

Voices of Feminism Oral History Project

Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College
Northampton, MA

LINDA STOUT

Interviewed by

KELLY ANDERSON

July 19–20, 2004
Belchertown, Massachusetts

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with generous support from the Ford Foundation.

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Narrator

Linda Stout (b.1954) resides in Western Massachusetts but her roots are in the Deep South. She was born to tenant farmers and thirteenth-generation Quakers in North Carolina. Stout's way out of rural North Carolina was going to be a good education and college, but a life of poverty and limited choices intervened: family hardship, lack of self-confidence, and financial trouble.

Stout was raised with a social conscience and in the Quaker tradition. Being employed in the mills allowed her to see racism at work and she became engaged in social change. In her early twenties, Stout and her sister moved to Charleston, where she worked for a civil rights law firm as a secretary and was exposed to articulations of injustice and a variety of strategies for social change. She was involved in a women's group organizing around ERA and abortion rights, but while she identified with the issues, Stout felt shunned in the context of this group for her class background.

The peace movement is where Stout would find a comfortable home. She organized Friends Meetings in Charleston, offered military draft counseling services, started a peace group, and was making the connections between military spending and poverty. In her effort to organize the low-income community, she met Septima Clark, a significant figure in Stout's story and civil rights history.

Family crises brought Stout back to the Piedmont region in North Carolina; she is best known for the project she founded there, the Piedmont Peace Project (PPP), a low-income, multiracial organizing project that makes connections between local and national issues. The PPP has had many successful campaigns, including voter registration and mobilization, literacy, lobbying, peace work around the Gulf War, housing, water and sewer services for low-income neighborhoods. In the late 1990s, Stout left North Carolina to take the helm of the Peace Development Fund in Amherst, Massachusetts, and is now the director of a new project, Spirit of Change.

Interviewer

Kelly Anderson is an educator, historian, and community activist. She has an M.A. in women's history from Sarah Lawrence College and is a Ph.D. candidate in U.S. History at the CUNY Graduate Center.

Abstract

In this oral history Stout describes in detail her family background and the rural, low-income communities of the Piedmont region in North Carolina. The interview focuses on her work in civil rights and the peace movement in the South, her anti-Klan organizing and the dangers of activism in the South, and the politics of class. She describes the impulse behind the Piedmont Peace Project and the ground-breaking ways in which the organization operates. Stout describes the national peace movement, the role of her organization and those of working-class peoples in the larger movement. The conclusion of this interview is a discussion of Stout's latest project, Spirit of Change.

Restrictions

None

Format

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

Transcript

Transcribed by Luann Jette. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Kelly Anderson. Transcript has been reviewed and approved by Linda Stout.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Stout, Linda. Interview by Kelly Anderson. Video recording, July 21–22, 2004. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Linda Stout, interview by Kelly Anderson, video recording, July 21, 2004, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 2.

Transcript

Bibliography: Stout, Linda. Interview by Kelly Anderson. Transcript of video recording, July 21–22, 2004. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Linda Stout, interview by Kelly Anderson, transcript of video recording, July 21, 2004, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, pp. 23–24.

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Sophia Smith Collection
Smith College
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted JULY 19 & 20, 2004, with:

LINDA STOUT
Belchertown, MA

at: Above

by: KELLY ANDERSON

ANDERSON: This is Kelly Anderson and Linda Stout on July 19th at her home in Belchertown, and we're doing an oral history for the Voices of Feminism Project at the Sophia Smith Collection. So, today, we're going to really try to cover family background and your politicization, how you got involved in politics. So, let's start, really, with your family and talk about your grandparents, which is something that you haven't written about much or talked about. So let's take it back one step further into your origins and talk about how your grandparents got to Carolina or that region and what their history is.

STOUT: OK. So my family, the Stouts, that's my father's side of the family, have been in the Carolinas since the 1700s. They were some of the first white people to move into the area as Quakers. There was a Quaker settlement in the center of North Carolina, Holly Springs, that area, and that's where my family settled.

So we're many generations of Quakers, and I only knew my grandmother. My grandfather died when my father was eight, and she was a farmer and she was also a medicine woman, she was an herbalist and people would say, you know, if your dog got bit by a snake, for example—because she did dogs and people—if anyone got snake bit, they would go to her before they would go to the vet or to a doctor, because she would be much more successful in saving them, they felt. So, she was also a beekeeper and what we call in the south a bee charmer. Do you know what that is?

ANDERSON: I do.

STOUT: Where she could literally walk into the bees and put her hands in and never get stung. So that was my father's side.

ANDERSON: Was she a significant person in your life?

STOUT: Um, yes. I had mixed emotions about her. She was very strict and firm and I was a little too wild and too idealistic and not, you know, focused on being a farmer enough for her, so we had this mixed relationship, but she had a huge impact on me. I had to be much older to really appreciate what I learned from her. Mostly I was mad at her [laugh] when I was younger.

ANDERSON: And what is it now you think you learned from her?

STOUT: I think I learned a lot about, um, appreciation of the earth and appreciation of, um, alternative healing, and a lot of things that I really admire about her at this point, which I didn't when I was young. My mother's parents grew up in the Appalachia way out beyond Silva and actually, my great-grandmother was a Cherokee, and I never knew her but I feel like she has also influenced my life because she was also a medicine woman, and my grandmother, I was very close to when I lived with her for a couple of summers when my mother was really sick. She was very religious, very fundamentalist, Christian, took me to Holy Roller churches, which kind of freaked me out, but just this loving woman who loved to cook and loved to do all kinds of special things. I remember she used to make biscuits every day but she'd always make this special shape for us kids. And she died of bone cancer when I was—probably the third or fourth grade.

And my grandfather was this very — he worked in the furniture factories, and he was this very big man who used to hold us on his lap and he played spoons and he taught me all these songs growing up. He used to sing to us all the time. And it wasn't until I was doing political work, and I went to political history in song, and I went to this show and this guy was singing all the songs, and when he got to the songs of the 30s and 40s, I knew every word to every song, because my grandfather had sung them to me and I had no idea they were these political songs, because as far as I knew, he also died when I was probably in my early twenties, and — so I went home and I said, "Mama, was papa a communist?" She said, "Of course not." And I said, Well, I told her about knowing all these songs and she said, "Well, I don't really know what he did. He traveled a lot."

And he had to leave home to get, find work. And so then I started talking to my aunts and they said, "Well, you know, he used to go to these meetings but we never knew what they were," but they also knew that all of a sudden, he could never get jobs around there and that he had to go travel far away to get jobs, and that he traveled around a lot. So, I'm convinced that he was some kind of either labor organizer or something connected to the political Communist Party of the time.

ANDERSON: I bet you could find out with some research into —

STOUT: I might could. But I've never followed that any further.

ANDERSON: That's interesting.

STOUT: But my aunts couldn't — they were clear he probably wasn't communist. But they had the — you know, this was in the 90s, 80s, and of course, they had a whole different viewpoint of what communism was other than what it was in the 30s and 40s.

ANDERSON: Right, right. That's interesting. In terms of your grandmother, then, she was biracial.

STOUT: Yes.

ANDERSON: So, how did the family talk about that? Was that significant? Do you know what her experiences were like as a biracial person?

STOUT: I think it's pretty common in North Carolina, particularly in the mountains, that there was, um, a mixture of Native Americans, a lot of that, and I think people just didn't talk about it, frankly. I mean, my guess is that my grandmother left a lot of her heritage — my great-grandmother, I mean — behind to marry into a white family. That there's almost like a denial about that, as opposed to pride in it.

ANDERSON: Nobody ever talked about any stigma or racism or —

STOUT: No, uh-uh. And my mother looked, especially when she was younger, she had a lot of the facial structure of a Native American, dark black hair. Yeah. So you could see it in her face.

ANDERSON: Right. So what do you think you got from that side of the family?

STOUT: Right. Well, I mean, I didn't even know my grandfather had influenced me in any way until I was much older who knew all these songs and I wonder, you know, because, I wonder how much that influenced me as a child.

ANDERSON: Do you remember what some of the messages in those songs were, or the lyrics?

STOUT: Well, they were all about, you know, they were about workers and poverty and I certainly had a keen awareness about poverty, of us being poor and — and it wasn't true for all poor people that I've talked to, they don't necessarily grow up with that awareness, or the same feelings about its injustice. So, I might have gotten that from the songs, because certainly the songs talk a lot about injustice. I certainly also had an awareness of issues — I mean, of things affecting people in this country and I didn't have words for it when I was little, but I used to say, "I

want to be a missionary when I grow up but I want to be a missionary to help people in this country and I don't want to talk about religion," I would say. So, but the mission — I never knew what an organizer was or anything like that, but that was the only way I had to describe it, so.

ANDERSON: So, how did your parents meet?

STOUT: Through family. My father's brother was married to my mother's aunt. And she went with them to visit one time. She was staying with her aunt and uncle and — which was my father's oldest brother and she drove down to Asheboro with them and she said she saw my father driving a tractor and it was love at first sight, and she knew she was going to marry him. So they met and they were totally in love their whole lives.

ANDERSON: Were the religious differences significant between them?

STOUT: No. It's really funny. I mean, my mother was Southern Baptist and considered herself Southern Baptist. We were actually raised Quaker. And then we moved away from the Quaker meeting when I was in junior high, and mother sent us to church for a while and it was — that was OK but I know when I moved back home to take care of my mother when I was 30 and she would go to the Baptist church, and then she would rant and rave about what the minister said that she didn't like afterwards. And finally, I said to my mother "Mother, I don't even know why you call yourself a Southern Baptist. You're much more Quaker in your beliefs. And you know, I don't think we should go back there." Because we hated all the hell and damnation and she just — she didn't agree with it philosophically, so I always said that she was really Quaker in her viewpoints, although she always called herself a Southern Baptist, because that's how she was raised.

ANDERSON: Right. So your mom sort of adapted to your dad's beliefs?

STOUT: Yeah. I think she was always very — I don't think it was even adapted, I think she was very independent. She was totally into, you know, women's rights before it was ever called that. She never knew that term. I remember her telling me this story, it was when I was very young, just a baby and the rage then was to paint red fingernails and toenails and stuff, and she had painted her fingernails, and my father came home and he said, "I don't like that. Take it off." And the next day, she painted her toenails and the rims of her glasses. They used to paint the rims of their glasses to match — I don't know, it sounds bizarre, but anyway, she'd done that. [laugh] And he never said a word, she said, after that. So, it was like her — there's two or three stories of how she really declared, you know, something my father would tell her to do or not do and she would do totally the opposite and he never said another word about it, he never mentioned it again.

ANDERSON: So that — examples of standing up to your father is why you think of your mom as a feminist before her time?

STOUT: Yeah. You know, she was very much in charge of the money in our family and a lot of decision-making. She believed women could do anything they wanted to do. She always taught us that. And even though she lived in a very traditional role, and maybe because she was disabled, but up until she became disabled, she would go to work, you know, and do other kinds of work in addition to the standard work.

ANDERSON: Right. So, where would she work? What kind of work would she do?

STOUT: Oh, textile mills and that kind of stuff.

ANDERSON: And what kind of work did your father do?

STOUT: He was a farmer the first part of my childhood. He was a tenant farmer. We never had our own land. He farmed for other people and worked on the farms and, um, then he also started working in the tex — not in the textile mills but he went to work in a plant called Fiber Industries but he did metal work. He did sheet metal work, so he worked on furnaces. He worked at Fibers Industries in Salisbury, North Carolina, and he was a temporary worker for 17 years. No vacation, no benefits, no sick days, and he never took a sick day in 17 years until the day he died.

ANDERSON: Which I know was very sudden.

STOUT: Yeah.

ANDERSON: And you have suggested that he got ill from working in that plant?

STOUT: Oh, I totally believe that, yeah.

ANDERSON: Uh-hum. So, tell me what your home looked like. Did you have one home that you stayed at when you were farmers to when your parents worked in mills?

STOUT: We stayed in one home the whole time. It was a trailer that was, like, ten x forty feet, so it was very small, and there were five of us who lived in it. We had no running water, so even though it had a tiny little bathroom and a kitchen, we, uh, and it even had a little tiny washing machine. I remember this. Which was the place where we kept the water buckets. And we had to walk, actually, quite a ways — in fact, I recently went back there a couple of years ago and I remember looking at how far it was to walk to get water and it wasn't as far as I remember. It felt like a mile. It was probably as far as from here to the end of our

driveway would be, you know, 600 feet or something. But when I was little, carrying those heavy water buckets, it felt forever. And we had to actually draw water out of the well. So it was a very small space and all three of us girls slept in one bed and then when we kind of got too big, my father built an extra little bed over the top of this bed, sort of like a half bunkbed, and we shared that way.

ANDERSON: Did it ever get running water?

STOUT: When we moved — when we were in high school, it got running water, and this thing —

ANDERSON: In that trailer?

STOUT: Yeah, in the same little trailer.

ANDERSON: Were your living conditions typical for your neighbors, or were they better or worse?

STOUT: I'd say worse. There were some tenant farmers who lived in — but most of them had little houses or little cabins or something like that.

ANDERSON: So how did you become more aware of your poverty than you think your peers?

STOUT: Well, I think the biggest piece had to do with lack of medical care; I became aware of that first. We had a car wreck when I was five, almost six, and my mother was in the hospital. She was in and out of the hospital basically for two years, and seriously injured. And all of our family was hurt really bad.

ANDERSON: Were all five of you in the car?

STOUT: Four of us. My mother was two weeks pregnant. And they never even told us about the baby because they never thought she would live to term. And they weren't sure my mother was going to live, even. So the baby was quite a ways along before they realized she was pregnant, because she was so sick and having major surgery all the time and all that kind of stuff. I think I began to realize, you know, my mother never had a wheelchair the whole time we were growing up. She was an amputee, and so she never got to go to the first day of school with me or go to any of my school plays, or even to my high school graduation. And it wasn't till after us girls were out and working that we were able to get the money and buy her a wheelchair.

ANDERSON: And you understand that that was about poverty?

STOUT: Yeah. And there were other things, like I couldn't — I needed glasses and I couldn't get glasses, and eventually the Lion's Club got me glasses, but there were all these kinds of things. But I think I didn't really become really aware of it until about the third grade, and um, my best friend at the time, Eugene Owens, I remember her name even now, said to me, "My father says I can't come home to spend the night with you because you're white trash." And I didn't understand that at the time. I spent weeks and weeks vigilantly trying to pick up every piece of trash around our yard where we lived, because I thought that had something to do with what he meant. But I started realizing it in school around that time.

And there were a couple people, one girl named Ginny Allen who everybody made fun of because she was poor, and I realized that she wasn't as poor as I was, that they actually lived in a house, but I had the advantage because my mother sewed for people. That was the one thing she could do, and so she made us these nice clothes out of scraps and stuff that people — material they'd leave behind and stuff. And so I always had decent-looking clothes, and didn't look as poor as some other of the poor kids. But I saw how they got made fun of.

And there were other things, like, in elementary school when the kids would go off on field trips, and I often, there would be, either me by myself or two or three of us who had to stay behind and sit in the auditorium. I don't know why they put us in the auditorium. But that's where they left us by ourselves, because we didn't have the fee and back then, they didn't — now they would never do that to kids, they wouldn't be allowed to, but yeah, they didn't have scholarships.

So then I became aware. I mean, there was a lot of — even though the school I went to wasn't like a lot of wealthy kids, there were clearly these class differences, very clear, about who — and it tended to be between the farmers, who were the farm workers and farm owners, and the bigger the farm, the more, you know, and between the textile workers who were either regular textile workers or in a higher position or in a totally high position and — not to mention the mill owners, which was another whole class to themselves.

ANDERSON: And how much the kids socialize across class lines? Any?

STOUT: It started separating. By third grade, it started getting more and more separate. By high school, it was totally separated, and it's interesting, because I could cross class lines then, with, and did, had friends on sort of every side, and —

ANDERSON: How were you able to do that?

STOUT: I'm not sure, you know. I actually got a lot of flack from it from some of the low-income kids about it. But I don't know how I did it. I'm not sure. That's an interesting question. I've never really thought about it. It

just occurred to me now that I had friends with one of the farmer owner's daughters, we were good friends in high school.

ANDERSON: Would she come to your home?

STOUT: She never would spend the night. I never asked anyone to spend the night. There was — in all the years I went to school, there was one night one person spent the night at our house.

ANDERSON: But you would have friends over?

STOUT: It was a huge scandal, actually, because I found out later that my father took a lot of flack from it. I didn't know about it at the time. But we were in the eighth grade, and we were going on a trip and I asked my best friend, really, this girl who I was in love with, Dorothy Gray, who was this African-American woman, girl at the time, and she was the only African-American in our school. This was, you know, even though the laws for integration had passed, they didn't do it for a long time in North Carolina, so she was the only girl in the school, and we used to walk down the hallways holding hands and so, we were going on this trip, and she spent the night at my house, and my father took us early that morning to meet the bus and stuff. And I later found out that he got a lot of flack about that because it being a black girl that was in his car and he took a lot of flack at work, but he never let me know that.

ANDERSON: What do you think her life was like in your community, or in your school?

STOUT: I only knew her briefly, for a year. And we weren't really aware — I mean, there was definitely racism and definitely problems but she sort of just ignored it. I don't know, you know, I have to admit, I don't know how deeply it bothered her or hurt her.

ANDERSON: But there was a level of harassment at school?

STOUT: Yeah.

ANDERSON: For sure.

STOUT: And then, in high school, I remember in high school, there was hardly any blacks in our school, but I guess there was some ruling, something happened, that all of a sudden blacks were going to come to our school, and I remember when it happened. So, it was probably like when I was a sophomore or a junior, um, and it was a huge, big to-do about it. And so, this would have been in, like, '69 or '70, that our school got segregated. Integrated, I mean.

ANDERSON: And so, tell me what that was like.

STOUT: I said the wrong word, I just realized. Integrated. We were segregated.

ANDERSON: What were the feelings?

STOUT: Well, there was a lot of hostility, a lot of fear, total separation, and uh, there was a time that there was actually some protests from the black kids. There was always this talk about that they were going to riot. I never saw any kind of riot, but people were just so afraid about riots. And that's what I always heard, so there was this fear that you were always going with, and um, so, yeah. I actually became friends with several of the black kids, and always went out of my way to talk to them and stuff. But not like close friends.

ANDERSON: Do you remember feeling afraid before integration? Or do you remember how your family talked about what was happening in your school?

STOUT: I don't think we talked much about what was happening at school. I know we did talk about, um, that black people were equal. I know my father always — my parents told us that, but I wasn't really aware of all the politics going around, you know, the civil rights movement. I didn't have an awareness of that. My parents did, I think, but I didn't, really. But they just always taught us that we're all the same and we're all equal.

ANDERSON: Where do you think that comes from? For your parents?

STOUT: I'm sure, for my father, that came from the Quaker background, and certainly, I was going — I went to Quaker meeting for many years and certainly learned a lot about that. Um, yeah, I don't know. For my mother, she just had this incredible sense of justice. My mother quit school, I think, in the sixth grade, and my father was fifth. She had one year more. But she read everything, and she constantly read and kept up with the news, and even when I was working as an organizer, I would still call my mother to find out what was going on in the news, or she would call me when there was something important I should watch. Um, but I think she just had this incredible sense of justice, and part of that probably came from a lot of her reading and maybe from her father, you know.

ANDERSON: Do you remember at the Friends' meetings talking about the civil rights movement?

STOUT: I don't remember talking so much about the civil rights movement itself. I certainly remember talking and learning about Native American

rights. I remember learning a lot of history. We did a lot of history of Quakers and their standing for justice, so I knew a lot about that. Um, I don't remember specifically the civil rights movement. But I think all my values about equality, about justice, about standing up for justice, came from there.

ANDERSON: Tell me about your parents raising three girls. What did they teach you all about what it meant to be female, or what were their expectations for women and girls?

STOUT: Well, I think, for my mother, the expectation was we could do anything we wanted, and when I was little, I used to say I wanted to be a teacher, and my mother started then telling me that I needed to work really hard and get scholarships if I wanted to go to school. And this was in a family where no one had graduated from high school. So, uh, but I remember her believing that I could do that.

And my father was always — I don't think he thought college was that big of a deal but if I wanted it, that's fine, you know. He was kind of, like, but he adored us and he would do anything for us. And uh, you know, I think he wanted a son. My sister was sort of a tomboy, so that was really good for him. He could take her out and teach her boy things. But he never complained; we never felt bad that we were girls, in any way, nothing like that. In fact, you know, because my mother was disabled, you know, he had to help me buy my first pair of hose and my first little high heels, and, you know, the Kotex, you know, all of that stuff he had to deal with. I remember when I was in high school, I'd get really embarrassed because my father also believed in buying quantity that was going to last. And here, he had his wife and three different girls who all wore three different kinds of products, and he'd go buy all of them all at one time, and I couldn't even be in the store with him, I'd be so embarrassed. [laugh]

ANDERSON: Let's talk a little bit about the impact of the accident on your life. You've recounted the story of going to your uncle's home after the accident. So, do you want to talk a little bit more, both about the moment in those couple of years where your mom was in and out of the hospital and your sister, I think, was also really injured. And then, what kind of an impact that had on your growing up, to have a mom who was disabled and the kind of shift in roles that happened in your home because of that?

STOUT: Well, like I said, I was five and it was a drunk driver hit us, and I remember every detail of that night to this day, which is interesting because none of the rest of my family could remember it at all. But our car was on fire and I was trapped in the back and had to get out and so, I remember doing that. Popping the window out. I couldn't get the doors open so I actually lay down and put my feet on the window and pushed

them out. And uh, got out. And my mother was there and I could see that her leg was cut, mostly off, and uh, and I kept saying, “Renaë’s crying. Renaë’s crying.” My little sister, she was 18 months at the time and, and my mother had told me when she was conscious, after it first happened, and said, told me to get out of the back seat and lay down on the ground. So I get out and we’re in this plowed field. Now, in the South, a plowed field is this red clay dirt, so it’s really hard, big lumps, and so I got out and I laid down in this field. It’s in October so it’s cold, kind of cold, and so I laid there about five seconds and I’d get up and told my mother that I want to go up to Mrs. Brown’s house.

But my mother wasn’t really conscious at that point. She had crawled out of the car with my sister. She had took her out. And I couldn’t find my father anywhere, and later found he’d gone through the windshield many feet away. So I went up to Mrs. Brown’s house and they had heard a crash and came down, were coming down when I went up and I got taken to the hospital but not really examined.

Because I was talking and walking, I think they just assumed I was fine, and they sent me home with my uncle, who I really didn’t want to go home with. I was afraid of him because I had seen — he was mean, and he was very abusive to his kids, my cousins who I played with a lot, and he would — at the least provocation, pull off his belt and start belting them, and so I was frightened of him, and I was crying and didn’t want to go home with him and, um, I went home with him and he put me in bed in what was their living room.

I used to think they lived in a mansion. It was this brick house and of course, I thought any brick house was a mansion, but later, going back there, I can’t believe how little this house was. It was just this tiny little house but they had a living room that had no furniture so it was sort of the playroom. And it had a closet with steps going up to the attic and the boys always — they had all boys at that time and they always told us there were monsters up there and so I was just scared to death in this room, and he put me in there and I was crying.

I wanted water, because I had actually been in this fire and I was totally, like, incredibly, my throat burned and stuff, and even to this day, I can’t sleep at night without water. I just, like, panic if I don’t have water constantly. And he wouldn’t let me have water, because he said if I had water, I’d wet the bed, which I had not done in years, but that was his assumption and I kept crying and crying and he threatened to beat me with the belt.

And that’s the last thing I remember. I don’t remember — evidently, they found me the next day and I was totally black and they thought I’d died and I had a severe concussion. And so I was in the hospital for, like, two weeks. I constantly got in trouble in the hospital, for turning somersaults when I was supposed to be laying still and, you know, it was one of those rooms where there’s like ten kids in a room and they brought a TV in and I wasn’t supposed to watch TV so they put it at the

end of my bed so I hung by my feet upside down so I could see, you know —

ANDERSON: Which was great for your concussion, right.

STOUT: Really great. You know, and they finally — oh, and they had these, you know, the old-fashioned bells that you hit the top, you know, and so they finally moved me out of the kids' wing into this room with an older girl, just the two of us, because they wanted me to be still. And then I discovered the bell. And I would ring it all the time. [laugh] I just thought it was the greatest thing, and um, they finally took the bell away from me. Then, me and this other kid stole a wheelchair and was running up and down [laugh]. I was always in trouble. And then I ran away looking for my mother and father and sister.

ANDERSON: Were they in the same hospital?

STOUT: They were in the same hospital. My father actually had visited with me and he looked like a mummy. I remember that, because he was just cut up all over from going through the windshield. And he assured me that everybody was OK and they loved me and, you know, and mama would be OK and, 'course at the time, I didn't know that they didn't think she was going to live. But he was real reassuring in that way. But I remember running away and I found my sister, and then they caught me and made me go back. But I was always in trouble in the hospital.

So, then we ended up living with different people while my mother was so sick for a while.

ANDERSON: Hopefully a different relative than the uncle?

STOUT: Yeah. A different relative. I stayed with my grandmother a lot. And then, when it was time for school to start, by that time, my mother — she was in and out of the hospital and she had this new little baby. And what would happen is, they — you know, our living room-kitchen was this tiny little space. And so the only thing that could really be in there was this hospital bed. And so my father would get up in the mornings and pack his lunch and pack my mother's lunch and the baby's stuff that she needed to keep the baby, and they'd put the baby on the hospital bed with her and leave. And she would stay there all day. I would go to school, and when I'd come home, I'd get the baby and take care of her from then on. But my mother never was able to carry her or anything. So she stayed with this child until — so, when she was in the hospital and stuff, Jane would go and stay somewhere else with other relatives and stuff. So she was much more separated from us. Renae, too, more. I stayed home more than they did.

You know, the interesting thing now is, I think, my sister Jane probably suffered the most from that separation, but both my sisters

really did. And I think, for them, they had a much harder time in life because of it, and I think for me, I was old enough to understand what the circumstances were and even though I was separated, I knew my parents loved me and could understand that, and had a little bit more awareness of “why” — not that it wasn’t traumatic for me, it was, but not in the same way it was for my sisters, who, like Jane, always had major issues of belonging and still does, I think. Plus, I’ve had years of therapy and they haven’t. [laugh] That probably helped, too.

ANDERSON: How old was — how long were your mom and Jane, then, confined to that bed? I’m just thinking of how hard it would be to really keep an infant on a bed. So she wasn’t yet crawling or anything like that —

STOUT: Right.

ANDERSON: when she was still —

STOUT: tough times, but, uh, yeah. I’m sure it was hard after that. I mean, at the time, it just seemed like this is the way things are and I didn’t think about it, but it must have been incredibly hard.

ANDERSON: So tell me about the shift, emotionally, in your home after this happens. It sounds like your parents had been very much in love, and while you were without a lot of resources, it was a very loving family —

STOUT: Absolutely.

ANDERSON: and what happened?

STOUT: I think the loving part never left. I think what really hap — I mean, certainly, there was a lot of stress. I remember my mother having lots of anger, um, most of the time, not at us, but sometimes coming out that way. I can remember that she started yelling more. But for the most part, um, I actually had to become the person who did the housecleaning, the cooking, all of that stuff, and taking care of my little baby sisters became my job.

And the thing I remember about that is often my mother made it into a game, which was good — not always, though, but a lot of times, especially housecleaning, she’d make a game and we’d do tasks and, you know, it was just a game. But I hated doing dishes and that kind of stuff. Especially, we didn’t have running water so it’s much harder. But she would sit in this hospital bed and the kitchen and living room was the same room, I mean it wasn’t even as big as this room, and you know, tell me step by step what to do. That’s how I learned to cook.

So I think I didn’t have as much time to play and be a kid, you know. That was the big thing, I think. And that was true all the way through high school.

ANDERSON: Did you resent that at the time?

STOUT: I think I started resenting it some in high school, yeah. I wasn't as able to go play and do things with kids and that kind of stuff as much. But I was also really focused in high school on making really good grades because I wanted to go to college. So I had that as another piece of — and I actually resented more when things took me away from doing my schoolwork, so...yeah.

I don't know what else, I think I was really sad a lot that my mother couldn't go do things with me. The thing that I disliked the most about what my mother was — what this thing with my parents was, what I would refer to now as their own internalized oppression. Their — I didn't know that word then — but, like, my mother would sew for these rich people, some who would treat her really badly, and they'd come into our house and they'd treat her really badly and they wouldn't pay her hardly anything and she wouldn't charge them, you know, and she — it used to make me so furious, just furious. And my father, too, I mean, he would work for these rich people and if they did — if they gave him one thing, they just thought that was the greatest thing, and I really resented that. And I wanted them to kind of stand up for their rights, or not think these rich people were wonderful because they did one nice thing, you know? That really got to me.

ANDERSON: And they must have been under a huge mountain of hospital bills.

STOUT: Oh.

ANDERSON: Were you aware of that, of the financial pressure, and the bills?

STOUT: I was aware of it, because they didn't have insurance, and my father paid every penny of that bills off. It was probably 25 years it took him to pay them off. And, yeah, I was aware. My mother always let us know, explained to us about finances and what the financial situation was. She didn't keep it a secret. When I was real little, I used to say, "Well, just write a check. Why can't you just write a check for something?" So, we never had money to, like, go — we never went on vacation, plus my father never got time off, and we, you know, we would go up to these mountains and see family sometimes, once in a while on weekends and that kind of thing.

ANDERSON: You were able to transport your mom out of the house? You would just carry her to the car?

STOUT: Yeah, yeah. My father would. She could walk a very limited distance, like to the car, a little ways. And she got to where she could walk into the house with crutches.

ANDERSON: Oh, she had a prosthesis, then?

STOUT: Eventually, but it never — it was like, because we were really poor, I believe because we were really poor, or either that or because they thought she wasn't going to live, they just did what they call a guillotine surgery, and so the nerves were never capped, so it was never prepared for prosthesis, so when she did walk on one, it was intensely painful. She lived with intense pain all her life. And it wasn't like what we think of as prosthesis, it was really difficult and cumbersome to use. But she did have one eventually, but never that she could just walk freely.

ANDERSON: Yeah. So what happened to your plans to go to college?

STOUT: Well, I got a scholarship, I got a full scholarship, and went to Lenoir-Rhyne College and then in the second year, the cost of the college went up five hundred dollars and, kids who had full scholarship wasn't allowed to work, although I snuck and did house cleaning off campus. But that was the only money I had to, like, get supplies and things I needed to live, because my parents didn't have anything to give me. And so it barely covered that, so five hundred dollars felt like this huge, huge amount.

So I went to financial aid office and I said, "I can't come back." And they just sort of brushed me off, and then I went to my father and we went — I was just thinking about this this morning — we went into this kind of store-front loan place, and I was just realizing, I don't think they have those kind of places around anymore, probably because they have credit cards and stuff. But they used to have all these little private loan offices that weren't connected to a bank, and we went and tried to get a loan and we kept getting turned down because he had no collateral worth five hundred dollars, and so I went back to the financial aid office and they told me, no, so I sold all my books and went to work in a hosiery mill.

ANDERSON: Had you moved back home? Or were you paying rent somewhere?

STOUT: No, I didn't move back home. I found a room with some other women, in a trailer, and I think there were four of us sharing a trailer, that's how it started, until I could get my own little apartment, which was in this little basement. And the basement had no windows except in the front, it was so dark.

So, yeah, I dropped out of college and I was so resentful of that for many, many, many years. I think just recently, I haven't felt that, so resentful about it. And, you know, people were, like, well, you could go back to college now and it's like, well, that's not what I want now: it's what I wanted then. It was what I'd wanted all my life and what I worked for and I resented that I couldn't go, and it was interesting,

when I started coming up here, people would say, “Well, why didn’t you do this? Or do that? Or do, you know, why didn’t you try another school?” or — and I didn’t know I had this options. You know, I often talk about the issue of poverty being that you don’t realize there are other options out there. If I was where I am now, if I knew what I knew now, I would’ve stayed in school. I would have figured it out. I would’ve have gotten other support. I’d found a different school. I would’ve done something. But I didn’t know that. And so my only option at the time was to not go.

ANDERSON: And to go to work.

STOUT: Over five hundred dollars.

ANDERSON: Right. Did your sisters end up going to college?

STOUT: No. My middle sister left home — they both sort of left home at the age of 16, I think Renae left at 15 or something.

ANDERSON: So they didn’t graduate high school, then?

STOUT: Well, they did. They both finished up high school, and Renae went in the military, that’s how she got out. But then she’s gone to school for various things.

ANDERSON: And Jane?

STOUT: Jane, um, she moved in with me and I actually started teaching her. We lived in Charleston and I helped her get this job that was taking care of books and stuff and she had no education in doing that, and I would teach her. We would have an hour ride on the bus into Charleston and then an hour ride back out, and we made it school. And I would teach her all these things for work. And then on the way back, I would teach her history and other things, you know, just that.

ANDERSON: What’s your relationship with your sisters like now?

STOUT: My youngest sister, I don’t have any communication with hardly at all. She became a Jehovah’s Witness, so she doesn’t approve of my lifestyle, and so we’ve just totally lost all connection. Renae was in a really abusive, terrible marriage and she had a young son, and we’ve had ups and downs in our relationship. We have very different politics. But she asked me for help and, um, my brother-in-law had taken Byron, her son, his son, too, out of school because Byron had a severe learning disability and in the third grade, they were going to put him in special ed and my brother-in-law said, “No kid of mine is going into special ed” and jerked him out of school. He said, “We’ll home school him.” And

of course they never did. Renae was working to make money and they never home-schooled this kid, ever.

And so, by the time he was — should have been in junior high, was when Renae was calling me because they were trying to get away from Jim, and I said, “I will help you but you have to put Byron in school.” And she was also wanting to take this job that had to do with management. She didn’t know how to do it and she wanted me to teach her how to do it. And I said, “I will teach you if you put Byron in school.” And she was afraid to because she was afraid they would take him away from her because he hadn’t been in school this whole time. He kind of fell through the cracks. They didn’t know that, you know, that he wasn’t being home schooled. I don’t know how that happened but it did. And I said, “They won’t take him away. You just tell them about Jim and the situation.”

So they put him in — she had moved by this time to Box Springs, Georgia, and they put him in special ed. But it wasn’t a special ed that really taught the kids. They just let them play games and read newspapers or — but the one thing about Byron was, the whole time was, he read. And I would send him books all the time and magazine subscriptions. And he really taught himself to read and he read everything.

So then, Jim found out where they lived in Georgia and he was coming, and I actually moved them up here and I got Byron — he was in special ed at Amherst High School the first year and then he mainstreamed by the second year, and we got him tutors, we sent him to summer school, we got him into the Sylvan Program. I mean, we did everything we could to — and he graduated with all A’s and has just graduated from Goucher College. So, he’s — he still has a learning disability and has major problems, but he made it. He did. He was the first one in our family to ever graduate [from college.]

ANDERSON: Yeah, and it took all of you to get him through that. I mean, it sounds like a combination both of the resources that you now have.

STOUT: Money.

ANDERSON: Right.

STOUT: And the second thing — the second year in college, he didn’t have enough money, and Renae’s answer was he could go into the military. And, you know, they came and told me and I just burst out crying. But it was sort of a done deal and then Byron called me, like, two weeks before Goucher was to start, and said, “I really don’t want to do this. I really want to go back to school. Can you help me?” And so we did an appeal and got him money to go and so, he is now graduated.

ANDERSON: That's exciting. It must have felt very healing for you to be able to do that for somebody in your family.

STOUT: It did, it did. It was important.

ANDERSON: Yeah. We're going to have to take a break to change the tape...

END TAPE 1

TAPE 2

ANDERSON: So, let's talk first about your work experiences. I want to back up and talk about working as a child and then we'll talk about your job after college in Charleston.

STOUT: I think I first started working when I was around 10, and, mostly in the summers, working in tobacco, working in the potato fields, that kind of thing. And, I think one of the really good things, which was unusual with my parents is, when harvest time came, most parents, especially tenant-farmer kids, kept their kids out of school and my parents never did, and so it was more strictly a summer job and — although I can remember in school, getting up really, really early, like at 5 o'clock, and going out and working with my father before getting ready for school. But that was not that often.

So I did that, and then worked during the summers between school, and then went to work in the hosiery factory after I left college. And decided very early on that I didn't want to do that kind of work. I was terrible at piecework, which is, you know, because you can't talk. I love to talk. [laugh] And I was always visiting with people. I was always getting into — you know, I could barely make production. So very quickly I started going to school at night to learn how to be a secretary.

ANDERSON: What was the work environment like in the hosiery plant?

STOUT: Oh, it was very harsh. You had to do piece work and by that, I mean, I had to inspect hose, like, more than one a second to make production. I mean, you had to move so fast, it was unbelievable. And people didn't take pee breaks and you did take a lunch break but it was just very short and very quick, and it was — you know, some people liked it. You know, it was what they did in their life and they didn't have resentment about it, but I had a lot of resentment about it, so it was very hard for me. The areas I worked were all women and the people telling us what to do, of course, were all men. And uh, yeah, it was fairly intense.

ANDERSON: Was it all white?

STOUT: It was mostly white, and — different areas, there would be areas that, like, black folks worked, tended to be the lower paying jobs. It wasn't very integrated at all, where I worked. And then I went to work for another company that made pieces for burglar alarms. And there I became a secretary and I started moving up into the work until I actually became a manager of the area that actually monitored the alarms and that kind of stuff, and the whole business. So I became a manager.

ANDERSON: How did that feel?

STOUT: It felt good. It felt good and I hired the first African-American man. And I got a lot of flack for it. And then I hired — I was actually told by the owner — he came in — he didn't do much of the day-to-day management and there was sort of three different areas of management. There was the management of the men who worked outside and then there was sort of more administrative management and then management of this department that I was over.

And the owner came in and told me that I needed to get rid of this person because he said, not because he was racist or anything, but because it was causing trouble with the men who didn't want to take orders from my staff who, you know, was a black man. And instead, I hired another black woman. And then I really started getting a lot of flack.

And started getting harassment. First in the form of phone calls and then messages painted on the side of my house. By this time, I'd bought a tiny little mill house. My first house. And um, and then eventually more threatening. Until basically, I had to leave town, it got so bad.

ANDERSON: You were never out and out fired. You were just harassed into leaving.

STOUT: I was just harassed. And what I didn't know was that one of the men who was in this other department who didn't want to take orders from black people, um, he gave me a hard time at work but I didn't know 'til much later on that he was like the head of the Klan in that area. And so, I had really stepped on the toes of some big Klan guy. And so it just became this very horrible, horrible experience and actually, you know, people coming into my house and doing stuff. So I actually ran away and I got in my car and started driving without any idea where I was going. And ended up in Charleston. Got a hotel for the night, looked in the paper the next day, got a job the next day, found a place to live the next day.

ANDERSON: What'd you do with your house?

STOUT: I signed it over to the bank.

ANDERSON: How'd that happen?

STOUT: I was threatened and I did it. So,

ANDERSON: What happened to the two employees?

STOUT: Oh, they were let go immediately, yeah, so.

ANDERSON: I know that that's something that's going to follow you as you become an activist. How did — even in those early days, how did you cope with that on a daily basis? The harassment and the —

STOUT:

Oh, I didn't cope. I mean, I was devastated. I was frightened all the time. You know, I had major PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder]. I was so afraid, and um, yeah. I don't know how I coped with it, but I think — I had been somewhat political in the fringes. You know, I would go do things, like volunteer for the Democratic party, gone to a few women's rights meetings. I didn't really fit there. I had gone to a couple of environmental things. But it wasn't till I moved to Charleston that I think it sort of catapulted me into being really much more political. Because up until that point, I think, having grown up in poverty, my one goal after I didn't get to do college was I want to have a house of my own, you know, that was really important to me. And I actually worked two full-time jobs. I would work at this job and then I would take a second-shift job working at the mill, until I could get money for a down payment on a house, which I ended up giving away. So that was really important to me.

And after leaving there and moving to Charleston, I had huge financial problems because of giving my house away but still having a mortgage. I had to pay that house off, still, for another ten years. And so, it threw me into a real downward spiral financially and, um, yeah, so that was a huge thing.

Then I went to Charleston. I first got a job working as a bookkeeper, with a rental agency, and I was told that if black people called, I was to tell them that all the rental places were filled. And I would never do that. And I would tell them that I couldn't tell the difference, which is really crazy. If you've ever been to Charleston, most of the black people from Charleston have this real Gulla accent and it's very difficult to understand if you're not from around that area. And so to say that I didn't know if they were black or not was really a sort of a little defiance stand.

And so, eventually, you know, I knew I was going to have to leave. I just didn't deal with their policies after what I'd been through in North Carolina. And so I began looking for a job in bookkeeping, which is what I was sort of moving toward. And someone said, "Well, I think this law office needs a bookkeeper."

So I go and visit this law office of Ray McLain and it turns out he basically needs a secretary, and I didn't really have training as a secretary. And he had me do a typing test and I think I typed like 35 words a minute and made like three mistakes. And so he starts talking to me and I find out he's Quaker, and we start talking from that perspective and it's a civil rights law firm, which I didn't know. I just walked in there sort of accidentally, and so he says to me, "You know, I would really love to hire you but it just doesn't make sense. We need someone who can really type really well and that's a big part of the job." But, you know, he was really nice and we really liked each other kind of thing, and I said to him, I said, "Hire me and give me a chance. I could learn to type really quick. I'll work as many hours as I need to

work to get the job done. If I have to work, you know, 16 hours a day, I'll do it to get the job done. I want this job." And he's like, "Oh, I don't know." And so I left, and within an hour, he called and offered me the job, and I not only learned to type really fast, I learned to type up to 120 words a minute eventually.

I then became the manager of that job, and that's where I learned a lot. I learned a lot about politics there, because I saw how — for a while, I thought, Oh, I'm going to become a paralegal. That's as high as I could think at the time. I want to become a paralegal. But then I saw, over and over, how screwed up the justice system was and how unjust it was. There was a lot of police abuse in Charleston. And we had a lot of those kind of cases, and I would see how we would have all the proof of certain things and it wouldn't even be allowed in court. So that the people making the decision couldn't even make a just decision because they weren't even allowed the information that they needed to make an informed decision, so how could a justice system work if people didn't have all the information?

And I became a — that's when I started becoming involved in politics outside of work, but with full support of Ray McLain, who was the lawyer. He believed in me, and I think that made a huge impact on me. I helped start a Quaker meeting there in Charleston, that was one of the big things that I did. And then started a peace group. That's how I first started becoming an activist.

ANDERSON: Right. Before we talk about that, can you, um, sort of characterize what the difference was in terms of black-white relations between Charleston and where you had come from? Was it different for you culturally, racially, class?

STOUT: In Charleston, there was this really weird dynamic, um, between blacks and whites. I sold my car soon after I got to Charleston because of finances and rode the buses. And white people just didn't ride the buses in that area. And what I learned, I mean, I saw this at work, like, there was a black woman who worked at the real estate company I went to work for, who was the person who did the cleaning, and she would run errands for people, and she would act like what I think slave mentality is, and it just used to freak me out, and she learned that I was very sympathetic to her, so that she would hide behind my door in my office to eat, you know, food and stuff, because they didn't — she wasn't supposed to do that, except at certain times. And she would hide, but she would always act like it was — you know, and I tried to talk to talk to her like a normal person and she wouldn't — she wouldn't let me do that.

And then, one day, I'm on the bus, and I see this woman who looks very familiar, all dressed up, just talking away, and I realize it's the same woman, but she looks like a different person and she's acting like a different person, and I realized it was all an act, like she had to act like

she was subservient, you know, and I saw that a lot in people who worked in Charleston, that it was sort of a survival mode for them of, you act like you're a slave and you know, you have this job, and you never stand up to people. But in their outside lives, they were very different. Her whole tone of her voice, the way she talked, like, she'd say, yessah, yessah, that kind of thing. She didn't talk like that at all in real life. It was all an act. And there was a lot of that in Charleston.

At the same time, there were a lot of very powerful African-American people, who totally rejected that way of life. And when I went to work at Ray McLain's office, there was an African-American woman who worked there, there was an African-American lawyer there, and so I got to see another side of Charleston as well. But that was so unusual. I remember the woman that worked there was Mary and we were coworkers and we were walking down Broad Street, the main street, which is where our law office was and I was, like, "Well, let's go to this restaurant for lunch." And she was, "Oh, no, we can't go in there, you know, I can't go in there." And I was, like, "Oh, that is so ridiculous."

ANDERSON: Because this was the mid-70s now, or late 70s?

STOUT: Right, right. Late 70s. I was like, that's ridiculous. Come on. And so we walk in, and you could tell they were not used to having black people come in, and they wouldn't wait on us. They just kept ignoring us and ignoring us and ignoring us, you know. And I had to really apologize to her. It's like, you know, God, I cannot believe this is happening.

ANDERSON: Did you leave?

STOUT: We did leave. And I never went back to eat there. It was one of my favorite places on Broad Street, but I never went back. So there were a lot of things. And Mary was great, because she would get really angry at things and, you know, talk about things, and I got a much more broad awareness of some of the kinds of things that went on. And of course, I'd already gotten that in North Carolina through the racism stuff there with the Klan, but this was different because it wasn't the Klan. But it was, you know, it was things like, a lot of — the buses would go past Broad Street all the way down to the Battery, and so people would ride down to the Battery and get out and walk around, and it was sort of a touristy place, too. But people started getting upset that too many blacks were going down to the Battery. And you know, south of Broad was, like, super-rich. Super mansions. I mean, even back then, there was nothing south of Broad, even little houses, less than a million dollars. And they got very upset that blacks were coming, so they stopped the bus route at the market and quit having the buses go down. So I had to start walking further down to Broad Street just to — yeah, it was bizarre. So there were those kinds of things.

ANDERSON: Did the Klan have a presence in Charleston?

STOUT: Yes. They weren't as well seen or known, but the way that I know that they were there is that two days after I moved into a house, a cross was burned on my lawn. And then I got a notice. Every time I moved, I would get a little note saying, you know, "The Klan is watching you and we've registered your new address." You know, they would send me this note. And then once my car was broken into and there was something left there from the John Birch Society so I don't know if they were connected. I sort have the feeling they were. Or had some of the same people in them or something.

ANDERSON: So, how did you cope with the fear this time around? You didn't flee.

STOUT: I didn't flee. It wasn't as bad. I was scared of it but, you know, I always had said that I wouldn't go back to North Carolina till I was ready to fight the Klan. But I don't know. I think I felt more defiant at that point. I felt like I had some allies at that point through the Quaker meeting, through the lawyers. And then I moved into a black community. I was the only white in this black community and, um, sort of midstream of Charleston, and so I was living in this little apartment and I got really interested in some of the issues and I would start talking to people at the bus stop and they'd say, "Oh, well, you need to talk to Miss Clark because she's the one who, you know, knows what's going on in the neighborhood. If you want to do something, talk to her."

So I went to talk to Miss Clark and um, I went in. I had no idea who she was. She was just this very elderly woman and she just sort of took me under her wing and started telling me things I should do. Like the first thing she told me to do is, I was interested in some housing issue that we were dealing with and she said, "Well, you need to go to the NAACP meeting and you need to do this and this and this." So I go, and of course, it's mostly men, and no white people, you know, and I'm so stupid, I don't really know what the NAACP is, you know. I'm really naïve politically at this point, and, I mean, I've heard of it, obviously, but, you know, I didn't realize there would be no white people there, and here I am, you know, in my mid-twenties.

And so I go back, and I go, "They didn't want to listen to me, they didn't want me talking, they didn't like me." And Miss Clark said, "Well, what do you expect? Of course they didn't. Now, next time when you go, you're going to do this, this, and this." And I was like, "I don't want to go back." And she's like, "Of course you're going back." And she kept making me go back. And of course, this was Septima Clark, who was this very famous civil rights leader, and the way I found out was, by this time I had gotten really involved in the peace movement, I basically started it, and um, did start it, and this, we were going to — there was going to be the twentieth anniversary of the March on Washington, so when — what year was that? That would've been —

ANDERSON: '83?

STOUT: '82 or '83. So I was going to go and what Miss Clark said is, "Well, we have to get buses and we have to raise — you have to go, raise money to buy all these young people seats on the bus to pay for it," because it's like \$40 a person or something. I don't remember exactly. I was like, "I don't know how to do that." She said, "Yeah, you do. You work on Broad Street. You ask every lawyer." I was like, "I can't ask people for money." [laugh] And she's like, "You ask them." She was really pushy.

So, I started with my own law office, and I remember asking the lawyer who's this African-American man and I said, "You know, I want you to buy a seat for someone to go." And he said, "Well, who's going?" And I said, "Well, you know, a lot of people." And he said, "Well, name me some names." I said, "Well, Septima Clark." And he said, "Oh, I'll buy Septima Clark a ticket." And so, I sold probably a hundred tickets for Septima Clark. And we ended up taking two buses. And these were these giant, you know, like, Trailway buses. And so, I sold all the tickets for Septima Clark. So, at that point, I figured out that she was someone.

So we get to DC and she's met by all these important people like Jesse Jackson and all these folks, and they take her up on the stage and it was only at that point that I really knew who she was.

ANDERSON: Oh, really, still up until this point? Wow.

STOUT: Yeah, yeah. I mean, I knew that people knew her and stuff and I'd then heard that she'd been in the NAACP and done all this work, and I heard this stuff but I didn't really realize how important, important it was, you know?

ANDERSON: What did she teach you about multiracial organizing? About working with the black community?

STOUT: Well, there were kind of two major lessons from her, I think. One was that of course, people aren't going to trust you. Why would they? And you have to keep hanging in there because it's only through consistency and allowing people to actually mistrust you that the trust gets built. That was a big thing she taught me and it's what I've tried to pass on to other people, other white people, that of course, people aren't going to trust you immediately and if you go in expecting that, then it's just going to reinforce what has already happened in the past and there are a lot of reasons for that mistrust. And, you hang in there. You keep working at it in order to build relationships.

And the second thing is, I mean, she really had — she was really a feminist who believed that part of the problem with the civil rights movement was that it didn't honor women's leadership, and that that

was part of why the civil rights movement wasn't as successful. And, you know, and she talked about people like Martin Luther King but saying, you know, he didn't understand that he needed to give women equal power, that she felt that was a major problem.

And she was probably one of the first women that really helped me understand, sort of, more the feminist, I mean I totally believe — when I got my first apartment, there was — all the ads in the paper would say, “married couples only” or men. You know, and I tell women that now and they — these younger women and they can't even believe it, you know, that that can happen, but I would call up and try to convince these people to rent to me, that I was this good girl, and they'd go, there was no way. And it took my boss who was a man to advocate for me to get me an apartment, as a single woman.

And another story was that a good friend of mine, who was actually several years younger, who was two or three years younger than me, and I was working, at that point, as a secretary, making more money than him, he was working as a person in a store doing boxes and stuff, in the storeroom, and we decided that we had to establish credit. We were just out on our own for the first year. I had, you know, a couple of years on him and I'd had some college. He was just — I think he hadn't even finished high school. And we went to the bank to get a credit card. And they gave him a credit card and they wouldn't give me one. And I remember standing in his face, just yelling at him, in the middle of this bank, about how could that be possible? And finally, I think just because they wanted me to shut up, they said, “We'll give you a loan of a hundred dollars and you can pay ten dollars a month to start to establish credit.” But anyway.

So I had that awareness, but I had gone to a couple of meetings, a few meetings, of women, of the women's movement meetings and they were talking about the ERA at that point and —

ANDERSON: So what year is this?

STOUT: This is in the mid- later 70s.

ANDERSON: And you're in Charleston.

STOUT: Yeah, late 70s, early 80s, at that point. And I just felt totally out of place. There weren't other low-income women. They were all well-educated, upper-class women for the most part, and I just — it didn't fit for me, and I felt totally ostracized. So it was through Septima that I really began to get the first real understanding of, or analysis about women and their place. Although I will say my favorite song was “I am woman, hear my roar.” That was, like, my first year out of school, I think, or soon afterwards. And I would get up on the chair and sing it to the top of my lungs, that kind of thing.

- ANDERSON: Was the term feminism something you felt comfortable with or did you identify as a feminist? What language would you have used?
- STOUT: I don't even know if I knew that term at the time. But — no, I don't think I thought of myself in that way until later. I had to understand more.
- ANDERSON: You felt, politically, your values and views lined up with what was happening with the women's movement?
- STOUT: Oh, absolutely, absolutely.
- ANDERSON: And you were very much aware of women's oppression?
- STOUT: I wanted the ERA, yeah, absolutely.
- ANDERSON: But the movement didn't hold a place for you at the time?
- STOUT: Not for me, no. And it might have been different in other places than Charleston. I'm sure it was.
- ANDERSON: So, the women's movement wasn't an easy fit.
- STOUT: Well, there were none of the movements that were an easy fit for me, except for more the civil rights movement and, um, and it was not very strong at that time in Charleston, but I kept — you know, I did get involved in the peace movement but it was a constant struggle and felt like I didn't belong there in many ways.
- ANDERSON: Say more about that.
- STOUT: Well, I remember, we started this meeting and one of the first things we did was we held a filming of, Physicians for Social Responsibility had put out a film, I'm trying to remember the name of it, it's really powerful, about nuclear winter or something.
- ANDERSON: I remember.
- STOUT: Yeah, and we had it and we got all these doctors to join our little tiny group, and very quickly, they began to take a lot of leadership and I ended up, would do all the work, all the, like, work of getting meetings, get people there, but they would sort of head the meeting once it happened. And that kept happening, and I remember we were going to have — we needed someone to go speak at this, um, I forget what we were doing, but we were going to send speakers around and one of them was the Black Ministerial Alliance. And I volunteered to speak, because I felt like I knew some of those people already, they were in the

NAACP and one of the people said, “Well, you know, it’d be better if Ken did it because Ken’s a doctor and people will listen to him more.” And just totally brushed me off and I just felt like a total idiot.

Well, right before — and I never spoke publicly, so, you know, I didn’t know if I could do it. I was scared about it. But, I’m trying, you know, to volunteer. And um, I felt so passionately about the issue that, so they called me, like, the morning of, because Ken couldn’t do it. He had called this other doctor, Steve, who also couldn’t do it, and so they called me as a last resort. And I went and I was so nervous. I’ll never forget — I was walking up to speak, and I dropped all my notes and they spread everywhere. I was so humiliated, I was so embarrassed. But they were so — so I was trying to read my notes and I couldn’t and I finally put them aside and I just spoke from my heart, and they gave me a standing ovation, and I realized at that point that I had a message that people could hear and that it didn’t have to be in this very academic language and in fact, as I began more and more organizing, I began to realize, oh, in fact, the academic language only reaches a certain group of people, and I began to see, you know, at the end, the differences. But it was still people totally, like, when I started talking about wanting to be an organizer — even people in the Quaker meeting tried to discourage me. Tried to discourage me. It was like, you know, it was terrible.

ANDERSON: Do you think that was all about class or was some of that about gender, too?

STOUT: I think a lot of it was about class, because this was women, as well. And I think a major part of it was about class. I think it was about the way I talked. I had a very working-class way of speaking. In the South, it’s very noticeable, you know.

ANDERSON: Yeah, yeah.

STOUT: And so, no, I — I really believe that, and I brought a lot of working-class people into the peace movement who very quickly left, you know, and they didn’t stay. That’s when I began to get this analysis about if we’re only talking to a certain group of people, we’re never going to win, you know. I started knowing that really early on. But I really wanted to be an organizer and I had made a decision that that’s what I was going to do. I didn’t know how, I didn’t — you know, I was going to try to raise money. I did my first walk-a-thon, it was for the Freeze campaign, and we raised a ton of money, and, was really successful. Tsali walked in it. I’ll never forget, because I was supposed to — you know, I didn’t want to sell my own tickets for the walk because I was also organizing it, so I sold them for Tsali. And they had Orangeade at every stop. You know, we had all this Orangeade donated by Burger King. And so, Tsali was, back then, this very white fluffy dog. He was

full fluffy, and he had a bright orange face from the Orange Aid. And he won the walk-a-thon, which was a little motorcycle we'd gotten donated. So we donated it back to be auctioned off.

ANDERSON: That's great.

STOUT: But Tsali won the motorcycle. [laugh] And his picture was in the paper. It was very funny. [laugh]

ANDERSON: So how did you start your peace group in Charleston?

STOUT: Well, it's so interesting. This woman, this kind of wild hippy woman, came to the Quaker meeting one day and she says, during the silence, she said, "Well, you know, the real reason I came here today is I want to be involved in working for peace and I'd like to connect up with people to start a peace group." Well, I knew right there, I was right there. So, I was on her immediately after. We went to my house and, you know, this is a woman who looked kind of like a street person. She has these sandals that are — she's tied strings to hold them on and, you know, wearing these long kind of crazy clothes and long stringy hair.

So we decided to do it, and we made up a flier and all this kind of stuff together, and then it was like, Well, who's going to facilitate this meeting? And I said, "Well, you are." Clearly, she had the knowledge, you know. She knew how to do it. And she says, "Look at me! Do you think anyone would listen to me for a second? It has to be someone straight looking like you." And I knew she was right, you know. I knew that she was a little too on the edge for people in Charleston [laugh] and she lived on a sailboat, you know, she was this crazy wild woman who I loved dearly and I can't think of her name right now. But she totally supported me all the way.

She was like the hand behind my back, to do all this stuff. And it was someone else I could bounce ideas off with, you know, and so that's how it got started. And then we got all these doctors involved who just took it and ran with it —

ANDERSON: What was the name that you gave the group?

STOUT: It was the Charleston Peace — I think it was Charleston Peace and then later, we affiliated with the Freeze campaign.

ANDERSON: OK.

STOUT: So that was there. And then, I became even much more deeply involved with peace at the national level when I moved to North Carolina.

ANDERSON: So what other things did you guys take on in Charleston?

STOUT: Well, we did a lot of — I actually got training and started a draft counseling center. And military counseling, because there were a lot of military people there and this — military counseling was for people who got into the military but realized they were a conscientious objector and needed — it wasn't, you know, either they had a change of heart in, while they were in, or they went in under false pretenses and realized, Oh, we're supposed to kill people? — you know, that kind of thing, and needed to figure out a way out, and so I got involved in that. We did a lot of demonstrations.

The one thing we never did, and I've never done this to this day and never stood with anyone doing it, is we never protested at the bases. We never protested the people themselves. I just never could go there. We would protest the policies, we'd protest the — but I think part — because I knew people in the military and I had counseled people in the military and knew a lot of the — particularly the low-income people joined the military, and that was so true, particularly in the South, that they go for school or for education. Even in my own family. So, I was very clear that we never protested at the gates of military bases and there're tons of bases in South Carolina. We got a lot of harassment for our protest and different things we did.

And then, we also became very active in the Freeze campaign, because that was the big concern. And we had a lot of nuclear weapons there in Charleston, nuclear weapons, submarine base and all that.

ANDERSON: So was there a racial justice component of your agenda or was that something separate for you?

STOUT: Well, it was kind of separate but it was something I really wanted to bring together. And I don't think I was really successful in bringing it together in Charleston. I think I would have moved that way. I was very quickly moving that way, and we had gotten involved in doing voter registration, get out the vote work, and that kind of thing, and I think, had I stayed longer, I kind of got jerked out right in the middle of starting all of this — I think I would have brought it together more and I think it's what allowed PPP [Piedmont Peace Project] to come in the way — like, I built PPP in a very different way because of that experience.

ANDERSON: Right. And you had been working at the law firm this whole time?

STOUT: Yes. And I had actually given my notice — I was working my notice, because I was going to quit and figure out how to become an organizer.

ANDERSON: And support yourself? I mean, you didn't have any budget or staff for Charleston Peace, right?

STOUT: No, no.

ANDERSON: No, it was just volunteer.

STOUT: I had raised some money. I had, like, \$3000 raised for the Peace, and I — that was an interesting piece, too, was that I went to the Peace folks and I said, “I want to start working on this full time.” And that’s where I really had the agenda for the justice piece connected. And uh, and we all agreed to that, and they decided that I wasn’t the person to do it. And I was so clear that this was my — what I needed to be doing. And a lot of that came from a deep spiritual knowing, not because I felt like this was my — that I knew how to do it.

It was really a deep spiritual calling, really a calling, because when it first started happening to me in the Quaker meeting — I actually quit going to Quaker meeting for a while and saying, “I need to be at home by myself during this time.” Which, as you know, Quakers say you should do that if that’s — and I took time away from the meeting and just sat in silence by myself and it just became stronger and stronger and I really tried to resist it for so long and so I knew this was my path. This is what I have to do.

So I gave notice and — but even before I did that, the, um, I had this meeting with the Peace group and they decided that I wasn’t the person to be the organizer, that they needed someone who had more experience, they said, even though I’d raised all the money and everything to make it happen. And so, I said, “Fine, but” — and so I started applying for jobs with the National Freeze campaign, you know, trying to start — and when they found that out and found that I was actually planning to leave to become an organizer, they came back and said, “Well, OK, you can be the organizer.” It was bizarre.

ANDERSON: What was that all about? Was it still about class?

STOUT: I absolutely believe it was totally about class. At least that’s the way I experienced it. They actually ended up hiring a woman who had, you know, a college education and had all this, you know. She didn’t have experience organizing and actually it totally flopped, unfortunately. I felt really sad about that. But I think they just felt like she was a better face for the movement, or for their organization. I think I was an embarrassment in many ways. I was still low income, um, and I guess sort of not polished, not a great speaker in their way of thinking. And then, you know, then they offered me the job, and I was going to start in January and my father died December 17, and so, I sort of made an overnight decision to move home.

ANDERSON: Right. So, you got a phone call from your mom, that your father was ill, and you —

STOUT: He'd been sick that weekend and so I was worried about him and then Wednesday night, he came home early from work. He was working 16-hour shifts, and he came home early from work. And for my father to do that, that's like, huge. You know, he never — like I said, he never had a sick day in 17 years. He worked when he was sick, and so he came home and the next morning, I called him and he wasn't going to work, they were going to go back to the doctor, and he said his left arm, he couldn't move his left arm. And I said, "Daddy, I'm really scared." And he said, "Yes, I am, too." And for my father to say he was scared, like, that was so huge.

Then I hung up the phone and I started packing my bags. And I called into the office and I said, "I have to go home." And they said, "Oh, we have to get this briefing out." And I went in to get it out and, you know, it was right before Christmas and I went in to get it out and left at noon. And they said, "Oh, please stay. We need you to do this one other thing." And I said, "No, I've got to go home, I've got to go home." And they couldn't understand. But it was like I knew. And by the time I got home, my father was in a coma and he never came out of it. He died later that evening. And he had leukemia. And he had been examined by the company doctor just the month before. He'd had a physical because he felt bad. And they told him he was just getting old.

And that's why I feel like — many people died after that in his same shop. And, you know, there's all kinds of stuff about — and many of my generation who lived around that plant have immune-system diseases. Several of my friends, all of our parents have died by their fifties and sixties, you know? It's been — it was intense. And, you know, a good friend of mine died of lupus. And I, of course, have MS. Both my sisters have immune-system stuff. My mother died of immune-system disease. That was incredibly awful.

ANDERSON: Has anybody taken that on in that community, in terms of accountability or class action?

STOUT: There was an attempt at one point to do that and then the company sold out and now they're owned by Celanese, and whatever lawsuits were impending were totally lost in that transaction. They just got out from under it, so.

ANDERSON: So how did that change your life, your father's death?

STOUT: Oh, well, I moved home to take care of my mother, because she couldn't manage by herself at that point. I think I taught her a lot about managing by herself.

ANDERSON: Uh-hum. Where were your sisters?

STOUT: They were both married. They both had children, and it was just assumed that I would be the one to take over, I think partly because I was the oldest, partly because I'd always been the caretaker in the family, and I don't think I even questioned it in some ways, except that my mother, who was totally falling apart because my father was her life, and then, you know, for the past, at this point, 25 years, he had taken care of her. And she was just totally falling apart and I said to her, I remember saying to her, like, she's like, "I can't go on. I can't live. I can't live by myself." And I said, "OK. I will move home and take care of you but I can't take care of you emotionally. And you are going to have to pull it together to deal with the emotional piece. I can't take care of you in that way." And she sort of sat up in bed and started making the arrangements for the funeral. She just pulled it together. And um, so –

ANDERSON: How did you even know to ask for that? Had you done –

STOUT: I have no idea. [laugh]

ANDERSON: I mean, had you already done some therapy or some sort of self –

STOUT: I hadn't done any therapy at that time.

ANDERSON: personal growth work in any — I mean, that's very self-protective and –

STOUT: Yeah. I don't know how I knew. But I just knew she was falling apart and I couldn't handle it. I felt like I myself, you know, I'd been through a huge thing with the Klan and felt very vulnerable emotionally and just knew I couldn't take care of her in that way. Um, and yeah.

ANDERSON: So you moved back into the trailer you grew up in.

STOUT: They had just bought a new trailer. It's still single-wide but it was like, 70 feet or something. It was huge in comparison. And it was going to be our first Christmas together at this trailer, new house, and my father was so excited, and of course he didn't get to experience it. So it was a new trailer. And my father had also been saving — my father always, like, all he wanted a piece of land. And he'd been saving money for it and he had, like, \$20,000 saved up.

And I took that money and bought a lot for — at this point, my father was living on this land that these two men — he did some farming but he also ran this little, when he wasn't working, he — they were into antique cars and he made — I think it started out sort of accidentally because my father farmed the land for them and he was really interested in his antique cars, you know. He thought it was the coolest thing. And they were trying to get a piece, a replacement bolt or something, and he went and made it for them. And they sort of said, "Well, could you make this finger for us?" and he made that for them.

And so they set up this whole shop and started shipping stuff out all over the world for antique car parts that my father made, invented the machines to make them. I knew they were probably making a mint.

ANDERSON: And your dad wasn't.

STOUT: Yeah. He was getting paid minimum wage and rent exchange. So when he died, they had quite a business going by then and he had helped them build these machines and all this stuff to make all these antique parts, and they patented a lot of it and, um, so when he died, they came to mother and they said, you know, "You can stay here as long as you want." And I had such a distrust of these folks, you know. I had a lot of distrust of wealthy people at that point. Now, I have a lot of wealthy friends, it's very different, but the people that my parents worked for, I had a lot of distrust for. And so I was really making a plan for us to move and my mother didn't want to move. And I was, like, "I think we have to move." So, it hadn't been three months before they came to her and said she had to move. They had other plans for that property. And it was devastating for my mother. Devastating. But I was actually kind of thrilled because it meant we bought this property, it got me a little closer to Charlotte, where I'd started working, and I had totally expected it the whole time. And to this day, I went back there a couple of years ago, they never did anything with that property after we moved away. Ever.

ANDERSON: So you and your mom are roommates again, and then you begin what's going to become PPP pretty soon.

STOUT: Well, it was so interesting. When I moved back, I never — I just gave up on that idea of organizing, even though I had this intense spiritual calling for it. So, I'm going to interview for jobs and the three places that I can work there in that area where we lived was Fibers Industries, who I really believed killed my dad, and the Food Lion, which is a huge — they're like the biggest southern chain for grocery stores — their headquarters, where there they had lots of job openings. Owned by a Klan member, big supporter of the Klan. The Klan used to meet at the Food Lion. So I didn't want to go to work there. And so the only other place was Man Bus Company. And I go to apply for Man Bus Company and they made — I don't know if you've ever seen those big buses that are double buses with the accordion in the middle, like two buses.

ANDERSON: Oh, long, really long. Not wide. Yes.

STOUT: They're super long. And so, they made that. I mean, it's really funny because we're out in the middle of nowhere, out in the middle of the country, and the closest city is Charlotte, an hour away. And you'd see these big buses driving around and so I went to Man Bus Company and they wanted to do a — I forget what they called it, but it's like a security

check, like an FBI kind of thing. And I had been arrested a couple of times in Charleston for protesting at the Savannah River Nuclear Plant, and also at the White Train, which was a train that carried nuclear weapons through communities that most people didn't know about, so we would protest and bring awareness that nuclear bombs were driving on the train tracks through our communities. And so I knew I wasn't going to pass the security check.

So I called up the AFSC [American Friends Service Committee], the Quaker organization in Greensboro saying, "Why is Man Bus Company doing security checks?" And so we started doing research and we found that they were also the makers of these things to carry nuclear bombs for the MX missile. So that's what they were making in addition to buses. And you had to have high-security clearance to get a job there, even as a secretary. So, I thought, well,

ANDERSON: You don't want that job.

STOUT: I'll go back to being a legal secretary. I'll go to Charlotte. So I'm going to Charlotte, hour drive away. And while I'm there, the AFSC had given me the name of a peace group there in Charlotte. So I called the woman to say, you know, I'm in town, job-hunting at the law offices. So I said, "I'm job hunting, but I wanted to call and find out about your peace group here." And she said, "We don't have any jobs." And I said, "I know, I'm not calling about a job, but I just wanted to find out about the peace group here." And she said, "Well, we don't have any jobs but you might call Carolina Community Project. They're looking for people." And it's really funny. I mean, later, me and this woman became really good friends and she was busy with her kids and she was in the middle of something and it was just — she was being really rude. We laughed about it, years later, but at the same time, she said, "jobs at Carolina Community Project." Well, that sounds interesting.

So I found out where they were, called them from the phone booth, and went to visit. And sure enough, they had three job openings and I applied for an organizing job, which they didn't give me but they asked me to interview for this job for North Carolinians for Effective Citizenship, which was under the auspices of them. And so I applied for this job, and it was voter registration, get-out-the-vote work, in the race against Jesse Helms and Governor Hunt for senator. That was the year. And so that would have been in 1984. So I applied for this job and I got it. It was amazing. And part of what I later learned, how I got it, because there was this lawyer applying for it and this other person applying for it, and when they interviewed me, they asked me all these questions about, "Well, how would you go into a black community? What would be the first thing you would do if you had to go into a black community to organize?" Well, I had all this experience with Miss Clark and so I talked about what I would do and how I'd talk to people and what my experience was.

And it turned out, Si Kahn, well, he was one of the people in it and he had done a concert in Charleston. I actually had tickets for it when my father died, right before Christmas. And when he went down there, these people had asked him to do a special — something for me. So he had heard of me and all these people who were in Charleston were talking about how I'd left and how sad they were and all this stuff, which I didn't have any idea that happened, even, but he had had this whole, like, little ritual concert about me in Charleston. I mean, people had stood up and talked about me and so he had this whole other side of knowing about my work in Charleston, that when I went into the interview, I had no idea. So I got the job with no experience.

ANDERSON: Well, with a lot of experience, just called something different.

STOUT: Right. And so and that's where I started my training as an organizer and it was community organizing, which I loved and I felt so at home with. There was a woman who was the director at Carolina Community Project who was a real working-class woman. And I found my world, you know, my peers, and that's where I first learned about class analysis, but I also felt still really strongly pulled toward the peace and broader picture, and really learned that it had to be combined. And so it was the next year I started Piedmont Peace Project.

ANDERSON: I'm going to have to turn this off because we're out of time.

STOUT: OK.

END TAPE 2

TAPE 3

ANDERSON: So let's talk for a little while more about you starting PPP and your work with the Carolina group, too, and your emerging class analysis. Were you afraid to go back home and start organizing in that region again?

STOUT: It's so interesting, because I think in my conversations with Septima Clark, what I began to realize, I had always said, the only way I'd go home is to fight the Klan. And through knowing her and talking to her, what I began to understand and realize was that the only way to fight the Klan was to create an environment they couldn't exist in, and that I couldn't fight them directly. That wasn't the way to go, and that a lot of people had done that and had spent years in court and, you know, a lot of time, but it really wasn't the way to change things. So I had really become — the philosophy of the way I had to fight the Klan is to work to create a different environment, a world they can't exist in. And so that became sort of my motto.

I was afraid, at some level. I was in a little different area and I had hoped that maybe they wouldn't, um, know to track me as much. But, of course, they did. And actually not only did I get a notice but I had saved pictures of, um, when they had tapped my phone line and had a tape recorder under my house I had found when I lived, before I moved to Charleston. And I had documentation of everything.

And when I went to work at Carolina Community Project and started having some conversations about, a little bit more about, what had happened — I had only told one other person, Ray McLain, and so we began to have some conversations and then I started doing the voter-registration work and one day, Carolina Community Project got broke into, and my office — every file drawer had been opened and stomped. My office was the most attacked. Me and another woman shared the office, and they had just ripped all of the files and everything and that file was gone. All the documentation on the Klan disappeared while I was at the Carolina Community Project.

So anyway, I was scared. But also, really clear I wasn't going to let them stop me in this work. And I also said things over the phone, because I felt like that our phones were tapped a lot of the time. And they were fairly amateur taps so that you could tell when someone was, um, and yet — so anyway, I would say things like, Well, I will never say who the people were, you know. I let them know that I was never going to give their names away, because I think that's what they were afraid of. So I let them know I would never do that. And because I had been threatened for my life and my family's lives so I wouldn't — I wasn't going to go that far.

ANDERSON: So tell me about your vision and their — the origination story of PPP.

4:16

STOUT: Well, I was really clear that I wanted to organize — I mean, I became aware in the peace movement that it was very middle-class white, and I was really clear that if we were going to be successful in changing things, that it had to involve a lot of people who were not middle-class white, college-educated people, and that we needed to be reaching out to these folks. And the peace movement folks, leaders in the peace movement, when I would talk to them about this, said, “Oh, you know, those folks are too busy trying to survive. They’re not interested in these issues. Blah-blah-blah.” So I really did not believe that and when I was doing voter registration, get-out-the-vote work, I became much more clear about how many people weren’t participating in the electoral process. And how, if we could mobilize folks to really participate in the electoral process, we could win. We could change the world, you know? I really believed that. We could create revolution.

And so I became really interested in how to connect all of those things. It was, like, how do I connect, sort of, the peace and broader justice issue, the issue of community organizing, how we survive day to day, as poor people, and how do we mobilize people to have a political voice and power. And so that was what was coming together for me, and you know, the spiritual calling. I sometimes feel like there was a reason I went to Carolina Community Project, because I really began to understand more that, first of all, that I wasn’t the only person out there who was low-income doing this kind of work. But also, that there was a place for building political power and a way to do that through voter regis[tration] — so, I learned a lot in that one year I worked during that election year.

ANDERSON: And why a new organization, versus something housed under the Carolina Community?

STOUT: Well, Piedmont Peace Project — I went to them. My job was over.

ANDERSON: Oh, OK. (both voices)

STOUT: and I went to them and said, “This is what I want to do. I want to start Piedmont Peace Project.” And I said this to this woman, Kathy Howe, who was the director there and to Si Kahn was there and another man named John Wancheck. And I said, “This is what I want to do.” And Si really didn’t believe it would be possible to organize in that area. There’d been a lot of attempts to organize in the rural Piedmont region, from Brown Lung Association, to the Quakers had tried, uh, the textile unions had done a lot of work trying to organize there, and it had just not worked. And so there had been lots of past experience. And so I really believed strongly and even though Si felt like it couldn’t work, said, you know, go for it, but the condition was I had to raise all the money. But Carolina Community Project would be sort of the umbrella for holding the money and that kind of stuff. And in the beginning, I

continued to work half time for Carolina Community Project doing some other stuff, and half time for Piedmont Peace Project. So I got support from them, began to learn how to write a proposal.

This one man — there was a foundation called the Youth Project at the time — Chuck Shuford, he grew up like ten miles from where I grew up, right? and he said, “OK, I don’t believe anything could ever happen there, but I’ll give you \$2000 because anyone who’s willing to try deserves some support,” and gave a small grant.

The other thing that happened that was really fascinating was, um, Peace Development Fund here in Amherst was really interested in the Eighth Congressional district of North Carolina. So in that first year, when I’m sort of thinking about starting Piedmont Peace Project, I get a call from Peace Development Fund in Amherst, Massachusetts. And they are saying, “We have to get rid of the congressman there, Bill Hefner.” And I’m, like, “OK. Why?” You know, I wasn’t as clued in on, like, votes and how people voted at that point in North Carolina. I had been in South Carolina, but I was still new enough to North Carolina not to even know what my own congressman was doing.

Well, it turns out, Bill Hefner, who was the congressman for this area that I was living in and wanting to work in and build Piedmont Peace Project, was the chair of um, well, he was on the committee, the budget for mili — OK, let me think about this. He was on the budget committee for the military spending. And so, he was really key for that reason, and he also was the chair of new military construction subcommittee. And so, he had a zero voting record on peace issues.

And so, folks up here were like, let’s get rid of this guy. Who can we find in the eighth district? So, I’m talking to them in North Carolina, you know, sitting in the middle of my trailer and everything, and how do you get rid of this guy? And I’m, like, I don’t know, but I’m trying to organize here. They were wanting to know, who organizes there? What peace groups are there? I’m, like, I don’t think you understand this area. And it was me. I was the only person. And I was on the Freeze campaign mailing list and that’s how they knew to find me. And so I tell them that I’m wanting to start a peace group and they’re, like, well, write a proposal and send it to us as well. So they gave us a little bit of money, and that’s how we got started.

And the first meeting I had was with a bunch of ministers, because I thought if I could get into the churches and talk to people in churches, that was the way to go. And I’d also met people through doing voter registration, get out the vote, particularly in the African-American community, because that was primarily the communities I worked in with voter registration. And so we began to do just these first little events and things to reach out to people, and to start organizing votes, and did programs in the churches and started bringing people together to do programs.

And it was pretty early on that the Klan started harassing us at our meetings and stuff. But we just went on in spite of the — well, now, it

wasn't early — it wasn't real early on but, because in the beginning, when we were just doing peace-related stuff, they didn't bother us. But when we really started doing voter registration connected to it, and making the connections for people between what the military budget was and why — because that was always the connection that I made, which was not being made in the peace movement in general.

They were really focused on nuclear weapons and we were really the first group in the country to really begin to say — I'll back up. I can't say we were the first group in the country, but the first one that we knew of, and a lot of people had never really thought about this, but we really began saying, "Let's look at the military budget and tell us how much things are going to cost, and we're going to compare that to whatever, housing as the issue, or education as the issue." And we started really making those links. And there may have been other people doing it but not connected with Freeze campaign.

So we were really the first to really sort of push that idea of connecting military budget and stuff. And partly, it was a strategy with Hefner and part of it was a strategy knowing that the way you rejoin the people is to talk about issues they're concerned about, and how do you make those links? And to me, it was always just so logical what the links were. And so there was not any one who just told me, this is what we need to be doing. It was just sort of instinctual, that this is the connections we need to make.

ANDERSON: And how receptive was everybody to your message, particularly the ministers?

STOUT: Well, you know, I called about 120 ministers, and I got about six who were interested. And one in particular who was interested, and we met and we started connecting, and they would let me come into programs in their churches in the beginning, and so it was pretty great. That's how we started. And then we eventually started doing more in actual community organizing, sort of started moving into community organizing but making the links.

So as we began to organize and get people interested, we started — well, what we started is what I called the listening project. We would go into communities and just start saying, "Tell us what you're interested in. What are your concerns? What do you need?" And then, give them information about, well, do you understand how your tax dollars are spent? How do you feel about the fact that 51 cents of your tax dollar goes towards military and only 3 cents goes towards housing, or 7 cents or whatever it was for health care and those kinds of issues. And people had a lot of feelings about that, and even though people were pretty patriotic and we had a military — you know, we were Fort Bragg right in our communities, people had a lot of knowledge, a lot of knowledge about how much money got wasted in the military, and how money was spent and how the actual people in the military were often mistreated or

not given benefits and that kind of thing. So there were a lot of feelings about that, and we began to say, "OK, how do we change this? Let's go talk to our congressman, but we all need to be registered to vote." And so we started that first year, we did voter registration, registered, like, 500 people. And we thought that was huge.

And so, at the same time, I'm learning about being an organizer and I'm going to all these trainings and I leave these trainings going (bumph) I mean, I went to a PDF training on how to fundraise with Ken Klein and I left, going, Oh, I could never fund any of this. And the funniest thing is, they trained organizations, which was really brilliant on their part.

ANDERSON: PDF did.

STOUT: Yeah, and not individuals. So in order to go to their trainings, you had to bring board members and staff and volunteers. Well, I didn't have that when I first went to their training on fundraising, but they let me come because they were so interested in the eighth district.

And so they paired me up with this man who was one of the founders of Peace Development Fund, who was not really a trainer or fundraiser himself, but they had all the trainers paired up with these organizations. And so, I'm telling him my whole situation and he says, "Oh. I don't think you can raise money." [laugh] And he was totally demoralizing. And he wrote a check for \$1000. He was our first major donor. We're now neighbors. And we're now really good friends, and have been friends for years now. It's really fun. But that was my first connection to a wealthy person who was supportive, you know. He was my first major donor. And he's still a donor to the work I do today. So anyway, that was a fun little story, just because I think of him, as right through the woods, as my neighbor. It's so ironic that I now live here, because I would've never believed in a million years that I would have been living in Massachusetts.

So I would go to these trainings and I'd feel totally disempowered. And yet, I don't know, I think there was this piece of it being deeply held inside of me that this is what I needed to be doing and also a stubbornness of, if you tell me I can't do something, I'm going to figure out how to do it. But I also knew that the way I was getting taught wasn't fitting for me and it wasn't fitting for our community. And I kept being aware of this but not quite understanding it.

And one of my trainers and mentors at the time, who was my first trainer at Carolina Community Project, was this incredibly powerful African-American man from Virginia named Ron Charity. And he and I was going to another training together at the Midwest Academy in Chicago, and while we were there, there was a group of African-American people who did a presentation about racism within the Midwest Academy and some of the issues of what it looked like. Because these weren't people who were out racist. They were people

who were working in support of African-American people and they were progressive, left, but they talked about the way people talk, the way the trainings were set up, how the meetings were held.

And everything they said totally fit for my experience. I was, like, this is bizarre because I'm white, you know. So I had this talk with Ron Charity on the way home. Like, "OK, Ron, I don't understand this. I experience every single thing they're saying. What is this about? How can this be racism?" He said, "Well, have you ever heard of classism?" I was like, "No." He said, "Well, what class would you say you're from?" I said, "Oh, I'm middle class." He was, like, "OK." [laugh] You know, because I never — I mean, what else do you say in America? You're middle class whether you're wealthy or whether you're poor. You're middle class. It's the great myth that they've got people to buy into.

And so he starts explaining to me about class, and I still don't quite get it. I mean, I hear it but I don't — and I sort of get it, but I don't get it, you know what I mean?

So in that first year, Cathy Howe, who is the director of Carolina Community Project, and I start having conversations about class, because she's experienced some of the same things and I'm starting to talk about it. And I don't even have language for it, you know.

And she and I had decided we were going to go to Nicaragua. There was a huge movement from peace folks starting to go to Nicaragua and support the revolution there. And so we went for a summer. It was the sixth anniversary of the revolution. And we went with organizers who were actually meeting with organizers of the revolution. We decided not to go with Witness for Peace, because we really wanted to explore with organizers how they'd done it, what had happened. We wanted to learn from them. And I went to Nicaragua and there were all these poor people living in very similar conditions that I'd grown up with: no running water, little tiny houses or even worse conditions than I'd grown up in some cases, and I met this whole crowd of people who were all very clear about their poverty and being poor, and talked about it openly.

I had always tried to hide it and as much as I could, I had tried to pass, you know? I wasn't very good at passing because of the way I talked, but you know, people assumed you had a college education. I never corrected them. If people asked me where I went to college, I'd say Lenoir-Rhyne, because I'd gone there, briefly. And I never told them, you know? So, up until that point, I'd never talked about being poor, and um, growing up in poverty.

And then, in Nicaragua, I had this totally revolutionary personal experience, which was, here are all these poor people who are proud of who they are, and take great pride in who they are, talk openly about being poor, and understand it as a problem with the system, and not anything that is about them. And it totally opened my eyes in a totally different way and I came back with this commitment that I was going to talk about growing up poor and that it was going to change the way I did

organizing and it was going to — you know, I sort of almost had a mission to help people understand that being poor, not having a formal college degree, didn't mean you were dumb, or not able to be a leader or not able to do any of these things. That in fact it was a different way of understanding and knowing.

And I came back with that really changed perspective. It wasn't easy. I still dealt with lots of issues of internalized oppression. I mean, I would say my issue of internalized oppression has always been about feeling stupid, and like, no matter what, I can't feel smart because somehow, I couldn't — you know, that was one of the ways that people treat you. Even in our movement of social change, often. And so it gets reinforced constantly. When I go into meetings even now that are totally academic, I just feel like I'm the stupidest person around and I leave there feeling like, you know, who am I to think I can do anything. And so I fight that even to this day. But it was that pivotal time in Nicaragua that really changed me.

And the other piece that they talked about in Nicaragua was that the work for us, as organizers, was not to come to Nicaragua and work. They appreciated that, but if we really wanted to help them, we needed to go back and build a revolutionary movement in this country, and they acknowledged that that would be the hardest work that could be done, and probably more threatening than even for them in Nicaragua, but that that was what was really going to change their conditions, and the only thing that would. And they were really clear. The U.S. is going to crush us; they're going to crush our revolution. At the time, there was bombing going on. This was the sixth year of revolution. And that they knew they were going to be crushed, and the only hope that they had long-term was for us to go home and organize a revolution in this country.

And so I came back with this idea of something that was needed to be bigger than what Piedmont Peace Project was. That there had to be a broad, connected movement. And I stood on that for many years. I didn't know what to do with it, but I came — you know, I was looking for it. I wanted to join it, you know. I kept waiting for someone to start it, and talked about that, you know, like we need a national movement.

And the peace movement was the strongest movement at that time, and I became very involved at the national level of the peace movement and really tried to push this idea of how do we build a broad movement that's beyond the white middle-class educated people? How do we bring in low-income people and people of color? And there was a lot of resistance to that idea, you know. People would say — I remember doing, um, one of my first presentations in Boston, and it was for the Peace Development Fund. It was a fundraiser for them, and they brought me up to talk about the work. And Meg Gage was the director there and she really got what I was saying, but not many people did. And so she brought me up to speak to this group of folks, and I remember talking about the fact that we would talk to people about

housing and health care and the issues that concerned them and make this link. And someone standing up and saying — this was the number one argument that someone made, you know — it was going to dilute the peace movement if we did this, and besides, no one was going to have houses if we didn't stop nuclear weapons. And that was the argument. And I said, "Yes. And we're never going to win as long as that's all we're talking about. We can't do it."

And so, class analysis became very integrated with the way I started thinking about the work, and how we would do it differently. And I was going to a national conference of the — by this time, it was SANE/Freeze combined. Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, which I had been on the board of, and National Freeze Campaign. And they were going to merge and so, these were the two largest peace organizations in the country at the time.

And so they were going to merge and I was on the transition team, so I was going to DC every month, and really trying to told out this message, which wasn't going too far, and I was going to one of the national conferences and I changed planes, I forget where, but midway, this woman who gets on, I recognized as Randall Forsberg, who is the founder of the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign, and she was going to be a speaker at this. So I wanted to talk to her but I'm too nervous, and I'm afraid to go speak to her and she goes on past my seat, and so I had an empty seat beside me, and after the plane took off, here's this woman saying, "Do you mind if I sit beside you? I don't want to sit that far back in the plane." And it was Randall Forsberg. I mean, talk about fate.

So she sits down beside me and I say to her, I said, "You must be going to the conference." And she says, "Yes." So, we start talking, and I tell her who I am, and I said, "Well, what we need," because she got really interested — and she says to me, one of the things she says to me, is, "Well, I feel it's my job to do this work because low-income people are too busy trying to survive." And I challenged her, and said, "No, you're totally wrong. People totally get this, and if they see how to work on it that makes sense in their lives, they're going to be as active as anyone." And so that was really fascinating to her.

And, I said, "Well, I am really interested in finding — we can't use any of the materials that come out from the Freeze campaigning group. Nothing is usable for our community, and we need materials. We need John to create materials." And she said, "Well, we can't create it. You need to create it. You're the one who's the expert on this." And it had never occurred to me that we could create our own materials, never even occurred to me. And I said, "Whoah."

And she's like, "Write me a proposal. I'll get you some money." So I said, "Are you serious?" She said, "Yeah, give me a call when you get back." So I give her a call, and she said, "OK." She calls me up and says, "Here's the language you have to use." And she gives me all this language, and I try to write this proposal. I can't write it. And I cannot

use her language at all. And I call her again. She helps me, because she's trying to help me get this grant, right, so we can do this process of creating our own materials.

And so finally, I write the grant, the proposal, in my own words, and I say, "Here's how we're doing the work, and here's how it's exactly what you're trying to say but we don't use this language." I said, "I can't use this language and if we even use this language in our community, no one would understand us." And I said, "I know we're probably not going to get you know, the grant, but I can't do it." And they gave us the money. And in fact, she later had me come on as an advisor to her organization about how to make their materials more accessible.

But we started developing our own educational materials that linked military spending to these other things and, um, one of the fun things that happened, we did this through getting all the community people to help work on it, because it had to reflect them, and later, people said, "Have you ever heard of Paulo Freire? And have you ever read his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*? Because this is exactly what you're doing." and I said, "No. I never heard." And I picked up *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and I could not read it for anything. I mean, talk about academic language. I later eventually read it in a reading group with people like PDF, where, you know, I could get more understanding of it. But at the time, it was like, what are you talking about? [laugh]

So we started asking people to help write the materials and if they couldn't read and write, we said, "Great, because you can make sure the picture is telling the story." And we spent months developing this whole series of materials and fliers, which are in the library and I have copies of them. But it was just such an empowering process that got people involved and people loved seeing these fliers. And it helped us grow by leaps and bounds, because people would actually go out and organize with these fliers, and we later learned that the, what do you call the folks who go door to door? Canvassers. That the same Freeze canvassers were canvassing in this wealthy community in California, and they quit using their materials and started using our fliers, and were much more successful using our fliers, written by low-income people, most of who could not read or write. The average learning level in our district was third grade for adults. They were more successful using our materials than they were using their materials that were written by these experts.

So that was another real lesson to me about low-income people have a gift to give to the movement, if people would just wake up and realize it, you know, that there's an innate understanding and knowledge and wisdom that, if it could be shared, would be so important. And so, um, that became another, just another piece in this whole puzzle of, around the class stuff.

And then, going back to — I mean, there's so many streams of stories about Piedmont Peace Project. One is the political power piece. That first year we registered 500 people. We began to say to folks, we

then developed out of that, a handful of organizers, like 100 organizers, I mean, or volunteer organizers. And so, the next year we said, "We're going to get out a thousand people to register and then get them out to vote."

And Ron Charity, who's a brilliant trainer, had taught me that if you register people to vote, probably only 10-20 percent of them are actually going to go vote in the constituencies that we have, unless you make one personal contact about, for get out the vote. And then you can raise that number to, like, 40 percent. If you make two personal contacts, you can raise that number to, like, 60-70 percent. And if you make three personal contacts and give them a ride, you can get it up to 70, 80, 90 percent. And so that became our philosophy. We were going to make three contacts and we were going to provide rides.

So that second year, we got out over a thousand people. By the next year, we said to our hundred volunteers, which we had trained them to get out ten people each. That was the job. We trained them how to do — you're going to go and you're going to find ten people in your block to register to vote, and your job is to make sure we get three contacts. And we're going to have different ways to do it. It won't all be you, but to make sure that they have a ride to the polls and they're going, and on election day, you're going to call them, you're going to pick them up, you're going to — whatever needs to happen to make sure they vote.

So we made sure that our thousand people, within 99 percent, all voted. And the next year, we said to this 100 volunteers, OK, this year, you're going to get a hundred people out to vote. And people were, like, "You are out of your mind, right?" And we said, "And here's how you're going to do it. You're going to go find your ten people that you've built this relationship with, and you're going to train them, and we're going to teach you how to train them. This year, we're going to train you how to train them. And you're going to train them how to get a hundred people out. I mean, ten people each."

Well, of course, not everybody did it, but we eventually, within five years, registered 44,000 people to vote. And in our targeted precincts, we were getting out 95-100 percent of people to vote. And we had the highest percentage of African-American people registered to vote in the South, in North Carolina, and we had the highest percentage of turnout among the African-American community, which was mostly our target constituency.

And as a result of that, as we were starting to learn to lobby, I would go to lobbying workshops. This was another one. It was like, this is how you lobby. Forget it. We'll never do this. I mean, everyplace — speaker's workshops, fundraising workshops, lobbying workshops — all these things is like, I'd leave there going, this will never work.

But we developed our own lobbying techniques and we would have different groups meet with Congressman Hefner to — and we would always make these links about what he had spoken on. He'd say, you know, there aren't — and we'd never use real numbers. That was the

number one thing they teach in lobbying workshop. You always use the real number. You always talk about — we said, “No, we’re not doing that. It didn’t fit for who we were.” We’d go and tell personal stories. You know, “This is what’s happening in my community. This is what’s happening with my daughter. I can’t get health care. And here’s the health care bill that you voted, you know, and here’s the money for it. You know, here’s where the money is.” And we would make this kind of connections. And Hefner really responded to that. Plus, we never let him forget that we registered and got more people out to vote than he would win by in any election, because he was a conservative Democrat.

And so we became really clear. I mean, I’ll never forget, in one of the elections, it was a close, close, close race, and it looked like Hefner was going to lose. And I think if it hadn’t been close, we probably wouldn’t have had as much ammunition with him, but we were totally nonpartisan, but he knew our constituency. So we got a call after midnight at my house from his campaign, saying, you know, “We’re losing the election but all of these counties are paper ballots and we just wonder what y’all did in those counties?” And we said, “Oh, well, we turned out 6000 in that community. Here we turned out 2000 in this community. We turned out 1000 in that community.” And he won. He won the election after they counted the paper ballot votes, which were mostly our constituency.

And so he knew he owed us. He didn’t particularly like us, but we showed up. We also, because we’re country people, right, you know, we’re rural country people. Everybody knew him. They knew where he went to church. They knew where he went when he was home on the weekends. We knew we could always find him at the Creamery, because that was a good place to politic, and people would stand in lines in the summertime, waiting to get into the Creamery to buy ice cream. We knew that he had Shoneys with his advisors on Saturday mornings, and we would see if — depending on where it was, we would send a minister who would wear his collar even though he never wore his collar any other time, and thank him for a particular vote. We always thanked him in public.

And we’d do things like we went to DC on a really important particular vote and we got to him ahead of time and he said, “I can’t vote this way. I have to vote,” you know, he was saying. And we said, “Well, we’re going to be standing off in the balcony thing,” whatever it was called, and we said, “we’re going to be having a little prayer meeting that you will vote your conscience, that’s what’s really right for your constituency,” because he was very religious. And we stood up there as they were voting, and he gets up to speak and he looks and we’re all praying [laugh] and we had some serious prayer people, too, in our group. And so he didn’t vote the right way, but they had a revote, and he voted the right way then. And we felt like he’d made a deal, he’d made some kind of deal. But the very next time that there was a vote, he voted the right way.

And so, we changed his voting record from 0 percent on peace issues to 83 percent, and from 30 percent on social justice issues to 98 percent. And I really know that we did that because we had the power. We built the base of power that he had to respond to.

But we also lobbied really effectively, and I'll just tell this little side story real quick. We probably have to end soon. I was up here in Concord, Massachusetts, for a visit with some donors and some friends, and it was a whole group of women, and because one of the women and I had the same birthday, we would always celebrate our birthday together. And so, it was on our birthday and we're having a lunch in one of the women's houses, and they were talking about, "Tell us how you've been effective lobbying, because we — how were you able to do it?" Because they'd all gone to all these lobbying workshops. Well, I said, "OK. We threw out all the rules. We don't follow any of those rules at the lobbying workshops." And these are all wealthy, college-educated women, right? Most of them are wealthy, or upper middle class. And I said, "Here's how we do it."

And they said, "Well, would you do a workshop for us?" And so we set up a four-day training and I called it "Lobbying from the Heart." And I came up and I said, "The first thing is, all the rules of lobbying that you've learned, we're going to throw out the window, and we're going to learn to lobby from our heart." And we started — I started doing these workshops and we did role plays and we did all this stuff. These women were so excited. I mean people, they were giggling and they were laughing, and they were so empowered, and they had felt so burdened by this way that they had to lobby, that it tore — I mean, it changed for them, it opened up this whole new window.

And that's when I first started getting a clue that this is not just about class. This is about gender and women's way of doing things as well, and I had never understood that. I had always had seen — I mean, I had always looked at things through class, because that's sort of my first level of experience. But then I started doing more workshops, speakers workshops, and fundraising workshops called "Fundraising from the Heart," "Speaking from the Heart," where we basically said, "What are the rules? Let's throw them out, and only after we've learned to do this from a real heart place that's really natural to who we are — because it wasn't one consistent recipe, it's like, look into your heart, does it have meaning to you? And how would you frame it from that place? And then let's look over here at the rules and see if any of them makes sense to us now. If they don't, leave them lay. If they do, we can bring them back in to make use of them."

So it became, I think that was the place where I really began to see that these women who were here in the North, who I thought totally had it all together, were really disempowered, totally disempowered, around some of the ways this work was being presented, or being taught.

Maybe we should stop. I think we went over.

ANDERSON: Is that OK?

STOUT: Yes.

ANDERSON: OK. So we'll pick up the rest of these threads tomorrow.

STOUT: Yeah.

END TAPE 3

TAPE 4

ANDERSON: It's now July 20th and back at Linda Stout's house, and we're going to first finish our conversation we started yesterday about PPP and we talked about the class analysis that led to a lot of your vision and the work that you did and we talked about creating the power base that you did. So, there's probably a couple of other threads we could pick up. One that I'm interested in is the process and the way in which PPP did its work, including your volunteers, your staff, what kind of ideology you brought to the table, and the process there. Do you want to start with that? Or is there another –

STOUT: Sure. I'll start and then –

ANDERSON: thread you want to pick up.

STOUT: If there's other things I'm leaving out that you think of, coach me [laugh] or, you know, just ask me about it.

ANDERSON: OK.

STOUT: You know, it's interesting, I think, between starting PPP. I was really clear about what did not work for me in organizations. And so, I started Piedmont Peace Project and this has sort of become a philosophy in my life of work, is very wide open without a clue of what it should look like, but really clear that we were going to figure it out. And so, knowing that we had to create a different kind of model that would work for us as low-income people, and so um, the idea that we should try different things and experiment, and so we sort of came up with this philosophy that said, we can't make a mistake. The only mistake is when you give up. And that if you do something and it doesn't work, that's just another message of that we need to do it differently and what can we learn from that. So we sort of had this evaluation process as part of everything we did, and also sort of trying to counter, sort of, the internalized oppression messages that, you know, where you thought everything you did was wrong, you were so worried about making mistakes. And so I would teach staff and the organizers and volunteers that we don't make mistakes, and there's no such thing as a mistake at the Piedmont Peace Project. Everything that we do is — is another, is just learning how to do it differently if we need to do it differently. Until we figure out what works, because we don't have a model to go by.

And people really embraced that philosophy, and if I ever got into a place where I was feeling like I did something wrong, staff or other people would remind me of that philosophy. So it became really ingrained as part of how we thought about our work.

Then, we also really began to think about how did we overcome internalized oppression. How did we deal with community in a diverse

way, because it was also something that none of us really had any experience with, that most of us had grown up in very segregated communities, in school and even once schools were integrated, it was still very segregated within the school system itself. And so, um, we had no experience of working together. And so we really worked to try to figure out how do we build community, and we made this commitment that half our time was working on that and half our time was doing the political work. And when we started saying that, we really got challenged by more seasoned organizers who were advising me and trainers who would come in –

ANDERSON: What about your funders? Did they also –

STOUT: Absolutely, at first.

ANDERSON: because they never want to fund any infrastructure capacity-building anything.

STOUT: Right. Exactly. And so, we really said, and we didn't always tell funders that as much, until a little — I mean, we did begin to, because we did talk to funders about how we did things, um, differently, and so we were really working to build community and build our own understanding of how to work together, and the interesting thing was, one of the challenges we got was people said, "You're not going to be able to accomplish your political goals if you do this, if you spend so much time in process." And I do understand where that was coming from, because I've been in organizations that are so process-oriented that they never get anything done.

But, somehow, we found a balance that was, like, because of the process we did, the work we did went so much more successfully and smoother and quicker. And there were about three new organizations or four new organizations that started right around the same time that were connected to Carolina Community Project, and we were the only ones that had this sort of philosophy and were really challenged about it. And in the end, we became by far the most powerful, most successful, most effective organization in the state at the time. And I really believe it was because of that. And that had we not done those things, other things would've broke down.

ANDERSON: Can you give me some examples of what that process looked like? What kind of things, conversations you were having, or things that got hashed out?

STOUT: Well, we did — at every — it was at staff level more than volunteer level. At staff level, we would do one staff retreat, one week-long staff retreat every year that was just about community building, about working together, about our whole — our process and our philosophy.

And then we'd do another one that was much more about work plans and our plan for the following year. And we did that every year. At the board level, we spent a lot of time working on issues that were, um, things like doing issues around internalized oppression, issues around religion, um, because we were primarily, our board was primarily Christian. A lot of fundamentalist Christians. And we wanted to bring that diversity in. We had that diversity much more on staff than was reflected in our membership. And we would work on things like that.

And every membership conference that we did every year, half of the day was devoted towards those kinds of things, toward looking at issues of racism and classism. We did a lot of looking at classism. But we looked at it in this very positive frame. We called it "finding our voices" training, and what it meant to find our voices. We talked about that a lot — which was part of finding our power, and that's how we defined it — and then, the other half, we focused on, you know, we either did workshops on how to run for political office, you know, like for the school board, or for, you know, and several of our members went on from that workshop to run for office and win, often unseating Klan members, which caused a lot of harassment and threatening, etc.

ANDERSON: How did the gender oppression or sexism fit into looking at classism and racism? Was that also a focus?

STOUT: Yeah. Can we pause one second?

ANDERSON: Yeah...OK, I was just asking about sexism and gender oppression and how that fit in.

STOUT: Yeah. It actually was an interesting thing. I mean, we did try to talk about it a lot, particularly because, you know, the men would make jokes and that kind of stuff, and it became a major issue around the, um, gay-lesbian stuff, that we had to actually take on and deal with in a major way. But one of the things we found that was really interesting is that when people who grow up low-income, and there's so much internalized oppression, that the traditional ways that we had learned to talk about oppression, which was um, sort of, power and privilege, is having power and privilege, if you're in this other category, uh, the non-oppressed category, was really almost impossible frame of trying to look at it.

If, for example, you were a low-income African-American man, and we're trying to talk to them about sexism, and we define sexism in the traditional way, which I define in my book, that I really have now begun to question — not the definition, I totally believe in the definition of, you know, prejudice plus power and privilege, I totally believe in that — but I don't believe it's an effective frame to teach people with, because what I found was, um, so you're talking to a low-income African-American man who is oppressed through racism or oppressed

through class, and you're trying to tell him he has power and privilege as a man? It's like, it doesn't cut it. So I learned actually to question a lot of the way we were trying to talk about it in the traditional ways, that I felt didn't work. And I think it's still a place where I struggle trying to figure out how do you talk about that difference, that power and privilege in a way that people can get without feeling attacked or feeling like, what are you talking about? I don't feel powerful. I mean, like, these wealthy white women in the Northeast that I do a lot of work with. They didn't feel powerful, even though from a class perspective –

ANDERSON: Right, and race perspective.

STOUT: and race perspective, they should. But if you start talking to them about having power and privilege, it's like, it didn't connect. It doesn't connect, if you're in an oppressed place. So we really began to try to struggle with how to talk about that in a different way, and um, I'm not sure we ever quite figured it out in an effective way. I mean, we did — I'll tell the story about the piece around homophobia because there were a lot of jokes being made, and of course, unknown to a lot of our membership was that probably more than half the staff of PPP were lesbian, almost all of us were, and um, but as traditional in the rural South, none of us were out. None of us were out for our families. Some of our families knew but they didn't know, you know? It's like, they sort of knew, you know, like, when I finally came out to my mother many years after I'd been a lesbian, um, she said, "Oh, I always knew you didn't like boys." That was her thing. And so I think a lot of our families kind of knew but they sort of — it was something you never discussed.

And it was dangerous to discuss, or to be out. I mean, it was — you know, it wasn't just a political choice, it was life-threatening, and I know when I had lived up here for a year and been out, because that was my thing, when I moved to Boston for a year, I said, I'm going to be totally out, and um, when I came back home, it was really hard to kind of push myself back into the closet. And my friends, my other lesbian friends, were saying, "You are endangering yourself but you're also endangering us by doing this." And so, it's a totally different reality, and so, but then we had this problem where all of our members — not all, but a lot of our members — would make little, you know, cracks, homophobic jokes, and stuff, to the point that we had a meeting as a staff and said, "We have to do something about this. We have to stop this. We are not about building an organization that is going to, you know, be oppressive to one group of people, and not only for our own personal reasons as being lesbians, but because we didn't want to build in our organization where that was allowed."

And so we started talking about wanting to take that on. And knowing how controversial, how threatening it would be to people. And so we brought in, you know, folks like Si Kahn and other organizers to

advise us, and help us think about it. And the primary advice was, you can't push this on people. So it was very much a Saul Alinsky model, among most of the organizers, which is you are not supposed to direct the grassroots folks, you know. You're supposed to take their lead. And I think that rule was sort of ingrained in a lot of people for a very good reason, because if you're a white, middle-class male coming into a low-income community, that makes a lot of sense, that you don't try to impose your viewpoints.

But we were from the community and we were building our own organization, and we were leaders in our community, and we were really clear that we did not agree with that. And we actually talked about it. I know we had one woman who was a consultant working with us, and she said, "Are you willing to destroy Piedmont Peace Project?" And we thought about it and we said, "Yeah. We are willing to do that and start over, and build the kind of organization that is about equality and love for everyone, because this is not what we have in mind." And so, we knew that we weren't — it was actually that big of a threat, that other, more seasoned organizers thought that it could be the destruction of Piedmont Peace Project. And so we went into this whole idea of doing this knowing that.

And so we began with small conversations, with small groups of people going around and talking to folks, saying, "Here's something we've noticed and it's a problem."

ANDERSON: Without outing yourselves?

STOUT: Without —

ANDERSON: Kind of abstract —?

STOUT: But throughout the whole period of time, we worked with this woman named Pat Callair, who is an amazing African-American woman from South Carolina who um — just to tell a little story about her life, she lived in a low-income African-American community and she heard about these sit-ins, right, that were happening in the town. And her parents had really, you know, she was maybe, like, twelve years old or something, I don't quite know how old, but around that, and her mother and father had totally protected them and they were never allowed to go near any of those protests or anything, and she and her little brother decided to go to the sit-ins, and snuck away, and went to sit-ins and they were the only little kids sitting in, and you know, and of course, they got caught. But she became an activist organizer and she became a therapist. And she would go back and forth. She'd be an organizer for a while and then she'd be a therapist for a while.

And so we actually got her to work with us as sort of our therapist-trainer, because she was a really good organizational therapist. And we brought her in to actually — once we'd had all these conversations with

folks, which was really challenging and really difficult, and some people who it was so uncomfortable with. This was primarily our board members. And then she facilitated the board meeting. And she was someone that people had loved and she'd done a lot of training for us around the racism stuff, and um, she came out. Because it was safer for her, because she lived in Raleigh and she had to drive. She lived in a town where it was much safer and she came out to our group. And that was really huge, you know, because — but I remember we had this all-day board meeting at the end of all these conversations, and two — and what we wanted out of it was to add into our mission statement that we were welcoming of all people and we talked about race, religion, all of these things, and sexual preference.

Well, the first round was, we we'll let people come in but we don't need to talk about it. That was what some of the women were saying. There were two men who were so adamant about it. They started using Bible quotes. They were like, this is, you know, we cannot do this. And they threatened to take — most of the board members represented a chapter. So each chapter had a person come in. They threatened to take their organization away, or their chapter away, which usually represented a whole county's worth of work, and this was a huge area of work that we had done and they were saying, "We will pull out of Piedmont Peace Project."

And so, people kept having the conversation. And finally, came to some agreement that, yes, we would put this in our mission statement. And everyone agreed to it except these two men, and they pulled out their chapters the following week. And within, I would say, less than a month, people from those chapters started calling us up and saying, "Can we start a new chapter?" And so we lost those men but we didn't lose the people. We built a stronger organization than in the beginning.

But then, the next thing that happened was so amazing. We had the next board meeting and the two new women came from these chapters and another chapter as well, and they had questions about it. So they raised the question like, "Well, what does this mean? Does this mean we have to go to those marches?" And, you know, I said, "No, I don't think you have to go to a Pride march." Which we never had marches around us anyway! [laugh] I mean, there was never a march around us! But there was one, like, in Charlotte and one in Raleigh, so people had seen it on TV, right? "Do we have to go to those marches?" And we said, "No." And people had a discussion about it and said, "No, it wouldn't mean that."

And this elderly man, Richard Brown, from Kannapolis, very religious, had a really hard time with the conversation, just didn't want to be a part of it, said, "Well, but what if someone was killed or hurt because they were homosexual. Then would we need to go out and march?" And it was — people thought about it. I mean, really stopped the conversation and thought about it. And we said, "Yeah. We would have to go. That's what it means. We would have to go, be there, if

someone got hurt.” Oh, my God. It was the most powerful thing. And — it makes me cry. So, we had really moved people in a big way. And people really began to see it as the — I mean, I think part of the conversation was, these are human people. These are people who we care about. If we’re going to be open and build a different kind of world. And um, so.

ANDERSON: Did you feel like it was risky in terms of outing you and the staff, just even having the conversation, that people would start to say, “Well, why should we bother? There’s none among us.” Or start looking for —

STOUT: No one said that. You know, it was interesting, like one of the women who had chaired our board, we knew her son was gay. It was never discussed. And we knew another woman had a family member who was gay. So everyone probably knew about someone who was in their church or someone — you know, so no one actually said that. I think we did worry a little bit, like, how would we respond if people asked. Would we, if we were challenged, would we come out? We weren’t sure. We didn’t know.

ANDERSON: How hard was that for you? To be leading this organization and to be in the closet?

STOUT: It didn’t even feel unusual. I mean, it didn’t feel unusual until after I’d lived here a year totally out, because I was out among my friends. I was out among staff. I was out — you know, there were certain arenas you could be totally out and others that you just — you knew you just didn’t do that kind of thing, you know, that it wasn’t safe.

ANDERSON: So to digress from PPP just for a little bit: let’s just stay with this topic for a few minutes. What kind of lesbian community was there, or did you find at this time, in that region? How did you guys socialize? Where did you hang out or find one another?

STOUT: Well, we socialized with each other usually in homes and, you know, a lot of the lesbians we knew became part of Piedmont Peace Project, and others didn’t, but we would hang out with them, and we knew people at the gym. I mean, there were just different little groupings of people that you knew and you hung out with. Sometimes when I was younger, I would go to the lesbian bars in Charlotte. It was an hour and a half drive away, you know, um — or gay bars, and uh, and you tended to be out, too. We often hung out with gay men. I mean, it was a mixture, a lot more, there, too, because you found each other. And you always could — you know, you have major radar back there because you had to. You had to know, and you just knew, and um, and you had these different networks of people.

ANDERSON: Can you talk a little bit about coming to know that you were lesbian or gay or how you came to use that language about yourself and your coming out process, both to yourself –

STOUT: I knew that I liked, yeah, I knew I liked women very early on. And I think I said my first love was in eighth grade. And in high school, I never tried to follow on it. I never tried to do anything about it. I hung out with groups of people. I never dated men, ever, or boys. I just never did. And so I just didn't date. So I hung out with groups. I had best girlfriends, and then, right after I got out of college, so I would've been, like, 19 or 20, I met a woman who I really fell in love with but she — I mean, I really believe that she was lesbian but she could not move on it. And then it was not until I went to Charleston that I really started, like, knowing it, but still didn't really — I really connected with the gay community –

ANDERSON: In Charleston?

STOUT: Yeah. And actually, before Charleston. I was going to gay bars in North Carolina and, but I was too — I don't know. I didn't meet the perfect woman and I didn't — I just didn't move on it. I would go to gay bars, I danced, I had a lot of gay friends. And in Charleston was when I really met someone that I knew, and we would've probably had a longer term relationship had I not moved right at that time. It was right before I moved. We were just starting to kind of date and stuff.

And then when I moved home, my life was so encompassed with taking care of my mother and all of that stuff. But I mean, I had kissed a woman in Charleston, I had, you know, I knew enough to define myself as a lesbian, but not really having acted on it. And that didn't happen until I actually moved to Boston for a year, and started dating women, and I had also had met this woman at Piedmont, through Piedmont Peace Project, right before I came here that we sort of stayed in touch and then when I went back home, we got together.

So, I started being much more, uh, connecting with women, or acting on my being a lesbian. And I know I went home during that year that I was here in Boston, here being Massachusetts, of course, um, and I said, "I'm bringing this friend home with me, this woman home with me." And she said, "Oh, great. That's great." I said, "Well, but I don't think you quite understand." I said, "You know, we sleep together." She said, "That's fine, that's fine, that's OK," because she was saying she would make sure there was a place for her to sleep. And I said, "No, we sleep together." And she said, "Oh, good, OK, fine." And I said, "I'm not sure you understand, Momma. We are lovers." She's like, "Oh, great, that's fine."

OK. So I'm hanging up the phone and I'm like, I'm just in a stew. I was just, like, a basket case. So finally, that afternoon, I call her back and I'm like, "Mother, you didn't have anything to say about what I just

told you?” She said, “Oh, I’ve always known that. You’ve never liked boys.” And I’m, like, “Oh.” I said, “You mean you knew about Dorothy Gray?” She says, “Dorothy Gray? You were only in the eighth grade!” [laugh]

So, my mother was so easy. I mean, she was always very progressive, beyond — I mean, she had this odd mixture of being very religious but extremely progressive, and totally open to everything I did and everything I did was fine.

ANDERSON: But it wasn’t so easy with the rest of your family, was it?

STOUT: Oh, no, no. I mean, I don’t go to family reunions. I’m not really out to my mother’s family but if I was, oh, my God. I mean, two of my uncles are Klan members, you know, so.

ANDERSON: Yeah. And your sisters — it’s a problem with one of them, right?

STOUT: Yeah, with one of them, because she’s Jehovah Witness, you know, which is odd because it’s a total —that’s not how I knew and experienced her when we lived in — she came and lived in Charleston with me for quite a while, was part of the Quaker meeting, you know. She was also raised Quaker. She married this guy who was Quaker, raised Quaker, and she, through me, met my gay friends, and I remembered the first time that she had met these folks who actually came down and visited from North Carolina, and after they left, I found her crying and crying. She’s, like, how could people be so homophobic — you know, she didn’t use that word, she didn’t know the word, but how could people treat folks like this. It was, like, her own awareness about gay people. Of course, I went out to her. But at the time, she was, like, so open to it.

But later, she became Jehovah Witness. And I really believe that connects back to her need to be held close, to be in community that really says, “You’ll be in this community and with this family forever and ever and ever.” And I feel like that partly comes out of her own — she had a lot of that, sort of, desperate need of holding onto people really tightly, and closely, and when she was in that relationship, no one else existed, you know? And so, I think that had to do with her own separation at birth. That’s my –

ANDERSON: Yeah.

STOUT: psychological opinion [laugh].

ANDERSON: So how did being a lesbian inform your politics, as an activist? What role has it played, if any?

STOUT: That's such a good question. I mean, it's hard to discern, because I think it's everything about how I think about things, who I am, how I understood. I mean, I feel like it's not that — in some ways, I was closeted, yes, but other ways, I was very clear about who I was. The class stuff had a whole different, I mean, I took on so much shame and stuff around poverty more than I did around being a lesbian. I don't think I had to deal with the same — and partly I think that's because I think I came up right as the women's movement was happening and even though I wasn't a part of it, I was influenced by it. So I think a lot of the way I think and the way I approach things had to do with me being lesbian, you know, I don't always know how to separate it.

ANDERSON: Well, for example, were you every attracted to any of the lesbian feminist kind of groups or organizations or movements?

STOUT: I didn't know any —

ANDERSON: Once you came north to Boston for the year, did that (both voices)

STOUT: Of course. Yeah, I mean, once I came north, I became very much, you know, I came out immediately and I connected with folks. So yeah, in that way. But in North Carolina, I don't know. I think it gave me another viewpoint into the world, and it gave me another level of understanding about oppression and fear, even though maybe I didn't consciously think of it at the time that much.

ANDERSON: Were you reading or did you have access to any of the feminist literature, newspapers, any of the writers, none of that?

STOUT: No. I was totally isolated. I mean, you have to understand, we lived in an area where — the newspapers we got were owned by the textile mills, very conservative, very, uh, one view. We didn't even get NPR where I lived, you know.

ANDERSON: And at PPP, did you seek out that kind of literature, like you sought out class-analysis stuff, or —?

STOUT: We did in the beginning. I think it was later that, you know, with people like, Pat Clair who came in, who opened our eyes to more of that kind of stuff and began to have conversations among each other about our own, you know, as being lesbians. Because at first, we wouldn't even be out to each other, you know, because we weren't sure about — we had our own little communities, but we weren't sure about each other enough to even come out to each other at first. And for some of the women at PPP, they had not come out even to themselves until they came to PPP, which provided this safe space, and place for them to come out to.

ANDERSON: Did you find the lesbian community, even though that's a very big umbrella term, a comfortable place as a person from a poor background? Did you find the same kind of classism within lesbian circles?

STOUT: Not as much, and maybe because I sought out more working-class lesbian circles, you know, which is interesting because that was a different experience for my partner, who went into a much more middle-class, political group where she felt a lot of class oppression, or different kinds of oppression, because she wasn't quite educated enough or aware enough of issues. But I didn't have that experience and I did connect with a lot of working-class lesbians.

ANDERSON: And how was the peace movement in a larger way for gay and lesbians? In terms of issues, in terms of feeling comfortable, outside of just the organization?

STOUT: You know, I think for the most part, it was pretty accepted. Um, I feel like there was almost more sexism. There was huge sexism issues in the peace movement, that I was aware of, more than — and it wasn't couched in your trad[itional] — you know, it was like these were people who were politically left and yet it was always the white men who were taking leadership, and I remember when we had a vote as a board and there were, like, 50 people on the board because you had a representative from every state, that said, we were going to require at least 50 percent of the board being women and other leadership be women, and men were freaking out. I mean, we thought that was such as easy thing, and it was just — we did barely pass it.

ANDERSON: What were their arguments?

STOUT: Well, it's just like, you know, whoever's the leader in that organization should come, be here and, you know, we're not sexist and this is not — but William Sloan Coffin was the president at the time, and as we were having this argument, he starts pacing up and down the room, and he's going, "I can't believe this. I am so ashamed of being male right now." He would come out with these comments, and as the vote's going on, he's like, "I'm so embarrassed. I just can't believe we're even having to have this argument." [laugh] You know, he would just make these very dramatic, "Oh, my God, I can't believe this is being said." He would say this to me as an argument against this vote [laugh]. And I really believed the reason we won was because several men abstained from the vote rather than voting against it, and I think he shamed them into doing it. I really give him credit for that vote to pass, as he was walking along, going, "Oh my." If you knew this man, he's so funny and dramatic and he's an amazing, wonderful man. [laugh]

- ANDERSON: So the peace movement, you would say, generally was a comfortable place to be female and lesbian, even though it wasn't always on the agenda.
- STOUT: Yeah, I think it was. I think people were pretty open and accepting of sexual preference.
- ANDERSON: And what do you think the movement made of PPP? Did they think of you guys as this sort of maverick organization because you were trying to make it local and national and include people of color at the table?
- STOUT: Yeah. Some people loved us and adored us. Other people could not stand us. I know when SANE/Freeze was having their national conference in Atlanta, and you could bring folks but only, you know, you only got two representatives to vote, and we had pushed through this ruling at the board level, the national level, that because we were trying to bring in diversity, that any group who had — I forget how it worked, but it was something like, if you brought a person of color, you could have an extra vote and I think if you brought a low-income person, you could have an extra vote. Like there were all these categories. You could get an extra vote as an organization. And of course, Piedmont Peace Project had all that.
- Well, we took 17 people to this conference at the Peach Tree Sheraton or Hyatt or some fancy hotel, and we had this huge stack of reading material that we had to have, know about all the issues that were going to get voted on. Well, a lot of our folks couldn't read or write. So, we taught them, I mean, we read these things aloud, all the way on the trip, so everybody was totally briefed. And we had worked for weeks ahead of time setting up, making crafts and all this stuff that we were going to sell to pay for our trip, and we stayed, like, in three hotel rooms, and we — my mother went along, and she was the cook. And we turned one of the bathrooms into a kitchen. We took, you know, an electric frying pan, a crock pot, and all this stuff, and we cooked these huge meals every day in the bathroom, and one of our organizers, the one male organizer on staff was like, "Oh, my God, we're going to get caught. We're going to get thrown out. Oh, my God. We're going to get thrown out."
- Well, several of our folks were domestic workers and a couple had worked in hotels themselves and one day, I walk into the room and there's, like, four or five of the maids who worked for this hotel sitting around with some of our folks, drinking scuppernong wine. And they started sneaking us up, like, all these little treats from the kitchen and little jelly jars and stuff. They actually totally supported us and helped us. It was very funny.
- But anyway, we went to this conference and we had tried to push — this was where the main issues of the organization, of the national organization, that they were going to focus on, would be chosen for the

following year. And there were, like, ten presented, and I had put one in that was, cut military spending, fund human needs, and it didn't come out on the list to vote on. Well, there was a way you could add something to vote on with this certain number of signatures. So, we went with that agenda.

The other thing that was going to happen was that there was a name vote, because at this point, it was the combined Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy and the Freeze Campaign and they needed a name. And they had sent out this briefing ahead of time about they had done these focus groups about names. And I don't remember what all the names were, but one of the names was Peace Works. And they wrote a little caveat underneath it that said people did not like this name because it reminds them of piece workers, mill workers. Well, oh, my God. When we read this at a board meeting ahead of time, people went ballistic. And they were, like, What does that mean? They think piece workers are bad? What are they talking about? And so, we talked about what we could do to protest this. Not the name — we didn't mind the name — but the idea that they would say that this was a bad name because of this reason. And so, we're talking about it, we're all furious, and — because even those of us who weren't piece workers, which is what you get called in the mill, is how you define your job, had been at one time. I mean, everybody had worked in the mill at one point or another.

And so, finally, one of the women who had probably worked all her life in the mill, she's an older woman, said, "What if we wear buttons?" and so we decided that we were going to make up these buttons and they said, "Piece Workers — P-i-e-c-e — for Peace." And we took these buttons and we sold them at the thing. I mean, we made a lot of money selling these buttons and we wore these buttons all the time, saying "Piece Workers for Peace."

We were the only group there that really had a representation of African-American people. I mean, out of the 17 people, I think maybe 4 of us were white.

ANDERSON: Would you say this is the early 80s?

STOUT: This was, uh, probably the late 80s, probably about four or five years into our organization, so, yeah, late 80s. And so here we are at this national peace thing and, you know, some people just want to hang around us because they're so fascinated by us. You know, we had a prayer meeting in our room every morning before we went out, oh my goodness. And we had a gospel choir, you know, and so we sang a lot. People really loved that.

So when it actually came time to do the vote on what the issues were, we got enough signatures from people, and our members were relentless. I mean, they were with little clipboards everywhere getting people to sign, right? And we commit people to sign, and there's, like, I don't know how many people, maybe a thousand people there, maybe

not that many, I'm not a good judge of numbers, but so each issue got to have one person for and one person against the issue that was going to get voted on. And so we were going to do this speech and you had to get to the microphone ahead of time, so we had people who planned to go stake out the microphone ahead of time so we would have a space, and to speak in support of this, cut military spending, fund human needs.

And the big issues that were the hot issues was, something about cut the MX missile might have been one, I forget what the other — but they had to do with weapons systems. And I worked and worked writing this speech and I got everyone in the group to help me so that it was a joint speech. And so, and by this time, we had a few allies, like, five or six allies, who were mostly from the Boston area who knew us and came down to visit and stuff, who were, like, we're going to, you know, be with you on this, we're going to totally — can we stand with you? Can we sit at your tables? Can we, you know, all this kind of stuff.

But before that happened, there was going to be discussion about it. And the way they set it up was that each table was going to have one person as a facilitator — they had assigned facilitators — to discuss the different issues. So we didn't know that was going to happen, so they tell us that this is going to happen. There's going to be discussion for and against ahead of time. And we're sitting there, there's two big tables of us, and with us and our allies, right, probably 25 people at this point, and we're sitting there and we're, like, we don't need to discuss these things. We've discussed it in and out and all around, and so Miss Cannon, Corrine Cannon, who was the chair of our board and the first black woman that ever worked at Cannon Mills, very powerful, powerful woman who, instead of getting black people to start drinking in the white-only water fountains and bathrooms, she convinced white people to come and start drinking out of the colored-only bathrooms and water fountains. She's a great organizer. She goes, "Well, why don't we just all spread out and each person go to a different table and argue our points?"

I forget how it was, but I think you had, like, a hundred points and you could put so many points on each one. And we were really clear that instead of spreading out our points, maybe it was only ten points, actually, that we were going to put all our points in this one thing, which was a way, the only way in the South that if you wanted to ever elect a black person, if you had four county commissioners running and there was one, or five county commissioners and you had three votes, you had to put all three votes on that black person in order to get him to win. And so, it was a strategy that we knew. So we say, "Let's put all our points on this one thing that we want to have be the priority for the work. And let's convince everyone else at all these tables to do it." This was Corrine Cannon's idea, so we all spread out. We were all making this argument.

And at Miss Cannon's table, one of the people said to her, "You know, that's not right. That's unfair. That's cheating." And she said, "Honey, when the system's unfair, you learn to cheat."

And so then there were the speeches, and when I went to make my speech, I said, "You know, I'm not speaking for just myself. I'm speaking for the whole Piedmont Peace Project group and our allies," and they all stood with me. It was so powerful. I think it's probably one of the most brilliant speeches I've ever made in my life. That really said, you know, if we vote for weapons systems, they're just going to bring another weapons system, and if we're ever going to win, if we're ever going to win, we are going to have to figure out how to build a broad movement. And the only way we can do that is to connect it to issues that poor people and people of color care about. And here's a way we can win on these peace issues. And if you really want the a frieze campaign, you really want to get rid of the nuclear weapons, then we need a lot more numbers than what the white middle-class educated peace movement have. And here's how we can do it. And we're all standing together, and we got, like, the standing ovation.

But then, some really nasty speeches against what we were doing. And you know, William Sloan Coffin, my hero, stood up and said, "Just look around this room. Tell me, where the people of color are in this room? And why aren't we listening?" And so, it was this very powerful moment, and we did win, and pushed the national organization.

Now, like many things you win, where there's a leadership that's not interested, they immediately took the second issue that won second, and made that the priority, and this became a secondary, and then they never talked to us about how they might do it. And so they never — they didn't know how to do it. They didn't know how to make that a focus. Later, I'd say two or three years down the road, it not only became the major issue but it became, like, the popular thing in the peace movement, and I really feel like had we not done that, it wouldn't have happened. But after that first year when they said, we got the first mailing that went out to all people about — and they said, "OK, the number one issue is this, and then this is the secondary issue." And we tried to work with them to work on it and after a year, we pulled out of the National Peace Organization, and said, "We can't be a part of it."

And so, we just — you know, we felt so betrayed. After all that work, after getting the majority of the people to vote for it, they still didn't — the leadership took it a different direction, and so at that point, it was like, they're not listening to grassroots. There's no real process here. And we pulled out, and I got off the board. I got off the national board. But, I mean, I do believe that, you know, now, it's a very popular thing to say, you know, connect the issues. And I think we just sort of led in that that way.

ANDERSON:
END TAPE 4

Yeah. I think that might be a good place to pause and stop this tape.

TAPE 5

ANDERSON: So, in the interest of time, let's move on. Why don't we just start by talking about how it is that you came north?

STOUT: You know, after I was up here and wrote the book, we had — I was really looking at how do we build a movement. You know, we had — I think that I mentioned before — had really been looking for a movement to come along that we could be a part of and feeling like the peace movement wasn't it. And not really feeling a place to connect in at a national level and knowing from the peace movement how important it was to have, like, these different issues that we could connect to, have a way of being part of something bigger than ourselves. It became even more critical to find that. And we started actively searching and couldn't — there wasn't anything to connect with.

So, I became really interested in how to connect with that and how do we build a movement and, you know, that's what the last chapter of my book focuses on. And how to do it from a vision place, you know, about what it is we're trying to build and really pull us there from all these different issues. I've always had this intense belief that we had to link the issues and interconnect them and it didn't mean that groups wouldn't continue to work on those issues, but to see how they were linked and how to build powerfully. And I think that's particularly critical to low-income people, that you can't focus on just one issue, and so that became sort of my goal.

And I came back for a year to Piedmont Peace Project and really was looking at how do we build something different. And for various reasons, I think, some of the hard things that having been the leader and then coming back into an organization where there's supposed to be other leadership, lots of issues about people afraid, like, oh, if you're going to raise money and take off in a different direction — so there was some tension there.

And I was really trying to figure out what it was, how I was going to do this? What it would look like? Was I going to go work with lots of organizations? I didn't know. And I got a call from Peace Development Fund saying, "We're looking for an executive director, and we're wondering if you'd be interested." I said, "No, no, no way I'm interested." I didn't want to work for a foundation of all things. And I did really admire Peace Development Fund's training program that they did around the country, and I kept getting calls, you know.

You know, my friend over here called me and staff were calling me, board members were calling me and our donors were starting to call me, saying, "We think you should take this job." And I said, "Well, you know, the truth is, I'm really interested in building revolutionary movement in this country. That's what I want to do." And several of the people said, "Well, come and talk about that. Come over here and talk

about that. We'll pay your way. It's not going to cost you anything. Come and talk to us, because PDF is really at a crossroads. We're really looking for direction, and maybe, maybe we'll be in the same place." Certainly, the staff were really keen on having this conversation about revolutionary movement.

And I often — for a lot of people, I always couched it a peaceful revolutionary movement, because some people automatically think revolution means —

ANDERSON: Arms.

STOUT: arms and, you know, or nonviolent revolutionary movement. And so I decided I would come up here and talk to folks and just be as outrageous about what my mission was as I could possibly be. Because I didn't want to come to a place that wasn't going to embrace my vision. The other piece of it was that I had very early on realized that fundraising was going to be critical to building any kind of movement, and I'd actually had these conversations with this man, Jed Horne, who's the city editor of the *Times Picayune* in New Orleans, who I believed — because I believe that if we were going to build a movement, we needed our own progressive newspaper, but not something like *The Nation*, which is this total academic, inaccessible thing to most people, but something like *USA Today*.

ANDERSON: Right. For the left.

STOUT: For the left. And I remember talking to him about how much money — it's going to cost ten million dollars just to actually set up the possibility of having this, you know, in a weekly version. And I was, like, OK, that's not, you know. So I figured out that for my 25-year vision, we'd need to have a billion dollars. And I started doing these scenarios of how we would raise a billion dollars, and like, I know at one point, I figured out that if I could get every AFL-CIO member to donate an extra five dollars a year, five dollars a year for 25 years, that was going to be 1 billion, 144 million, you know, something like that, you know, over a 25-year period. And I would do all these different little scenarios. I was, like, OK, all right, we know African-American people are on our side. What if one out of every ten adults — and I would look up the statistics, right, of the population census, and I'd go, if you could get one out of every ten adults to give a dollar a week, you know, I had all these different images, but had no idea how to make it happen.

So I thought, OK, what if part of my job at Peace Development Fund is to figure out how to raise a billion dollars? And so I came and of course, I get here, and the first thing I find out is that there's this huge deficit, and that Peace Development Fund is in huge trouble. And so I decide to, you know, my first year or to is like — and staff salaries had

been cut and all their benefits had been cut. And so, I thought, my first role is to get this organization up and healthy. I have to do that. And that took me a year or two.

And then I felt like I had energy to really focus on these next two areas. So, the one area was, how do we build a movement? And the other piece that I was very excited about coming to Peace Development Fund was it was going to give me access to see the landscape throughout the country, and see all the organizations out there and how to access into other areas, the open doors that I wouldn't have otherwise. And so, there was sort of two tracks that I took this vision on at Peace Development Fund, and not everyone agreed with me, I should say. There was dissension among the board about my vision.

ANDERSON: The board hired you.

STOUT: But they hired me. And part of that was there was evidently unanimous consent among the staff to hire me, that there was really huge support among the staff, and, who I think had a more progressive vision than the organization had then at that point.

And so we had two tracks. The first track was how are we going to start talking about movement building and find out what is needed? And the second track was, how are we going to raise the money to really make this happen? So I went to the board with a proposal around the money side, saying, "OK. Here's my proposal. I'm going to go out and raise a million dollars extra." That was about our whole budget, so I'm talking about doubling our budget. "I'm going to go out and raise a million dollars from donors, and this will be over and above what their regular gift is — we won't ask for it unless they'll give over and above their regular gift — to build the capacity for us to figure out how to raise two million dollars next year." Five million dollars in five years. Ten million dollars in ten years.

And I actually was thinking billion but I knew — I'd already learned that to say a million dollars extra was a big jump for people and people were, like, freaked out by it. When I first came and I would say things like, "I'm going to raise enough money to bring back our benefits and to get us out of the deficit" and there were some people, board members, who would say, "Don't say that, because you're just setting people up for disappointment." And it's, like, what? I remember, I said to one board member, "Why did you hire me? If you didn't think I could do this, why did you hire me?" And of course, I did do it. You know, I went out and did it.

So, I presented this proposal saying, "We'll raise an extra million dollars and part of what it will include is building our capacity, whether that's staffing, training, know[ledge] — you know, how we're going to raise more money. And the selling point of this is going to be to donors, that as we learn this — because we don't know how to do it at this

point, and no one that we know of in the movement knows how to do it — we're not going to keep it just for Peace Development Fund. We're going to start training other groups how to do it from what we learned.

But we need this money to hire the kind of consultants. And the way we described it, and one of the women who I was training to be in development, came up with this great imagery, Dana Gillette, she said, "Well, here's how we should describe it. We know how to build a house, you know, like, we know how to fundraise like someone knows how to build a house. We know the blueprints. We have the tools, we have the training. We know how to build. But what we need is a skyscraper, and it takes a different kind of tools. It takes a different kind of blueprint. It takes a different knowledge that we don't have, and that's what we have to do."

I went and I talked to, like, folks who did the development work at Mass. General Hospital. You know, like who were used to raising millions and millions and millions of dollars. This was the kind of people that I wanted to, like, learn from. So the board said, "Sure. This is a great idea. Do it."

Well, the first conference call about six weeks later, I said, "OK. I've got \$350,000 committed for this." Everyone went, "Uh, wait a minute. Who said you could do this? Why are we doing this? What is this for?" I was, like, "Am I in the *Twilight Zone*? What's happening here?" And I-I talked to the treasurer later, and I said, "Well, everybody — I mean, I can go back and show you in the minutes. This was unanimously approved." He said, "Yeah, but no really believed you would do it." I was like, OK, how do I handle this? So I started to pull back and the board said, "No, no. It's good. Go ahead and raise the money." So I raised the million dollars.

And at the first board meeting, we went forth with the proposal that said, "We need to do a feasibility study." That's what we learned. And a feasibility study costs about \$25,000. And a board member said, "That's enough money to put an organizer in the field for a whole year. We can't spend that kind of money on a study." And I said, "We were talking about putting hundreds of organizers in the field every year." And so they talked about it and talked about it and said, "Well, we don't believe we should be spending this kind of money on capacity building unless we are giving money for other organiza — for our grassroots folks to be doing this same kind of thing. And we feel that half of the money should go to them." And I said, "Well, that's not what we promised board members, but I will go out and raise more money to do capacity building from the grassroots." And I went out and raised a half a million dollars for that within a — I don't know, three months or something. And I came back.

We could never get the board to agree to any step in the process of doing this capacity-building plan. And I decided to resign — oh, so there was whole another piece that was happening simultaneously, but it

was the two pieces that I decided to resign and leave Piedmont Peace Project — I mean, Peace Development Fund, I'm sorry — that I had decided to leave Peace Development Fund.

But just to finish this piece of the story up was, at the last board meeting, I said to the board, "I just need to know what comes into your mind when I say the word capacity building." And one person said, "Oh, well, I think about deficit." OK. And another person said, "Yeah, and you know, we're the board and when there's a deficit, we could lose our house." And then this other woman goes, "Well, you know, when you get too much money, you know, it makes you feel powerful and that's destructive." And I'm going, "Oh, my god. This is all about internalized oppression. This is all internalized oppression."

And then, there was one man who was a man who came from wealth, who had run a foundation. He was on the board and I thought, OK, I'm really interested in hearing what he says then. And he said, "Well, you know, the Funding Exchange tried to raise five million dollars for a" — what do you call it when it's just sitting there?

ANDERSON: An endowment?

STOUT: An endowment. "They tried to raise a \$5 million endowment and they only raised half of it, so what makes you think we can do this?" and I said, "Well, you know, in my mind, it's like, first of all, we're not asking for an endowment. I got the million dollars because it was an investment in building a huge, you know, long-term" — people, donors saw it as this long-term investment of raising more money, and figuring out ways to raise more money for grassroots in particular.

And, but I realized that this was sort of the same thing that happened at PPP in that last year I was there, that the issues of money and power and getting too strong and success was huge barriers in our movement, in building a movement. I mean, I feel like there was almost this, um, comfortableness of being victims in a little bit of way. There's certainly internalized oppression at play. There's also this whole huge thing about fear of power, because we've seen power as bad, we've seen the negative ramifications, so we're afraid to be powerful in a different way.

And in the end, so there was this whole analysis that came out of that experience. It also really freaked me out. I mean, I felt like I totally betrayed all of these donors that I had raised this million dollars from. Some people were really close friends. And it made it harder for me to fundraise at this point, because I felt like I'd betrayed these folks.

But the other tract that was going on simultaneously was this whole piece of how do we build a movement. And so we went to grassroots throughout the country. We did what we called "The Listening Project," which is based on what we did at Piedmont Peace Project.

ANDERSON: I heard you present on that at NNG, that's what it was.

STOUT: Yeah. Oh, OK, oh, absolutely. And so, we did this national Listening Project where we asked the activists, “Do we have a movement? Do we need a movement? And if so, what’s it going to take to build” — and we called it a broad-based, transformative movement that will change the world. We had to take out the word revolutionary because it hit buttons for people that we didn’t want hit, you know, that it made them immediately go to armed, you know, violent revolution. So we took that out and said transformative movement.

And here there were several things that arose out of that. One was that people really began to say, “We don’t have a vision of what it is we’re trying to build. How do we have a movement without a vision?” You know, Mart — the civil rights movement had a vision, and we don’t have the similar kind of vision other than the individual issue-oriented visions. And, how are we going to build a broad base of people to join us when all they hear us talk about is what we are against. Well, this totally was in alignment with my idea that we had to have a vision. And so I totally, like, “Oh, my god. This is such affirmation for what I believe.”

The second theme that came out of it was, we don’t know how to build organizations that are really consistent with our values. That we tend to recreate the same dysfunctional things in society that we’re trying to fight in our organizations. They are racist and sexist and –

ANDERSON: And underpaid and –

STOUT: classist and underpaid and overworked and burnout and all of these things that are totally against our values. And, you know, it was interesting because when we started asking a question like, well, how would it look different? What would it need to be? I remember this one woman saying, “You know, we are products of our society. We don’t know how to do it differently. We don’t have models. We’re just repeating what we know in our organizations even though it’s not consistent with our spirit and heart.”

Which was so eye-opening for me, because it was so true. I mean, and I had the background experience of Piedmont Peace Project where we said, none of these models work for us so let’s try creating a model that’s just what we know. And it was, like, by giving ourselves that permission, we were able to create something really amazing and powerful. But I felt like there’s a way that, especially people who are more educated — the more educated, the more college, the more you become ingrained in these societal ways of things have to be done this way. It’s almost a detriment in some ways.

And then, the third thing people talked about, which didn’t actually get published in the Listening Project report because it was very hard to actually put words to and get a handle on it, because it was talked about

in so many different ways, and it was what I refer to as “spirit,” which to me, is not about spirituality or some one being, but it’s about our values, our heart, and, for some people, it is about spiritual practice. But people talked about what brought them into this movement in the first place, into this work in the first place. And for some people, it was religious values, spiritual values. For some people it was this deep-held belief in humankind and in the earth.

So it came from all different places, but people were talking about the fact that our organizations did not, and our workplaces did not allow space for that to be present. And yet that’s what fed us, that’s what brought us into the movement, it was our inspiration. And yet it was often very disconnected from our work. And for some people, they felt like that had that over here and their work over here and it never met.

For some people, they felt that they were losing it by coming into the work, and there was no really clear ideas about how to do it differently, because people really clearly acknowledged we’re all so diverse. It’s not like the Christian right where there’s all one religion. We are all different viewpoints and religious and non-religious. And so, how in a diverse community do you ever bring that forward without it hurting other people? If I bring my Jewishness forward or if I bring my Christianity forward or my atheism forward or my Buddhism or my wicca, how do I do that and so, I don’t want to hurt you, you know? You’re Christian, I’m Jewish. I don’t want to step on your toes. We’re in the same organization, there’s no way to do it. That was the sort of idea.

And yet, people were hungry, hungry for it, and saying, “You know, I thought about leaving the movement because of it.” I’ve had friends who left the movement. There are a lot of people who have left the movement, who didn’t feel like they could be their full selves.

So, after discussions about these viewpoints at Peace Development Fund, it was clear that Peace Development Fund couldn’t be the place to work on it. And so we started talking to some of the groups, saying, “Well, what if we gave you funding to continue to try to figure this out, to have these conversations?” because many people said, “I’ve never got to talk about this before. Like movement building, we maybe talk about it with a few people at work once in a while but we never have time to focus on it, and never get to talk with other people about it. We never have these conversations.” And people were feeling like it was incredibly valuable. So we said, “What if we fund you to continue these conversations?” And people said, “It’ll not happen. You know, Peace Development Fund needs to do it. Someone needs to make it happen. We need to have these conversations. And we need to figure out these different tools and different ways of doing things.”

And so, due to the money thing and this conversation, I had a different spiritual calling at this point to say, “OK. I need to quit work and figure how to answer these questions.” And I’d sort of given up on

the money idea, like, raising money is not the issue, because if we can feel powerful and have a vision, the money'll come. I really believe that. I learned that at Peace Development Fund. When I held out a vision, the money came. I could raise the money. That wasn't the issue. The issue was, we needed to figure out what the vision was. What the vision was and what tools we needed to be able to create. So that became the vision for Spirit in Action.

ANDERSON: How long were you at PDF?

STOUT: Four years. I gave them six months' notice of leaving. And I left them in really good shape. I felt proud of that. With cushion and a million dollars of capacity-building funding, and I felt really good that I was — and I'd only committed three years, so I felt really good about my stepping away. And I came home to my partner Angela and I said, "I've decided to leave Peace Development Fund and I'm going to start a new organization and I have no idea where the money's going to come from." And we were building this house. And she said, "Well, can we at least live in our house for two or three months before we have to get rid of it?" [laugh] Because Angela's commitment in our partnership was, um, that she committed herself to supporting me in the vision that she shares, and that she's not a political activist in the same way, she's not an organizer, but that she would do everything to support my work. And if that meant getting into a camper, traveling all over the country, she would be the driver. So that was her commitment.

ANDERSON: Your support person, yeah.

STOUT: So, here she is, saying, "Well, could we at least live in our new house for three months before we lose our job?" [laugh]

ANDERSON: How did you end up staying there that long with the kind of undermining board that was in place when you got there? Did you end up replacing some of the board members? Or was it really that difficult a working relationship the whole time through?

STOUT: It was very challenging. I brought new board members on who were supportive but couldn't deal and left. It was very dysfunctional and challenging and I feel hard that this might be public, but it's true. And I think the other — the executive director that followed me, felt the same way. He was an amazing man and he left after three or four years for the same reasons. And um, yeah. So, it was hard. I had a lot of great staff support, and some board members' support, so, um, I just kept thinking I could change it.

I do remember going to this meeting with some people who I think are some of the greatest organizers, activists, trainers in the country —

Tracy Gary, Kim Klein, Si Kahn — and I remember saying, “Do any of you know any models of the national board that works? And they all said, “No.” I mean, I think we all have had experience with local boards that worked really well, but they didn’t know any national boards. I’ve since heard of some other boards that have worked, but for the most part, people said, “No, it’s really problematic.” And here’s a corporate model that is imposed on nonprofit organizations.

So when I started Spirit in Action, it was, like, OK, let’s throw everything out the window, even the board structure. Let’s figure out how to build something totally different, and we’re going to build something that’s about answering these questions. I had no clue as to how I was going to start. Luckily, I had a few wealthy friends who said, “We’ll give you the money to start something and try to figure it out. We’ll make it to your commitment.”

So we started Spirit in Action. I started Spirit in Action. The first thing I did was a few retreats with — we did one of women leaders and we did one of — we called them the elder visionaries, you know, people like Starhawk and Fran Peavey and George Lakey and people that I really knew had been in the movement for a long time, who I felt really had a spirit connection, heart connection, that they hadn’t lost. And we all sat around in this room for a whole weekend talking about, well, how do we start to address this issue of spirit? How do we think about vision?

And so again there were sort of two tracks that came out of what we were doing. One was this track of how do you connect spirit and build community among diverse groups of people in a positive visionary way. And what I realized out of the retreats that we did was that people would just get to a place of really building community with each other, really beginning to trust each other, and it was time to leave, you know, just as we were ready to get to the juicy, juicy stuff.

So, I had heard about — I was doing a lot reading and a lot of research — I don’t remember where I’d read about this — I took one whole summer — that’s when I read the *World Split Open* and read a lot of books and stuff, and really just took time to think. And one of the things that I had heard about were these democracy circles in Denmark, back at the turn of the century, which — you’re a historian. I would’ve loved to figure out how to get more information about this, because I just heard the story about it and it influenced me so much but I don’t have a lot of research on it.

But in Denmark at the turn of the century, they had — last century — these democracy circles where people would come together to talk about how they wanted the government to be, how they wanted to be a part of — and they had all this community — and I read that at one point, like, 80 percent of the population of Denmark were a part of these circles. I started thinking, wow, you know, what if we could bring circles together to really figure this out?

29: 30

And then I learned — because Miles Horton is also, was a hero of mine and I had read that he had gone to Denmark and that was his model for coming back and starting Highlander Center — then I later learned that the whole circles thing, a lot of it came from some of that and from a Native American tribe in this region, in the Northeast region.

So I started thinking, OK. This makes a lot of sense, because the way we used to organize at Piedmont Peace Project was, we talked about kitchen-table organizing. You know, you did these little groups in homes all the time. And that's how I learned to do fundraising. I called it the Tupperware Party model.

So I thought, well, what if we could do this around these issues? And we decided to try to start some pilot circles. And we did six pilot circles around the country, and we found organizer- trainer-facilitators who had experience in doing that, but really were looking for a different way of doing things, that were sort of questioning things in the same way that I was questioning things.

So we brought these folks together. Some people questioning more than others — and the other piece is, I heard Carolyn Cushing, who had done a lot of participatory research projects. She'd worked at Peace Development Fund and I knew her. And I knew also — I always say that one of the good things — the best skill I have as an executive director is that I know what I don't know, and I know what I'm not good at, and I'm always hiring people to help. You know, I'm not a details kind of person. I'm good at seeing the big forest but not always all the trees that need to be there to make the forest. And so, I brought her in to be a part of this team and help me research.

And we went to several trainings of groups that I thought could be useful and helpful to us, one being the Public Conversations Project in Boston. And so we started this series of six circles and the job of the facilitator — and we paid the facilitators to run it. Because part of their job was to report back what was working, what wasn't, and we were experimenting with a lot of different models, a lot of different things, bringing together stuff from Joanna Macy from Public Conversations Project, from the Nonviolent Communications Project. All these different pieces of tools that are out there, but how do we bring them together really to figure this out?

And what we didn't really have tools for was the spirit piece. So, we were really experimenting with that. And we set up a model where we said, OK, we have to build diverse circles. That's the number one key, and not only diverse race, gender, although we weren't, I mean, we had some all-women circles. We sort of didn't push the gender issue as much, and we had more women than men, but we were really pushing around race, class, and spiritual or non-spiritual practice. At first, it was going to be just for organizers, and then we got really challenged by other people who said, "Look. I've left the movement, and I left the movement because it didn't have these things. I think my voice needs to

be in there if you're going to try to build a movement." And that made a lot of sense.

And so we started bringing these folks together, and we set up a — the first thing we said is, OK, the way we're going to do the spirit side, to start, is we're going to ask each person to take a turn in the circle leading or closing, with their spiritual or non-spiritual, whatever it is that they want to do that brings their heart and grounds them in this work, and to share that with people. So everybody got a chance to do that.

And then we said, um, we need to begin to have discussions about what we can do collectively that we can all agree to, and maybe that's different in different regions and different groups. So, you know, for some, we could build an altar together. And some said, "The work altar doesn't work for us. We're going to call it a sharing table." You know, great. Um, singing. We offered lots of ideas: poetry, reading quotes, doing art together, dancing together, doing silent meditation together, all of those things. Plus, we would share who we personally are each coming from, our experiences.

And we developed this very powerful exercise that we use now, where we actually start in a circle and ask people to call spirit in them in the way that they experience spirit. And so, someone might call the four directions and someone might say a prayer to God, and someone might sing a song or read a poem and someone might call for a period of silence. And that we just ask everyone to be present. And we start a lot of our big meetings that way, in particular. You can do it shorter or you can do it longer, and we start most of our meetings that way now, where, you know, one person may say, I just want us to each say one kind thing to the person next to us. You know, so you don't have to have a spiritual practice.

And so, by the second year, we did circles — we realized that in order to have the diversity of race that we wanted, we needed diverse teams of facilitators. So the second year, we trained 27 facilitators and ran 12 circles around the country, from Kentucky to Philadelphia to Seattle and San Francisco and the Cape.

ANDERSON: And do organizers or organizations pay a fee for you guys doing this kind of training?

STOUT: We raise all the money —

ANDERSON: You raise all the money to do this.

STOUT: to hold, and pay the facilitators. And the facilitators would report on the Web, to each other, what they've learned in each one and report to us, and we were constantly talking to them. So, for instance, one of the things we ran into, was we did this vision exercise for my book and

people bringing into — when people would start to do vision, they hit this huge wall of despair and hopelessness. Not everyone, but if two or three people — it hit it. It just ran rampant through the whole room. It was, like, contagious. Too bad the visionary piece wasn't more contagious, but hopelessness and despair were outrageously contagious.

And so by the time this happened in three groups, by the time San Francisco was ready to do this, we were saying, OK, we've run into a problem, and here's what's been happening when people start to do visioning. So the facilitator stands up in front of the group and says to the circle, "Here's what's been happening when we try to do visioning. This whole issue has been coming up. How could we approach it differently?" And every participant knew that this was all an experiment and they were part of an experiment.

And this one woman said, "Well, what if we thought about things, little things that we're hopeful about? And that it could grow into something big in 25 years? What would that look like?" And that became a fundamental exercise within Spirit in Action called "Seeds of Hope" that we do this piece before we go into the vision.

And then we developed — we adapted a Joanna Macy exercise that says, Here's how to deal with — if you feel like your circle has a lot of hopelessness and despair, before you even do visioning exercise, do this exercise around hope. That this is something that you need to pay attention to. So we adapted as we went along, right?

And the other thing that we were doing simultaneous to the circle work, which was extremely exciting, the other message that came out of the Listening Project was, we need to figure out ways to get our messages in the media, that we don't have — we're not getting our stories out there so even, you know, it's not just about not having a vision. It's like, even the things that are happening aren't getting in the media. Our stories are not getting told.

Well, I have to back up to tell this story a little bit, because when I was at Piedmont Peace Project, we won the Peace Development Fund's National Grassroots Peace Award one year. And we get a call about that, it's, like, \$10,000, which is a huge amount of money to us, at the time, and with that came a media consultant who was going to do a two-week media campaign with us. And I said, "Can we have the money instead? Because our newspapers are all run by the mills and, you know, it's not going to work to do a media campaign here in rural North Carolina." And thank God for the wisdom of Meg Gage at Peace Development Fund. She said, "No."

So this woman came to be our media consultant, Jane Walley, and she didn't have a clue what she was coming into. I mean, she calls me up and she says, "You know, don't worry. I'll just take a bus from the airport." I'm like, "No, I don't think so." And she said, "Well, don't worry about me getting around while I'm there. If you could give me a bicycle." I said, "You know, me and the other organizer, we joke about

the fact that we lived on the same road two hours apart, which is true.” She’s, like, Oh. So, we’re going, who is this woman? [laugh]

And so she comes — did I say her name? Her name is Jane Walley. And she did this media campaign. And all of a sudden, instead of seeing these very negative stories, which is all we’d ever seen in the media, we had all these, like, positive front-page stories. And I became so turned on to the power of how to use the media, because what she was so smart about is — reporters are out there looking for stories. If you frame it in the right way, if you know how to frame it, if you know how to do the kind of tricks, if you know how the media works, you can get your stories in the media.

And out of that experience, we ended up raising money and hiring her to work for Piedmont Peace Project for all the rest of the years that we were there, which was, like, five or six years maybe. And we became — we had a multimedia strategy. We had a media strategy for how to reach youngers. We had a media strategy for building our membership base and affecting our issues and winning. And it was things like, where do you want to be seen in the media? Well, *Ms.* magazine? No way. None of our folks read *Ms.* magazine. You know, you can’t even buy it in the local stores here. You have to go to Charlotte to buy *Ms.* magazine. *The Nation*? Nobody reads that. I can’t even read it, you know, it’s so academic. We want to be in *Family Circle* and *Reader’s Digest* and that’s what we went after, and that’s what we did.

And so she was brilliant about media. And we became this incredible team of her learning about class and we made some big mistakes and we learned about how to really work with grassroots folks about ownership of the story, about how to have a voice in the media, and we began to develop real training about how to do media with working-class, low-income people in ways that they didn’t get disempowered. And when things didn’t work right, you know, which happened to us a couple of times.

And so we just learned from our mistakes and she was fabulous, you know, and we still do work together today. She’s going to work with us for Spirit in Action. We did a project together at Peace Development Fund. So I became very in tune to media stuff and the power of media.

And just to say a couple more things and then I’ll go back to this piece of Spirit in Action. One of the things we started doing was learning how to be the experts, so that media called us instead of other people. And that was a whole different strategy than getting your name in the paper. It had nothing to do with getting your name in the paper. And it was a whole different strategy, technique, organizing piece of work that we did, and we began to really impact how media was covering issues in North Carolina. We had a state-wide strategy. And we began to really see how we impacted stories.

And all of a sudden, you know, when the budget came out in the state, it would be where, um, they would always talk to a local professor at the university about what the impact of it was. They started coming up to us to say, “What is the impact of this budget going to be on people in North Carolina?” you know, and so we became the experts.

When the business reporter at *The News and Observer* in Raleigh was going to do a story on NAFTA, when the NAFTA vote was happening — he came to us and said, “I can’t use your name, but would you be willing to help me find out how NAFTA’s going to impact people in North Carolina?”

Well, we’d trained people in NAFTA. We’d had whole conversations. We knew all about it, because it was affecting our plant closings, and we had connected our workers with *machiladora* workers in Mexico. And so, when the business reporter of the *Raleigh News and Observer* came, he talked to these all folks who really knew how NAFTA was going to impact their lives. And it was, like, the front-page Sunday page of the business section. And one of our organizers said to him, “Why did you choose to call Piedmont Peace Project, of all things, a business reporter?” you know? And he said, “Well, because when I put in NAFTA” — and I forget what else — “and job loss, Piedmont Peace Project’s name showed up 17 times. And we have these databases and it came up number one as being” — so we became the experts.

The other thing that happened was that year that, between Piedmont Peace Project and the Peace Development Fund, I was doing training and working with a small group of folks who were so impacted by this chemical plant that every single person was sick and many, many of the families had lost family members and children to horrible diseases, because of the environmental impact in this community.

And we were going to do a media campaign around it. Well, it was in this little corner of West Virginia and none of the reporters were willing to come out to this long, you know, two hours from the city in West Virginia. We couldn’t get anyone to agree to come. And so Jane, in her brilliance, said, “Well, if we could make this a bigger story, if we could make it a national story or an international story, then we could get the coverage we want. And so let’s figure out how we can to that.” So we called organizations in Louisiana along Cancer Alley, and we said, “Look. You’re fighting the same chemical plant.” We called an organization fighting the same chemical plant in Louisiana and said, “Would you be willing to do a simultaneous press conference and we will fly one of your — we’ll put someone down there and we’ll help you do your press release and everything.” And they were, like, “Sure. We’d love to do that.”

And then we called people in Bhopal, India, and said, “OK, your community is being destroyed by this same chemical company and here’s what’s happening in our community, and would you do a simultaneous press conference?” And they said, “Absolutely. We’ll do a

prayer vigil and press conference.” And so we had these three stories and all of a sudden, it’s an international story. We not only got all of these folks coming, we got it into *The New York Times*, we got NPR, we got CNN and all the state people had to come to this little tiny community.

So I became really clear that if we could get really smart about media, and at the same time we did the Listening Project, Sally Covington came out with the report from the — what was that, the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy or something like that? I don’t remember exactly. I have it in my office. But she’d done a report on how the right had been successful.

ANDERSON: Oh, multi-year funding and capacity building and all –

STOUT: And all that stuff.

ANDERSON: I remember that. Yeah.

STOUT: So as people were in the Listening Project were saying, “If we could build a way to get out messages out, this would be really important.” So I thought this was another purpose for Spirit in Action. And so I called up, like, ten or twelve people I knew and got ten or twelve more names, all the folks who were like Jane Walley. They weren’t the reporters but they were the folks working with grassroots to get the messages out, either through PR camp[aigins] — doing, you know, PR consulting, or in some cases, there were media staff people in national organizations that usually only national could afford a full-time person, so communications directors and people who did training for grassroots on how to do media, like the Spin Academy out of San Francisco.

And so I started calling these folks and saying, “Let’s come together and figure out how we can work together to make sure the messages are heard in a much more powerful way.” Because my experience in West Virginia said, if we can connect these things, we could be so much more effective. Well, typical of bringing in any group of folks who have lots of competition with each other, was like, well, if you’re going to invite that organization, our organization isn’t going to be there. And, well, those folks, they just take people’s ideas and raise money off of other people. And, you know, there was all this resentment and anger and not willing to sit in the room together.

And at first, I thought, OK, we just have to give up. And then I thought, this is the mission of Spirit in Action. How do we build something that’s really different where people can come together, and there had been previous meetings of these groups of folks that had never worked, had always blown up in their faces. And usually these meetings had one or two or three token people of color, and they tend to be led by white men, who often were fairly clueless — I mean, I know a lot of

white men who aren't clueless, but they tended to be pretty clueless. And it was just disastrous.

And so we were trying to build something based on this old history. And so I wrote people with a challenge, all these folks and said, "I know as an organizer that media trainers, consultants, tell us that the more we work with other groups, the more effective our message can be, and how can you not be willing to sit in a room together and try to tell" — you know, sort of blackmail them a little bit maybe or something, I don't know. Actually, I was still told that's a bad word to say, what that means, the word blackmail. I just learned it was actually a racist term.

ANDERSON: Oh, I hadn't heard.

STOUT: Comes from a racist term. Anyway. So, I was trying to convince them that they should be coming together and I said, "Spirit in Action will find a way to deal with these issues that are keeping us separate." Well, we didn't have a clue how we were going to do it, but that was my commitment. And I heard, then, about Public Conversations Project out of Boston, and they work to get people on totally opposite ends in the political spectrum, like, um, pro-life and, you know, the folks at opposite ends to talk with each other. And I figured that if they could do that with opposite ends of the spectrum, maybe they could help us, when people who are on, supposedly, the same side of the fence.

So we went to some of their trainings and they actually worked with us in the first couple of gatherings to help us to think about a process. And so we called everyone up who said they would consider coming, and there were about 16 or 18 people, I think, that considered being a part of this process, and we interviewed every one of them and said, "What are the issues about working together? What are you afraid of? What are your concerns? What are you angry about?" I mean, there was a lot of old hurts, especially against, um, there was this one really strong organization led by two white men, very powerful, had come together and had really used ideas from some smaller organizations led by women and people of color, and had raised tons of money, you know, there was sort of all this kind of stuff that happened, that was really legitimate. And so we asked people to tell us all of this stuff, confidentially.

And we said, "OK. Pretend for one moment that none of this existed, and what would be your dream of what we can accomplish together if none of this was in the way?" And people had amazing ideas. And so, we said, "OK. Let's see where we go from here." And I wrote another letter to everyone and said, "All right. Here is the dreams that people have that we could do together, and here's what's standing in the way." I just sort of reframed it a little bit. And I said, "We're going to call you back and talk about what kind of agreements we need to have to work on dealing with these issues that are in the way of our vision."

And we called everybody back again and did hour-long interviews. I mean, we spent tons and tons of time on the phone with each individual person. And in the end, I think about ten or 11 people actually could come for the gathering, which was a pretty good percentage of the group that could get together. And we had this meeting. One of the agreements was, we're not going to talk about being a network. The other agreement was, we're not going to share any of our ideas or training models. And I'm like, Why are we doing this? But thanks to Carolyn and Public Conversations Project, too, stay with the process, stay with the process. Trust the process.

We did and that first — oh, people were very nervous about Spirit. What's this Spirit thing? What's in this name? Are you going to make us do any woo-woo stuff, kind of thing. And we assured them we wouldn't. So, OK, so how do we bring spirit into a group of people who weren't ready for spirit. So what we asked them to do is bring in an item to share, that communicated — because they were communicators — communicated something about themselves and why they did this work.

Well, I'll never forget this one man called to me in a total panic. "What do you mean, share? What are you talking about? I don't understand. What does this mean? I don't know what you want." And finally, on the third call, I said, "OK. Tell me why you do this work?" Well, because strategically, blah-blah-blah-blah-blah. I was, like, "No-no-no. I mean, from the heart, why do you do this work from a heart place?" "Well, because I think that media is the most important" — I'm like, OK.

ANDERSON: You've got one minute left.

STOUT: "Tell me why you do this work for non-profits that can barely pay you instead of for IBM." He said, "Oh, well, because I want a better future for my children." I said, "Then bring a picture of your children." He, went, "Oh-h-h-h." [laugh] So.

END TAPE 5

TAPE 6

ANDERSON: We can wrap up the last half an hour finishing talking about Spirit in Action and then I want to just ask you a couple more long-range, reflective questions, too. So go ahead and finish what you wanted to say about Spirit in Action.

STOUT: So we had this first meeting of these folks and the first evening, we did the sharing, we did a diversity circle. The next morning, we did visioning, and it was interesting. I mean, some people were doing the — we were doing ten-year visioning and, and someone mentioned — maybe I mentioned the idea of the newspaper, the progressive newspaper, that I had that looked like *USA Today*. Someone tagged it *USA Tomorrow*. And so we talked about *USA Tomorrow*, and so we did this visioning, but we did a lot of community-building stuff. We left lots of space for people to really — we set it up so that we had a caterer bring in the food but we had to prepare it together.

And one of the things that happened, by lunchtime the next day, people started saying, “OK. So the afternoon, we’re sharing stories, but what if we wanted to share our training design? I want to explore this model that I have with people.” And we said, “Well, you know, we have an agreement that we’re not going to do that. But if people want to, they can have the option.” Every single person did.

And at the end of it this one woman said, who was one of the most resistant to coming, said, “I feel like we’ve accomplished here more in this past day than in the past 17 years I’ve been doing this work, and I feel we like we should talk about building a network.” Which was the other taboo subject. And there was unanimous agreement on it.

And so we talked about what would it need to look like and we said, well, it had to be at least a third people of color, and some people said, “That’s impossible, you know. I’ve been to these gatherings, and there’s never — you know, there’s just not that many of people doing the work.” And we said, “Well, we can’t do it unless there’s this commitment to that.” And by the second gathering, we had a third people of color who said, “This should be 50 percent people of color.”

And we just had our fifth gathering. The network now consists of around 80 to 90 people. We’ve continued to do the community-building piece of the work, and the spirit focus of the work without it being overtly spiritual. But, like, we’ve gotten so big, we now have to go to more institutionalized spaces. So I have, like, twenty beautiful batik cloths that I hang up and put on the walls. We put flowers in the room. We totally change the way the room feels. And we do all kinds of diversity-circle stuff. We do a lot of things we’ve learned through the circles.

And that network had become so powerful. People who used to wouldn’t even sit in the room together now do cowork together. People

who would say things, like, “Well, they don’t really work with the grassroots. They only work with, you know, the privileged people,” now say things like, “Oh, you know what? Now I understand that my piece is a really critical piece of the work but so is their piece, and that when my folks reach to a certain level, I can send them over here to this training and that’s really useful.” And they see themselves as more a piece of the whole, and that the whole can really be stronger.

And it was not till the fourth gathering that I believe people really began to say, “How do we become more than the sum of our parts? That it’s more than just about networking. How do we become this more powerful piece as a whole?” And we’ve begun to have the conversation about how to develop a message, a frame and message that spans all of our issues, which the right has been brilliant at doing, things like family values and stuff. And so we’ve begun to explore that, and we have people, say, working on these committees between the conferences, which is highly unusual.

I mean, you know, when people, like at that first gathering, when people said, “We have to have a network,” the next day we did networking. If we’d started out at that place, we would have never accomplished it, and, you know, it’s again this whole idea that I have that the more time you put into building trust, building community, the more quicker and more powerful that the work becomes.

And so we have now built this very powerful organization. They’re now called the Progressive Communication Network. They have their own leadership group, which acts sort of like a board. And when we built the first leadership committee last year, one of the men who came onto the committee, this white man who was so hard to deal with that first year. It’s like, oh, my god. He’s so typical white male, taking up all the space. And now still takes up space but says, “I know I talk too much. You tell me when to shut up.”

You know, and he came onto the committee and one of the things he said about it was, “I want to make sure as we spin off from Spirit in Action that we hold on to the values and the sort of spirit that Spirit in Action brings into this organization, and that the importance in community building stays a part of what we do, because that’s what’s made it work.” You know, this man who couldn’t figure out what to bring to share in the beginning.

I mean, it’s been amazing. And he said, “Not only has the experience of Spirit in Action just one meeting a year changed the way I do the kind of work, it’s changed how I am in my family.” I was, like, oh, my god. And I feel like we have stumbled onto — not stumbled on, we did it very, um, proactively, trying to figure out a new model. I think we figured out a really powerful model for networking, and part of the reason we’re wanting Spirit — Progressive Communicators Network to begin to spin off and become its own thing is because we want to try to form different kinds of networks, and really build networks where there

haven't been in the past. So I feel like that's a critical piece of our work for movement building.

The other piece is the circles of change, which, after two years of doing circles — some of the circles, they were for a set amount of time, 13 weeks, and a lot of them continued beyond 13 weeks. Some turned into other things. Some people — our idea was, folks would take what they learned out of the circles and go back into their organizations, and that has happened. But one of the things we've heard from people is, we want to take these skills back into our organizations and we realize how important they are, but we need the kind of training that the facilitators got to be able to do that. And so, we need that five-day training.

We've also, you know, some of the circles have gone on for two years. And then we've started a new circle. We just did one in a high school that was incredibly powerful.

This is a really good story to tell, and I am being cognizant of time, but what happened is two of the women, one of the women, Bethsaida Ruiz, who was the woman who thought of the idea of Seeds of Hope, they were participants in that first circle, and they decided they wanted to be a part of running a circle in the next gathering the next year, and so they came to the facilitators' training. It was this woman named Bethsaida Ruiz and Karen Hutchinson, both lesbians, both from low-income backgrounds. And they decided they were going to team up and run a circle. And they worked together in this hospital. They both left movement organizing and gone into health care because they felt like there just wasn't a place for them to be their whole selves in this work.

And so one of the things that we ask participants and facilitators was to figure out ways to take these tools back into wherever their workplace or organizations were. And so they started thinking about how can we take it back into this place that we work, which was a wing of a hospital that was for severely disturbed, mentally disturbed teenagers. It was a lock-down ward for teenagers who were incredibly violent, suicidal, and violent to other people, who were at the end of their line. There was nothing else to help them. This is, like, the last stopgap measure. And so they started thinking that it's such a tough workplace for the nurses. Karen's a psychiatric nurse and Bethsaida is a social worker. Such a tough place that maybe they would set something up of a circle idea for the workers. Didn't go. Couldn't get any interest.

So then Bethsaida, who ran groups with these kids, said, "What if we started bringing in some of the circle things into the — with the kids? Let's try it." So she and Karen started doing this. Well, it was amazing. I mean, a lot of the kids wanted to be a part of it. There's usually about, anywhere from a dozen to 15 kids on their wing, so they made it voluntary in the beginning. And then, they made it mandatory, and all the kids had to come.

And what they started noticing, they did it in the evening, was that bedtime, which was the most traumatic, violent, hard for kids, most

traumatizing, took four hours to put kids to bed and often had to restrain them, often medicated most of them — that it started shifting and they started noticing a difference when they would do these circles. To the point that, like, one of the head people in the wing, nurses, said, “We think this should start happening every night that you’re here.” So they started doing it every night they were there. And Bethsaida said that the bedtime went from, like, a four-hour traumatic time to, like, twenty minutes.

And then some of the hospital personnel came to them and said, “We want you to do an inservice and train the other staff people to do this.” And they started working with kids on nonviolent communication and — not for every kid, but for some of the kids, it has been life changing. And so then we said, “If this can happen with kids who are severely disturbed and some are, you know, have no hope of ever getting out of this cycle, what would happen for kids that are sort of on the edge, that are at-risk kids, or even kids who aren’t at risk? What would that look like?”

And so this last year, we’ve worked with a school that is a charter school in San Francisco for at-risk kids. It’s a charter school that’s focused on social change and social service environment. And so we’ve gone in and we’ve done a circle and it’s been amazing, amazing, powerful tool for these young people. I mean, some of the young people came in, they volunteered to come in but some came in to get — you know, because this guy was in there and because they wanted to get out of this class, and different reasons, you know. They came in very defiant. And by the third time, it just built strong community that is so amazing and powerful that even some of the teachers who were totally against the idea are going, I’ve noticed the change in this person.

For the circles themselves, we realize that what next has to happen and where we’re going now is that we have to develop a training program so that it becomes a much broader-based thing that our volunteers can run. We still have concerns about that, because how do you get low-income people and people of color to be able to have the amount of time that’s needed. I mean, we’re looking at, can we afford to pay stipends and can we help make this accessible to everyone, because otherwise, again, it’ll become a middle-class white women’s thing. And we’re trying to figure out ways and we have to find money to do it. That’s the hard piece.

But we learned so much in those two years about this process about how to bring spirit in, about how to think about positive visioning, and what needed to happen to allow for that space, for people to get into that space. And so, we have just spent the past year doing a participatory evaluation and involving all these folks in actually helping write up a report, which has just come off the press, and I’ll give you to take to the library.

ANDERSON: Great.

STOUT: This is our report on transforming the way we do change, and so this is all from circles of change. And I'm so excited about it. And then the other thing we're doing is, we're developing a curriculum guide and we're in the process of writing that now. There's also a team of people writing it. Bethsaida is one of the people involved. We have five people, six people coming in this weekend to work on it. We've done a series of four retreats now to work on it. And we'll have a curriculum guide that will complement this piece. So we see ourselves next year starting a national training program to help people learn these tools, that they can then hopefully take back into organizations.

I mean, I think a piece about this report is that I really want people to understand that there's a different way of doing work and so we had a hard time recruiting a lot of organizers because they're so already burned out and so busy that the idea of taking time for themselves or to build community is like, I don't have time for that. I don't have to bring spirit in. And yet what I'm really hoping that people will begin to understand is that we don't have time *not* to do it. We have to build a winning organization that can change the world, and the only way we can do that is by changing the way we do the work.

And that we're heading down this perilous path of burning ourselves out in a way that's ineffective. And it's not that we haven't had victories and that we haven't won things, but it's not enough. And we've done amazing things and we want to build it on that, but there are models out there on how to do it differently. They're just not national models for the most part, and there's pieces here and there and what we're trying to do — it's not like we invented all of this stuff. We didn't. We figured out, oh, this is a really good piece. Let's pull this in. This is a good piece, let's pull it in. Oh, this piece isn't there. We need to redo it. And out of the report, there's still a lot of stuff we have to figure out. You know, like that piece that I mentioned before around, how do you talk about racism and classism and sexism in a way that doesn't polarize people.

We have to find different ways to do it, and that's a piece I'm really interested in. We were really good at beginning to get visioning but still not at the level of concreteness that says this is the kind of movement we need to build. This is what it's trying to look like. So there's still a lot of pieces out there that I'm still searching for.

The latest piece that I'm very excited in working with Kristi Nelson about is how do we fundraise in a way that's totally different, that's really based in heart and spirit like the rest of Spirit in Action. What does fundraising look like? And that's totally what Kristi's into, is how do we do it in a way that's so consistent with our values and our beliefs and really based in spirit and heart and relationships, which is mostly

the way that I fundraise, but how do we actually develop a system around that that we can then help other people do it as well.

And I still hold onto my vision of a billion dollars of fundraising, in my lifetime. And I don't think a billion dollars is enough. I think other people have to raise billions of dollars, too. And I think it's totally possible. So that's some of the stuff.

ANDERSON: You've been so successful at mobilizing people and raising a lot of money. What qualities do you think make for — you don't have to only speak about yourself — make for a great organizer or a great fundraiser, and do you see them as separate?

STOUT: I don't see them at all separate. I think they're totally connected. I think it's about genuinely building a connection to people. It's about relationships, and that's why it takes time to do it. If you follow the rules, it doesn't account for that, for the most part. It's about bringing your own vision and passion for it. I think all of us have that in us and there's a lot of fear about bringing it out. Yes, there is fear, I have fear about it, but I think I have such an internal push, that's sort of what I call a spiritual calling, that I'm willing to fall on my face and make mistakes, and so I think we all get caught up in what we should look like, what we should say, what we should be like, that we push that part of ourselves down.

I think women especially do this, and I think I couldn't — I mean, if I had been better at passing, I don't know if I'd have got to that place. I was terrible at passing. I'm a terrible liar. You know, I just — I do try to lie sometimes about things, and Angela thinks it's hilarious because I'm so bad at it. And I just wasn't able to pass and so I had either had to accept myself as I am and say, this is OK and I'm going to do things that are uncomfortable for people, you know?

Even when — I know, my first day at Peace Development Fund, the first staff meeting, I read to them a Dr. Seuss book called *Away We Will Go* or something like that. It's one of my favorite books and it's all about — you know, and I bet some of them thought I was so hokey and they were, like, oh, my god, this is going to be our executive director. But there was a message in that children's book that I really wanted people to hear, and I was willing to make myself look like a fool, which some of them thought I was. [laugh] I mean, they were really sitting there, like, with these looks of shock, you know. And I'm halfway through it and looked at their faces and went, oh, my god, what have I done. But it's like that willingness to take risk and willingness to make mistakes. I think that's the biggest piece.

And the piece I said about knowing what you don't know and knowing that I can be one slice in the whole and that's OK and if I can figure out how to fill in the other slices, that's what makes it a powerful whole, and that's what can make me a good leader. I used to do this

leadership training and I would say, for low-income people, and I would say, "What do you think makes a good leader?" And we'd put all these things up. And I'd say, "OK. How many people have all of these qualities?" Well, not one hand. "Do you think you have one of these qualities?" Well, yeah, we have lots of hands. OK.

So if we're all leaders, we can build this powerful force, and we can help each other learn these different pieces and we don't all have to know all of it, because some of us don't even want to know pieces of it. I mean, some of us are introverts and we don't want to be the out-front person, and some of us don't want to do this kind of work. That's OK. We can all be this much more powerful force if we can learn to do what Starhawk refers to as power with as opposed to power over, and as long as we've had this leadership idea of power over, we're never going to be successful, and that's the only model we have about how to use power, and no wonder we reject it. But if we can embrace power in a different way, it could be so powerful and nothing can stop us.

You know, I never get hopeless about the idea of, that we can have revolutionary change. I know we can. And I know we could in a short time if people weren't so hopeless. That's what I get hopeless about, people's hopelessness. It's like, how do we overcome that hopelessness, and that feeling of despair that we can never win, we can never change things, and as long as everybody believes that, you know, we will never change things.

ANDERSON: What are you the most proud of in your life?

STOUT: My goodness. The most proud of. I think just what I was talking about, the qualities of an organizer is being willing to take risk and being a person who walks on the edge of the cliff and willing to put a foot out without knowing where it's going. Being able to sit in the fear and the unknowing, because knowing what's behind me, what's holding me, isn't good enough. And I think we get — and it's easy to do this, I know, but it's easy to sit in the status quo because that's what we know it. It's much easier to stay there than to walk into the unknowing place. Even though we don't like what it is, you know? We'll stay in abusive, dysfunctional relationships because we don't know what else is out there, rather than blindly walk out. And that's what I think, with lots of support, I've been able to do.

ANDERSON: Did you face that kind of fear when you wrote your book? I mean, I know you said, "I can't write a proposal" but here you are, a published author.

STOUT: Oh, my god, yeah. You know, and I didn't know how to do it. And I read all the things about how to write. Didn't know. I had to create my own model. My own model was, OK, I can talk, you know? I talk really

well. I come from a tradition of storytelling. So what if I make up questions, I outline, I make up questions, and I find volunteers to interview me and I tape it. I'm a great typist, you know, I was a legal secretary. I type 120 words a minute. I can take my own dictation. But that's how I wrote it.

ANDERSON: Uh-hum. That's a brilliant way of doing it. I did an interview with Amber Hollibaugh, who said the same thing. She was so afraid of writing because of feeling stupid and coming from a low-income background and so she did tapes.

Let's just close with your vision for your own life, ten, twenty years from now. Spirit in Action is still part of your life, maybe, or where do you hope to be, or be doing?

STOUT: Well, I hope to be doing something around building movement. I hope Spirit in Action has become one of many organizations that is working toward building and supporting movement. I see us as a supportive movement, not the movement builder, and that there's lots of networks out there. And I would see myself as someone, I mean, twenty years from now, I would probably be retired. I'll be 70.

ANDERSON: You can imagine that?

STOUT: I can — well, not retired in the traditional ways. What I can imagine is helping young people find their voice and find their power and mentoring new organizers and new leaders coming up, and continuing to be a part of the movement. I don't see myself as being out there in a leadership role all the time. I don't actually like that role that much. I don't like, um, some of the weird attention it brings you, like, you know, Angela calls them my groupies. [laugh] And yet, you know, I used to push those people away and I did find out that that was very hurtful to people. Like I felt like I was getting, like, all this weird attention and, you know, people wanting me to autograph my book and all this kind of stuff, and someone sat me down and said, "Wait a minute, you know. These people are looking to you for, you know, leadership and if you push them away, they're going to just," you know. It gave me a different perspective.

But I want to help younger organizers coming up. I feel like new, younger people are more willing to take risks, new ideas. I mean, I even see in myself, even though I pride myself on always being willing to sit in the unknowing, I find ways I get stuck myself, or ideas that I've gotten stuck in, and I try. I mean, part of the circle facilitators and even the PCN gathering, we have a huge outreach to young people, young leaders, and I feel like that's really important. I think as we get older, we start thinking we know how to do things, and we forget how creative and open and risk taking we were young, and that we need those young

people constantly in our life to remind us to do that. And so, that's a really important piece in movement building, is that, you know, that we keep that youthfulness as part of ourselves and as young people come into this work. So something about that, something about me training and supporting others.

ANDERSON: The next generation, yeah, so you can leave Spirit in Action to somebody else someday.

STOUT: Possibly. It may, you know, I don't know what it will look, turn into.

ANDERSON: Yeah. They'll create their own model, I guess.

STOUT: Yeah, yeah.

ANDERSON: OK. I think we're about out of time.

STOUT: OK.

ANDERSON: Is there anything else you want to add?

STOUT: I can't think of anything. How about you?

ANDERSON: No.

... [tour of house]

STOUT: ...we'd have lots of gatherings for work and that it was a gathering place. So we built the kitchen with the idea that, like this table was spread out. We've had people sit from the end of this table to the end of this table. We had leaves that added in.

ANDERSON: This is a nice big room.

STOUT: Yeah, and it's a community cooking, and that's one of things that has become a, sort of a principle in Spirit in Action, even in the circles, they all share a meal together, and so we do a lot of meals together and cooking together. So this is actually our meeting space. And this room actually could open up to be, like, we have a lot of back jacks and stuff and we move things back and have quite a crowd in there and as you know, the doors shut. And then in my office, has just recently become my office. We're adding staff in the next year so there'll probably be another person sharing with me, because there were three others in here.

ANDERSON: Linda's office.

STOUT: And Macy.

ANDERSON: Right, because Spirit in Action now is upstairs. Angela showed me the apartment up there. Very nice.

STOUT: And orchids. And then, out here is our fire circle. This coming Saturday night, there will probably be about twenty people at the fire circle.

ANDERSON: Out here in the woods of Belchertown. There's Tsali, who's been part of the movement for a long time. Here's one more. And there's —

STOUT: Here's the baby.

ANDERSON: There's the baby.

STOUT: There's Smidgen. There's Smidgen.

ANDERSON: The next generation.

STOUT: Yeah.

END TAPE 6

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