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Interview with Cheryl Johnson-Odim

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Cheryl Johnson-Odim Interview
[Full Source Transcript]

KA: Okay, my name is Kerry Armbruster. Can you please tell me your name and then spell it?

CJO: My name is CHERYL JOHNSON-ODIM, c-h-e-r-y-l j-o-h-n-s-o-n hyphen o-d-i-m.

KA: Okay, today’s date is December 4th, 2009, and the interview is taking place in Cheryl’s office at Dominican University. What years were you active in the anti-apartheid movement?

CJO: Well that depends on how we want to define active. I was introduced to the anti-apartheid movement really in the 1960’s, and I was—am I talking loud enough?

KA: [Checking levels on recording] Oh I’m just—nope you’re great.

CJO: Okay. I was introduced to the anti-apartheid movement in the 1960’s, actually in the early 1960’s when I was in junior high school. And I was a little bit active then, but I’d say that the period of my—my greatest direct sort of aggressive activity was the 1980’s.

KA: And then where were you located during the years of your activism?

CJO: Well in the 1960’s I was located in New York; that’s were I grew up. And then in the 1980’s I was in Chicago slash Evanston.

KA: What year were you born?

CJO: 1948.

KA: And, where—

CJO: Same year apartheid was actually instituted as a formal policy.

KA: Where were you born?

CJO: In Ohio.

KA: Okay. And then you were raised in New York?

CJO: Yeah, we moved to New York when I was seven years old, and I lived in New York from the time I was seven till I was twenty-two.
KA: Great. What was your earliest memory? CJO: My earliest memory of apartheid is in 1963. And we had a music teacher, his name was S. Carol Buchanan, at junior high school 59 in Springfield Gardens, Queens, New York, and he was very good friends with the musical director for Harry Belafonte. And Harry Belafonte has, you know, famously been, very involved in progressive social movements. And that early period he was already involved in the anti-apartheid movement. And my music teacher took some of us to—try out, to audition, to sing on an album with Harry Belafonte called “The Streets I’ve Walked,” and it was an album that he made in which he sang a lot of songs with children. And so I was one of the people who was chosen to sing on this album, and when we went to tape the album and to tape at Bell Telephone Hour—it was like, I don’t know, Ed Sullivan you know, in the 1960’s—and he had brought a troop of South African dancers to New York, and he was taking them around the country and they were performing to raise money for the anti-apartheid struggle. And, you know, this was—these were the years of the Rivonia Trials and so forth, and so they were called the South African Boot Dancers. And so he took the children—you know we were in junior high school—who were singing on the album with him to see one of these performances. And, not only was the performance unbelievable, they talked to us about apartheid. And that was my introduction to apartheid.

KA: Oh, wow. Bringing you back a bit, what was your favorite thing to do with your father growing up?

CJO: My parents divorced when I was very young, although I did spend time with my dad and his family, and probably—I had two favorite things to do with him. One of them was to ride around in his car. He had a really old DeSoto (laughs) they don’t even make DeSotos anymore! Those were the days of no seat belts, and so my dad used to let me stand up in the front seat! Can you believe how dangerous that was?! And the other thing was he used to take me to sort of, um, fairs, and ride on the Ferris wheel. So, I would say those were my two favorite things to do with him.

KA: Great. When did you first experience or witness treatment that was, unjust or unfair?

CJO: When I was in the first grade. You know, having been born black in the United States in the 1940’s, clearly I think that most African Americans in this country lived under some system of apartheid post civil war up until, you know, at least the passage of the civil rights and the voting rights acts. That at least gave a kind of a—legal equality, but I attended a Catholic school—this is just before me moved to New York. It was call St. Patrick’s, and my family were the only black people in the whole school—me and a couple of my cousins. (Deep breathe) And I remember being in the first grade and having a student stand up and, you know, all I remember her saying is something about
niggers this and niggers that. And I was sitting there, of course the only black child in the whole room, and I looked to the nun because I suddenly felt afraid, and I thought that the nun was going to say something to her, and the nun didn’t say anything to her. And so then I felt truly alone (voice trembling) and completely unprotected. I didn’t know, like, what could happen. I remember going home and telling my grandmother, who came up the next day and raised absolute hell. But the point is that it was a real wake up call for me because there I was in this sea of white faces and the only adult in the room was not acting in a way that I considered to be protective of me. So I’d say that was the first time.

KA: Growing up, what were your family members’ attitudes toward the political movements happening in the US?

CJO: Yeah. My family, you know, was very supportive of the civil rights struggle, and, you know, had been all of my life. Both my mother and my aunt had been involved with CORE: the Congress of Racial Equality, and you know, my grandmother had grown up in the south, and actually graduated from Atlanta University in 1918, and she taught school in the south because it was a segregated public school system. When her family relocated to the Midwest she could not get a job teaching school even though (coughs) she had a degree. And many of the people teaching in the public schools only had like normal school certificates. Because she was black, and even though education was segregated in the Midwest, it was segregated in a different way than in the south. In the Midwest people went to the same schools, but you sat in the back of the room, or, you know, you couldn’t use the swimming pool or something like that. But, they- they didn’t economically often separate students in the way in the south you went to a totally black school. So, she couldn’t teach because they weren’t going to allow her to teach in a- an integrated classroom. Ah, so, you know, that really politicized her, as well as own background. So, you know, I—I sort of always was aware of progressive social movements.

KA: Okay. So, where did you go to college?

CJO: I went my first two years at City College of New York- C-C-N-Y, which is actually located in Harlem. And that was a—you know, I started college in 1966, which was a highly politicized time. So I was, you know, very involved in a lot of things that were going on in New York with Friends of SNICK, and I remember when Preston Wilcox came through when I was actually in the tenth grade. It was in 1964—that was summer when they were recruiting a lot of northern college students to go to the south to register people to vote, to teach at freedom schools, and I tried to go, but when he found out that I was sixteen (laughs) they wouldn’t take me. But, you know. So, I went to CCNY for two years, and then I actually dropped out of school for two years. I thought the revolution was imminent, had been very involved in the black
power movement, and didn’t think I needed to finish school, and then I ended
up going back later to Youngstown State University because I left New York one
step ahead of the posse (laughs), and went to Ohio where my grandmother was.
So, I went back to school there. And then I went to Northwestern University-
that’s what brought me to Chicago. I came to Northwestern to do graduate work.

KA: Oh, and what was your field of study?

CJO: History.

KA: History.

CJO: African history actually.

KA: So, is that how you chose to study abroad in Nigeria?

CJO: Yeah, I went to Nigeria. I got a Fulbright Fellowship, and I went to
Nigeria to work on my dissertation, and, yeah- that’s how I got there. (pages
crinkling) That was 1976. 75-76 cause I was there a little over a year.

KA: Okay. So you said you participated in the civil rights movement.
How—how were you active in that?

CJO: Well, I was active first with a group called Friends of SNICK, and that’s
actually how I met Preston Wilcox—when he came through and the in the Spring
of 1964, recruiting for the summer of ’64 that they often called ‘Freedom
Summer’. So, I worked raising money for Friends of SNICK, and then later I
became involved with a group called the Democratic Liberation Party, and a
group called NBAWADU, which was the national black anti-war, anti-draft
union. And so, you know, was involved in some teaching in what
we called Saturday Freedom Schools, you know, and raising money for the
struggle in the south and in other ways like that. (Clears throat).

KA: Great (whisper).

CJO: I also became involved really at that time say in the women’s movement
because in the civil rights movement, but particularly in the black power
movement—and I did go to- to Georgia during part of that time, but was not
really out in the rural areas, you know. I was just too young, and people just
wouldn’t—not that there weren’t young people in the south doing it, but
when people being brought down from the north, you know, they wanted them to
sign things, and you know—But in any case there—there were a lot of
issues that arose in the civil rights movement (voice starting to strain)
and in the black power movement that had to do with the role of women. And so
this was a period of time when—some people call it the second wave of
feminism—and you know it was—it was a delicate and- and balanced issue
particularly for black women. You know, because we can’t disaggregate being black from being women. And it was also a period of time, particularly in the black power movement, when—when black men were sort of—you know, often times—because they had felt hammered or battered historically, were sort of trying to reassert their manhood in a certain way that was chauvinistic, and so black women had a hard time during that time.

KA: So how did you start getting involved in the anti-apartheid movement?

CJO: Well, as I said, my introduction was in 1963 through Harry Belafonte, and you know, I was astounded—actually we all were—because even though we all were very aware of what was, you know, really a kind of system of apartheid in the United States because, you know, I mean as I was growing up there were places where black people could not legally go. You know, when my first son was born in 1968 there were still sixteen states in which blacks and whites could not legally marry. So, it isn’t like we were not aware. You know, and there were signs all over the South; you know, ‘Colored’ and ‘White’, and so forth, just like, you know, in South Africa. But, looking at the situation in South Africa where the level of oppression and the level of conditions in a majority population in their own country— you know—was just astounding to me. And s—and that was one of the things that got me really interested in African history, and was one of the reasons that when I went to school, I decided to major in history, and then when I got my PhD I decided to do it on African History. So, you know, we raised funds, we educated people, we used to, you know, teach on Saturdays, you know, younger students, and educate them about what was going on. There also were, you know, African solidarity events that happened in New York frequently. I began to read a lot of African literature. There were African solidarity events, you know, that people went to that you supported in that kind of a way. So, there wasn’t a—a formal organization I belonged to that was only anti-apartheid, but even in the civil rights movement, and there were organizations that I worked with in the civil rights movement, the organizations I worked with in the women’s movement, and the black power organizations, you know, not only were people talking about civil rights of people of color in the United States, but all over the world. And certainly South Africa was—was just a major place. I remember in the 60’s when we were boycotting lobster tails from South Africa. You know, boycotting Krugerrands, you know, boycotting, you know, all kinds of things, you know, grapes from California (laughs) because of Hugo Chavez. So, you know, those were the kinds of ways that—that I was engaged.

KA: Okay. How did your parents respond to your involvement in the anti-apartheid movement?

CJO: My mother was very supportive, as I said, my family was—was a fairly politicized family. And so, my mother, my aunt, my grandmother- You
know, my dad was a little less politicized. He was more concerned about the conditions of black people in the United States, but you know, he was certainly supportive. But I wouldn’t say that he was as knowledgeable about what was going on in South Africa as- as my mother and my grandmother and my aunt.

KA: Tell me about the first protest or demonstration you participated in.

CJO: Oh, geese, I’m trying to (laughing)—What was the first? Geese, I don’t know! Probably the first, major demonstration I participated in was maybe in 1964 or 5, which was a – an anti-Vietnam war protest. And, you know, I didn’t—I did not go although I had wanted to go to the march on Washington. So I would say that the anti-war protest was probably the first major protest that I’ve participated in, but later, probably around ’64 as well, I also protested in picketing some stores at- in New Yor- I trying to think this chain of drug stores. You know, I keep wanting to say Walgreens, but of course it was not—

KA: Woolworth?

CJO: Yes! Woolworths! (laughing) It was Woolworths! Why can’t I think of that? It’s were they sat in in- ah- Greensborough. You know, picketing Woolworth’s in New York because of what was going on in the south, you know, after the- after the sit ins. So, you know, I was doing that in ’64 and ’65 as well. In ’65 really. I think Woolworth’s was ’65, and I started doing that in ’66, and ’65 was when I was working with Friends of SNICK. So I’d say those were probably the first: both the anti-Vietnam thing and the- and the- picketing of Woolworths. Yeah.

KA: Mkay. Can you tell me about your experience during the Soweto Uprising, when you were in Nigeria?

CJO: Yeah, you know, it was really interesting. There’s nothing like being outside of this country, and having a major- you know, international event happen, and it’s just very different. I was in Nigeria when Soweto happened, and you know, so, actually one of the first places that I read about- I mean- people were talking about it. It was, you know, on the news in Nigeria, on the radio, on—even on TV. There was very limited TV, but it was on TV. And I remember reading an international version of Time magazine- because later I was to see the US version of Time magazine- and it was different. It just seemed very different in the way that it covered Soweto, but you know, being in a black country, you know, an African country, and having Soweto happen—I mean people were just up in arms. You know, people were absolutely up in arms. And—and the thing was that everybody knew about it and people had a kind of depth of knowledge about apartheid that people in this country did not have. I remember when Soweto happened that a couple of my
friends, you know people I had grown up with but that I- I hadn’t really—that I
grew up with, that I knew from Ohio, who were old family friends, wrote to
me and said, you know, “I hope- you know- you’re not too close.” I’m thinking
to myself, “My God! Do they know where South Africa is?!” You know,
compared to Nigeria?! So I was just thinking about how I think—first of all, that
Soweto did not get the kind of coverage here that it got in Nigeria, or in many
many other countries outside the United States. And second of all, that the public
that received it in Nigeria already knew what was going on in South Africa, and
that I think much of the public that received here—that that began to be their
education about what was going on in South Africa. You know, so- so it was- it
was very different, and every place I turned I felt that there were people of like
mind, you know, who I could talk to- emote- protest with, you know,
about what was going on in Soweto. You know, just to—certainly a depth of
knowledge and commitment to that struggle that I- I would not have found, except
in certain communities in the United States.

KA: So how—Did you feel a certain responsibility when you came back to the
US?

CJO: Oh yeah! I mean, I had already been involved in some African Liberation
Day activities here in Chicago. I came to the Chicago area in 1972, as I said to go
to graduate school at Northwestern, and so, Northwestern had a- and still
has- an internationally renowned program of African studies. So, I was
doing a PhD in history, but the program of African studies coordinated, you
know, a lot of the things that went on about Africa at Northwestern, and
Northwestern in the 70’s had a huge population of African students. I’d say
that of the maybe couple of hundred people who were studying Africa in different
disciplines, you know: political science, anthropology, history, you know,
linguistics, etcetera—that about half of them were African. And they were from
all over the continent, you know. And so there was a very vibrant and robust
African community there. In addition to that, Chicago has a long history of, you
know, being involved in African liberation struggles, and so there was an African
Liberation Solidarity community in Chicago, you know, and every year there used
to be an African Liberation Solidarity day. So, you know, certainly
I was involved in activities at Northwestern, and then also involved in the
activities in the- in the Chicago area. It was very shortly after that in
fact that Northwestern hosted—I believe it was 1981—a major conference about
South Africa. It was not a particularly progressive conference, so there were a lot
of us who protested it on campus. It was- it was a conference I think
sponsored by the Ford Foundation because I—at that time I had gone away to
Loyola. I was still- I mean- living in Chicago, and was in the history
department at Loyola for two years, and I went back in 1980 to Northwestern as
assistant director of the program of African Studies. So, in 1981 when this
conference—it wasn’t hosted by the program of African studies by any means. It
was hosted by the university as a whole, and it was a response to a movement at
Northwestern to get it to divest from South Africa. So Northwestern’s response
was, “Well, we’re not going to divest, but we’ll host this conference.” And so the Ford Foundation brought in all these people, and, you know, people who were talking on both sides of the issue, about- you know- divestment and—So there were a number of us that boycotted the conference. I remember the graduate dean- Clarence Ver Steeg was his name—the dean of the graduate school came to me because I was assistant director to the program of African Studies—trying to beg me to control the students (laughing). And, you know, I mean I- I- you know; I was egging them on (laughing) as opposed to controlling them! I was letting students, for instance, use the Xerox machine at the program of African Studies to Xerox all kinds of stuff. You know, I’d open it up at 6 or 7 o’clock at night when nobody was there and let them, you know, use, you know, boxes of Xerox paper and Xerox all these things, and then, you know, lock the door back. And I’d let them hold meetings there, like 10- 11 o’clock at night. So, you know all this was going on. Students built a shantytown at Northwestern. I remember contributing to the shantytown. And, you know- and then as I said, many of us protested the conference and refused to go. So, you know, I became very involved, you know, particularly in the- in the early 80’s as the divestment movement really, you know, sort of started to ramp up, and that’s around the time we founded CIDSA- in 1983. Yeah.

KA: Can you tell me a little bit about the formation of CIDSA?

CJO: Yeah. You know, it was a- a whole group of people. Blacks and whites, which was very interesting because even though Chicago had a long history of African solidarity work- anti-apartheid work- civil rights work—you know Chicago is—had a—of course there were many people in Chicago who were not progressive, but they had had a strong progressive community here. Still, often that community was divided along, you know, racial lines, even though they sometimes worked together. And, you know, CIDSA was actually founded by a multi-racial group of people. When we had the early, initial people who met- there were probably like 8 or 9 of us, there was Prexy, me, Carole and Kevin Thompson, Sharon Pitts, Ora Schub, (long pause) golly- I know I’m forgetting some people. There were a couple of other people. And so—I believe it was the spring of 1983 that we founded CIDSA, which was- you know- Coalition for Illinois Divestment from South Africa. And at that time our aim was to work for divestment in a number of different arenas: to work for divestment at the state level, you know, in terms of large state pension funds, and you know- in the importation of products from South Africa, particularly steel, and other things. I remember there was steel being imported to build—what was the new— there was a new building downtown. It was a—State of Illinois building or something like that. ‘Cause I remember, you know, going down for many protests because some of the steel being used to build that was being imported from South Africa. And so that was—you know, that was our idea. Our idea was one- to educate people about the issue in South Africa. To that end we traveled all over the state, I mean, I remember driving all over the state, you know, going on the radio and, you
know—We worked with some very progressive legislatures, too, in Illinois. Charlie Hayes, who was a Congressman—who had been a longtime union worker. I remember being on some radio programs with him, and people calling in, telling us we were communists, and—and then Carol Moseley Braun actually, for awhile was very progressive, and was, you know, a friend to us, and she was a state legislator at that time. So we were trying to get the state to divest, we were trying to get the city to divest, and we were also working with a number of other groups around the state—different universities, like, you know, Northwestern, University of Illinois in Champagne, etcetera-UIC-you know. There were student groups at all these universities that were trying to get the universities to pull funds out of investment in South Africa, so—that was our—you know, education and divestment were- were the two sort of signal arms of CIDSA.

KA: Great. Let’s see—going back a little bit, what was your reaction to Reagan’s election in 1980?

CJO: Oh my God! (Laughs) I was absolutely sick. You know? And, he didn’t disappoint. (Laughs) He was- he was everything I thought he would be as a president. You know, I just never could understand his seeming popularity with such a large, you know, number of people in this country. I mean, it was just—You know, I thought he was a duplicitous, evil man (laughing) and—and not all that bright, you know? Perhaps not as simplistic as W., but you know, pretty close. You know, and it was just a tremendous disappointment to me. I remember—that was just later. Anyway, it was a tremendous disappointment to me.

KA: How did you feel about his administration policies towards South Africa?

CJO: Oh- oh it was just ridiculous. It was, you know, it was nothing but a disguise for- for supporting, you know, apartheid. You know, Reagan’s whole foreign policy was basically a narrowly construed foreign policy that was, you know, in the best interest of US capitol. You know, and so to that end, you know, he pursued what for him would have been a very logical South African policy. You know, the whole argument that, you know, sanctions would hurt people in South Africa, the whole notion that, you know, they would backfire. You know, we could have sanctions against everybody else, you know. We could have sanctions against Libya, or we could have sanctions against—But you know, no sanctions against—Somehow, South Africa was, you know, different. (Sarcastic) Sanctions weren’t going to work there. I thought it was, you know, it was just duplicitous, you know. I remember Chester Crocker- you know- was his person at state—because at that time—because I was assistant director to the program of African Studies at Northwestern—we used to go every year to have a meeting of African Studies directors from around the country to
DC. And so, we would meet with people from the administration. I remember they used to always send Chester Crocker. You know, it was this beety eyed, you know, apologist for apartheid. And so, that’s what I thought of Reagan and his policies (laughing).

KA: (softly) Let me see the time. Okay, how about—this is jumping back ahead—how did you—how did your group participate- CIDSA- participate in divestment specifically?

CJO: Yeah. Well, as I said, one of the things that we did is we used to go around and visit, you know, churches, union meetings, schools, go on the radio, you know, go and give talks, at, you know, various places and universities, educating people about apartheid, and about divestment, and about why we needed to divest—all over the state. So, that was one of the things that we did. We used to hold, you know, conferences and workshops. We worked with legislators. As I said, we worked with Charlie Hayes, who was a member of the congressional black caucus. We worked with Carol Moseley Braun, who was in the—a state senator. You know, we worked with people in—in the city, and- and what do you call it? What do you call—(pause) the aldermen. (laughs) You know we used to work city aldermen in an attempt to, you know, to get the city to divest. So, you know, we- we put together packets of information, you know, talking points for state legislators, for aldermen, you know, for Congress people from Illinois so that, you know, they would have the background research to support why we needed to divest. We worked with union groups- AFSCME—uh, you know the American Federation of—What is it? County and Municipal Employees? State County and Municipal Employees. Oh, with SAIU. And then, you know, when the Free South Africa movement happened, CIDSA was a main component in the Free South Africa movement. We used to publish a newsletter, you know, we used to host groups from South Africa, you know, political people from South Africa, people representing the ANC, you know, sometimes people representing the PAC, you know, people from Namibia. So we would host people who would, you know, we would take them places to talk, introduce them to people so that they could, you know, very ably represent themselves. So, we did, you know, all kinds of things like that.

KA: How did you succeed in your divestment as a group?

CJO: Well, you know, it was rocky (laughs). You know? And there were a couple of times- as I recall- that one of the first pieces of divestment legislation I believe was defeated. Maybe it was 1986—87. But eventually we were able to have some limited success in getting the state—trying to reconstruct all of this, but as I recall to agree not to import steel from South Africa. It was—we never did get the state to agree to divest all of its funds and penchant funds from South Africa, but we had limited success in getting some
divestment legislation passed at both the state and the city level. But, you know, it was a long, hard road, and there were, you know, people that we had to—that we worked with, you know, aldermen and state legislators to—you know, to provide them information, to get to develop enough of a grassroots swell that people would write and say we support this, you know, so, to educate the public so that the public would support it. So, you know, in 1987 we were able to have some limited success in getting legislation passed. I’d actually have to look up the names of the bills and all that. I don’t have that at the top of my head anymore. That was like—I don’t know—twenty some years ago, you know, unfortunately. But, you know, it’s easily a part of the public record, and so there—there was some success. One of the—one big piece of national success here in Illinois actually came out of the Free South Africa movement, uh, which began in 1984, and as I said CIDSA formed a core of that. I was—at the time I worked with a group called TransAfrica, and I was the Tran Africa sommittee—committee—TransAfrica was a national organization in DC. So- and you know, apartheid became one of its signal efforts. And, TransAfrica formed what they called support committees around the country, and so the support committee in Chicago was a committee that I chaired. And, in addition to that, then I became chair of the national TransAfrica support committee group, and so when the Free South Africa movement happened—and I’ll talk about that in a minute—because I was both co-chair of CIDSA and chair of the TransAfrica support committees, you know, CIDSA became a very active participant in the Free South Africa movement. And in Chicago we had the first trial- the first national trial of people who sat in. We didn’t have an embassy here, obviously, but we had a consulate on Michigan Avenue, and so people sat in at the consulate. And so, we had the first trial of people that sat in at the consulate, and they used what was called a necessity defense, and it was written up in the New York Times because they got off! And so, it was— you know, it was a pretty big deal in terms of, you know, sort of lending high moral profile to—to the movement. So I could talk about how the Free South Africa movement got started, or—or—shall I? Or—

KA: Yeah, that would be great.

CJO: Well, the day before Thanksgiving in 1984—I remember it very distinctly— I got this phone call from Salih Booker, and Salih Booker was one of the people—he worked at TransAfrica in DC, and he was the liaison from TransAfrica of all the TransAfrica support committees in all the cities, so, as I said, I was chair of the Chicago TransAfrica support committee, but also head of the national committees. And so he called me, and he said, “Cheryl—you know—you gotta get something going!” I said, “What happened?” And he said, well, Randall Robinson, Mary Francis Berry, and I forgot who the third person was—was it William Fauntleroy? May have been. —Went into the South African embassy and have refused to leave, and they’ve been arrested. And I said, “Oh my God!” And he said, “Yeah, so—and, you know you gotta get
something going.” You know? (laughs) So, the next day was Thanksgiving, the
day after that I started calling people. So, you know I met with people from
CIDSA, I met with some people from the—I believe it’s a branch of the
City University system called the Center for Inner City Studies, but the Center for
Inner City Studies had a number of sort of— you know— black, old hands in
both African Liberation Solidarity work and anti-apartheid work, like Conrad
Woorill and— geese—Bob Starks, and—Oh! I’m just—the names—but
anyway, Bob Starks and Conrad Woorill particularly, but there were others as
well. And my friend Alice Palmer, you know, who—who also had been a
long—and later Alice Palmer actually was a New York state—a New York
state?!—An Illinois state senator. She’ somebody you really should talk to,
too. I don’t know if she’s been— interviewed for this, but she- she really
should be interviewed for it. Anyway, so I met with a lot of people, and then
we decided that we were going to have a major organizing meeting, and we
were going to hold it at the Center for Inner City Studies. In fact, this is written
up in the— oh my God—um, (long pause)—What’s the name of the black
newspaper in Chicago? I cannot—I cannot believe this—I really think I’m pre-
Alzheimer’s. Take this part out (laughing)!

KA: Is it the Defender? Or—

CJO: The Defender. The Chicago Defender! There’s a big story about this
first organizing meeting that we had in the Chicago Defender. I may have a copy
of it if you’d like. I think I sent Lisa a copy of it because it’s got this picture
of me with my mouth wide open, and because I chaired the meeting. And so, we
were—you know, we had this meeting at the Center for Inner Studies, we had
hundreds of people come, and we talked about what had happe—by that time it
had hit the news, and they were already calling it the Free South Africa
movement. And so we talked about what had happened, and so this was a
meeting at which I was hoping to organize a protest outside of the South African
consulate, just like the ones outside of the South African embassy. And so, you
know, what happened is that a whole coalition of people from, you know, really
a very diverse— an eclectic group of activists came together to support this.
So there were—as I said, you know, old hand African Solidarity workers,
people from the civil rights movement, people from the anti-apartheid movement,
people from the union movement, people from the women’s movement—you
know, just all kinds of people came together. So, you know, the other piece I
shouldn’t leave out is that a very active part of the Free South Africa movement
became Trinity United Church of Christ. You know, one of the things Trinity
United Church of Christ on West 95th Street is most well known for now is the
fact that that was Jeremiah Wright’s church, and then subsequently Barack and
Michelle Obama’s church. And Jeremiah Wright was the pastor then, and
Jeremiah Wright was—his church was the first church in all of Chicago—and
Illinois, really—that had a Free South Africa sign. He had put out a Free South
Africa sign you know—I don’t know—sometime in the 1970’s. And so they
had these hu—not Free South Africa—Yeah! It said Free South Africa! And
so Jeremiah Wright’s church—Trinity United—also had a very active Church and Society committee. And so that Church and Society committee—because Randall Robinson, who was the head of TransAfrica, also knew Jeremiah Wright, and so he actually introduced me to Jeremiah Wright when he asked me to head the TransAfrica support committee here. And so I got to know Jeremiah as a very progressive minister, and so his Church and Society committee really worked with me and the TransAfrica support committee. So they were very active in putting this together, too. So they were represented there. So—anyway, we worked for about a week, and it was either December 3rd or December 4th or 5th we had a huge demonstration outside the South African consulate on Michigan Avenue. There must have been a thousand people. It was one of the coldest days of the year. I mean, literally—it was below zero with the wind chill factor. And of course we were walking around, you know, with these megaphones and, you know—And then as we had chosen a certain number of people, and they went upstairs and went into the consulate, and they were arrested. And one of them was Jesse Jackson’s wife, Jacqueline Jackson. And, I mean, they were let out a couple of hours later, but they were charged with trespassing, and that was the trial that, you know, went to trial as a necessity defense. But, you know, it was just a—it was an incredible outpouring of a very diverse community in Chicago, many of whom had been long term activists in various movements, and some of whom were completely new to the movement—you know, high school students, and you know, college students who were completely new to the movement. But it was—it was just a very impressive turn out. I remember that Alice Palmer and I met—we were—I think the thing was supposed to happen around 8:30 in the morning. We met like 6:30 or something at this hotel that was right—I think the consulate was at 444 North Michigan Avenue, and we met at this hotel right across the street at 6:30, and you know we were planning and—You know, it was—it was really quite interesting, so—

KA: How did it feel when you showed up at the consulate, and all those groups were there supporting—

CJO: It felt wonderful because we weren’t sure what to expect. I mean it was a terribly cold day. It was very early in the morning. Even though we’d had a couple of hundred people at the organizing meeting at the Center for Inner City Studies, it—you know, seeing all those people turn out and stay—You know, it was just—It reminded me of things that went on in the 60’s, you know. It just reminded me of doing things in the 60’s. It was just so gratifying, and just so—You know, it just- it just made you feel like change could be made. You know? That change- change could happen, and I mean I already knew that. I’d seen so much change in my lifetime. And I knew the kind of sacrifice that it- it took to make change, but you know it was just—it was just incredible. Really.

KA: So how during your activism did you stay informed on what was going on in South Africa?
CJO: Yeah. Well, you know, it's so funny. In the 60's when I was involved in
the you know, sort of civil rights and black power movements we used to have
education sessions. There were two kinds of sessions we used to have.
You know, we—we—you know, it's constantly necessary to keep yourself
educated, and you know, it's difficult in this country to be—to be educated.
(Laughs) I know that sounds kind of crazy, but this is a place that, honestly, even
though we're one of the most industrialized nations in the world, I find
people are, at least in my travels and my experience, the least knowledgeable
about things that happen outside of this country. It's just amazing to me. I can go
into a village in Nigeria, and find people who know more about what's going on
in the rest of the world than people who have college degrees, you know, in the
United States. So, you have to hunt information in the United States. You
can't—you listen to the 6 o'clock news or the- you know- you are going to hear
more about the latest fire on the west side than you are going to hear about what's
going on in the world. So, you have to listen to the BBC, you have to you know,
read the international Tribune, you have to really hunt- you know- information. I
mean, in those days there was no internet, you know? So you didn't just go on
the internet and find things. Now, of course— you know- you can. So, you
know people brought the—I remember in the 60's reading things that people had
smuggled in the country. I mean, you know—seriously, like Robert Williams is
somebody you wouldn't have heard of, but he was a—an African American man
who was very active in the south and South Carolina. Anyway, he ended up
having to leave, and he was in China for a long time. And he used to publish this
newsletter from China, and people used to smuggle it back in the United States.
So, you know, we got together and educated ourselves. The other thing we used
to do is have criticism and self criticism sessions—that is that once you had gone
out on a- a protest or some particular kind of action that people would get back
together, whether it was after getting out of jail or, you know, leaving the protest,
and debrief: What went right? What went wrong? What should we do
differently next time, you know? Where do we go from here? So it was a
whole sort of criticism and self-criticism session. So, you know, we also—it—
it's very important, particularly in dealing with an issue like apartheid, to make
sure that you are in contact with people who are there. You know? And that
you're not just here- you know- trying to educate yourself, deciding what
you should do, and making stuff up, you know? (Laughs) I mean, you need to be
in contact with people who are on the front line. You know, you need to be in
contact with people who are in the organizations and leading the organizations
that, you know, have the reality check of what's going on on the ground. So,
another thing that I think we took great care to do in the 1980's and the anti-
apartheid struggle was to make sure that- that we hosted people who were either
from South Africa, living in South Africa, or people who had been—were in
exile, but were in contact with people in South Africa who were the leaders of the
movement there because we had to in some ways take our cue from them,
you know. And we had to know what the reality was on the ground, so that was
another way of educating ourselves, really. And of course people used to- to
travel to, you know—outside of this country to go and visit with other
anti-apartheid movements, etcetera. You know, I—one of the reasons I
haven’t been to South Africa is because for most of that time most people
were boycotting travel to South Africa. I—I forgot to mention one other thing
when I was—that happened when I was in Nigeria because this was a very
interesting later development. Arthur Ash came to Nigeria to play in a tennis
tournament, and he was on a way to a tournament in South Africa. He had played
in South Africa several times. And so I was introduced to him at a party at the
ambassador’s house—it’s a long story about how I got there: There was a guy
who was gay, who was on the staff, and he didn’t want anybody to know he was
gay, and so I used to accompany him (laughs) to, you know, various things as his
sort of—his woman interest. It was all completely made up, but, you know I
didn’t care that he was gay; I’ve never been homophobic. So, you know, so—I
got to do a lot of great things in Nigeria (laughing) because I was, you know,
escort—you know, he was my escort. That’s how I met Arthur Ash. So, anyway,
we were riding in a limousine, and we were talking at this little cocktail party, and
I was having this huge debate with Arthur Ash about his going to South Africa to
be in this tennis tournament. And he was defending it like hell! You know, and I
remember at the end this guy was saying to me, “Boy, you shouldn’t have been
talking to him like that.” I was like, “I don’t give a damn” (laughing). But you
know, this hug—this huge debate. Four years later, Arthur Ash was one of the
founding members of Athletes and Artists Against Apartheid, and I thought about
that so many times (laughing). I thought of that so many times. It was such an
interesting—you know what I mean?

KA: Mmhmm.

CJO: So, you know, I’m not taking any credit for that, but I’m saying I’m sure he
ran into a lot of people who gradually educated him. And then you—he came
round to be one of the founders of Athletes and Artists Against Apartheid, so, you
know, it works! (Laughing) It works to educate people.

KA: Just planting the seed. Let’s see—Can you tell me a little bit about
CCISSA?

CJO: Yeah, and you know, I was not that actively involved in CCISSA. What
happened is that once we had achieved what we thought we could achieve in
CIDSA in terms of divestment and, you know, as- as the movement
began more and more to even take a broader turn, then, you know, CIDSA sort
of decided to dissolve itself, and to recreate itself as CCISSA. You know: the
Chicago Committee in Solidarity with Southern Africa. Because, you know, it
began to be a broader struggle, you know, and also because, you know, there
were—there were larger issues too, other issues. And so, I think CCISSA begins
in like 1987 or 1988, right around the time that CIDSA dissolves. Now, I was on
the board of CCISSA. I had almost forgotten that. And I was downloading some
stuff because my daughter was doing a thesis at Wesleyan University on the
anti-apartheid movement in Chicago so—So, I was getting some materials together for her, and I ran across this old CCISSA newsletter, and it, you know, listed the Board of Directors. And so I said, “Oh yeah, that’s right! I was on the Board of Directors for awhile.” So, I was only on the board of directors for a little while. I had had a baby in 1988, and you know, just a bunch of stuff started happening, and so, you know, I really can’t talk to you too much about CCISSA except to say that CCISSA also began to draw in, you know, a lot of other people who began to come into CCISSA. Basil Clunie was very active in CCISSA, Lisa Brock was very active in CCISSA, Rachel Rubin was very active in CCISSA, and CCISSA really sort of was still in existence, you know, when Nelson Mandela was released from prison. And that was the start of a whole new set of challenges for South Africa.

KA: So, what were you—What were you doing when you head Nelson Mandela was being released?

CJO: Oh, my God. You know, I was nursing my baby (laughing). [Cheryl later informs me she has misremembered this detail, and was not nursing her baby when she heard of Mandela’s release.] And, I—I remember—I just, you know—Nelson Mandela’s release, even though it began to be suspected that was going to happen, to me was sort of like Barack Obama’s election: Two things that I did not think I’d live to see. You know, I actually thought Nelson Mandela would die in prison. You know? And I never thought Barack Obama would be elected. Now, I’m not equating them, you know, as—as men in struggle or anything like that. I mean, Nelson Mandela—his credentials are impeccable, and you know, Barack has credentials, but they’re not Nelson Mandela’s credentials! and I’m probably substantially to the left of Barack, although I-I support many things—not this war in Afghanistan, but that’s another story. But, you know, it was just—it was just a stunning development. First of all, that he lived. You know, thirty years in prison! Second of all, that then he was—he was released, you know, and then that he—I mean, his release was not only real change, but it was also symbolic change. You know, it was both sort of simultaneously. It was just a—quite an amazing thing, just an amazing thing. And even though, you know—clearly I know and I’ve often heard Prexy say this too—that you know, I think it was in Mozambique- as opposed to Angola- but they used to say that, you know, “A luta continua, vitoria e certa”. “The struggle continues, victory is certain”. But after independence, they said, “Vitoria continua a luta e certa “Victory continues, the struggle is certain”. So, clearly, you know, the release of Nelson Mandela, the end of formal apartheid, you know, the enfranchisement of the African majority was a stunning development. But, it was the beginning of another kind of struggle. You know, the end of one kind of struggle, but the struggle clearly continues, and so I think none of us thought this was a magic bullet. You know, it was a wonderful thing symbolically and for real. For Nelson Mandela to be released from prison—but not a magic bullet—it was the beginning of work. You know, the beginning of nation building, and it- it continues. You know, it continues. So.
KA: What challenges do you see facing South Africa today?

CJO: Oh my God, you know, I—When we think of a country like South Africa, or any developing quote-unquote nation, or underdeveloped- if we use that as a verb—What we see is not only—it’s very complex relationship between their internal challenges and the rest of the world. It’s like when people look at a country—developing nation, they say, “Well, you know, look what’s happening there.” They say it almost as if it has no—it’s economy, or it’s political issues have no relationship with the rest of the world. And they do, you know. I think about South Africa, for instance—one of the biggest challenges for South Africa internally is the redistribution of land. I mean, you know, like—it’s just a huge challenge, and consequently the redistribution of wealth. You know the—there’s still the Afrikaner community, the white community, still controls vast majority of the wealth in South Africa, and it controls, you know, a majority of the land. And, you know, when you have a situation like that- political control is—is just the tip of the iceberg. You know, I mean you—it—it’s really just the tip of the iceberg. You know, you’ve got a black person in office, well you know, maybe you have black people in parliament, I mean—it’s just the tip of the iceberg. You have to control the resources in order to make real change in the real lives of real people. So, I think a way to deal with controlling some of the resources of South Africa—redistributing some of the resources of South Africa— those include things like access to education, access to health care, production, you know, natural resources, you know, like gold and diamonds, and you know- other things- land- you know. That’s the big challenge ahead for South Africa. That’s the very big challenge. You know, I think the other thing is that those resources in South Africa are connected and intertwined with global capital. You know, and so it’s not so easy, you know, to just take them over because you know—they’re the outside, you know. They’re the United States, you know, or other countries like that. Also, you know, whatever they say out of one side of their mouth about, you know, the moral imperative of of- of having ended apartheid, and you know, changing the lives and conditions of the people in South Africa—there’s also the interest of global capital, you know, which has no interest in redistributing the wealth in South Africa. And so, you know, that- that poses another very difficult challenge, that kind of external internal slash challenge. So I think those are the biggest challenges. Now, there are also smaller, more manageable challenges. I think that South Africa has begun to develop greater access to education because, you know, you need a—an educated and trained population of people color, particularly the African population. You know, in order to be able to develop the kind of innovative leadership that will be able to confront some of the more intractable problems that South Africa has. I think some of that is happening. I think that there are—as there would be any place—you know, during the period of apartheid it was them and us you
know, but part of the them and us, part of the way that apartheid worked was by dividing up the black population; by dividing the Xhosa from the Zulu from the Pedi, you know. And you know—and also, I mean people had histories that predated apartheid where they were—had their own nations. So, you have this country that is manufactured by colonialisms. And, so now, you know, you do have coming out of the woodwork as one would expect, you know, internal issues between various people in South Africa. You know, black South Africans are not just black South Africans. They’re—they’re Xhosu, Xhosa, Osa (??), and Zulu. And you—I mean—and so there are some of those issues that are beginning to raise their heads. And, of course, there are some people who—there are some class issues that are beginning to develop, you know, as you begin to develop a middle class, you know, or an upper class. You know, it’s—it’s difficult sometimes for people to understand their own interests. You know? And they begin to develop strange bedfellows, you know. People began to align across race, along class lines. And then that has the potential to relegate a vast majority of the African population, South Africa in particular, to you know—being—continuing to be an oppressed population.

So, there are—there’s a hard road ahead.

KA: Yeah. Have you continued on as an activist?

CJO: You know, I would say not in the way that I used to be. I—I mean I don’t go out and march and protest. I haven’t marched in a protest in years. Well—yeah, years. It hasn’t been ten years, but years. But, I do continue to be active in various other kinds of ways. I’m on the board of the Public Square, and, you know—which is ah, an organization that, you know, seeks again to sort of educate the ordinary public about things that are going on. You know, I’m on the board of the Black Metropolis Research Consortium, you know, which is seeking to develop access to materials about the black experience. You know, I’m working to develop a black world studies department here. And there are—there are several other boards and things—I’m on the board of the Institute for the study of Women and Gender at—at Columbia, which just did a very interesting traveling exhibit about the horrible situation in Congo, you know. Particularly about the rape of women in Congo, and so we were able to take it to the United Nations. It’s traveled all over the country. You know, it’s traveling different places in the world, so I guess that’s the kind of activism that I engage in now, which I think is a very important activism, you know, don’t get me wrong. But, for instance, when there was a march downtown Chicago against the war, I didn’t go. So—yeah.

KA: Looking back on your work with the apartheid movement—anti-apartheid movement, what are you most proud of?

CJO: I think my involvement as a whole. I mean, I—I suppose for me one of the things that stands out—although I think that everything that we do in progressive struggles is important no matter how small—maybe the thing that
stands out is the leadership that I gave to the Free South Africa movement. You know, because of my relationship with Tran Africa—you know, being the person who got the call and feeling that responsibility, you know, to call that first meeting, to develop that first protest outside of the consulate, etcetera. So, I would probably say, you know, that was one of the most important things I did in terms of accepting the responsibility of that call from Salhi Booker. But, you know, I would say, you know, I’m proud of everything I guess, you know. And I’m also proud that I’ve raised children who (laughs) you know—just the fact that my daughter is doing her senior thesis on the anti-apartheid movement—You know, I’ve raised children who have some idea of of history and progressive struggles, so.

KA: Great. Let’s see the time (softly). Is there anything else you want to add?

CJO: No, except to say that I’m really happy to see you doing something like this. I’m always happy to see young people, you know because there is a lot of struggle left to wage. And I’m really happy to see young people educating themselves about past struggles, and- and embracing the challenges of the future because we have them. (Laughs) So, thank you.