

Voices of Feminism Oral History Project

Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College
Northampton, MA

LINDA BURNHAM

Interviewed by

LORETTA J. ROSS

March 18, 2005
Oakland, California

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Narrator

Linda Burnham (b. 1948) grew up in Brooklyn, New York, the child of parents active in the Young Communist League in the 1930s and 1940s. A 1968 graduate of Reed College, she co-founded the Women of Color Resource Center in Oakland, California, in 1989. A journalist and political activist, Burnham has been involved with the Venceremos Brigades, the Third World Women's Alliance, the Alliance Against Women's Oppression, the Angela Davis Defense Committee, and the Line of March. Her recent writings focus on women and poverty and on women and militarism.

Interviewer

Loretta Ross (b. 1953) became involved in black nationalist politics while attending Howard University, 1970–73. A leader in the antirape and antiracism movements in the 1970s and 1980s, she co-founded the International Council of African Women and served as director of women of color programs for the National Organization for Women and program director for the National Black Women's Health Project. After managing the research and program departments for the Center for Democratic Renewal, an anti-Klan organization, Ross established the National Center for Human Rights Education in 1996, which she directed through 2004. Also in 2004, she was the co-director of the March for Women's Lives. In 2005 she became national coordinator of the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective. The Loretta Ross papers are at the Sophia Smith Collection; the Voices of Feminism Project also includes an oral history with Ross.

Abstract

In this oral history, Linda Burnham describes her childhood immersed in the black radical community of New York City in the 1950s and 1960s. It also includes a brief interview with her mother, Dorothy Burnham. Linda's interview focuses on her activism in the early abortion rights movement in Black Women United in the 1970s and the impact working with the Venceremos Brigade and traveling to Cuba had on her life. She also discusses the anti-imperialist work that led her to San Francisco in the 1960s, to New York in the 1970s, and back to the Bay Area in the 1980s, where she founded the Women of Color Resource Center, which she still directs.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded on miniDV using Sony Digital Camcorder DSR-PDX10. Four 60-minute tapes.

Transcript

Transcribed by Rosemary Berkeley and Wanda Strukus, May 2005. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Revan Schendler, June 2005. Reviewed and approved by Loretta Ross and Linda Burnham.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Burnham, Linda. Interview by Loretta Ross. Video recording March 18, 2005. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote example:** Linda Burnham, interview by Loretta Ross, video recording, March 18, 2005, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 2.

Transcript

Bibliography: Linda Burnham. Interview by Loretta Ross, Transcript of video recording, March 18, 2005. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote example:** Linda Burnham, interview by Loretta Ross, transcript of video recording, March 18, 2005, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, pp. 15–16.

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Transcript of interview conducted March 18, 2005, with:

LINDA BURNHAM
Oakland, California

by: LORETTA ROSS

(The interview begins with a six-minute conversation with Dorothy Burnham, Linda Burnham's mother.)

ROSS: This is March 18, 2005, in Oakland, California. My name is Loretta Ross, and I am doing the oral history of Linda Burnham. And I have the unprecedented opportunity to interview her mother. How are you doing?

00:20

D. BURNHAM: I'm doing fine. I'm glad to be here with you.

ROSS: Could you tell us your full name, your date of birth, and where you were born?

D. BURNHAM: I was born in Brooklyn, New York, on March 22nd, 1915.

ROSS: OK, and what's your full name?

D. BURNHAM: My full name is Dorothy Dowridge Challenor Burnham.

ROSS: OK, and what was your maiden name?

D. BURNHAM: My maiden name was Dorothy Challenor.

ROSS: OK, and how many children do you have, including Linda?

D. BURNHAM: I have four children, and Linda is the third.

ROSS: So tell us about your four children, when they were born, and their names.

D. BURNHAM: My first daughter was Claudia Burnham, and she was born somewhere around 1943, and she was followed by Margaret Burnham, who was born in 1944. And then Linda came along several years later in 1948. And then my boy child, Charles, was born in 1950. So those are the four.

- ROSS: So tell us about getting married to Mr. Burnham and how that happened.
- D. BURNHAM: Well, I was in Brooklyn College where some professors talked to me about socialism and communism, and were very active in the movement to free the world from poverty. And I became very interested in joining the Young Communist League and started working with young people. And Louie Burnham was at City College. He lived in Manhattan. I didn't know many people from Harlem at that time because I lived in Brooklyn, but he also joined the YCL and the American Student Union while he was in college and became very active in the youth movement. And so we met at some meeting in the youth movement and got together at that time. And then he was appointed to work with the Southern Negro Youth Congress, which at that time was in Birmingham, Alabama, and was working to end segregation and [win] jobs for young people and so forth. And they asked him to come down and be the executive secretary. And so we got married and moved to Birmingham. And that's how we met. We met in the city, but we moved to Birmingham immediately after we got married.
- ROSS: So, Mrs. Burnham, why don't you tell us about your parents, where they were from and how you all got from Alabama to New York. 3:13
- D. BURNHAM: How we got from Alabama to New York — no, New York to Alabama.
- ROSS: OK, tell me about that.
- D. BURNHAM: My parents came to Brooklyn, New York, from Barbados. My mother, she came to live with a cousin who had set up a rooming house for immigrants, and she came and stayed with the cousin. And I understand that one day my father showed up. He was working on a ship, and he decided to leave the ship and stay in Brooklyn, New York. And he met my mother, and they got married. And my mother talked about Barbados all my young life, so I felt very much at home in Barbados.
- ROSS: What was your mother's full name?
- D. BURNHAM: Her name was Aletha Dowridge.
- ROSS: And your father's?
- D. BURNHAM: My father was Frederick Challenor, and he worked on ships. And when he came here — he had worked as a shoemaker in Barbados, but when he came here, he couldn't get decent jobs in the factories because the union discriminated against people of color, so he worked most of his life in janitor jobs. And my mother came and worked as a housemaid. She was a nursemaid for children. She went to the country with these families and stayed with them. These were early years. And when she got married, she did sewing at home, piecework, finishing up garments

from the factory and things like that. And my father continued doing the janitor work. But they decided that their children wouldn't do that kind of work, so from early on, they pushed us all to finish up college. And my older sister went to Teachers' College and became one of the — at the time she got into the New York City school system, she was one of the first black teachers in the school system.

ROSS: Did you have brothers and sisters?

D. BURNHAM: I had two sisters. My older sister is passed away, and my younger sister is still with us.

ROSS: All right. Well, thank you for giving us background information on Linda. It's been a joy. I'll let you go so we can continue with the interview.

D. BURNHAM: Thank you so much.

* * * *

ROSS: Today is March 18, 2005. My name is Loretta Ross. I'm with the Smith College Voices of Feminism Oral History Project. I'm in Oakland, California, interviewing Linda Burnham. How are you doing, Linda?

6:18

BURNHAM: Oh, I'm doing fine, and it's so nice to be able to welcome you here.

ROSS: It's great. You have a lovely home. Thanks for welcoming me and the project. Tell me a little bit about yourself, first of all, starting with your full name and your date and place of birth.

BURNHAM: My name is Linda Louise Burnham. That middle name, I was named for my grandmother. And I was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1948, January 9th, 1948.

ROSS: And did you have siblings, or —

BURNHAM: I was born into a family in which I had two older sisters. Claudia is my oldest sister, and Margaret is the next one down. So I'm the third girl. And after me there was a boy. They were working toward a boy, but I just was not him. So actually when I was born my dad wrote a poem about that, that they'd just have to keep coming up with girls' names and they might end up with a girls' basketball team as they worked their way toward the boy. Luckily, they didn't have to go that far. The next one was a boy, Charles. And then they stopped. So there's three girls and one boy in my family.

ROSS: OK. Tell me about your parents, their names and what you remember in terms of being raised by them.

BURNHAM: My parents are Dorothy Challenor Burnham and Louis Everett Burnham. And both of them are the children of immigrants from Barbados, so they grew up in the African American community and the Bajian community, specifically, my dad in Harlem and my mom in Brooklyn. They were the children of working people. On my mother's side, my grandfather is what they now call an illegal immigrant. He jumped ship from the Caribbean — he just got off and decided to stay in Brooklyn and consequently never got to go back to Barbados. And my grandmother on that side came when she was a young woman. They met here, and they had three girls, my mother being one of them. And on my father's side, my grandmother came. I don't know as much about the story of her coming, but a lot of her brothers and sisters came as well. And she was pretty entrepreneurial, and she ended up with a rooming house up in Harlem on 139th Street, and another rooming house on 138th Street. And so my dad, whose name is Louis, and his brother, Charles Burnham — they only had two kids — so there was a pretty vibrant Bajian community, extended family and community in New York at the time. So I grew up as part of that community.

My two older sisters were born in Alabama because at the time my parents were working — they were kind of premature civil rights workers, in the early '40s, so they went down to Alabama to work with the Southern Negro Youth Congress on segregation issues, on organizing and mobilizing African American youth. And consequently my two sisters were born in Birmingham. I was born in Brooklyn, went down to Birmingham and spent my first year there.

The times were sort of tightening up politically. It was the beginning of the McCarthy period, and work in the South was becoming much more difficult. It had always been difficult, but it was becoming even more so. And consequently my parents moved back to New York. And so for most of my growing up years, I grew up in Bedford Stuyvesant, on Cambridge Place, and then about junior high school years moved to Flatbush and spent my junior high and high school years there.

ROSS: How do you believe that your parents became politically conscious — because obviously it would have been maybe easier to just melt into society and not become political activists. What do you think was the difference in your parents that made them commit to struggle?

11:11

BURNHAM: Well, you know, they had a sort of strong race consciousness from the beginning, and part of that is, it may have been in their own upbringing. My grandmother on my dad's side was a Garveyite and had stock in the Black Star Line. And I think we still have the certificates (laughs). I don't know that it's worth anything, but — so she was a strong Garveyite. And the streets of Harlem in particular were, you know — there was a strong tradition of street corner orators and kind of a vibrant political scene in Harlem. And by the '30s, I'd say maybe mid- and late '30s — well, both of them obviously lived through the Depression —

there was a lot of activism on the part of various kinds of socialists and communists, especially in the colleges, even though on my mom's side particularly — [she's] from kind of a working-class family, both of their families were very strong on education, as many West Indian families were.

So they, you know, from the early days, sort of moved towards the college scene. So my mom went to Brooklyn College; my dad went to City College. And in both settings they became exposed to socialists and communists, you know, folks who were teachers and other students, and just because of the politic of the world at that time, ideas of liberation were linked to ideas of bringing to bear a socialist world. Things are very different now. But that's what was going on at that time. And so they both became active in the — now we're in the late '30s, early '40s — in the Young Communist League, which, you know, between having some sense of international politics just because of their own backgrounds, and a strong sense of race politics, that then I think got sort of grounded in the internationalist, pro-socialist, pro-national liberation politics of the communists and socialists of the day.

So I think that's some of how — and they, you know, it's funny. My mom's 90th birthday is in a few days. And my friend was over here. We were just chatting, and my friend asked my mom, "Well, what do you want for your birthday?" And my mom said, "World peace." (laughs) So she's pretty much still in the same mode that she was molded in many, many, many years ago.

And, my dad became, after they left Alabama — we were living in Brooklyn, but a lot of his political life was based in Harlem. And he became the editor of a newspaper that was oriented towards the African American community. Paul Robeson was the publisher of the paper, and it was a paper called *Freedom*. And I still need to go back and, you know, do the work of really sitting down with all the issues of that newspaper that came out. It was a newspaper that just touched on both the domestic issues of the day and also on how international issues evolving in Africa and in other parts of the world affected the African American community. So, he also at one point ran for, I think, state senate on the American Labor Party ticket, and he ran on a platform that included protections for workers, protections for domestic workers as a matter of fact, for agricultural workers, a fair employment commission, et cetera.

So basically I grew up in a highly political family, to put it in a word, and a highly opinionated family, which is still highly opinionated. You know, when you go, when we go to family gatherings, there's just a lot of talking (laughs).

ROSS: Are you aware of any attempts to persecute them for being radicals — of course, because of McCarthyism?

16:36

BURNHAM: Oh, absolutely. I mean, they — you know, in Alabama my dad was arrested and threatened and all kinds of stuff. I mean, he did, you know,

he sat in Bull Connor's jail. That was around — an interesting incident that, I just met a guy who went to jail with him, a white guy, and they were meeting in a restaurant, and this was segregated Birmingham and you were not supposed to — blacks and whites were not supposed to eat together. They were in a black restaurant, which normally they could have gotten away with and had gotten away with before, but they were obviously being followed. Somebody called the police, and they were both arrested. And I recently read the story in the newspaper, in the Birmingham newspaper, about their arrest. And one of the things that was interesting about it, they didn't put the address of the white man in there, but they did put the home address of my father, which was, you know, basically an invitation to some racists to do whatever.

So during the McCarthy period, it was an interesting period because we lived on a block in Bedford Stuyvesant with two other African American families who were also active in the Communist Party. And in fact, you know, looking back on it, many of my childhood friends and sort of the extended family beyond the blood family were folks, black folks, who were active in the Communist Party. And one of those people went underground, and his daughter, who was one of my closest childhood friends — this is a family called the Jacksons, James Jackson, he was underground for I'm not sure how long, I'd have to go back and think about that — but at that time, we were followed to grade school. What were we going to do? We didn't even have any idea what the heck was going on — we were kids.

But that was, you know, an atmosphere in which there was a lot of repression, and people were basically — I don't think I knew at that time what the Communist Party was. I think the only additional thing to say about that is, people were vague, my family and others around me, because of the repression, they were a little bit vague about their politics. So it was like people were progressives, but I don't think I understood that my parents were Communists until pretty, you know, way down the line. I'm not exactly sure when I fully understood that — and that was a result of the kind of repression that, you know, was out there when I was a young girl.

ROSS: Was it unusual for African American families or activists to be involved in the Communist Party back during those days?

20:10

BURNHAM: It wasn't as unusual as people think. We had a pretty wide circle of friends who were either in the Party or they were members of, you know, organizations that were close to the Party. So it wasn't — I mean, clearly, you know, there's a way in which it's a very particular experience, but it certainly wasn't a unique experience, it wasn't a unique experience. I mean, I have friends who are still friends who came up in more or less the same mode.

ROSS: OK. In terms of their work experience, your parents, you talked about possibly your mother doing domestic work? Or was —

BURNHAM: My grandmother.

ROSS: Your grandmother. Tell me what kind of work your parents did.

BURNHAM: My mother, she graduated in biology from Brooklyn College, and she says that she wanted to be a doctor. Now her opinions about doctors right now, I'm not sure (laughs). But she, you know, was a child in the Depression, and going to more school than college was not an option. So for many years she was a technician in a laboratory in hospitals in New York. She did that for many, many years while we were growing up. And then at a certain point she switched over to teaching and she ended up (break in recording) teaching in the community college system in New York and then also in kind of adult education at Empire State University, teaching adult students biology, bioethics, health sciences, that kind of thing. So that's what she did. So I guess the only other thing about my mom is that she's somebody who, even after she retired, continued with her association with her college, and even, I think, down to today, mentors students and does student evaluations and that kind of thing. So she's had a very long work life.

My dad, my dad died when I was very young. He died when he was very young. He died when he was 42. And essentially he was a political activist and a journalist his whole life. So when he returned from Alabama and the work with the Southern Negro Youth Congress, as I said, he started working with the newspaper *Freedom* in New York, in Harlem. And once he finished doing that, he worked with the *National Guardian*, which was a progressive, left-wing newspaper also based in New York, and he was a correspondent for the *Guardian* on the civil rights movement and African American issues. And he was still working with the *Guardian* when he died.

ROSS: How did he pass?

BURNHAM: He passed — he was giving a speech, [it was] Black History Month, and he was giving a speech and he had a heart attack and was taken to the hospital, but didn't survive the heart attack.

ROSS: So was it difficult growing up, it sounds like, for a large part of your childhood without your father?

24:17

BURNHAM: Yeah, it was difficult.

ROSS: How old were you when it happened?

BURNHAM: I was 12. I was 12. So I think it's difficult for — it was really hard on the family. First of all, he was a lovely man, you know. He was a really beautiful man, which, you know, you don't necessarily have a sense of that when you're young. Your parents are just your parents. You don't

really necessarily have all that much to compare them to. But, even today, you know, when I'm kind of in deep middle age, older people will come up to me who remember my father and — I wrote a poem about this, too — who just remember. He had a lot of grace, and was a very welcoming person, and he's remembered in that way. So it was a huge loss to the family. It was experienced as a big loss to the movement, to the antiracist movement, to the left. But certainly for us as kids, and for my mom, you know, then raising us — as a single mom with four hungry kids (laughs), that's work. Yeah.

ROSS: Were there other significant adults that influenced your childhood?

BURNHAM: I think there were many significant adults in my childhood. I mean, in my immediate family, certainly my grandparents. You know, we were, I'd say we were a pretty close family, so we'd spend most weekends at the home of one grandparent or another. I spent a lot of time in the company of my grandparents, my grandmothers. So they certainly were significant influences in my life. You know, they didn't necessarily understand the turn that their children had taken towards radical left politics. They were, of course, both church-going families. And my immediately family was not. So, you know, there were some — people had taken different paths, but the families remained very close. So they were a strong influence. My father's brother, Charles, Uncle Charlie, was also a strong influence and still is. He's 92 maybe now, but a very lively 92. And he has been very close to the family for a long time. So I'd say he was a strong influence on my growing-up years. I feel like I grew up in the company of a lot of caring adults.

ROSS: You rather interestingly said that they were religious. What role did religion, if any, play in influencing your family life, and if it didn't play any, why not?

27:35

BURNHAM: It played a role in the sense that, you know, every once in a while I'd go to church with my grandparents, but my parents didn't go to church, and were not believers. I know that's kind of a radical thing to say today, because everybody is assumed to be a believer, but they were not. And so I didn't grow up in a religious family. I knew what church was about because I went to church with my grandparents, and my grandmother on my father's side was, at least for some part of her life, was part of a fairly strict sect called the Brethren. I'm not really sure about all what that was about, but, you know, they were against dancing — all the things anybody would want to actually do (laughs), I think, including television in the early days — but on the other hand, I remember her as being a big soap opera fan. So I'm not sure how her religion and her soap operas mixed. So in that sense I didn't grow up in a church. I didn't have a home church. I went to church every once in a while, you know, I went to the neighborhood church, which was Concord Baptist,

every once in a while. But it was not, you know — a religious upbringing was not sort of part of how I came up.

ROSS: Did you notice its absence relative to other kids in your school or in your neighborhood? Did you notice there was something different?

BURNHAM: I may have, but I don't remember it being a source of any kind of big problems or anything. You know, there were some families that were more attached to the church than others, and there were others that were occasional churchgoers, and others that didn't do that much church-going at all. So I don't think that made me feel particularly different.

ROSS: Well, tell me about your educational experiences. You obviously went to elementary school, the usual process. Given that your parents placed a premium on education, how was going to school for you?

30:22

BURNHAM: I went to public schools in New York, in Brooklyn. So I went to P.S. 3, P.S. 11, Lefferts Junior High School on Empire Boulevard, and Erasmus Hall High School on Flatbush. And I was a pretty good student. As a young person I was a big reader, basically. You know, I'd just sort of go through shelves in the library — I did a lot of reading. And I was a pretty decent student, good enough so that in New York — I don't know if this is still the case, but it was the case that you could do junior high school in two years instead of three. So instead of having to do seventh, eighth and ninth, you could just, you know, skip that and do two years and go straight into high school. So I went through all of that relatively quickly and got out of high school when I was 16, which was nice, to be able to kind of skip through some of that (laughs). And I think I was a fairly good student. I didn't necessarily apply myself at the level that I probably should have applied myself. So I was probably a little bit lazy, but I did fairly well.

And then coming out of high school, coming out of Erasmus, my mom was concerned — this is, you know, probably related to trying to raise three girls — she was concerned about where I was going off to college and who was going to be watching over me (laughs). So I went to — it was her decision — I went to a historically black college which was pretty conservative at the time, socially conservative, which was Bennett College in North Carolina. And that's where I spent my first year of college. And there were ways in which that was a wonderful experience, and ways in which it drove me absolutely out of my mind.

ROSS: Such as?

BURNHAM: Well, the driving out of my mind part basically had to do with the fact that there was a way in which they were trying to turn out ladies — and I was not a lady, and it was going to be really hard to turn me into one (laughs). So they tried. So there was all this stuff about, you couldn't wear pants on campus except on Saturday mornings, you had to show

up at vespers, you had to, you know, put on gloves — just stuff that was not part of my framework. It was not how I operated.

ROSS: What year was this?

33:55

BURNHAM: I went away to college in 1964. So I'm sure Bennett has changed a lot since then.

ROSS: Particularly under Johnetta Cole —

BURNHAM: Particularly under Johnetta Cole's leadership, which is fabulous, and had Johnetta Cole been there at the time (laughs) — but it was a pretty conservative place. And just, you know, things that didn't feel like they were going to be helpful to me in terms of how I understood myself and where I was going. The positive side is that there were some wonderful sisters there. I had become a political activist, a young activist in high school in Brooklyn, and when I got to North Carolina I was able — and I don't even remember the context or the organization, but — to do some door knocking around voter registration in Greensboro. So there were sides of the experience that I really did enjoy, and other parts of it that made me a little bit nuts. So I got out of there (laughs).

And I didn't really know where I was going to go from there. I applied to Swarthmore, I think, and didn't get in. And then a neighbor friend or somebody who my mom knew suggested that I apply to Reed College. And of course I also needed to go somewhere where I was going to get a scholarship, because I didn't have the money, my family didn't have the money to do all this. And by this time my two older sisters were either in college or — so I had an older sister at Fisk, Claudia was at Fisk, and I don't think she was through yet, and my other sister, Margaret, she went to Bard and then she moved to Mississippi and went to Tugaloo. So I had to have somebody giving me some money to go school.

And I applied to Reed College — I had never heard of Reed College — which was in Portland, Oregon. I had probably barely ever heard of Portland, Oregon (laughs). I mean, I was — you know, there's a kind of provincialism in New York, Brooklyn provincialism, Manhattan provincialism, where, you know, you basically think New York is the center of the universe. I'm sure you've run into people who truly believe that. And at 16 I had no idea what the rest of the country was like. But I applied to this school in Portland, Oregon, and I got in. And I got on a train and went across the country to Portland. And I spent the last three years of my college experience in Portland, Oregon, which was an experience (laughs).

ROSS: So how was it, going from the highly urbanized environment of Brooklyn, Bed Stuy, into — I've been to Reed College. (laughter)
What kind of cultural experience —

37:11

BURNHAM: And what kind of culture shock was that?

ROSS: Yes.

BURNHAM: It was a shock, first of all because — but it was a good thing, I think, for me, in many ways. You know, because you do have — I think it's true for everybody. You're shaped by where you grow up, but you also have some distortions in your sense of what the country is about, depending on where you grow up. So it's good to get out and see some other idea of what's going on. Now, so I went then from Brooklyn to Greensboro to Oregon. So that was, you know, that's kind of an interesting circuit. And the Oregon experience, partly — on the racial side, my sense of white folks was highly ethnic, because of growing up in New York. So, you know, you're either Jewish or Italian or Irish, more or less. And I got to Oregon, and I had never — there were just white folks that I had no idea. I guess these were white folks that were in most of the country, but I didn't know it (laughs). So that was an experience in Portland, you know, just getting a different sense of what the country looks like from a different angle.

Reed as an educational institution at the time — now we're talking about the mid-'60s, going towards the late '60s — and so it's a period, you know, when the sort of drugs-sex-rock-'n-roll thing was going on, which I participated in (laughs), all sides of that — drugs, sex, and rock-'n-roll. So as an educational institution, it was pretty interesting. It was fairly rigorous, some decent teachers. I got into school and I didn't have a lot of vision about where I was trying to get to, you know, I didn't go into college with some firm idea of, I want to be a something or another. I had no idea, really. All I knew was I really liked to read books. So I became an English literature major, without having any idea what this might be good for in the world. And actually, as an English literature major, unless you decide to go on and get an advanced degree and teach it, it's really not good for anything (laughs) except honing your skills at reading books, which were already pretty well honed (laughs). So, but I enjoyed my years there.

There were barely any colored folk on the campus. I mean, really barely. You know, I was their attempt at trying to get the place somewhat integrated because, you know, who would go to Portland, really. So there were a couple of black folk from Portland itself, a few from other parts of the country, but really few and far between. It was a small campus. So, you know, that's what those years were about.

ROSS: And you graduated from Reed?

41:11

BURNHAM: I graduated from Reed in '68.

ROSS: And then what did you decide to do?

BURNHAM: I graduated from Reed and I went back to New York for a year, and I taught in the SEEK program. The SEEK program was kind of like a bridge program to bring young people into the city colleges who might not have had the highest level of skills and needed to strengthen those skills. So I taught at Queens College in the SEEK program, and (pause in recording) I basically taught young people, mostly young people of color who were trying to figure out how to — you know, that was a time — it was a different time. It was a time when, you know, there were kind of a lot of programs really trying to move people along and move folks into the city colleges. And so I taught there for a year. I lived in the East Village at the time and commuted to Queens to do this job. And so I stayed in New York for a year.

And when that year was up, I got in a Volkswagen and drove back across the country. I had gotten used to driving back and forth across the country, because when I was in Reed, in order to get home — every once in a while there'd be cheap airfare, but usually I was in some jalopy of a car trying to get across the country at the end of the semester. And by this time, my partner at the time was somebody I had met at Reed College who didn't take to New York all that well. He was from Denver, Colorado. And so we decided to go back across the country and go to San Francisco. We had some friends in San Francisco. And now this is 1969, I guess, so you know, we were amongst probably thousands of people (laughs) crisscrossing the country and ending up in San Francisco.

ROSS: At the height of the hippie movement?

BURNHAM: At the height of the hippie movement, there you go.

ROSS: How did that have an impact on what your thinking was at the time, and perhaps your future thinking about becoming a political activist?

BURNHAM: Well, I think there was a time there, certainly at Reed and maybe in the first year or so after I got to San Francisco, where my political activism was kind of minimized and it was, you know, more about hanging out, smoking a little weed — are you allowed to say that on tape?

ROSS: It's your story.

BURNHAM: (laughs) It's my story! The country is so conservative now, I don't know what you're allowed to say that you actually did do (laughs)!

ROSS: I don't think the FBI will be looking at this tape, and if they are, they already know these things (laughter).

44:18

BURNHAM: So, you know, I was young and there was just a lot of hanging out, and — I was always working because I had to make a living. And at that time, when I came to San Francisco, I got a job as a legal secretary. I

think I was a legal secretary for a few years. And hung out with friends and, had a good time for a couple of years. And then somewhere along through there, as I said, I had already been a political activist when I was in my teen years in New York, and that was around mainly antiracist issues.

But the first, as I recall it — and my memory's not that terrific — but as I recall it, the first political thing that I did in San Francisco is that there was a call for a march for abortion rights. And I decided to go. It was in Union Square, and this must have been maybe 1970, possibly, I don't know. It's probably possible to confirm all this. So I decided to go to that march, and got there. I remember going alone, although that seems kind of unlikely, but that's how I remember it. And it was principally white women at the march. And I, at some point, somebody took a bullhorn and said, Can all the — I don't know if it was African American or all the women of color, it was probably, Can all the black women come and meet under this tree in Union Square. So I went over to the tree, and there was just a handful of sisters there, literally a handful. And the sad part of this story is I just went to a march around abortion rights last month, and there were still not many sisters there. So I know you've done work around this issue in trying to get us mobilized, but unless that work is done with intention and consistently, we don't just show up.

But in any case, back to the story. There's a sister who's now a very good friend and has been a friend since that day, so 35 years, whose name is Attieno Davis, and she's the one, I believe, who had called us together under that tree. And from that experience, we formed a little consciousness-raising group, these sisters, and I think we were called Black Sisters United. And Attieno was a part of it. Another sister who I still see, whose name is Ammah, she was a part of it, and, you know, just a bunch of sisters. And it was a group that got together and just mainly talked about who we were, what we thought, what we believed, dealt with issues of sexuality. In that group was a combination of straight women and lesbians. I think we may have done a little bit of political activism of one sort or another, but it was mainly a place for us to get together and reflect on who we were in the world and what we thought and what that meant and what it felt like being an African American woman in those times and thinking about the kinds of issues that we needed to think about. So that was a really good place for me to start to reintegrate into the world of politics.

ROSS:

Are there records or archives of those groups in that period?

48:50

BURNHAM:

I don't think there are any. I don't even know if we took notes. The only record I have is I still have a little button that says, Black Sisters United. And I think that's about it. So that's one of — you know, there were probably hundreds of groups like across the country. That's the kind of history that really does get lost. Because I'm still in contact with a couple of those women, so we should just have a conversation and —

because as I say, my memory is terrible, but other people have better memories and they could probably sort of reconstruct what it is we did at that time.

ROSS: Well, I'm going to pick up on the thread of your political activism in the next tape, but I want to continue with your personal story a bit longer.

BURNHAM: Sure.

ROSS: I met your daughter this morning.

BURNHAM: Mm-hmm.

ROSS: Tell me about her and her father and how — what happened?

BURNHAM: (laughs) Where'd she come from? She –

ROSS: Your daughter's name.

BURNHAM: My daughter's name is Ilyana. And I met her father at Reed College. He was a — what was he studying? First he started studying math, and then I think he switched to literature, too, which is probably how I ran into him.

ROSS: What is his name?

BURNHAM: His name is Gary Achziger and he grew up in Colorado. His parents are of German background, so just about as far away from Brooklyn (laughs) as you can manage to organize a relationship. I remember the first time I met his parents — this was probably around graduation. And they came, and I think my mom was there, too, and they came to the graduation, and we all went out to dinner or something. And, you know, it was one of those interesting sort of cultural, not clash so much, but interesting cultural mix. So he grew up in a white community outside of Denver, grew up doing a lot of trout fishing, which, you know, trout fishing to me is like, if it's not in a can, I don't know about it (laughs)! That's not quite true, but in any case, it was a different cultural experience. So that was young love. So as I said, we went to New York together. He did not take all that well to New York. I think it was just overwhelming.

ROSS: Did you ever get married?

BURNHAM: No, I've never been married. There was a time in which, you know, people didn't really feel like being married was the thing to do necessarily, or people didn't feel like it was necessary to be married, to be in a committed relationship, and I was one of those people. And I don't really think I'm too much the marrying kind, so although I've

been in a few sustained relationships, I've never married. And I don't really feel like I've missed anything.

So, let's see. So, as I say, he didn't take all that well to New York, which was part of the reason we came back out here to San Francisco. He became a bus driver. He was a municipal railway driver in San Francisco. I was a legal secretary. We both ended up being politically active, which we'll come back to. But along the way, in 1976 — so this was a relationship that started in '68 — 1976 we had a daughter together, and that's Ilyana. I only have one child. Probably if things had been different, it would have been nice to have, you know, another one or two somewhere along the way. I like kids a lot. And I really enjoy my relationship with her, so it might have been nice to have another couple somewhere along the way.

ROSS: Your reproduction wasn't forcibly interfered with? It was your choice to only have one child?

BURNHAM: Oh, no, it wasn't forcibly interfered with. I would just say it was never — I broke up with her dad when she was about three, and the circumstances were never quite right again, for whatever reason. It was partly probably sort of overinvestment in political work at a certain time, you know, that sort of coincided with those reproductive years. That combined with relationships that, you know, there are stages in which it feels right to have a kid in a relationship, and stages where it's like, nah. So, all the stars never lined up again, I guess I'd say.

ROSS: OK. I'm going to take a break here and check the tape.

54:33

END TAPE 1

TAPE 2

ROSS: Tell me, Linda, how did you become a political activist yourself — your first conscious engagement with political activism?

BURNHAM: Well, as I was saying before, I grew up in a very political family, and an opinionated family, a family that was opinionated about what was going on in this country and what was going on in the world. So in that sense, I think that came into me by osmosis, just in terms of the setting I grew up in. And I don't remember my first political act.

In terms of women's rights issues, I remember an argument that I had early on with my grandmother, and it was very interesting because when I look back on it, I can't quite figure out where it came from on my part. I was young. I couldn't have been more than 13 or 14. And we had an argument about abortion. She was against abortion, you know, she was a deep Christian, and abortion was not anywhere on her map. And I don't even remember how we got into the conversation. She was a little bit appalled, number one — and what's interesting to me about it is, I was also, you know, a sexual innocent, so I'm not even sure that I completely understood, you know (laughs), the mechanics of sex or any of the rest of it. But I had a firm opinion about a woman's right to choose very early on, and was prepared to argue that opinion with my grandmother. I don't remember where that argument ended up.

But in terms of my political activism, I was, in my high school years, active around both peace issues — at that time, it was sort of antinuclear issues — and civil rights, antidiscrimination issues. And I became a member of Student CORE. The Congress of Racial Equality had a student chapter, and I was a part of that. One of our main activities was picketing a neighborhood bakery called Ebinger's, which did not hire African Americans at the front. They had some African Americans in the back, baking and doing whatever, but no counter people. So we did a picket of that bakery. And I found recently a very old kind of mimeograph, hand-done flyer, from back in those days. I also remember going to a lot of the peace marches down in Union Square and all of that kind of stuff in those — so this must have been, like, basically the early '60s.

ROSS: During the Vietnam War.

3:30

BURNHAM: During the Vietnam War. And I remember in junior high school, the first time the issue of the Vietnam War came up, and there was a young man in, you know, social studies class or something, who was just talking about the fact that we were at war and all of this. And so, in those early days — the anti-Vietnam War activism came a little bit later — this was principally, you know, kind of ban-the-bomb, antinuclear stuff, as I remember it. And, you know, I would go to a student meeting here or there. I was certainly not near any of the leadership of those, but I was an active participant. Yeah, so that, I mean, that's sort of the

beginnings of my activism. But when I went to Greensboro for that one year — and again, I was not in leadership, so I don't remember how any of this was organized or who organized it — but I remember doing door-knocking, voter-registration work in Greensboro.

And then there was kind of a lull in my political activism until the early '70s. And in the early '70s, I first hooked up with this group, Black Sisters United, which was principally a conscious-raising group. And soon after that, in the early '70s, I ended up becoming active with the Venceremos Brigade and then the Third World Women's Alliance, and started doing a lot of — well, the Venceremos Brigade were — oh, and then there was also the Angela Davis Committee. So it ended up being a very intense political period, you know, late '60s, early '70s, very intense.

So, the Venceremos Brigade — here in the Bay Area, there were a lot of young people of color who were organizing other young people, not solely, but largely, young people of color, to leave here and go to Cuba to, in our case, build housing in a town that was coming up called Las Naranjas, I believe. And so I joined the Venceremos Brigade. And what was positive about that experience is that there was sort of a deep learning experience on the front end before we ever got to Cuba. There was a big emphasis on political education and really trying to prepare young people to understand something about colonialism, something about U.S. relations with Cuba, you know, sort of some of the history of that relationship — what U.S. capitalism is about and how it functions in the world, studying about racism and how that functions in the world and in the U.S.

And I think in the Venceremos Brigade, it was the first time that I had an opportunity to do some fairly systematic political study, basically. And, you know, I was thankful for the opportunity. I mean, in that preparation, there was an extended preparation period before going on the brigade, and it was a combination of reading, discussion on the political education side, and then work projects. And the intention of the work projects was to get us in the mode of, you know, working collectively together as we would be doing in Cuba. So for us, that meant going down to Agbayani Village, which was in the Central Valley, which is a project for older, retired Filipino farm workers. So it was putting together housing for these (pause in recording). So we went down to work on Agbayani Village, which was building retirement housing for folks, Filipino farm workers, many of whom came and worked here without their families, many of whom had been active in the grape boycott and all of the farm worker activism and development of the United Farm Workers' Union. So we worked down there. And I remember working on a roof and falling through and hanging in the rafters.

We also worked on the I-Hotel, which was, again, it was a housing issue for — because in many cases, you know, this is still true, many immigrants come and the men will come and the women stay, and in some cases, you know, men get old and retire and still don't have

families. So the I-Hotel was another place where we worked and painted and did this, that, and the other. And then there was a Native American university, college, which I can't recall the name of.

So anyway, these were just — I guess the significance [of] this for me and for my political education was that it was a way of introducing me to communities and struggles and issues that I wouldn't necessarily sort of run into otherwise. And all of that took place in the context of the Venceremos Brigade. So that was sort of the lead-up, and then we went to Cuba with a group of young people, you know, most of us in our early 20s maybe. I went twice — on I think the fifth and sixth contingents of the Venceremos Brigade — working on building housing in a town called Las Naranjas.

And so, as it was for many, many, many young people who were active in the movement at that time and who continued in their activism, it was a transformative experience. It was my first time outside of the U.S., I do believe, and the combination of, you know, being in a place where politics was sort of so central to the life of the country, and the perspective on the world was so radically different from the going perspective here in the U.S, and then experiencing all of that at a relatively young age as a sort of intense collective experience with a whole set of people — I think that really molded me as a political activist and also as somebody, who, I think from that time on, sustained an international vantage point about what was going on in the world.

And as I said, I went on the Venceremos Brigade twice, first in '71, I believe — I'm not sure my years are right, it might have been '70 and '71, or '71 and '72. And then when I came back I was recruited as, you know, somebody to help organize and do the political education for the next contingent going down. So I went on the next contingent, along with my very close friend Miriam Ching Louie. We went together as kind of the leadership of the Bay Area contingent on that next brigade, which was also a political lesson in other ways. I mean, we had, you know, the similar work of sort of building the brigade and working with, you know, folks who were our own age and trying to figure out how you start to provide leadership — all of that kind of stuff.

But then when we got down there, we also had — and there's no way that I can tell you the details of this, because of course I don't remember — but there was also sort of struggle internal to the brigade about what direction the brigade would take. And that had been unfolding at the national level of the brigade and also in the Bay Area. So there were some complicated and difficult lessons to be learned also about internal political struggle, when everybody's supposed to be kind of on the same political agenda, but it doesn't quite work out that way. But overall I would say that that experience of working with the Venceremos Brigade was a formative one for me politically and then also personally, because there are friendships, many friendships, that were formed in the context of that Brigade that I sustain today. And that is 30 plus years. So —

ROSS: So how did your consciousness around gender develop and get expressed?

14:04

BURNHAM: Well, as I said, I had, for whatever reason, I had some consciousness that had developed around reproductive rights issues, as reflected in going to this march around abortion rights. And I think it's also the case that because of the model of my — I have strong women in my family, my grandmothers as well as my mother, both of my grandmothers and my mother: all strong women. I feel like I come from a tradition that's about, you know, you can get out there and do whatever needs to be done as well as anybody else on the planet. So I think the ideas of the women's liberation movement — I was kind of fertile ground for (laughs) that to come along.

And somewhere along the way, sort of coinciding with the period of the Venceremos Brigade — as I say, I don't remember all the dates on this but, again, in the early '70s — it was a sister who had come out from New York. Her name is Cheryl Perry. Her name at the time was Cheryl Johnson. And Cheryl came out because of a relationship with somebody who was, you know, whatever. But she had been in the Third World Women's Alliance in New York. And once she came out here, she decided to start a chapter of the Third World Women's Alliance here in the Bay Area. And she recruited for that chapter from people who were in the Venceremos Brigade, and people who were active in the antiwar movement, et cetera. And so at some point, Cheryl recruited me into the Third World Women's Alliance.

And so it was then in the context of the Third World Women's Alliance, again in the early '70s, that I was able then to start to think and discuss and educate myself in a slightly more systematic way about the kinds of issues that women face, and solidify a more developed gender perspective. So that came out of the Third World Women's Alliance work.

ROSS: What is the history of the Third World Women's Alliance? I mean, it may pre-date your joining them, but you may know some of its history.

17:00

BURNHAM: It does pre-date me joining them. The Third World Women's Alliance grows out of — and we at the Women of Color Resource Center now have a lot of the papers of the Third World Women's Alliance, and it is something some articles have been written about, but it deserves a more comprehensive treatment.

The Third World Women's Alliance grew out of a kind of dissatisfaction within SNCC, within the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. It grew out of dissatisfaction amongst women in SNCC about the role of women in SNCC, and about how women were viewed, and about how women's contributions were viewed, and the whole issue of what women's roles were and or should be, et cetera. So somewhere along the way — and you know, I think everybody knows, famously, the Stokely Carmichael quote about the position of

women in SNCC is prone — so a Black Women's Caucus formed, internal to SNCC. Frances Beal was one of the people who played a leading role in forming that Black Women's Caucus. The Black Women's Caucus, and I don't know all the politics of the time, but the Black Women's Caucus eventually became an independent grouping and named itself the Black Women's Alliance.

The Black Women's Alliance — now we're in New York — was approached by some Puerto Rican women who were active in the struggles around Puerto Rican independence and issues affecting the Puerto Rican community in New York. And over the course of a number of conversations, they decided to change the name and become the Third World Women's Alliance, third world being the language of the day — that language has changed, but [that was] the language of the day, to indicate what we would now call people of color, basically.

And so, the Third World Women's Alliance — now we're talking about the late '60s — the Third World Women's Alliance came together as an antisexist, antiracist, anti-imperialist organization. They put out a newspaper that was called *Triple Jeopardy*, which is available on microfiche or whatever. It might even be available online — I'm not sure. But the intention of that newspaper was to really speak to the ways in which women of color experience the world, and speak to the issues that were not at that time being addressed by the white women's movement, or the mainstream women's movement. And it was the early side of the recognition that women of color faced issues and discrimination and marginalization, not only as women, but also as people of color, as people with particular class background, et cetera.

And some of this [analysis is what] later came to be called intersectionality, which is a very complicated term, but the ideas behind that were formed in these early years, where people were essentially saying, We're whole people, and we can't combat women's issues as though we're unaffected by issues of race, as though we're unaffected by the issues that face our broader communities. So the Third World Women's Alliance was an early — it's not the only — but was an early articulation of this.

ROSS:

What were some of the issues or — you told me some of the issues you worked on. What were some of the things that the Alliance did that had an impact?

21:40

BURNHAM:

Some of the issues early on had to do with reproductive rights issues — even before I joined the Alliance, back in New York — issues around sterilization abuse, in particular, and trying to figure out how to make sure that women had [provided] informed consent before they underwent a sterilization procedure. So the Third World Women's Alliance was active in a coalitional effort in New York to work on sterilization abuse issues. And they won that struggle, as I understand it, to make sure that women had informed consent, because black and

Puerto Rican women were being sterilized without understanding that that's the procedure that they were undergoing.

Out here, we worked on a range of different issues, including infant mortality issues. And it was true at that time and it continues to be true, that especially in African American communities, infant mortality rates are outrageously high. So we worked on infant mortality issues, especially related to the general hospital over here in Oakland, which is called Highland Hospital, so we engaged in a struggle around that.

We worked consistently on peace issues and anti-Vietnam War, so that meant organizing contingents for the big marches, doing education around peace issues, those kinds of things. We worked around developing community celebrations, especially around International Women's Day. We were very active each year in developing a broad committee that extended beyond the Third World Women's Alliance, bringing women together to celebrate International Women's Day and to use that time to really talk about not only what was happening for women here in the U.S., but what was happening for women in other parts of the world — so really trying to sustain the kind of broad international consciousness that many of us had come to through the work in the Venceremos Brigade to figure out how to sustain that in our day-to-day practice.

We also had work around South African Women's Day. We started to celebrate South African Women's Day as a way to raise issues of the apartheid regime and how the workings of the apartheid regime affected women in particular. So each August 8th we would develop a community education and celebration around South African Women's Day and bring South African Women who were resident here in the U.S. to talk about the kinds of issues they faced. So these were the kinds of things that we did, as well as, you know, all of the internal education, and reading and discussing, and all of that kind of stuff.

ROSS: What was your relationship as an organization to mainstream women's organizations in the area? Did you collaborate with them, or were you oppositional? Was there a relationship?

25:10

BURNHAM: I'd say not so much. It was probably more oppositional. I think we, to the extent that we formed alliances and relations, we were more likely to form those kinds of alliances and relations with organizations that were based in communities of color, organizations made up of men and women that weren't organized around women's issues necessarily but that were organized around whatever the range of issues was in those communities. And so we were more likely to form alliances with those kinds of organizations, rather than with mainstream women's organizations, certainly. Yeah, I think that's the case.

But I think the value also of the Third World Women's Alliance, even though in some ways it presented us with some difficulties — so this is, I think, one of those things that's a mixed blessing. We, the organization, was made up of African American women, Asian women,

and Latinas. I don't believe, at least in the Bay Area, we had any Native American women in the organization. At one time we did have an Arab American woman in the organization. And that was a really rich mix. We learned a lot from each other, a lot about each other, a lot about each other's communities. And trying to figure out how to, you know, especially in the community celebrations that we organized, how do you make sure that some of the richness of those communities gets expressed in whatever it is that you're doing and projecting? I think some of the complications of that, though, in terms of our own activism, were reflected in the fact that once you are trying to work around a particular issue, there really are differences in how you might approach different communities. And what kinds of issues are important to different communities and in what ways.

ROSS: Such as?

28:19

BURNHAM: Well, let's see if I have an example. Such as, you might, in an Asian American community or in the Latino communities, have issues having to do with immigration and immigrant rights that express themselves in particular ways vis-à-vis women, which might not be an issue in the African American community, necessarily. Then you have an organization in which all of these different constituencies are represented. Then the question of, how do you do your decision making about — you know, you're not in a position of infinite resources, so we'll just take on anything and everything — so then, how do you do your decision making about which of these issues and why. And if you're working on this particular issue, is it going to have any currency or relevance to this other community. So I'm just trying to express what some of the complications of working in a multi-ethnic, multiracial setting, you know. And I think those are issues that people continue to face, that are real.

ROSS: Did the Third World Women's Alliance deal with issues of sexuality as part of its political agenda?

BURNHAM: The Third World Women's Alliance dealt badly with issues of sexuality at one point, and then, I think, made a turn and dealt with those issues better. So, to be specific, the organization was, when I joined it, principally straight women. So I'm just going to talk about sexuality in terms of gender issues between straight and lesbian women. The organization was challenged at one point by a sister whose name is Paris Williams — she's still around and still active — the organization was challenged around its homophobia. And there were, in fact, women in the organization who were homophobic at that time and who were not ready to deal with issues of sexuality, who might have been, you know, OK with accepting lesbian women into the organization but were not at all interested in trying to figure out how to put issues of sexuality on the agenda. And so — this again is in the early '70s, when the organization was criticized, and I think rightfully so, for essentially being a

heterosexist and homophobic organization — several years later, the organization was challenged again, and made a turn, you know, essentially sort of sat itself down and struggled over it, internally, over trying to do some internal education about homosexuality, and to get itself into a better place, which it did.

The organization then went through another transformation. Let's see, this is now in — I don't know the years, somewhere along the way in the '80s, early '80s, I would say, yeah, early '80s — the organization went through a transformation and became the Alliance Against Women's Oppression, and at that point as an organization, brought white women came into the organization and was much clearer on, and more publicly articulated, an antihomophobic politic. But it took a while in that organization to get there, it took a while.

ROSS:

Well, what were some of the other factors pushing a transformation into the Alliance Against Women's Oppression, and maybe pulling white women into the discourse so that you ended up with a more multiracial formation?

33:30

BURNHAM:

I think different people will have different narratives, both about how this happened and also about whether it was a good thing or a bad thing for the organization, so I'm just going to give mine (laughs). And other people, I'm sure, will give theirs, somewhere along the way. One of the main things that was pushing that transformation was, always internal to the Third World Women's Alliance there was — it was not a Marxist organization, but it was an organization that, like many organizations at the time, it was an organization that was influenced by Marxism, by Mao's *Little Red Book*. At that time, organizations that were on the sort of progressive-to-left end of the spectrum, there was sort of a set of things that people studied and thought about in terms of how they tried to function internally, and how they thought about the world. So the Third World Women's Alliance was strongly influenced by Marxism from its early days, from its origins. And I think that would be, you know, confirmed by looking at some of the issues of *Triple Jeopardy*, the newspaper — very influenced also by national liberation movements, which were themselves influenced by Marxism and socialism and et cetera.

So consequently there was, in the organization, a sort of ongoing conversation about the working class. And the notion that the working class, to the extent that there was going to be a revolutionary process — which at this point in time, 2005, looks kind of fantastical, but at that time (laughs), say, 1975, 30 years ago, didn't look quite as fantastical — there was, you know, ongoing conversation in the organization about what does working-class leadership look like and what does that have to do with communities of color, and understanding that while communities of color were in the main working-class communities, that there was also these white folks out here that we needed to pay some

attention to politically. So there's that current internal to the organization.

I think external to the organization there's also a development which is that several of us, myself and a number of other people in the Third World Women's Alliance, were also becoming active in an explicitly Marxist formation. And that was — let's see, this must have started, now we're talking the tail end of the 1970s, which was, you know, [when there were] many attempts, I think, in the country to try and figure out how to develop a revolutionary politic, how to get that politic expressed out in the world outside. And it's a political tendency that had its own set of criticisms about earlier attempts and et cetera. I was part of that, as were a number of other people in the Third World Women's Alliance. And so there's also, I would say, an external pressure coming from that side to develop a women's organization that has sort of a more explicit class basis, and that brings in and integrates white women. So somewhere around — let's see, I don't know, my dates are really bad on this, somewhere in the late '70s, early '80s, maybe? — somewhere in the early '80s, the Third World Women's Alliance goes through a transformation process which involves a lot of conversation, a lot of discussion — and the papers are all somewhere — and becomes the Alliance Against Women's Oppression. So that's —

ROSS: Was it controversial to engage white women in the organization? Was there resistance by women of color within the organization?

39:05

BURNHAM: It was controversial, and there was some resistance. And not everybody made that transition, which is why I think it's important to talk to other people about it as well. And in putting together the Third World Women's Alliance papers, one of the things that's been positive is being able to bring together women from prior to that transformation process, not all of whom went along with the transformation process, to just re-engage the conversation about what the Third World Women's Alliance was about, because I think there was a sense of loss and a sense of resentment on the part of some women who were not necessarily into — you know, who had a political home in the Third World Women's Alliance, and were not that interested in seeing it transformed, were not that interested in working in an organization that included white women and therefore did not make that transition. So it's been good to be able to sort of regroup that set, and to, you know, have the conversation.

ROSS: So when did you, Linda, start using the dreaded "F" word for yourself, that feminist word. When did you start calling yourself a feminist, if ever?

BURNHAM: (laughs). That's a really good question, because I never self-describe that way. I don't resist it if other people label me that way, but I never self-describe. And that's all about history — it's not about today, it's about history. And it's partly because we in the Third World Women's

Alliance and in the Alliance Against Women's Oppression both came up in strong opposition to what we saw as mainstream feminism. My political identity as somebody who organizes for women's rights was not forged with an understanding of myself as a feminist, but with an understanding of myself as somebody who was highly critical of feminist thought and of feminist practice — deeply critical.

ROSS: In what way?

BURNHAM: Well, I'll just give you one example. In — what year was that? maybe it was 1980, somewhere along the way, it might have been 1980 or so — there was a set of feminists who were very concerned about what they identified as the feminization of poverty, right? In some ways, rightfully so, but they had a phrase that was sort of the catch line for both their thinking about it and how they thought they were going to go about working on this issue, and it was, "By the year 2000, all of the nation's poor will be women and their dependent children." And, you know, I'd just turn around, and everywhere I'd see this thing and I'd just tear my hair out. And so I'm thinking, OK, so now what are you all thinking is going to happen to all the colored men I know who are out there who are poor? Are they disappearing off the planet? Are they becoming wealthy? What is going on here?

And it was just emblematic for me of the blinders that the feminist movement had in place and were pretty much refusing to remove, even when they were struggled with. You know, I thought, how could you look at the world as it is today — say 1980, I can't quite remember what year this came out, but it was probably around 1980 — how could you look at the world as it is today and imagine that all of the nation's poor — even if it's like a propaganda line — that all of the nation's poor are going to be women and their children? You have to not have any familiarity whatsoever with what poverty actually looks like, or with poor communities of color, certainly. And you know, it was one of these things that just made me nuts. And so I felt like, well, if that's what feminism is about, I'm not a feminist. And I'm not going to be a feminist, because I can't identify with something that is so far removed from the realities that I know, that it could come up with some nonsense like this.

Feminism has come to mean something else in the intervening years. And it's come to mean something else because women of color have started to claim it as their own, in different ways. And so I don't have as much problem with the terminology now, when other people lay it on me. But I also know my own history, so if I don't introduce myself to somebody as Linda Burnham the feminist, that's just how it goes, you know. It's OK if somebody else wants to call me that, and a lot of it is just water under or over or through the bridge. But I'm just saying how I came up, and how I saw the way the feminist movement saw the world. It made me nuts, you know, it made me crazy.

ROSS: But given that your work was embedded in communities of color, and that it focused on women, no doubt those in resistance to looking at the oppression of women called you a feminist anyway. And I'm not talking about in relationship to the white community, but in those communities of color. Did you experience resistance in those communities in terms of working on gender-specific issues? And how did you experience that? They used to use feminist as a dirty word.

46:10

BURNHAM: Mm-hmm. I don't think my experience has been — well, you know, there's always, especially within the black community, there was, and I think continues to be, but was, at that time, kind of an ongoing dialogue with nationalism about, in particular, more nationalist — which is sometimes also more traditionalist in terms of male-female relations — so there's that dialogue and sometimes struggle (laughs) over, you know, what the rightful roles of women are and should be. But I don't think when we have worked in communities, when we go at it in terms of work around a particular issue — let's see how I would say this. When I'm working around a particular issue, I'm not necessarily looking for people to, you know, adopt my whole world outlook and whole brand of politics and become a feminist or any of that. I'm looking for some movement around whatever the particular issue is, you know, whatever the particular women's rights issue is — whether that be, you know, how women of color experience homelessness or what reproductive rights issues look like for women and for women of color, or what the welfare system looks like for women and women of color, do you know what I mean? So in that sense it's not kind of an abstract fight about a feminist worldview. I don't know if that answers the question.

ROSS: Well, probably it's a question that's coming from my own experience, because I developed my feminist consciousness within the context of black nationalism — (both speaking; laughter) and so I have very real and lived experience (laughter) —

49:20

BURNHAM: A lot of fights there (laughter).

ROSS: — about how the brothers felt we were betraying the race —

BURNHAM: Yes. Yes.

ROSS: — for not doing —

BURNHAM: No, that's a —

ROSS: — women-specific work, and so —

BURNHAM: Absolutely. That's a reality. And in some way I feel like we're in such a conservative time that that kind of nonsense comes back around,

especially around how this focus-on-the-family stuff, how that plays out across the board, really — gains I think that we felt like we were making progress on — and this is something that you had mentioned earlier, [how] we've just rolled back to, really, you know, pre-'60s, pre-'50s thinking, practically (laughs), on marriage and family and the role of women and all the rest of it, is kind of pitiful. But certainly there is that, to the extent that we worked in coalition and on events and et cetera with folks who were more nationalist oriented, you know, there's some friction there, there was some friction.

ROSS:

So in addition to your work with the Alliance Against Women's Oppression, what other political formations were you engaged with?

51:10

BURNHAM:

Well, let's see. Now we're talking again in the early '70s. I was very active around Angela Davis's case, partly because the Davis family are old family friends from way back in the Birmingham days, so my parents had become close to her parents in the '40s, when they lived in Birmingham. And then Angela and her sister Fania were living out here in California, and my sister, who was an attorney — very young attorney, practically just out of law school at the time — became one of Angela's attorneys and moved out here to play that role, as her attorney. So naturally, pretty much, I was very active in the Free Angela, Angela Davis Defense Committee that was located here. We had an office over on Fillmore Street in San Francisco.

And it was also a learning experience for me, because one of the things I was responsible for — we had, you know, a little newsletter or newspaper that came out of that committee, and so one of the things I was responsible for was trying to figure out how to translate these complicated legal maneuvers that people would explain to me, how to turn that into something that somebody, you know, regular folks on the street, could understand. How to get the community we were in — at that time we were in the Fillmore, which was at that time predominantly an African American community. That's changed with gentrification, but how to get that community also engaged in the movement to free Angela and how to keep up the communication really with people from all over the world, at that time, who were interested in her case and interested in her release.

So that was also a time when I worked more closely — because people who were active in the Communist Party were very active in that campaign because of her association with the Communist Party, so it was a time when I connected with a lot of activists who were in the Party. So that was, I feel like, a really important learning experience for me, working on that campaign. And, you know, it was all kinds of stuff: going to the courtroom, driving people back and forth to the courthouse, all of that kind of stuff. So I was associated with that. And then in the, as I say, late '70s, early '80s, I guess, I joined a Marxist organization which was called Line of March. And —

ROSS: Why?

BURNHAM: One might ask. (laughs). That was obviously not the product of a focus group. How can we find a really strange name for an organization? It came from a quote, and I don't even remember the full quote, but it was something about knowing the line of march, meaning, knowing the way forward. So it started principally in the Bay Area, became a national organization, and it was, you know, in the political landscape of the time, it was kind of a rejection of the political orientation of the Communist Party — you know, sort of the old-line Communist Party at the time — but also a rejection of kind of heavy-duty Maoism.

ROSS: Why did it feel it needed to reject the Communist Party line?

3:55:

BURNHAM: Oh, you know, this is the arcane politic of the day, but it had to do with the Communist Party's allegiance to the international orientation of the Soviet Union and what we thought at the time was problematical about that. You know, it was one of these (laughs) — someone else can explain this better than I could, but it's one of these political debates that seemed really critical at the time and then in retrospect is kind of interesting but a little abstract. But in any case, some of it had to do with generational stuff, you know, young activists coming up, coming to Marxism, and there not being kind of a strong enough pull into the Communist Party of the day to kind of magnetize us in that direction. And I think it also had to do with the strength of the Maoist brand of communist politics at the time amongst young people here in the U.S.

In any case, this political formation came together and it was made up of many of the young people that had been in the Venceremos Brigade, who had been in — some of us who had been in the Third World Women's Alliance, some folks who had been in a Filipino organization called Katipunan, KDP, you know, sort of a mish-mash of young, radicalized, budding Marxists. So I was in that organization for a pretty extended period of time, into the late '80s. And continued in that time working also in the Alliance Against Women's Oppression, and continued at that time just being engaged with various and sundry political currents, both here in the Bay Area and also nationally. So [I] worked in both of the Jesse Jackson campaigns, in '84 and '88, the Rainbow Coalition, which was actually quite active here in the Bay Area. So, you know, did quite a bit of work with the Rainbow Coalition, et cetera.

spelling?

ROSS: All right. This is a good stopping point.

58:20

END TAPE 2

TAPE 3

ROSS: We had almost finished talking about the 1980s and different political organizations and formations that you were engaged in then. Tell me a little bit about transitioning in the 1990s. How did your work change? The Reagan revolution had taken hold, Bush One was president. How did that have an impact on your work?

BURNHAM: It had a big impact. Had a big impact. Really, I think an era of activism sort of came to an end, and a pretty abrupt end, at the tail end of the 1980s. And it posed a lot of difficulties. And some of it had to do with — at least for the generation of activists that I was a part of, part of it had to do with us becoming older and you know, really having to sort out, for those of us whose lives had been almost completely oriented around activism — so for me and for a lot of the people that I knew, we were not career-oriented. We basically tried to figure out how am I going to get myself a little gig that will keep a roof over my head and bread and butter on the table so that I can do what I'm really about doing, which is trying to figure out how to make a revolution, or win women's rights or, you know, fight for black liberation or whatever it was. So we were not sort of inclined to follow a career path.

And because of really the worldwide changes that happened at the tail end of the 1980s, the Reagan revolution combined with the breakup of the Soviet Union, which was, I mean, obviously that was significant as the breakup of the Soviet Union itself, but it was also significant to the extent that it served as an indication that one path, the socialist path, that there were obviously clear problems with the way that folks had followed that path, if not with the whole theory itself. Now that's all still in the process of being sorted out, but the point being that we ended the 1980s at a place where there were big question marks about how to go forward with politics.

It also was the end of a period in which it was possible to sort of build and sustain organizations mainly on will power and energy, and on all-volunteer labor. Organizations like the Third World Women's Alliance, and even an organization like the Line of March, and the Alliance Against Women's Oppression — these were all organizations that grew and developed off of the volunteer energy of the people who belonged to them. And none of them were funded by foundations, certainly. You know, sometimes there might be a donor or something somewhere along the way that would, you know, kick in a few hundred dollars, but none of them had big money. Well, by the 1980s, the end of the 1980s, that model of organizing, at least for those of us who were hitting our 40s, was no longer really a viable model. So by this time the Third World Women's Alliance was long dead and the Alliance Against Women's Oppression ended — I don't remember what year, but somewhere along in there. So, you know, I personally was working all this time, mainly as a legal secretary in various offices around the city.

And so I faced the question of, how am I going to — I had been fortunate enough to develop a set of politics with a set of like-minded people around women's issues in particular, and I was very reluctant to see those politics disappear or dissipate, disappear off the political map altogether, so I faced the question of, how and in what form might I be able to sort of sustain a political orientation and vision that, again, traces itself back to the Third World Women's Alliance and then the Black Women's Caucus. So I got together with what was called at the time a project development team. This was somewhere around 1989. And we started talking about, well, in what form might we be able to transition these politics and stabilize them in an organizational setting.

And out of those conversations, we decided to form the Women of Color Resource Center. And in its earliest stages, you know, there were sort of a range of different conceptions out there about exactly what the Women of Color Resource Center would do, but a lot of it really was about trying to form some kind of group that could sustain the understanding of the situation at least of women of color, having to come at that from a holistic point of view that included trying to understand how racism works in our country, how economic injustice and class bias and class discrimination work in our country, and trying to understand how discrimination against women, misogyny, and, you know, all the kinds of challenges that women face, how do those things all work together. So it was basically about figuring out how to sustain those politics in an activist way.

So we decided to put together the Women of Color Resource Center and we decided, knowing nothing about what it entailed, to develop a nonprofit organization, because it seemed as though in that period that that was one way of being able to produce and develop an organizational formation that had some staying power. So in its early years, the first two or three years of the life of the organization, I held a part-time job and I had a little bit of office space, shared office — somebody gave me a corner desk, basically, in the office of the National Network for Immigration and Refugee Rights. Cathi Tactaquin and Arnoldo Garcia worked there, and they were good enough to allow me to share their office. And we, with this project development team that eventually morphed into a board of directors, we got our nonprofit status, got somebody to do the work for us on a pro bono basis.

And one of our very first projects, actually, was putting together a national directory of women of color organizations and projects. And the idea there was just for us to be able to do a landscape, a lay of the land of who's out there, what are they doing, what kinds of women of color organizations exist in what parts of the country, what are the main focuses of their work, and that kind of thing. So that was one of our very first projects.

And then I had to do the on-the-job-training thing, which was to really sort out what it meant to try and figure out how to raise money, you know, what it meant to — all the issues of nonprofit organizational development I was then faced with. For the first several years, I was

6:55

pretty much there alone, in terms of staff. Again, in the early years I worked part time at the city attorney's office, and then later on I did some work for the Applied Research Center part time for a while — all the while trying to figure out how and in what direction to develop this organization.

Over the years, the organization, you know, started to develop a profile and persona for itself, but it took a long time, really. Part of it was the on-the-job training parts and part of it was, it was very difficult to raise money, very difficult to raise money for the organization in those early days. I'm sure you've had the experience of (laughs) having what you think is a fabulous idea (laughs) and not being joined in the opinion of its fabulousness by people who are in the position to give you some money. But in spite of that, you know, I had a good board of directors, and over time the organization developed programmatically.

So by the time the Beijing Conference came around in 1995 — well, actually leading up to the conference, for at least a year before that, now, in the Alliance Against Women's Oppression, we had taken a delegation of women to the conference in Nairobi. You were there in Nairobi (laughs). So we had taken a delegation to the conference in Nairobi, and that was the first international conference on women's rights that we had organized towards, and learned a lot in that process, learned a lot. I always tell younger women that participating in those U.N. conferences you've got a steep learning curve. There's really a lot going on. So that first year, in 1985, when we went to the U.N. conference in Nairobi, we took issues around reproductive rights, we took issues around the wars in Central America at the time, and we just had the opportunity to engage with women from around the world in ways that we had not previously.

So in preparation for the Beijing Conference on Women, we decided to put a lot of energy into bringing people together and doing the kind of advance work to prepare people for what they might encounter. We brought together finally a national delegation of about a hundred women. Traveling to China with a hundred women was an experience in and of itself (laughs), needless to say. We also at the time went to Beijing with issues around immigrant women and immigrant women's rights, immigrant women in the U.S. and also did a caucus and workshop linking immigrant women in the U.S. with women from other parts of the world. And we also went with issues having to do with welfare rights and homelessness, especially the relationship between the status of low-income women and the pressures on housing. So we went with some women who had been homeless to speak with their own voices about what that experience was about, which was very interesting, in fact, because, of course, many women from around the world were astonished to hear that there was such a thing as homelessness in the U.S. They had no idea, basically.

So this was, for us, at the Women of Color Resource Center, it was an opportunity both to do that kind of work, and in doing a lot of the preparatory work for it, I think it forced us to engage with issues having

to do with the impact of globalization on women around the world and also to start to understand how global economic policies, or the parallels to the kinds of global economic policies that were impacting women in other places, how they were impacting women here in the U.S. And I think one of the things that was most important about that gathering was to really understand that for many women in other parts of the world, their thinking and understanding and work around women's issues was framed by how they understood the impact of transnational capital on their communities. And so that in that way, there tended to be sort of a more integrated approach to the variety of different issues on a women's rights agenda than was the case for those of us from the U.S. who tend to have a more fragmented — at least in my opinion of this — more fragmented approach to our agenda.

When we came back from Beijing, apart from doing — you know, we have always felt, I think, going to these international conferences really is a big privilege, and so feeling some responsibility when we return to figure out how to translate and transfer some of the knowledge and experiences we've had back into the community here. One of the ways that we did that, coming out of the Beijing experience, was to put together a work, a popular education workbook, which is called *Women's Education in the Global Economy*, which looked at a whole range of different issues but looked at it from the vantage point of, what is the impact of structural adjustment policies on women in other parts of the world? How are women's lives affected by the policies of the World Bank and the IMF? And how do women look at issues of work in the informal sector, trafficking in women, violence against women, the kinds of environmental toxins that women have to deal with — how do women understand those issues and how do women work on those issues? And again, we paralleled those questions with questions of women's double day, or double and triple day, and some of the other issues impacted especially by privatization policies here in the U.S. So the point of all that is, I feel like it was both a continuation and a deepening of an orientation, a long-standing orientation towards the international arena and towards placing the work that we do in an international context.

15:45

ROSS: What impact do you feel the Women's Resource Center has had on the community in which it's situated?

17:40

BURNHAM: I think a few different impacts. I think one impact has been that people look to us consistently as a voice, for one thing, to be able to raise and articulate the kinds of issues that women of color face and to be present in the community. So some of that presence is just, you know, things in the form of being available to speak at events, go to forums, be on the radio, be a presence in that sense, be prepared to sort of comment on politics as they unfold and as they impact women of color.

One of the things that we do is we do a yearly celebration in October. And what that is, is each year we raise up the contributions of

women of color in our communities. So we honor anywhere from four to six women of color, usually local women. You know, occasionally we'll bring somebody in or occasionally we'll honor a more prominent political figure, like Congresswoman Barbara Lee, or Cynthia McKinney, or something like that. But a lot of it is local women who are making contributions either around political organizing or in the arts, you know, people who do art that's got some human and social consciousness somewhere reflected in it. And it's looked forward to and it's a contribution to the community in the sense that it's a celebratory event. And I always feel like every time we sort of come up on this — we call it a Sisters of Fire event — I feel like I have a very long list of women to honor, you know? And so it worries me, when am I going to get to all of them? Because it is a very long list. The sisters are out there doing the work, doing serious work, both the generation of my age and above, and also young sisters who are coming up, who are doing really excellent, excellent work that deserves to be lifted up. So I feel like we make a contribution to the community in the sense that we keep these women and these issues sort of in the public domain.

Then, I think we also make a contribution at the level of sustained analytical work, especially on a couple of different issues where we make every attempt we can to go at this in an integrated way. So on issues of peace, on issues having to do with women in other parts of the world, and on issues facing low-income women in particular, I feel like we have a fairly developed and established analytical slash [/] theoretical point of view, but not abstract, tied to policy questions, how particular policies impact particular communities and particular sets of women. So I feel like we make a contribution in that way. And this again is through, you know, working papers, or op-eds, or whatever.

And then I feel like we make a contribution on a practical side in being a place where women of color, and increasingly [younger women] — obviously there are women of color who are way younger than I am (laughs) — can find a political home to ground themselves. Yeah. Find a political home to ground their own politics, to develop their own politics through, you know, our main programs. We have a peace program and an economic justice and human rights program. So those are two of the main program areas we have. In addition to that we do work around popular education and leadership development, and then we have a piece of work around research and documentation. So

23:35

through different initiatives, like —
I'll give you an example. Currently, one of the things that we're doing, which is actually a lot of fun — coming out of our peace program, one of the women who is a program director of the Resource Center is putting together something called Redesigning Peace. It's a fashion show. And the idea of the fashion show is, how do we — we've been working with issues about gender and militarism for a while. Now there's one way to do that, which is, you know, a lecture, a book, and talk, talk, talk. (interruption 23:35–24:00)

Redesigning Peace is a fashion show, and we decided to do that format because we wanted to be able to get a broad audience in the place. We wanted to be able to talk about gender and militarism issues, which are the issues that we're concerned about — where do those things intersect. There's a lot of really interesting theoretical work done around that, but we wanted to also get to an audience that's not going to sit down and read the book. And so we decided that we would go at this in two ways. One, we're going to have part of that fashion show be about how military-inspired fashion is the fashion on the street. And what is that saying to people that they're out there in camouflage or they're out there in, you know, flak jackets, or they're out there in parachute gear, like they're having to jump out of an Apache helicopter — how about that name, while we're at it? But anyway, so going at it that way as a way to sort of spark people's consciousness about the ways in which this highly militarized state that we live in infiltrates our consciousness. And one of the ways it infiltrates it is through fashion.

And then the other side of that show is going to be encouraging young designers to come up with peace designs. So what are the designs that are going to, you know, speak to our common yearning for peace. And so in putting this together, we're working with a broad set of other people. Some are designers, they're not necessarily political activists, but they may be designers who, like a lot of people, have ideas and opinions about the state of the world — so in this way we sort of function as a place where people can come together to work on different projects, people with sort of varying levels of day-to-day commitment to, you know, I'm in the struggle, but who have an orientation towards peace and justice. So I think the organization plays that role as well.

And then, I think the other piece of work that we're doing, which is reflected in the Welfare Radio Collaborative, and hopefully will be increasingly reflected in the economic justice and human rights side of the work, has to do with mobilizing low-income women to speak in their own voices about their own experience, to be able to start to become advocates, political advocates, for themselves around the issues that they identify as most affecting them. And so the economic justice and human rights part of our program work is oriented towards that.

ROSS: So given your decision to found the Women of Color Resource Center, what were some of the developments that you saw happening among women of color nationally that you felt that the resource center was an idea whose time has come?

27:42

BURNHAM: I think it's largely about what I felt was not happening, maybe not so much as what was happening. And having come of age politically at a time when women's issues were more central to the agenda of progressive and radical movements, because women had put them there, I think I felt by the late '80s that there was some receding on — certain things obviously had been won, and important victories, actually, had been won, but there was also a way in which the arena for, or the space for a strong women's rights agenda — that was essentially

a period of backlash and increasingly conservative vantage points on women's rights.

There was also a period which I think is also important to note, that there's a little bit of a missing generation of feminists, or of activists. It's not just in the women's movement, it's in the progressive movement more generally. But as a consequence of those Reagan years, there's a whole set of activists maybe who would have been, as a cohort, who would have been now maybe in their mid 40s. It's a very small cohort right now. So I find in my work, and I think other people find in their work, that there's the generation that sort of came of age politically in the '60s and early '70s, and then there's a kind of drop off. So what that means is that a lot of the folks that I work with are either activists of my own generation, or then there's drop down to the, you know, late 20s early 30s crew. And that set in between. So there was a while, I think, when, particularly in the early years of the Women of Color Resource Center when, you know, there was kind of a question mark of, is there going to be kind of a new set coming forward to take on these ideas as their own? And that really was a question mark for a while there, in the early days of the Women of Color Resource Center. Is this just like an old folks' endeavor, or an increasingly older folks' endeavor, or is this something that's got some relevance for younger women as well?

So in that way I feel also that the Women of Color Resource Center has kind of served as a bridge in that sense, the fact that some of us were able to sort of hang on to a certain set of politic in a time that was pretty hostile to those politic, and at a time when there were not a lot of younger people sort of coming on and going down that road. Sometimes I talk about it as kind of the crumbs-in-the-forest phenomenon, where, you know, I'm trying to sort of make sure that there's documentation of the work that we do, that there's some sense of what we were thinking and why we did what we did, so that folks who come after, you know, don't have to start over from scratch.

But there was that period of several years when it was a question mark: are new women of color who are oriented towards women's rights and justice around women's issues, are they going to come forward? I'm happy to say that it's become clear that they are, but there is that sort of missing piece. So I think the Women of Color Resource Center also played a role in ensuring that that politic sort of made it through that dry period, if you know what I mean.

ROSS:

In doing research on you, I noticed that you also are following your father's crumbs and engaging in a journalistic career. I see your writings a lot. Tell me about that and how it appears that you're pushing your analysis into publications more and more. You made quite an impact with your analysis around violence against women in the Iraq War ["Sexual Domination in Uniform: An American Value"].

33:13

BURNHAM:

Well, I think I've been — writing doesn't come easy to me in the sense that I can't just kind of sit down and scribble something off. But I have been blessed — and it's partly because I was such a reader when I was

growing up, and because in my whole educational background, especially through English Lit, you know, the orientation towards thinking critically about ideas just sort of developed as part of my makeup. And I have to say, I think another part of that — which I didn't talk about earlier — another part of my political formation in those years — I'm on a sidetrack now, but I'm assuming that's OK.

ROSS: It's wonderful.

BURNHAM: (laughs) OK. In those years that I was in the Third World Women's Alliance and working with the Venceremos Brigade and all of that, I also was fortunate enough to encounter somebody who was here as a mathematician. He came as a student. He was actually from [South] Korea and his name was Harry Chang. And Harry was a very interesting man, was a little bit older than us. He must have been — we were in our early 20s, he was probably in his 30s headed towards 40, which seems very young now, but — and he took it upon himself to engage a whole set of young people in the study of Marxism, and in a very rigorous study, and I feel like, you know, beyond the ten-page classics. So we spent a lot of time making our way through very complicated and difficult texts under his guidance. And, you know, I think the advantage of that for me was, it really encouraged sort of a deep analytical thinking and conversation and discussion about complicated ideas. As a consequence, in some ways I feel like my education through those years — this went on maybe for two or three years — I feel like I value that part of my education at least as much as what I got in college, in terms of developing a capacity for critical thought.

And beginning in those years, and beginning with really turning our attention to trying to figure out how to analyze issues of racism, trying to figure out how to analyze issues of sexism and gender oppression, my writing really started in those years. So it's in the way back. And it wasn't so much for public consumption, it was more internal, in a relatively small group of people, as a way to sort of understand and analyze what our current situation was, and then to go from there to thinking about how that might be reflected in policy and activism. So I think a lot of that writing started there.

But I think it's also the case that, you know, part of that probably does come from the example of my father. I come from a very verbal family, you know, a family that sort of enjoys the talking, verbal interchange, and all of that. And I feel like, still — and this is one of the things that I really encourage young women to work on — there are not enough of our voices out there in the public domain. Not at all. In fact, there are very few of us who can capture public attention with our ideas and understanding of what's going on in the world. And I feel like our ideas and understanding are as legitimate as anybody else's, but we tend to — I don't know if it's silencing ourselves, or if it's not finding the space to sort of project our opinions about these things, but I feel like it's something that we need to be a lot more aggressive about. Yeah.

ROSS: When you wrote your analysis on gender in the Iraqi War, did you get any negative feedback on that, or what type of reaction did you get?

39:17

BURNHAM: Well, I got a couple pieces of correspondence from military folks who were not happy at all (laughs), whose response — I mean, I think what I was trying to do in that piece — you know, one thing I find [difficult] is to try and put out complicated ideas in six or seven hundred words, because when you're looking for somebody's attention span in an op-ed piece or something like that, you're basically at six or seven hundred words, in which space you can get across one, maybe two ideas.

And the situation presented by Abu Ghraib was very complicated, as you know. And that was a situation in which — and this is sometimes how things happen in our office, you know, we came into the office, there wasn't a staff meeting or anything, but everybody was just undone and outraged by the whole situation. And so we spent some time just talking about it amongst ourselves and trying to think about it. And then we decided that we should try and figure out how to put something down on paper, and put something down on paper that exposed just the ways in which the Abu Ghraib phenomenon was — the multitude of ways in which it was just nasty and funky, and what it revealed about us as a nation, and what it revealed about gender relations in the military. And we thought — and I think we were correct in this — that if we were not ready to talk about it, it probably wasn't going to be talked about. So that was the impetus behind putting that piece together.

The kind of stuff I got from guys in the military was basically along the lines of, we're out here defending our country and putting our lives in danger in order that you can have the right to write and speak about the nonsense that you are writing about. And one of the points that I made in that article had to do with the military's role in encouraging prostitution all over the world, wherever there are U.S. military bases. And at least one of the people who wrote me who was a military officer was adamant about how that was not the case, and how the military strongly discouraged its military personnel from, you know, using prostitutes and et cetera, et cetera.

ROSS: Right.

BURNHAM: Right. So his version of reality and my version of reality did not, in fact, mesh. But he wanted to let me know that, at least (laughs).

52:58

ROSS: But in terms of positive feedback from the community, because it was one of the most brilliant analyses I've read about gender and the war — and what did that, Lindsay, or Lynn [Lynndie England] —

BURNHAM: Yeah.

ROSS: — what she represents, and —

BURNHAM: What she represented. Well, we got a lot of positive feedback, and also, you know, obviously this is a world of the internet, so once you do something it goes way out. It goes way beyond where you think it might have gone. So as a matter of fact, it was one of those things where I got feedback from overseas. I heard from somebody, you know, I hadn't seen — lives in the Philippines and I hadn't seen in the past 30 years, that kind of thing. And I think it's also one of those things where people from outside the country who are looking at us and thinking, what the heck is going on over there, and where are the alternative voices, and what are the alternative voices saying — so I got responses like that also from people from overseas. So in that sense it was positive. And this is part of the reason that we've decided to really spend some time trying to go at the various different dimensions of the relationship between gender and militarism and try and sort of unearth the many different ways in which we can think about that question. (pause in recording)

ROSS: OK. So I'd like to hear more about your writing. Do you have any plans to write a book or publish a book? I heard about your *WEdGe* [*Women's Education in the Global Economy*] book. It wasn't just a popular education manual, but something more in terms of a political analysis. What are your plans around continuing this writing, since you're so good at it?

44:44

BURNHAM: Well, I don't know. You know, I've written a lot of different articles and a lot different kinds of articles, some longer analytical pieces, you know, and some shorties. I went back to school, I don't know, somewhere in the 1990s, because I was very interested at the time in really understanding what was going on around the issues of homelessness, with African American women in particular. And I felt like one way for me to really understand that was to go to school and to study it. So I decided to go back to school and I did like a master's program in sociology. And in order to get my degree, I wrote a thesis on African American women and homelessness. And it was kind of a fascinating experience doing that work. You know, both doing the studying and doing some of the interviewing that went into that. And I would like, at some point, to go back around to that and — I mean, all the information is old now, so I'd have to completely update the demographic side of it. But it's not like the problem is going away. And so, you know, there are certain kinds of issues that I'm interested in.

The problem, as I'm sure you realize, to try and be the director of a nonprofit, is the time to write, and time to reflect, and time to read, is at a real premium, you know, because you're basically working ten- and 12-hour days just trying to figure out how to keep your shop open and keep the programs going and keep the money coming in and all of that. So I've found, unfortunately, that most of the pieces that I've done recently are more shorties — something that I can sit down and get the bulk of done in a day and then maybe do some fine tuning and editing the next day, and then it's finished and over and out. I haven't had the

time to do the kind of work that takes kind of a longer period of reflection and thinking, or research.

We were talking a little bit earlier on about how annoyed I had gotten about that whole analysis coming from the feminist movement about the feminization of poverty. I did write an article about that that was published, I think, in *The Black Scholar* many, many years ago, and another article about the impact of deindustrialization on African American women in particular. So I have a lot of interests in basically how African American women are affected by economics and economic policy. So if I had the time (laughs), if I had the time, I might, you know, try and do something like that. At some point. At some point.

ROSS: Well, I think that, first of all, you exhibit a lot of talent and a lot of skill, but more importantly, you have an analysis that is desperately needed. And I read a lot of books that are really oversized memoirs purporting to be analysis (laughter).

BURNHAM: Yeah.

ROSS: And so, as one of your potential fans –

BURNHAM: Say, get to it! (laughter). Well, you know –

ROSS: I should offer her something to read.

BURNHAM: Yeah. What I enjoy about writing — I mean, there's a painful side, too — but what I enjoy about writing is that it does really force you to sit down and try and think hard about what the heck it is you're talking about. You know, the holes in your logic and the holes in your thinking are right there staring at you off the page. So I enjoy it as an exercise in terms of really kind of just of forcing you to think more deeply and more carefully about things that you've been making assumptions about.

ROSS: Well, one of the things I appreciated that Angela Davis did was string a series of her speeches together, smooth them out –

50:05

BURNHAM: Then turn them into a book. (laughter)

ROSS: So that may be a strategy for those of us who don't have that academic setting –

BURNHAM: Yeah. Yeah, Yeah.

ROSS: – in which to do the single-themed piece.

BURNHAM: I would like to do it because I do feel — and this is, you know, one of the other things — I don't know, maybe this belongs on the next tape — but one of the other things that I feel is hampering us is that we don't get enough — the sort or relationship between the activist set and the

academic set is not nearly as strong as it could be, and, you know, we don't talk enough to each other and some of the important work that folks in the academic community are doing doesn't filter over this side and some of the issues that, you know, we need their analysis on doesn't make it over that side. So I do feel like there is a lot of work to be done out there, you know, not just my voice, but trying to find ways to get our voices more in the public domain. I don't know. I really do feel like there's very few of us, very few of us who are sort of consistently out there with the political commentary about the stuff that's affecting us. I don't know. What do you think? I know this is not the conversation we're supposed to be in, but (laughs) –

ROSS: Well, I think that, to borrow a line from bell hooks, who says that it is a revolutionary act to move from silence into speech, if that's the role you can offer to the revolution — and you do it so well — then those of us around you need to support you and make you that offering, and continue to push and urge you to — and I think it's just as legitimate as any other form of revolutionary activity.

BURNHAM: Oh, no, I think it's absolutely a legitimate form of work and, you know, I'm hoping that — this is now moving into the future, and you'll pardon me — but I'm hoping that there will come a time when I can do more reading and writing, and less raising money (laughs).

ROSS: Well, on that topic, let's close this portion out. What has been hard about maintaining the Resource Center?

53:08

BURNHAM: There are a couple of things that have been hard. I think one thing that is hard — not impossible, but hard — is staying really steady, you know, kind of staying steady on the vision and the idea when you're in a situation where everything is, you know, all kinds of things are changing. So things like staff changes, up and down, in and out, board changes, people come on, people go off. And then there's got to be something there at the center that sort of holds on to, what is this really about? What is this thing supposed to be doing? Why is it in the world and why is it worth preserving? There's a way in which, even if there are many other people who believe in the Resource Center and believe in what it's doing and have agreed to whatever, serve on the board or serve on a committee, or you know, support it by giving their money, or whatever — somewhere somebody's got to be very steady and, this is what this is about and it's worth fighting for and we're going to make it happen, regardless of these nine million other things that are happening in the world. So that piece is sometimes hard, you know, just being that.

I think the other piece that was very hard in the beginning was the fundraising piece. It continues to be hard, but it was hard in the beginning because I had no training whatsoever in fundraising, unlike the situation with some people who start nonprofits — you know, some people start nonprofits and they actually have money (laughs). They're either trust-fund babies or they know some set of people in the

foundation world and they get some pile of money to get started, or whatever. I didn't know anybody in the foundation world, I had no trust fund, and I didn't really have any skills. And I think in addition to that, I probably had a little bit of an attitude, or, no — I undoubtedly had a little bit of an attitude, which is, do I really want to be asking people for money? How do I do this? What is this about? And sort of the whole process of abstracting yourself out of it, depersonalizing the process of fundraising, and understanding that if you don't figure out how to do this either in relationship to individual donors or in relationship to foundations, then the organization isn't going to survive. So there were many years in those early years when, you know, the organizational budget was \$25,000 — out of which came my salary, the rent, and anything else that happened (laughs) in the Resource Center.

And I believe — partly it was my lack of skill in fundraising and partly it was some of the attitude, I think, of the funding community — I felt like, with the Resource Center, it was kind of like, OK, well, we'll see if you survive ten years or so on nothing (laughs). Then we'll believe (laughs) that you actually are out there trying to do something, and then maybe we'll give you some money. Or at least that's how it feels like it played out. So there's a — I'm kind of a stubborn person, which served me in good stead in this set of circumstances. I think the place would have folded a long time ago if I hadn't been stubborn, and also if I hadn't — I had some advantages in doing this work.

One advantage, I'm really healthy. So I didn't have to have a health plan. I didn't have to pay, I didn't have to raise enough money to keep myself on a health plan, so I didn't have a health plan for the first, you know, eight years that I was doing the work. I didn't have a lot debt and I didn't have a whole set of big material needs or desires that I had to satisfy, so I didn't need a big salary. So, you know, there were certain things about my circumstances that made it possible for me to do this work that might have been more difficult for somebody else. But, you know, creating a space for the organization and creating a space where it's seen as a legitimate voice, in the progressive movement generally and in the women's movement in particular, you know, took some time. Took some time and it took some work. But I feel like by and large a lot of that has been accomplished in the sense that I think the organization now has a positive reputation, you know, amongst women's organizations, amongst women activists, and in the progressive movement more generally.

59:15

END TAPE 3

TAPE 4

ROSS: OK. Linda, I would like to ask you a question that comes up for me rather frequently. Younger women of color often don't buy into the term "women of color." They think of it as something that white women created and labeled women of color. Plus, they don't necessarily buy the concept of women of color working together across race. Are you encountering any of that type of resistance?

BURNHAM: I've encountered a few different things. I've encountered African American women who assumed that women of color only meant African American women. I don't feel like I've encountered that much resistance to the terminology, but even though our organization is called the Women of Color Resource Center, I think we're not so much attached to the terminology as we are attached to the idea of women working together across lines of race and nationality, understanding that the terminology is kind of a synthetic concept — do you know what I mean? — that it brings together kind of disparate identities and that it's likely to change. So I would be surprised if people were using the terminology "women of color" 50 years from now. Just as the terminology around "third world" has changed, you know, and within the space of 30 or 40 years, it seems likely to me that the terminology "women of color" might also go through some change, and if that's the case — I mean, I think in terms of our organization, that the terminology still has enough relevance and is still understood enough so that I don't think it presents a problem for us as an organization. But at some point it might, in which case we would have to sort of reconsider, if there was a new terminology that emerged.

3:00

I understand, certainly, the desire of some women of color to work solely within one ethnic group or one racial group, and I feel like that's a completely legitimate decision, that there are important kinds of work to be done amongst, you know, say, immigrant Latinas or African American women in a certain neighborhood, or Asian women around a particular issue, like there's an Asian women's shelter — things like that. So I feel like there are many legitimate ways to organize and mobilize women. Along a single ethnic line is one of them. But I also feel like there's a value — and I feel like I see it every day — that there's a value in organizing and mobilizing across racial and ethnic lines, that there are things that we bring to the table when we come together, things that we learn from each other, strengths that we bring to the table when we work across those lines, that make the formations that work as women of color very important.

ROSS: Have you ever gotten any feedback on the perception that the Women of Color Resource Center is not a space for white women to organize?

BURNHAM: That doesn't come directly to me. It may be that people feel that way. There certainly are circumstances in which we work with white women

in coalition, in collaboration, on particular projects. But we also feel like it's important to preserve a women of color space, and part of that is political and part of that is just kind of a feeling thing of — OK, I'll speak personally on this one, just for myself.

Somewhere along the line, I realized that, you know, I made a political decision which was, Where am I going to do my best political work? In what kind of political space am I going to be able to do my best political work? And some of that has to do with, you know, what's the level of nonsense you don't want to have to deal with, you know what I mean? Let's just eliminate some stuff so that you can actually focus and do some useful work. And so while I, for example, work with men in various and sundry endeavors, and other locations and all of that, I'm really not interested in having to bump up against the male ego on a day-to-day level while I'm trying to do political work. It's just not something I want to do. And so, that's kind of a decision on my part about where I want to do my work.

Same thing of, you know, white women have a lot of work to do on the question of racism, and it's difficult work. It's not the work that I want to do on a day-to-day level. And god bless those people who do it on a day-to-day level, but it's not the work that I want to do on a day-to-day level. And I feel like they're important — so, I guess what I'm trying to say here is, there's an individual and personal dimension to it, and there's a political dimension to it, and who knows how those two things interact, but, so, yeah.

ROSS: So tell me about the current work. Can you expand more on the current work of the Women of Color Resource Center, and where do you see its future?

7:09

BURNHAM: Well, as an organization, you know, we have come a long way, always with the idea of keeping the connections with the international arena, with women who are working in other parts of the world but who are impacted by U.S. policy in particular and the policy of international finance institutions. So we've certainly kept that on our agenda. We've kept on the agenda the idea of working with low- and no-income women. We've kept on the agenda the idea of trying to figure out how to bring together research and analytical work with day-to-day, on-the-ground organizing. So where the organization has come to in the past couple of years is finally having enough, you know, feeling like there's enough sort of stability in the funding — who knows how long that will last — but feeling like there's enough stability in the funding to be able to project a future for the organization.

And also, it was important at a certain point to try and objectify what was going on in the organization so that the organization was not just a sort of a projection of its founders, or a projection of me and Miriam Ching Louie in particular — so that there was some sort of common sense of what the organization was about and what its mission was in the world. We went through a long-term planning process a few years

ago, and in that process we identified four main work areas for the organization, four main programmatic areas, which is not to say it's the only thing we do, but it's kind of our framework and guiding parameters.

So one piece of that work is peace and international solidarity, and that piece of work is based on the understanding and presumption that part of the U.S. role in the world, one aspect of how the U.S. functions in the world that is a more or less permanent feature, is to throw its weight around militarily, and to be a disrupter of peace in the world. And that because of that, we women have a special responsibility in relationship to the issue of peace — that this is not something that's going to go away, that there may be times when there are more heightened peace issues than at other times. So for example, now, when the military invasion and occupation of Iraq and the threat of the so-called Axis of Evil, you know, we're in an administration where the impulse towards war and the impulse towards an incredibly bloated military apparatus is especially strong.

But even when that's not the case, even when we don't have a George W. Bush in office, the U.S. plays a particular role in the world, and the weight of its military is a phenomenon that affects women all over the world. It affects people all over the world, but it has specific effects on women all over the world, and women here in the United States. So we made a decision based on that and based on our past practice of — in the international arena with the Beijing Conference and et cetera, and work with women in Central America and here there and everywhere — that we would also include in that international solidarity, meaning, developing the relationships and ties and links with women in other parts of the world, many of which really come back to sort of teach us about how we how we should understand and look at the impact of our country out there around the globe. So that's a long way of saying that one of the programmatic areas that we decided on in this

12:25

planning process is peace and international solidarity.

Another program area that we decided on as ongoing and central to our work is economic justice and human rights. And that, again, is a reflection of our ongoing interest in and concern for raising the voices of low- and no-income women, voices that were heard not at all in the last presidential campaign, voices that are consistently ignored. And we felt like we wanted to have central to that agenda linking economic justice to human rights, and being able to assert the right to housing security and food security and income security — identifying those as human rights issues. So, linking those to rights that have been agreed upon by the international community. So we have that as one of our program areas.

Another program area, the popular education and leadership development program area, is related to trying to ensure that we are able to both learn from and speak to folks at all different levels of this sort of educational spectrum, so that we develop ways to engage people who are rich in life experience and rich in analytical skills related to their

own experiences, but may not have the kinds of reading and writing skills that you develop if you, you know, go through the whole four-year college route. So a good portion of our work is oriented towards sort of translating, you know, some of the complicated ideas about what's going on in the — for instance, in the global economy, how do you work with those ideas in a way that they become accessible to the people who are, in fact, most affected by what's going on in the global economy. So the popular education and leadership development aspect of our work is oriented towards that. And we want to be able to use those skills in developing curricula around peace issues as well as developing work in the economic justice field.

And then the last program area that we are working on is called research, social analysis, and documentation. And one of the documentation projects that we've taken on is making sure that we document our history and making sure that we understand and that other people understand it's not like we came out of nowhere. I know that you've run into the phenomenon and I run into the phenomenon, especially in the academic community, where people take ownership of ideas. And we're not really for that (laughs). So it's really — we want to make sure that people understand that the intellectual base for the Women of Color Resource Center has a history, goes back in history and comes out of many different women contributing many different ideas out of their own experience, most of them not from academic settings, but really coming to the process of understanding the interconnections between the various kinds of discriminations and oppressions that they face. So we feel like it is therefore important to document that history and to know on whose shoulders we stand.

15:47

And so consequently we have a documentation project which, in this first phase, is putting together the papers which were scattered all over the place, and in people's basements and all that — putting together the papers of the Third World Women's Alliance. And then it would be really nice — and maybe we can get some help with this — being able to do some oral histories with the women, all of whom — you know, when we came together last year, I think, to talk about some of this, for each of them — and many of them did not go onto, you know, lifelong political work. Their political work maybe took them up to and through their mid-30s and then they went on to have families and raise them and stayed politically conscious and probably made financial contributions and whatnot, but for each of them, their time in the Third World Women's Alliance was powerful, and changed their lives. So we want to figure out how to document that as well. And they're interested in having their stories told, and each one of those women has a different perspective, because they came, you know, from a different background, and they came to the Third World Women's Alliance for a particular reason and what they got out of it differs in how it shaped their lives. So we have a documentation process. And we also try and pay attention to documenting our own processes as well.

We try and get our research and analysis out there in the public realm, so whether it has to do with doing an analysis of welfare reform as a human rights violation, policies around welfare reform as a human rights violation, or whether it's around — most recently we've put out a working paper — we have a series of working papers and the most recent working paper is on the ways in which the criminal justice system and the welfare system intersect. And it's basically about the criminalization of the poor, and the ways in which women whose main crime is being poor, are, you know, funneled into the criminal justice system as well. So that's all part of our research, and analysis, and documentation program. So those are the main program areas that we work with.

ROSS: Have you had any thoughts about leadership transition, or this is going to be your work till you retire?

20:12

BURNHAM: We have had thoughts and conversations about leadership transition, and as a matter of fact, in the last board retreat we had — we do an annual retreat and bring board staff together and just, you know, go over what happened over the past year and try and look forward — and so, issues of sort of generational transition have been on the agenda for a while, both because I'm not really not interested in, you know, dying in the job, and also because I'm interested in trying to think about other ways to work, thinking about ways to let go of some of the work that I'm not really interested in doing. And there are now women who are in their early 30s who, increasingly, are, you know, present and accounted for. It took a while to transition the board from being predominantly women of my generation with a few women of the younger generation to the reverse, where it's predominantly younger women with fewer women of my generation — all of which, you know, starts to lay the basis for a change in the leadership of the organization. So we've collectively been doing some thinking about it, trying to figure out exactly what that will look like, whether we want to go through a process of a co-directorship, and exactly how to do it. But it is something that's on the agenda for us.

ROSS: Well, in terms of your own particular legacy, which is an inappropriate question, as young as you are —

22:30

BURNHAM: (laughs) Oh, young! — nobody's called me young for a while, only you!

ROSS: But you certainly have been doing this work for 30 plus years. You've left a large footprint. So how would you like that footprint to be described?

BURNHAM: Oh, boy. I don't know about that. I don't know if it's up to me to do the describing. I mean, I —

ROSS: Well, you can wish.

BURNHAM: (laughs) Yeah, but, uh — I don't feel like that's really in my control, and I don't really feel like it's something I have any need to control. Some of the things that I feel positive about, I feel like I have, especially now, I feel like there's a lot of younger women that I'm working with, and it feels good. And that wasn't the case, you know, a while back. I really enjoy it, and I feel that the interchange is positive and that I'm sort of helping to sort of, you know, get them grounded and find their feet and their voice in the world of politics. So I feel good about helping to sort of bring along a set of strong political activists. And I feel good about being able to sustain a fairly complicated, but I feel important, orientation towards women's liberation. I feel positive about being able to sustain that in the world over an extended period of time and be part of a not-that-large group of women — yourself being one of them — but part of a group of women that's not as large as I would like it to be, playing that role in the world.

ROSS: Well, we discovered a long time ago that at least we weren't the movement tourists (laughter) –

BURNHAM: In and out –

ROSS: – take a few pictures, prove you were there (laughter) — then you're gone. Are you involved in other organizations, and do you have leadership positions in any other organizations you would like to make part of your story?

25:00

BURNHAM: Well, you know, every once in a while we do a piece of work that's outside the Women of Color Resource Center, or I do it as part of the Women of Color Resource Center. So, you know, at the beginning of the war in Iraq, I worked on a steering committee for a group that was called RJ911, and it was mostly younger generation activists, people of color, a lot of different organizations nationally who were trying to figure out how to put the issue of the invasion and occupation of Iraq and the war on terrorism on the agendas of organizations that already had very full agendas but wanted to sort of understand the relationship between their particular issues and what was going on in terms of Bush's foreign policy. So I spent some time working on that.

More recently, I spent some time actually in the South working on — leading up to the November election — working on organizing people to monitor the polls, especially people in the African American community. And I will probably continue that work in some form, mainly in relationship to the Voting Rights Act and the reauthorization process for the Voting Rights Act that's coming up in 2007. So, you know, I stay engaged, oftentimes in a few other areas, with the Women of Color Resource Center as kind of my home.

ROSS: Have you been the subject of other oral histories or interviews that you have access to or copies of?

BURNHAM: A short while ago, a young woman whose name I'm not going to remember — she's doing a movie about black feminists. Excuse me for a minute. Mom, what is the name of that young woman? She's a daughter of a friend of yours.

D. BURNHAM: In New York?

BURNHAM: Yeah, she's in New York. She's a filmmaker. Sandler, maybe, is her last name, or something? It'll come to me. Because I think she also interviewed Fran [Beal]. I can't remember her name. Anyway, she's doing a film about black feminism, I believe. I don't remember her name.

And then, you know, various and sundry people have asked me about this, that, and the other, and some more formal interviews and some just, you know, trying to find out the story. And then increasingly I'm finding, as I get older, people of the younger generation are trying to figure out, you know, do the cross-generational talk.

ROSS: Do you have papers, files, photos, correspondence, journals, or memorabilia that you'd like to consider preserving at the Sophia Smith Collection?

BURNHAM: I have more files than the law allows (laughs).

ROSS: But not more than an archive can handle, especially one with resources.

BURNHAM: I have plenty o' stuff. Actually, you know, at a certain point I decided I was not personally going to be the archivist of the western world, so I threw away a lot of stuff, so, I know that's an oops, that's a terrible thing to say on this tape (laughs), but it's true.

D. BURNHAM: That's not a good idea.

BURNHAM: But I have a lot, you know — all the stuff from the Women of Color Resource Center is all in one place, more or less. It might not be all neatly in one place, but it's all —

ROSS: It does not have to be, because that's their job.

BURNHAM: (laughs) But that's all in one place. And a lot of the papers of the Third World Women's Alliance. My personal stuff, you know, scattered and here and there.

ROSS: So am I hearing that as a yes?

BURNHAM: As a yes for the Sophia Smith Collection?

- ROSS: No, that you would consider Smith for your papers?
- BURNHAM: Would I consider. Would I consider. I guess I'd consider it.
- ROSS: There are, of course, other archives and other collections. When they asked for my papers, my staff raised a very legitimate concern. We'd rather it went to an HBCU or some place more accessible, but the truth is, HBCUs don't have the resources to actually preserve this stuff.
- BURNHAM: Yeah, I know.
- ROSS: It ends up in moldy boxes where the rats get at them, because it does take a lot of money to preserve stuff forever.
- BURNHAM: Yeah. Yeah, I know. We went through that with somebody's papers. I remember trying to figure out somebody's papers.
- ROSS: OK. And you will receive a copy of this interview. Do you prefer DVD or VHS?
- BURNHAM: DVD (laughs) — and then I'll have to get a DVD player to play it!
- ROSS: Well, are there any other significant experiences that you'd like to share and reflect on?
- BURNHAM: Let me just say one thing. One thing that was very good for me, because I'm a little bit of a workaholic, I work too hard, and at a certain point — actually, it was in 1998, when I turned 50, and the Resource Center was still struggling, you know. There was a staff of basically two. And I decided for my 50th birthday I wanted to get up and go around the world. And, you know, I had to at that point come to terms with, Well, either this thing is going to survive with me gone for six months, or it's not. And if it doesn't, well, that's just the way it was supposed to be and I'll have to come back and do something else. And it was a really good decision, both for me and for the organization, because I got up and left, and I was not in contact. The whole idea was to be — and this is like, pre-cell phones all over everywhere. And the idea was just to take the time for myself, not to work. I was not working. I think I visited one women's organization on the whole trip. And that was in Fiji. And it was really a positive thing for me to just let go and, you know, be Linda, an observant citizen of the world, but not a political activist. Be out of my regular environment. And it was good for the organization to survive my absence and to know that it could survive my absence. So I feel like just — and then it was also, you know, positive for me just in my own personal, formation, at 50. So I would like — you know, 60 is coming up (laughs), so I would like to be able to get up and go, again (laughs). It's always good to be outside the country for an extended period of time.

ROSS: So why don't we close this interview with me going back to where we started. What's going on in your personal life? Are you in a relationship? Would you like to talk about that?

BURNHAM: I am in a relationship with somebody who lives a couple of blocks away from here. And that is a relationship that's been kind of off and on for many years, and for the past couple of years has been more consistent. And that's a positive thing for me. I mean, there was a period, I think, when I was most involved with making sure that the Women of Color Resource Center could survive, when I don't think I really could have done that and been in a relationship at the same time, to be honest, or be in a relationship that anybody would have wanted to be in with me (laughs). And that was because I really, in order to make it possible for the organization to survive, I basically worked all the time, you know, weekends, late at night, whatever. And I was not really a fit subject for a personal relationship. So that's changed. And that's a good thing (laughs). But I'm still not really a fit subject to live with (laughs). So yeah, I'm still not ready for that, and may never be.

ROSS: So tell me about your involvement with yoga? Several times that has come up in our negotiation with this interview, and it's obviously something that's important to you and further fleshes out the picture.

36:05

BURNHAM: Yeah, yeah, it's very important to me. I in a way, yoga kind of saved me and made it possible for me to do — I mean, I think everybody has to find something, otherwise they just burn themselves down to a crisp. And, you know, I was really intensely political through the '80s, '70s and '80s, really, giving huge amounts of time, being in incredible numbers of meetings and overworking badly. And actually probably both my physical and my mental health were suffering for it. And at a certain point — well, I remember actually, one of the things that happened is I went home for Thanksgiving or Christmas, something like that, and my uncle, Uncle Charlie, who was then well up in years, was at the gathering. And as is his wont, he was extremely lively, and you know, kind of a very vibrant presence in the gathering. And he is somebody who started doing yoga as a young man in Harlem, of all things, in the '30s. So, in that sense, yoga had been in the family for a very long time. He took up yoga before it was, you know, the kind of fad that it is at present. And so it put me sort of back in mind of a way to sustain that vibrant presence. And then somebody who I was in a relationship with at the time just brought a flyer back that they had gotten off of a lamppost that advertised a yoga lesson. And I went, and I've been going back ever since.

38:00

ROSS: How long ago was that?

BURNHAM: Oh, that was a very long time ago. I guess my girl was about four, so about 25 years ago, 24, 25 years ago. And I started taking lessons, and then I wanted to do more lessons. Of course I didn't have the money to

do, you know, four or five lessons, so I started doing practice on my own. And then I went into a teacher training class. And then I graduated from the teacher training class in the early '90s. And I've been teaching ever since. So I teach a couple of days a week, in the morning. I teach an early morning class from seven o'clock to eight o'clock in the morning on Tuesdays and Thursdays. And really, I should be paying my students, because for me, what it does is it forces me to be present, it forces me to be, you know, still and focused. It makes me be present in my body, and you know, turn off some of this sort of chatter and all the — I mean, there can be a lot going on in the head. And this puts me in a place where I'm going to let all of that go and pay attention to teaching. And it means that I have to pay attention to my own practice. I have to stay in my own practice, which is hard to do when I travel, so traveling is hard on my yoga practice. But when I'm here, I still take lessons — I take either one or two lessons a week from my own teachers — I teach a couple of times a week, and I do my own practice. And it is a really important part of me, you know, trying to stay sane (laughs), trying to stay sane in a crazy world.

ROSS: Or actually, I'm trying to stay crazy in a crazy world. (laughter)

BURNHAM: You think sanity's overrated, right? (laughter)

ROSS: But I think it's a choice you make every day.

BURNHAM: True. True.

ROSS: So are there other significant activities that we should know about Linda Burnham?

BURNHAM: No, just being with my family, even though a lot of my family's on the East Coast. My mom is big on the matriarchy thing (laughs), she kind of holds the scene together — a lot disparate strands that she presides over (laughs). So that remains important to me. And I have a lot of really fine friends, I have to say. I have fabulous friends, a lot of whom I've had since — you know, a lot them come to me through the political work, and a lot not, but I have friends who've been friends for, you know, 30, 40 years, and then new friends. Younger people as well. And it makes life worth living.

ROSS: All right. Thank you.

BURNHAM: Thank you.

ROSS: On behalf of Smith College and the Sophia Smith Collection, thank you. (atmosphere shots, 42:00–43:30)

END TAPE 4

END OF INTERVIEW

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