Fall 2009

Interview with Funeka Sihlali

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Interview Transcription
Ranell B. Shubert

Okay- let’s see just for safekeepings.

1. Ranell Shubert: Okay- let’s see just for safekeepings. Okay my name is Ranell
2. Shubert. It’s December 1\textsuperscript{st} 2009. We’re located at 624 South Michigan the Ca-
3. Columbia Library. This is Funeka. I’m gonna have you go ahead and pronounce your
4. full name for, for the tape.

5. Funeka Sihlali: Hi I’m Funeka Sihlali

6. RS: Okay. I’m gonna go ahead and just start the interview and I’ll ask you a couple
7. questions. What is your year of birth?

8. FS: 1948

9. RS: And your place of birth?

10. FS: King Williams Town in South Africa

11. RS: And is that the, you were raised there also or?

12. FS: I was raised there but my father my father worked for the government and
13. therefore he was transferred

14. RS: And your father’s place of birth?

15. FS: Tarkastad in South Africa

16. RS: And your mother’s place of birth

17. FS: Peddie in South Africa

18. RS: Let’s go ahead, what was your first memory?

19. FS: The house we lived in, in a, in a Ginsberg location in King Williams Town. I
20. don’t know what was happening but there were some renovations so we had to move
21. to one section of the house. Which was very small. Government houses for Africans
22. were very small. I think all we had were two bedrooms. A living room ,
23. dining room served as everything. A kitchen and a room you could convert it into a
24. bathroom if you had money or it was a store room or a shed but it was part of the
25. house with no windows so. And the bathroom, no the toilet, or the lavatory as we
26. called it, was outside shared by four families, four houses. That’s my first memory. I
27. don’t know I think so.
RS: No that’s great thank you. So you said your father was a government worker-

FS: He was a Civil Servant.

RS: Civil Servant, what exactly did he do?

FS: He worked in Buntu affairs. (laughs) Which is, which was all departments of
government you could- you could say it was city hall in some ways. You could say
it was foreign affairs. It was everything. So as far as I can remember he was the only
black person in that office building with an office.

RS: And you mother, did did she-

FS: My mother worked in the hospital.

RS: Okay. What sort of activities did you guys do that brought you guys together?

FS: As a family?

RS: Yeah.

FS: We traveled together, we went to church together, umm circus- everything that
we could do, merry go round which came around maybe once every two years where
we were. Visited other families. Families visiting each other that was a big thing.
What would be equal to family reunions here in America and games. Playing games
together.

RS: Des- so who not only-

FS: Storytelling was a big part. Night time stories which were full of morals and
what you would call here night- bedtime stories but our stories really had to have a
meaning. At that time I didn’t know that but later on I got to understand if they
wanted to teach you something they would tell you a story and you’d get to
understand the meaning repeatedly. You know some would have scary endings
others would have that punch line but story telling was a big thing.

RS: Can you remember one that effected you the most?

FS: Yes there is one that I still remember and I tell a lot of people. My parents loved
to share sometimes I would get upset. People would come and they would eat with
people and we had to give to- we were not, we were not by any means rich, even
middleclass. Though they worked. And I remember this story of a um- a young
woman was married to a merchant, a nomadic merchant. And she was told as a bride
that because of her location of her house she had to share food with travelers
whenever people stopped, remember there were- either people used horses, mules
There very few Africans with cars if your going to talk about the stories olden,
olden day stories and they used to tell us one of the stories was about this woman who was left at home husband was a merchant so she was told all travelers going past her house she must feed them. And her husband would be gone for long periods of time and she got tired of this frequent traveler who’d stop at her house and she decided because her husband was always gone also. So she decided she was going to poison him so that he doesn’t come back. She did and then the following day the husband came home and he said this time I almost run out of food because there weren’t to many people- you know people where nomadic and people had moved. The route he had taken the houses were- the safe houses where he used to stop were gone and he met the traveler and he knew this traveler also. He said were it not for so and so I would have starved to death but I ate- he gave me- he shared his food with me and then she remembered that she had tried to- she had poisoned that man. Thus she was poisoning her husband because they other traveler shared with her husband and the moral of the story is whatever good you do it comes back to you. What goes around come around. She thought she was destroying that man- and she killed her husband. So that’s you know the colloquial sayings when you dig a grave dig two. Dig one for the other person and dig for yourself. The man died because he ate the food, of course we are not sure he died but the husband in the story died. So she could not reverse that. Whatever we do we always have to be mindful those stories like that.

RS: How long did your family live in that house?

FS: The first nine and half years of my life we lived in that house.

RS: You spoke about going to church with your family-

FS: Yes.

RS: How much did religion play apart in your upbringing?

FS: Oh when your young- religion was influenced by colon- colo- colonizers ya know and therefore there was tinge of hey I’m going to church to have fun. As kids I was from a religious family I think (laughs) and therefore I went to church for fun because I remember my grandmother on my father’s side was known as the Sunday schoolteacher. So I had fun at church because I knew all the books of the bible, I don’t remember them now. I knew all the questions you know I knew her favorite verses so I knew what she was going to ask and therefore always- I was able to answer all questions and get candy or money. So church was fun. And they sang well. I love the music because I can’t sing so I used to go to church to sing and most of our preachers were not trained preachers. They were lay preachers so now when I look back some of the lessons were not so good and not so accurate, but it was still fine. Not all of them depending on where you were. Some were just screaming and hollering but it was good. Until that- I would like to know what drove my father
away from the church I think something happened. He was still spiritual he gave at Thanksgiving but he used to work at his garden on Sundays and he would say he is nearer to his God working the soil then going to church. Somehow it was never discussed why he stopped going to church.

RS: Now is it still apart of your life today?

FS: Oh I go to church I love church

RS: Yeah.

FS: I, I consider myself a practicing Christian (laughs) I go to church and I do things with fellow Christians at church and outside the church.

RS: Can you think about what was your most precious object as a child?

FS: my parents, my family. I always knew I belonged and I felt loved. It wasn’t some thing it was always people.

RS: What kind of hobbies did you have as a young child or as a young person.

FS: I ran and talked and played and got into mischief. Those were my hobbies. (laughs) I think yeah-

RS: So you have to tell me about something mischievous you did because that interests me.

FS: (Laughs) Well I always managed to get by- I remember parents- remember we had no phones and I remember parents would write our parents or the elders would write to each other even if you were going maybe twenty blocks away and you would walk. So- I would leave my house and I would walk slowly and as soon as I turned the corner I would run because I know I am going to get somewhere and find other kids and play. And then you have to be sure the note is safe and then play and take the note and come back and play again. It’s forgetting where you left the note because sometimes your clothes don’t have pockets and you have to try and reconstruct your whole trip. Sometimes you are lucky and you found your note and sometimes didn’t and you lost it. So you had to make the trip again or get a whipping. That’s all I can remember.

RS: Can you sort of talk about the dynamic of the neighborhood that you grew up?
130. FS: I grew up the first nine years I- nine and a half years- in fact on the very next
131. street Steve Biko- do you know Steve Biko? Oh okay. Steve Biko lived on the very
132. next street. Hard working black people all kinds of people- there were teachers. Our
133. neighbors Mr.---(??) was a school inspector. And on the other side was a court
134. interpreter and on the next or south to us I don’t know what he did. I think he- he
135. worked somewhere downtown but wore a nice sports jacket. He was not- I don’t
136. think he was a laborer. And at night some men came and practiced band players at
137. his house so we could go out after dinner and all children from the street could go
138. out and dance in the street. And the next-door neighbors were the Monahan’s, she
139. was a school teacher. And across the street- Mr. Pumbelo was a policeman and -----
140. (??) was across the street from us also worked in another government office and so
141. you know- oh and Mr. Imjamba up the street. There were quite a few people as
142. school teacher. I think same street as Steve Biko, Vincent… who later went to Cape
143. Town. A few people.

144. RS: Tell me, tell me you asked me if I knew Steve—

145. FS: Steve Biko?

146. RS: Yeah tell me about him.

147. FS: Steve Biko was the founder of one of the Black Students Organizations. He’s a
148. leader who ended up being killed and they said he committed suicide.

149. RS: Yes I know---(??)

150. FS: Yes. In fact when I came to one of the memories I have of their mother I suspect
151. their father- was it in maybe 56- 1956 57 and their mother always wore black. I
152. suspect their father had just died and next to her front door was a tree with hot
153. pepper. She used to cook good food that lady. I remember that and there were two
154. girls and two boys. I think today only the youngest girl is alive. Nobandile.

155. RS: Well you just brought up food-

156. FS Yeah

157. RS: So what kind of stuff did you- what was your favorite stuff when you were
158. younger to eat or does your-

159. FS: Oh just loved food. I was thin then I didn’t eat a lot. I wanted to eat all the time
160. which is what we should do today. But my parents especial my father was always
161. health oriented. Fresh vegetables, small amounts, colorful food. He knew the
162. pyramid before I knew what it was all about- the food pyramid. So we ate
163. everything. We didn’t eat candy. We didn’t have a lot of candy. We always made
164. our bread, brown bread, which is wheat bread. He didn’t like processed totally
165. processed food. We you know African kids when your parents go away and the
come home they bring something. My father or my parents would bring fruit, peanuts, and popcorn. We didn’t - kids didn’t drink tea and coffee in my family because of the caffeine. We’d go crazy and I would have gone crazy I was already spastic. We didn’t drink pop. So we ate healthy.

RS: You talked a little about in Church you liked the music in church you said you had a neighbor who played. What other sort of ways did music play apart in your life or do you remember the stuff that you liked back then?

FS: I always loved music and I was always aware I couldn’t sing. My sister could sing. I think two of us in the family really could not sing. I loved playing - I loved getting involved in debates. Arguing about stuff. That how I learned about most stuff because as you know maybe as children you get convinced of something and really it’s the wrong conviction or unfounded conviction. So that’s how you learn by debating or talking with people. So I always like to be involved in some kind of debate. That’s how I learned besides reading and I loved reading. I would hide to read. Anywhere I can find a quiet corner I would hide and read.

RS: What was a favorite- what was a book that you were-

FS: Something that looks like a *Cosmopolitan* it was *My Fair Lady* in South Africa I used to read that. I have forgotten the other book but it had an insert and the inset had like love stories. My mother used to take that out. And I would say I want to read this too why can’t I - she was like no this complicated English you won’t understand it. Only because it had love stories, adult love stories. Nothing obscene. Nothing obscene but parents you know would like to keep our eyes and your ears as virgin as possible for as long as possible.

RS: So what was primarily spoken in your house?

FS: Xhosa. But most of the time the radio if you wanted to listen to the news the radio was in English. Only at certain times of the day could you listen to Xhosa programs but we always got the *Daily Dispatch* which was the paper that was circulate- that was in circulation at that time. So very early- my mother was a schoolteacher before she started working in the hospital and both of them would make us- would encourage us to read the English newspaper. So hmm I don’t even know what my- how they tease me because everybody else had a word- had a name like my brother couldn’t say church. It was chook so things like that. But what my father hated was the mixing of languages not just dialects languages. If you speak in Xhosa stick to Xhosa. If you speaking English speak- stick to English. So we sort of learned English early and the fact that if they wanted to talk about us they would speak in English we wanted to know what they were saying. You know parents have their codes. So they would go into that and I was like no I’ve got to understand what they are saying about me. So I had to learn English quickly.

RS: You know I am going to ask you at what age did you become aware of the
205. apartheid and what was happening?

206. FS: You couldn’t help but be aware of the tension because even if you were down town there were areas that were white by night. Even when you were traveling you knew you had to time your traveling. We had to get out of here at a certain time and my parents I remember being taught a double standard from the home. For instance to be respectful towards African elders you don’t’ look them in the eye and that is very awkward when you come to the West. People think you shiftless- mischievous-you- when you avoid to hold a stare but it’s a form of respect and it puts people in an awkward position. But I had to be taught from home that you stare at white people as much as you can. As much as you are not used to it if you can’t looked at them here right between their brow. They won’t know but don’t do that with black people. You do not look at black elders. You do not stare them in the eye. So we had to understand why they are going to call you names. If you don’t feel safe and there are no elders or older people with you, you can cuss at them under your breath. Don’t let them call you a monkey. You can call them a baboon too. And I remember being taught by my parents to accept things from white people with one hand. Only when it is really heavier than twenty pounds will I use- but I must always try to except it with one hand and only transfer it to two hands later. Just to be as cheeky as you can be within the law and know your surroundings, know how safe you are. So you got to understand the white houses and the white neighborhoods were nicer and our houses were smaller. So you end up asking questions and little by little your parents make you understand.

227. RS: Do you remember the first time you experience something that was- you knew was not right and unjust?

229. FS: Well I told you my father in that particular office at that time- we knew when we walked into the office his office mate were nice to us but all of the sudden if we met them in the street they just wave and would not talk and I was not 10 yet so. I had to ask why are they nice when were in the office and my father had to explain why.

234. RS: Lets talk about your education-sort of like your beginning education and what that was like.

236. FS: Okay. I was fortunate because my mother was a schoolteacher. Married woman could not teach fulltime Elementary education unless they had degrees and my mother did not have a degree. So she taught part time when there wasn’t a fulltime teacher. That was good for us because number one we were able to be accepted in school without Christian names. Both my names are African names. That one school I think was progressive enough that they did not force people to only register their kids if they have what was called Christian names or what were called Christian names at that time. So my mother was there and most of the teachers were people I knew. Excuse me. So school in early stages was very nice to me. I remember one of the teachers was Mrs. Fletcher she was Mrs.- she was the wife of the minister at the
church we went to. Mrs. Dubela, Miss Marlowe, I remember those people. And I knew them so to me it was informal school as such. I just went there and then I- at that time I didn’t feel I was challenged enough. I liked being sick (laughs). Call- I’d lie and say I’m sick and my father would take me to the doctor which I hated so I would get well.

RS: I can see the mischievousness coming out.

FS: Sometimes

RS: So how, how did you get to school? Was it far? Was it near?

FS: Oh walk it wasn’t far. Maybe elementary was maybe twenty blocks and that wasn’t- or less so people walked that was no big deal. And then its when we moved to the transgate to- (??) That we started walking and there were- it was a weird situation for us because in King Williams Town we were sort of in the city, in town. That was a town that’s still not a city. Then we moved to a village town, we were maybe two and a half miles out of town next to a forest and a quarry and there were only four houses for African civil servants. The schools were in the villages. When we first got there we used to walk maybe four miles, that was too much for us coming from the city and we crossed two rivers. My parents didn’t feel safe- there were bridges, we didn’t wade in the water we crossed over the river but there were deserted roads and then my parents changed schools for us at least we didn’t have to cross rivers but it was a long distance. Then we moved again and by then I was in boarding school. So when you’re in a boarding school you live on campus so it was different.

RS: So is there, is there a reason sent you to a boarding school?

FS: Oh no no no no it’s a different approach. In fact it’s the opposite of what I’ve been told here in America. Most people think that a child is naughty or unruly especially a girl to be sent to boarding school. That is not what it was for us. It’s to make sure your child is safe and to increase their chances of networking and better exposure away from the elements of if you want to call it ghetto life or location life.

RS: Now was this-

FS: I was not the only one. Most people- those- most people tried hard to send their kids to boarding school because they were safe especially if it was a girl’s school there were no boys to distract you from your studies. So it wasn’t punishment or anything like that. I was a wild kid but I was a good girl.
281. RS: Was it difficult to get into one of those schools or-

282. FS: Not really, not if you apply on time and you pay school fee, boarding fees. No.

283. RS: Can you think of an important figure in your education. Somebody who has

284. made some sort of-

285. FS: Mrs. Fusahni, (laughs) Mrs. Fusahni was this lady who taught us English and

286. Latin and um in some ways I think she liked me though she was hard on me because

287. her husband was in the political movement with my uncle. So she knew my family

288. and oh she was hard on me. She made me work hard but I liked her and she taught

289. me enough subjects that appreciated her.

290. RS: So in high school after you studied- what did you continue to study after-

291. FS: After high school?

292. RS: Yes.

293. FS: I would have loved to to get to to take medicine but I knew my parents didn’t

294. have money so I had to look into nursing and that’s what I did after working for

295. maybe a year or so.

296. RS: What age is that?

297. FS: 18 or 19

298. RS: Why did you join the A-N-C African National Congress?

299. FS: I didn’t formally join the A-N-C. Members of my family were A-N-C members

300. but at that time people were not formally joining the A-N-C because it was banned

301. when I was coming up. There’s the group ahead of us that had formally joined and

302. then when it came to us you just became- your affinity was defined by what you did

303. and your beliefs. Does that make sense? I mean if you grow up in a family that is

304. democratic you think you are a democrat even before actually sign. Now if that can

305. be banned then you are still calling yourself a democrat and that’s what happened

306. and when I left South Africa thirty years ago the A-N-C was still banned. And I

307. have- well you. know I haven’t lived there. Every time I say I am going to be a card

308. carrying member but members of my family are.

309. RS: So at that time there was no sort of real structure-?

310. FS: There was structures there was work to be done, underground work. Yes.

311. RS: Did you have any part of that structure or did you remain just-
FS: Well I remember writing letters. I had a cousin Owen Vana who was a reporter for the Daily Dispatch, worked with Donald Woods, he would come to our house on Sundays and we would go to-uh what we called the outside room. I think it was an extension of our house and he would dictate to me. I remember thinking that I could get away with it. I wouldn’t touch the paper and I would write with a pen and we would wear gloves and put the mail- the letters in envelopes and he would find a way of sending them to a certain—(??) shop in Johannesburg who would then fly out of the country with them and then they- the police apparently were watching him because they approached my father and told him that my association with Owen was- at first they thought we had a sexual relationship but he was a cousin. Because we would go to this room and close (laughs) the door and right no body would know what we were doing. So my father explained that we were cousins and nothing of the sort but he asked me if I was doing anything with him political. I just denied it. So he went to jail a few times but they never pinned me down for anything as far as that is concerned and that is when I was still staying at home. And then I went to Johannesburg. We used to have prepare for- after 76 because I was still in Johannesburg we were with a group of guys who were helping kids go to school and helping some who wanted to leave the country. And then I came to Chicago.

RS: Now you said that you didn’t— your father asked you if you were doing anything and you said no.

FS: I said no. The less people involved we knew that was better because you don’t- even now when you follow the history of the A-N-C you will find out somebody is in charge of multiple groups. Sometimes people in the same cell don’t know each other or don’t know that they are all managed by the same person or recruited by the same person. So the best thing was not to tell because if I tell me father- what if he breaks down and pleads for me and say take me but don’t take my daughter. So they believed my father ran a straight house and it was better not to tell him. His brother had already been in jail. Had been in and out of Robin Island and I didn’t necessarily want to expose him to unnecessary pain. See families sacrificed sometimes one brother would be deeply involved and then the other brother or sister would sort of be responsible for holding the base together or keep the fires burning.

RS: Was there anyone else in your family who was involved besides your cousin?

FS: Yes my little brother he used to drive people across to Lasutu. He even went into exile. He’s not little anymore (laughs). And my sister oh lord. My sister was involved with someone who now works for the current president and she used to travel back and forth to Lasutu to see him. She tells me she used to carry grenades. She used to do a lot of things.

RS: So you never- everything you did was sort of secret never apart in any activities that were public?
351. FS: Oh demonstrations we did attend demonstrations that vets in the locations. In
352. meetings, planning strategies but our- it was weird we would go to these things and
353. you’d come out of the meetings and by then the police would be there. You would
354. have to run fast- find a way. You didn’t get go there cute. You didn’t wear high
355. heels going there. You had to have flat shoes because- and scout how you going to
356. get out of there because police would be there. I don’t know why they would be late,
357. excuse me, I suppose they knew that meetings were legal to some extent. So they
358. would catch people on their way out. So if you left immediately you could get away
359. and they would find a way of provoking people then people would protest.

360. RS: So you never found yourself in any of those difficult situations?

361. FS: Yes you did. You ran. You jumped. Nobody wants to go to jail. I mean if you
362. went to jail once they got hold of you, you were in deep trouble. I think it was
363. always the strategy that not all of us are always going to go to jail. Struggle is fought
364. at different fronts. It is not fought from one street corner. Other people bake bread
365. and fed the protestors. Others teach them. Others sow clothes. So there was always
366. that division of labor that was understood. For instance some people were against
367. shebeen but that is where ideas were being discussed. That’s where money changed
368. hands. That’s where trips were planned so everybody played a part. Do you know
369. what a shebeen is? A shebeen is sort of a private tavern. You can have a shebeen at
370. your house. They were illegal. We had no outlets. We had no ways of entertaining
371. people. So in the evening everybody would lets say come to your house and you
372. would sell liquor. That’s illegal but you would get it at a certain price. Have it
373. delivered and sell it and sometimes not keep all of it here. Keep it at different house
374. because when the police come they would just come and smash bottles and pour it
375. out and that’s money lost, that revenue. So everybody played a part think of the
376. people who were storing the liquor for the shebeen queens and you know make the
377. lookouts for the police. So that if the police come it would be like no we are not
378. selling liquor we are just having a party. Get rid of that liquor. Take it next door-
379. find ways. So everybody- most people played a part in the struggle and they did not
380. have to belong to any organization because oppression was just everywhere.

381. RS: Talked a little bit about problems with police and resistance, were there other
382. local authorities that sort of came down on people besides?

383. FS: Yep. They were exceptionally hard on men. For instance if we had been to a
384. party remember people were not rich. They had no resources. So we would all use
385. the same car and there would be eight to ten people in one car. They would pick on
386. men. I remember a guy the guys used to called Baby Elephant. In fact these
387. professional men were also activists I’m talking about used to send young to school
388. to college and they used to call this guy Baby Elephant. He was big. He was like
389. Shaq. He had big hair and whenever the police got hold of him they kicked his butt.
390. I think they just hated big strong huge black man. So it wasn’t safe for them to be
391. out. That’s one of the reasons number one we didn’t have cars to if- to go home. If
392. you’ve been at a party until midnight so everybody stayed there but the other thing
393. was the threat and violence of police.

394. RS: How did you stay informed about what was happening?

395. FS: The grapevine, the bush telephone. People had ways. People had ways. But
396. remember in spite of that there was censorship. Extreme censorship.

397. RS: What was a- can you think of something a moment in your activism in South
398. Africa that you won’t- that you just can’t forget?--- We can come back to that if you
399. want.

400. FS: okay

401. RS: So it was a community wide involvement in the movement correct?

402. FS: It was but you also had to be careful because there were informers. There always
403. informers who are paid. Who might be caught in compromised situations and
404. therefore they have to talk or they are just bought, plain bought. And therefore they
405. had to- we had to be careful of people like that. And usually it would be somebody
406. who just tries to get involved from nowhere. You know you had to be introduced.
407. Your credentials depended on the previous person. Like I said my cousin. Well
408. people knew my cousin wrote for the paper and they knew his articles. So if I’m
409. brought by him there is some element of credibility to there because he’s going to be
410. blamed if I do nothing or if I mess up. So some people could get in and be so good
411. and yet they’re informers or they are careless or they just like to brag. Yeah we’re
412. going to bring this house down. Yeah we’re going to plant a bomb. And people
413. would do that so you had to be careful when it came to elements like that.

414. RS: Did you ever feel like that there were directions that the movement in Africa
415. was taking that you didn’t agree with or were you just-

416. FS: At that time you were just so steeped in anger that whatever can be done-
417. because one thing the South African intelligence was outstanding. It’s as if they
418. anticipated moves or they had such good informers that they could reconstruct what
419. has happened and leave you no alternative but to say yes or no. So whatever you
420. could do whenever you could do it, you did it and sometimes when orders came like
421. that people followed through. You know sometimes you- like nurses you were
422. considered safe and there were white people who would- who were sympathizers
423. with the movement and some of them would have lets say patients, a sick person,
424. and as a nurse you think you are going to take care of a patient but really you’re
425. carrying messages. So there were lots of ways of bypassing things but you just had
426. to be safe because they watched everyone.

427. RS: So you talked a little bit- what sort of nursing jobs did you take after you
428. finished?
13

429. FS: This was interesting because we had protested something as nurses and we were
430. the first group that graduated general training in midwifing and did not have
431. vacancies at Baragwanath which is now Chris Hani and they told use that we have
432. no vacancies on Wednesday afternoon after we wrote the first part of the exam. I
433. think they wanted us to fail the second part. So there we were with no money and all
434. of us had to end up doing private duty, most of us. I think from our group of more
435. Than fifty people they only took four or something like that. So the rest of us were
436. left without jobs and we couldn’t- after our parents had help us go through school go
437. home with no jobs, no money. So for some of us what was open was private duty
438. and who had money to employ us in private duty was white people. Oh my God, talk
439. about conflict. I so hated white people that in spite of knowing that we all human
440. and our temperature was ninety-eight four I felt like if I touched- this doesn’t have
441. to make sense okay- if I touched white people they would be like jelly and cold.
442. That’s what I had made up in my mind but the very first patient I had was this
443. English family. I think the husband had been a professor and the wi- where were
444. (??) I’m not sure but the wife was so nice. A now a smack in
445. my face and here I am anger as hell and here is this woman nice as all get go. She
446. was so nice. She would give us extra money. She would- everyday you would take
447. care of her husband she thanked you. She gave us little gifts. That wasn’t going to
448. undo apartheid but you get to a point where you look at a person as a person more
449. than a perpetrator of every act of apartheid. And that was amazing because most of
450. us did not want to take private duty jobs but we ended up taking those jobs and
451. that’s were we could make money. So.

452. RS: Now I know it wasn’t what you exactly wanted to do but can you think of
453. anything you did enjoy about these jobs?

454. FS: It’s all- you know once you are trained as a nurse, I hate trained but that is what
455. we say in nursing training, you enjoy helping people and I soon realized that I am
456. better off taking care of white kids than adults because adults maybe I was still
457. going to be angry and I wanted to believe the kids were innocent enough and were
458. not going to talk back or call me names. So I ended up having kids especially Jewish
459. boys- bris specializing in that and its nice to see- making somebody else comfortable.
460. It rewarding. You just don’t do it for yourself. Remember my story whatever you do
461. for others you are doing for yourself, so.

462. RS: I am going to ask you what were your feelings about in 76 about what
463. happened in Soweto.

464. FS: I was on a assignment out of town. I think I was in Benoni taking care of some
465. babies and I watched TV and I saw fire in Soweto. I could not believe it. I was in
466. Benoni for maybe two weeks (phone rings once) and I had to call back and call
467. Soweto and find out what was going on. That was amazing be- I know I am one of
468. those people who did not expect that at that time but we knew how to manage it
469. when you were in Soweto but if a riot broke out and you were not there it was
450. difficult to the press the media would paint such gory pictures but if you were there, there would most of the time be word. You knew how to maneuver how to stay away from certain areas depending on your responsibilities and where to be involved. I had fr- as a nurse I had friends who were doctors and sometimes they would be called- we would be called to come and take care some of people. So, it wasn’t always all bad. You just be driving down street- I don’t drive so I be in some bodies car and it be like these cars can’t go through but you go through because you going to help so and so and so this. We have come casualties down the street so some of the things- some things like that would happen and you just have to work. Those days we were not so scared of AIDS you just worked. Today I don’t know how I would.

461. RS: Did you know anyone who was-

462. FS: Killed?

463. RS: lost, yeah. Or did-

464. FS: I did, I did there were kids you know when you lived in Soweto you know some- you may not know them personally but you know a kid has been lost in that house or oh that kid who used to go past here in the morning there gone. Yes you get to know people. Yeah and even if you don’t know personally it’s a loss to the nation so everybody felt it all the time. In Africa you don’t go to a funeral because you know the person personally one a one to one basis. You-and individual and with the things they’ve done they deserve to be- to to- they deserve to have a nice send off. It’s like it’s like a thank you for your contribution to the struggle.

472. RS: So you came to Chicago in 79.

473. FS: Yes I did.

474. RS: What brought you to Chicago?

475. FS: Oh the family whiles I was doing private duty the family I worked for he was still is American and she was South African. He felt the political climate was explosive and at that time he just asked me to help his wife bring the kids- the two kids over to America because one of the kids was young. And I thought I wasn’t going to stay but when I got there I was like they let me go? Why not stay and go to school and then my family started telling me- the summer before that I had traveled across South Africa with a girlfriend of mine and then they started reconstructing my whole trip. The police did and visiting everybody I had visited to question them. That scared, that scared me I said I shouldn’t go back there because they’ll throw me in jail. We had done nothing. It was a summer vacation but I think they thought we were caring information from place to place but we were really partying with peela (laughs) it was nothing political. You know that’s the other thing South Africans in
those days were able to balance lives. The terrible political situation in their lives. We manage to leave and enjoy life to some extent.

RS: So when you arrived- who came with you when you arrived?

FS: The family I was working for we had just- I told you I used to be the nurse for Jewish kids when they had their bris and this family I stayed with them for three months and I suppose it was his plan that they should keep me so that I would- because the child was not sick really but they had money. Those days childbirth for white woman who had money they felt they had done a lot of work for nine months having been pregnant so if they could afford a nurse they asked for a nurse and if you stayed with them six weeks then you started taking the kid for shots. And that’s what I would do and you know they become cranky the first few days after you they have had their shots and I would be there. And sometimes I would be there when they start teething because their parents would want to sleep all night and that’s basically what I did. There are rewards that’s working with a white family.

RS: What- how did you communicate with people back home in Africa?

FS: I wrote a lot of letters because calling was very expensive, still is. So I still have some letters from my parents.

RS: Did you have any plans- were plans for yourself when you arrived or just-

FS: My goal was to stay and go to school, which I later did. It took me some time but I did it.

RS: And why?

FS: Because I didn’t understand this system I thought the system here was similar to ours at home but you had to go to school all year round and I always used to think what if I have to go home. Not understanding you could skip a semester maybe. And then I also needed funds. School is expensive of course and being I would have to pay out of state out of country fees. And just being scared because people would say- of course I still have an accent and I want to keep it but a lot of times people will say they don’t understand you. And that’s very awkward when you are in a classroom. I suppose that I was not- convinced enough that I could make it. So I was building up to it money, time, resources, confidence, and just working on my immigration status that’s very important to go to school. So those are just some of the factors I had to think about.

RS: So after you’ve graduated here you continued working in the medical field.

FS: Yes.
RS: How is it different- how was it different in Chicago compared to back in South Africa?

FS: In South Africa if people eventually got to treatment they were very very compliant. The system had beaten them down that they would take medication as ordered most of the time. But in Chicago they’re quite a few people would challenge the doctors, or let me say in America, and that’s good to be part of your treatment. To be informed about why you are doing certain things. And that one of you know there’s pros and cons on each side. People participating in their care. Say well I have alternatives what if we don’t do this but do this. Because there was a time I was doing midwifing and late on I found out some private doctors came only on Fridays because they could make money and do surgery on woman even if they didn’t deserve surgery but they the doctors would be paid they do a cesarean section. I’ve forgotten her name. There was this sister in charge she could standup to them. She was good. I wonder who she was. I wish I could go back and– she could she would stand up to them. We worked at night and when they would come and do surgeries Friday and Saturday night. We would crank them, we would crank them and people wouldn’t question it. So.

RS: Let’s move to- when did you first become aware there was a anti apartheid movement here in Chicago?

FS: Africans are never alone somehow you get to find people- we find each other. And I can’t say I know a time when I did not know. As soon as I found other South Africans here they take you and introduce you to other people. So as soon as I got here I found a lot sophisticated activists who knew sometimes a lot about South Africa. Things I didn’t even know because of censorship. So I can’t say I was here for a long time before I knew about activists. Most of the activists I know from then are still my friends and I just can’t imagine Chicago without them.

RS: How did you make people aware of what was happening in South Africa?

FS: The debates, the talks when I go home people will ask you what’s going on because still the press puts a twist on things and sometimes what will be reported is what has been observed in either with the poorest or with the elitist. So by being South African I think I can bring a different twist. For instance one of the professors here is a friend of mine and we used to talk about the folks who were in exile as they went back what happened with them and I still feel there was a sector that is neglected the people who were left home, their losses. Who lost sons they cannot trace. They don’t know where they were and what about them. What about their struggle keeping the fires burning waiting for that husband that never comes back. Waiting for the sun and daughter that never came back or somebody that comes back shell-shocked by- well it doesn’t have to be grenades but just the losses of just being tossed from one country to another country. Of being raped- woman have to put up with that. When you have no accommodations as a woman you a lot of things happen. When you hungry a lot of things happen. Situations are created so
what about those people who waited and waited. And what about those that came back and have never had recognition or compensation. Because some have not had compensation. They- all of a sudden now they have to prove in the gaps in their political resume they have been out of the country. So- because at that time there wasn’t- I cant – I was not out of the country like that but I don’t believe there were records kept and what if your upstream comrades are dead that means there is no one to vouch for you that you were out in exile. You can’t put it on paper now. So there are lots of gaps- I wish all of those could be corrected.

RS: What do you mean by political resume?

571. FS: Your CV they're people who just got swept and left the country and maybe they did not know who to report to or maybe they knew who to report to but they’re upstream. Lets say a person dies and they get adopted into another cell (button noise from cell) and that one gets promoted because some of them when they were in exile they had to use different names so that they could not be traced and their families could not be tortured as I said there were informers. So what if an infiltrates and says oh Ranell is here. Ranell that is an odd name and they connect with you’re with your last name. it’s rare that there are going to be two Ranell Schuster?

RS: Shubert.

580. FS: Shubert, Shubert and that’s easy they go home and they say we can get you your daughter back if you do this and this and this. Those are the kinds of things they did. They would black mail families and families would try to get you back. So those who were outside were all of a sudden you would change your name and you would not be Ranell Shubert you would find something else. So what if an informant infiltrates and says oh Ranell is here. Ranell that is an odd name and they connect with you’re with your last name. it’s rare that there are going to be two Ranell Schuster?

599. RS: Here in Chicago can you talk about maybe some of the things you did with the organizations here?
601. FS: The organization C-I-S-S-A Committee of Solidarity with South Africa, have you heard of C-I-S-S-A?

603. RS: Yes

604. FS: C-I-S-S-A used to collect money and they would hold rallies and you know toyi-
605. toyi?
606. It’s the dance like a war dance in front of South African Consulate on the other side of the bridge. And then on this side they moved without telling people. You had to look for the South African Consulate. It was very hard to go there. Made people aware. Go to people’s houses and they would talk about the situation, the strategy-
610. excuse me universities used to hold these debates. Functions would be held at Malcolm X. We used to walk Trinity United Church of Christ under Reverend Dr. Jeremiah Wright used to give us a place so that we could start walking form there and come back there. There were other churches I think the third (rod ??) but Reverend Dr. Jeremiah Wright always had a sign outside his church that said free South Africa from 1979 oh my goodness until he moved into this new church and that’s when somebody stole it outside but he has always been an advocate for our freedom and equality. Visitors from South Africa were always welcome there allowed to tell their story to somebody who is very understanding, you know because some people are just there fly by night and he understands the African and South African story. He’s well read and whenever he could and he still does he talks about South Africa. So there have been lots of things where we could participate.

622. RS: What do you think as someone who came from South Africa what kind of things do think you contributed that made the difference?

624. FS: It’s explaining the small details. You know being outside sometimes people want to help they may not know what you need and what you want. People can say-
626. lets say an African comes here with no money and people say oh you need a car. It may not be what you need because you don’t have enough resources for your background. I think one of the things I was able to- one of the areas was to explaining basics. Sometimes people need basic resources so that they can stand up on their own feet. Don’t give them a mansion when they don’t have a job. It- do you see? That’s the best example I can tell you. You give them a mansion you say live here. Then they have to pay for electricity. Then they have to pay for all utilities and the the mansion is in Winnetka, that will never happen, but it’s in Winnetka. How they going to get back and forth and then your going to think they ungrateful. How because you gave them what they didn’t need. You didn’t sit down with them to understand exactly what they would like to have and what they need. So I think I was able to I’ve been able to contribute by explaining the culture not saying I’l give you this. Understand people want to know you. You can’t just give people stuff.
639. People want to know you. I can’t- it’s subservient always having to say thank you when I don’t grow. Help me grow and develop and that’s what’s important. Its another way of endorsing- do you understand anything about public aid public assistance?
RS: A little bit yeah.

FS: Okay public assistance as far as I am concerned that people who deserve it but most people if you said for the next four years I will help you go to school so that you can get a job that is before this whole thing but if you did that you will have done them a favor and I think sometimes that is what we have to do with Africa. You have a piece of land I’ll help you till it. I can’t always bring you cabbage and potatoes. I’ll do that for you for six months and in the meantime I am going to bring you seeds and water. And you get up and work that land and I think that’s were I’ve been able to come in. Just small- I’m not a big project person. Its like little things I understand this. These are people. These are human beings give them back their self-confidence and their self-esteem.

RS: Can you think of somebody you worked with your activism in Chicago- here in Chicago that really made-

FS: Dr Jeremiah Wright, Dr Lisa Brock, Harold Rogers, Prexy Nesbitt.

RS: Why? Why some of these people? Tell me more.

FS: Those people they will not be moved they know what they know about South Africa and they know what they want to do with and for South Africans. Mind you with. They are people who do things very abstract and- you know in in ways the- they know how to get down and work with people. Those stand out in my mind. I have a lot of people that disappointed I didn’t mention their names but those four.

RS: Now- any- did you- tell me about some maybe some marches or demonstration that you did here in Chicago.

FS: In front of the consulate- we would go. You’d be told that something is going to happen and you’d go there. As South Africans we would go in smaller number most of us when we come here we have double responsibility in that we still responsible for out families at home so we would be in school. We would be working. We’d go to these demonstrations. We’d go to the walks but we still had to know that we had responsibility at home and we would sing songs. Police would come and take some people and throw then in the van but as a African fortunately I have never been caught. I got a job early in 80 and most of the time I worked at night so I would work at night and sleep during the day. If I’d go maybe I’d go early and then leave because I have to go to work. And I had to have a way of earning my immigration status because if I messed up at that time I would be thrown back to South Africa. So you always have to know the lay of land. I wasn’t gong to play careless---- (??) and allow myself to be caught. So most of the time we got away.

RS: How do you compare the resistance you experience here to South Africa?
When I first came here at times I would be upset because in South Africa you knew it was the law here it was not the law and people would tell oh no we - racism is dead in America everybody can do everything and the minute like I said the minute I opened my mouth, the minute people see my hair, the minute I have different needs you would know. You would know. And it hurts because people say anything is possible in America, it is not. And those people I work with someone who denies there is racism and maintains that sometimes minorities exaggerate it’s just that the person who exercises racism is incompetent anyways. That’s amazing to me they could be racist- they could be incompetent only with minorities but not incompetent with other people. so um it’s that kind of denial that hurts. Because when you experience nobody wants to go around inviting abuse but when it comes and then somebody says you don’t understand you are not being abused it makes you- it reduces your thought process. That person is saying you don’t think. You don’t know. You don’t understand. Mean while they are enjoying all the privileges. That’s very inconsiderate and still enjoying the privilege of being white and saying no there is no racism it’s just an incompetent person. So it can be annoying at least in South Africa you knew what was what, what to expect. It was wrong mind you it was wrong but you knew what to expect. Here you could deceive yourself into saying oh no racism it’s illegal and wham you get it. We see it all the time.

Identifying what companies were doing in South Africa. What they were investing in. How they treated people in South Africa and also communicating with the people back home on how not to participate with or buy certain products. And here we would be inva- in on panels to talk about divestment and boycott those institutions because most institutions would claim that they did not know. You’re in the 70’s and 80’s when this was at it’s height people would say no we didn’t know and really once they feel the pressure- whenever you hit people in their pocket they would react. It would take time but they would react and I think that’s one of the variables used in to bring down apartheid. In that people were told that we’re not going to send out kids here this school- we will tug at this school for because- some universities for their insur- for their insurance and they are retirement they invested in South Africa so little by little they had to pull out. And some are going back. Others are not because too many things were in play here. The health system for blacks was not good but once they pulled out people didn’t have jobs and therefore they were not eating well and therefore their immune systems were challenged. And then we had another apartheid in the form of HIV AIDS so all the confluence of all these factors was rough and still is rough on the country.

I am going to do some of these reflection questions

Yes.

And I- there is so many I wan to ask you that I won’t have time for. What do you think is the biggest challenge that South Africa faces today.
FS: Health, understanding that their health is their wealth and do you stay healthy. I think by being safe and I think by eating well. Okay that sounds very simplistic. So housing has to improve in South Africa. Agriculture has to be upgraded. There is a lot of land in South Africa that lays feral. When things sometimes are not done gradually there’s always a vacuum. Land was occupied by skilled white farmers who had laborers even if they were not skilled they had lot of laborers. So there was enough labor and they could control labor so they were able to be productive and they were supported by the government. Now some farms are taken over by blacks but they don’t have some don’t have the skill and they don’t have the labor. So now there is a vacuum there and there isn’t enough food to feed people. There’s I I think it’s easy to have three points every time you approach from my- remember I said I’m a small project person. I would say safety. Have housing, nutrition, health, those things. Safety goes with housing. Everybody must have decent housing. Health I would go to nutrition and agriculture. And what’s the other thing I said? Jobs and Education. That’s how I would approach- that’s the challenge and I think if people feel safe they’re prepared to be productive and therefore they will work in the land and therefore they will send their kids to school and- because they are so many resources in South Africa and South Africa has to learn how to take care of it’s base. Take care of home.

RS: What was your reaction to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report and its conclusions?

FS: It was that truth but I don’t know if there was reconciliation because most of the people who ended up- the white policeman who confessed were insulated. There families were safe. They were already let out of the country. There were rumors that they were compensated. They were giving lots and lots of money. They still had families where as the people- the children they killed, the folks they killed were gone forever. Reconciliation I don’t know if you have to pay people for their pain more than you have to be honest and say sorry in a meaningful manner. I suspect that was not done and culturally I think when those woman cried I don’t think it touched those black woman cried I don’t think it touched black man. So there’s still a gap I feel exists. I don’t think there was a lot of reconciliation there. There was a little bit of close sure. My child died why did you have to do that? What do I get for my loss? For wondering for ten, twelve, fifteen, twenty years where’s my child and then I find out you shot my child like a dog. You set my child on fire. Why? And then what do you expect me to do now? And remember those are people whose children mean wealth. These are the kids who have did- would have been working for them. So they have lost on so many fronts. Stress from loss of their children, stress from not knowing, stress from not having children to work and take care of them. So what do you give them and then your still protected. I don’t know how much reconciliation- it’s a step. A lot of people say it’s a step at least they know its partial closure but there are
people who don’t recover from that kind of hurt. I don’t know if I would. I don’t know if I would. So I think we should sure hope they took it seriously but I think there are people who were able to literally dodge the bullet. All they had to do was just appear there in a crimpléd suit or polyester suit and say what they wanted to say and it’s easy to say I am sorry. And then go home and go- I wish I never heard of a single one that committed suicide after a confession to show remorse. That’s not Christian like. That’s not good but I want to see one of them that cannot live with himself. I feel so bad I am so depressed I’ll kill myself. Not one. I haven’t heard. So it’s its’ sad I don’t know- I think it left people hanging. There’s still more to come? What else? What else? And then it’s like okay that’s it. It’s over folks. I don’t know.

RS: For you what is something that your you’ve accomplished that your most proud of?

FS: I’m proud of the fact that I got here and got my education. I’m proud of the fact that any South African who cam here if I could I helped. I helped them walk the corridors. I’ve helped them transition and I have helped them make a life of their own and I am still working with my family back home. I’d like to do more at home. I might retire. Hopefully I will retire and do more but the the most interesting thing for me at home I’d like to do is focus on health that is in contact with agriculture. Feed the people. I feel like if you feed the people the rest will happen.

RS: Is there anything in your life wish you would have done differently

FS: I would have started the feed the people notion earlier and I would have approached it differently. I would have funders. Do you have money?

RS: I’m a college student (laughs).

FS (laughs) I want really I want the land in South Africa to be utilized productively. South Africans shouldn’t starve. South Africans shouldn’t starve. Male, female everybody nobody should starve. Lets just use the land. It sounds like- give the people water and seeds and feed them for a limited period then they feed themselves. Make them proud. That’s all I want. And then if I can do that for 5 years the next 5 years I’ll make sure everybody- now- we’ll all work towards educating people making them understand they have resources, jobs, and all of that.

RS: It’s easy to see why that story of that you remember has influence your life.

Easy to that. Okay I think were doing really- were going to go ahead and just finish here.

FS: Okay