and I was working at the time for a bookstore, downtown in Chicago, and met a South African author, Donald Woods, who had written a book on, about his own
experience he was, he was a white journalist, uh, who had left South Africa. And, and he came and I met him, and told him of my involvement there, and he hooked me up with um, some other South Africans here in Chicago. Dennis Brutus, who was a professor who had a lot of trouble with his, he was being faced with deportation, um, he’d been involved in anti-sports uh, kind of a, organizing against uh, South Africa being allowed to participate in international sports, issues and whatnot. He was actually a, a, literary uh, professor to, to this day. Anyway, but he, and we got involved in supporting his case not to be deported. And he, and it was successful, ultimately, but that was part of the Dennis Brutus defense committee, was how I was involved with that. So, that was kinda was the first South Africa issue that I got involved with. And then, everything changed when Prexy Nesbit came back from, he had been in Switzerland and, and he got hooked up with me from the clergy lady concern um, I don’t know how in the world we got together. But I remember distinct, sitting down, having a cup of coffee and talking about all the strange connections we had internationally because of our involvement in the World Council, (light laughter) and his involvement, and we were involved with a church that had supported the program to combat racism, which is this sort of radical program through the World Council of Churches, where they were actually having, was mostly Protestant churches mostly, supporting liberation movements in South Af, in Southern Africa. And, which was controversial because of arm struggle issues. So, and my church happen to be one of the two in the whole United States that was supporting this program. (light laughter) So, we had a lot of little strange connections, and uh, he, when he came back here he wanted to revive, um, some, there had been some pervious African liberation support groups, going back into the seventies, and he had been involved in. And um, and he, so he was the conduit to all of those kinds of, uh, those kinds of uh, organizations and that’s when we formed CIDSA, which was the issue of the day was the Illinois, divestment from South Africa. Divesting corporate and institutional funds from companies that were doing business in South Africa, that was the, the movement at that moment. And so, we started that group and that’s how uh, I got involved with Lisa Brock and all the other cats and characters that went on for the next ten or fifteen years.

MM: So, why personally, did you get involved with the Anti-Apartheid movement?

CT: Well probably like, like I said, I, I was a little young for Civil Rights Movement. but I always was interested after studying that it, it resonated with me because of my own childhood experiences. And that, and I saw that as an injustice, I thought, needed that be addressed. I thought, as another leg of the, of the Civil Rights Movement and um, and in a way to work interracial, uh, an anti-racism issue. I didn’t, I never articulated it quit that way, in those days, but that, I think that those what, what I was interested in doing.

MM: So, I know you kind of started to talk about it, but can you give me an, a more in depth explanation of how you became involved with Anti-Apartheid once you started to.

CT: Right, well, if, if, I don’t know if you’ve met Prexy Nesbit, but if anybody has you know, you, you, you get taken along on that trip. And, and I was already involved through Clergy and Lady Concern, but if, Clergy and Lady Concern was largely white
organization, um and wasn’t um, a mass movement kind of thing. And we needed to turn
this into more of a mass movement kind of thing. Uh, in order to have any real political
effect and so, we did. And we, um, worked, created an organization here in Chicago, in,
in Illinois that would move to be passed, state laws and city laws sanctions against,
divestment in South Africa. And that’s pretty much what we worked on, so um, uh, it was
slow in getting started, um, we started setting up kinda a educational meeting, pulling
people together. I was, I was not a main player. I was a behind the scenes. I was the chief
cook, bottle washer you know, who wrote newsletters, did mailings, made phone calls.
You know, creating boxes of literature to have available for people. Um, all those kinds
of support; baked cookies, yea, uh whatever, made the coffee, you know. Um, did all that
kind of uh, organizational support; the books, the you know, money, the deposits, and all
that kind of stuff. So that was more my role, even though we were all involved in the
strategizing and the planning and whatnot. And, and looking, and outreach and I did
particularly outreach with uh, kind of a mainstream Protestant Churches.

MM: Who was the person that inspired you early on in your activism?

CT: Well, uh Prexy certainly was, was an inspiration, but also Sheryl Johnson Odium, but
and, Lisa Brock, I mean, those two. And there, there were a number of women, uh,
African-American women, who got involved in this, very early on and um, who were,
um, brilliant (light laughter) and, and inspirational in there perspectives in there a,
historians and attorneys uh, who were a, just very um, you know, very committed to this
campaign and also had a lot of more knowledge about South Africa than I did, so I would
always learn so much from them because I really was kinda a novas on, I was not an
Africa scholar or (light laughter) anything like that but they exposed me to many Africa
scholars over the years and, and so I’ve learned a lot more.

MM: When did you get married?

CT: In 1974, so I was out of college for a couple of years.

MM: At what point of time did you and your husband decide to have children?

CT: Well, we decided to have children, long before we got them. (laughter) I had a hard
time getting pregnant, so uh, probably when we moved back from Germany, which
would have been in about, seventy-four, about seventy-six, it might have been seventy-
seven, um, but my son, I didn’t have my son until 1985, (light laughter) so, it took a long
time.

MM: And, tell me what it was like to start your family.

CT: Well, we, we wanted to have kids for a long time, and we even looked into adopting
as an alternative, but that was also very complicated, um, uh, partly due to, you know,
some, like I said its, I, we didn’t feel that we could be open to an inter-racial adoption
because of family, we just felt that would have been very difficult at the time. I think it, I
think probably that was more of a fear at that time, than (light laughter) it would have
been today. But you know, that’s how families are. And um, we just didn’t feel like that
would be a good thing for us to do. Uh, it, it was great, once we, once we had kids, and
we really tried to um, have them have a different racial relationships, therefore, they each
have black god-parents. They each, you know what I mean, they have people who’ve
known them all their lives. And, and now they went to a, a magnet school, which is,
which is balanced racially. They went to a primarily black high-school. They, you know,
uh, it was a good high-school, but it was a tested high-school. But it was like, forty or
fifty percent black um, students and we felt that just really important informative thing to
just change the world in that way too.

MM: What did your family think about your activism?

CT: They didn’t get it. They still don’t get it, completely. Um, they thought it was
idealistic. But they didn’t support it, they weren’t supportive of it in any way, really, you
know.

MM: What impact did your family have on your act-a-activism, if any?

CT: Not much. Other than um, other than that because, I, I mean it’s not like they were
against what I was doing. But they didn’t really understand it. They didn’t understand
why I would spend so much time doing it. And um, they always kinda commanded a, a,
you know, a lot of a very traditional, ordinary time, (light laughter) you know, holidays
and this and that. And so it was, so in that sense there was always a bit of a, a strain for
me to meet those expectations, as well as, I mean, I always and I still do have a good
relationship with my family and I love them. But, but, we never really have seen eye to
eye politically. And, and my family, um, really went from being kind of working class,
uh, working class uh, democrats, to fairly wealthy republicans. And so, and I stand out
from that considerably. (light laughter) I may have not made as much money as my sibs,
or my parents, and um, but that all developed in my, you know, when my, when I was a
child my parents didn’t have any money. By the time, they had, I had five brothers and
sisters who were spread out over twenty years. By, by the time the younger ones came
along they had quit a bit of money. So, that was always kind of a tension. But I always
had one foot, in that sort of, normal white world, while trying to, still to do something
different by, even just by living in Chicago, was uh, to not, even though we live on the
north side, its not, was not a particularly a mixed neighborhood but

MM: Briefly, what kinds of groups, collations did you work with, regarding Anti-
Apartheid?

CT: Well, we formed, like I said, starting with Clergy of Lady Concern, and then I felt
the need to move away from that, even though Clergy of Lady Concern considered,
continued to do some work, sometimes, I felt almost in competition with (light laughter)
but I felt that it was so important to establish this multi-racial coalition that was
multifaceted and, not just a church group, doing its little church thing. Um, and um, so, I
put all my eggs in the other basket and we formed CIDSA, was uh, the uh, Coalition for
Illinois Divestment from South Africa. And so, that, that was, and then after we passed
some divestment legislation, and, in Illinois, and then um, then they finally in the end, passed some in uh, in a, federal legislation. Which was vetoed by the President and then overwritten uh, by the congress, which was a big victory. Um, uh, then its what’s next? So we, we, we kinda segwaied into this CCSA, which was the Coalition, of uh, um, Chicago Committee and Solidarity for South Africa. Which just expanded a little more, from working strictly on divestment to uh, trying to re-raise money for uh, various projects in South Africa that were related to liberation movements which probably today we’d all be in jail __________ but at the time, because they, they considered the ANC and uh, Mandela and all they considered him a terrorist and, and uh, the ANC a terrorist organization, but we were in regular communication and uh, literal financial support of projects related to them. Mostly on the ground, uh, we didn’t raise lots of money like the, they were using for, to, to establish military, you know, uh groups, you know, outside of uh, South Africa, but we were, we were supporting projects on the grounds in South Africa; developed a sister community relationship with Alexander Township in South Africa. That was another, piece of that work. Uh, so those were the main, those we kept going through the first elections in South Africa.

MM: Give me an overview of your responsibilities in the movement.

CT: Well, like I said before, I did a lot of the back-round um, stuff. I was not, even though I was not normally the public speaker, um, or doing that kind of thing, But I did a lot of coordinating of events and um, um, you know arranging things, you know, setting up stuff. Like I said, I, I often did the newsletter. Other people would write pieces but I literally laid it out, got it printed, folded, mailed, uh, throughout those transitions of technology. So, (light laughter) starting with, you know, very simple typing things up, to computer layout __________ and my husband was very involved in that because that’s his expertise, so

MM: What was your source of income during your activism?

CT: Well, that is interesting um, we really started CIDSA, in around 1983, and at that time I was working for, I worked with Community Organizations. I still do, uh, I uh, was working for, at that time I worked for a community organization and a community mental health center and I was working there until my son was born. And after that, I didn’t work for money, so uh, basically we relied upon my husband’s income for the, for the years from eighty-five to maybe ninety-five or ninety-three. And then I began working again with community organizations. Uh, during that time I did the Anti-Apartheid Movement, I also headed up a ward for Harold Washington during, uh, election of uh, Chicago’s first black mayor. And so um, I worked on eighty-three on his campaign and then in eighty-seven I was award chair for that, so that was another big, big commitment. So I, I wasn’t working for money, but I was pretty much working (light laughter) In addition to being the primary one responsible for two little kids.

MM: What liberation movements did you support in South Africa?
CT: Um, we were very much aligned with the African National Congress, um, and, both in spirit and uh, their commitment to non-racial uh, non-racialism. And there always were conflicts there, and here between that, those movements and the more black liberation movements, which were more committed to um, it uh, to black controlled liberation, black controlled government. And we, a, we, we understood the importance of leadership and image and uh, and reality of power within those relationships. That was one of the beauties of this organization, one of the things we all learned a lot about working together in a multi-racial way that was respectful of the needs of uh, African Americans to uh, have power, and that, and for whites to step back and, and uh, be supportive and learn to follow sometimes, those were very important. So, the African National Congress it mirrored that, that’s what I, that’s what I’m saying, there was a mirror of that they were always white leaders in the African National Congress even though they totally understood the importance of those racial dynamics.

MM: Why these organizations and not others?

CT: Well, there weren’t, it wasn’t like you could pick and choose between many, many groups, uh, you, different groups did different work in, it was not a big, there were national overall groups but they weren’t, uh, it wasn’t like a strict, uh real structured membership, um, among those groups. So that in, in one city, the, it might be done through the American Friends Service Committee, I mean, Anti-Apartheid work. And in another place it was done through um, groups like our, that were unique to our city. In, in others, it was something through the uh, American Committee on Africa, which is a New York based organization that had some, you know, kind of a cells in different, in different places. So, there, you know there, but in Chicago, for a white person, this is where you did the work. I mean, could you lay in certain—considered, continued to, to do some stuff. But, I particularly wanted to be involved with a board dynamic, a multi-racial group, and that was the one. We also had um, a group in Chicago, called the Free South Africa Movement, which was connected to Trans Africa, which is another national organization; oh, uh, it I mean, it was not unfriendly relations, but they were, they were more, the folks that got involved in that, in Chicago, tended to be the black nationalists in Chicago. And so there wasn’t much room for uh, for white folks to really be involved actively with them.

MM: I know we talked a little bit about it earlier, but can you give me an explanation, a further explanation of CIDSA?

CT: Yes. CIDSA was, like I said, was pretty much committed to passing uh, legislation in the city of Chicago, and in the state of Illinois, um to, and in, and in other institutions for divesting funds from corporations that were doing business in South Africa. There were some international campaigns, specifically around particular companies, like Shell Oil, that was one, that was, was, big and um, also, um, I so, specific campaigns I worked on in regard, for example, the, the United Methodist Church, has a pension fund, ok, for there pastors. And there was a movement to get, funds from that pension fund, taken out of companies like Shell Oil. Oh, you know, and other companies that were doing business in South Africa. Um, and so would, that, that’s the kinda, that was what divestment meant,
and in the state of Illinois, pension fund, that was the big, that was the big one. City of
Chicago it’s a little different, it was more purchasing agreements, that they would not do,
you know, business, with, now, it’s, it’s hard to get these kinds of things passed. The
factual legislation that gets passed is full of loopholes. (light laughter) You know what I
mean? It’s not perfect, but it was important to building public support, and building this
uh—you know, this image of you know, United St, folks in the United States who were
really serious about ending Apartheid in South Africa; about putting pressure, you know,
on that. Because the US is one of the big supporters we’re of the, we’re of that main, you
know, stall-work supporters of the South African Government. And uh, and it was how to
erode that, that was the start, that was the concept until this divestment campaign was, we
started here, we didn’t choose it here. But, many universities were involved in these kinds
of, there were campus campaigns, and we connected with all the ones in Illinois, as well
as, we developed, um, a group called, the Illinois Labor Network Against Apartheid.
Which was very important, uh, with people from different unions, who were putting
pressure on the, for the state, particularly for the state uh, legislation. And that was, that
was a real interesting development, working with, union folks on political issue and uh,
union organizers that we worked with, so that, that was exciting for me.

MM: What was an average day at CIDSA?

CT: Yea, um, well we didn’t often have paid staff. I mean, we had off and on, we would
have somebody so, um for me, it involved dealing phone calls, um, uh, working closely
with the other leaders in our group to set up educational, sometimes we would have ella,
uh, tours of South Africa. And so we would bring, we did that at one point, we took a
tour of South Africans down state, in Illinois. Um, with like three of four groups of, three
pr, one car load of, which involved uh, white American activist, black American activist
and a couple of South Africans, sometimes. And who would go around on a speaking
tour, speaking to churches to things like, uh, um, urban league groups, uh, various kinds
of unions and different things, and you know. So, we had this one tour, where we sent
four groups all around, uh, Illinois to, to met with legislators in Springfield, to you know,
just to expose people to folks from South Africa. We also had number of speakers come
through Chicago, uh, many, anybody traveling this way, we would set up a venue, and,
you know have a, a public uh, event. Which meant getting out flyers, getting out
mailings, you know. We also did, you know, I kept a mail, kept a mailing list database.
The mailing list, so there is always updates on that. Um, we would raise money from time
to time, I would grant proposals, um, you know, we never raised tons of money, but you
know, little bits here and there, to keep us rolling. Um, and individual contributions and
so on, and so, just keeping up all that records um, getting out regular newsletters so
people would know what was going on. Um, many people wrote for the newsletter, I
didn’t write, uh, you know, I didn’t. But just making sure they were current, and uh, we
always had events going on all over the place to. We would, we would meet too, um,
some, during the periods when we were working on the Harold Washington campaign,
we kinda took height and sometimes just did some stuff behind the scenes but, when we,
when we were actually actively working, we met often once a week, um, if not more, if it
was necessary for an event. Um, so there was you know, considerable, uh, and, and also
tried to study a little, we would read books and papers, from time to time, and discuss
them in light of what was going on.

MM: What committees were helpful to work with in CIDSA?

CT: You mean within CIDSA?

MM: Within CIDSA or outside of CIDSA what involvement did you have, like
partnerships?

CT: Um, well within CIDSA, sometimes, we did set up little working groups based on,
um, like on a particular project or on an event or something like, we, we did, like we took
uh, we had lobby day down in Springfield, where we took three or four buses full of
groups from various churches and here and there, and we get all these people on the buses
and take them down to Springfield to lobby for the, for the legislation. Um, uh, so we
would set up little, com, those were internal things. Externally, I think it was more, um—
hum, we worked with like the American Friends Service Committee, and various other,
you know, groups that kinda had their own agenda, but they were interested in this. But
that was more usually an occasional meeting, you know, other wise, what we would do
is, you would call, if you had a big demonstration, you would put out a fl, put out a letter
saying, asking, if groups wanted to sponsor it, and than you would develop a group of
sponsors and then hopefully you would at least get some of them to a meeting for
planning this specific thing. There were periods when we were demonstrating at the
South African Conciliate quit frequently. Sometimes, it was based on a oh, a particular
case, someone was in jail or someone was, you know, there was some kind of human
rights focus to it and then we would get people out for that. Or sometimes, it could be,
you know, around the divestment bill, or around the timing of uh, some vote in
Springfield, or some vote in city council. We were, we would develop some kind of, and
so we always tried to build specific collations for those events, you know, sponsorship of
a particular event. Even though our core group was, was a little smaller. And we had,
there were, quite a, you know, quite a number of different kinds of groups that would get
involved; church organizations, associations of churches, you know, um, seminaries, and
uh, that sort of thing, and that stuff more because I was more involved with that, but also
the labor unions and they, they had, that was became its totally own separate sub-group.
And then, uh, late, later, uh, also this group that was the Alexandra, Chicago Alexander
Support Committee, you know, they, they developed a sister community project. And
they, um, developed kinda a separate group. And then, at one point also, Prexy,
developed a Mozambique Solidarity Network, which was actually a national
organization, but it was based here in Chicago and he kinda spun off onto that project for
quite a while, when he actually, took a role for a while as a um, a foreign agent of
Mozambique Government. Um, and this was after the ___________ the divestment
campaign was done.

MM: So, we are going to go to C-C-I-S-S-A.

CT: CCISSA.
CT: Right. 

MM: Um, will you explain what CCISSA is? 

CT: Sure. CISSA um, was the, the Chicago Committee in Solidarity with Southern Africa. Which it was once divestment, was, we were as done with divestment as we could get. (laughter) Like I said, it, I can’t say that it was absolutely a, a lockdown on all divestment, but we made our political point, we added Illinois to the list of states that were divestments in South Africa, we added Chicago to that, those lists. That was our goal and we did that. And um, and then it was what next? How next, what’s the next step? So, the next step we felt was to find ways of, to understand the region better. Because the region was really important to what was going on in South Africa. There were these sergeant wars, and at the end of the Cold War, um, there was a lot of, of stuff playing out in the countries surrounding South Africa, relating to South Africa, but in Angola, and there were you know, were literally military actions between the South African government and the Cuban government. The South Africans supported by the US, the Cubans being supported by the Russians. And, you know, you played out the very end of the Cold War, in, in central America and in Southern Africa, and in Mozambique you had the same thing with one, you know, the Americans siding with, one, you know, one uh, group and the Russians supporting another group. And you had these literally, Civil Wars going on uh, there, um, also you had the tail end of, uh, I can’t remember. I’m, I’m gonna get bad on dates, because I can’t remember all the dates but you know, the, the um, Zimbabwe liberation of, in, Zimbabwe. All these things, all these different um, post-colonial struggles for who is going to control those countries. And a lot of that played, played out, you know, the US used South Africa as their sergeant, and through that support for various insurgents used in those countries. And uh, the Russians, and Cubans, and you know, supporting in China, supporting, you know, some more of the left uh, it was a very different world, for the end of the Cold War. And uh, and so a lot of that played out and it all, it all eventually, you know, um, a lot of that ended with the end of Apartheid because you no longer had, I mean, the US was no longer supporting that. Um, but it, you know, it was interesting. But at anyway, we, we, we had to learn about that, more about that, because we were pretty much focused on South Africa at the beginning. And, we had to learn more about the region and those regional wars and some of the stuff going on with that. Um, we were looked for ways to highlight how that was, how the US was complicit, in, in that, in those activities and in those wars. And to lay that there in terms of the human rights violations, in terms of a the um, the you know, racist mentality, um, (light laughter) of supporting, a of you know, using South Africa in that way uh. And, and it, you know, it there’s also the whole economic piece of, you know, wanting to promote, um, a very, you know, capitalist model for all of Southern Africa. South Africa certainly was that model and is that model. But, you know, the other countries were open to more mixed economy at the time. Now, who knows? The whole world is a, on a __________ but you know, at the time, that was part, what we were learning about. And in addition to that we, we, we knew we wanted to have more on, uh,
more direct support for liberation activities in South Africa. And that’s where, like I said, we began raising money for projects there for a alternative medical system, but you know, medical clinic, that was you know, not supported so much by the government. This was pre-AIDS, in South Africa. This was you know, pre-pre-before that time. But you know, there wasn’t always good medical coverage for, particularly for people who were resisting the government. Um, uh, what other kinds of, there were other educational projects things like that. Women’s uh, women trying to develop you know to, uh, small cottage industries and whatnot, that kind of, those kind of projects; so we’d find a group that was setting up a sewing collective or whatever, and that might be the focus of our fundraising for, so we did some fundraising, but we also did this more, continued to do educational work around the region and around what was going on in these sergeant wars, uh, during that period.

MM: What was challenging about organizing Anti-Apartheid documentation?

CT: Documentation, what is?

MM: As far as your office work; the things that you were doing behind the scenes.

CT: Uh-huh.

MM: What was a challenge, and what was the most challenging part of that? Was there anything that was, um, confusing? Did you ever get overwhelmed?

CT: Well, any time you have two small children, (laughter) you can be overwhelmed. So that, you know, there was that, but, it especially since I didn’t have a paid job outside of that, it wasn’t, and I, and I, had, technology at home, so, I, that’s the, was a good thing and that was partly because my husband’s uh, background in technology. So we, we had that all right there. So, it was, it was, it was often time-line challenged because working with people, is working with people. And everybody doesn’t always honor deadlines. And, I mean that kinda stuff, you know, lot of boring folding newsletters and my children did plenty of it, in their years too. Uh, on the dinning room table, you know, thousands and thousands of newsletters and stuff went on in there. Um, so that kinda, I mean but that’s not, that was not, the challenges were not nearly, uh, anything to make you not do it. I mean, it was so inspiring and exciting in many ways that it was a joy to do. It was not, you know, it wasn’t a ch, I mean, you know, there’s always a balance with family and stuff like that.

MM: What about your job as an activist, was rewarding for you?

CT: Well, I suppose, you know, you feed your idealism, you know, you’re actually able to feel like you were doing something. We were very unique here in Chicago, during those years in that um, this was like during the Regan era, when generally there was like a malaise of, its like it has been during the Bush years, where you feel like that bad things happening and there’s nothing you can do about it. But, the Anti-Apartheid work we actually felt over time, I mean it felt really drudge, drudging at first, but it picked up such
momentum and we had a huge victory. And similarly, with, you know, Harold Washington getting elected in this mist of all that, you know, which, which also had similar qualities to the multi-racial collation of it, and the commitments in his leadership, in that regard, that it, it all was a piece, you know, it all kind of, it all kind of fit together. And, it, it, it was very hopeful, it was a lot of hope for, um overcoming some of that work. And then later af, af, I, worked with um, uh fare housing organizations in Chicago, for that was one of my first back, getting back into the work force thing. And, and that again, you know, you, you felt like you were apart of all, all this. And even though this, this stuff is so meticulous and so overwhelming and even race relations today. I mean Chicago is still super segregated. And those things play out in schools, we see it play out in churches, we see it play out in, you know. Even the stuff with Brock Obama’s election, it all felt so personal, (light laughter) it was terrible, I mean, in some ways because so many, so many, people who become, you know, hot, hot buttons, Jeremiah Wright, Mike Flakier, you know, all these guys, these are all guys we worked with on this Anti-Apartheid work; spent a lot of time in their churches and know them and know them to be good people, if showboats (light laughter) and then, you know. Problems like that, but, you realize the rate, you, you can’t help it when you get into that. You understand this total racial tension of all this, of all those kinds of issues. And um, for Bill Aries, you know what I mean, there’s a bit a again, a crisscross of politics and race and, and a class in the city. All of those things play out. Um, and you, like I said, you know, it felt really strange, you know, to have all that being played out on a national stage after we struggled with it so often. But um, you know, that was a challenge. And, and that continues to be a challenge and, I mean, there’s lots and lots of work to do. MM: How did you generate buzz in the community about upcoming events? What were the steps necessary?

CT: Well usually we would, um, like I say, um, look for sponsorships for particular events. Um, you know, certain churches that were we knew we had the pastor’s ear, in particular. And then it would be a matter of bringing flyers to those, you, you know, to those uh, places, so they would pass them out to generate interest in people coming to an event, coming to see a film, coming to see a, a, you know, speaker, uh, something like that. Um, uh we didn’t, we used, a little bit with the newspapers and so on, but you don’t get good coverage for something like this. I mean you, they, they finally would get to the point were they wouldn’t cover anything unless somebody was gonna get arrested. (laughter) You know what I mean? Or, or uh, or you were ga, you were, you know, we’d have a thousand people out in the street and it was like, that was nothing, you know. And, I mean, the local papers, you know, that just, they didn’t even bother. Uh, and we had to provide our own pictures to the Defender, which is the black paper; The City of Chicago Defender. Um, they didn’t have, they didn’t have the whereabouts of sending their own photographers and whatnot, so we would take all our own photos and send it to them. We’d put stuff in, they might put an announcement in, but maybe not. I mean, you know, we pretty much had to do it all, with our own mailing lists, you know, telling people and then through these intuitional connections; seminaries and whatnot. Having people puttin’ up flyers on bulletin boards, you know, passin’ out flyers after church and that kinda thing.
MM: What public speaking tours did you set up?

CT: Um, you know, I was more the support, I didn’t often set them up. You know what I mean, I was part of a team that set them up. And, and the main, you know, the main thing is when we would have people come through Chicago, and we would set up an event, in Chicago, um, for that person to speak at, sometimes there were ten people there and sometimes there were 200 people there. It, it they weren’t mega, you know, uh, events, you know. Uh, till, Until, Nelson Mandela, you know, then they, then their talkin’ mega events. But, but, before, ( light laughter) before he came, you know, they’d often be very small. But I didn’t already tell you about the one big tour of folks we took through the state of Illinois, before the state legislation was passed and that was, that was am important one. Um, it just took a lot of coordination, um, cars and hotel accommodations, you know the typical things like that. But, you know, there was, there was a whole team doing that, it wasn’t just me, that’s for sure.

MM: What was a greatest challenge in setting up a fundraiser?

CT: Um, well, getting people to part with their money, you know what I mean? (laughter) Never, never an easy thing, and, and, and many of people who were involved were not deep pockets, you know, we, we didn’t have that kind of support. Um, there were, um, we had stalwart’s supporters but nobody would give us a big, big chunks of money. So a fundraiser often was, um, more of an educational event that we asked people to give a few dollars for. Still festival where we charged two, two bucks, five bucks to see some films on Southern Africa we did that, once or twice. Once in a while, we would do something, we’d try to do things that were more social like uh, uh, an event in the club, you know, or like uh, uh, with music and stuff like that, but we’d never make a whole lot of money off those events. So we, you know, we did, we didn’t do, uh, most of our fundraising was done by mail, I think. Uh, most of the time, we did, well, I remember one though. We did, this something called uh, Get Up, Stand Up it was based on Bob Marly’s song and, and it uh, it was uh, uh, music and films and so on and uh, I’m trying to remember that was in some, club in uptown, uh, it was Riviera, or something like that. That one was an actual, actual event with tickets, with, you know, uh, with live music and uh, you know, big names and so on, that was kinda cool. But then again, that was a matter of selling tickets and getting people to buy tickets and so on.

MM: What role did religion play in furthering your activism?

CT: Well, it’s kinda at the core, I think for me, um, uh, as I mentioned, I grew up, you know, in the Catholic Church, of course I went away from that, as a, as a teenager largely over issues of women’s ordination and hierarchical issues like that, that bothered me. But then kind of found my way back through this Christian Socialist Movement, and um, and so, I, it was important to me, it, it drove me, I think. I got a lot of support from my own church community, which was a very progressive church called Wheaton United Methodist Church, up in Evanston, um, located in Evanston. And um, what, I always felt that was like, almost like a sergeant family for me in terms of support. Because my
family, many, many activists had families, who there parents had been activists since
then, I, I didn’t. So, I didn’t really have anyone, who really understood what I was doing
or really supported it, except my elders at this church, these people who had been
activists, all their lives and they’re now in their eighties and they’re still activists you
know, their amazing, And, and they were very, very supportive of me and, in doing all
that, all that work. And uh, were always sponsoring all of my stuff, and always, you
know, wanted to know what was going on, and you know they’re just being supportive.

MM: Was Wheaton Methodist Church involved with any Anti-Apartheid activism
organizations?

CT: Yea, I, I, whenever we would need, whenever we were looking for sponsorships for
something, they would do it, they would sign petitions, they would write letters, they
would, you know, they were supportive of all of, anything I brought to them. And in fact,
one of the people there, um, had been involved with Clergy and Lady Concern, that’s
how I got involved, er, or I don’t know if I got involved there separately, but anyway, I
was there with him, initially. Um, through you know, because they had, they were aware,
and they were, and they were educated on these issues, because it was a, it was kinda a, it
was a very progressive church.

MM: How did you get involved with the ANC, the African National Congress?

CT: Well, that’s always been a bit remote for me. Um, um, you know, we were
supporting them, remember they were, they were clandestine most of the years we were
working. So they were not in South Africa, they were, I mean, except underground in
South Africa. They were in neighboring countries, Tanzania, uh, they had a big office in
London, and they, you know, uh, in, in Sweden, they had support groups in, through the
American Committee on Africa, uh, in New York. That was one way that, and Prexy had
his own connections. The ANC had an office in New York, and so he had some relations
with them and, in terms of them sending speakers through. Um, we had their materials,
we, you know, we would study some of their papers, things that would come, oh, down
the pike, you know, and that, that was the main thing. Um, we, we discussed now, over
many years, their various principles um, that they uh, had the Freedom Charter, which
was a sort of list of like thirteen points, that uh was kinda like their declaration of
independence, sort of, document. And, and we would occasionally hold that up and study
that and we were committed to the same values. And that I think was the, the core of that.

MM: What were your responsibilities at Lake View’s Citizen Council?

CT: Um, when I worked there, I was the office manager. But, I was also involved in
strategy sessions, very similar actually, similar role, sort of been my, my thing. Um, and,
uh and that was a local community organization um, that you know, did all kinds of
issues, tenant’s rights was the big, I think the biggest issue that we took on, that had some
success in, in that, Chicago developed a tenant’s rights ordinates, which is even to this
day, uh, a pretty progressive uh, protection for tenants in the city.
MM: Tell me what it was like to be an activist, white woman?

CT: In relation to the South Africa stuff, or just in general?

MM: In general, however you want to take—

CT: —Um—

MM: —the question.

CT: Well, I mean, for one thing, I, I, had to say you know, I really had the luxury of having a husband who had a real job, so, that I was, I worked within community organizations where I could afford to work for less money. If it hadn’t been for that, I don’t know what, I don’t know, I might of had a very different life. You know, but, but, and, and, and it wasn’t a big burden on my husband, he enjoyed his technology (light laughter) and the developments that technology went through over the many years that he’s been doing that kind of work. And he always then took all those, all the technology and applied it to these projects that we did together. And, so, um, you know, not to make it like, you know, he was out doing all this work and I was having all this fun, but, but, it, you know, I found that, it has certain elements of a very traditional um, old fashioned fifties lifestyle. So, of where, you have dad who earns the money, and mom who does the volunteer work. And it, and I, that doesn’t necessarily always make me happy that, that was the case, because that took a toll. We made a decision, because I made so little money doing community work, that all my, all my money would of gone for childcare, and that didn’t seem to make any sense, (light laughter) to me, you know, in order to keep doing the, the work I was doing at the time. So, being at home with my kids for eight years without any paycheck, meant that I also though had the headspace and the mi, you know, the uh, emotional space to be doing this activist work on that. That, and you know, and I think that’s kinda the, and I mean and it’s a, it’s, and it’s hard because now at this juncture for me, it’s hard because I hadn’t developed a career in the same kind of way I might of. But, I don’t know that, that had to do so much with the activism as much as, family and you got to make choices and, you know, somethings got to give. And, you know, it’s very hard, it’s very hard to raise children with two fully committed careers, um, two, you know, deep careers. But, the activism certainly was, um, intense, and, and uh, spent a lot of time on it, you know, it was just flexible and that was a good thing.

MM: Tell me about some of the conflicts or tension, among Anti-Apartheid activists that you worked with.

CT: Um, well there always were, I, I mean there always were these ideological differences between um, some, from between the CCISSA group and the nationalists.

There always is conflict on that, and that played out on an international scale, in South Africa, you have the ANC but you also had the PAC, and the PAC was a nationalist group; Pan African, Pan Africans Congress. And they were ver, they wouldn’t speak on the same stage together, and some of that played out here too. Because we, we all knew each other, but you know, we just bump, you know, and you were lucky for people to get invited across, to come to various events. So, then there was that tension um, and then
uh, within CCISSA or CIDSA, I think a lot of it was more personal politics. You know, just needing to be aware of not um, you know, of, of letting people leave, of not assuming, to much um, but, there were, there were so many within the group who were very generous in there, and, and meeting, being a white person in that setting that was so critical of white domination. It was just a real learning experience and, um, uh, important and, and, uh, something you have to go through, (light laughing) you have to live through it, to understand it. It’s, it’s, a, to, to, be willing to open yourself up to serious critique of much of what formed your __________ and your, your white privilege and understanding your white privilege. And, nothing you do about it, but you, I mean, you can’t well, there is something you can do about it, but I mean, there’s nothing you can do about the circumstance where, where you find yourself born into, but um, that you have to make a conscious commitment to, stand against it. And uh, it’s not always easy, and it’s not easy to talk about, just like a big, you know, you’ve heard, just in recent months where Eric Colder says, you know, we’re all cowards when it come to talking about race. Well, I, I, don’t know that I was a coward going into it, but there were times that were challenging, in that regard, to be willing to, like I say, sit and listen to this, to sit and hear how people, how people respond to white leadership or what white people think or how white people act or whatever. And to, I remember specifically going through the whole OJ Simpson thing and, and, I, it was fascinating, it was fascinating to, to be within more of a, more of a black organization and hear what the women had to say about all that stuff and __________ You know, um, black white relations, that, I think that was the, the, the most challenging thing on the racial, racial level.

MM: Tell me about some ways that you educated people about the issues of Apartheid in your day-to-day life.

CT: Hum—Well, um, I remember one, um, I, mean my day-to-day life was the Anti-Apartheid Movement, (laughter) so its, I didn’t really have much outside of that. I mean, uh, you know, um, my, my kids, I mean, grew up in the movement, you know, I mean, they were in baby strollers out in front of the conciliate, and you know what I mean, and, you know, grew up within this thing, you know, how to answer a particular, you know, liberation call, you know, and then stuff like that and um, always being aware of that um, and, um, being um, at the church I was at, it was kinda interesting, these things would play out too. There would be a demonstration at the Methodist, um, uh, pension fund board, which is also located in the same town as the church and people who were the security for the pension fund were members of the church, as well. So, they were always pushing for things, like say, well, if you’re gonna have a, if you’re gonna have a, education, you’re gonna do an educational program, Anti-Apartheid, we need to have the other side, you have to present both sides. And, and I was like, no I don’t. (laughter) If you want to present the other side, feel free, but don’t, you can’t expect me, because I’m setting up an event. And that, so that was a little bit outside the, but, but it really showed the kind of mentality of some people, practically around divestment. I mean, this was not so much that Apartheid was good, but it was more, whether divestment was valuable. And, would, would, end Apartheid, would have any effect on Apartheid or whether or whether, what they call, constructive engagement, this is the alternative to divestment, which, where the, it would be the, their government and major corporations were saying
no the way we can change South Africa is by engaging them and being there, being in,
you know, which of course we didn’t believe that at all. So, you know, but, I, you know, I
would have to play that out sometimes and you know, people would say, but you have to
be fair, you have to present both sides of this issue. And that was kinda, that was just, just
not my job, you know, it wasn’t. So, but I don’t know, that, uh, that was maybe was not
exactly what you were trying to get at.

MM: That was perfect.

CT: Ok.

MM: Thank you. What was the last project that you worked for regarding the Anti-
Apartheid Movement?

CT: Well other than a lot, a lot of little gatherings, since, over the last years. The last big
event we did of course was the first election and, in South Africa, and we, we um
supported a delegation from Chicago to go to be observers, um, through the UN, and to
be observers of the election. And um, so we, you know, got involved recruiting people,
helping them raise money to go, um, getting them orientated, you know, to what life was
like in South Africa then, making all the connections for them, you know, and sending
them off and a having big send off, and having a big thing when they came back, because
that was fun. (light laughter) We had some big parties. When Nelson Mandela was
released from jail, that was a big party, and then but then, the elections. But I didn’t go to
South Africa then. And, some of it was, matter of, its hard for to me to get away with the
kids, and that was my primary responsibility. So um, I didn’t go, I choose not to go. But
we supported the elections here, so, here people came to Chicago to vote at the conciliate
and we held all day, uh, the American Friends Service Committee had an office a couple
blocks away, and we held all day reception for voters and we stood out in front of the
conciliate the whole day with music and balloons not in a demonstration mode. And as
people came to vote, they were either happy to see us or really pissed off. (light laughter)
Because there were a lot of white South Africans who were not happy about what was
going on. And so, we had confrontations and we had good times, but it was a great day,
was a very exciting day and um, and we served food all day at American Friends Service
Committee, so there’s a lot a, you know, just on the ground work, but that was the last, I
think that’s the last real work we did, other than a party when they came back from South
Africa. And since then, there’s been a number of uh, more, uh, social things in South
Africa, conciliate hosts us from time to time to various receptions and whatnot. And um,
but that’s always wonderful. Lisa Brock is often the instigator of those, uh, those
invitations for all of us. Which, which it, it’s very nice, but I miss the actual work
together on that um, more than, it’s nice to see people once and a while, we have, you
know, just friendships, you know. We occasionally do something together but, you know,
I really miss seeing everybody frequently and struggling with them, over a common
cause.

MM: When did you feel disappointment during your activism?
CT: Um, well you know, I, it, for the years that we worked, like I said, compared to other, you know, compared to people who worked against Apartheid their whole lives, never to see any, light at the end of the tunnel, (light laughter) you know, we really had it relatively easy. I only worked this for fifteen years or so, fourteen years, it really was not that long. But there were times in that were you can feel like you’re beating your head against the wall. You know, but you literally, you know, with the Regan administration was so anti, uh, so pro-Apartheid they were so, they were so tight with the South African government and um, were you really felt like you know, like I said, like you were really, um, beating your head against the wall. But, I think, I think that, you know, these things take, it takes a very long time, to change the public’s mind. And, and yet and it takes, there’s this build up, build up, build up, and then you have these historical moments where things, snap. And, and we were just lucky to have been there at that moment when all those many, many years, going back to when Mandela, was put in jail, you know, and he was in jail for twenty-seven years, I mean its nothing to, I mean it was in jail, (light laughter) and we were just, you know, doing this work for some years, um, and I mean it’s nothing to what people suffered on the ground. But, but those, those things could be frustrating. Um, you know, just feeling like, you’re just plotting along, plotting along and MM: If you could re-do one major event in your activism life, regarding Anti-Apartheid, what would that be?

CT: Re-do. I think more about how the world’s so different today with communications. Then we didn’t even have email, I mean, you know, it was phone calls or letters. You know what I mean? It was, you know, maybe, maybe faxes came in and that was a big deal, you know what I mean, that you could, you know, actually get something from New York without waiting for a week, you know, for it to get to you and um, uh, stuff like that. And, I, I think, I don’t know, I, I sometimes wonder how that might have changed things. I mean, I saw a few, you know, Anti-Iraqi War demonstrations like, (snaps fingers) snap, just come together out of nowhere, um, with people on, on cell phones and stuff like that. I just thought that was very interesting that, that kinda, those kinda developments. I think that, more than, more than regrets over how we did things in the past. I, I, I didn’t have that so much, as, as just thinking how it might have been different.

MM: Who do you attribute to the success of organizing the Chicago, Anti-Apartheid Movement? You know, it’s a very broad question, but when you think of someone who really dedicated to the cause, who would that be?

CT: Yea, well Prexy Nesbit, in particular, was a real center for us, as well as, as Lisa, um, brought a lot of really important things to the table. Um, and, Sheryl Johnson Odium was uh, another professor and a historian um, who, um, they were, I think the three, you know, bases that to me were really at the core of, of what we were doing. Um, I mean there is so many people who played important roles, and people who wrote legislation, lawyers and some lawyers who actually wrote this stuff. And, there were, you know, uh, like I say, other people who worked deeply in the labor movements trying to get them to support that, which we never would have passed legislation without them, um, those kind of folks but, I think that would be my main three.
MM: What was your greatest moment of accomplishment in your activism?

CT: Well, it had to have been that first election, or maybe even when, Mandela’s release, that was big too. I mean, the legislation, you still didn’t know, once the legislation passed, it was fine, it was like a fine post, we passed it, we were glad, but, but, it, it didn’t, you know, Apartheid was still there, (light laughter) you know, Mandela was still in jail, you know. So, I suppose, um, Mandela’s release, that was, that was big, because then you really knew that was really the sign that the end was, was near.

MM: What did you learn from being in the Anti-Apartheid Movement?

CT: Um, well it confirmed what I knew from history, that in, that in order to change things, people have to get involved, and, and that um, it really can happen. (light laughter) I mean, that’s the, the beauty of it, is to actually see the, see it, a campaign that actually had some effect. Um, but you also learn there’s the other side of that. I mean, you have your victory, but then, victory can be fleeting, in that, uh, then you come down to the reality of governing. In whether it’s Mandela, Washington, Brock, you know, any, any, any of these situations, they had to deal with reality on the ground. And um, like I say, this, those, the, the exaltation of the victory is very fleeting, when you start basing serious problems of inequalities of uh, people’s lives in South Africa still today, and then aids on top of it in South Africa, it’s been so devastating, um, and um, even today now with transitions, uh, Mandela was sort of amazing that he stepped down, um, that was very important to the history of South Africa and to Africa in general; to have a leader, a popular leader, be in, and step down and have a tran, peaceful transition to another leader. Topeka, the next President, was a bit of a disappointment in some ways, and now we are facing a big unknown with this Jacob Suma, will be the, probably the new President. Um, and, um, so, but all you can do is um, you know you, work toward what’s important to you, and, and that it moves history forward and that I think that, that was uh

MM: How did your involvement with Anti-Apartheid change you?

CT: Well, it, it totally my um— it was very rewarding in a being able to have good interracial friendships, uh, very, working, people level (light laughter) really being able to develop friendships, and um, and have mutual respect, understanding. Which seems so impossible, in my early years, it seemed like an impossible idea. And than, and I didn’t go into Anti-Apartheid work expecting to find that. I was interested in the issue and the racial justice aspect of it, but I, I think, maybe in my subconscious I always wanted that. I think that resolved some of that for me, some of those, um, the pain of that, you know, that separation, that uh, it isn’t just black people who, who suffer that pain, that white people suffer that pain too. It’s part of why it’s so hard to talk about it. And uh, so, and I think that that, that has been the, you know, the beauty of it is, seeing South Africa coming to some new political place. But also, seeing the possibility of true reconciliation between groups of people who you know, have historically hurt each other, you know, terribly, and um, and it’s by far not done, a done thing, and so, its still keeping those
commitments, but those friendships and those, that comradely that uh, can sustain you.
You know, through those struggles.

MM: Looking back what are you most proud of?

CT: Well, it, it you know, it’s easy to be proud of, of the victory and yet we played such a
small role relative to, you know, events of the world, I mean, um, and it’s, it’s always
wonderful to be thanked and praised from the ANC or from the South African
Government and get an award, things like that, that’s always very, you know, very nice,
but um, but I’m think, I think I’m most proud of those relationships that we talked about.
Even more than, than you know, the bigger political victories, which I said are, are
dramatic, important historically but sometimes fleeting. And yet, yet, um, I feel as
though, um, where you, you know, you really fight Apartheid is in, day-to-day
relationships with people, and uh, whether it’s, you know, where you put yourself in
terms of community or where you put yourself in terms of people you, activist you work
with, and uh, and uh, and I think that that uh [tears come to her eyes]

MM: That was beautiful, you’re gonna make me cry. (laughter) [tears and smiles]

CT: Oh, no. (laughter) [tears and smiles]

MM: (laughter)

CT: (Laughter) Well, most of it is here, in the library.

MM: (Laughter)

CT: All this stuff, about, about ninety percent of the stuff that’s here in the library was in
my house.

MM Oh

CT: Boxes and boxes and boxes, I brought in boxes of stuff was, was 5,000 banners, and
all of this stuff was in my garage so, so, I was the one who had a place to store stuff so, I.
I had, I had all the stuff.

MM: (Laughter)

CT: And, um, but I’ve kept, I have some, uh, I have some uh, one set of newsletter I kept
and for myself and then I also kept just a few, interesting oh, fabric, fabric stuff from
South Africa that people brought me back that um, had Nelson Mandela’s photo on it.
People would wear them uh, during the elections and stuff. And I have some of that, and I
have some mugs, you know, that were from when Mandela was in jail, you know, that we
sold mugs and, I mean, that was one of our little fundraiser thing, and uh, a few things
like that. A few little, you know, like I say, these little uh, little uh plaque or a plate that
was given to us by the South African Conciliate and you know, thanking us for our work. I mean that was, the, the most important thing about that one was, that was just a few years ago that, that we, that they had a reception and we used to always have events on Sewado day which is a commemoration of a time when some children in South Africa were mowed down, they were, they were fighting against learning only in Afrikaans, which is the white langue, and uh, the police shot ‘em dead, a whole bunch of children. And so, this is always a commemoration, well now, they don’t call it that anymore in South Africa, it’s Youth Day. So, when we went to the conciliate my kids were there, and the, the uh, Council General was just a great guy, um, really highlighted them and talked, talked about their, how important it was that they grew up in this and what their responsibilities were to the world. And that’s what, that why that, they gave us uh, like a plate thing and that, that was important to me because of that and that it really made an impact on my kids who are in their early twenties. So, that was uh, that, you know that, it goes on, now, that the, that’s the memorabilia, that’s the, what you need to remember to help to take it forward.

MM: What do you wish others to know, in 2009, regarding the Anti-Apartheid Movement?

CT: Well, I, you know, I think, I think it’s good for people to know that’s, that something like that happened. And that it was possible and that we worked together on it, and that we brought together, it’s just like people with Harold Washington or whatever, that there was a time (light laughter) were the people of different races could come together to actually try to do something, in the city. And um, even today, to start something like that, it just seems impossible. There are so few places where that, where that happens, um anymore. Uh, we’re back to the white guy rules, you know, in this city. And um, but, so that’s important but, but also that it’s not over. Just because you, you know, have these victories along the road, it’s not over. I mean, many people in South Africa still suffer as much as they ever did under Apartheid, with poverty and disease and, and uh, and things are much better than it was, many more services and whatnot but, and in the city, the same thing is true that um, you know, they inequities, you know, maybe, maybe now garbage is picked up a little better after Harold Washington, and he used to talk about, he was gonna be fairer than fare, in terms of service delivery to different neighborhoods and, and, and that was important because um, and it did improve and Daley built on that because he saw that, that was politically expedient, but, but it’s not over, you know, and those things are still difficult. Or that, you know, uh, racism still is a really deep seeded um, uh, piece of this countries history and that we haven’t addressed it, and if reparations would work, I would be for them, (light laughter) I’m just not sure it would make any difference. You know, I, I don’t know what the exact answer is. But, but, I don’t think that this country is honest with itself about the roots of it’s, the, the creation of wealth in this country on the back of slavery and on the back of today, you know, Mexican immigrants, and, uh, that their, you know, that these race problems still are critical and, um, and it’s you know, and, and it’s hideous; uh, historically and, and uh, generationally your still seeing the, the, the, the pain of, of slavery played out in, in people’s poverty, (light laughter) today. And, and you, and you see white privilege and that’s even difficult, you know, and I mean, and, and you realize how hard it is, even my children who grew
up with this consciousness, have a hard time understanding it completely. They both
1149 have, a, a, pretty good sense of it, but it’s like, you know, it was hard in high school for
1150 them to see um, racial issues, even though they’re right in the thick of it. With a little bit
1151 of distance, they see it more and after moving to, like, my son went to school in
1152 Colorado, which is pretty white, and suddenly realizing a lot of this stuff because it, it, it
1153 was no longer under his noise, you know, um, to see the tensions, the racial tensions, I
1154 mean, even in the high school I mean that, we tried, we, we built a multi-racial parent
1155 group to raise some money for projects, but the main thing was to work together and be a
1156 model for our kids on how you can work together and, you know, do stuff together and
1157 uh, have the uh, common purpose and uh, and make stuff happen, and that you know, I
1158 think that that’s, the you know, that’s, unfortunately is the, is the legacy, that, that still
1159 goes on. And in South Africa, as well as here, and that, that was always a big feature of
1160 our work, here in Chicago, was understanding that, we needed to be the, the future, we
1161 wanted to see in our relationships. And we needed to, um, as much as we could, I mean,
1162 you know, and we needed to deal with stuff on the ground, as well as, uh, internationally.
1163 MM: Well, I would like to thank you very much on behalf of: Columbia College, the Oral
1165 History class and myself for your dedication and service for the Anti-Apartheid
1166 Movement. And also, [official interview ended after Movement]