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Interview with George Schmidt

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MELENA NICHOLSON: Alright, so, my name is Melena Nicholson, with Columbia College and this is George Schmidt. Today is Friday, April 16 and we are at the Burgundy Restaurant, here in Chicago and – what was your years of activism, probably, about –

GEORGE SCHMIDT: Probably, uh the most focused was between 1975 and the late 1980’s. I was part of a lot of other things I was doing. By 1975 I had been active in what was called the GI movement and military counseling for almost seven years. And in 1975 we started the teachers news paper, Substance, after some of us came back teaching in Chicago Public Schools. Um, after the end of the Vietnam War a large number of us continued doing other types of anti-imperialist work and one of the most dramatic examples of white western imperialism on the planet was apartheid in South Africa, along with the other white supremacists governments in the Southern part of Africa. We also worked with uh, ZANU [Zimbabwe African National Union], one of the two liberation groups in Zimbabwe which at that time was called Rhodesia. And we worked with people in Angola, Mozambique, and few other places in that part of the world. But it grew out of the way in which we came together as a movement as a result of the Vietnam War and the experiences of a lot of people. Especially working class Americans, black and white, uh, in the face in that imperialist monstrosity. So, I’d say roughly form 1975 to the late 80’s overlapping from the end of the GI movement and from the time Substance became very viable in the Chicago Public Schools I was also doing these other, other activities. It wasn’t limited to Africa. And probably in 1979 we hosted a teacher from El Salvador who was part of the resistance there in a, uh, couple of events against the tyranny in El Salvador at the time. At that point for example, just the memory has uh, over 200 teachers have been murdered at their desk spots in El Salvador, um, it was imperative Regan’s uh, and the Jimmy Carter, in the beginning of Reagan’s counter revolution. But, um, we focused on, Substance focused on the anti-apartheid divestiture movement, because the Chicago’s teacher’s pension fund is one of the largest pension funds in, in the mid-west. And there were investments that were made in those days through the pension fund that were in corporations that were doing business in South Africa. So, we were part of the group with the Chicago’s Teachers Union that demanded that our trustees on the pension fund oppose them, and it required a couple different layers of work. The first would be just identifying companies that actually had direct corporate activities in South Africa, like factories –

GS: -- or direct investments. But then the other kind was the indirect activities, you know, where they were in some kind of supply train. I think we are going to have to go someplace else and I know where if you want to?

MN: Uh, yeah. I’m just going to stop the tape real quick.

GS: Okay.

FILE STE-001

GS: And we are taking advantage of the fact that it is a beautiful spring day.
MN: Yes we are. We are outside here. Okay and we’re just going to start this tape over. So, my
name is Melena Nicholson from Columbia College. And this is – I’m here with George Schmidt.
And that’s George N. Schmidt?

GS: N. yeah, for Neil, N-E-I-L, and Schmidt, the usual way, S-C-H-M-I-D-T.

MN: Okay. Today’s April 16, 2010. And we are at his home on the front porch.

GS: Yeah, this is the home and this is also the office of Substance.

MN: (laughs) Home and office of Substance. And your years of anti-apartheid activism?

GS: I’d say roughly 1975 to 1980’s.

MN: Okay and when were you born?

GS: I was born in 1946.

MN: Where?

GS: Uh, Elizabeth New Jersey.

MN: And where were you raised?

GS: I was raised in Elizabeth, Lyndon, and Newark, New Jersey. Uh, I went to college in 1964,
and came to college in Chicago in 1966 at the University of Chicago. And I have been here ever
since.

MN: Kay, and your father’s place of birth?

GS: My father was born Elizabeth, New Jersey.

MN: And, when was he born?

GS: He was born in 1917.

MN: And where was your mother born?

GS: My mother was uh, from Elizabeth, New Jersey and she was born in 1919.

MN: Okay, and what’s your earliest memory?

GS: [Gives a look]

MN: (laughs)

GS: Um, my memories don’t begin until high school.

MN: Really?

GS: Yeah, my mother was in the army during World War II and she had a real bad war. She was
stationed on Okinawa during the entire battle. So she came home with what we now call post
traumatic stress disorder. And it affected our family life. Although, it wasn’t articulated at the
time, but part of the problem I later realized she had was uh, she was a nurse in the first field
hospital on the Okinawa Island, during the entire battle from April through August, September,
1945. And no one was crediting – this is pretty important for our family history too – no one was
crediting woman with having been in combat, at that time in history. You know, now there are
woman who experience combat in the United States Armed forces, but a nurse in a field hospital,
she was in the evacuation hospital. So [she saw] more of the actual results of combat than
almost anybody else. And she did it for six months, so she came back a little bit – She was a
good mother and did good things but there were few instances in our childhood when my – I
didn’t have childhood memories. Probably you know we went to the swimming pool with her
and stuff, but, uh, my memories begin after about 8\textsuperscript{th} grade. Just like going to high school, trying
to play baseball and work for a living, those usual things. Um –

MN: So, you didn’t–

GS: that’s it –

MN: – see much of your mother before that?

GS: Oh I saw her all the time.

MN: Okay

GS: She was around, uh; she just slowly had greater and greater problems.

MN: Okay

GS: You know between, uh, I mean I was the first of four children. My mom and dad were in –
my dad was in the army before Pearl Harbor. He was part of the 1940 draft and, um, so they
traveled around the country, where he was garrison during most of World War II because he was
already a trained soldier. And, they put off having children even though they had this wonderful
love and had this wonderful love up to 1940. They put off having children because they didn’t
think they’d both come back from the war. But when they did, they got right to work so I was
born, like, ten months after they were reunited.

MN: Okay

GS: My Dad was – ended his war in Europe in June 1945 in Austria, and then was back in the
United States by the summer, and they were planning to send him to, to the Pacific for the
invasion of Japan. The Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings ended that necessity, so he
was – he waited in New Jersey for my mom to get home, but my mom was on the other side of
the Pacific Ocean in Okinawa and she didn’t get home for an extra four months. There was like a
traffic jam in the middle of the Pacific. And also, I found out later the United States Government
was trying to maneuver, uh, American soldiers into China. But there were huge protests against
that in the Philippines, and Burma, and India and other places where US soldiers were stationed.
But if some parts of American ruling class had had their way the United States would have been
at war with the communists in China and with the Soviet Union by the end of 1945. Instead, you
know everybody got home, because they said, okay we beat the Japa– the empire of Japan, we
beat the Nazis. Let’s all get home. So my parents had to wait though a few months. They got
back in December 1945 and I was born in September 1946. They stored it all up. They had three
other kids after that.
MN: So you’re the oldest?
GS: Great love story. Yeah, I’m the oldest of four.
MN: Okay. What, what sort of rules did they have for you? You know, growing up.
GS: I think the most important rule they had was, be honest, and don’t be prejudice, except
against the Japanese.
MN: (laughs)
GS: My mother had seen too much of what Japanese militarism did –
MN: Yeah.
GS: -- on Okinawa. And, um, you know she would, she would literally, she would discipline you
if you were any kind of racist about black people in the United States or any stuff like that. But,
she, she considered the Japanese just a special kind of horrible people because of the war in the
Pacific.
MN: Did she ever change her mind?
GS: No.
MN: No.
GS: Um –
MN: Did that, I mean you got around that –
GS: Well, yeah, but, it’s a generational thing, you know, I didn’t see what she had to see but, in –
for example in the stories from the field hospitals where the American nurses and doctors had to
treat first the American wounded the Okinawans, then the Japanese. The Okinawans are a
separate people from Japan and they were colonized by Japan and they were treated as an
inferior race by the Japanese. Well, some of the Japanese soldiers who were brought in wounded
actually blew up the nurses who were trying to – you know, they’d come in on a gurney with a
hand grenade underneath them, when you turned them over the hand grenade underneath them
would explode. Because they were trained to never surrender.
MN: And, did your mom –
GS: My mom knew that kind of stuff, had stories about that kind of stuff, and had seen it. Um,
you know the history of the battle of Okinawa is just being told now in that new HBO series the
Pacific. Because the Okinawa was the end of the line and that’s where the United States decided
if there was going to be an invasion there would be a million casualties, because the Japanese on
Okinawa were so fanatical. There were two instances that stood out that I was told about. One
the Japanese elementary school teachers had their kids as young as third grade age, prepare
bamboo spears which they used to charge the American infantry lines at sunset one day. The
Americans had to machine gun eight and nine year olds who were coming at them with these sharpened sticks. The other one was that the Japanese nurses and other Japanese civilians on the island actually committed suicide by jumping off a cliff on the end of the island with their own children and families. Rather than surrender to the United States.

MN: Wow.

GS: So, you know, the horror of what was sort of there, we weren’t getting a lot of it from my mother. My dad was in the 44th infantry division, and his war he told me later during Vietnam, that they were in the line, longer, more days in the European war than any other division in the United States Army. And the line is that – they call it the thin red line, because it goes all the way back to ancient history, it’s the place where all the blood and horror takes place in a war.

MN: Yeah.

GS: You know the – I meant the war is just a big, a big push of, you know, you push a bunch of people forward until they come up against each other and then they do all this horrible stuff. Whether it’s the Iliad and the Odyssey or World War II or today in Afghanistan and all the blood is in that thin red line. And that’s where he and his people he was with, in the infantry, uh, were in France, Germany and Austria, they were in the – he said they were in the line for two-hundred and forty-four days. Anybody who said that, who knew what that meant assumed he was knowledgeable. But I use to ask him how he got a, he got a bronze star for how he was in a combat. He was only an enlisted man. He was a sergeant. And I kept asking him when I was a kid, you know, because that’s pretty cool that you were a hero, somebody gave you this medal for doing something heroic. And we were raised during the John Wayne years. But he always discouraged that. He said, he never would tell us what, what happened. He just said one night I got lost and I got very lucky. He brought home two German bayonets and he never told me how he got them.

MN: Never?

GS: But one of his brothers told me he took them off the people that were carrying them. And in order to take those you probably had to kill the person who was holding them. But he never talked about that. And then later when he was very old, he blew his top one time. He always really said how you had to be very accurate about history.

MN: Yeah.

GS: And there was a story in the New York Times about how this, uh, black, uh, regiment in Europe had liberated one of those smaller Nazi death camps in Southern Germany. And, uh, you know, that there was this whole to-do in the 1990’s about how the history wasn’t you know getting told. And a bunch of people said that they were in – and I, you know, he said that’s not true, your generation is messing up the whole history. And I said how do you know it’s not true. And he said, because I drove the first Jeep that went into that place with the 114th regiment, of the 44th division, because that day I was driving the Kernel in command of the regiment. And I said, so you were the first American into this death camp. And he said yes. And I said what do you remember about it most? He said the smell; the smell and the silence. And you know, he was finally talking about something at the end of his life that was actually a part of his war. And I said why didn’t you ever tell me or the rest of the family this story before? He was like seventy-
four years old. And he said, because there’s some evil that words can’t describe. And then he stopped. And, and he said just make sure when you do — when somebody tries to tell you what the history is you always try to be as honest as possible about it.

MN: right.

GS: Because they’ll be people who come around and they’ll be sure to tell you all kinds of bull shit and he did use words like bull shit, although he never used the F word after he got out of the army he told me. So that’s, that’s where we came from and that’s how they trained us. And I remember one instance, that uh, in 1952 or ’53, we got our first television.

MN: Yeah.

GS: And we had one of the first T.V.’s. It was one of those old black and white things. It was about ten inches, on the side. And he and his buddies, he use to work in the post office after the war, they use to come over to watch baseball. And we were in Northern New Jersey, so we’d get all three New York teams. There were the Dodgers, Giants and Yankees and he was a Yankee fan, but we watched the Dodgers. And Jackie Robinson was playing for the Dodgers.

MN: Yeah.

GS: The Yankees still didn’t have any black players in the early 50’s. And, and I remember watching a game with him and some of these men that he had been in the war with and stuff. And this one guy started cheering Jackie Robinson when he was stealing a base and heading for home. He says go black jack, boy can that nigger run. You know, in our living room and my father just looked at me and grabbed me, because he had done you know, this whole thing with us and never used that word and never talked that way. And later I said, what’s with this? And he said, you know, these are good men and they’re brave men but they’re never going to understand about this. That’s pretty cool way to grow up.

MN: So —

GS: (laughs)

MN: -- you would say your parents had a lot of influence on you growing up.

GS: Yeah. I mean in fact if, uh, if we used the F word, they would immediately discipline us in the old fashion way. And we would never think about calling the Department of Family Services. I mean I learned it by playing at a construction site one day, and came home, and I’d never forget this. This is a memory from probably elementary school. I just said it at dinner and my mother took the mash potatoes, which were pretty hot and pushed them in my face.

MN: Oh, no (laughing).

GS: Don’t ever say that word again. And later my dad told me, that word is so loaded it’s a word of violence, it’s a word that you hear too much.

MN: This is the F word?

[Noise from a plane going over head]
GS: Yeah, the F word and war. It’s loaded with violence. It’s different from all the other words. And, and it’s true. Um, so they taught us that. They taught us that prejudice was a horrible thing, unless you hated the Japanese because of what they did not because of who they were. Well that was my mother. My father always told me my mother was a lovely person, but that was, that was different. You know, she had seen what the Japanese did. Well he couldn’t hate the Germans because he was a German-American third generation. His father had been a Nazi of sorts. In northern New Jersey and New York, in that part of the United States a lot of the Germans supported Hitler in those days. But my dad and his whole generation opposed the Nazis.

MN: yeah.

GS: So it was that kind of complicated nuanced reality that you had to be honest about. It was a good way to learn.

MN: And – as you grew up, did the rules ever change? I mean, when did you –

GS: Not –

MN: When did you parents start telling you more about their experiences?

GS: Well, my mother – as my mother unraveled more, she started going into delusions, mysticisms, and hard core Catholic visions. And I didn’t experience it as much as my siblings. Because I just sort of tuned it out after a couple of traumatic experiences with her. But uh, she was always interpreting it symbolically, from the view of the Bible. So it got less and less connected to reality. And I had to ask other people what the reality was because the only thing you could be sure of, for that generation was if you talked about the war and asked questions honestly, like you wanted honest answers. There were, there were just certain places where, people would you know, they would cringe, you know if you just said the word. One of them was Bastogne, anybody who was actually there for the so-called Battle of the Bulge, never was able to get warm again during cold weather. Because it was so cold, and there was so much death. Um, that was winter of 1944, ’45. Another was Okinawa. Uh, another was Guadalcanal. Some of the Pacific islands that was just so horrifying, that anybody who was actually there, actually on the island was considered like special, you know, that they were still alive, and that they had been there. And so my, you know when I talked to people I’d ask them, you know my mother was on Okinawa. And they’d say she couldn’t have been. I said yes, she was with the evacuation hospital. And they’d say, oh, shit. Um, and there was a sign about that. That indicates sort of the complexity of all this stuff. I don’t think my mother ever went to the washroom after dark, in her life, without somebody with her. She would instead use some sort of device if she had to; because I was told on the island the nurses, there were so few white woman on the island. They were all nurses and they were all in the same place. If they went out after dark, they’d probably be raped, by the American soldiers. Because the American soldiers knew they were going to be dead the next day. So everybody was kind of crazy. So you either had somebody who was going to be your carrying a gun friend.

MN: uh-huh

GS: Or you held it all night. That’s one of the experiences of Okinawa. That was probably unique and transferred into our family. But we were taught by all of them that war was horrible, at the same time it’s necessary.
MN: Yeah.

GS: If the United States didn’t defeat Nazi-Germany and the empire of Japan, the world would have been a lot worse, even though the American empire has got some pretty nasty quarters. But that’s the complexity of the last hundred years.

MN: Now you mentioned, uh, Catholics, Cath – Catholics, your mother was Catholic?

GS: My mother was Catholic, we were raised Catholics.

MN: Okay. And what, what role do you think that had on you?

GS: Well, when it got sorted out, the you know, the Catholic Church, in the 1960’s, really went through some changes, and a lot of the priests and nuns that I knew I suspect they wound up ex-priests and nuns, by the 70’s. But I was out of the church by then. Um, you know, that was Vatican too, and the whole idea of the social gospel. The whole thing that the current Nazi Pope, you know he was fighting against from the time he became the head of the thing for the protection of the faith, [sounds from trucks moving on the street near us] Ratzinger, was a real, a real nasty person the whole time. But, that um, side of catholic theology, liberation theology in South America, um, you know social gospel in the United States, and all that stuff was real present. And like, like in Faust, where Faust, Joseph Faust, talks about two souls or in my own breast, you know one’s pulling toward the heavens the other, the other to the darkest side of reality. Well that’s what the Catholic Church went through. Now the Catholic Church has a pope I guessed it earned after twenty-five years of clawing its way back up to dismal reaction. Um, but the side that I respected as I was leaving belief, um was the side of these people who were social activists, who were really committed to the, to you know, to trying to establish justice and work for justice. A lot of them were either ex-communicated or silenced. You know the theologians who wrote it the priests who did it in South America. The most traumatic is like – Arch Bishop Romero in El Salvador was murdered by the right wingers. But there were hundreds and thousands of others in the clergy and elsewhere you got to respect incredible (??). But by mid 1960’s I couldn’t, I couldn’t devote any interest in the church it was just, it was too messed up and it was easier and better to just move forward and on those things, and respect the people who were doing it from the point of view of religion.

MN: Right. So uh, how did you get exposed to things like social – socialism and – was it your parents or school? Or –

GS: All of the above. I mean our parents encouraged us to read a lot.

MN: Okay.

GS: And um, you know, my dad especially, and I don’t know how he did this but, he, he had studied every war I ever wanted to know about. Uh [there] was a legend in our family that he had the highest IQ in the 114th infantry regiment, which could be true, I don’t know, whether it matters because he was a working class guy.

MN: yeah.

GS: And he taught you also that, that doesn’t do you any good unless you have a lot of money.
MN: Yeah.

GS: SO he couldn’t go to college but he had insisted that we read all the time and try to come to terms with that and he’d talk about it. And he really focused on the Holocaust. But it wasn’t called the Holocaust back then. You know, he had seen it first hand, but it didn’t have a name until the 60’s. And he was just sort of moving into saying try to figure out how a country as civilized as Germany could do that, because if you can understand that paradox, you’ll know it’s always going to be hard to do good, to do the right thing. And then in the 60’s when I got to Chicago one of my, uh, apartments, I had three roommates who were Zionists. Um, and I was officiated but we got along fine. But all of them had a copy of the book, that is now famous, it just got written up again in the nation, Raul Hilberg’s, *The Destruction of the European Jews*. That was the book that actually first articulated the history of the Holocaust, and the meticulousness which with government had created that roads to those camps my father had driven into in 1945. And uh, I read that. And you know people talked about it. And these guys, one of them is a professor in Tel Aviv now, in Israel, we haven’t been in touch now in years, because you know I swung way over to the left and you can’t be a Zionist professor and have too many of the friends who do the things I do. But he’s a, we got in touch once, and we don’t even talk about it. That generation decided that never again would Jews be unarmed, and just do what Hilberg, and Hannah Arendt and other people said happened, you know, was just going quietly you know, to annihilation. And at least I can understand Israel, even when I disagree with it because of that. Um, but my dad was the one who encouraged us to think through all that stuff. He also made it impossible for us to, to be pacifists.

MN: Yeah.

GS: And that caused me an interesting problem because by the time I was confronting Vietnam I had a student deferment. And I decided I was going to apply for conscientious objector but I wasn’t a Pacifist. Well, I had to explain that to my draft board down in Elizabeth, New Jersey. MN: (laugh)

GS: You know because a conscientious objector usually is supposed to be a Pacifist. And so I went. We had a long conversation. Then the draft board basically said okay, you’re a conscientious objector. But, the reason was, I was the first one Elizabeth, New Jersey. Uh, it wasn’t like Hadeshberry (??), or Berkeley, or probably Harvard Yard, where you could just sort of do that and everybody’d understood. Everybody at my draft board knew my father, my mother, or one of my uncles. If you go to Elizabeth, New Jersey – are you in? [Looking down to the recorder] no? Are you in? You good? –

MN: Yeah.

GS: If you go to Elizabeth, New Jersey and you go to the old St. Michael’s School, which is what they call down the port off U.S. Highway One between Highway One and the turn pike. Um, the St. Michal’s Church across the street is the school, and in front of the school, which isn’t a school anymore, there’s a plaque, [with] the names of everybody who served in World War II, the largest number is Schmidt’s, including my mother.

MN: Really?
GS: So, you know it’s like, well it’s hard – hard core Germans but they all fought against Nazi. And so everybody on the draft board knew everybody in my family and their big question was how did you become a commie? I says, well I’m not quite a communist, but yeah I got to tell you this Vietnam War, no. So we had a two hour discussion about the Vietnam War, and then they said – You know they were actually reading the regulations, because I was the first person to apply for C.O. status. And I’m sitting there with all these World War II veterans and government bureaucrats on the draft board; everybody had to go through the draft in those days. And they said to me, Okay, okay we’ll take you on your version that you can be a conscientious objector even though you would have probably fought like your father did in World War II. I said you know, Vietnam is my existential moment about it. And they said okay now, given that, do you want to be a non-combatant military service or do you want to be a civilian alternative service? – Because there were two categories. And I said I don’t care. I’m just not going to kill anybody for this war. Because the issue my parents taught me was, you go in the army you’re going to wind up killing people, especially in the infantry and that’s what you’re doing. So the war better be a good idea because killing people is pretty–

MN: Right.

GS: Something you have to think through, not just, well you know. They said you mean you’d go in the army even if you felt this. I said, yeah, but I wouldn’t carry a weapon or kill people.

MN: (laugh)

GS: They said wait a minute. You’ve got all these objections about the war but you want us to put you in the army so you can – you – you’re not going to shut up are you? I said no. they said okay you can do civilian alternative service. We are having enough of a time figuring out how we got you in the first place. The last thing we want to do is put you in the army and have you come back home here. So that’s how it happened. But those, you know there were more cities like Elizabeth, New Jersey, than there were places where the anti-war movement was a comfortable way to get, you know, to get around.

MN: So what did you do in the Civilian S –?

GS: I didn’t. I was teaching high school in Chicago. They called me for alternative service, and they told me to report to a uh, a mental hospital in Southern New Jersey –

MN: Uh-huh.

GS: – where I’d become an orderly and I wrote them back and I said, I’m teaching at DuSable, one of the most segregated and impoverished high schools in the world. You know, it was right next to the old Robert’s (??). And I’d like you to tell me how this can’t be the acceptable alternative service as a, you know, as a, civilian activity. And then they were suppose to get back to me on it, you know, I got one letter back saying, we are considering your thing, and I sent them pictures of DuSable.

MN: Uh-huh.
GS: It was a hundred percent black, a hundred percent poor kids. They all lived in the housing projects, the famous housing projects. And then uh, uh somebody burned down the draft board. That—

MN: What?

GS: That draft board was attacked during the anti-war movement. The anti-war movement escalated into the 70’s.

MN: Yeah.

GS: And that was one of the draft boards that was, uh, burned. (Laughs)

MN: Burned? By – by who?

GS: I think it was done by one of the Berrigans. Those priests, those radical catholic priests and nuns. It took place in probably in 1971 right when I was having a debate, maybe, no it would have been ‘69, ’70.

MN: And why, why did they burn it down?

GS: They were burning down any draft board they could get to before they were arrested and put in prison.

MN: Okay.

GS: I mean people were attacking government buildings. Uh, you know the weatherman was just this uh, crazy upper middle class version of the same thing. But the people went after the draft boards. They saw the draft boards, especially in working classes places like Elizabeth, New Jersey as the funnel within which working class men were sprayed into uniform.

MN: Uh-huh.

GS: So they did uh, I remember there was a draft board in Catonsville, Maryland where these radical Catholics went in and they took he records out of the draft board, they just walked in and started pulling files out, and they took them outside and poured blood on them and they all got arrested for that. And there was a local board number forty-two, I think was my board, in Elizabeth, New Jersey somebody just burned it.

MN: So then you stayed teaching?

GS: I kept teaching. I never heard from them again. And then a few years later the, the army records center in St. Louis got burned. So I think the army lost a lot of its permanent records of its whole history. I mean there was a lot of stuff going on in those days. I wasn’t part of it but, you know, I never heard from them again and nobody said come back. Uh, but I have a draft card. Because they used to – they stamped my draft card with you know the draft categories were 1-A if you were eligible for the draft. There was another category if you had served in the military and then come out, and then conscientious subject or civilian alternative services, 1-O. And usually it was a little, bitty, you know, type on a line. They stamped mine in one-and-a-half inch letters; 1 – O. In red.
MN: (laughs)

GS: And I don’t know whether they had a special stamp made, but –

MN: (laughing) just for you? (Mumbles)

GS: I don’t know, (mumbles) they hadn’t had anyone before that.

MN: Okay.

GS: So they had to figure out something. But I still have the card. I, I share it with people because, you know, when people talk about how, you know, the whole Reagan, post-Reagan, brainwash about how the whole 60’s thing was a crazy, hippie, drug-addicts.

MN: Right.

GS: Self-indulge – I mean, we ended the draft.

MN: Yeah.

GS: Otherwise kids would face what my generation faced coming out of high school in 1964. You either went into the army or you went into college, or you got a medical deferment and people called you coward for having one.

MN: So, after high school you went to University of Chicago –

GS: I went through S – a place called St. Vincent College, because they gave me a full scholarship.

MN: Okay

GS: I think they had a hunch they might still make me into a priest, but that wasn’t going to happen.

MN: Okay.

GS: And then I transferred out of there after two years, because it was kind of scary –

MN: Out of St. Vincent?

GS: Out of St. Vincent. And the University of Chicago was the only place that would pick me up with a scholarship.

MN: And what did you study there?

GS: The University of Chicago?

MN: Yeah.

GS: I had to pick up what I had credits for already. So I finally got a degree in, it was called English and Humanities, in 1969.

MN: And –
GS: And I spent a lot of my time there either working and trying to survive and – pretty quickly organizing against the war.

MN: Uh –

GS: Because my friends from high school were all in the military and one was already dead. One was the POW, one was dead, and that’s what happened to you if you didn’t get into college. Um, so I had some time to think about it and I decided, I was going to have to do something about the war and not just talk about it.

MN: So what, what kind of activities did you do in college at –

GS: We started doing what became known as military counseling and GI organizing. Those were two separate things. Military counseling was legal counseling for soldiers who had problems with the military. Some of it was for guys who had actually been in combat or who were facing combat, who decided they were actually conscientious objectors. And it’s pretty amazing, but one of the things that will make you into a pacifist is killing a bunch of people.

MN: Yeah.

GS: And so I counseled a lot of people how to do that. And usually they got – they had a pretty rough time, because they were already in the military, they had already served in combat and done their duty. And then they’d go and they’d say I’m never going to touch a weapon again. I am never going to kill anybody again. And you had to do a lot of paper work, if you were lucky enough to have the time. But by then the anti-war movement and the military was also broader than just that pacifist part. Um, there were men and women all over the world who were organizing against the Vietnam War and, and more broadly against U.S. imperialism, everywhere. I mean the women – the main women’s army training camp for example was, uh, Fort McPherson in Aniston, Alabama. And that place was as h – as big a hot bed as anti-war activity by 1970, as the huge U.S. infantry bases, like uh, or the armor base, Killeen, Texas at Fort Hood. And we were going around doing legal training and also helping people put out anti-war propaganda. You know, I was on every military base between the Ohio Valley and the Rocky Mountains during those years.


MN: Okay

GS: Maybe as early as ’68 but it really tooled up in ’69 and we just kept doing it. That’s what we did. I substitute taught in Chicago when I was around, I drove a cab, and then we’d just drive to Junction City, Kansas and spend a week with people in Fort Riley. That was the head quarters of the first infantry division. Or one of my favorites was it was scary though, because you could see what was happening. Colorado Springs, um, that’s where Iron Mountain is.

MN: Okay.
GS: I don’t know if you’ve heard about this but during the Cold War that was where the – there’s this Iron Mountain and they hollowed it out to be the command post for the U.S. military in the events that America got nuked by the Russians.

MN: Okay.

GS: Yeah.

MN: So you –

GS: And, and people were organizing. So, I was out there. We arrived at this – a dress up in the hills near the Garden of the Gods, it was like a farm house, you know, and it supposedly was the G.I. Movement Center. It was all these Vietnam veterans and, and, and other people there and they were the ones doing the organizing putting out an underground paper for Fort Carson. And I got there early in the morning and it looked like there’d been an orgy the night before. There was a bunch of naked people laying around.

MN: (laughing) what?

GS: Who slowly woke up as I walked in, and they said, oh come – oh we’re glad you’re here. You know. They sent uh, a bunch of women into town and wearing those big granny dresses form the 60’s.

MN: Okay.

GS: To get dinner. They shop lifted steaks in my honor.

MN: Oh!

GS: And uh –

MN: (laughing) in your honor? And you and uh –

GS: I was –

MN: - who you were with?

GS: I was – yeah, me and my first wife. We were training people how to use the law and how to put out a newspaper.

MN: How to put out a newspaper. Okay.

GS: Yeah, and um, so they had a big barbeque and we ate, and then they had a tank race in my honor.

MN: (laughs)

GS: They all got stoned and they pulled a couple of tanks – you know what a – you ever seen a tank?

MN: Yeah (laughing)
GS: Going down – you’ve seen tanks, right?

MN: Yeah, yeah I’ve seen tanks (laughing).

GS: Well these are like those old, patent tanks from the 1940’s and they’re rumbling across this, this huge field in front of the Iron Mountain, you know having a race. And all these guys are stoned out of their minds!

MN: What?

GS: I mean I was allergic to marijuana so I could (stutters) at least get out of that part.

MN: (laughs)

GS: But, it was like, you know, it was totally – god. People were just so crazy. And that was before Charley Manson did his thing, but this was like the same kind of stuff that the Manson tribe was.

MN: And what were –

GS: But all these people were armed.

MN: Yeah.

GS: They were all soldiers.

MN: Uuhh.

GS: They’d come back from Vietnam. And I don’t know where all these young women came from, but they were all just there too. (laughs)

MN: And, what was their newspaper suppose to be about?

GS: It was an anti-war newspaper, published by the G.I.’s of Fort Carson, Colorado against the Vietnam War and for all things beautiful, good and true and including the Black Panthers, you know, Revolution –

(Sound of airplane flying over head)

MN: Okay.

GS: And anti-imperialism. I mean, whatever people, you know, sort of got the word about, they were for, as long as it wasn’t against the other stuff. And you couldn’t just sort of sit down and tell, tell a bunch of soldiers who had been to Vietnam, now let me explain this. So that was what finally had happened to the war. There was all these guys came back from the war they said no, nope, you made me do a lot of heavy shit, but I am never going to do what you want me to do again. How are you going to tell them? I mean they know how to drive tanks, fly helicopters, use every piece of weapon, ______(??) weaponry you’ve trained American young men to do. And they also have it all, you know? I mean, because, anybody who tells you military secures its arsenals very well, I expect these people could have gotten a couple of tanks off that base if they decided to, and just rolled them through Colorado Springs.
(Sound of a child’s voice, passing by with his mom)

MN: (laughing) now, what was this – or the group you were with doing this?

GS: The group we were –

MN: The teaching –

GS: - with in Chicago was called – The teacher group I was with in Chicago became SUBS,

MN: SUBS.

GS: Substitutes United for Better Schools. Because –

MN: Is –

GS: I came back into teaching in 1975 and there were no jobs. Reason there were no jobs was all
the guys who didn’t want to organize against the Vietnam War, yet didn’t really want to take a
stand, went into teaching and got a teaching deferment. It’s a whole generation has that story to
account for. Um, so I come back in ’75 into teaching and, and I put out a leaflet when I saw the
pay of substitute teachers had been the same since 1969 when I had started, when I left for a
while to do all this G.I. stuff. And so I put out a leaflet and a petition saying, we should get a
raise, because our pay has been frozen for six years. And this guy called me up, and he says I got
to talk to about organizing. So this guy came over and I was in an apartment in Logan Square at
the time. We met in the kitchen, he says, how do you know how to organize anything? I said well
you know I just spent six years organizing soldiers against the war. He says, well how do you
feel about the war? And I said, well you know, sucked in a lot of ways that I couldn’t describe,
but I wasn’t there, and I told him – He said, well you don’t know the half of – you don’t know a
hundredth of how bad it was. I said how do you know this? He said, well, I was in First Marines
I Corps.

MN: Wow.

GS: For thirteen months. I said, oh. Now in those days, if you were in an anti-war activist like
me –

MN: Yeah.

GS: And you met a marine. Two things were going to happen. Either you were going to be
friends. Or you were going to fight, and then maybe be friends after the fight. We became
friends. He’s the god-father of one of my kids –

MN: Wow.

GS: You know we’re still in touch; he’s a retired teacher now. His name is Larry McDonald.

MN: Larry McDonald?

GS: Yeah, he’s – he and his wife moved to North Carolina after he retired. Um, but that – we
started SUBS and then we started the newspaper Substance. And that’s how Substance got
started.
MN: Mkay.

GS: And the look of Substance comes from a newspaper, called Vietnam G.I. Because the paper I had apprenticed on and learned how to do a newspaper layout was V.G.I. which was one of the most famous of the anti-war papers. I just helped, because the guys who actually put it out were all Vietnam veterans.

MN: Yeah.

GS: Who came back from Vietnam and they’d do something like Jeff Charlotte –

MN: How did you get onto that?

GS: Well there were people in Chicago doing it. And we were in touch through the legal aid work we were doing. Um, but it was a tabloid newspaper. And it, and it specialized in first hand stories of how messed up the war was. Um, and we would be doing the legal aid and sometimes, you know, like I had mentioned to you earlier, I got called for this late night meeting with this guy who had a box of photographs in the first infantry division, including the battle of Black Virgin Mountain. And, um, you know that’s how we give the stories. It was this big network, and part of the deal was we were always very discrete. So if there were ten people interested in – Oh man, I think it would be so cool to do G.I. organizing and – There was also a kind of sexiness to it, where everybody was making close interpersonal relationships as fast as you could do it. Um, and we’d say, okay, well we got to get to know you better, because you know there’s layers of security you had to be at least aware of, because the bad guys were pretty serious too. So, we did Vietnam G.I. I was mainly in distribution, I would interview people. But one of the funniest parts, was this was a tabloid newspaper, printed in Chicago.

MN: Yeah.

GS: And it’s mostly mailed to Vietnam. And so the question is: How do you mail an anti-war newspaper to soldiers in Vietnam, during the Vietnam War?

MN: Yeah.

GS: Well, you get a bunch of catholic girls who had that perfect penmanship, and they would address envelopes in their handwriting, and then you’d spray it with that stuff you use to be able to buy in five and dime stores. I called it, you know, Tijuana whore house cologne.

MN: (laughs)

GS: So you know, then you’d stuff the paper in this thing and seal it and then, you know, somebody would do the big lipstick thing – and so when the letter got to Vietnam, nobody was going to open it except the person to whom it was addressed.

MN: Okay

GS: Because it was obviously from her. Only it turned out, you open it up and then there is Vietnam G.I.

MN: Awe (laughing)
GS: And they had thousands of, uh, addresses of soldiers in Vietnam, many of whom had written
and said I want to get your newspaper.

MN: Now the – the people in Vietnam wrote –

GS: Yeah –

MN: - and they wanted it.

GS: And, and the reason why it was easier was because, all the Vietnam mail went through
A.P.O., San Francisco, that’s Army Post Office, San Francisco, same zip code and then it was,
you know, to be all the unit numbers you know, and the name of the person. It just took a long
time to do the mailing.

MN: Yeah.

GS: Because you couldn’t just send it to an automatic mailing shop and have them all get
stamped out. I remember we would drive with boxes of these letters and it was stink up the car
with that perfume smell. From here to Milwaukee and every time you’d pass a post box you’d
drop ten of them in.

MN: Okay.

GS: So they’d all be postmarked different.

MN: Um –

GS: That’s how, that was –

MN: That’s how you spread –

GS: - one of the many ways how the Vietnam anti-war movement got built inside the army on
the ground in Vietnam.

MN: That’s pretty amazing.

GS: I know it is. It just made common sense as soon as you think about it –

MN: Yeah.

GS: - right down to those lipstick kisses with that cheap lipstick, people would – you know, they
still do that. People would kiss mirrors and say I love you in the men’s wash room in some high
school.

MN: (laugh)

GS: Um, it’s what young people do or did.

MN: You mention –

GS: But it worked.
MN: Yeah. And you mentioned, though, you had the bad guys. You had to go through layers and
you had to get person with people. How would you –

BS: Yeah. We had – Our group that did the military counseling in Chicago was called CAMP
that stood for Chicago Area Military Project. And we published a newsletter trying to summarize
the news of the G.I. resistance. And we did legal counseling. Well, at that time the U.S.
government held a huge investigation at communist attempts to subvert the armed forces of the
United States. They issued a three volume report, because they, the people who were viewing
that stuff, thought that there was somebody at a control panel in Moscow pressed a button and
you got people like me to be against the Vietnam War, and I was following orders from, you
know somebody at the hierarchy in the Soviet communist party. So did this big investigation, but
at the same time, they were also always, they were also always trying to infiltrate what we were
doing. Now if we are taking a guy who is AWOL from the military, that’s Absent Without
Official Leave, or a deserter, and we want them – we want to give them legal aid and help him
go back. Usually these are guys who had been in combat and decided they were against the war
and they didn’t know what to do. Well, in the time we were preparing him to go back, getting
him a lawyer, maybe getting him some other help, and doing paperwork, you didn’t want
anybody around who was going to call up the 5th U.S. Army, which was based here in Chicago,
and say hey there’s a deserter staying at 2418 North Central Park in Chicago.

MN: Okay.

GS: You know?

MN: Yeah.

GS: So we use to be careful about who we would let do different things.

MN: Did you ever – [get rattled out]

GS: Yeah, we did. There was a horrifying one once. One of my jobs was to do the first
introductory things. Say you come in and your all smiles and you want to join the revolution and
help us overthrow the empire.

MN: Okay.

GS: And I’d say fine. And we’d talk for a while and I’d ask where you were from, and I’d get
your high school and a few other things like your home address, and I’d do the first layer of
checks, and I’d make sure you actually did go to that high school and call a few people. Because
you know people lie. At some point they start – the lie starts and you can just tell and you’d just
say, no thank you.

MN: Yeah.

GS: Well, the more sophisticated ones, they would have all their lies lined up and they’d be true
up to a certain point. So we had a, we had a final step. There would be one or two women, who
would hang out with this person, this person was usually a guy, and if they came back and had a
bad vibe –

MN: Oh, okay.
GS: It was a veto. Didn’t matter if everything I found out was true. Because there was a way in which, without being sexist, women just have a better radar about, you know, who not to trust. Uh, and, and so this one guy was trying to get to work with us, he really wants to build a revolution he’s been a soldier, he knows how to use weapons, and, and two women said, there’s something about him we don’t like.

MN: Yeah.

GS: So I told him, I said, you know it’s a big movement, we’re just – we don’t need any help right now. It’s one of those employment – we weren’t paying anybody.

MN: Right.

GS: He wants to make the revolution.

MN: Did you ever mistakenly take someone? And –

GS: Yeah we did. I had a roommate who actually spied on me. Um, but, but this one was the big one, because we told him not to come back and he left Chicago.

MN: Okay.

GS: He went to Milwaukee and, and started working Vietnam Veterans against the War in Milwaukee. And one night, you know there was a lot of stuff going on everywhere, three Vietnam veterans in Milwaukee decided to fire bomb a grocery store in the black ghetto that was selling bad food to black people. It was part of the thing with the black panthers. Well two of them showed up for the thing and were shot dead. The third one disappeared. The third one I got a call from Milwaukee, they said why didn’t you tell us about this guy? I said you should have asked before it was too late. So he was the agent who told the police this thing was going to happen.

MN: And that was the guy you guys turned away?

GS: That’s the guy we turned away because the –

MN: Because of the woman?

GS: - ladies said – don’t feel good about him. I wouldn’t want to be alone with this guy.

MN: Oh, my gosh.

GS: I mean, I mean you know that’s why all this computerized stuff only gets you so far.

MN: U huh.

GS: Because there’s a reality that, that’s still based on human beings understanding reality.

MN: Wow.

GS: Because I would have never gotten through, you know this guy’s last bit of bullshit.

MN: Of course, yeah.
GS: And everything he told me was true. He had been in Vietnam, (noise from finger tapping the table) he had been with the Unit he was, he had come from a certain place in Kansas, through Minnesota. But they just didn’t feel good with him. So that’s how we did it. And that was you know, and it didn’t always work. I mean somebody could come through. I always said later the best way to do that kind of stuff, send in Grandma.

MN: (laugh) if grandma likes him?

GS: Black, black dress – no, no. I’m talking about if you want to – if you want to be a bad guy, send in Grandma. You know Grandma could carry a bomb under her, under her long black dress with her cross hanging around her neck and the rosary beads and stuff. She could go anywhere, because nobody’s going to frisk Grandma.

MN: No. Nowadays some places will.

GS: Nowadays they might even at the airport. But –

MN: Yeah.

GS: But that’s where, you know, that moved into the whole so called anti-imperialist movement. And by the mid 70’s with the United States moving out of Vietnam, but still being every place on the planet, we uh, we were already trying to do what we could about these things. Like in 1973 the U.S. government helped the – Augusto Pinochet and the Chilean military over through the gov – the elected government of Chile. And you know, led to twenty years of fascism, and, and any number of international crimes and atrocities. The, the G.I. movement was aware of that, you know, because there was guys in the U.S. Navy who were suddenly – their ships were sailing into the South Pacific, when the you know, when the imperial war was still going out by the South China sea on the other side of the Pacific Ocean. So they would, you know – they kind of – we don’t know what’s going on, but we’re heading south instead of northwest. They were off the coast of Chile when Pinochet overthrew Allende. This is back up, you know the empire doesn’t, doesn’t leave as much as it can to chance, even though it’s weak at the human level.

MN: Uuhh.

GS: Um, the entire struggle in southern Africa was incredible in those days. From Angola and Mozambique south – through South Africa you had these colonial and colonial era governments which were totally white supremacist who viciously suppressing black people, who were the majority in all these places. So, in various ways that was part of our agenda by the mid 70’s. And then in the late 70’s when I came back into teaching and I don’t even know how this happened but, we wound up, those of us who had been part of the anti-war movement and the G.I. movement, wound up working with a group called SAMRAF. That stood for South Africa Military Refugee Aid Fund. And SAMRAF was based in, in South Africa and in England and in the United States. And Military Refugee Aid Fund meant that they were raising money to get to – to encourage white men from the South African military to desert from South African Military when they were doing pro-apartheid, anti-national liberation stuff. Like the South African army was, uh, fighting a war in the area called the Caprivi Strip, in the northern area near, Namibia. And so you know, now and then, just like during Vietnam, these guys who spoke with a different accent, but still spoke English would show up in Chicago and Brooklyn. And it was pretty much the same stuff except that the South African security forces were a lot better at what they did
than what we were use to. So SAMRAF got, got turned inside out by BOSS. Uh, BOSS was the South African Bureau of State Security. And they actually infiltrated all the way up to the top and then they just, you know, what they call turned it inside out. They turned it into a thing that worked for South Africa, the apartheid government and not for the opposition. That’s – I mean one of the funnier stories of that, I mean somewhere if the medical records still exist, there are two me’s in terms of dental records.

MN: Really?

GS: Because this guy shows up in Chicago, and he’s got an impacted wisdom tooth. One of the deserters from South Africa –

MN: Okay. The military – deserters.

GS: Yeah. Military deserter form South Africa. So, I managed to get his dental problems done under my Board of Education dental insurance.

MN: Okay.

GS: As me. So I hope if anybody tries to identify what’s left of me someday by dental records, they don’t get the wrong ones, but, it worked. Uh, you know, you can talk about that stuff later, but that’s like – it’s like the perfume on the, on the letters.

MN: Yeah.

GS: It’s what you do at the time. I mean this guys was definitely a soldier, who had definitely been in Caprivi Strip, definitely been in the South African army and had walked out of the white South African army over to the black enemy.

MN: Uhuh.

GS: And said I think I’m on your side. I mean that took a lot because a lot of those black people were not well disposed towards white people.

MN: Yeah.

GS: But then it was a question about how do we get this guy from Namibia to London to Chicago. Now there’s some stories.

MN: And how – well –

GS: I never needed to know.

MN: Oh, you never knew?!

GS: (Stutters) Well, I did it sometimes from the opposite direction, you know. If you want to get from the United States to Canada –

MN: Okay.
GS: In 1974. You get an old Ford, and you wear your auto worker clothes, and you drive across the bridge from Detroit to Windsor at rush hour. And who’s going to stop you in that flow of traffic?

MN: Uhuh.

GS: You know the bridge.

MN: Yeah, I do.

GS: Okay, so know we’re in Canada. See how it worked?

MN: Yeah (laughs).

GS: It was – it was kind of common sense. I mean, unless they were bar dogging and knew – knew your car, and it was on a hot-list.

MN: But so to get someone from South Africa –

GS: To here? I didn’t know. They –

MN: They did similar things?

GS: I assumed they came through Canada and some part of the British Empire. But he was here.

MN: Okay.

GS: He was (fumbles words) you know, stayed with us for a while.

MN: Prexy actually told us a story about he dressed up as a nun to go across.

GS: Okay. Yeah, I could believe that.

MN: So, stuff like that?

GS: Well, that’s – hey, you know there’s – right. I mean, everybody I – not everybody I know, but a lot of people had their Roman collar and black jacket and I could never stomach that idea of, you know, I’m a priest –

MN: Uhuh.

GS: And just grab the bible and – didn’t work.

MN: So, when did you become – you were in the SAMRAF. You –

GS: I worked with SAMRAF. I don’t know if I was in it I don’t remember what that meant to be in it.

MN: So what was your job? To kind of –

GS: Well it was –

MN: - be a part of it.
GS: - it was my job to get this guy’s teeth fixed, to meet with people and talk about how, how we were going to get stuff printed if we had to get it printed here and you know –

MN: Because –

GS: - raise money.

MN: Okay.

GS: Um, there was, there was an Afrikaner priest, or minister, named Don Morton, who was one of the people who was running the show.

MN: Okay.

GS: He had broken, with uh, apartheid. And his family went back to the original Dutch settlers.

MN: Okay.

GS: So you know uh, the Afrikaans view themselves as the white tribe of Africa, and they’ll, they’ll tell you they’ve been in Africa longer than most black people have been in the United States. How dare you say they’re not Africans.

MN: Right.

GS: That African-Americanism, Amer – American – whatever. So Don Morton had, had uh, had broken with – he had been a fairly prominent family, and he had broken with apartheid. So he was living with – in, in New York City, going around trying to organize this stuff. And I remember when he, he sat one night, describing this to us, and they had actually had a funeral for him, back in the church that use to be his Methodist church, because he was a traitor to the, the white tribe. At least that’s what he told us, and I believe him.

MN: Yeah.

GS: He started crying; I mean he’s a man in his thirties, whose whole life came out of that white –

MN: And he had to leave it.

GS: - culture. Well he didn’t have to – he didn’t just leave it. I mean he, rejected it and started working for the other side.

MN: Yeah.

GS: You know he supported the A.N.C. and the liberation movements in all those countries.

MN: Right.

GS: I mean, so they did – they, they, they said they read – he told us that they had a funeral. His name was no longer to be mentioned as far as his entire family and all of the people he knew he was dead.

MN: So he had a funeral while – he was living?! Okay.
GS: They had – they gave the funeral for him while he was living, back in apartheid land.

MN: Oh, my gosh!

GS: Those people are pretty intense.

MN: Yeah.

GS: I mean, the fact that Nelson Mandela has been able to sort of broker some reasonableness with them, I wouldn’t count on lasting forever, but it certainly was wonderful, and if we got a nice movie about it, now that everybody’s crying about, good.

MN: Wow.

GS: But that was heavy stuff, and that’s what, you know, so we raised money, we helped him out, and then we’d take people – you know it’s one of those thing, you take a phone call and somebody’s there. And you got to trust the people who handed him off to you, and now he’s got a bad tooth so he needs the dentist, we’ll take care of that part.

MN: So you knew a lot of people who came from South Africa?

GS: Not that many –

MN: But –

GS: Only a handful. They didn’t usually get this far. I assume most of them piled up in places like London and –

MN: Right.

GS: Or in Canada, just like the – just like the people who left the United States during Vietnam.

MN: Right.

GS: Naomi Cline’s child of an exile from the Vietnam War. You know, the woman who wrote *The Shock Doctrine*; writes regularly for the nation.

MN: Okay.

GS: She’s really good on imperialist stuff. But that’s – yeah that – Few of them got here and one day, one day we were told SAMRAF had been blown open by the South African security forces.

MN: Okay, what happened?

GS: At every level. Well they probably – I didn’t know all the details, because it was just like, sorry about that.

MN: Yeah.

GS: We won’t be talking anymore. I assume that they rolled up – they called it rolling up the apparatus. They had people all the way from South Africa in the army, because they had contacts
in the army who were helping the other side. You don’t want to think what happened to all the people. But it was – I mean nothing happened to us in Chicago.

MN: But the – the people who were helping SAMRAF in South Africa?

GS: Were probably had a very bad time with it.

MN: And of course the records are probably?

GS: They may be available somewhere.

MN: Yeah.

GS: Uh, I don’t have many of them we have, have some stuff, because I just kept carrying boxes around through three marriages and several apartments and homes.

MN: Um –

GS: But I can’t even dig it out, it’s in an old box. Maybe I’ll pull it out sometime, but you know how long it took for us to have this conversation.

MN: (laughs) how did your parents respond to your involvement in the anti-apartheid movement?

GS: Well the anti-war and the anti-imperialist, anti-apartheid by – My father always wanted to know what was going on. When I first went home as a draft resistor and conscientious objector I had to sit down with every adult male in my family and then friends, in Lyndon, Elizabeth, New Jersey, and explain one on one, over a beer, what I had done and why. I had been a boy scout and an eagle scout, I had the largest paper rout in Union County, New Jersey, I was the top student, all that shit, and I went – I was in class in – and I was in high school with the guy who was in – the most famous POW, from New Jersey, he’s in the movie. So I had to sit down and explain it to people. My father was okay with it early on. (Noise from wind) My mother, went a little nuts on it for a while, she uh – In fact one night I was home at Christmas in the mid, late 60’s and I was going over to New York for a protest, a G.I. movement protest, I think it was for the – there were two guys, or three guys at Fort Hood who had been arrested for organizing against the war, and we were having protests all over the United States. They, they’re car was stopped, they were soldiers, they car was stopped, and the M.P.’s, Military Police, searched the car and they allegedly found marijuana residue in the lint in their pockets. Uh, which they then identified through lab tests as marijuana residue. So, they charged them for possession of drugs. But according to the testimony of military trial, the, the residue had been destroyed during the lab test. So, you have to take the technicians word – This is military law. So we were protesting against these guys. These guys got like five years of Leavenworth.

MN: Five years of –

GS: Five years of hard labor in Leavenworth Federal Military Penitentiary in Kansas. Uh, for having marijuana, which nobody could find –

MN: What?
GS: - by the time of the trial. That’s what was happening.

MN: Right.

GS: So, I was going over to New York to join this protest, and my mother said, where you going? And uh, I said I’m going over to protest what’s being done to these soldiers. And she said, I knew you were a communist; I’m going (phone rings) to call the FBI right now. You better turn it off; I’m going to get this.

MN: Okay.

[George Schmidt takes a phone call, while Melena Nicholson turns off tape]

FILE STE-002

GS: (mumbles something that the tape doesn’t catch)

MN: Oh. [Responding to conversation before the tape starts]

GS: But let’s get back. So, so my mother said – she, she picks up the phone; it’s like two days before Christmas; she’s going to call the FBI.

MN: On you?

GS: Yeah. I said, I’m real sorry about that, and probably said some other things that I would regret later, because I, because I spoke very forcefully in a, in a more colorful language in those days. I just left.

MN: So your parents did not support you –

GS: Well my dad sort of did, he said he thought it was a bad idea because unless you were rich you couldn’t afford to go around –

MN: Okay.

GS: and do the sort of things I was doing. And then he, you know, he came back from his war and really wanted to go to college. The only way he could really go to college was on the G.I. Bill. But he and my mom were so passionate about doing the family, they did it by the time he woke up, five years later, he had four kids. So he had to keep going to the Post Office and working everyday instead of going to college.

MN: Okay.

GS: I mean so he knew that from his own experience. But, uh, I remember one thing – uh, so my mom tried to come back from it later, and we, you know worked things out, but – I just left, it was Christmas, and I came back here. It was like sorry, uh, we can’t have that conversation, you don’t want to understand. So that was just pretty intense for everybody. And uh, (tape picks up a child talking in the street) I remember one guy was a father of a high school buddy of mine. And he called me up when he found out I was organizing (noise from wind) against the war and a conscientious objector and stuff, was – we had – I – it was funny – I – some of the dad’s that were, you know, we were more friends than I was even with the guys. But he calls me up and
said I need, I need to talk with you about what you’re doing. So I went over to his house in New Jersey. And we sat in his kitchen, one beer, and then coffee, and he’s asking me, over and over, why are you doing this? And I said the same thing you know better than anybody, because he was a tanker with patent World War II and stuff.

GS: So you know better than anybody what soldiers do is kill other people. So you got to have a real good reason, and that was what I said to the draft board – and you haven’t given me a good enough reason to go out and kill people I don’t know. Straight up. And there for, I am doing this instead. And finally he stops, and he says, you know, you’re right. I said, huh? He said you know, I was a driver, and, and a machine gunner, on a Sherman, that was those high profile tanks, that had – maintained in the U.S. Army in Europe in World War II. And then the front of this thing, there were two hatches; there was a tarot with a canon, if you can picture a tank – There were two hatches, and when you’re going through and you’re not buttoned down because you’re not actually in combat, the best way to drive this thing was to have your head sticking out –

MN: Right.

GS: of the hatch, and you have a machine gun right in your hands in case you need it.

MN: Okay.

GS: And as you go through France and Germany, they’re going through these towns where you couldn’t even go down these streets, because the buildings have been bombed into rubble and the tanks are bouncing over the rubble. And he said he came around this – they, they came down this one street and they made a turn and suddenly half way down the block they were f – [facing] one German soldier. And so this German soldier is sitting there with his riffle in his hands,

standing there. And this guy tells me this story. And this guy is sitting in the tank, you know with his head sticking out and his machine gun in his hands. And his job is to cut the German soldier in half so that the tank can keep going, because you’re supposed to destroy the enemy.

MN: Yeah.

GS: And I said uuhh. And I said what did you do? He said, I stood up and said would you get the fuck out of here before I have to kill you?

MN: (laugh)

GS: And I said, and then what happened. He said the guy ran. And that was the best day I had to whole war, because that was one person I knew I didn’t have to kill. And then he started crying. This grown man, you know, twenty-five years after his war. A-and I asked him, I said did you ever tell your story to Ed, your son. He said no, I just don’t think he’d understand it.

MN: So this is why –

GS: That’s the way that culture was.

MN: Yeah.
GS: See if you were an anti-war, peace creep, or a coward, you were going to be tested.

(Thumping noise from Mr. Schmidt’s finger tapping the table) These men had seen death, they’d lived with it, and they’d killed people for a good cause. They didn’t want their sons turning around and abolishing that whole thing they had to do, in the name of what they thought was some hippie abstraction. So that’s the way it came down in those conversations, and my mother was more fiery than my father about it. But she eventually spent a lot of time – I guess she prayed about it and did whatever she did, and eventually she said it was - it wasn’t as bad as she thought. But it was several years, it was kind of horrible, you know because you don’t leave home at Christmas time and tell your mother to –

MN: Yeah.

GS: - go to hell or whatever. But she was right there with the telephone, she believed J. Edgar Hoover was the reincarnation of Jesus in the current age.

MN: (laugh and sigh)

GS: And she wanted to talk to him about her commie son.

MN: Wow.

GS: So that’s the kind of thing that happened. I assume it’s going to be the same. Whenever you resist you better be – you better have good reasons.

MN: So that was your reason to be an activist, instead –

GS: Well I was the complex reasons to be an activist. You know the thing that happens is, by the late 1970’s we were in the Chicago Public Schools; apartheid, you know, organized segregation, the destruction of the hopes and dreams of generations of children. It’s not as vicious as napalm in Vietnam or the kind of stuff they did in South Africa, but this city is doing the same kind of imperial nastiness to the majority of black people, within twenty miles of where we’re sitting. And you know, it starts happening to the children before they are even old enough to know it, just because they’re poor and black. So you know Substance is the main thing we did, but South Africa, the South Africa work was part of that over all anti-imperialist work. We took it to the National Union Conventions, you know. We were part of these anti-imperialist caucuses of the American Federation of Teachers. And there was a – there was actually more activity about Central and South America than there was about Southern Africa. I think it was the distance and also, you know, people can drive from El Salvador to Chicago. You can’t drive from Cape Town to Chicago.

MN: No. So, then how did you stay informed about South Africa?

GS: Well until the internet, you know there were a bunch of um – there were a bunch of groups that published, uh, um, studies, regular magazines in the 70’s and 80’s dedicated to – to different parts of the world. There was MRIP, the Middle East Research and Information Project, NACLA; North American Congress on Latin America. There were a few on Africa. Um, one of them that I remember, I think was the American Committee on Africa, which was sort of an overlap group. And so, I would just sort of stay with that and if something came up regarding schools you know, we’d plug it into Substance, but I moved more and more towards focusing on,
on Chicago and on the Chicago schools. But, when the internet came by, you know – now you can just sort of –

MN: Right.

GS: find some of it. The danger is that everybody thinks that the Wiki entry is probably accurate when you’re likely at best, a little bit accurate. But, um, theoretically, somebody could do for those struggles – and I hope that’s what ya’ll are doing – what David Zeiger did for the GI movement, in the movie, Sir, No Sir, which I showed you. It took him twenty-five years to make the movie, because everybody knows people needed video as well as the narrative – pros-narrative. And so the movie Sir, No Sir exists now. But backing up Sir, No Sir is an entire internet archive of G.I. underground news papers. The actual newspapers, that were published at the time, by soldiers who were resisting the war in Vietnam. Similarly these Oral Histories that you’re doing, when it goes back through maybe somebody will find Don Morton if he’s still alive; ask him what happened to SAMRAF. I mean I’m just a little piece of the big puzzle.

MN: Yeah.

GS: And I, I can only, you know check out a puzzle, you know the puzzles that I have to try to tell people how they work now, and they mainly, you know – Chicago’s latest horrors just went toxic and national thanks to Barack Obama and Arne Duncan. Chicago’s version of corporate school reform which is dedicated to the destruction of public education and the continuation of as much apartheid as possible is now national policy. Arne Duncan, the former head of the Chicago schools, is U.S. Secretary of Education. So if I wrote everyday for the next ten weeks I still wouldn’t be able to tell the whole story and it is a question whether it would be coherent enough for people to get just how bad Arty Duncan’s record – and how bad the Chicago thing was. Um, so that’s where it goes. I don’t know what else – you know I feel good – I’ll give you a funny example. I was – (phone ring)

FILE STE-003

[Tape turns back on to a conversation between George Schmidt and Melena Nicholson. They are discussing about the importance of keeping one’s sources’ trust and keeping their identities safe]

GS: -certain entities because they have had a record of trust. But nobody’s going to be a hundred percent perfect, but you also have to know who to trust. And so we’ve – Substance has been in business for thirty-five years, and we tell people, we’ve never burned a source. Burning a source means you take information in confidence from a news source, then you turn around and reveal who the source was to the people in power. Um, we’ve never burned a source. I’ve been ready to go to jail, uh, a couple of instances where I was supine on. One in particular to get you to reveal sources, and you just can’t do it. So that phone call who was from a guy who was a very, very good source for years and now he’s very prominent. So the story will be the top story in tomorrow’s Substance website.

MN: Uhuh.
GS: But you know, you earn, you earn the trust of people over time. Hopefully you can keep it even if you get a little bit older and a little bit slower than you were when you were able to run from one end of the city to the other without thinking about sleeping for four days straight. So, I don’t know. Where were we?

MN: Um, well I wanted to – wanted you to tell me a little more about Substance and how that came about and how –

GS: Well, 1975 when I came back teaching, like I told you, Larry McDonald and I got back together, I was interested in protesting the, uh, treatment of substitute teacher’s because we all wound up being stuck substitute teachers. Those of who had come into teaching after the Vietnam generation that dodged the war draft by becoming teachers. Not exactly a heroic moment in the history of public education, but it did provide a generation of talent.

MN: Yeah.

GS: So after a few months of organizing substitute teachers, I suggested that, maybe we could publish a newspaper, because I knew how to do that from the Vietnam soldiers movement. So we started. And we literally came together in pieces. I mean the name Substance came out of the organization which was SUBS, which was Substitutes United for Better Schools. And we actually gave ourselves the name SUBS, before we knew what SUBS stood for.

MN: Uuhh.

GS: I said, somebody will come and figure out what the acronym is. That’s the way things like that happen. So, we started publishing every now and then, and then we, by the late 70’s we were publishing every month and people had to pay for a subscription. And then in 1980, when the rolling class foreclosed on the Chicago Public Schools declaring a financial crisis, which was really uh, same thing they are doing now, they wanted, they wanted to suck more money out of the Board of Ed budget. Um, we actually got center on all, all the protests against that; the establishment of school financial party. And we learned how to read the budget documents of the government, which is the key to a lot of this stuff. And we’ve been doing it ever since.

MN: And how did you use Substance for the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa?

GS: Substance, um, in the late 19 – mid, late 1980’s published a series of articles, long series of articles uh, mostly about the investments of the Chicago Teacher’s Pension Fund in South Africa. One of the largest pools of, um, of investment dollars that, that there is some public access to in the United States is in the Public Employee Pension Funds. And, and so, a bunch of activists, including people who were with Substance, started taking the position that there should be no Chicago money going to anything related to South Africa. That included direct investment from corporations and also included indirect investment and there was a big several year long struggle about how far you would take the indirect definition. Um, we, Connie Day, Lou Pyster and some other people regularly wrote articles documenting how many dollars were invested from the fund of these corporations. And I was the editor. I didn’t do the actual research. Other people did the actual research, Connie Day; it was Connie Day at the time, now I think her name is Connie Prince. Lou Pyster, I think is still around. He’s a retired uh, union person and activist.

MN: How do you spell Pyster?
GS: P-y-s-t-e-r.

MN: Okay. You know we actually interviewed Connie Day?

GS: I know. Um, and uh, you know she was – and I remember, it was funny because, she and Lou never got along on this, but they collaborate a lot of stories, and I’m going to send you the back issues of Substance when it appears, I’ll mail it to you. Um, it’s not in digital form. Um, and editing people on a, on an unpaid staff, for a rinky-dink agitational newspaper that tries to be accurate, won’t pretend to be natural on anything. We always said, uh objectivity is ridiculous, it’s a pretext. But um, my position was if we were looking at nine million dollars of investments that was okay. We didn’t have to take up line space; $9,104,364.25. Well, the other people who were on the story, Connie and Lou, liked the decimal point.

MN: Okay.

GS: And there were times when I’d sit there, because also in those days we were just moving the computer type center – Turn if off for a second.

[Tape turned off for a short break]

FILE STE-004

GS: Um.

MN: Connie Day and –

GS: Connie Day and Lou. Well, Lou was carrying this, this fight on, uh as well as me and other people, inside the Union House of Delegates. We were all elected delegates from schools that we – that we were at; most of this time I was at Amundsen High School. Um, eventually by the late 80’s – and I couldn’t put a time on it – that perspective started to prevail inside the teacher’s union. It was especially important uh, at the time because after 1984 president of the teacher’s union was Jacqueline Vaughn who was an old style union politician, but at the time was a fierce African American female feminist, and so as the movement grew nationally, uh, Jacky Vaughn became more and more attentive, you know, to this part of the argument; that the pension fund simply should say no, we should investigate all the investments that were going there. Some of my friends took a different approach to that. And I remember one of our friends, who is still on the Substance staff, would get up in the union meetings when we’d approach this and he’d say, investments for my future and my pension are not a question of black and white. The only color we should care about is green. Are these investments producing the profits that we need to have a st – You know, this –

MN: Yeah.

GS: - was a speech. And there was a large body of people (laughs) who would say, you know that makes sense.

MN: Oh, no.

GS: No, that was – it was – you know –
MN: Yeah.

GS: It was a democratic debate. That CTU’s [Chicago Teachers Union] as democratic as you’re going to find in a large organization, and it was always fun.

MN: Yeah.

GS: Finally, I remember, Pyster, there was, there was a vacancy on the Pension Board of Trustees, and the sure way to get elected, the election was held with all the, all the active duty teachers get to vote for the six teacher reps on the pension board. And there was a vacancy, so Pyster was going to run and he was going to be our candidate, but we were the minority faction in the union. So the key was to get the endorsement of the House of Delegates. We got the endorsement of the House of Delegates, the union would support Pyster [and] through the mailing he’d get the votes to be on the pension board. And, and he never forgave me for the speech I gave, but it won the vote.

MN: Okay.

GS: And my speech was simple, I was a delegate, and I had the right to the floor, and I said you know we are talking about our pension and our future.

MN: Right.

GS: And we all know Lou Pyster. He’s persistent to the point of obnoxiousness; he’s dogged until the point of tenaciousness and beyond. Nobody here would ever use the word – and I paused and it was like – calm to describe Lou when he’s really interested in something. But what do you want guarding your pension; a poodle or a pit-bull? Vote for our pit-bull, reject the suggestion that we need another poodle. Elect Lou Pyster to the Pension Board (claps his hands).

– Here’s one of the guys from the church. [George Schmidt waves to a friend across the street]

Man from the church/George Schmidt’s friend: Nice day, huh?

GS: It’s great!

GS’s friend: Are we going to (can’t make out part of the conversation) on this side of the street today, or what? Or that’s Monday.

GS: That’s Monday.

GS’s friend: Yeah.

GS: See, we had to have a little battle to make sure we could have that conversation. But it’s worth it. [Earlier before the interview, Mr. Schmidt had recollected a past event which he and his neighbors had protested against black discriminations in their neighborhood. The friend he had just talked to was black.] Um, so anyway Pyster got elected to the pension board, and that moved things forward on the question. Uh, (laughs) but it was like, he said did you have to do that? I said Lou, that won a lot of votes.

MN: Yeah.
GS: Because the perspective wasn’t we weren’t electing Mr. Congeniality. We were electing the person to guard our future pensions. And didn’t I make it clear that you were dogged and determined and everyman we would want to have there, guarding the gate of our dollars. So that’s the kind of thing you have to do and actually, you know, to get the thing you have to provide people with the information which we were doing with all these articles, because we were researching real carefully.

MN: Right.

GS: They could get a list of all the investments of the pension fund and then they could take the list and could play it off against, you know, who’s actually corporately active in South Africa. Um, and then you had to get the power to actually change it, and that meant electing people to the pension board or changing the minds of the people on the pension board. Finally, during that time, and this was from 1984 to 1994, the biggest single vote was Jacqueline Vaughn, the president of the Teachers Union. She should be a legend in Chicago history. She certainly was the most powerful black woman in Chicago during the 1980’s, but she’s been literally wiped out of the history books in favor of people like Marva Collins, who’s a total fraud, because of the white-wash and the brain wash from the Reagan years.

MN: Right.

GS: Jacqueline Vaughn was a militant union leader, who led three huge strikes.

MN: Okay.

GS: So and, and did a lot of other stuff, including you know, moving towards this anti-apartheid stance in relation to Chicago.

MN: What kind of strikes?

GS: Oh the strikes we – well the strikes were all just nuts and bolts union strikes, but we struck, we struck in 1983 for thirteen days when she was vice president of the union, but she was the public voice because a majority of the kids were black. She was the black vice president at the time. The president was an Irishman named Bob Healey who was white. And he just very wisely made sure that Jacky was the person who went up against the black lady, who was the school super attendant, who would get up and say, you know these teachers are, are hurting black children. Well, the fact the majority of teachers were black too was sort of irrelevant in the ruling class line of about what was real and what wasn’t. 1984 we went on strike for what I think was ten days. And then in 1987 Jacky brought us out for nineteen days in September, the longest strike in Chicago’s schools history. And in each one we won and held back this assault that’s been going on ever since on our pay benefits [and] working conditions. Um, then Jacky died of breast cancer in 2 – in 1994 and it’s been downhill ever since.

MN: Oh.

GS: Um, her successor was a wimp. I ran against him and, he was, he was a white guy, but he ran as a black guy, and Jacky’s successor.

MN: Yeah.
GS: It was bizarre. I still got about forty percent of the vote but I lost the election.

MN: You lost the election? He –

GS: In 1994 for president of Chicago Teachers Union.

MN: You ran for it?

GS: Yeah, that was the last time I ran. I ran in ’88 against Jackie herself.

MN: Really?

GS: And got forty percent and she for two years she wouldn’t speak to me, because I ran against her. Then later before her death, we became kind of friends because I kept telling her, I said this is deep. This involves shit like South Africa and you know if you went – and then she did go.

MN: She went to South Africa?

GS: She went to South Africa. This is out there somewhere and this may be something somebody can find for the labor history project – for your project. Jackie was one of the American Federation of Teachers representatives to the International Labor Organizations in Switzerland. And they’re the ones who, you know, go out and see all those ten year olds working in sewing machines for sixteen hours a day in Bangladesh or something like that. Jackie comes back to a union meeting one month. We have monthly meetings where the president gives a report and she talks about her visit to South Africa, and this is before apartheid ended. And she talks about being a black woman in the network of people who were against apartheid in South Africa. It was like cool.

MN: Yeah.

GS: Tell me more but she never got to tell it. She died.

MN: Oh no!

GS: It’s there somewhere.

MN: Okay.

GS: The, the – the House of Delegates in the Chicago Teachers Union kept a stenographic transcript of every meeting. And I think if you got diggers in your research staff you could find that. She wound up, because she was talking about how they were visiting people in all these townships.

MN: Yeah.

GS: And how they had to travel carefully and you know the usual stuff that you’re hearing all the time if you are doing this project. But suddenly it’s the most powerful black woman in Chicago giving this narrative in relation to South Africa to six hundred teachers.

MN: Right.
GS: Who are tired after a whole hard day’s work in the schools and now we’ve come after for a meeting once a month. Yep. That’s part of the story of the South African anti-apartheid movement in Chicago, is the president of the Chicago Teachers Union was part of it.

MN: She – okay so, South Africa had a big influence – the apartheid there had a big influence here and apartheid here?

GS: Yeah, and there is a funny last part to that – just in my personal thing. In 1999 I published these tests called the CASE Tests in Substance and by that time Dailey had consolidated his control over the public schools, and they wanted to destroy me if they could. So they suspended me and charged me of copy write infringement – we published the actual test to show how dumb they were. And um, they eventually fired me in August 2000. They formally took a vote to fire me as a teacher after twenty-eight years, at a board of education meeting. Only one labor movement leader – labor union leader in Chicago stood up at that meeting and talked in my defense. His name was Jarvis Williams. He was president of Local 46 of the Service Employees. And he compared to what I had done to Nelson Mandela whom he knew personally. He was a black guy who was head of the janitors – of Service Employees representatives of the public school janitors. I just remembered that. And Jarvis got up and he said, you need people who are going to stand up and say what is right, even if you disagree with him, blah, blah, blah. Well, a couple years later, they forced Jarvis Williams out. Andy Stern was consolidating the Service Employees, and the Local 46 was dissolved. It was one of the most powerful black unions in Chicago. Jarvis was one of the most powerful black labor leaders of Chicago. Jarvis is put into retirement at a very nice pension and they made a – Local 46 became a part of an amalgamated Local 73 Service Employees, which is currently under a white woman named, Christine Boardman. Instead of just representing the janitors and other people like that in Chicago Public Schools, they represent everything from bus drivers in Gary, Indiana to the toll takers on the Illinois Toll way. But, that’s a real proud moment, now that I think about it, when Jarvis Williams got up and the Board of N meeting and did that for me. That’s kind of embarrassing for me, because Jarvis – I’m not – there’s a big difference – but Jarvis Williams if you can find him, he has pictures, he had pictures of the old S.E.I.U. [Service Employees International Union] office of him with Nelson Mandela.

MN: Jarvis with a J?

GS: J-A-R-V-I-S Williams. And if you call me from Frank Cline’s number, Frank Cline would still know how to get in touch with Jarvis. But Jarvis was forced out about five or six years ago, under that thing that Andy Stern was creating with SEIU Um, but Jarvis would remember those details and he – I have a hunch that he had a lot more to do with the anti-apartheid movement. I mean it’s just coming back.

MN: Yeah.

GS: So, you want to know.

MN: What – you said Cline, Fran?

GS: Frank Cline –

MN: Frank Cline.
GS: is still. You got to keep his name out of the official books, because he is still working for S.E.I.U.

MN: Okay.

GS: Just remember it. Uh Frank is still in touch with Jarvis as far as I know. He’s a good man, but he’s getting to retirement age, and his job at SEIU is this thing’s going to pay him a pension unless Christine decides to go after him, the way she went after — she fired me finally at SEIU.

MN: What does SEIU stand for?

GS: Service Employees International Union.

MN: Okay.

GS: It’s the largest union in United States.

MN: Okay

GS: You can Google a lot of stuff about it; because they have been having a civil war inside for, for the past couple years. But, um, Andy Stern, who is now leaving as president of SEIU, uh, according to the New York Times, visited the White House to talk to the president 20 times since Obama was inaugurated. That’s SEIU. But locally SEIU was a much different thing ten years ago when Jarvis was running Local 46. And SEIU had a hand in the anti-apartheid movement. I got another example of the anti-apartheid movement I just remembered. This involves Zimbabwe directly and an- South Africa directly. You know, the black labor unions, like the black churches at their best, were able to do things carefully in support of the liberation struggles in Southern Africa that nobody else could do. The longshore locals, south of Baltimore — and I believe this is true all the way over to New Orleans — were mostly black. The stevedores are the people who load and unload ships. And during the anti-apartheid struggles, as early as the 70’s, one of the representatives of the Zimbabwe struggles spoke to my classes at a high school in the west side, when I was teaching at Collins. So this guy told the kids, and these are the poorest kids in Chicago, they’re in ______ (??), he was telling them about the struggles for the liberation of black people in what was then Rhodesia, they were calling it Zimbabwe, but it wasn’t Zimbabwe yet.

MN: Yeah.

GS: And so to keep — you know the kids say well, what can we do to help you? These are black kids who had one pair of shoes. He said well you can bring, you can- we need everything. We need shoes, we need money, but it doesn’t look like you have much money, we need shoes, we need clothes. He said you can bring them to Mr. Schmidt. Bring it to — to him and we’ll make sure they get too Africa.

MN: Okay.

GS: Okay? What are you going to do? Send it Fed Ex?

MN: (laughs) so, what did you do?
GS: We filled a truck and sent it to Norfolk, Virginia, where somebody loaded it into some empty space on ships that were headed to South Africa. And it got offloaded by the black people who were unloading the ships there. There were two cargos. There was the official cargo, and then there was the space that the –

MN: The extra space.

GS: The workers knew was there. Right.

MN: Okay.

GS: I was told the stuff got through. I didn’t see any of it after it left Chicago, but my classroom filled up. With shit like shoes and, you know, that’s the way it happened. And you just had to hope the person who was taking the truck –

MN: You just had to trust them?

GS: I mean but who would want this stuff on the truck. It was worse than stuff you would find on the Salvation Army store.

MN: Oh.

GS: You know, it was old clothes and stuff. But these kids wanted to do something to help the struggle in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Angola, and they slowly learned and probably knew as much about the geography of Southern Africa in those days as they did about other geographies. It’s this hard core west side ghetto.

MN: Yeah.

GS: Yep, that happened too.

MN: So what kind of things did you teach your students?

GS: What did I teach them? I taught them whatever I was told to teach them. I taught them literature if they were sophomores, and it was U.S. literature if they were seniors in advanced placement. Depend upon the class I always taught them the Vietnam book after – uh, I teach them literature. I teach them –

MN: And –

GS: I mean, I – well we’d have conversations about everything.

MN: So you taught them, though – you – about South Africa a bit?

GS: Well, I’d bring it in if I could.

MN: Yeah.

GS: Depended on when. If they – you know, if you’re a white guy and you’re teaching at Chicago’s vast ghettos.

MN: Right.
GS: The first day – until you get a reputation in the school, the kids know you’re not friendly. So, in 1980 I had just gotten out of Marshall High School in the West side. There had been like seven substitute teachers and I arrived just before the 1980 presidential election. So I’m the white guy that they don’t expect is going to last long. Kids come in and say, after Election Day, when Reagan won, you’re going to put us back into slavery now. I said, well, you don’t know me very well, but I should explain to you over time when we get to know each other. (Laughs) No, but why do you think the election of Reagan means you’re going to wind up slaves again? And it turns out the precincts happens across the West side went around and told black voters that they had to vote against Reagan because he was going to reinstitute black slavery.

MN: Really?

GS: Uh, and the kids at least, a lot of the kids believed it. So, you asked what you teach – some of what you teach depends on the number of books, because my principle was every child should have a book to take home and read tonight. Well not – most of the schools that I taught at they didn’t have enough books. They used class sets.

MN: Yeah.

GS: You know, you have thirty books for the room; kid can’t take it home, and then the kids who want to study or fall in love with the book, wind up stealing the book, from their own public school. It was bizarre.

MN: Yeah.

GS: So, I would always fight like crazy for the book, to make sure everybody could take home a book. And I always budgeted, I told people you had to budget 120 – 140 %. You’re going to have a hundred kids in this class; you’re going to need 140 books because human children, especially in this community, where everything is disrupted, we’re going to lose them. Or if the kid gets killed, I am not going to ask mom –


GS: - to bring the book back. I mean, I had a kid one day you know, he was – we were in the middle of Huckleberry Fin, he had finally fa – uh, past the test; Monday morning, kid comes in with the drop thing, because the kid had been murdered the night before in a gang fight. And you know, and you’re supposed to write down which books the family is suppose to return. I’m not going to do that. I mean, that’s nuts. So you lose a book, you’ve got to budget for having enough books. When you are teaching a book like To Kill a Mockingbird, even though, it’s kind of you know, wishy-washy, you can have a lot of fun with that, because the central theme is race. You can also have fun with the fact that, Harper Lee, for all her brilliance, didn’t render black dialect too well when she does that confrontational scene in the black church. The house keeper, Calpurnia, takes the two white kids to the black church and they have a confrontation with one of the black people. And the, the dialect is just a little bit – a white person’s version. And see we can have a little bit of that conversation –
GS: - with the class, once you know the class. You know, um, I mean there is a lot of things you can teach. But I didn’t teach – I rarely taught history and social studies. I mostly taught English.

MN: Okay.

GS: I taught shop for a while. Um, drafting. You know, you teach whatever they are going to pay you to teach.

MN: Right.

GS: Until you – But you can do a lot with literature. You know Moby Dick is one of the most incredible. People say Moby Dick? If you teach Moby Dick as a metaphor for the struggle for America to find its way in a multi-racial, multi- it’s, it’s an incredible thing. You teach Huck Fin as the story for what it’s like to be white; and try to deal with whiteness? You can’t cut out the N-word because Huck and the white people around him are using – that’s the way they talked.

MN: Right.

GS: But you got to get the kids to the point in the book where Huck sits there and says – if you remember it – Huck says, well I guess I’m going to go to Hell because all the Christians say if you steal someone’s property like I’m helping to steel Jim, you go to Hell. He says well I guess I’m going to go to hell. That’s an incredible white thing, right? It’s right there in Mark Twain. Later you can go about how Mark Twain did all the ant-imperialist agitation against the Philippines invasion. He, he wrote some of the best stuff about the horrors of the Belgian occupation of the Congo and the brutality of it. But Huck Fin. You got to deal with Huck Fin. And there is a lot of use of the word nigger in Huck Fin. And a lot of people go, well you can’t; you got to.

MN: Right.

(Paper blowing away)

GS: Uh-oh. Don’t lose it.

MN: (laughs) [Retrieves paper] got it.

GS: Anyway, it depends on what you teach. But I don’t believe that teaching should be primarily preaching.

MN: Right.

GS: You know you got to work it into the learning of what the kids are doing. If the first book a kid reads from stem to stern is Romeo and Juliet, and that’s happened –

MN: Yeah.

GS: You can teach in the context of a reality that the kids can learn from. That’s all. That’s how I teach; or how I use to teach. I’ve been blacklisted for ten years. They fired me in August 2000, they black-listed me city and suburbs. I went for suburban jobs teaching.

MN: Why did they fire you?
GS: Because I violated the board of education’s copyright, by uh, by publishing six of the CASE tests. It’s in the old Substance website.

MN: Oh, right. You said. Yeah.

GS: There’s a 7th U.S. Surrogate Court decision by Richard Posner, nineteen pages long, where he denounces me and uses me as an adjective. He said I’m an extremist. If I had figured out to compromise instead of publishing the whole thing, he might have listened to my argument. But because I said you have to publish the entire tests to see how ridiculous it is – You can’t just publish the stupidest questions, because I mean, anybody could say oh well we had one stupid question.

MN: Yeah.

GS: But the whole test was stupid. In fact, my favorite was a racist question on World History. One of my favorites. You had to study the whole test but this question was; the primary job of a woman in rural Africa is? Huh?

MN: Is?

GS: A: Gathering food and tending to the needs of the family. B-C-D – it was one of those multiple choice things. The reason I published the whole thing was you had to just look at that, right?

MN: Right.

GS: Africa extends from the Mediterranean Sea to Cape Town.

MN: Right.

GS: From the Indian Ocean to the Atlantic Ocean. Let’s do Africa; second largest continent on the planet; lots of women. This one was resting on the stereotype of rural black women from southern – south sub – uh sub-Sahara Africa. It was, it was so offensive and they gave it to twenty thousand high school kids in Chicago Public Schools in 1999. They never gave it since.

MN: So because you published it?

GS: That’s what I got fired for. I got fired for publishing that –

MN: But you changed –

GS: What?

MN: But you changed the – they didn’t give it to – out anymore? Because –

GS: No they didn’t – No they haven’t used that test through – or that back of tests since But they accused me of – the sued me for a million dollars. They said it cost them a million dollars to develop this pile of garbage, and that I had destroyed the value of it by publishing it. I said it was worthless to begin with. It was a waste of the tax payers’ money. And we did the city a favor by showing how that example of how the money was wasted.
MN: Looking back how do you feel about what you did?

GS: Of that piece?

MN: Yeah.

GS: It was consistent with all the other stuff I did. I mean, you know, it was kind of rough to lose the teaching bump. But, I mean, if you think about all the people that we’ve dealt with or supported or struggled with, just think about Nelson Mandela as the set piece. I mean, Robben Island was never a picnic. And you know, come on, getting blacklisted from teaching ain’t much.

MN: Yeah.

GS: Especially because I had twenty-eight years. So, I mean, it would have been nicer if I could have worked to a full pension.

MN: Yeah.

GS: You know, Sharon’s working – teaching at Steinmetz High School now.

MN: Your wife.

GS: My wife. Uh, you know, but we’ve been able to survive. I mean, a lot of people are too scared to ever be able to do anything. They wake up when they are sixty years old and you know, they say, I was supposed to do that when I was twenty. No.

MN: No.

GS: you got to think to do it.

MN: You mentioned earlier about, um, Reagan’s election and – well how did you react to Reagan’s election?

GS: Well, I didn’t realize how comprehensively it was going to change things. Um, looking back now, the intellectual underpinnings of the insanity that we’ve had to suffer since then were being seeded with billions of dollars to buy professors and other people to say, this is the way the world should work. We knew it was going to be worse than it was. Some of us thought it would have been better if there was a viable social democratic or socialist party in the United States. Because the democrats are at best a week ally in the struggle for social justice. But the republicans were metastasizing into this horrible thing that exists today, uh, starting with the preparations to elect Reagan. I mean, the, the Reagan years were – it was funny because in a way it was the black and white was so much easier. There was a thing that I never checked out, but somebody said that Reagan’s policy on South Africa was; what do the white people want? And that may have been true. That he actually said those words. You know, our policy; whatever the white people want. Um, it was hard to imagine before hand, although, now we have lot of examples how totally well orchestrated bullshit can dominate an electoral contest. But Arnold Schwarzenegger was the genius of the same thing in one of the largest countries on Earth. So, you know, anybody who thought that a third rate actor, Ronald Reagan, couldn’t become
president of the United States – I mean, a fourth rate actor could become governor of California
with the same stuff, right?

MN: Right.

GS: We’ve got to know this. Um, the Reagan policies internationally were so, you know, if you
look at all the Iran contra and all this other stuff, they were so uniformly racist, imperialist, and
just ugly. I mean the support for the contras in Nicaragua, the murders of there. You know the
support for all those torture regimes in South America. Young critical support for Pinochet’s
dictatorship, um, was breathtaking. And it was hard to communicate to people during those
years. You know we’ve got to organize with a better strategic idea of what we are for, because
these people know what they want and what they’re going to do. There – and then with the fall of
communism and the collapse of the Soviet Union after 1989, the problem was that there was this
triumphal, international capitalism that gave us the mess we have now since uh, 2008. But it was
all built into that, that horror. I don’t know what else to say. It’s an era that I think is passing. But
it’s substituted individualism for, for, for social understanding and collective responsibility;
substituting greed for a sense of the common good; substituted white-supremacy and white-male
supremacy at its worst for – even though they were smart enough to recruit their Condalisa
Rice’s and their Barack Obama’s to do certain things. Um, and I put him in that category even
though, we got two pictures of him here; one of him with my wife and kid and one of him with
my brother at the White House.

MN: Was – how did they meet –

GS: Well, Barack use to come around the Union a lot when I was working for the Union.

MN: Uuhh.

GS: So, it was easy to get his picture taken. You know, you didn’t have to pay thirty thousand
dollars just to have a picture taken with Barack Obama. My brother’s picture, my brother is one
of the last survivors of the stone-wall riots, which gave birth to gay liberation and stuff – gay
pride.

MN: Right.

GS: He was a working class kid from New Jersey, who was also a gay artist. So he was at the
Stonewall when the shit hit the fan.

MN: Really?

GS: And he – he was – I guess he was catholic and conservative enough that he never had
partners who were too risky. So, unlike most of the people who were there he is still alive.

MN: Yeah.

GS: And now he’s just sort of famously regarded and he lectures on, on the Stonewall.

MN: Wow.
GS: Sop when Barack was trying to kiss and make up with Gay America, after all that bullshit, my brother was one of the two people that was invited to the white-house to get his picture taken with the president and the first lady.

MN: What is your brother’s name?

GS: Thomas Lanigan Schmidt. He uses my mother’s name and my dad’s.

MN: Okay.

GS: You can Google him easy.

MN: How do you spell Lanigan?


MN: Okay.

GS: I mean –

MN: That’s interesting.

GS: But you know we’ll – I don’t know what he thinks at this point about Barack, but I’m – that whole community was kind of angry that they were pushed back after helping elect Obama. And when Obama appointed Arne Duncan and tried – and pushed the Chicago Plan on American Public Schools, I mean that was it for us. And that’s not even counting Afghanistan. You know, or Timothy Geithner or any of the other things that are out there as a fact of history. But that’s okay. I mean, I rather that Michelle Obama can be the first lady of the United States than Nancy Reagan. I mean, that’s a good thing.

MN: Yeah.

GS: You had to sit there in front of a TV in the 1950’s, you know I said I didn’t have many memories before high school, but I never forgot that scene with Jackie Robinson. And that was a whole generation. That’s, that’s the way they thought. You know.

MN: Yeah. What about Reagan’s policies on South Africa? How did you feel about –?

GS: (laughs) we opposed them completely.

MN: Yeah.

GS: I mean, the, you know, that was across the board. That was part of the divestiture – I mean, I remember the Reagan people tried to slide – I forget the guy’s name. What was it? Sullivan? Minister from Philadelphia, who tried to come in as a broker for a compromise on divestiture, and uh, that began under Reagan. Um, I forget what Sullivan – I mean you’re asking me to remember something that was a while ago. Um, American Foreign Policy has – is unlikely to – well, it’s better now than it was.

MN: Right.
GS: I’m glad we elected Barack Obama. But I’m glad people are learning that you can’t have too many illusions about somebody who is going to get to the presidency courtesy of the Democratic Party.

MN: Um, how did you participate in anti-apartheid boycotts?

GS: What do you mean? The boycott of South African goods and stuff?

MN: Yeah. And like, what about the – or protests, marches?

GS: If there was marches and we had the time, we’d be at them. If there were – you know the main thing we did, like I said, was through the Union and through the stuff in the schools.

MN: Right.

GS: And the biggest thing was that our focus was on that pension fund and that as a model for all the pensions that had the control. You know, just to frame that, Chicago teachers Pension Fund has, has, has um, twelve trustees who decide on all the policies. Six of those are elected by the active teachers who are working in the Chicago Schools. Three are elected by the pensioners; two are by the board and one by the principles. So, if you have a democratic chance to actually influence that policy, you have to elect people to the trustees as the CTPF [Chicago Teachers Pension Fund??]

MN: You have to elect trustees?

GS: You have to elect trustees like a told you, we elected Lou Pyster.

MN: Yeah.

GS: And that person then has to go to the trustees meetings, which are public, and speak out for a policy.

MN: Right.

GS: Against a guy who is equally _____(??). Who gets up and says the only color I care about is green. So, you know, that’s a long, that was a long struggle. But we did it.

MN: Yup

GS: And then, suddenly – I remember I was teaching at Bowen High School the day of the election in South Africa. You remember that? I don’t know if you have seen the movies of the election.

MN: No.

GS: People stood in the sun for 8-12 hours. You know, some without bringing enough water. So they could vote for the first time. There were pictures of black people lined up –

MN: Yeah.
GS: - for blocks, waiting to vote in the townships and stuff. And I, I was at Bowen High School, which was half Black and half Mexican. (Phone rings). Most of the teachers were Black and other. Hang on. I got to get this real quick. [Answers phone] Hello?

[Tape turned off for a short break]

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MN: Okay, we’re back.

GS: Good. So what did we do? You know there were marches, there were protests, but our focus was what I said.

MN: Did you ever do like Coca-Cola, Polaroid boycotts? Stuff like that,

GS: Probably. I don’t even remember. If I look at the – you know we’ve got the visual records, so there might have been an ad sometime, you know one of those Coca-Cola can ads.

MN: Yeah.

GS: I mean, I remember IBM and some of those places were less directly tied, but they had some sort of connection, and we were dealing with that. I’ll have to find it. I’ll have to mail it to you. You are going to have to give me your card and some place I can send some stuff when I photo-copy.

MN: Yeah. That’d be great.

GS: Because you know, at least we kept the – we, we put what we had in print. I remember other stuff, but I haven’t gone back and read those papers in a long time.

MN: Um –

GS: That’s why I like journalism. You put it there, and if you’re accurate the first time and well edited you can go back and say, oh, that’s what happened. You know?

MN: You were talking about the election, in South Africa.

GS: Oh. Most of the – I was on the second floor of the Bowen annex building, that was where my classroom was that year. And most of my colleagues were black teachers. At the time the majority of teachers were black, that’s been wiped out by Mayor Dailey and Arne Duncan too. He has gotten rid of over 2,000 black teachers in the past seven years by closing so called failing schools. Um, but I remember some of them had TVs in their room and they were watching that, because it was so big. And I remember one woman just sitting there crying, and one great teacher, veteran teacher, twenty-five years experienced, the whole – she just sat there crying looking at that, that line. You know, it’s just what it’s about; this is what it must have been like in 1865. You know that was the analogy. Um, and I was always glad when I was working close to large numbers of Black people to be able to have that, you know, get that feed back to understand that from that perspective. Um, that explosion of voting just meant so much to so much of the world. It was like Grant Park in November 2008 when Obama won. You know it was like – um, all these things are going to lead to disappointment later because the motion is so
great and reality is going to come by – but yeah that was, that was part of that thing about the
election. Then when – you know I was skeptical when, when Nelson Mandela said he was going
to try to work out a reconciliation, because –

MN: The Truth and Reconciliation –

GS: Yeah, because I – you know, I knew people who had been tortured by various right wing
regimes and I wrote about that kind of stuff and I don’t personally feel a lot of Christian charity
to people who do that to other people. You know the people who – who was it Steve Biko? That
they killed, fractured his skull when they were beating him uh, I forget who –

MN: Uh, that sounds like it.

GS: Yeah. You know, I mean, all those regimes do the same thing to the people who were rounded up opposing
them. Whether it’s the Vietnamese, or the – you know they are just very nasty. And they pay the
most sadistic human beings to do horrible things to other human beings. So to say we are going
to have a Reconciliation, um, that’s amazing to try to do that. Only Nelson Mandela could have
tried to even bring it off. Because he had been on Robben Island, he had suffered, you know as
much as anybody. But I don’t think even he could try to calm the rage of the people who, who
had lost their, their loved ones to that kind of treatment. I mean you should only spend a few
days actually researching what they actually do when they decide to do that to people. You don’t
ever need to study it farther than that, but it’s unforgivable. That’s why we have human rights
laws in the world and why this whole thing was around in Afghanistan and the Whole War on
Terror on Iraq and Afghanistan has been so nasty. Because you know, to give the green light to
that stuff officially – There’s the Ice Cream Man, he is looking over here hoping that my boys
are going to run out, but they’re not here. See.

MN: (laughs) um –

GS: Anyway.

MN: How would you propose then for – instead of the Truth and Reconciliation report?

GS: I, I personally think that – well let’s put it here, because I’m not going to interfere with
South Africa’s right to how it’s going to define how it’s going to -

MN: Okay.

GS: - under its current leadership. I think, now that it’s come out today that the head of the CIA
helped destroy the interrogation tapes, I think those men and woman who uh, supported and
carried out torture on the behalf of the United States, this is not harsh treatment. Harsh treatment
is a euphemism for torture. Torture is a systematic sadistic application of pain, psychological and
physical to another human being – for whatever purpose. It’s usually to terrorize a group. Those
people should be brought to justice. Now you can’t bring them to justice in the sense that you
can make them endure what they made other people endure, but they at least should be stripped
of any power and, or dignity that they would have in the community, because they had to make a
personal decision to do those things, or to be part of an apparatus that did those things. And that
would go to the South African security people who did those things to other people in South
Africa. And I would apply it, because we talked about necklacing earlier; it probably applies to
certain people in the Black forces too. Um, but unless you are going to defend a civilized
standard against that extreme, you really are going to start losing the ability to have a civilized
society, real quickly.

MN: Yeah.

GS: Um, and, and you know this is the city where police officials, not just officers. I mean, and
you know, street cop is going to slap you around. I mean, I got slapped around in September
having a run in with a street cop for leafleting in front of the union meeting when I was not
supposed to. We worked that out by the next month. But a police officer is going to slap you
around maybe, because it’s a harsh job in a town like this. It’s not true maybe in the suburbs, but
for the police to handcuff somebody on, on a radiator and then, turn up the heat, which is what
police officers did in this town to people. That, that has to be stopped.

MN: Yeah.

GS: Whether it’s in Chicago, Cape Town, or Tehran.

MN: Have you ever been more than slapped around as you say?

GS: No, but I had – I was arrested once with a person who was. In 1968 Democratic Convention
we had a six person team and one of our people was a, was female, and so she was separated
from us and they really were nasty to her. Um, I was with a couple Vietnam veterans and some
other people. We were down in the U.S. Army was in Washington Park during the convention,
and we were talking to them because we were doing the GI movement thing. And most of the
people I was with had just gotten back from Vietnam and were males, but this young woman
from Minneapolis came along. And so we were arrested and we were put in a cell. She was
taken. She didn’t get out after another day and a half. But one of the things they did to her was
they hand cuffed her arms behind her back and then they made her lean with her head against a
wall. And they slowly moved her feet back farther and farther. And they put a pin right next to
her eye.

MN: (gasps)

GS: this is in Chicago in August 1968.

MN: 19 – August 1968, Chicago.

GS: When she came back, she couldn’t talk about it for a day and then we finally sat her down
because we were together. We were kind of like an infinity group. Well what did they do? And
she finally said it.

MN: That’s traumatizing.

GS: Uh yeah. Oh, she was never going to go out and protest again. I mean it’s one thing to
believe all that Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi stuff. It’s another thing to have a couple of
sadistic female police officers decide how much they could make you suffer when you are
absolutely unable to see any way out. So that’s what happened. Uh, and you know, worst than
anybody that was with me that day was this, one guy was this whole pacifist thing and it turned
out he was claustrophobic and he hadn’t told us. So we all get thrown in this two person cell.
And he starts going into melt down, and we had to hold him the whole day. I mean, man, if
you’re claustrophobic you can’t do your Gandhi thing. Sorry. Next time tell us.

GS: You know that’s the complexity at the ground level of all this kind of stuff.

MN: So you spent a little bit of time in jail you’d say?

GS: Just a little. Just a couple times I was taken into custody for stuff. That one in the convention
I later – it was funny because I had short hair and you know, most of the convention arrestees
were hippies, but I was with a bunch of soldiers who had come back from Vietnam, and we were
talking to soldiers. And so when it came to trial the arresting officers testified that we were all
hippies and my lawyer just had a picture of me from the day of the arrest. He was like, do you
recognize this person? That looks like him. You just testified that he was a long-haired hippie. Is
that him? Your honor? End of case.

MN: Um, And anything – were you ever in jail for anything for the anti-apartheid movement.

GS: No, no. Nope, and I, I missed the big demonstration at the beginning of the Iraq War, and a
friend of mine was the oldest person in the cell down on 111th street when they did that big round
up on Chicago Avenue. He said this is kind of cool. He was 60, and he said, most of the people
with him were in their twenties. He said this is a new generation. I said it’s about time. That’s
good. They were pretty scientific and mean about it. No. I was never arrested on – and I can’t
remember. Might have been some stuff that happened, but you know.

MN: Right. Now, what event or person would you say was the most influential in your
experience as an activist?

GS: There’s a lot of them. There’s just a lot of them. You know, in every, in every – I’ll give you
an example. We marched against segregation and racism during the anti-apartheid years 1976 we
marched into Marquette Park as a group called the Martin Luther King Jr. Movement Coalition.
Marquette Park at the time was 100% white and there was a Nazi Office right there at the 71st
and Rockwell. And on the wall of the building, a three flat, was painted the swastika and it said
niggers, go home, in like five foot high letters. So we get to march and we had a permit, but only
200 of us were allowed to march and they provided six police officers. We go to the corner of
71st and California, somebody from the city of Chicago conveniently dumped a load of concrete
on the edge of the park so that people could throw stuff at us, and there were 2,000 white people
there trying to kill us. Minimum 2,000. I mean, so, you know, so the sky filled with shit.

MN: Oh, my gosh.

GS: Into the street. And, and, so, I remember distinctly, this is the kind of thing that’s valuable,
two things; one, is the leaders of the march, which was a couple of Black ministers and this
lawyer I know, had moved ahead of the march about ten feet so they were getting pummeled the
worst, but we had to stay in the street because most of the marchers were black. And if you were
black you were color coded for destruction if you went onto the sidewalk. And I thought you
know, those people are still standing, that’s really admirable. And I’m ducking shit too, but you know, I’m just looking at them thinking this. And then I noticed this one white guy who was a real outspoken activist type, he disappeared into the white side of the sidewalk. I suddenly saw him over there being white. It was an incredible example of how white can be a privilege. So that he could get out of the street and become white, he wouldn’t be – all this stuff happening. So that sort of the –

MN: So –

GS: The, the yin and yang of it. You know you’ve got the –

MN: How did –

GS: So, I – you know – that day those people who were standing in the street – you know – you asked for who is your role model. I mean there is hundreds of them during the war, men and women who stood up to the war from inside the armed forces. Uh, when my son Danny, who is in college now, was young, and Sharon and I got married, we needed a Sunday school for him. His mother and I were divorced and she was suppose to provide him with her Christian education, but she wasn’t doing it, so we said okay, got her clearance, because it was in the divorce thing. He’s going to go to Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, because, Sharon’s Presbyterian plus Dutch reform. Depends on which church she likes to go to. I don’t know if you know Fourth Pres. But it’s worth on Sunday. It’s the church across the street from the Hancock building.

MN: Oh okay. Yeah.

GS: On North Michigan. It’s the rich people’s church.

MN: Okay.

GS: So we go to the church.

MN: Yeah.

GS: And he goes to Sunday school. One of the Sunday school teachers was a guy, I found out after we get to know people, had been one of the first West Point –

MN: OH.

GS: - graduates to become a Conscientious objector and oppose the Vietnam War.

MN: Wow.

GS: And you know this is twenty years later, he’s teaching Sunday school at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago. We talked about, you know, -- you don’t even know who all these people are. You meet them over time, maybe later or maybe the day people are throwing bricks at you trying to kill you. That day in the street I remember one scene – There was a bunch of very well organized, hard core Trotskyites in this march with us, from the youth against the war in fascism, it was called.

MN: Okay.
GS: And we all, by the way, we used hickory two by fours and three quarter inch ply wood to hold our signs, not that thin stuff.

MN: Okay.

GS: the reason was, we had a hunch it might get rough.

MN: Okay.

GS: And you really want to have hard wood if you are going to have to defend yourself. But anyway the, one of the things, these crazies were throwing at us was these quart beer bottles. They, they drink half the beer and then they throw the thing and they see it spinning end over end with the beer foaming out. And I’m watching this woman, and we’re trying to bat these things away with the sticks, and one of them got this woman –

MN: (gasps)

GS: - right on the forehead. And she went down and you know, when you get cut across the forehead there’s a lot of blood. And she went down, she came back up, and her comrades –

MN: Yeah.

GS: - made sure that they stayed with her and held her up and that she was able to finish the march. Because it wasn’t like she could leave the March and say, excuse me I have to go to the hospital, because these assholes on the sidewalk were going to kill any of us that were in the street.

MN: Okay.

GS: So that’s uh, you know, I, I forgot her name. But that, you know, when you’re talking about who you admire, there’s the official people you are suppose to admire.

MN: Like –

GS: Right.

MN: Martin Luther King.

GS: Martin Luther King, etcetera, etcetera, we give holidays to them. But then there’s these other people whose courage –

MN: The every day –

GS: - actually, everyday. You know like, the people who bought that church, you just saw them, you know and they – they’re just doing all kinds of good stuff right here in this community, despite Eddie Cortez, but everybody else is cool with it. Um, and I – there’s a lot of examples if you think back through life, there’s lots of examples like that. Because that’s what really matters for, for kids. And if we’re going to set an example, you want to set an example for your own children, and you want it to be solid and live. Not something where you preach one thing and you practice another. You know, if you say you want to be, if you say there should be a faithful relationship between parents, and they should respect each other and respect the children, then
you don’t go and have affairs on the side. You just are consistent. If you – if that’s your thing
then you don’t do the other. Uh, I don’t know that’s – I could probably think of fifty or sixty
people and some of them I could still name. I hope that would help, but that would be the
perspective it would be in.

MN: Okay.

GS: And there is a lot of people I know, you know. It is just an incredible number of people, who
have shown more courage under the harshest circumstances than anything we could imagine.
And South Africa gave a lot of examples of that and, and produced a man whose name will be
remembered for centuries.

MN: Nelson Mandela.

GS: Nelson Mandela, but he knew he was a leader of a people not just, you know, the big guy.

MN: Yeah.

GS: Now I’m not sure the people who are following in his wake
are capable of the same sort of
wisdom. But that’s okay.

MN: This one is a little more broad, but how has being active in the movement changed your
life?

GS: (laughs)

MN: Enriched, you know diminished? (Laughs) um –

GS: Um –

MN: Changed your characteristic?

GS: I can’t think of any other life I could have lead, it was a – you know.

MN: Rewarding?

GS: Well, one of the biggest rewards came uh, two days ago; Sharon and I celebrated our twelfth
anniversary. Sharon and I met because she admired Substance and wanted to write for Substance.
And I had gotten out from a bad marriage and was raising Danny, here. Uh and working my ass
off. And I mean it was like we got married. So you know, activism quote, paid off. Uh, with true
love and happiness and they all lived happily ever after. How’s that?

MN: Sounds good to me.

GS: I mean the rest of it is all like, all the usual good stuff, you know I can look my kids in the
eye.

MN: Yeah.

GS: And I can say here’s what I did and why. You know what did you do during the war,
Daddy? I did this. That’s important, because when you’re raising your own children you have to
be able to be as honest as possible with each age. You know, their developmental stages will change. But when my older guy – when I was sued for a million bucks, he was nine years old, and his mother hated my guts, she was my ex. So when it got on TV, and it was on all the TV stations –

MN: This was at Substance?

GS: Yeah because of substance, this is when we published the CASE tests –

MN: Okay.

GS: - and among other things that creepy question about African women. Um, and he saw it, his mother encouraged her to believe I was edited for stealing a million dollars from the children of Chicago. Not for infringing on a copyright that the mayor and the spin misters at CPS are going to try to spin that way. It took a while for him to get comfortable with what actually happened and to sort out the facts. Two weeks ago, during a vacation, we went to Berkley to see him, because he might graduate within the next six months if they are offering the courses, and his little brothers won’t be able to see him as an undergraduate and all the glory of that, and that we wanted them to see.

MN: Right.

GS: In Berkley, so we flew out there. And, and you know, by now he’s real comfortable with everything I’ve – most everything I’ve done. I think for a long time he felt bad that I divorced his mother, but I think now that it was better for everybody that that happened. But it’s really good to be able to have that. Uh, but it was rough at the times when, you know I was doing stuff that, you know, she told him that I was going to lose the house, I was going to lose my job, he was never going to be able to do the things he wanted, because I was going to go bankrupt. And it was all my fault for being crazy.

MN: So, like, you wanted to be a good role model?

GS: No, I just felt that it was responsibility for you to be consistent and fair and honest and then you would be one. I think there’s a difference.

MN: Okay.

GS: You know, you don’t say, I’m going to be a role model.

MN: Right.

GS: you say, I’m going to do what’s right, work for justice, try to print the news accurately, not blow a source if I get an off the record source on a news story.

MN: So you weren’t worried about the role model aspect but the –

GS: No, the role model aspect comes with I think the other things. It feels pretty good to be able to say that stuff, and even to not remember a lot of it. If I go back now and send you the Connie day stuff, um, you got to write how I can mail you a pile of stuff here, now that we’ve gotten this far. So write the whole thing there. [Hands Melena a notebook]
MN: Okay.

GS: Name, address, city, state, zip, email, and phone number.

MN: And, what was your biggest – this is also probably could apply to many answers – um, your biggest contribution to the movement? It’s one of the required questions.

GS: (laughs) you know what’s cool about that question?

MN: What?

GS: You would have to ask people going all the way back to Lyndon, New Jersey, and continuing until today; in different, in a lot of different movements; anti-war, GI, schools, anti-apartheid. So, I couldn’t say, because that’s something other people have to say. Maybe ultimately if you get to be sixty-three years old and you could still be doing this stuff, then you can – when younger people say I really want to work for justice and go out there and get that fiery passionate thing that you see. And some old person says oh, you’ll grow up. You can say well I know some people who never grew up and that sense. You know, if it’s wrong it stays wrong, no matter what age you are looking at, right? So maybe that will help at his point, right? Because I can’t run around and go out and run up and down in Colorado Springs where people are going to have a tank race for me. I don’t do that anymore. But if there’s other people doing it we’re fine. So I think that’s the way I’d have to view it.

MN: So just passing the word on –

GS: Yeah, that’s why we got the website. It’s easier to get it now. Although, it’s still hard to find it. I mean, there is so much sludge on the internet, that’s just wonderful(??).

MN: Yeah.

GS: There’s a funny story about how you can be naïve. My second wife was Romanian. I got involved in the Romanian movement against the communist dictatorship in the late 80’s.

MN: Uuhh.

GS: And um, helped publish a newspaper called, Democratic Romania, for a thing called the Romanian Freedom Formarea. And after Ceausescu was overthrown, I thought freedom of the press in Romania would mean stuff like Substance. Couple months later, the new free press of Romania started coming out from Romania; you know what most of it was? The freedom to, to porn.

MN: Oh.

GS: The mild tabloid newspapers now had Miss Page three everyday like the British tabs, and the hard core stuff was coming out all over Eastern Europe within a year. So much for the first amendment (laughs). You know, that what freedom is.

MN: Yeah.

GS: So, never, never assume what’s going to come out of the struggle that you helped.
MN: That’s funny.

GS: That sure, took me a while to get my head around it. This guy I was working with, on the Romanian Freedom Formarea, he was an exile. His wife was back home in a town called Arad. He comes in one day and he’s crest fallen. I said what’s the matter man? He opens the local newspaper to page three. Miss Page Three, topless, was his wife. He says what am I going to do? I said I never go there on this kind of thing. I don’t know what this means, man. So you know, freedom has a lot of meanings.

MN: Um, looking back now, what would you have done differently? If you could do it over again?

GS: Probably would have been, a lot less impatient with people who weren’t putting in with the intensity – At times I was pretty tyrannical. You know, I mean people contribute as much as they can, at the level they can, and you have to be aware of that. But if you really get into a thing, you can get, you can get really tunnel vision about the people around you, and lose the ability to be a part of that. You know, complex humanity is swirling all around you. So whenever you get really intense about a form of activism or a cause, you have to have some way of recognizing that all these things are going to end. Apartheid ended. The evils and injustices in South Africa continue in different form. But once, you know, if all your energies are devoted to ending apartheid and you’re going to sacrifice the people around you and everything else to do it, you may be making a mistake. You got to step back. Take one day out of seven off. Relax. I think that’s a big thing you have to do. And I, I – there are other times in my life where I could have done a better job of noticing that. I mean every night before we go to bed now, we read or tell bed time stories to the little ones.

MN: Yeah.

GS: And the one I usually get stuck with is making up a monster story for the little one. He just has to have these two fictional characters defeat a monster. And then at the end of every night, every night at the end of the story they go to bed again and they all live happily ever after. And you have to have that.

MN: Yeah.

GS: And that’s got nothing to do with defeating Arne Duncan’s education plan and etcetera. You know, because the five year old is going to set the agenda. And we won that fight too. (Laughs) [Waves to a neighbor] That’s the woman who runs the church programs. I mean that was kind of – that one almost just sort of flowed, but when it was in her own back yard it was kind of funny. When Eddie went toxic about the black people –

MN: Eddie –

GS: Eddie Cortez, the guy two doors down. That was his wife out there by the way. She’s a very nice person. She came to me one time; she said I got to tell you Eddie’s not a racist. I said okay, you tell me. I am just saying, okay, you tell me he’s not a racist. This just means everything he did was racist. And we’re going to stop him, and I don’t care what he thinks about black people, he’s just not going to make this block into a hot bed of craziness. Story end; we won. I better uh; I better get you back to the El.
MN: Okay.

GS: You may need to ask more questions, and we should wrap this up because –

MN: Yeah, I just got –

GS: You got your time.

MN: - one more left. What –

GS: Do it.

MN: What challenges does South Africa face today, do you think?

GS: Well, South Africa has been stuck as part of the new global economical order and neo-liberalism. That’s depicted very well in some fictions. Uh, I think it’s been analyzed very, very well in Naomi Klein’s book, *The Shock Doctrine*. She has a big section on it, on South Africa. And uh, it’s kind of nice that we are in the same boat. I mean the neo-liberal, which is basically finance capitalism at its worst, agenda is to do this to all of us and now they are doing it here in the United States. And the schools are the cutting edge. Um, so well we can get back to this internationalist perspective. It’s kind of sad that they had to undergo that incredible class bifurcation in the society rather than moving towards more equity. But I, I wish them well. Can you imagine being a South African gold miner?

MN: No.

GS: I mean, well, anybody who goes down in the Earth, whether it’s coal miners in West Virginia, or China, or South Africa they’re going to be the hard core struggle for justice at some point. And so we’ll also be staying in touch with the unions. You know, that’s the – *The Shock Doctrine* does a good job of linking all that and we’re just writing the latest chapters because the Obama administration is pushing that same agenda on behalf of finance capital. Which some of my friends call neo-liberalism, but I prefer the classical descriptions.

MN: And you said that was *The Shock Doctrine*?

GS: Yeah the book is *The Shock Doctrine*. It’s by Naomi Klein. She’s a Canadian, whose parents went into exile during the Vietnam War. She writes regularly for the nation and she’s written a few books on Globalization and basically, all they are saying is we told you so because it’s coming home to the United States now. They did it in Eastern Europe and the – from 1989 on. Jim Veil who writes for Substance covered the Yeltsin era in Russia. You know, the people who built solidarity and over-threw the tyranny in Poland wound up getting the same, same shit as the people in South Africa are getting now. They’d be a hard press to stand together and say, wow, we’re the same. The ship yard workers from Gdansk, Poland and the miners from South Africa. But it’s true.

MN: Yeah.

GS: It’s a class thing.

MN: Um. Is there anything else you want to say?
GS: Nope, thanks. Good luck to you. I’m really glad that um, Columbia College is doing this.

MN: Any – any more names of anti apartheid activists that you think would want to help?

GS: I’ll think about it as I look back through this, now that we’ve uh, we’ve gone through this.

MN: Yeah.

GS: Because if I come up with somebody, I will send you. The main I would say, if it’s possible, um, is – see if you can locate Jarvis Williams.

MN: Jarvis Williams.

GS: Because there was an entire part of the American Union Movement – Prexy knows this too –

MN: Okay.

GS: But to get that on, on the record is very important, because there is a tendency for so-called progressives to view American Unions as sort of a big lump of semi-conservative, self interest. And that’s never been true. So, you want to use the washroom and stuff?

MN: Um –

GS: I’m going to and then we’ll go. I’ll drive you back to the El.

MN: Okay, thank you very much for this.

GS: Okay.

[End of final tape]