

TAPE 20

ROSS:

So we had to push back on Ford in terms of what they were demanding of us. The fact that we didn't choose all of the organizations meant that some people joined the collective for different reasons. Some people actually believed in the collective. Some people believed joining the collective was a way to get Ford money, and amazingly, it was the groups that Ford chose that mostly believed that. And so, in our first years, we lost a few groups that had come because they had gotten their Ford grants and they took them and ran, and that's fine. But 13 of the 16 groups hung in there and decided that they were there to form a collective. And so SisterSong emerged from that.

1:00

When we first organized, we had a fairly complicated management structure that was called the anchor structure. Within each ethnic group, one group was chosen to be the anchor of that ethnic group, and then the anchor organizations were to form the management structure for the collective. And it was the anchors that were supposed to have the conferences for their ethnic group, the trainings, and what have you.

What we found that was flawed about that structure is that if the anchor didn't do their job, then all four groups suffered, and it didn't allow the other three groups [to] rise to the leadership to do that job. And so, like, within the Asian American community, NAWHO [National Asian Women's Health Organization], which was one of the founding groups, really didn't believe in a collective. I mean, Mary Chung said openly when she joined, "I don't believe in collectives. I'll work with this system because I have to work with this system to get this grant." But, I mean, she was up front. She didn't have a hidden agenda at all. She was up front with it. "I don't believe in collectives." So as a result, in three years, the Asian American mini-community never met but once.

And so, after our first three years, we abandoned that anchor structure, because it simply wasn't working. For some communities, the Latina and the African American communities, anchors worked really well. But for the Native American and the API community, it didn't work at all, and it really limited those communities and their engagement with SisterSong.

The other change that happened, that affected us, was that Rena left Ford, and new program officers were hired. And one of the new program officers didn't believe in collectives either. And she certainly didn't believe in SisterSong. And so, even though we had gotten our first three years of funding — and it was supposed to be Phase I funding for capacity building so we could [use] Phase II [for] the more programmatic work that we wanted to do — she cut off the funding.

FOLLET:

Is this –

4:03

ROSS:

Chu Chu Flanders, yeah, at Ford.

FOLLET: Oh, it's not Floyd, it's –

ROSS: Ginger Floyd was Chu Chu's boss. Ginger hired Chu Chu but Chu Chu was the one responsible for us. And we had all kinds of problems. Chu Chu only lasted a year and a half but God, she was so destructive in that year and a half, it was just amazing. Anyway, she cut off our funding and that threw us in a crisis, which actually turned out to be OK because then we had to become much more self-sufficient and less Ford-dependent once that funding was cut off. So although it was not Chu Chu's intention to strengthen us, but it actually did because we became self-financing, our member organizations started paying dues so that we could support ourselves while we regrouped to reorganize, and moved into our Phase II work, which is more of the advocacy work: building the collective, recruiting new members, that kind of thing.

FOLLET: Now is NCHRE functioning as the facilitator of all these groups?

ROSS: You're getting ahead of the story.

FOLLET: OK. All right.

ROSS: That's exactly what eventually ended up happening. Um, in the Phase II work, we decided to do away with the anchor structure and develop the management circle, which is representatives from each group sitting on what functions as a board of directors. And we hired a national coordinator for the first time. Hired I use loosely, because we never could pay her, but Laura Jimenez ended up being our national coordinator. She used to work at the National Latina Health Organization and now works with the Dominican Women's Development Center.

And the crisis happened in 2002 when the funding was pulled. And really, I have to honestly say that the younger members of SisterSong thought it was all over for us. It was just — the pulling of the funding was a death knell, and what were we going to do? And we had this very, very depressing meeting and uh, it was in Savannah, Georgia, where we were really making a decision whether to dissolve SisterSong or not, because — that's the other problem. The tension is we all have our own organizations to maintain, so maintaining this coalition or this collective in addition to maintaining our organizations, particularly when this collective is not getting any financial support for its maintenance –

FOLLET: And the financing had been what pulled you all together in the first place.

ROSS: Right.

FOLLET: Right?

ROSS: Exactly. Well, yes, it was the glue that held us together, but it wasn't what pulled us together. The other thing, and I said this in *Undivided Rights*, this was the fourth national effort to form a national women of color reproductive health coalition. So, the impetus to come together was driven by our recognition that we could only do together things that we couldn't do individually. We could only be strong together, because there'd been a national coalition effort following the '89 In Defense of Roe conference. There'd been one for the ICPD in '94. There'd been one from Beijing in '95. So SisterSong coming together in '97 was the fourth effort recognizing that we needed some kind of national formation of women of color that worked on reproductive health. So Ford was the glue, and certainly was, what, a convenient drive, but I still think we would've been still struggling with how to form this coalition with or without Ford. It just wouldn't have happened at that time in that way.

And so that actually came up in the Savannah meeting, because we were all sitting there, you know, with our jaws hanging on the table, saying, What are we going to do? We've lost the funding. You know, we barely got born and we got aborted. You know, all kinds of gruesome, gross imagery was happening. (laughs) And I was the one that basically challenged the group and said that we could dissolve SisterSong, yeah. That would be relatively painless. We could do that. But Luz, I've been looking at you for the last 10, 15 years, Charon Asetoyer, I've been looking at you for the last 10 or 15 years. And all of us know that five years from now, we're gonna be back at a table trying to figure out how to form a national women of color coalition even though we'd been through all the previous three.

FOLLET: So let's keep struggling now.

8:55

ROSS: Right. And I can bet you that when we come back in five years, we're not going to be seeded with \$4 million. I can pretty much guarantee that. So this may be our best shot that we have, and we can't let any one woman at a foundation determine our destiny. I mean, we've got to be a little bit more in control of our destiny than that.

And so, that's when my leadership of SisterSong started happening from behind. Because up until then, I was not one of the anchors, I was not part of the anchor structure. We were just the training intermediary, providing a given set of training to the other 15 groups. We were not trying to determine the destiny of SisterSong or anything, but that was in the management of the anchors.

But that's when — Byllye is the one that told me that phrase, Byllye Avery, about leading from behind, and I'd never understood what she meant by that. Byllye always says these cryptic things I can't figure out, but I began to understand that — that we [NCHRE] weren't a

reproductive health organization, we were a human rights organization. So we didn't need to be out front as the reproductive health organization, but I could use my experience, my knowledge of the reproductive health movement, and offer the younger women the benefit of that counsel and advice but let them be the out-front leaders.

And so that's what the next two years of SisterSong was. Loretta leading from behind, along with Luz and other people. I won't say it was just me, but –

FOLLET: So what was your advice under those circumstances?

ROSS: That we need to determine what our agenda is, that we're going to move into Phase II activities. If so, what are those Phase II activities going to look like? What do we want to achieve at the end of Phase II? How will we get support? We have to be able to prove to the funding world that we believe in this plan enough to self-finance it, so that they don't think they're just funding this. We can show that we're putting up enough, a certain percentage of our budgets, to make this happen, then we increase our credibility. We increase their belief in what we're trying to do.

And so, the organizations that could, started paying dues to help pay Laura's salary, you know — really just a stipend to Laura, it was not a salary. We could never — Laura did an incredible amount of work and probably made a total of two thousand a year, and so, it was by no means — but to pay for our meetings to come together so that we could re-plan the future of SisterSong.

And then, to decentralize the work beyond the anchors, so that different organizations took responsibilities for different aspects of the work, based on what their natural inclinations were. Since, for example, the National Latina Health Organization and the California Black Women's [Health Project] are much into participatory research, well, that's where we would center that work, and then they would be the trainers on the rest of the collective on how to do that kind of work. If SisterLove does the HIV/AIDS work and the Minnesota Native American Task Force does the HIV/AIDS work, then why aren't you all together so that you can teach HIV/AIDS work to the rest of the collective, so that we can look at this in a different way.

And so, we made the decision to stay together in November 2002 and we also made the decision to host the national conference for the following November, to be, like, our public debut — this would be, you know, We are SisterSong — and to bring together what we thought was the missing voices of women of color who worked on reproductive health issues.

There is this myth that women of color don't work on reproductive health issues out there, and the reasons for it are too many to list, but there is this popular perception out there. We know it's not true but we have to prove it. And so, we thought that by having a national conference on women of color reproductive health issues, and only

13:00

allowing plenary speakers that were women of color who were experts on reproductive health issues, we could prove that we have this capacity. And so that's what we did.

But we had no money. We still had no money. How are you going to pull off a national conference when you have no money, right? Well, making something out of nothing is what we do.

So, it became the first conference Loretta Ross ever organized solely over the Internet. I mean, we couldn't even drop a mailing. We had no money to print up anything. So we did a call for papers that was distributed over the Internet. We allowed six months for it to get circulated and set, like — first we had a March deadline and then people got back to us and said they couldn't get it back to us in March so we extended the deadline till May, then we extended to June. (laughs) You know, because we were actually using an academic format in a call for papers, which really didn't work. And then we found out that people in communities, they didn't even know what a call for papers meant, call for presentations. [A] Woman's [been] working for twenty years but I don't know if I can write a call for papers to be a speaker, so, still, we were making it up as we go.

And the conference was tremendously successful. It was held in November in Atlanta, and it actually became a victim of its own success. We originally had scheduled to have the conference at Spelman College in Atlanta. The largest auditorium at Spelman seats 300 people, and 600 people came to the conference. Even two weeks before the conference, we knew had problems because we had over 400 people registered.

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And so we had to, at the last minute, switch the first two days of the conference to a hotel, which was very happy to see us with only two weeks' notice that this conference was coming. And they were really wonderful to us, given how everything was very much at the last minute. But it threw the costs hugely over budget, because, you know, a hotel banquet is quite different than lunches from the Spelman cafeteria. I mean, it was just — it was chaotic logistically, dealing with a conference in two locations. But at the same time, we could not afford to rent enough breakout rooms at the hotel to accommodate the workshops, so we still had to move the second two days of the conference, which were the workshop days, back to Spelman. So here we're giving the conference in two separate locations — I mean, it was just a logistical nightmare.

It was a victim of our own success. I mean, if the conference had stayed small, if there hadn't been this overwhelming need for all these women to come together, we could've kept it at Spelman, but the —

FOLLET: The energy there was unbelievable.

ROSS: Absolutely. It was kind of like they'd been waiting for this for a long, long time. And so, one of the things that happened for me, I became

conference coordinator, because I probably, in the collective, had the most experience pulling off these things, because I'd done the '87 conference. It was certainly my vision and my idea that we do it and I kind of like force-fed it to the collective, because they didn't believe. I mean, yeah, we're so broke, we can't afford to pay for postage and we're talking about pulling off a national conference in the same conversation. And so it takes a degree of faith and an ability to take real good risk that you have to have [in order] to have the kind of vision.

And so, I became determined just to make this thing work, and so, my staff would probably offer a strong criticism of me because I sank our institutional resources into making it happen. Everybody on staff had a conference assignment and they didn't know from one day to another that they weren't going to be working on their normal work, that they were going to be working on the SisterSong conference. They didn't sign up for that, and so, that was a little hard.

The funding world kept telling us no, because the other thing that had happened is that that program officer at Ford who didn't like SisterSong had bad-mouthed us in the funding world, [saying,] "Oh, they didn't get anything accomplished. All they did was build their own organizations, but they didn't really do any work" — not having an idea of the larger strategy here, you know — "they didn't even issue any reports. They didn't do anything on women's health issues. All they did was sit around and talk about Self-Help and finances and stuff."

And so, she had bad-mouthed us in the funding world, so much so that the first funder I approached to support the conference said, "Loretta, I think the conference is a great idea, but I think you should call it something else other than SisterSong because SisterSong has been stigmatized." And at the time, I had not decided what the name of the conference was going to be. It was going to a conference of women of color health issues, as far — oh, I know what it was. I had said it was going to be on race, class, and reproduction. That was going to be the name of the conference, Race, Class, and Reproduction — just looking at what we were going to do.

But when this funder said to me, "Do not use the name SisterSong," that pissed me off, (laughs) and so the conference immediately got named SisterSong: Women of Color Reproductive Health and Sexual Rights Conference, because she pointed out to me that we had to restore our reputations, that we had to de-stigmatize the phrase SisterSong. And if we ran away from our own name, we're adding to the stigma, we're not challenging it. And so, you know, you can't listen to funders. What do they know about movement building? And she was gracious enough to tell me after the conference [that it] was a success, and she sent us all of five thousand dollars that she was wrong.

FOLLET:

At least she paid attention, right?

19:45

ROSS: Exactly. And so, we pulled the conference off. We had over a hundred speakers there, and just an incredible outpouring. And the other thing about SisterSong was that while we worked towards the empowerment of women of color, for the empowerment of women of color, it's not an exclusionary process. We don't leave white women out. We don't leave men out. It's not about excluding. It's about including anybody who sees as their mission building a movement of women of color. I mean, it's not — anybody who can share that goal with us is welcome to the table. And we even keep places at the table for the groups that left. I mean, I'm constantly calling them and saying, "Are you all ready to come back yet?" And groups do get new leadership, so NAWHO, Mary Chung has left NAWHO, so NAWHO now has leadership that talks about, maybe it's a good idea to rejoin SisterSong. And so, now we are up to 40 groups. One of the other things we launched at the conference was our individual membership campaigns, so we now have 300 individually paid-up members, and we want to grow that.

What I discovered doing the organizing for the conference was that I miss reproductive rights work, because that which I'd done so much of for the last 15 years, I hadn't done a lot of it, because I did — I came to work at the National Black Women's Health Project but was only there for a year and a half, then I did CDR for five years, and then I did NCHRE for the next eight years.

FOLLET: So does this explain why you're now moving from NCHRE to become the —

ROSS: National coordinator of SisterSong.

FOLLET: National coordinator of SisterSong?

ROSS: I'm returning to my roots.

FOLLET: Your roots in reproductive rights work.

ROSS: Uh-h m.

FOLLET: Tell me about that appeal at this point. You missed it. What did you miss, and why is it important to you now?

ROSS: Well, I mean, I got into feminist consciousness because I had been sterilized. So I'd been raped, I'd been sterilized, I'd had a miscarriage, I'd had an abortion, I mean, all this stuff happened to me in my life, but I had moved on. I had moved on, into working more globally, more into human rights, into civil rights, into antifascist work, but I was still, at the same time, writing *Black Abortion*, which is a manuscript I had started.

Vanessa Northington Gamble and Stanlie James conspired to bring me to the University of Wisconsin to give a speech on the history of women of color — no, history of black women in the reproductive rights movement, because it was under Vanessa's history of medicine department, so I had to give a speech on historical stuff. And I think they had invited me because I started constructing some of that history as part of the march organizing in '86 and '89. In order to persuade black women and other women of color to participate in the march, I had to construct history and talk about it.

And so it was Stanlie that challenged me to turn this speech into a written paper, when I never write my speeches. So that in itself was a hurdle. It was, like, You must be kidding. She said, "No, Loretta, I think you've got enough here to really make a good paper." And so, it was Stanlie holding my hand that ended in "African-American Women and Abortion [1800–1970]" being published in her anthology with Abena Busia [*Theorizing Black Feminisms: The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women* (Routledge, 1993)] in 1992, I think that was.

And so, then I conceived the really crazy idea — I call it crazy because it hasn't been born yet — of turning that paper into a book. And not only looking at the historical activism of black women, but then I wrote chapter two, because the historical look, I took from slavery to 1973, to *Roe*. And then I wrote in Rickie Solinger's book [*Abortion Wars: A Half Century of Struggle, 1950–2000* (University of California 1998)], the chapter from 1973 to 1993, which is just when I finished that piece of work, '93, '94 [article entitled "African-American Women and Abortion"]. In *Undivided Rights*, I actually had a chance to take it to 2001, 2002. Actually, I talk about SisterSong and all of that, in *Undivided Rights*, so in different places, I'm getting a chance to expand on the history.

Um, I applied for next year for a Soros Fellowship, because I want to write the chapter on the black anti-abortion movement as part of *Black Abortion*, and at some point, I need another fellowship or another opportunity because I want to nuance the term "black," because subsumed in the category of black are the experiences of all immigrants of African descent, whether they're from the Caribbean, Latin America, or Africa, and they do not have the same experience as women born in America. But for statistical purposes and all the data, their identities are lost, and so if my book is going to be called *Black Abortion*, then I really need to look at the abortion experiences of African immigrants, Caribbean immigrants, black immigrants from Latin America. And so, that's a whole body of research that's waiting to be done.

FOLLET:

Tell me about the focus on black abortion. What it seems to me has happened with the women of color movement around reproduction that's evolved is the evolution from reproductive rights meaning abortion, to reproductive health, to what you call in the book "reproductive justice," a much more broad-based, holistic vision that

25:14

connects the dots between toxic environments and health and all the issues, and your ongoing interest in this issue of abortion?

ROSS:

Well, I intentionally called it *Black Abortion* because when I first started doing organizing around reproductive health in the black community, we called abortion the “A” word. I mean, we did not name abortion. So to me, the whole power of naming abortion in the black community needs to be expressed. And so, very intentionally, I’m using the title of *Black Abortion*, not to diminish the larger analysis and framework that I also push, but in the African American community, we euphemize entirely too much, and we use it to suppress — not to disguise so much as to suppress — and the suppression of discussion around abortion in the black community, I’m willing to fly in the face of, with *Black Abortion*.

Now that doesn’t mean that you disconnect it from the context and so, as one reads the manuscript, of course I contextualize and I talk about all the other reproductive health issues that black women are dealing with and family planning, but it’s a coherent abortion thread that I’m following, because there may be books written on black teen pregnancy programs or blacks going to medical school — what does that mean? There’s books written on other aspects of what I’m dealing with, but mine is the one looking at the provision of abortion in the African American community from —

And actually, I’ve even gone further back because I said from slavery to the present, but one of the chapters that I developed while I was at Agnes Scott College was on abortion in ancient Egypt and Rome. Because I asked the question of myself, How did the slaves come over here know about abortion? Well, what was going on in Africa that would cause slave midwives to be developed and how did they learn the technique? And so that caused me — I took this Greek Civ class and had to do an original project. Of course I was going to make it correspond with my current writing, and actually I had to do it against the advice of my professor, who’s an expert, speaks ancient Greek and all this other stuff. And so I told her that I wanted to look at abortion in ancient Greek, Roman, and Egyptian civilizations, and she told me it didn’t exist.

FOLLET:

Oh, you don’t tell that to Loretta. You’re that determined — it’s like telling you not to continue SisterSong.

28:33

ROSS:

She told me it didn’t exist. (laughs) She’s an expert. She was a feminist, and she hadn’t — in all of her 40 years of work in this field, she’d never seen any mention of any such thing and so, obviously, I was wrong. And I said, “Na, na, na, Sally, I really appreciate your advice but as a feminist, there’s some things I’m pretty certain of. For as long as women have been having sex and babies, they’ve been trying to figure out how to control that. (laughs) I just know that, OK?”

And so, I think we need to read gender into these ancient texts. Let's see what they have to say. And of course, I go and do all this research, find out that there's this Greek doctor who made recipes for abortions, that talked about it extensively in his writing. Egyptian papyrus that had both recipes for contraceptives and abortifacients in them. I mean, there were Roman emperors who were talking about the decline of the Roman population and discouraging women from having abortions so that the Roman population could grow. I mean, all you have to do is look for it and it's there. And I'm no Greek or Roman scholar at all, so I was using her textbooks that she'd given me, reading them with a gender lens. And so it was so funny, because Sally invited me back next year to lecture her class on original research, you know, which was real good validation.

FOLLET: To her credit.

ROSS: Yeah.

FOLLET: That's good, that's good.

ROSS: So *Black Abortion* even goes way back beyond slavery now. It was because of that work I was able to do at Agnes Scott.

FOLLET: So you turned to the history as a way of directly addressing that conspiracy of silence.

ROSS: Absolutely, absolutely. And there's a lot more to be done. I mean, the persecution of black doctors who provided abortions from the 1920s — well, actually from the turn of the century to *Roe*. Their story has barely been told, and I'd love to do one chapter just devoted to the legal cases, the prosecutions, the persecutions of those doctors. Most of those doctors were the people to whom white women turned when they needed abortions, so I want to talk about the racial politics of, What does it mean when the only safe abortion providers are all in the black community and what does it mean for a white woman to have to go into that black community under a Jim Crow system to seek reproductive health services? And I'll probably want to interview some white women about, What did that feel like? What were you dealing with at the time? and stuff like that, because it was popular medical practice to accuse white women who wanted to limit their families of being crazy, so they had to actually go through medical review boards and stuff if they wanted to have a hysterectomy or an abortion and so —

FOLLET: Yeah, you could get a psychological — the kind of therapeutical loophole and you could — if you had a psychological reason.

ROSS: Right. Or you could go to an underground provider.

FOLLET: Yes. Right.

32:00

ROSS: And a lot of them did. The black doctors. And so, there's so many aspects of *Black Abortion* that I have yet to work on, and it's my dream to actually get a year or two at some point and finish that book because it's — like I say, it's the pregnancy that won't end. It's a 14-year-old project now.

FOLLET: Well, you've got such a great start on it. I mean, you do. The stuff you've already written laid such a fabulous groundwork, so —

ROSS: Yeah, but I still need about two years of concentrated time to get it out.

FOLLET: It'll happen. It'll happen.

ROSS: And then I was so mad. I wanted to say — I love Dorothy Roberts and her work. But when she wrote *Killing the Black Body*, I felt like *Black Abortion* had been preempted. She got hers out before I got mine. But it's not about abortion, it's really — she's more about what the state did to women, where mine is about what women did for themselves, so it's really a different look.

FOLLET: Exactly. So, in addition to taking on the directorship of SisterSong, in addition to — you're also working with the Sophia Smith Collection here, doing interviews and helping to save the history of women of color in manuscript form as well as in oral testimony, you —

ROSS: And the Soros Fellowship, if I get it, to work on *Black Abortion*, so I'm going along with four jobs next year.

FOLLET: You are.

ROSS: And I'm gonna still be working in NCHRE.

FOLLET: You are?

ROSS: Yeah, because I'm still — I'm going to be in charge of doing the documentation of our pedagogical process. I know the best about how we pioneered a new way of teaching about human rights and so I have to write the training manual for that and do a lot of coordinating of training. So I'll actually be in a part-time position at NCHRE, part-time position with SisterSong, a part-time consulting position with you all, and I'll be trying to write *Black Abortion*. So, that's what 2005 is going to look like for me.

FOLLET: That's a pretty graphic description of what — the answer you usually get when you say, "Hi, Loretta, how are you?" and you say, "Oh, crazy busy." "Crazy busy" is kind of standard vocabulary for you.

ROSS: And I love it.

FOLLET: So what makes you tick? I don't know, what drives you? What motivates you to do what you do?

ROSS: Well, this work is absolute joy. One thing I often tell people and, you know, when you give a lot of speeches, your own words become your own clichés so they can get boring, but, so if I inflict one on you, please forgive me. Oppression is so ubiquitous that everybody has to deal with it and there are a few of us who get paid to fight it, and that's a very privileged position, so we could just be in the masses of people who just have to endure it, and they have to work their jobs at IBM or Subway Sandwiches or whatever and just put up with this stuff. Never getting the chance to study it, deconstruct it, to understand these forces that are affecting their lives. We get paid to do that part. And so, to me, I feel like a rich woman. That's what I want to spend my life currency doing, and um, and so I have a ball. I have a ball. There's nothing really dreadful [about] getting a chance to travel the world and seeing strange and great new places at other people's expense, so, I mean, how can you complain about that?

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But more fundamentally, I mean philosophically, I believe that if life has taught me anything, it's that a lot of really bad stuff has happened to me, which I am very clear about, and I don't have any problems complaining about that stuff. But I try not to complain about the choices that I've made, because if you complain about your choices, make different choices. I mean, why complain about those things you *can* control? Complain about those things you can't control. And so, if I choose to have four jobs, you're not going to find me complaining about my four jobs. You ask me how I am, I'll tell you I'm crazy busy. But I don't follow up with no whine about how busy I am, because that's — I could choose not to be so busy. And so, that motivates me because I know everything I do in life, with the exception of paying taxes, is my choice. (laughs) And so, what's not to like? That's the way I feel about it.

FOLLET: Tell me a little bit about your sense of leadership and your own leadership style. You've worked in a lot of different organizations.

ROSS: I have a dreadful leadership style, in my opinion. It's effective, but it's dreadful. I actually have had and provided training for other women on leadership, on female ways of leadership. And I find that I have a commander style of leadership, much more than a cooperative or collective style of leadership, and it's very male-type leadership system,

where I tend to be very outcome-oriented, very task-focused. I judge based on outcome, much less on process.

I mean, my staff gets very impatient with me because when I ask them to do something, I have some staff members that come in and tell me every step of the way that they're engaging in to get something done, and then there's some staff that I don't see till it's done, and it's the staff I don't see till it's done that I prefer. The ones that are wearing me out with their process are the ones that are least likely to get the damn thing done. I don't know, and so I know I'm more outcome-focused than process-oriented.

Now, I'm not saying that process is not important, because how you do something is as important as what you do. I do believe that. But as a manager, I don't want to manage your process. I want to see your outcome.

FOLLET: I think in the Stanlie interview, you talk about the structure of NCHRE as a web, and you talked so much about the power dynamics in other organizations, that some of the battles that were tearing organizations apart, like NOW, weren't so much ideological or political, as power struggles. Is the web structure in NCHRE a conscious effort to create something else, or is it — you do describe the web with yourself at the middle. So is this — where does your style fit in a critique of organizational styles?

ROSS: Well, I can honestly say that the commander style doesn't fit neatly into a web. It really demands a much more communal collective style, so it's an ill fit, to be honest. My natural inclination is for the commander style. I am learning other ways of leading that more suit the vision that I'm trying to construct. I mean, my style more suits a hierarchy, but my passion, my political passion, is for it to be more communal, more collective, so it's a learning curve for me.

In the web style of leadership, you do end up kind of like the spider at the center, and the beauty of the web is that not only is the spider at the center, but all the webs are connected to each other, they're not just connected to the spider. And so that provides a lot of lateral leadership in other people. You kind of want to be the recipient of a lot of the information, but there's a lot of information that goes around the web like this without ever touching the center. And that's just as important as sustaining the web as those connectors to the center.

GEIS: Well, we've got twenty minutes on this tape and I think we can do it.

FOLLET: I think we can.

GEIS: OK. But what —

ROSS: We were talking about web leadership. And — are you ready?

GEIS: Uh-h m.

ROSS: So, web leadership allows a lot of lateral growth, particularly when you look at the traditional structure, you need mid-managers, midlevel managers that are empowered to make a certain level of decisions. I mean, you have to divide up decisions. Some decisions only the ED can make, some decisions the second in command needs to make, some decisions the program directors need to make.

And so, I get overwhelmed by the concept of, just because I'm executive director, [they believe] I need to make every decision about everything. That just drives me crazy. I mean, I once snapped at a staff person who was asking me about what brand copier to buy. And I said, "One that works." I mean, what else do I want to be concerned about, what brand copier to buy? If you can't figure that out, why do I have you as my operations person? you know, kind of thing. And unfortunately, many women come into the workforce without being empowered to make that kind of decision making, so they think it is their job to come and get permission to make decisions that they should be making for their job.

And so, part of the web leadership structure is about empowering people to make the appropriate-level decisions for their jobs and to sustain them in that decision making. Even if they make the wrong decisions, you don't take the power from them to make the decision, you just show them how they can do it maybe differently the next time. So sometimes every decision they make is not going to be a good one. Every decision I make is not a good one.

You have to be very willing to admit mistakes, because if a manager does not admit her mistakes, then everybody around you is going to be afraid of admitting theirs, and they will spend all their time covering their asses and not enough time learning from their mistakes. And so, you have to be the first one to run and shout that you screwed up, so that other people get empowered, feel emboldened enough to say, "Oh, I did this and it really messed up on me, but I'm going to do better next time."

But if you try to create this image — because it's nothing but an image of the perfect, impervious, always-in-control manager, which is what we're taught to be out of the classic business schools — um, it doesn't work within our construct, because it doesn't provide sufficient learning for people. Plus, the energy involved in maintaining such an artificial image is just exhausting. And so, I think that's why all these white men suicide so early. It's got to wear you out to do that thing.

So that's the kind of leadership that I try to portray. But also, there's the whole concept of getting comfortable with getting called the leader, because that was a process, too. I mean, I never saw myself as leadership. I saw myself as a worker. I actually — my ideal job is to be the second in command to a great leader. That's what I'd really love to

be. You know, where I don't have all the responsibility but I get to think the great thoughts, you know. I don't want to be the one in front. Really, I'd really love to be the second in command, because I worship genius, and so I'd like to work for a true genius, and I don't care how quirky they are. I don't — that doesn't bother me, as long as they are a true, authentic genius, I can put up with anything.

FOLLET: And then your role in relationship to that person in this ideal setup would be what?

44:50

ROSS: To sustain them, to support them. That's why I loved working for Byllye, because I thought she was a true genius. To sustain them, to support them, to help figure out strategies for them, to maybe do some of their writing, some of their speeches — writing their speeches for them, to be their ambassador to other groups.

FOLLET: And yet, it seems to me, I've heard you describe yourself as a visionary, that your role in the movement is to be the visionary.

ROSS: Because I'm a big-picture girl, but that don't mean you have to be the out-front person. There's no requirement that the visionary be the out-front person.

FOLLET: Wouldn't the visionary require having people work for her, to implement the vision, to make —

ROSS: Yeah, well, I need people under me that'd follow details, because I'm not a detail person. I didn't say that. And maybe what I'm describing simply can't be done, but, um, I — as I said, I like people who have big visions, and I like sharing vision with people, so that's why — you know, Byllye's vision of building a black women's health movement, I could get with that. That wasn't my vision. I didn't start with that vision, but I bought into her vision. And then, my visionary capacity was to imagine how it would be done. OK, now I still needed people working for me that — I would say dot the T's and cross the I's, I always mix that up (laughs) — you know, that do the practical aspects of that.

But I'm real good at seeing systems. You know, I was the kind of girl that when they gave those stupid tests to to say, you know, look at this diagram and talk about what it could have been, or put these pieces together: I can see systems and component parts real easy and assemble them. That's what makes me a good analyst, because I can take what looks like unrelated facts and discern a trend, and I can turn a lot of trends into an analysis. So I can do those kinds of things.

But — I'm competent out front, I'm good out front, but I'm not comfortable out front, put it that way. I'd rather be the one to whom — and the very specific reason is, to be an effective leader, I believe you

need a necessary degree of charisma, and you need a high, high level of human empathy. I don't have either of those things. I don't feel that I have — that's not my strong suit. I tend to be a little blunt. I tend to — I don't like groupies. I don't like those things. I don't even remember people's names. I can meet people and not remember them. And do you know how hard it is to lead people who think you've forgotten them? It's really hard. And so, I never saw myself as the leader. I would follow. I would rather be the second in command to a Byllye, to a Gloria Steinem, to somebody else like that, someone who embodies what I call leadership. If I had my dream.

FOLLET: The empathy thing — I'm not sure I buy that.

ROSS: Oh, honey.

FOLLET: Loretta, this — you — this is someone who can talk about a Floyd Cochran and see the humanity in his circumstances.

48:40

ROSS: But that's an intellectual [thing] — how I am at peace — that's a standard I set for myself. That don't mean I really like Floyd. Or really want to spend any time with him in my personal space or anything, because I'm a very private person, you know?

As a matter of fact, the clearest example I hear is the distinction between me and Dazon. Dazon's a visionary and a true leader in many, many kind of ways, in ways that I envy. And, you know, the fact that at one time I used to mentor her. And Rosalyn, my replacement, is another, she embodies this — I can see it in them. And I see it because I don't see it in myself. One of the things that has made Dazon so successful at SisterLove, which is an agency that provides services to women and children that have AIDS and HIV, is her ability to be there when women die, and to help them when they transition, to help their families when they're transitioning, to be there and to be there for their children when their mothers have passed on and to incorporate these children into her ongoing life, so that she remembers their birthdays, she helps them decide how they're going to get into Spelman, or whatever.

I mean, this is so wonderful, but it scares me to death to have that many people making a demand on my personal space and time. So, I admire it in Dazon and really admire it. That's the kind of leader I admire. That's the kind of leader I ain't. I know the difference. I really do know the difference. And when I was on the board of SisterLove — I mean, I'm still on the board of SisterLove 15 years later — but when I first joined the board of SisterLove, we have these retreats for women with AIDS, and we ask them to come to the retreats and bring the people who are most significant to them in their life, so it could be their minister, their mother, their lover, whoever. And for the first three years of the retreats, I didn't go. While I was willing to give everything in my

power to SisterLove, I did not want to know women who were dying, because I didn't think I could handle it.

You see the difference? I could be there in an intellectual way for [them], but making that emotional commitment is something I have a lot of problems dealing with. I have very few really close friends. I know thousands of people. I have very few people who are in my personal space. And I think a successful leader is less protective of their personal space, more willing to share their personal space. I'm the kind of person that when someone comes to me and I feel for them, I'll write them a check but I may not go to their house, because that's getting into their space. Does that make sense?

FOLLET: OK. OK. OK.

ROSS: But I know my limitations.

FOLLET: All right. Let's — we've only got five minutes. I know you have some short-term plans and commitments and goals, so let's — is finishing Agnes Scott one of them?

52:05

ROSS: Absolutely. I am one Spanish class away from getting my degree in women's studies at Agnes Scott, so that's a long set of unfinished business, so 2005 is the year I am going to do that. I actually had wanted to do that in the spring of 2005 when I found that I waited too late to try to reregister. I had a November 1 deadline and I didn't try until, like, mid-November, and so I'm going to enroll in the summer to finish up that Spanish class. So that means I will graduate in December 2005.

And then, academically, if I graduate in December 2005, then in the following September of 2006, I'm enrolling in Emory. They have a Master's/Ph.D. program where in three years you get both, and so I want to eventually emerge with a Ph.D. in women's studies and if I'm really, really, really, really lucky, some university will find that I have something to teach, and I'd love to be a professor of women's studies at some college, and I don't care where. Whoever offers me the job, I'm going, because that's what I want to do as — that's the next career I want, because I want to get out of direct community activism. I'll always have some hand in it, but I'm — I mean, I've been working for a long, long time and I'm ready for something else, and I find a passion in research — I'm learning this passion for oral history through Smith College.

I'm discovering more to me than being a political community activist allows me to be. And that doesn't mean that the jobs don't [fulfill me] or anything like that, but at the same time, I want to explore for the next 30 years what else I can do. And I think it's going to be in the academic world. That's where I want it to be. And so, to have a chance to teach. And I've found through NCHRE that I like to teach. I didn't know that I liked to teach as much as I like to teach. Maybe it's

the power — maybe it's the power dynamics of the classroom I like, I don't know. But I like to teach.

Now, what I am a bit worried about is the politics of the academy. I hear they're as vicious as anything that happens in the community, and I probably will not enjoy that as much as I think I will, standing on the outside looking in. But I have to honestly say, you know, since I cut my teeth on community politics, I can probably bring some skills and insight to the academy in that, from the outside world, that may help me —

FOLLET: I think so.

ROSS: — if I do that. But by majoring in women's studies, I found a lot of holes in what's being taught. A lot of people who teach women's studies don't have the activist experience to ground the feminist theory that's being taught. I've got this wonderful book, someone gave me, called *Disciplining Feminism*, talking about how it's become such an arcane subject, out of touch with what is going on in women's lived experiences. And so, as a 30-something, 30 years feminist activist career, now teaching women's studies, I think I have a different perspective to offer, because I'm going from the practical to the theoretical, and I think marrying the two will create a great praxis, and that's what I'm going to do.

FOLLET: Well, we need everything you have to offer. Your experience and your work and your vision and your wisdom.

ROSS: (laughs) wisdom. My irreverence.

FOLLET: Irreverent, that too.

ROSS: (laughs) (unclear) my work.

FOLLET: And your empathy that I still think I see despite your disclaimers.

ROSS: There's empathy. There's sympathy. Actually, mine would probably be more sympathy than empathy, but, you know, I'm OK with that, because I can admire a characteristic in somebody and not want to embrace that characteristic myself. It's just like I admire people who have strong faith. That don't make me want to be a person of faith. You know, I admire people who have what I call the social-work gene. That don't make me want to be a social worker. I just admire it in others, you know?

FOLLET: Oh, Loretta —

ROSS: You've got to be comfortable in your own skin.

FOLLET: Loretta, thank you so much.

ROSS: Well, thank you, Joyce. I'm glad we got a chance to do this. I'm so glad it's over. I am so happy it's over. This again has to be — it is the political equivalent to a pelvic exam (laughs). Just as necessary, just as welcoming, but ooooooh. We'll have to do this with you some time.

FOLLET: OK.

GEIS: Stopping tape. (camera in next room; Ross & Follet still miked)

ROSS: We'll have to conspire to make that day happen.

FOLLET: That's scary just to think about it. It is.

ROSS: Tell me about it. Tell me about it.

FOLLET: Oh, I have to turn some of these questions on myself.

ROSS: I think also, two years of anticipation and waiting for it to get over.

FOLLET: That's true.

ROSS: Because you all approached me, and it was, like, it was going to happen in the next 30 days, and that —

FOLLET: That's true, and then it was, no, we need to get the papers first. That's true, that's right.

ROSS: It was like waiting for *the* pelvic exam for two years. And then you're finally up in the stirrups. And then with this political speculum going through your life. (laughs) I'm not complaining. Again, I'm not complaining. I'm laughing and describing. I think that's what happens to us as women. We're not given permission to describe our experiences without them being interpreted as complaining about them.

FOLLET: True.

ROSS: And so we're silenced because —

FOLLET: Because we don't deserve to and it's not as important as someone else's and it's —

ROSS: And we don't want to be seen as whiners.

END OF TAPE 20

ROSS: Some contradictions as well, and I'm learning to be OK with the contradictions. I probably would prefer a guy that didn't believe in Edward Seaga, but at the same time (laughs) — one of my dearest friends, Marlene Fried, challenged me on that, as a matter of fact, because I was expressing my frustration to her one time, you know. Politically, we're not that much in tune, and you know, I'm very ambitious and focused on getting things done and achieving and he's not. And Marlene stopped me in my tracks and basically said, "Loretta, you have a couple of hundred people in your life you could talk politics with. I know at least a half a dozen that you can achieve with. You have one person that makes you smile every time you say his name, and why would you want to change that?" That put it into perspective for me, so I kind of backed off on trying to change him. That's enough on Hopeton, I think.

24:27

FOLLET: OK. That's it. Let's do the room tone. (recording room tone)

END TAPE 23 END INTERVIEW