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Interview with Tim Wright

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JONATHAN VOGEL:

My name is Jonathan Vogel J-O-N-A-T-H-A-N V-O-G-E-L I’m interviewing Tim Wright T-I-M W-R-I-G-H-T, it’s November 25th, and the location of the interview is Mr. Wright’s office on East Wacker Drive. So I’d like to start by just asking you when you started your anti apartheid

TIMOTHY WRIGHT: Honestly I don’t know when. I think I had an um I had an awareness from um high school. Ya know I tend to kind of reflect on people like Patrice Lumumba and I don’t know where it really came from. It was just an interest that I had and it certainly hadn’t matriculated itself into anything like, formed itself into anything as clear as anti-apartheid or divestment movement. But I think it kind of came out of the injustice that I saw growing up being black in America. You know I grew up next door to Watts and in fact my grandmother lived in Watts. And so all these incidents that I saw related even to Watts riots I was at the park when that stuff jumped off. I was playing baseball and I saw what took place and the reactions. And even more important than that I saw how they treated my father.

I remember one incident we went to Chinatown to eat. We were all in the station and we were pulled over. They made him lay on the grounds as they checked. They didn’t have any warrants or anything. Just the abuse that came out. And seeing that grow up, growing up I kinda had a umm I guess you know . It was clear I wasn’t from there even though I was a foreigner. It was clear (unintelligible). The focus then kind of turned to Africa and so it was just something that I was distinctly aware of at an early age. So that didn’t really manifest itself into any potential stuff to South Africam maybe you know high school subject of studies, you know book reports- stuff like that. And my first heightened awareness took any kind of significant action was probably about college.

JV: So where did the bulk of your anti-apartheid activism take place?

TW: Where did the bulk of it take place?

JV: Mmhmm.

TW: professors who were aware of this stuff, like Angela Davis, like Dr. James Garrett. I think my freshman year I got involved in a group- that was I got involved in a group that was trying to insure that the CIA stayed out of Angola and that so called civil war between the fractions. And so. It was at that time that I took on some role of activism dealing with what you would call apartheid. It was actually taking place in Angola at the time and the South African government was supporting UNITA in their efforts to dominate the sub-saharan African continent.
JV: And so I will start with some more biographical questions. What year were you born?

TW: Fifty Five.

JV: Where were born?

TW: Los Angeles.

JV: Where were you raised?

TW: Compton.

JV: Where was your father born?

TW: Vernon, Oklahoma.

JV: And how about your mother?

TW: LA.

JV: And so how did you get your name?

TW: Well, my name was named after my father after my grandfather after his father and after their father. My grandfather was a Chock Indian and his name was Timothy W. Wright. His father’s name was Timothy W. Wright except they didn’t count back then. So it was assumed.

JV: What is your earliest memory?

TW: Probably being a toddler. And interacting with my mother. Throwing her pins around while she was making a dress. Walking her outside of the door. Is maybe my earliest memory.
JV: What did your mother do?

TW: My mother did a lot of different things. She was an athlete. She went to school with Tom Bradley at Jefferson High School. She was known as downtown maple brown. She was I guess a professional baseball player. She was a singer, she was a dancer. She was a uh, she did a lot of political work and she became, she settled down, she raised all the kids. She used to be a nurse for quite a while. And then she became what is called a key punch operator. I think that is what ultimately where she retired from.

JV: Would you say that her political work influenced some of your activism?

TW: Ahh, I wasn’t that aware of it. I knew that uhh every time we had an election our house would be set up as a polling place. And I knew that uhh she would - and I met like the first black mayor of Compton who was (unintelligible). But I was just, I probably more aware looking back now then I was then looking at what she was doing.

JV: Right. Can you tell me what your neighborhood was like growing up?

TW: My neighborhood was uhh, typical Compton neighborhood. You know when you’re poor you don’t know you’re poor, but we wasn’t poor. I had a father who worked and mother who didn’t have to work and then she would work. But then we would have the basic kind of necessities, but we didn’t have uhh a whole lot. It was a typical lower middle class neighborhood where every person on the block, every household on the block, you knew. And every household on the block you know- uhh the parents in that house had the ability to parent you too. And so the whole notion that it takes a village to raise a child was certainly alive and well there. And so they’re some of the fondest memories of my life but I also, umm you know things changed and there were gangs and shootings and killings, and I was shot and stabbed myself before I got out of high school. We had to arm ourselves and protect ourselves while were in high school, getting an education.

But the other part of my life was sports. Compton where I grew up just had a reputation for incredible sports. In terms of football, baseball, basketball, track, uhh we had probably more Olympains come out of Compton than anywhere else in the nation. We’ve had more football players in the NFL and so, the other side is that it was just a hotbed of athleticism and I was an athlete. I was in my element so to speak. But you know, all in all, I think it was positive, certainly the issue of gangs and the killings and all the stuff was tough. We didn’t know if we would survive it- when you don’t know that you will live you know beyond the age of eighteen and twenty or something like that it gives you a different perspective on your life . And so uhhh those are, it was good bad, it was good and bad and ummm, you know we’ll see. I mean I think there are some incredible lessons learned. It certainly had an incredible impact on my life. And certainly helped me survive in Africa too. But anyway.
JV: So at the time did you say you had professional ambitions or what were you looking forward to?

TW: I had ambitions from early on. I didn’t know what they were I thought I would probably be a professional athlete. I always wanted to be a lawyer. Even though I was the first in my family to ever go to college. So it wasn’t as if I had folk who had brought me along but I had folk who were pushing me to get there. So you know I was uhh, I was you know I was always fairly intelligent I did a lot of reading and so there was always a sense, I made good grades. Most folks you saw me on the street wouldn’t know that, but I did. You know when I played football I was a Nations Scholar Athlete. Pretty much a straight A student.

JV: So which sport did you play?

TW: Football. Or baseball.

JV: What positions did you play?

TW: Fullback. Linebacker. Defensive end. Umm, early on when I was a kid I played on the line. Then of course baseball I played center field or left field. Sometimes first base.

JV: So how did you decide to go to Claremont Men’s College?

TW: Well, I didn’t really, but I did. Umm, you know I was being recruited by a bunch of different football schools because of my grades. I was also recruited by Harvard, Claremont, Stanford but Stanford I didn’t view them as a football school anyway. So I thought I probably, I wanted to go to SC. I decided to stay in California, and I decided, after back and forth, I was recruited at UCLA. So I decided I was going to go to UCLA and play football and go to school. So that was my decision. And that was where I expressed my intentions, I made a commitment to go. But a couple of things happened. One was I tore up my knee during the end of the year. Umm, and you know tore it up again in the summer. So I didn’t think based on that that I would have a real shot (phone rings) of playing, I didn’t think I would have a real shot playing professionally playing at the college level. To play professionally. So I started thinking about the education I was getting. So what I wanted to do was quote unquote get out of the ghetto. Make some money. Take the next step. (Coughs). And so umm, umm, and so umm, so I started thinking about like Harvard and some of the other schools. In fact I met with the coach of Harvard and flew out there and it was snowing out there and I said, now look, and then
the coach at Claremont was real hot on me coming out. And I did a recruiting visit after
the fact, I was with Ricky Bell, Robin Cole, Danny Benson, all three of those players
got to the NFL. So anyway we went out, and it was pretty cool, but what I liked the
most was, the coach gave me a room to stay over overnight, and then I could keep a key
(coughs) had a lunchcard, so I would like, and then find out, at Claremont, there were
these beautiful women. So I went to a couple of parties and said man, this is pretty cool.
So I would go back out over the weekend and stay in the dorm and go into the cafeteria to
eat and like, enjoy the weekend. And I said I kinda like this. So I ended up changing up
my school and decided to go to Claremont. So that’s how I got there.

JV: So what did you study there?

TW: Well I studied economics and political science. So I came out with a dual degree, a
dual bachelor’s degree. Umm, but I started off in math. I did some engineering work.
Cough. Claremont was a difficult place because of the struggles as it pertained to students
of color you know black students on campus it wasn’t easy. I had like three or four
classmates, you know three or four other blacks in my class. I was told by one professor
they should have never allowed blacks to come to that school and he told me that I would
probably have never graduated from Claremont. And these were advisors. So it was a
challenge. I would be in all white classes, and I would ask questions, and everybody
would start laughing and the professor would say I don’t understand what you’re saying.
Growing up in Compton, you grow up with a whole nother kind of vernacular, I say I
learned how to become bilingual. I spent too much time at Claremont, and I would come
home and the brothers in the hood would say, man what are you saying. I don’t know
what you’re talking about. So I got to speak both languages so to speak.
So Claremont, in its efforts, we had a black studies center, they were always trying to cut
it back. We hired Angela Davis they tried to fire her. I remember my president, Jack
Stark, once told me that we were fire insurance. Meaning that we were allowed to come
into the school so that they wouldn’t burn it down. So anyway.

JV: That’s intense. So how did you get to go to Angola out of the Claremont Men’s
College?

TW: Well, two ways. One I didn’t even know about. One was from Angela Davis and a
book she was writing. I was her research assistant. (Coughs). And ultimately I wrote my
senior thesis on the Angolan economy, indicators of underdevelopment, the subtitle being
the prospect of transformation to a world economy. On the theory that most of the
colonial places that had been colonized in Africa only had extractive economies or
infrastructures, where they were pulling out wealth. And there was no finishing or
processing that took place. And finishing and processing is how wealth is created, how
wages are created and so on and so forth. But for example they are fishing out Walters
Bay in Angola and processing the fish up in Portugal. You know, and so, there was, that
was where the value was being created. So, anyway, [Phone Rings, Mr. Wright takes the
call, recording is turned off]

[Recording begins again]

TW: No I’m fine go ahead.

JV: So you were talking a little about Angola and the work you were doing for Angela
Davis. Can you talk a little about what you were doing with her or what was the intention
of the trip or your experiences there?

TW: Well, what was I doing with her- just going to Africa with her. I was her research
assistant so I would uhh research for our, it was just an opportunity to take a trip. I had
never been out of the country. Um and so really it was a series of meetings that she had
and I remember flying to South Africa, flying to Angola, and I met Dr. Augustine Onito
of the NPLA. You know I just became acutely aware from the discussions that were
taking about what the conflict was really about and it was ultimately really about South
Africa.

JV: Mmmhmm.

TW: Even with the Portuguese abandoning, with the Portuguese giving up Angola, just
saw what they did when they left, in terms of pouring cement into the sewer system and
stuff like that. Just anal stuff. Just angry stuff. As they had to leave Angola. And so, uhm,
it was a series of meeting and talking and visits looking at sites and so forth.

JV: And so umm, how did you become involved in your first anti-apartheid group?

TW: Well, again, what it was being able to see first hand what was taking place as
opposed to what was opposed to on the papers and knowing that I was very very different
and then trying to talk to people about that and get that information out. Umm I don’t
know who ultimately, Graylon Davis comes to mind, he was a uhhhh schoolmate of mine
at Claremont, and I don’t know who else but we started to talk about forcing universities
from supporting these companies who were ummm essentially supporting this South
African government and the apartheid regime. First was the talk about the atrocities
taking place, stuff that we actually saw, stuff that wasn’t being communicated by the
media. So I think it began with some awareness campaigns and being able to talk to
someone. It then turned into action (Coughs). And I think the divestment movement
began at UCLA. Uh, and then began to took around to some of the other colleges and
ultimately became full force. I remember being involved in that when I was in law school at UCLA and the divestment movement at UCLA to get the law school and universities from putting their money in the conflict and doing business there as a way of forcing some change. Umm I know after law school I was working with Carol Mosley Braun who was in the state representative to draft legislation divestment legislation for the state of Illinois. And then we did that and it was passed. With Baldman and others were involved but I was a principal drafter in that. Then it was connecting up with other players like Prexy. I think I met Prexy at the point that we were involved in advocacy around Angola. Umm and that would have been 74, 75. Right around there. And then I think, then having come to Chicago, after law school, which would have been 83, 82, 83, I reconnected back with Prexy and got involved you know the ongoing activity. Also I was a member of the National Lawyers Guild. Cough. And through the National Lawyers Guild I got engaged in volunteering time to be involved in some of these efforts that were taking place. Where they was going to South Africa and doing affidavits of detainees. Uhhh, some you know got involved in council for Namibia and the remnants of the Committee Against Apartheid. So anyway.

JV: So it was a pretty wide. So how did your family react when they understood you were becoming heavily involved in the activist movement?

TW: You know, no major reaction. I didn’t- My mother always worried about my safety. But other than that, my politics were mine.

JV: And so when were you talking about the divestment movement at UCLA, did you find that there was a great deal of support among your peers or was it something more struggling?

TW: I think it built a momentum. It was something that uhmm people were very cognizent of. For me it was always that connection (Coughs). Because I felt that until umm Africans were free in their homes I couldn’t be free in mine. You know I saw a direct correlation between how I was treated in this country versus you know in what was happening in that country. The similarities, the strife so I felt that the battle had to be fought there and that the implications of that battle or the ramifications of that battle would have impact here. I mean I saw, understanding being in California gives me a unique viewpoint particularly with respect to Japan. And Japanese and Japanese-Americans who had been incarcerated during the war uhmm and the status of Japanese of American, Japanese-Americans and I saw that as Japan kind of shrugged off its defeat and decided to engage in the economic market and became strong, as Japan became strong so did the fortunes of the Japanese increase. And Japanese Americans here. And their status, and ultimately so I saw that in a similar vein in respect to Africa. It hasn’t worked quite yet but it’s still on its way.
JV: Right. That’s interesting I’ve never thought about that. And so umm, let’s see, can you describe some your closest friends in the movement, especially when you first started in it?

TW: Well I think it would have been Prexy Nesbit, Sharon Pitts, Basil Clunie, Steve Cough. Haywood Burns. Umm you know there was so many out there. Graylon Davis as I mentioned earlier. Umm I guess just tons of people.

JV: And, uh can you describe sort of tensions in between activist groups, like any conflict between groups that were occurring when you were in the movement?

TW: Yea, I mean, I don’t particularly remember any. It doesn’t really kinda come out and uhh hit me. But you had a lot of groups and most were cooperative. You know same issues, but they had a different strength. Maybe this group (Coughs) was about Namibia, this group was about Mozambique, this group, but they were all fighting the same issue for the most part. So I didn’t pick up a whole lot of tension for the most part. There might have been some old Cold War kind of Communist kind of stuff happening with one group as opposed to another group, ideologues, this or that wasn’t nothing.

JV: Mmhmm. Can you describe for yourself a little bit about the relationships in the different African countires you visited and how it sort of impacted you, how you visited so many different places in Africa and how you feel that sort of travel impacted you?

TW: I’ve been able to see the real stuff. I’ve been able to experience the real stuff. I’ve been in Zimbabwe, I’ve been in Namibia, I’ve been in Mozambique, I’ve been in Zambia. I’ve been in South Africa. All these different places, they’re different people, you know (Coughs), it’s always incredibly interesting just to see how people cultures so forth so on. You know I guess if I was to step back a bit and say that what I have most appreciated is what I saw twenty five, thirty years and what I seen today. And to see that progress has taken place. Even looking at all the skirmishes on the planet. On the continent and how have they really become a few. Look at the modernization that has taken place and it gives you a sense of how that in fact ultimately umm Africa is going to be just integral, uhh to the world’s economy and full part and parcel and their governments will be, will reflect that and umm uhh it will be an interesting day. But this is you appreciate your culture, it also makes you appreciate the economic strength of this country and uhh you know your hopes that some of that can be created there.

JV: Mmhmm, To keep jumping around a little bit, can you describe how became involved in Harold Washington’s administration when you came to Chicago?
TW: (Coughs) Actually I became involved in Harold in LA. They did a fundraiser out there and I think I was an intern for Willy Brown at the time and I had volunteered to go there because I wanted to meet this guy Harold Washington. I was taking a civil rights course at the law school and Harold was carrying the civil rights bill in ’82, ’81 whatever it was. Therefore I remember going back there and going to this thing and kind of meeting Harold. And being enthralled with him. He and Tom Bradley was there. And Tom Bradley was always Tom Bradley who I thought was a candidate of the Jewish West Side Community in LA and not necessarily being of the black community. And in that sense kind of umm I heard Harold speak, and I’m like saying this is the real stuff. This is what we have to be. And the kind of progressive issues he was talking about and the way he dealt with the issue of color.

And so I decided that I wanted to help out, we talked and I took home some callbacks in Chicago I would come out here and work in some menial job passing out fliers just doing whatever volunteers did. And so that’s how I got involved, and then I decided to come to Chicago after law school and clerk I worked at Bpi, Business Profession People for Public Interest I was a public interest lawyer got involved in some stuff with Harold. And so I would be seen as somebody here. But at one point back in ’83, ’84 they tried to kick Harold out of office because of the ethics statement. So I got involved in that and essentially researched it and provided a memo to the corporation council and he looked it over and he thought it was it. He used it- I was in court that day with him. We won, you know a couple months later they invited me over so the mayor could thank me and my partner (Coughs).

And he did and he says, “Son do I know you from somewhere.” And I say, “Well we met in LA.” And so I think after that umm they made me an offer. I think we did park district and then Harold made me an offer to come in inside and I turned him down but he had other plans. And so he prevailed. And I started working with him. I started as the assistant to the chief of staff and I was deputy director of intergovernmental affairs, and I director of intergovernmental affairs, and I was special council to the mayor and then I was the commissioner of economic development for the city. But Harold and I were extremely close and you know I ran city council. I did some other things for me. He was my mentor. He taught me politics. So that’s the story. I ran city council, that’s it in the middle [Mr. Wright points to picture on wall].

JV: That’s incredible. Do you have any favorite memories from working under Harold Washington?

TW: Oh tons of them.

JV: Tons of them?
TW: Just tons of them. You know from the twenty nine-twenty one city council and uh
council wars quote unquote to the White Sox stadium to any interactions around that and
we got it done. That was a story every day. So very, very fond memories. Umm, stuff that
I would never talk about, but umm good stuff.

JV: Right, and was anti-apartheid activism a topic that came up in the administration, or
how was that?

TW: Oh sure. Harold was very much supportive of that. In fact when ummm Toyota
Toybil (coughs) was the first head of Spabo and was in prison on Robbins Island with
Mandela. And when he was released from Robbins Island one of the first places he came
was Chicago. And Harold Washington gave him the key to the city. Umm Harold knew
of my work in South Africa and was very much supportive of it. In fact it was under
Harold that umm the city prosecuted those seventeen defendants of the criminal trespass
and it was somewhat cooperative that most of the jurisdictions should have been
dismissed charges so they would just go away. Under Harold they maintained the charges
so the issues could be confronted.

JV: And so how did you get involved in that case, can you talk a little about how that
case started?

TW: Man you have to be pulling my memory like I dunno- Well you know people got
arrested at a protest and I was called in ahead of time, early to bail them out to get them
out of jail and I did that. And so we had bail money and all kind of stuff you do around
action like that. And so got em out, and you know proceeded to prepare. Uhm the
defense I represented 17 defenders so I put together a team of lawyers on the other side to
represent some of the top kaywers in the city. And I coordinated and wrote the bench
brief, which you saw. So you know, in fact, I was teaching at Columbia College.
And I was teaching a class called Law and Society. And I did- that became a project for
my class was the preperation of the defense of those 17 defendants including Jackie
Jackson, uhhh Dick Newhouse, Alice Palmer, uhhh you know all the ones that, Alice
Streeter, so we prepared the examination the cross examinations of the officers we
prepared the direct examinations of all the witnesses that we would have and we had just
a ton of witnesses (cough). I think ranging from Ted Kennedy to Charley Hayes to
Margerie Bantiff to Prexy Nesbitt to- and we just put on a trial.
And the trial and in a sense uhh, while we had utilized these defenses that we thought
would be available to us through the supremacy clause- in fact that these treaties and laws
of the UN were being violated in South Africa. So we also chose some local common
law, which was necessity. And so we had to show on the necessity defense all these
atrocities were being committed and weren’t being addressed and that you know under
the necessity defense allows you to address a wrong to break a minor law in order to
prevent a greater crime from occurring. And that’s essentially what we had to show. So it
was an extraordinary trial I think that those young Columbia students got the thrill of
their lives because that was their assignment to come in there every day.

JV: That’s great.

TW: And writing on that. But they were able to develop defense work through the theory
you know, and to prepare the witnesses and all these kind of things, I think that was the
last time I taught it. And then we had the trial.. Trial was about a week long we had
maybe 117 countries represented by press.

JV: Wow.

TW: I mean it was pretty huge. We did this and at the end the jurors came back with a not
guilty for each person and then they read a statement and they asked to join the Free
South Africa movement. (laughs) After demonstrating all of that. And so I mean it was an
interesting, an interesting piece.

JV-Did that bring a lot of awareness to the-

TW- It sure did.

JV- Mmhmm. And jumping ahead a little bit again, can you describe your reaction when
Ronald Reagan was elected?

TW- Well you know Ronald Reagan was from California. And my reaction was, “Damn,
they let him out.” Well yall in trouble now because yall don’t know Ronald Reagan.
Ronald Reagan and Samuel Highcower were always these conservative folk out of
California and Richard Milhouse Nixon was too. Umm but, umm, Milhouse was smart,
Reagan was not (coughs). And so I don’t know. My reaction was I hope we can survive-
we survived Hitler we survived other players we have to survive this too. But it wasn’t a
good reaction because I knew we’d be in for hell. I knew he’d be the kind of guy that
would support South Africa and the white regime.

JV-Did that sort of change the work you were doing here about apartheid or-
TW- No. it just- you just had to redouble your efforts. But it didn’t happen. I mean there were always opposition to it, you know. There was Kennedy, he was supporting these folks. So it was the same stuff.

JV- Mmhm. Can you describe some of your visits to South Africa during this period and how you had the opportunity to do that?

TW- Mostly it was through the National Lawyer’s Guild or through something else, some kind of seminar going on over there and we would utilize it to go over. You know back in those days you had to be an honorary, you had to have a visa, and so you had to be an honorary white person in order to get the visa. As you could well imagine after I did that trial I was never able to get another visa. And so ummm but most of these trips were trips where we were doing legal work or having conferences over working for example Odessa with the national lawyers guild sent some lawyers out to help the antina government when they were working on reforms to the constitution, so we got involved in that way. And there were trips when we had to bring information back to the UN that the South Africans didn’t want us to do. And so we had to play a little cloak and dagger and stuff in order to accomplish that. Or kind of we went into like, when they were protesting at Crossroads and the South African government was bulldozing those homes and it was illegal for us to be there at Crossroads and helping to organize those residents but we were doing it anyway.

JV- Can you describe some of the conditions you saw when you were in South Africa?

TW- I saw al little bit of everything man. You know the squalor, the shanty shacks, you know like you see right up there in that top picture where they got the eggs up there [points to picture]. They were voting. I mean that’s what people lived in. No plumbing. None of the stuff. The passbook laws and having the areas and how restricted and policed it was, militarize. In Soweto- Soweto was cool back then particularly back then because everywhere had to live there. Tutu lived there, Mandela lived there. Everyone had to live there. It was kinda like Compton under these restrictive racial covenants when you could live in certain places. In America we had doctors, we had lawyers, because they could only live in Compton. We had baseball players, we had a uhh, a mix economically ummm, and that’s how Soweto was back then. So there would be some very poor there would also be some very nice, well off, they had some nice houses. (coughs). But, you know, once people were liberated and lived where they wanted to live that leads to where the poor can’t leave the certain place and conditions becomes even more squalor, crime becomes rampant, and particularly if there are no jobs, in an apartheid system, umm, there thing was to keep a pool of ready labor, it was meant to- they didn’t have jobs except for certain- and they kept people poor. They could not accumulate wealth.
JV - Can you describe for me what a turning point for you was in the movement?

TW - What do you mean a turning point?

JV - When you felt that your activism, that the activism, in South Africa and would lead to the downfall-

TW - I had a vision one day. It was in 1985, I was in South America. I just met one of my close friends, whose now ambassador for South Africa Doume Matabete (??), he was the ANC’s rep in Washington, Johnny Macatin was ANCS rep in New York but I met with Doi in South America in Georgetown. I think Prexy was there too. But anyway. So we were staying at a hotel down from the conference and you know I told him, we were sitting there with some guys from Nicaragua and Sandanistas so they say. And some Cubans. And umm these were the outcasts. And so we were sitting with them and drinking some rum and eating some fish and smoking some Cuban cigars and I told Doume, “Man I see it brother.” He says, “You see what?” I said, “I see uhh a Free South Africa.” I said I can see it right now. He thought I was crazy. He said, “Man these boys will never give up South Africa. There’s gonna be blood in the streets.” And I said, “No man. I said I see a change taking place.” [Phone rings, Mr. Wright takes call, recording stopped]

[Recording continues]

JV - So I guess you were speaking a little about when you were in South America, talking about what you saw as the future of South Africa?

TW - Yea, so I told Dumi, Botomome I said Dumi I said in ten years I said within ten years we’re going to be sitting, we’re going to be standing at, we’ll be staying at the finest hotel in all of Johanessburg, drinking the finest cognac (phone rings) and we’ll be saluting a free South Africa. And then he says, “Man are you crazy” (laughs), but anyway that was in 1985. I think Dumi hadn’t been home. He was in the armed, well, he was in the armed forces [Mr. Wright checks e-mail, long pause] Sorry there was a flight-

So, umm, so anyway so Dumi hadn’t been back and ummm, you know fast forward to ummm I started going over there I guess in, I started going back over there in I guess like ‘90, no ‘88, ‘89, something like that when the discussions had begun and they were Kadessa was focused on Declerq and he done what he had done. And I think I had went over there with the national lawyer’s guild. So, you know, I didn’t know when this stuff was going to pop but then in the early 90’s it became clear that this was about to pop and so I remember what it was in like 94, umm, I sent Dumi back, I bought his airline ticket,
or helped him buy it. He had gone back home because when they declared the amnesty against ANC, might have been in like ‘92 or ‘93, I’m not sure. And then so Dumi went back home, so, first time in 20 years. So when I go out there, I go out to do the election in 94. I think that’s the next time I saw Dumi. The next time I was in South Africa, I think that’s correct, because I did Bill Clinton’s campaign, I was his director of domestic policy. And so that would have been ‘91, ‘92 and I worked the transition team. But so anyway it was after that that I worked back out to South Africa, to work the election, and I was picked up at the airport by Dumi and his nephew, and I was staying at Carlton hotel which was one of the finest hotels in Johanessburg and I had bought this bottle of cognac from the plane, you know in the free, whatever they call it, in those little things they had. I bought this very nice bottle of cognac and we were up in my room and I had a balcony, looking out on to whatever street we were on. So I said to Dumi, I said, we grabbed a couple glasses, I said, “Brother, remember when I told you when we were in the jungles of South America, and I told you that within ten years we would be sitting in the finest hotel in Johanessburg drinking the finest cognac. I says so lets do it.” (laughs). So we toasted to a free South Africa. And so but anyway we showed up at the hotel on the election night because we were working out in the field I was in the Western Cape I don’t know where Dumi was. All this stuff when it was a little tenuous we were out in the field, and that’s when that picture was taken right there, with Dinkens (points to picture), and that’s when these pictures were taken when we were out there. And so, but anyway, that night they had three nights of voting, three days of voting, just some incredible stuff. Just brought tears to my eyes, just to watch this occur. And to know this was happening. And finally, that night, I went in to see, oh I was going in, I had to leave because I had to get back for some reason. So on the last night I had to go. And it was clear that Mandela had won. And so as I was walking downstairs, going downstairs, I ran into Thabo Nbikee, that’s him in that shot now. Beneath Harold. (points to picture) So I run into Thabo. He says, “Man what are you doing. He says where are you going?” I says, “I gotta go man.” I says, “I gotta go back.” He says, “You haven’t even you enjoyed the celebration.” I says, “Victory is the celebration.” He says, “Do you want to see the old man before you go.” I said, “I would like to say congratulations to him.” He says OK, so we go up to the suite and he goes in and they open the door. As I walk into the suite, there’s this room and this couch and this coffee table, and there was Coretta Scott King and Mandela, you know, he got up and greeted me and we hugged and he thanked me, and I said (?) this king. But that was probably uhmm, that was an image there that could never, ever, ever be erased. It was just an incredible- It was a confirmation of all that I have thought in terms of even sitting in high school and understanding the relationship between the two peoples and the two places and the two movements and the oneness of all that struggle brought that home in terms of that picture. So it was an incredible piece.

JV- That is pretty incredible. So going ahead to some reflection questions, about the whole activism history, so how do you feel about South Africa and what’s going on there today?
You know what, I lived there, I lived there for three years. I was there from 2003 to 2006. And I still keep a home there in Fumalong, outside the cities. You know I think, that the struggle continues louta kouta (??) no, out there, I thought the peace when Mbike was ousted and Zumi, I thought it threatened but you know, I keep, we gotta create some jobs, I think the economic issues. You know its one thing to have fought for regime change and to have fought for empowerment and to fight for you know the right to uh, lead yourselves without having these imposed minorities backed by guns, but that’s one thing to get into office. But the fight is not yet won. The fight has to be won economically. It has to be won when we have created jobs, when you’ve created economies, when you’ve done these kind of things, when you’re allowed to operate freely in the world market. When you know your focus is on education and development and so that’s the next stage that we have to get to. South Africa is in the lead, they’re not by themselves, Angola’s there, Zimbambe, I mean not Zimbabwe, well Zimbabwe was there, Zimbabwe was one of the best economies in Sub-Saharan Africa before Mugabe began to destroy it. And others, it’s not just Mugabe. But, so, you know, that battle has to be fought and the battle of access to capital, the battle of development and businesses and so forth, and of running water, and of railroads that work, and that connect, and all those battles are still being fought and ultimately before there’s real freedom they have to be won.

Right. And so why do you think the movement to end apartheid was successful?

Why was it successful? Because God had ordained it and it was supposed to happen. These people were not supposed to be in this situation, subjugated in the way that they were. You know I think that in this way of things, it was supposed to occur. And I think that you know we can take some credit for it, I think all the credit for it belongs to God. I mean, those changes had to occur. I think that we were simply instrumentalities of that process. That’s how history works. That’s how life works.

So how would you describe your biggest contribution to the movement?

ust being foots on the ground when necessary. Being an advocate. Doing what’s right. You know, being of a right heart and trying to make a difference in other peoples lives. And, you know, but it’s me, me, and others like me. You know, who’ve made that difference. It’s not one of us. But it’s doing what right’s in this life to make a difference in lives without fear or concern. Now, I certainly fear, you know, of being harmed but you know what, I have no fear with respect to it. I mean death’s a possibility that’s how we live. But that’s what this life’s all about.

So if Mandela was here right now, what would you say to him?
TW- You know what couldn’t you say, amagandi (?), go well. You’ve done well, you’ve lived a good life, you’ve made a difference. You have struggled for what is right and your struggles have been rewarded. It’s not that the struggle is over but we certainly have made progress. I think you know Mandela is by no means perfect. There are issues, but you know what, it doesn’t matter because he’s an important call that has turned. And we can only be so lucky to be able to do that. You know he has the wisdom of God in him. And, he’s stuck by that. And that’s a blessing.

JV- So my last question is, what do you hope your legacy will be?

TW- You know what, I wanna be like Harold. I wanna say if they talked about me, they say that he tried to help make this a better place. You know, he was, he had his flaws, he had his issues, but you know what, on the whole, he tried to make a difference for other people. And particularly those who couldn’t make a difference for themselves. That’s it. Hopefully my kids will go well and do well, you know, and I’ve been able to push them a little further. Umm, but you know, this is what us souls are here for. This is what we do. And, you know, it just helps to bring forth I think the kingdom.

JV- Alrighty, I guess that’s it.

TW- OK.