Spring 2010

Interview with Elizabeth Benson

Micah Ariel James

Columbia College - Chicago

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Recommended Citation
James, Micah Ariel. "Interview with Elizabeth Benson" (Spring 2010). Oral Histories, Chicago Anti-Apartheid Collection, College Archives & Special Collections, Columbia College Chicago. http://digitalcommons.colum.edu/cadc_caam_oralhistories/14

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MICAH ARIEL JAMES: Okay, so what is your full name?

BETTY BENSON: Elizabeth Irene Benson.

MJ: Okay, and so, my name is Micah Ariel James. Today is—

BB: Micah?

MJ: Yeah, M-I-C-A-H.

BB: Nahum.

MJ: Yeah. (laughs) Today is April 11.

BB: Unh-hunh.


BB: Unh-hunh.

MJ: And what’s the name of the church?

BB: Wellington Avenue United Church of Christ.

MJ: Okay. Um, so during which years were you an active member of the anti-apartheid movement?

BB: I’ve never been a really active member of anything.

MJ: Well what years were you involved with the—

BB: Well I was talking to, um—I can’t even think of his name. Anyway, I was talking to a young man over the phone and he said it was the early eighties.

MJ: Okay. Um, through the end of it?

BB: Pardon?

MJ: Through the end of apartheid?

BB: Up to the point where South Africa changed government.

MJ: Unh-hunh. Okay. Um, and where was your activism based?

BB: It was—It was, uh, at the corner of Adams and Michigan, on the Southwest corner. That’s where the Consulate was. And then for some reason or other, they moved over to,
close to the Wrigley Building on the other side of the river and I was going to ask, um, Norm [a fellow anti-apartheid activist to whom Ms. Benson referred prior to the start of the interview]—I was going to ask why, why was it was moved over there? I think it must—the consulate must have moved over there because I know there was a lot of—I don’t think it was for the um, uh, for the um— I can’t even think—the money—the, uh, what was it? What was—what was the, uh, money that we were—? I can’t even remember what we were— The names don’t come to me, but I don’t— I don’t think it was the Consulate, but we all moved over there across the river for a while. And then I think we moved back again. So, I don’t— I don’t know why.

MJ: Okay. Um. So, but it was in Chicago the whole time?

BB: Uh, yeah.

MJ: Okay. Okay. Um, so what year were you born?

BB: Sixteen.

MJ: Okay. Um, and where were you born?

BB: Des Moines.

MJ: And where did you grow up?

BB: Uh— Chicago, Kansas City— Uh, probably Des Moines, Kansas City, Chicago. Mostly Chicago from the time I was four years old.

MJ: Um, where did you— Oh, what is your father’s name?

BB: Clarence.

MJ: And where was he born?

BB: Iowa.

MJ: And, ah, do you know where he grew up? Where did he grow up?

BB: Iowa.

MJ: And what was your mother’s name?

BB: Leon Francis Hall Benson.

MJ: Where was she born?

BB: St. Louis.
James

MJ: And where did she grow up?

BB: Well probably—probably Missouri and, and Iowa.

MJ: Okay. Um, so now we’re going to go, go back a little. What’s your earliest childhood memory?

BB: I remember Christmas at 8810 South Carpenter Street. Ahead of that, we were in Iowa. And I just don’t remember. I remember when I was five-years-old, I was too big to believe in Santa Clause. And, um, my cousin was—I think was three at that time. I—When I was four—When I was four, we lived in Kansas City. I remember that. And, um, we had—I—We had, um—My father had rabbits and we’d go out and feed the rabbits every morning. We lived in a little bungalow. Not too far from the zoo—Kansas City Zoo. And my mother said we used to be able to hear the lions roaring from where we were.

MJ: Hm.

BB: Uh, and then we went to visit my—her, her mother and her sister. And we were gone—I don’t, I don’t know, uh, exactly when it was. It would have been, uh, around April 1920. And, um, my father decided while we were gone—He was, he was working for a—he was in, working for a—insurance company, I think. And he decided when, when we were gone that he’d, he’d have a c—he’d have an operation, get it over with before we got back again as a surprise. So I don’t remember whether it was kidney stones or gallstones. Then my mother began receiving letters written one day a week, one, once—He’d write a letter, a group of letters, and mail them—have somebody mail them everyday while he was in the hospital. And, uh, we got one of those letters after he had died. He died, uh—what—They said they couldn’t get the doctor—They couldn’t get the surgeon because he was on a golf course. They didn’t have cell phones then. And, um, so he—So she got the letter—She got word. I don’t know, probably telegram, after he had died. And then she—next day, she got a letter from him.

MJ: Oh, wow. And how old were you at that point?

BB: Four.

MJ: Okay. Um, did you have brothers and sisters? Only child?

BB: They’re all—They aren’t all gone; they never were.

MJ: Ha. Um, what sorts of rules did you have?

BB: “What sort of—”

MJ: Rules did you have as a child?
BB: I don’t—I don’t remember any rules.
MJ: Okay. Um, what was your favorite place to play?
BB: I don’t know. Just played at home, that’s all.
MJ: Inside or outside?
BB: Well, when I was on Carpenter Street, I was four-years-old, four, when we were visiting, but then we didn’t live there more than several months. We went—lived in—moved to Beverly Hills in, in Chicago. So it was in our yard and inside.
MJ: Um. Did you have any chores when you were growing up?
BB: I suppose I did. I don’t remember. I know I was, had to sweep the sidewalk, but I don’t remember anything more than that.
MJ: Okay. As a child, what type of student were you?
BB: What—what?
MJ: What type of student were you?
MJ: Right. Um, what sorts of activities did you do with your family?
BB: With my family? Well my grandfather—my, my, my maternal great-grandfather lived with us. In Beverly Hills. He also lived for a time down at 8810 South Carpenter, which is in the Gresham area. So, um, my grandmother—his daughter—one of his two daughters, uh, lived with us. And my mother went back to teaching school. And, um, she—I—I know that, um, my grandmother took us down to Field Museum for the morning and afternoon lectures they had with my—oh, and my cousin came—my little cousin came to live with us. Um, her mother was, her mother was working. And, um, we went to the—I don’t know that she went to the symphony, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, or not, but I went to children’s concerts when I was, uh—and my grandmother, uh, went with us. We got a—afternoon off from school which was pretty great. (laughs) And then I studied the violin, played violin, and practiced—I can’t remember whether I played the piano—Yeah, I played the piano, too. That’s, that’s, that’s about it. We had—We played with neighborhood kids, but not too much.
MJ: Um, so what was your favorite after-school activity?

BB: Raking leaves, I guess. (laughs)

MJ: You— You enjoyed raking the leaves?

BB: And practicing and doing homework is about all that I remember.

MJ: Um. So you moved to Chicago when you were four, you said? Okay, why did you move to Chicago?

BB: Why did I leave Chicago?

MJ: Or why did you move to Chicago?

BB: My father died and we moved— My mother— We lived in Gresh— in Gresham for a while and my mother bought a house. In Beverly Hills.

MJ: Okay. Um, what, uh, what college did you attend?

BB: University of Chicago.

MJ: And, um, why did you choose— Why did you choose the University of Chicago?

BB: I don’t really know. My mother had gone there, uh, part-time. And I guess that was— I think it was probably her decision.

MJ: Um, what degree did you receive?

BB: Uh, BA.

MJ: In?

BB: French and minor in Spanish.

MJ: Okay. Um, what sorts of jobs did you hold following college?

BB: What?

MJ: What sorts of jobs did you hold following college?

BB: What kind of jobs?

BB: Well I worked, um, uh, for the University of Chicago Libraries. Uh, couple of years. And I also studied—I didn’t get a—didn’t get a Master’s Degree, but I went to school and worked at the same time. In fact, I did that through college. Through the college, worked part-time. And I don’t know what all I did after that. I know I worked for Encyclopedia Britannica. Uh, I know I had a whole lot of jobs.

MJ: Um, what was— That was your first job, was working at the Libraries? In the Libraries?

BB: No. I taught school for— After I got out of, uh— After I stopped going to the University, I taught, um, school down in Benton, Illinois.

MJ: Um, elementary school?

BB: High school.

MJ: Um, what other— What other jobs did you do?

BB: Isn’t that awful? I can’t even remember. I can’t even remember. I had—I know there were other jobs, but I can’t even remember. I—after I, uh— Oh, I—I worked for the, uh—I worked in the, in the, um, for the US, um— I worked for the US Government. Censorship. I worked for US Censorship, uh, during World War II. Then I had to work for the Encyclopedia Britannica. Then, of course, when I—when we moved to Se—when I moved to S—when we moved to—when I moved to overseas and I worked for the US Army, uh, from ’54 to ‘60. And I came back. I worked for, um, Bureau of Indiana Affairs and the Department, uh, and Bureau of Commercial Fisheries. And, uh, what else? Oh, I know when I was in Chicago, um, back in the late ‘40s, I was Secretary of the, of the, uh, Hyde Park Baptist Church. I can’t— I can’t remember anything else.

MJ: Yeah, where— Where overseas did you live?

BB: Pardon?

MJ: Where overseas did you live?

BB: Uh— Jargeau. J-A-R-G-E-A-U. Jargeau, France. And Olivet—uh, or, eh— We lived in Olivet and worked in F— That was when we—I was working for the army. And then in Munich. [Unclear due to background interference…] Um—Hei—Oh, no. One other place in Germany, then in Heidelberg. In Heidelberg. In Germany.

MJ: And— And that was for six years?

BB: France and Germany was from ’54 to—June ’54 to January ’60.

MJ: Okay. Um, and so where did you live—? Did you come back to Chicago when you left—?
BB: Uh, no. We went to Seattle. My mother retired in ’54 and—from teaching. She taught in Harvey, Illinois. And then we moved— Then we, um, went to, um, Seattle. Lived there for four years. And then came back and lived in South Shore, uh, Prairie Shores. Uh, after that, we went to, um— Then my mother died. Sh— Uh, then I moved in ’87 to, um, where I live now. To Rogers Park.

MJ: Okay. Um, so now to kind of get into a bit of the activism. Um, what was your relationship— Like, describe your relationship to activism prior to your involvement with the movement.

BB: When we lived in Prarie Shores, I—I really wasn’t active very much. But it was back in the—probably in the ‘70s that uh, a friend, a neighbor in Prarie Shores— You know where Prarie Shores is? On the Near Southside. Michael Reese Hospital used to be there. I don’t think there’s a Michael Reese Hospital anymore. But, um, she gave me a membership to Common Cause. And at that time, I began to get active. She was not active. But, uh, then I began to, um, get active in the Common Cause—had a local affiliate—and, uh, visit, um, politicians, and—

[Volume of conversation in kitchen begins to rise.]

BB: I can’t remember what else we did.

[Staff pass through from kitchen to exit—speaking loudly.]

BB: Uh, then after that, I—I don’t remember how— I— When I came to this church, I was active with Citizens Alert, which will probably cease to exist in—this coming June. And, um, and of course— In the ‘80s, I think, we—it was when, uh, began picketing for the, um— Can’t even think of the name of the, of the gold piece—the, um, money—the, uh— I can’t even think of that. I’ll think of it when I go—when I, when we leave. And then it worked into picketing the South African Consulate. And there was a weekly— There was a weekly vigil, for probably several years.

MJ: Okay, um. Talk a little more about Common Cause. What— What was that exactly?

BB: Well it still exists. It’s for good—good government. And it’s— It’s, uh—uh— They always campaign for good government. It’s not a— It’s nothing deductible. They— Or you— If you give to them, it’s not deductible because any—uh, working for a change of law, you can— Do you have a computer at home?

MJ: Mm-hm.

BB: And internet?

MJ: Mm-Hm.
BB: Look up Common Cause on the computer.

MJ: Okay.

BB: It’s still a— It’s still active. But I think they’re mostly— They’re not so much by mail. See, I— My career was mostly non-computer. Typewriter.

MJ: Right.

BB: And writing a lot of letters. On the typewriter. Um, so, now everything is—from high school, maybe grade school up, it’s computer, you know. I had a part-time job in Chicago, too. I worked—I worked for a young woman that turned out to be a crook. (laughs) Loaned her money, she never paid it back.

MJ: Aw—

BB: But, and, and I never got any money. I didn’t go for money. Oh, I had a friend who now has dementia. I guess. She—she’s lost her mind. And she— I worked for her for free. I don’t think I ever got paid from her. Maybe I did. I don’t— I don’t think so. Um—probably a couple of years. The other— The crook I worked for, probably about five years. She had a ware— He had a— She and her husband had a good business, uh, on 18th and Michigan and did very will financially. Good wi— And after her husband died, she kept— She kept, uh— She kept working. Uh, she kept the business. But then her friend told me that one day she had a check in front of her and she didn’t know what to do with it. That was the point where her mind began to—had, had begun to fail. I wasn’t working for her at that, at that time. So she’s in a— She’s in probably a—a—where— I can’t even think of it. She’s— She’s in a nursing home. Been in a nursing home. Physically, she looks good; she’s fine. But, uh, mentally she’s somewhere off— somewhere else.

MJ: Um. So where were you employed when, when you became involved—

BB: Where was I—

MJ: Where were you employed when you became involved with the—

BB: Uh—

MJ: —movement?

BB: I think I was working for Mary Louise. The one who has—whose mind is gone now. I don’t kn— I don’t even know.

MJ: Okay. Um, how did those who were closest with you react to your being involved in that kind of activism?
BB: Well, uh, it was—except in this church where everybody’s an activist, almost—uh, what, the people that I know—my, my good friends—thought I was—that was special. I felt it was part of being a citizen. But, uh, they, they thought it was—They, they themselves were, were not activists.

MJ: So did they—Did they have—They just—Did they have an opinion of it, of your activism?

BB: No, I don’t think so.

MJ: They just themselves weren’t involved. Yeah. Um, how did you first learn about apartheid?

BB: I think it was when I was—I mentioned a Norm Watkins [a fellow anti-apartheid activist to whom Betty referred prior to the start of the interview]. And that was one of the organizations I belonged to. I don’t know what I did for it. I wrote letters, attended meetings. Uh—Well, Common Cause, I was active—I was active with. And then, uh, I think they encouraged, uh, people to—I wish I could think of the money. The gold, the gold, uh—We, we’d, um, picket banks for—Maybe I’ll think of it pretty soon. So it was—it was with, um, Clergy and Laity Concerned. And they—They no long exist. Uh, that was during—I think that was during some, some—one of our wars. I wish I could think of the gold piece. I can’t remember—We picketed the, uh, First National Bank, I know. It was—had to do with Africa—some union in South Africa. I can’t think of it. If I think of it after you turn your paper in, I’ll let you know.

MJ: Um, how did you come into contact with Clergy and Laity Concerned?

BB: Well, let’s see. It was an Af—It was a Nicaragua Organization I belonged to. I don’t really know.

MJ: Do you know when you joined the movement?

BB: Joined—?

MJ: The—like the Clergy and Laity Concerned.

BB: Probably, probably in the ‘80s. I don’t even know.

MJ: Um, what made you decide to become a part of an actual organization?

BB: When I got the membership to Common Cause.

MJ: So you go the membership and—

BB: Then they had a local affiliate and I began attending meetings and I suppose writing letters. I don’t know.
MJ: Um, and so, so the one that you joined was Clergy and Laity Concerned. Um—
what—? Talk a little about the relationship between your religion and your activism.

BB: Religion and Activism? Not—there wasn’t any connection as far as I could do.
You’re about ten years too late.

MJ: What do— What do you mean?

BB: Asking questions. (laughs)

MJ: Oh.

BB: I could have given you answers ten years ago.

MJ: Um, what other work did Clergy and Laity Concerned do?

BB: It was mainly against, against the war. And concerned about the war, I th— I
suppose that was the Vietnam War. I suppose. I don’t even remember.

MJ: Okay. Um, and so were there—there were events that, that Clergy and Laity
Concerned would put on?

BB: Probably. I know there were meetings. Oh and then, uh, another group that, um, that
Illinois— It was FREEZE. It was called FREEZE. And then there was SANE. Meaning
freeze nuclear weapons. Illinois Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign or something like
that. That became— That joined with another group and it was SANE FREEZE. And we
used to, um, uh, be a part of a annual march in—on the near Southside. And then it
became the—then it became the Illinois Peace Action. And it’s still a— It’s not active,
but the, uh, the national organization is active, is very active. The Illinois Peace Action is
still— It would be on your, on the website. And the one who was the, uh, who was very
active in Illinois SANE FREEZE is now the head of Illinois—head of the Peace Action.

MJ: Um, how—how did you stay informed during your time in activism?

BB: At that time, it was not email. There was no email. And I didn’t have email for a
very long anyway. I couldn’t keep up with it. It was always mail and, and I suppose
telephone. And I, when I was, and I, when I worked for Citizens Alert, I— I think I
James

459 became a member of Citizens Alert when—or active Citizens Alert—when I came to this
460 church which was in, which was in October ’87. And then I was active a long time.
461
MJ: So were they—were there mailing lists?
463
BB: Mail, yeah.
465
MJ: Um, so, like you would put your name on something and they would send it you?
467
BB: Yeah.
469
MJ: Okay. Um, did you at all follow the news?
470
BB: Do what?
472
MJ: Did you follow the news?
475
BB: I used to. I don’t anymore, at all, because I’m trying to clear my apartment of all the
477 stuff I collected all the years I was active.
478
MJ: Ah. What sort of attention did the, did the movement, um, receive from Chicago
480 officials?
481
BB: Sort of— What kind of response did, did the—? Well, I— All I know is what— All I
483 know even a little bit about is what happened in this church, because this church turns out
484 for the Peace Actions against war. They, um— I, I don’t go down to Columbia. I’ve
485 never belonged to Christian Peace Makers. But, uh, these people here have accompanied
486 people in Gaza, in Palestine, in, uh, El Salvador. Our minister lived in El Salvador for a
487 while, while they were busy killing, killing, uh, people there. He was—I think he was
488 there when, when— He was the only one that, I think, survived. Uh, and they not only go
489 once; they go more than once. They accompany, uh, immigrants that are coming over the
490 border or— There are a lot, there are a lot of undocumented immigrants—maybe a
491 million in the United States. And they’re, they’re working to help those people so that
492 they don’t get, uh, jailed, um, and, uh, sent out of the country. They— They’re— Right
493 now— I went out two or three times to Broadview, Illinois, and, uh, they bring them all
494 over from—I don’t know if it was just Illinois or the middle states. They bring them to,
495 um—they detain them—and then they bring them down to Broadview, Illinois, put them
496 on a bus, and send them out of the country. Sometimes they keep them for— Well in—
497 The United States is keeping people for months and years that are undocumented, and,
498 uh, it’s wrong what they’re doing. And people here have been active. There are a couple
499 of Sisters. Uh, nuns who, uh, have been taking on the cause of, of, uh, undocumented
500 people. And finally, we weren’t—when we were there, we weren’t allowed to see them at
501 all. They were—We saw them on a bus way out there waiting to go, be deported. But, uh,
502 they, they got (clears throat)—They have, and supporters have gotten them, uh, the
503 authorities, uh (clears throat), people in charge— One of the members of the, of the same
504 church that this nun belongs to, I think, got so they could get onboard, and, uh, the bus,
and, uh, pray with them, and, uh, help with their families. Uh, that meets—I think it’s just once a month, that group. And they, people come from all over. Our pastor always goes there. Uh, and his daughter is the head of an organization, uh, in Chicago, that works with undocumented, undocumented people. This, uh, this is a wonderful church to, to try to help people. People with beyond, almost beyond help as far as the national government is concerned.

MJ: Yeah, what was— Um, was the— How did the national government react, um, do you feel, um, to the anti-apartheid movement?

BB: Anti-apartheid? Well— Krugerrand!

MJ: Krugerrand? Oh.

BB: Krugerrand. That’s why we were picketing the First National Bank. And other cities, too, picketing banks that uh, um, sold the Krugerrand to help the South African government, you know. So, um— Of course that— I don’t, I don’t know whether people were imprisoned or not, but I know— I know that that’s why, what we— We went down— I remember going downtown on a Saturday, when everything is dead, and we, um, picketed the South—the, um, First National Bank. Nobody was down there. No, no, notoriety. No, no, uh—nothing, nothing in the news about it. Nobody was down—just, just the people that were picketing. So, uh, I don’t know whether there was any reaction from the US Government at all. There had to be something, but I don’t remember what it was.

MJ: Okay. Um, so more on the, on the local level, um, how did you react to Harold Washington’s—

BB: React to what?

MJ: Harold Washington’s 1983 election?

BB: Well, it was a big tragedy that, that—and I, still, I still don’t think we have the story of how he died. I, I still don’t. Even though people say that it was natural cause, I don’t, I don’t know. But, um, actually, it’s kind of interesting. The son of the—one of the white, um—probably it was a Republican—uh, when it was rai—uh, was, um, running for mayor—I haven’t heard of him for a long time, but he became an activist for—not for all these white Republican organizations, you know. But he became an activist. I can’t remember what organization it was, but he was—and he lived over in Bridgeport, and I don’t—I haven’t heard of him for years. It was a great, it was a great triumph when Harold Washington was elected.

MJ: What impact did his election have on the anti-apartheid movement?

BB: I don’t really know. I don’t know. One of the meetings I attended, and I don’t remember what it was, Harold Washington was there when he was running for mayor. I
know it was a house meeting and it was over in, probably close to Rogers Park. I remember, I remember that. I don’t remember much about the meeting.

MJ: Um, how did you feel about Desmond Tutu being awarded the Nobel Prize for his work in, in—

BB: Yeah, I don’t, I don’t— I don’t know much. I don’t know much about him.

MJ: Um, how did, how did the movement attempt to involve Chicagoans who maybe weren’t activists in the movement?

BB: For, uh, for “Free South Africa,” you mean?

MJ: Uhn-hunh.

BB: I don’t. I don’t know. I know that—

MJ: I mean you, you talked a bit about, about writing letters—

BB: Yeah. Always writing letters about everything. Um, I don’t know.

MJ: What, what sort of letters did you write?

BB: Always write on behalf of what, whatever, whatever is the, uh, liberal side. I don’t— I’ve written so many letters; I’ve thrown away so many letters.

MJ: What sort of attention did the movement get from the people of Chicago?

BB: Don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know.

MJ: Um, how did you react when you, when you learned that Nelson Mandela had been released from prison?

BB: Well I know one thing that, um, I was invited to the banquet when he was, when he was here. It wasn’t just—it wasn’t just because of me, but there were hundreds of people. And I know we went to a celebration, but I can’t remember anything about it at all.

MJ: Um, did you, did you follow that case a lot?

BB: I don’t think so.

MJ: Um, how did react to the official, legal end of apartheid?

BB: The, the what?

MJ: The official, legal end of apartheid?
BB: Legal end of the apartheid. Well—Oh, I’m glad you asked me that. Uh, I have a picture—It was a Soweto Day Celebration in front of the Art Institute, and has, uh—oh, it’s about this big—and has a lot of the, um, people used to picket pictured. Remind me to give that to you, because it’s up in the, uh, up in the balcony area.

MJ: Sure.

BB: And that—The—When the, um—When the election—When the election was on for Nelson Mandela, people came from a certain region to vote, came to, in Chicago to vote. And, um, I guess that was one of the loveliest days of my life when I, when I saw. And American Friends Service Community—Are you familiar with them, who they are?

MJ: Um—

BB: American Friends Service Community. Quakers.

MJ: Okay.

BB: They, um, they still—they have an office. Their office was on Dearborn, I think it was. I can’t remember where it was then, but they invited people who came to vote—the South Africans who came to vote—they invited them afterwards for coffee or whatever, rest, whatever. But they had—They came from var—several different states, and it was really one of the happiest days of my life. I think it was so beautiful. Um—Can’t, I can’t remember. I know—No, the weather was nice. The people were outside. I don’t remember much more.

MJ: What was it about that day that was so special?

BB: Because everybody was really upbeat. Really positive. Really happy. You know, it was a great, it was a great day.

MJ: So who, um—You said that there were a lot of, um, activists or people who were apart of it in, in this picture—

BB: Yeah, it was about—it was several years after the, uh—it was—I don’t even remember whether we met up in the South African Consul—uh, Consulate or not. I can’t remember. But kind of, one kind of thing that was kind of interesting—Elaine, whom was here in church today, was, uh, had a group of, uh, people who had been active in the, uh, anti-apartheid movement. They were invited—I suppose the South African new government had something to do with that—but everybody who had—not everybody—but a lot of—many people who had been active in other ways than just picketing, other ways than just protesting—I mean, people who had probably given money—And she had them in her apartment which, at that time was on, uh, Lakeshore Drive—And I, and I know I was there. And, um—What was I going to tell you? It was, it was—Oh. One of the people who had worked for the old South African government in the, in the Con—in
Chicago Consulate and was hold-over from the, with the new South African Consulate told me that, uh, the Consul General used to come to the window and look down and he saw me, because I think I was the last one to picket the South African Consulate. Uh, we used to have—there used to be several, several of us. Um, there was—a lot of— There used to be a—going a cir—a long line of people going round and round and round and front at Adams and Michigan, across from the Art Institute. And, um, he told me that the Consul General used to look down and see me and was really kind of afraid of what I was doing. (laughs) And I thought, how can he be afraid? But he said he was. And I think, and he reported to Washington. Um, there was another person down there that came down there at the same time I was. And he’s, uh, he’s still around. I saw him at the, at the, uh, Eight Day Center, um, Good Friday Walk. And, um, he’s a—he’s probably the only black, um—oh, what do I want to say there?—black—I can’t even think of the word, but one who was against government period. He’s—only one in Chicago. And he used to come and distribute his leaflets, his, uh, fliers. And I, I got one the other day, and I didn’t understand all of it. But then the Jewish people— We were near the, where, the, um, Chicago Symphony Friday—uh, Wednesday?—Wednesday, um, atten—concert attenders, uh, would, would pass us and some of the Jewish people thought that this, that, uh, Jer—, that black man and I were working together against, uh, Jews. And, uh, he was anti-Byron—anti-Zionist. He said he’s never been against Jews, but just against, um, the Zionist movement. And so, they would—they really didn’t like me at all. And I realized that I’d have to choose a different day when, uh, he, when the black man wasn’t there. Very nice person, but he’s—that’s his one— It’s like Johnny One-Note. All he has is one note. And, um, he was the one— Actually, he was the one that—one of the three people who helped me move from Prairie Sh— Where in the dickens was it? Prairie Shore. Yeah, from Prairie Shores to, um, where I live now. Really nice person. (clears throat) What’d I start to say? It was— I can’t even remember what it was. Anyway, when I dissociated myself from him at the same time, then it was all right. Um, but he’s been doing this for years. He’s been brief with me; he hasn’t (______??). He— It was four sheets. I don’t know where he gets his money to do all that. I can’t—I can’t remember anything else.

MJ: You said there were times when you were the only person?

BB: Toward the very end of the end—just toward the very end of the end, of the, uh, apartheid. Yeah, I was the only one.

MJ: And why was that, do you think?

BB: I don’t know they diminished. I had— We used to say, uh— We had chants that, that we would say, but I don’t know why it go— why it boiled down. Well, of course one reason I was the only one was I chose a different day from the regular, regular day. Uh, I know one time the Consul General came down, invited me to go up for tea to get warm because it was a cold day. And, um, I said no. No, thank you. Uh, and I know Consul General—I think he introduced me to his sister. And she came down and talked to me. I was very rude. I said to her, “Love the—,” “We love the sinner, but we hate the sin.” (laughs) That was very rude. (laughs)
MJ: And, and, what did she say?

BB: Pardon?

MJ: What did she say?

BB: I don’t— She saw anything— said anything at all.

MJ: So what, what sort of— You had mentioned before about the, about being involved with the undocumented—

BB: With the what?

MJ: Undocumented people.

BB: I’m not really involved with them other than that I attended a couple of the, uh, of the monthly, uh, um, times when they, when they, uh, send people out of the country. They’re on, they’re on the bus and the relatives come down there and there’s a— It’s a— Do you drive? You don’t drive. No. It’s out in Broadview and I don’t drive either. I don’t, I don’t go out anymore, uh, there. But these two sisters, these two nuns, are still very active, um, in getting— being able to speak to people and being involved and I don’t know whether they are involved in doing anything, helping their families or not, that are left. Because sometimes the mothers are sent out— deported. Sometimes the fathers are deported. And it’s a very bad situation. But, uh, Jenny and this, uh, pastor’s daughter is, uh, a Christian— is in the office of the Christian Religious Leadership Network. And she has her own desk and she is actively involved. She’s, she’s accompanied people out in Arizona and she’s a wonderful young woman. I c— I can’t think of anything else.

MJ: Um, well what other type of activism were you involved in per—post-apartheid?

BB: Well very much involved in Citizens Alert, which is, uh, on police accountability. It’s, um— The, the, uh, one who, uh, has been active in it, has been— kept it going for I think thirty-five years now— is about four years younger than I am. And she’s, she’s not able to carry on, uh, and there’s nobody to take over who has any experience, so— Uh, I was active in that. That would have been since I came to this church, which would’ve been eighty—nineteen— I came here in the fall of ’87. So, um, it’s maybe about five years ago I was— I became inactive. And then, of course, I’ve— I was— I’ve been— About ten years, part-time, I worked at the church files which were in boxes and bags and I got them organized into the files and— And that was done about two years ago, and, uh, almost three years ago now. And there’s nobody to take over, but I’m not— I’m not going to continue with that. That took a lot of time and I just don’t have the energy or the time. I have, I have to focus on clearing my apartment now. That’s my main focus. And, of course, I’ve been going— since the, ’91— no, no, no, couldn’t have been ’91— since the United States became involved with Iraq— maybe seven years ago— I’ve been attending the weekly vigils. Except this winter, I did not go down when it was very cold,
but I’ve been going back again. As long as I have energy, I’ll keep the Peace—go down for the Peace Vigils. There’s a Catholic—Eighth Day Center for Justice. And, um, I think there are about twenty Catholic organizations—uh, nuns and priests—who support the Eight Day Center for Justice. But our church had a Station of the Cross. Do you know what a Station of the Cross is? Well, when Jesus went to, was to be executed, they made him carry a cross. And (clears throat), and there were various places where something happened. You might look that up on the, on the, uh, website, on the Eighth Day Center— I—Do I have?—I have an extra book at home. Maybe I could send it to you. But certain things happen. Somebody, uh—Certain actions happen at various places on the way to be executed. And, uh, this is an annual commemoration—Eighth Day Center Good Friday Walk—and annual commemoration of Jesus’, um, execution, and the way to execution.

(Sirens from outside.)

BB: And instead of quoting the Bible, you quote what’s going on today this is still, that is still, um, making—is still evil, that is still evil. And they go down to, they go down to, uh, various government organizations where, where things are going on which are wrong. Like, like for the undocumented or people or organizations that are, are, um, treating people—gays, lesbians, uh, heterosexual, whoever—treating them wrong. And they, and then our church had the second Station of the Cross, I think it was. I went down there as I said, uh, on Good Friday, and then I realized I didn’t have any energy to do it and I went right back home and—first time for years I haven’t gone on the Good Friday Walk. But there are hundreds of people that go on that walk. To commemorate the wrong doings that are against everything that Jesus stood for.

MJ: So, looking back, um, what is your, what is your strongest memory of your involvement with the Chicago—like, with the anti-apartheid movement?

BB: I suppose the picketing. The picketing. That went on, I think, for several years, once a week.

MJ: Is there like a particular moment? Like a particular—

BB: No. It was just that, whatever the weather was—That was the time I didn’t pay any attention to the weather. I went, went every week. But I don’t, uh—I don’t have any special, um—The present—The last Consul General—Let’s see—Land had one party. I think Elaine had two parties at her house for people that were active, who gave money, and for—active in other ways than, than just picketing. And he—And I’ve been to—I was to a banquet where I was invited. I mean there were a lot of people there. And I would be active now except I asked them to take me off the list because I can’t be active anymore. But, uh, when you’re with—I don’t know how it is with you—but when I’m with somebody that, with other people that have the same views, that want justice where there is injustice, that’s, that’s a wonderful, that’s a wonderful experience. But you can’t stay there all the time just with your own, with your people that believe like you because that way nobody else is going to have any change, change in, in what they’re doing—stay
the same old way. But, um, even, even if— But it’s really nice to be with people that you, that you respect. But it’s always a ha—, it’s always a happy experience, you know, when, when you don’t have to say, Well, no you sh—, we shouldn’t be doing this. Because they all say, they all say the same thing: We should be doing better; we’re not doing well. So you don’t have to convince anybody. They’re already convinced. (laughs)

MJ: Yeah.

BB: Like-minded.

MJ: What, what did you learn from your involvement with the movement?

BB: What did I learn with the involvement? Well, I learned one thing, I think, is that, uh, you think you’re alone on some viewpoints and you find that there’re a lot of people that think like you. So you’re not the only one. I think, I think that’s, that’s wonderful. It’s strengthening to know that you don’t have to, uh, that you don’t have to be on the defensive all of the time. That there— It was the same thing Saturday, yesterday. Had nothing to do with apartheid. But, uh, Joe Moore is our Alderman, 49th Ward, and he had (clears throat) a vote, voting—it’s been going on for days— Uh, anybody who was sixteen or over and a resident of the 49th Ward—you had to be sure you were a resident, uh—can vote, could vote in this participatory, um, uh, balloting. Not balloting. Participatory vote. And, um, I thought there might be two or three people on there on Saturday. There were hundreds of people. And he’s, he’s a member of the, our church here. And it was, I know it was very gratifying to him because I—he’s not one of Mayor Dailey’s favorite people. He bucks. He bucks a lot of times. He’s against Mayor Dailey. One time he had the speaker turned off so he couldn’t present his, his view on one vote that was coming up. I, I think it’s good— I think the best thing is if you can find friends who are—uh, to work with who are like-minded. I think that’s the best. That’s the, that’s a, uh, a wonderful thing. Because a lot of people, you— You could go to Cubs Park and not find one soul that would be interested in what you’re interested in. Sox, or whatever it is. Or you could listen to all of the goofy stuff on TV and, and not find anybody that—not find somebody who is serious enough about issues. Our world’s going down to hell in a hand basket and, and you can watch TV or— I have a friend who, whose world is TV. She doesn’t think— I don’t, I don’t know what she thinks or what she doesn’t think, but to my— In my opinion, if she lost TV, she’d lose the whole world. Because her life had been, has been unpleasant in many respects. And so she really drowns herself in, in TV, so she doesn’t have to think about the problems which she has.

MJ: What do you regret—

BB: What do I—?

MJ: What do you regret most about your, your activism?
BB: Well, I think—I think that I haven’t been active long enough. And when I was
(clears throat), when I studying, I studied. I didn’t— I’m not a great—I’m not a scholar,
by any, by any means. So whatever I, whatever I did, I did all right. But whatever I did
wasn’t anything great and it wasn’t easy. So I, uh, I regret that I didn’t start being active
when I was five-years-old. You know. My mother was a teacher; she had to grade papers.
There was— That was her life. And she supported my, my grandmother—her mother, her
sister’s child, her great—her grandfather, her maternal grandfather, and me. And she had
her— She had her, uh— She had hard time during the depression, when everybody
else—when not everybody else—when a lot of people were committing suicide, jumping
out of high buildings. This was in the Depression of ’28, ’29, right in there. We had
overdrawn in our bank account about by maybe ten or fifteen dollars or something. We
didn’t lose any, anything like that. She got paid in gas coupons during the Depression and
we didn’t have a car. She had to sell the coupons and—at a discount. So it wasn’t, it
wasn’t— She did, she did not have an easy life. And her childhood, her young
womanhood was not easy because her parents were divorced and it was hard to get
money from her father to go to, to continue in college. So, uh— Then, I— Then, of
course, I worked part-time when I, when I was in college. I think all four, probably all
four years of college. And it was hard during that time. We had to pay a hundred dollars a
quarter. That was very hard. Now it would be a snap. But then, going to the bursar and
asking to have a delay in payment or something like that, it was, it was hard for me,
because, uh— And he was a member— Eventually, after I was out of college, he became
a member of Hyde Park Baptist, uh, Church. So, uh, but I hate— Please, please, I don’t
want to go to Mr. Cotton. No, it was Mr. Mather I didn’t want to go to. There were two
bursars at the University. Please, please, I don’t want to go to Mr. Mather. Mr. Mather
also became a member of our church after I left. And, oh, I was so glad it was Mr.
Cotton, because he wasn’t sarcastic about not being able to pay, uh, immediately, you
know. So I had other things and I can only, I could only do so much and it wasn’t, it
wasn’t enough. And even after I retired, of course— After I retired and really didn’t work
for either the crook or my nice friend, I don’t know why I wasn’t more active. Then of
course when mother was ill, that was something different. I think, uh, I think these
parents, young parents here that have kids that are active in whatever the parents are
active in, I think that’s, that’s wonderful. My mother didn’t have time to be active in
anything. Just active supporting the family.

MJ: So did, did your mother’s history contribute to your going into activism?

BB: No, I—I don’t know. Except that she was a very good teacher and she was— That
was in the days when the teachers visited the parents, when the kids were, when they’re
not in school and they’re supposed to be. And so she had a very good relationship with
the, uh, with, uh, the parents. Now that’s unheard of, you know, by and large, I think.
Maybe private schools, but not public schools. So she—the kids liked her. She was kind
of hard on them. She didn’t, uh, she didn’t cater to them. And I remember a few years
after she retired that one of her, uh, co-teachers, co-workers said that, uh, when she went
to a school to substitute—she had also, she had also, um, uh, retired—the kids would tell
the teacher what they were going to do. The teacher would tell them what we’re—Today
we’re going to do... No, we aren’t. Today we aren’t going to do that.—kids. And, um,
she wasn’t that kind of teacher. But it was a different school. It wasn’t the same school.

Sometimes I hear kids telling teacher—hearing about kids telling the teacher what they will do and what they will not do. And getting physically—physically aggressive toward the teacher.

MJ: Of what are you most proud?

BB: I’m proud that I get out of bed every day and put my feet on the floor. (laughs)

MJ: That’s great. Ha. Um, do you, do you have a moment from your activism or from your life in general that makes you most proud?

BB: Makes me more proud? I can’t think of anything I’m proud of doing, no. I’m trying to help people. I may get into trouble with it. I have a (clears throat)—I have a friend across the, down the street that told me last May, I guess it was, that she was, her business had been sold and she was, and pay had been cut. She’s a waitress. And, uh, she didn’t know what she was going to do, how to pay the rent or anything. So I’ve been helping her in little ways that way. And, um, she has—she’s going to be—she is sixty-three now, this month—April. No, was it April? March. So she’ll be getting, she will be getting Social Security. So it’ll be a little bit easier for her. They are sexually, and, uh—There was ageism involved, sexism involved, uh, and she does not, um—She’s not, she’s not, timid when she, when they, when they, uh, are doing the wrong thing. She lets them know. But they’ve cut her—not only her pay—but they’ve cut how many days a week she can work. And they give her the worst part of the restaurant where she doesn’t get much in the way of tips. Uh, and, uh, they add—they’ve cut it down to three days a week. And she can hardly pay the rent. And the other person I’ve been helping in minor ways for quite a few years, um—people that are on Public Aid. And I didn’t realize that if you, if people that are on Public Aid get, uh, help from the outside, they are taken off Public Aid. (coughs) Nobody told me until just the end of last month. (coughs) She told me—this one person I’ve been helping for a few months now. But she still wants the help, wants me to help, and I, I want to help, but I don’t want to get her in trouble and I don’t want to get me in trouble. So I got to figure that one out. I don’t know how to do it. She wrote a letter, what she needs. Uh, so I have—That’s one things I have to do when I get home besides doing the laundry. Um, that’s a challenge that I hate to figure out. I don’t want to ask my minister what I should do because I don’t want to say well go—expect him to say well go ahead and do it anyway. I don’t want, I don’t want to put him on the spot. So I know somebody—I think I know two people from the Eight Day Vigil—who, um, worked for Public Aid. And, uh, I haven’t been able to get the rules so I could read them so I’m going to ask them where on the internet should I, uh, should I—I can ask my friend Jackie who was down here asking about eggs. I can ask her, uh, to look up on the Internet what the rules are because she cannot get the—she does not seem to be able to get the rules for Public Aid. And I want to see it in writing before I go ahead. So, that, that is a challenge. I’ve given her quite a little bit of money. She needs—She has to have all of her teeth pulled out including—well, the last teeth that haven’t fallen out or had to be pulled out. There are seven more teeth to go. And, um, she can’t—She’s a subway musician. She plays the violin, she tap dances, and she whistles. Now with her
teeth all out, she has to have dentures. She has to learn how to whistle all over again and
she can’t be working. I said to her, doesn’t whatever you get in the subway—doesn’t that
count? Does Public Aid know about that? And I don’t think so. She got real excited, uh—
I was going to have— My minister’s interested in her, too, and want, wants to—maybe
the church can help. But she got all excited about that because she called him a busybody.
I said, he’s not the busybody. I’m the one that wanted to help—have him help. So she
wrote a letter. I haven’t read it yet. Then she needed eyeglasses. She lost her eyeglasses
three years ago. She couldn’t read anything. She couldn’t read musician—uh, music—
and she has a piano at home. I talked to her the other day. Can you read music, your
music now? She said well glasses are wonderful. So that was one thing. I don’t know
whether, uh, I’m supposed to do that or not, but I don’t think I’m going to find out. I
don’t think I’m going to inquire. Um, so those are main things. One of the, one of the
people in the Citizens Alert where I volunteered for years, uh, were let go by the
Jewish—Jewish—Jewish— Oh, what do they call it? It’s an organization, places people
in, in other, in non-profit organizations for work. And she’s worked there about four
years. And now they let her go, need somebody else to have, have a chance to do it. She
hasn’t got a job yet. So she hasn’t got a job. She’s seventy. Seventy-something-or-other.
And I, I did help her a little bit, but haven’t continued. She has a family. The other two
people I’m helping now have no families, no— No I thought—I keep hearing kids. I,
uh—
[Loud voices in the background as a family enters the kitchen next to the fellowship area
of the church where the interview is being held.]
BB: He works on recycling. He and his wife and, uh, their son work on recycling every
Sunday after, after church. Because this is a, this is a—during the week, this is a Jewish
Daycare Center. And they have recycling—
MJ: Okay.
BB: Need to be done. Needs to be done.
[Following the interview, Ms. Benson referred to the members of the family of volunteers
as “the real activists”.]
BB: I guess. I guess that’s all I can think of.
MJ: Um, what— What lasting impact would you say being a part of the anti-apartheid
movement has had on you?
BB: Has had on me? Well, I think— Again, I think it’s a blessing to know there are other
people who have the same ideas and not everybody is nuts on that subject, you know.
MJ: So just the, the sense that, that there are others?
BB: Yeah, a personal— It’s comforting to know that when you take a stand that a lot of
other people won’t take a stand—that they’re all out there. It’s like yesterday. Yesterday,
that great big school. I don’t know that you’ve seen it or not. Probably not. You haven’t
been out as far as, uh— Oh, what’s—? Uh, well it’s beyond south—north of Devon.
You— Have you ever been north of Devon? No. Well, it’s a big, it was a big shopping
mall. It was a huge shopping mall. It was closed. All these little businesses had to go
elsewhere to find, find a place. I don’t know what they did. I felt bad about that. But now
it’s a school. And lovely school. It’s a long, long building. And that’s where the
participatory voting took place yesterday. For all the 49th Ward. Whether they were
registered voters, whether they were citizens, whether they were— They were just, had to
be old enough and res—, sixteen and above and residents of the 49th Ward. So a lot of
people— It was a lovely occasion. I know Joe was really please—the alderman. So there
are happy occasions, and those you do remember. Now, he—the next vote’s coming up
on the fourteenth. And this is a vote that only citizens, uh, of Chicago can vote—to close
the, uh, coal, the coal plants on the, uh, think it’s south, southwest side that produce so
much pollution. And uh, and of course, the organiza—the, uh—the companies, the
industry are all on one side. And the people that are breathing the pollution are on the
other side. And they don’t, they don’t have, uh, a lot of money. People don’t want to be,
don’t want to be sickened and killed by air pollution. Not the ones that have the money.
The ones that are making the pollution are the ones that have plenty of money. And
money is what rules our country now. So we’ll see what, how that comes out. I don’t
know whether I’ll go down there or not. Probably not. I need to—I need to save my
energy so that I—by December 14th of this year—I can have everything cleared out,
including books and files, everything cleared out of my apartment. December 14th is my
date, so I have to concentrate on that.

MJ: Um, do you think you’ll ever stop being an activist?

BB: Well, the day I die. (laughs) But I, I’m not really, I’m really not an activist now. I’m
really not. I mean, I do little things. But I can’t do anything, can’t do anything
consistently. I go down to a vigil one hour a week, and—if it isn’t too cold. I’m through
upstairs, all I can do with the files. If nobody takes over, nobody takes over. That’s why
every—, I think, one of the main reasons why we got the mess in the first place was that
everybody’s an activist. And nobody has time to do anything silly like keeping the files.
Except when the hundredth anniversary comes along, which is this year for this church.
Then the files become very useful. But after the hundredth anniversary, you might have
to wait until the hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary before the files get sorted out
again. (laughs)

MJ: Well, is there anything else you wanted to add for the interview?

BB: Are you an activist?

MJ: Um—
BB: Will you be when you get out of school and don’t have all the books and papers to do?

MJ: I think—I think I would love that.

BB: Yeah.

MJ: I mean—

BB: Yeah.

MJ: Yeah.

BB: And I think that’s what is inspiring—I think that’s what is inspiring. Is that Jackie?

[Ms. Benson’s friend Jackie passes through the room with two small dogs.]

BB: Oh, yeah, that’s Jackie. With her two babies.

MJ: Ha.

BB: Um, I think that that’s what is hopeful and inspiring. Because the city budget—

down. Everything—down. I don’t know whether they have a saying for this time, kind of life or not—this kind, time of life or not. But during the war, you go in—during World War II—you go into the store and, Do you have such-and-such. No we don’t have—Did you know there’s a war going on!? So I haven’t heard anything similar to that. But, um, I know that our, our public facilities, our library—all the things that are useful and helpful to citizens, uh, are not getting the funding. They, they’re cutting down. They don’t know how much money they’re going to be getting. And I think, I think that—One of, one of the things that I think is, I will always remember, I hope, if I always remember everything—anything, uh, anything. Uh, our minister used to say that you don’t do something because you expect something out of it, uh, personally. You don’t do things because—You do things because they should be done, not because you’re expecting anything out of it, any reward, anything special. You don’t do things because you know it’s going to win, because a lot of times you don’t know if what you want to do is going to win. Possibly won’t win. But you still go ahead and do it.

MJ: Is that what you lived by for all these years?

BB: Sorry?

MJ: Is that what you’ve lived for all these years?

BB: Oh, I don’t, I don’t know. I’m not consistently living by anything. But, um, anyways, I think that’s a hopeful kind of thing. That when you write a letter to some schnuck—some white, Republican schnuck—(laughs) They aren’t all bad, right? We had a, we had...
a wonderful, uh— When I lived in Prairie Shores, we had, uh, Susan Catania who was a
Republican representative. Wonderful person. Now that does—it sound like an
oxymoron. But she was great. But, uh, most of the things the Republicans are doing these
days are not helpful. And there are a lot of Democrats that are siding with— That’s why
we’re in a mess now. We have the Democrats check their spines in the checkroom, you
know. So it isn’t a lot— I— One, yeah, one thing I regret the most, probably, is that I
didn’t start out voting for the Green Party. But Joe, Joe is Democrat. He isn’t always—I
haven’t always liked what he did. But he’s more appropriate than some of the Democrats.
Jankowski is, uh, very much pro-Israel. She votes great on other things. But as far as
funding Israel, she’s, she’s great on that. And I very— In fact, I’ve stopped giving,
making my little contributions to her because I don’t like— But then you get a
Republican who couldn’t do anything right, you know, running against her, so devil in
the deep blue sea. I mean, voting Green Party may, may be fine if the world’s still around
in, uh, a few years. Maybe people will say, oh there’s a Green Party? Oh, I didn’t know
that. Maybe start voting for the Green Party. But, uh, I, I should have been doing that a
long time ago. But the thing that amazes me is that there are still people like that goofy
Alaskan governor that (laughs), that people, uh, approve of and are, and are enthusiastic
about. I— I don’t understand. And even Bush, if we’re with Bush— And I, and one of
the things that I’ve been doing for years—and I’ll never know whether it’s—until I can, if
I’m up, up high and can look down at the quilt or the jigsaw puzzle or whatever it is—
Oh, yeah. Oh, that’s a piece that I put in. But I’ll, I’ll never know. But I’ve been writing,
uh— Arkansas tomorrow has an execution coming up. And, uh, I write the governors. I
have been doing it until we can— The office— Citizen’s Alert, where I, where I could,
uh, fax my letters, is closed. And I can’t get any information because I don’t have
internet. Uh—

[An unclear distraction.]

BB: Who’s going down by Cain? I don’t know who that is. —Um, I used to be able to get
information on the Internet, but a lot of times, the National Coalition to Abolish the
Death Penalty does not have information on these people. They used to have, but they
don’t give it anymore. So if there are mitigating circumstances—like he was brought up
by parents that were physically abusive, or brought up in a household where drugs were
being, drugs that were being, uh, used, and, uh, where he, uh, he had—he, usually he—
ran away because things were so miserable at home. And he, and he starts, uh, doing the
wrong things and there’s nobody there to stand up for him. Or he gets hurt in Iraq. He
gets to, he gets, he learned how to— The big thing in the Army is to kill, kill, kill. That’s
what they’re trained for, not— So, it means he’s become—sometimes, often—he
becomes abusive. He kills. He continues killing because he’s, that’s what he’s learned.
Then he goes to death row. Then he gets executed. I mean, uh, and there’s no excuse for
it. No excuse for it. He’s horrible. He’s mean. He’s terrible. He’s done bad things. Out.
Off with his head. And there’s no, um— The mitigating circumstances— Like with
Governor Nixon in, uh, Missouri— He’s never seen anybody on death row that he didn’t
want to kill. I mean, there— I think, and I can’t help but think that there’s a, that there’s a
pleasure, there’s a satisfaction in being able to, legally, to kill people. I, I can’t—I mean,
there, there— People, uh— The board to pardon paroles in Texas never meet. They never
meet together. How they get, come to come to their decisions from various parts of
Texas, whether one person says this is what we’re going to do and they all say, Yes, we,
he should be executed—Texas is great on executions. I think Arkansas is not good. Um,
Missouri’s not good. I had a friend on death row in Missouri, and um—He used, I used
to send him money. I’d say—And then he had cancer of the throat. And I said, I didn’t
send money to you to smoke. Well, at the latter part of his life, he was using cigarettes to
barter people to get other things done. And that’s a no-no. You don’t do that in, in—And
when I’d phone to find out how his, about his treatment—You cut me off whenever you
want to, because I know it’s a long time.

MJ: No, no. You’re fine.

BB: Um, and I’d talk to somebody on the nursing staff or medical unit and he’d say,
Well, you should look at what he’s been buying. He’s been buying cigarettes. I couldn’t
say, Well he doesn’t smoke anymore. And then he got, uh, he got throat cancer. And, uh,
it so happened in Missouri that the per—, the doctor who was in charge of, of the lethal
dosage for the people who were to be executed, uh, had something wrong. I don’t—
something wrong with his eyes. He didn’t always use a, use the same lethal dosage. He’d
been on that—He’d been doing that, I think, for eighteen years. And nobody—The
governor apparently knew it, about it. Other people in charge apparently knew. But
somehow it got out that, uh, he was, he was not doing, giving the dosage that was
prescribed. Not that that was any better. But he didn’t, he really didn’t have—There was
nobody in charge. So all these people, all these people being killed and possibly with pain
that they should nev—, they never should have had. I mean, it’s bad. There’s no such
ting as a kind execution. Uh, kind, and gentle, and humane. There’s no such thing. Uh,
so, I, I just—I can see people around, uh, in, in ancient days—early, early days of so-
called civilization—sitting around a bonfire. And some interloper comes along and they
all chase after him with clubs and beat him to death. And that’s what we’re doing now.
These are white men sitting around at the table, and maybe women. I saw a, uh—I saw a,
uh, documentary on what happens up at Tulsie where my friend was. And, uh, right up to
the time of the execution, I—Sad, sad, sad. But, uh, I think it’s nice—dressed nicely and
say, He is one to be killed. I think it’s somebody nicely—Must give them pleasure. He’s
bad. He’s no good. Kill him. Any sol—Anything that we have, any big problem in the
nation (human??)—It’s their fault. They have the gold. They have the resources. They
have no right to them. We are the ones that need them. So we get all our brave young
men who can’t find jobs and put them in the Army. And, uh, they aren’t treated
(______??) maybe. Or they learn their killing vocation too well. They did that and they
come back and they can’t be perfect citizens anymore. Maybe they weren’t perfect
citizens before they left, but when they come back, they’re not perfect citizens. So,
mitigating circumstances. Who cares about mitigating circumstances? No pity. But I, I
think that that’s what our civilization is. And we’re sitting around a table instead of a
bonfire and deciding who is worthy to live and who is not worthy to live. I am worthy to
live. You are not. You’ve done bad things. The fact that people are CEOs, are making
millions of dollars off of, off of munitions, off of whatever they manufacture, you know.
Uh, that’s okay. That’s okay for them. It’s okay for CEOs to earn ten, fifteen, twenty,
however many times their employees earn—much money, I mean. I, I—So I write
letters. I don’t know whether it does any good or not. I think it, I think it’s, they have a
yes column and a no column. Yes, execute him. Save him. No. Wastebasket. That’s the
end of my sermon.
MJ: That’s great. Well, I just want to thank you for, for doing this interview.
BB: Well I hope you, hope you can make something out of that mess.
MJ: No, it’s been very fantastic.
BB: And I want to give you that picture before we go.
MJ: Okay.
BB: Yeah.