

Voices of Feminism Oral History Project

Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College
Northampton, MA

LORETTA ROSS

Interviewed by

JOYCE FOLLET

November 3-5, 2004

December 1-3, 2004

February 4, 2005

Northampton, Massachusetts

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Narrator

Loretta Ross was born in Temple, Texas, August 16, 1953, the sixth of eight children in a blended family. Her mother, who brought five older children to her marriage with Ross, had been owner of a music store and a domestic worker; she was a housewife as Loretta was growing up. Loretta's father, who hailed from Jamaica, was an Army weapons specialist and drill sergeant. After retiring from the military in 1963, he worked for the Post Office and often held additional jobs to support the family.

Loretta attended integrated schools — Army schools through second grade, then public schools. She was double-promoted in elementary grades and was an honors student in high school. When Loretta was 11 years old, a stranger beat and raped her. At age 15 she was the victim of incest by a distant relative; she gave birth to a son, Howard, in April, 1969. Because she chose to keep her child, she lost a scholarship to Radcliffe College.

Soon after enrolling at Howard University in 1970, Ross became involved in black nationalist politics and tenant organizing in Washington, D.C. She joined the D.C. Study Group, a Marxist-Leninist discussion group, and the South Africa Support Project. She became a founder of the National Black United Front and an officer of the City Wide Housing Coalition (1974-80). The murder of her friend and political colleague Yulanda Ward in November, 1980, which she considers a political assassination, is a turning point in her life.

Sterilized by use of the Dalkon Shield at the age of 23, Ross found her way to reproductive rights and anti-violence activism. She became one of the first women to win a suit against A.H. Robins, manufacturer of the device. In 1979 she became director of the D.C. Rape Crisis Center, the only center at the time run primarily by and for women of color. In that capacity she organized the first National Conference on Third World Women and Violence in 1980. While serving as Director of Women of Color Programs for the National Organization for Women (1985-89), she organized women of color delegations for the pro-choice marches NOW sponsored in 1986 and 1989, and organized the first national conference on Women of Color and Reproductive Rights in 1987. In response to the Supreme Court's *Webster* decision in 1989, Ross co-coordinated production of the pathbreaking statement "We Remember: African American Women Are For Reproductive Freedom." As Program Director for the National Black Women's Health Project (1989-90), she coordinated the first national conference of African American women for reproductive rights. From 1980 to 1988, she was a member of the D.C. Commission on Women.

From 1991 to 1995, Ross was National Program Research Director for the Center for Democratic Renewal (formerly the National Anti-Klan Network), where she directed projects on right-wing organizations in South Africa, Klan and neo-Nazi involvement in anti-abortion violence, and human rights education in the U.S. In 1996 she created the National Center for Human Rights Education, a training and resource center for grassroots activists aimed at applying a human rights analysis to injustices in the U.S.

Active internationally, Ross is a founding member of the International Council of African Women and of the Network of East-West Women. She has been a regular participant in International Women and Health Meetings and helped organize the delegation of 1100 African American women to the 1985 United Nations women's conference in Nairobi. She also participated in the UN women's conferences in Copenhagen in 1980 and Beijing in 1995, as well as the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994.

Ross has served on numerous boards (including National Women's Health Network, SisterLove Women's AIDS Project, Men Stopping Violence) and testifies on women's health and civil rights issues before Congress and the UN as well as via such national media as the Donahue Show and Pacifica News Service. She publishes on the history of abortion in the black community and is co-author of *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice* (2004). Ross is completing a bachelor's degree at Agnes Scott College.

Ross was co-director for women of color for the April 2004 March for Women's Lives. In January 2005, she became National Coordinator of the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective, a growing network of Native American, Latina, African American, Asian American and other women of color groups. SisterSong's mission is to connect reproductive rights to human rights. SisterSong promotes reproductive justice through a combination of the Self-Help approach to internalized oppression and the human rights approach to structural inequity.

The Loretta Ross Papers are at the Sophia Smith Collection.

Interviewer

Joyce Follet (b.1945) is a public historian, educator, and producer of historical documentary. She is Coordinator of Collection Development at the Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College. She earned a Ph.D. in Women's History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Abstract:

In this 23-hour interview, Ross details her childhood and early education, family life and sexual assault. She traces and analyzes her political evolution from black nationalism in the 1970s to liberal feminism in the 1980s, and from human rights advocacy in the 1990s to reproductive justice organizing in the present. Her account sheds light on the interplay of national and international events in women of color organizing in the U.S.

Restrictions: Pages 331 and 332 are closed until January 1, 2020.

Format

Tapes 1-10 (Nov 2004): videographer Danielle Beverly, using Canon XL1, normal mode.

Tapes 11-20 (Dec 2004): videographer Kate Geis, using Canon XL1S, normal mode.

Tapes 21-23 (Feb 2005): videographer Kelly Anderson, using Canon XL1S, normal mode. Some outside construction noise during Nov and Dec taping sessions.

Transcript

Transcribed by Luann Jette. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Revan Schendler. Transcript has been reviewed and approved by Loretta Ross and Joyce Follet.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Ross, Loretta. Interview by Joyce Follet. Video recording, November and December 2004, February 2005. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Loretta Ross interview by Joyce Follet, video recording, November 3, 2004, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 2.

Transcript

Bibliography: Ross, Loretta. Interview by Joyce Follet. Transcript of video recording, November and December 2004, February 2005. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Loretta Ross, interview by Joyce Follet, transcript of video recording, November 3, 2004, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, pp. 34–35.

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Transcript of interview conducted NOVEMBER 3–5, DECEMBER 1–2, 2004,
FEBRUARY 4, 2005

with: LORETTA ROSS

at: Smith College,
Northampton

by: JOYCE FOLLET

videographer: DANIELLE BEVERLY

(set up)

FOLLET: We are rolling. We have been waiting for a long time. OK. So, here we are. Joyce Follet with the honor of interviewing Loretta Ross here in Northampton at Smith College on September — no, excuse me, November 3rd, 2004. Enough said about that. [day after the presidential election]

ROSS: Let's try not to be too depressed.

FOLLET: OK. Well, this is part of the Voices of Feminism Oral History Project. It really is an honor. It's just a thrill to be doing this.

ROSS: A blessing, you just can't see it.

FOLLET: So, this is going to be a fairly lengthy life history, so, if we begin at the beginning, let's have you tell me about your family as you were growing up.

ROSS: After waiting all this time for the question, I don't even know where to begin. My family is a blended family, meaning that parts of us are American and parts of it is immigrants. So my father, his family is from Jamaica. My father, Alexander Ross, was born in 1918 and apparently had come over when he was about five years old, from Jamaica. There was a wave of Jamaican immigrants that happened in the 'teens, right after World War I. But he was raised primarily in Baltimore.

Now my mother's family is from Texas, and has been in Texas since 1867. They moved to Texas from Alabama, actually. There's a cute story attached to that, because apparently we were slaves on a peanut

plantation near Selma, Alabama, and then right after the Civil War, my ancestor, I think his name was John Lake, took the family down to Mobile, built this boat, crossed the Gulf of Mexico, landed in Nacogdoches, Texas, and ever since then, my family has celebrated Juneteenth in Nacogdoches, Texas, as the family reunion day. So my family's roots in Texas go back to 1867, and my mom's family apparently migrated somewhat north from Nacogdoches, which is on the coast, to Bell County, Texas, Temple, Texas, in the central area.

And Mom was born in 1922.

FOLLET: And her name — was her name Lake?

3:33

ROSS: Her name was Lorene Dolores Burton. Somehow, the Lakes had become Burtons and I'd have to probably go back and look at the archives and figure out how that happened.

But anyway, so, my mom was married twice. She was first married to a guy named Charles Ward. I guess she got married when she was 16 to him, and they had five kids, so those are my older brothers and sisters. Then in 1952, she married my father, Alexander Ross, and I'm the oldest of the three kids they had. So, out of a total of eight kids. I was born August 16, 1953.

Dad was mostly in the service. He had joined the Army back around 1939 or something like that, stayed in the Army for 24 years. So we moved around a lot. As a matter of fact, the timing of the kids is totally related to my dad's leaves at home. So the kids were born almost exactly one year apart: 1953, 1954, 1955. So that was when my dad got leave, because — came home, Mom was pregnant and having the baby while he was gone, come back, get pregnant again, that kind of thing. We moved around quite a bit, though, because we were Army brats and that was pretty cool.

FOLLET: Where did you move? What places did you —

5:02

ROSS: Well, I was born in Temple, Texas, while Dad, I believe, was stationed in Fort Hood, Texas. But we spent a pretty good time in Temple, at least until I went to the first grade. I started the first grade in Temple, but then we were stationed at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, also. We apparently were there only about six or seven months, because I was still in first grade, and I actually finished first grade at [Grape] Street Elementary school in Los Angeles, California. So I was in three different states just doing first grade. So that's what I mean by moving a lot. Actually, it was pretty cool, though, because we were able to see a lot of the world and see a lot of different communities, and I think Mom's — (construction noise)

FOLLET: OK, so you were saying that you moved around quite a bit.

6:00

ROSS: And I think it really provided an advantage growing up. I mean, maybe families that stayed in the same neighborhood, in the same community growing up had a different advantage. But for us, we felt worldly, we felt cosmopolitan, we felt like all the little kids who never went anywhere were disadvantaged. I know we went to better schools, because we went to military schools, most of the time, in between. Sometimes we were at public schools, but most of the time we were at military schools. And I remember being taught to speed read in the military school in the sixth grade and so every time I went to the public schools, my reading level was so much more advanced than that of kids who stayed in public schools without interruption. It really did feel like an advantage to be able to say, Well, we lived here and we lived here and we've lived there. There was a time we were stationed in Germany, though I barely remember it.

We did have a funny story about our time in Fort Hood, in [Texas], and I really didn't realize the story was true. When my father died, it was about five years ago, we were at his funeral, and I was boo-hooing my heart out, because Dad and I were really close. Well, growing up, Dad had always told us that he'd been Elvis Presley's drill sergeant. And we didn't believe him. At least, I never believed him. I was, Right, right. Tell me about Elvis again, Dad. (laughs) And so I never believed that story.

At my father's funeral service, here comes his Army buddies giving their eulogies, whatever, and all of a sudden, my head jerked up as this guy was talking about my dad and Elvis. And in the middle of my dad's funeral, I went, That was true? Yeah, Loretta, that was true. And then I was crying all over again because I didn't believe my dad. I hadn't believed him the whole time he was alive, and to hear confirmation of what I thought was his tallest tale at his funeral was pretty sad.

But also, Dad was really special. Dad was a provider. Um, he was in the service, as I said, for 24 years and then when he retired from the service, we moved from Fort Belvoir, Virginia, where we were last stationed, to San Antonio, mainly to be closer, I believe, to Mom's family. Dad didn't really have any strong roots or connections to Baltimore, even though that's where his, the rest of his family was. And then he started working for the Post Office.

FOLLET: So he got out of the Army? Do you remember when that was?

ROSS: 1963.

FOLLET: Sixty-three. Now, had he been in Vietnam or did he get out around that issue?

ROSS: He retired to keep from going to Vietnam. He had gotten badly shot in the Korean War. I mean, he went through World War II and then the Korean War, got badly shot in the Korean War — I remember seeing all

these bullet holes in my dad's belly one day and asking him about them. And so, he got orders to report to Vietnam. And he decided three wars was too much, and he'd done his 24th [year], so he was ready to get out and so he did. And, um, I think the orders were to go to France first and then Vietnam, some kind of way, so, I always kind of regretted that we never got our chance to live in France, but he wanted to get out and I'm glad he did. I mean, the thought of Dad getting shot again was not good. He had all the medals and all the things that he needed.

Interestingly enough, Dad was also a Mason, which I didn't really understand at the time. He wore the ring with the G on it and all of that. And it was all of these things that became known about my dad's life at his funeral. I guess that's what was so amazing, at least to me, because you had a problem with your dad and kind of take him for granted until all the rest of the world tells you how great he was.

FOLLET: What does the Mason piece — what surprised you about that?

ROSS: Well, first of all, I don't know much about the Masons — even though I grew up, apparently, in a Masonic household — where it was such a secretive society, kind of thing. It wasn't anything my dad ever talked about. I just remember having the license tag on the car and the ring on his finger. And then, at his funeral when all his brothers started, as I said, giving their tributes to him and all the things that he'd done — I remember my dad showing me this photo of this white guy whose life he'd saved. He didn't come to his funeral. But I was just thinking of all the great things my dad probably did, but he was rather reticent about sharing them with us. He didn't brag on himself. And it took his funeral for everybody to start bragging on him.

FOLLET: You said you had a special relationship with your dad.

ROSS: I'll give you an example. My father, at the end of his life, had a lot of strokes. That's how he died. And so I got a chance to do what I call an exit interview with him, because about three months before he died, I went home. We were sitting at the kitchen table. Now, my father's now retired, both from the Army [and] from the Post Office. His retirement income is negligible by most [standards], and we're sitting at the kitchen table, and Dad pulls out this 100-dollar bill and tries it to press it on me. "Here, baby, do you need some help." I was OK up until that moment, until I realized that here I am, probably making four to five times as much money as my father's retirement income, and Daddy's still trying to take care of me. I mean, I just broke down at that time.

And the reason I call it an exit interview is that my father started the conversation, saying, "Well, Baby, I don't think I'm going to make it to my birthday." This was about February or March, and my father's birthday is in October. I said, "Well, how do you feel about that?" He says, "Well, I'm all right with it. You all are doing good. The kids are

fine. I've done my job. I feel OK with it." And I was like, Are you sure of that? And at first I wanted to say, "No, you're going to be around in October." But he was serious. He told me, "I don't think I'm going to make it."

And he was mostly blind at that time and stopped driving his car. He was president of his local Veterans of Foreign Wars chapter and he ran an American Legion Club but he'd had to drop out of all of those activities, and so he wasn't happy. He was not at all happy with his helplessness, the fact that he was no longer independent. I mean, my dad was a really big guy, about 6'2", 6'4", something like that, and he'd kind of shrunk within himself by that time. And so, I asked him, you know, "How do you feel about it?" and he said he was OK. And actually, once he said he was OK, I was OK with it. And that's why I call it the famous exit interview. Although it wasn't planned to be an exit interview, but it was pretty stark to have a conversation with your dad about him not being there and him being very clear on it.

FOLLET: Sounds like — I remember at one time, you said you grew up as "Daddy's girl."

14:20

ROSS: Oh, I was absolutely Daddy's girl.

FOLLET: What did that mean?

ROSS: Well, first of all, he married my mother when she had five kids, so he had five stepkids, and then I was the first of his kids, and that meant that he and I hung out together all the time. To his death, we were each other's favorite people to hang out with. I mean, I learned how to play pinochle because my daddy taught my how to play pinochle. We would still — could go to the American Legion Club and get a good pinochle game going. I mean, this was how we were all of our lives together. I probably communicated far less with my dad than I did with my mother, but I think our communications meant more than with my mother, because they were far more substantial with my dad. We could say whole paragraphs in a very few words, where with my mother, you could talk for five years and never quite get your point across.

FOLLET: What kinds of things would you talk to your dad about?

15:28

ROSS: Uh, once we had a real good conversation about politics, because when Jesse Jackson ran for president in 1984, I wasn't quite sure where my father was going to go with that, because he was very conservative in most things. He was the classic immigrant who was more conservative than other African Americans. And he was in the National Rifle Association, you know, had weapons rustling around the house. Actually, I have a funny story to tell you about him and guns. But when Jesse ran for president in '84, that was the first time my father and I

could actually talk about being for the same things, on the same side of issues and stuff, and in contrast with my mother — my mother's a born-again Christian, extremely hyper-Christian, and there's very little we have in common. Now, she probably votes Democratic, but that's probably more tradition than conviction, because she is probably against every progressive value I tend to stand for.

FOLLET: Against every progressive value?

16:43

ROSS: I think so, in terms of reproductive rights. I mean, we can talk about how she feels about abortion when we talk about something else. She sends money to the Christian Coalition, Pat Robertson, faith healers. I mean, she's very much part of the Religious Right, so. And my father was definitely to the left of her.

FOLLET: He was for Jackson in '84?

ROSS: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. And my mother was for Jackson, but mainly because he was a minister. Reverend Jesse Jackson. But the same woman who was for Reverend Jesse Jackson was sending money to Reverend Pat Robertson. So for her, religion was the end-all and be-all. By that time in her life, which I probably should say, because I don't think Mom always was there — I actually, in talking to some other people, got a picture of Mom living a much more risqué life than she let on in her later years.

FOLLET: What do you remember about her as you were growing up? How did she figure into your childhood? What was your relationship with her? If you were Daddy's girl, what was your relationship with your mom?

18:04

ROSS: Strained. I think that would be the best way to put it. Distant at first, because during a good portion of my early years, particularly pre-K, my mother was a domestic worker, so she couldn't take care of her kids, and because I had an older sister, Carol, who is nine years older than me, Carol, I thought, was my mother. I could not recognize the woman who was my mother as my mother. I remember one time, my mother getting really mad at me when I called Carol "Mama," because Carol had to take care of us. Um, so, it was always fairly strained, I think.

And my mother loved her sons and raised her daughters, I mean, in that classic patriarchal way. So Carol and I did a lot of the housework. We took turns, because she did it before I was able to and then when she left, it became my job. Whereas the boys, we felt, were totally spoiled. I mean, you had five boys whose principal responsibility was cutting the yard and taking out the trash, and you had two girls whose responsibility was everything else — you know, the cooking, the cleaning, the childcare kind of thing. I know I resented it, and Carol did, too. So both of us managed to leave home as soon as we were graduated from high

school, never to look back. Whereas the boys, you had to pry them out of the house with the crow bar because they managed to cling and stay at home any number of years.

FOLLET: Where did those messages come from, about the boys' roles and the girls' roles?

20:00

ROSS: I think it was cultural and it was religious. I also should add that once Mom was able to stay at home and become an at-home mom, which was in 1955, I mean, it was totally reinforced. I guess about 1955 I said, but now I'm not sure. It was probably — before the 60s, anyway. And it was totally reinforced by my dad because my dad was willing to work two or three jobs to keep Mom from working one. Because it was a status symbol to have an at-home wife in the African American community. I remember growing up in our eventual neighborhood in San Antonio, my mother was the only woman that wasn't working in our neighborhood, and that was seen as a status symbol, when every other woman was going to work every day, and my mom was there to fix our lunches. And actually, we kind of wished she would go to work because we had a lot less freedom with an at-home mom than we probably would've had.

But where did the messages come from? Like I said, probably religion had a lot to do with it, tradition had a lot to do with it.

FOLLET: Were you church-goers?

21:17

ROSS: Well, the family is. I have never been really good at it. Mom, in her own way, was somewhat liberal in that she let us go — she made us go to church but we had the freedom to go to the church of our choice. We were born Southern Baptist, or raised Southern Baptist, for the most part, but then, at some point, Mom joined the AME — African Methodist Episcopal church. Then she joined me [at my church].

I kind of was much more inquisitive about religion, and I had this bizarre idea in my mind that if you were truly a spiritual being, then you had to have a very solemn church service. And so I was totally turned off by Pentecostalism. I actually thought the Baptists partied too much in church. I just — if you believed in God, why weren't you serious about it? I hate churches that make me think I'm in a nightclub. I like to have a distinction between my religious experience and my partying experience. When they blend, I get confused.

And so, I went from church to church, trying to figure out where my spiritual home was and I eventually ended up in the United Church of Christ, in the Church of Christ — I'm sorry, it wasn't United, the Church of Christ — and I liked their services because they had no musical instruments, there was no piano, no tambourine, no drums, none of that. They didn't have a segregated choir, meaning that the entire congregation was called upon to sing. It was not a small choir set off

behind the pastor singing. And they took their religion quite seriously. They also had quite compact services. I mean, when they started at 11, they were over at 12, and I kind of liked that, too. And eventually, Mom ended up joining the Church of Christ with me. It was the one religion that I joined. I must have joined the Church of Christ when I was about ten, and I stuck to it till I was about 15.

Then my brother became a pastor. My brother Charles, my oldest brother — he's the oldest of the twins — became a minister for a Missionary Baptist Church. So now the family kind of like all followed him into the Missionary Baptist faith. Of course, my path diverted at age 15 and I haven't been back to church since. So.

FOLLET: It sounds as if what you found appealing about the Church of Christ was a kind of atmosphere, a style. Was there anything about the message, the theology, or the religious message that you were listening for?

23:58

ROSS: Well, it was a church of tolerance. It wasn't a church that said, Believe our way or you're damned and going to hell. I've always felt intolerant of intolerance, that kind of intolerance. I actually had briefly studied catechism, thinking I was going to become a Catholic, because I also liked the solemnity of those services, but something about having the intercessors to God didn't work for me. I just never could get the proper reverence for the popes and the bishops and the priests that the Catholics seem to demand under blind obedience. I mean, one thing you learned quickly in catechism was, Thou shalt not question. And I could never be blindly obedient. That was the kick in my gallop that frustrated my mother and probably frustrated every spiritual person I ever met — whereas within the Church of Christ, we were allowed to question. We were allowed to say, I don't believe this. And they said, That's OK, you know, just stick with it and you'll find your own peace. They were really Unitarian in their approach to religion. I think that if I had been exposed to the Unitarians back then, I probably would've been a lifelong Unitarian, but I never met Unitarians until much, much later. But I liked that.

I got a funny story to tell about that church. As I said, I dropped out of that church when I was 15. I swear, I must have been 45 years old, 30 years later, I'm walking down the streets of San Antonio, Texas, and this wizened old man walks up to me. Are you Sister Ross? and I'm like, Yeah, who are you? I'm Pastor So-and So. I just want to tell you, we're going to bury you. We're going to bury you. And I was like, My God. Thirty years after I've left this church, this church still remembers me, number one, still considers me a member of their family, number two, and basically told me they have dibs on my body when I die. So any thought I have of going to another church, getting buried somewhere else, is out of the question. This church will have to oversee my funeral rites. Now I know that sounds like a weird thing to have this old man walking up, saying, "We're going to bury you," but he really

— that's what I read from the way he was talking to me. You're still a member of our family. Thirty years later.

FOLLET: What was your reaction? What's your emotional reaction to that?

27:00

ROSS: I teared up. Oh, my God. First of all, I didn't expect this guy to remember me, and I certainly didn't remember him. It was just — just gave me a warm, fuzzy, this-is-what-home-feels-like kind of feeling, and I don't often get that this-is-what-home-feels-like kind of feeling, because I left home when I was 16, never to return, so that felt like home, that felt like family. I was amazed that he recognized me. I don't think I — except for obvious things, I don't think I've changed that much, but physically, I must still look — facially, I still must look alike, because he recognized me.

FOLLET: That is amazing.

ROSS: I had no idea who this guy was.

FOLLET: Speaking of what home feels like, in your family, with the eight kids and Mom and Dad, what did that family feel like?

ROSS: Well, first of all, there were too many of us to ever eat at the table all at the same time, so we kind of ate in shifts, kind of thing. Um, with the two sets of kids, you had the older set of kids and you had the second three, the second group, which was the three of us. I loved my older brothers and sisters. I mean, I worshiped them. There were two twins, Charles and Ralph, who were born in I think 1937, something like that, 1938. And then, Jimmy, the next one, was born in 1940. Carol was born in — no, Bill was born in 1942. Carol was born in '44. I'm mixing them all up. But anyway, they were born way before we were. I think — yeah, anyway. And so, as I was growing up, as I said, Carol was my primary caretaker. Charles and Ralph were already processing out. I mean, they had gotten married before I was four or five years old so I barely remember them ever living at home.

Jimmy was the brat in many ways. Um, while we lived in Los Angeles, he got involved with some LA street gangs and I remember one time having to bail Jimmy out of jail. My mother, like, literally marching him out of the jail down to the Army recruiting office all in the same night, because she was tired of his hooliganism kind of things. It's amazing, because if you were to meet Jimmy now, with his staid, snobbish self, you'd never know he was the bad boy of the family. He's the most well-to-do family member right now.

So I was conscious of Carol. I was conscious of Bill because they were closest to me in age. But literally, Carol left home when she was 16, so I would've been about seven. Bill left home a few years later. (pause in recording)

FOLLET: The older kids that you were close to left. Then what for you –

ROSS: It was almost like we had a new family, because then I was the oldest. Now, my family had its problems, its challenges, because my younger sister Toni, though she was born normal, developed polio and muscular dystrophy. This was back in the early 50s, when the polio virus — Salk hadn't done the polio thing yet. She apparently was born with this really depressed immune system so that she got everything that came through, she got. And so she became an epileptic. She didn't walk until she was ten years old. It was really trying, though, having — Toni's 13 months younger than me. And so in many ways I felt that I got neglected because of Toni's needs, because she did have very large needs. Many times people thought she was going to die because of the combination of illnesses that she had. My mother took her to a faith healer. Swore that's the reason Toni's still alive to this day. It is a miracle that Toni is still around.

What that meant, though, was that I had to become probably a lot more self-sufficient than I would've been under different circumstances. I know she was a large part of my wanting to leave home. Largely because we had so many kids — we only had a three-bedroom house — I had to sleep in a bed with Toni and Toni was incontinent, and so I slept in urine a good portion of my life, and that disgusted me. I cannot tell you how resentful it made me of my sister, which probably, of course, was not fair to Toni, but at the same time, who wants to wake up every night with someone peeing in the bed and it wasn't you?

Then I had my baby brother Michael. Michael, by being the baby, was in my mind, you know, the spoiled brat. And everybody felt that. It's amazing how great Michael is now because at the time we despised him. He was the kid that you couldn't do anything with because he'd always go run and tell somebody. Then, of course, we conspired to leave him out because who needs the tattletale? And Michael's great now, but at the time, we were uniform in pretty much not liking him. He was Mama's boy and really was spoiled. And so, that was the family configuration that I most remember, simply because we grew up together.

Um, what was it like? Mom was preoccupied with taking care of Toni, so in many ways, that's how a lot of the housework and stuff devolved on my shoulders. I remember having bitter fights with my mother because days I was too sick to go to school, I still had to get up and cook my brother's breakfast, and I thought that was just wrong. If he was well enough to go to school, he was well enough to fix his own breakfast. I mean, there's only two years difference in our ages. And so, that's kind of the resentment of patriarchy that I had at a fairly early age.

FOLLET: What did you do with the frustration at that point?

33:58

ROSS: Take it out on my brother. I used to beat him up until he got too big. (laughs) Then, about — I was about 11 and he was about nine and I couldn't beat him up anymore.

FOLLET: Could you talk back? What was discipline like?

ROSS: Oh, no, no. There was no talking back in my family. As a matter of fact, one of the things that I realized as I got older is that my family was pretty fairly free of all kinds of violence. I mean, I don't ever remember any domestic violence in our house. There was one incident when Mom and Dad got to arguing, and Mom threw a knife at Dad, and this scared all of us, you know? and like, quivering in the door, about five inches from his head, and stuff. And that was like, it was so out of everything [out of context].

They bickered like all married couples bicker, but they always had this thing that they'd always take their fights into the bedroom and shut the door so we never heard them, and so we weren't even around the raised voices and this stuff. It was just — that was not our family culture. And so when Mom threw the knife at Dad, because they were fighting over something, I mean, the whole place just went deathly silent. It was, like, we couldn't believe — she was just slicing bologna or something and Dad was standing in the door fussing at her. I guess she got enough of it. Chunk. Whoa. It was kind of funny, because Dad hid the knives in the house for about two weeks after that.

FOLLET: Do you remember what triggered it?

ROSS: I have no idea. I mean, my family — they bickered over minor stuff. Like I said, there was no arguing over division of responsibilities because Dad worked, and the purpose of the house was to take care of his ability to work. And so I remember having to iron my dad's uniforms, his postal uniforms. I ironed his Army uniforms all the time. Dad left the house usually, particularly after he retired from the Army, at 7 in the morning and he didn't come home till midnight, six days a week. And so, we had to have his uniforms ready, have his lunches packed, have his meals ready, all of those things, so that we could support his ability to work.

FOLLET: Because he was at the —

ROSS: Well, he worked at the Post Office but then he also worked a second job. Like I said, he worked two or three jobs after he retired.

FOLLET: What other kinds of work did he do?

ROSS: I don't remember most of his other jobs. I just remember the Post Office. I think he might have worked as a janitor at a couple of places. I don't remember what other kinds of jobs he had.

FOLLET: Your mother had been a domestic worker, you said, until the mid-50s?

36:55

ROSS: I think when Toni's care became the most important thing for her was when she got out of the labor market. And that's why I said I remember her being gone, because there was this big issue one Christmas. My mother wasn't able to come home for Christmas because she was busy cooking for this white family on Christmas Day, and I remember there being a big dust-up about [it]. Whether this is something — I don't know if I remember it, or I remember it being told me. I'm not quite sure. But Toni was born in 1954. She was terribly sick by '55, and so, around that time, in the mid-50s, '56, '57, Mom got out of the workforce, really to take care of Toni.

FOLLET: Did she talk about having been a domestic worker?

ROSS: Not really. The career my mother talks about is actually, she owned a record store. See, I haven't even told you about her first marriage, which was kind of exciting.

FOLLET: Right.

38:05

ROSS: Um, I could tell you things that I know now that I didn't know then and so I'm doing a little bit of revisionist history. Apparently, my mother had been the victim of child sexual abuse from age eight to 16 by a great-uncle. And she got married, she says, as a way to escape this. She was living on a farm in Texas and it was one of those families where all the generations stayed together, and unfortunately, this meant that older men had access to the younger girls in a very inappropriate way. So she married this man named Charles Ward. He was a musician. And somehow, while they were married, my mother ended up buying a record store. And actually, it was because she owned this record store that she met my father, because it was where all the GIs used to come and hang out. Well, she stayed married to Charles Ward long enough to produce five children, then they got divorced. But it also produced quite a bit of musical talent in the family that I could talk about. My sister and her son are quite great musicians.

Then she married my father. Now, when my father tells it, my mother was like the boogie-woogie queen when he met her, because he talks about how they used to go dancing and partying and stuff like that. Of course, Mom was in total denial that any of this happened in her life. But I think about what type of woman in the 1940s owned a record store? This is not — that was like the hangout joint, the juke joint, the

place where people came to party and to get music and stuff — this is not your Southern Baptist Christian woman thing here.

FOLLET: Now, was this while she was married? Or after she was divorced, or do you know that?

40:00

ROSS: Well, she kept the store after she was divorced from Charles Ward, so apparently she had gotten it while they were married and kept it after they were divorced, because that's how she met my father. There was a period of three to four years between divorcing Charlie Ward and marrying my father, and that's how they met, was that she had that record store in Temple, Texas, on H Street, and the soldiers from Fort Hood used to come hang out at her record store. And that's how she met Dad. So I have a feeling Mom was never as upright a Christian as she'd like us to believe. I mean, they never talk about it, but it doesn't add up.

FOLLET: Who else might you find out about that from? I know you've mentioned that your mother was from this family that moved from Alabama to Texas and there's a great-grandmother, there's a large extended family, right?

ROSS: Well, yes. I know about my great-grandmother, who we called Big Mama, whose name was Eleanor Lake. So, she was the daughter of John Lake and I think Melinda Lake, were the people who moved from Selma to Mobile to Nacogdoches. Big Mama was born in 1873 and died in 1963 when she was 90, so I was ten years old, and I had a chance to know Big Mama and be in her house. And some of the photos you have are of Big Mama's house, as a matter of fact, in Temple, Texas. My mother's mother apparently had 12 children, but she was dead before I was born, so that's why I don't know my grandmother. As a matter of fact, my grandparents on both sides of my family both passed before I was born so I never knew my grandparents at all. Her name, her married name, was Burton.

FOLLET: Whose married name?

ROSS: My grandmother's married name was Burton, because that's what my mother's maiden name was, Burton. Her husband was named Jim Burton — I'm trying hard to remember my grandmother's name, it was just escaping me right now. And then my great-grandmother —

FOLLET: This is Big Mama?

ROSS: Big Mama had a lot of kids and so that's where my great-uncles came from. S.Q. [Samuel Quincy], Booker T. — I'm forgetting them all. Apparently, it was a great-uncle named Elijah, who I never met, who committed the incest against my mother and ended up being

institutionalized in a home for the mentally ill or something, and he died there. And it was interesting, it was his death notice in the 1970s, or actually 1980s, that triggered my mother telling this story about how this man had abused her. We didn't even know the man existed. No one ever talked about Elijah, ever, ever, ever anybody talked about Elijah. And then we get this notice that he died. Who in the world is Uncle Elijah, you know, all these uncles. And that's how the story about what he'd done — apparently not only to my mother, but some of her sisters as well — came out. So, yeah, we had a huge extended family on my mother's side.

My father's family was smaller. My father had one brother, and I believe three sisters, and the way they came here was a bit unusual. Um, my father's parents didn't get visas to come to the United States, but this family named Dunwoodie did, who didn't have kids. And so, this childless couple brought the five Ross kids from Jamaica with them and raised them as their own. And so, the Dunwoodies became, in fact, my grandparents even though there was no blood relation to us and we never actually got to meet my grandparents that were in Jamaica. And they all died by the time I was born.

My father was not in any particularly close contact with his siblings. I got the sense that he was either the youngest or the next to the youngest. And I never could quite get at what happened over that. I do know that he was bitterly angry when Mrs. Dunwoodie died and his oldest sister didn't let him know so he could get leave and come to the funeral, and that led to a period of them not speaking to each other for well over twenty years. And my mother actually healed the breach there, but my father was not making any effort and finally, she called them to tell him about the family's developments.

And it was kind of interesting, because when my father died, by that time, only one of his siblings was still alive, Ethylene, and Aunt Ethylene comes to the funeral. And after the funeral, we're all sitting around at my mom's house, you had to have a big feast, all the food and everything, we're all sitting around my mom's house, and Ethylene, hobbling on her cane, "Anybody got some pinochle cards?" And my son and I looked at each other, like, "Aunt Ethylene, you play pinochle?" "Well, how do you think your daddy learned?" And so, after my father's funeral, we had three generations of Rosses sitting there playing pinochle — my aunt, her husband, me and my son, we played pinochle, after my father's funeral. It sounds like as good a family tradition as any, I guess. (laughs)

But it kind of shocked me, because I'd never thought about, well, where did Dad learn how to play pinochle? Pinochle is not, like, a game everybody plays. It's a particular game. I don't know how to describe it, but if you were passionate about it, it's like bridge fanatics, we're passionate about it. And just the thought of playing pinochle with an aunt that I barely knew, that I'd maybe met three times in my life, at my father's funeral, it was pretty special.

You'd asked about my family culture. What else to describe it? Um, I actually thought my family was noted for its mediocrity. I mean, we were unexceptional in many, many ways. While we felt kind of special — but we were special in that we were loving and we were OK with each other. As I said, I'm not aware of any major drama going on. Predictably, you don't really know how boringly normal your family is until you leave home and then you find out all these other bizarre configurations and things that happen to people in their families, and all that. And I just felt kind of normal, kind of boringly normal.

FOLLET:

Did you mostly live on military bases?

47:47

ROSS:

Till Dad retired, the first ten years. And then, once we moved to San Antonio, we bought a house and lived in that house, and so I lived six years in the house, because I left home at 16, and that's the family house.

FOLLET:

How would you describe the family's economic circumstances when you were growing up?

ROSS:

Um, poor to lower middle class is how I would describe it. Even with the best will in the world, Dad was not able to take care of ten people off of a staff sergeant's salary. It just didn't pay that well. And then there were periods when apparently the checks weren't as regular as they should've been. And so I remember feeling at some times we were, like, solidly middle class, because we had a house, the Army provides housing, and so we always generally lived in pretty decent housing, though, still, three bedrooms for ten people is not what you call spacious living. All the boys had a room, all the girls had a room, and then there was Mom and Dad's room. So that was always kind of cramped.

But there were times when apparently the checks weren't arriving. I'm not quite sure if it was Mom and Dad had a falling out or if there was something wrong. But we were living then off of charity. I remember while we were living in Los Angeles, getting food from Catholic Charities, and Catholic Charities food was old restaurant or grocery store food that was spoiled. And we'd get these bags and bags of half-rotten vegetables so that we'd have to pick through what was edible, or the peanut butter that separated, the oil separated from the peanut butter. The government cheese kinds of things. But fortunately for us, those were the exception, not the rule. I mean, most of the time, lower middle class. And being in the Army meant that we had adequate health care, which no one not in the Army could brag about at the time.

And so, lower middle class. I would not describe it as abject poverty. We lived in Watts, which was my only real experience living in a ghetto, and even then we had a house. We weren't living in the projects. We rented a house, even in Watts. So, poor, lower middle class, but not — I don't remember my family being on welfare, which is good

because I [know] that it's not all the romantics crack it up to be (laughs). And having a basic economic security in our lives caused by the military and Dad's working — because that was the other thing. Um, I didn't realize how rare two-parent families were until I left home and realized that our family was not the norm in many parts of the African American community. A working dad and a stay-at-home mom really were pretty rare back then and I didn't know. Like I said, I used to wish Mom would get a job. How can you play hooky when your mom's always home and the school can call?

FOLLET: Were you part of an African American community, your family?

ROSS: We were not. I think because we relocated so often, we never did establish any deep roots anywhere, except through my family. Family roots were far more important to us than community roots, because we were always newbies in a community. And then, as my father's rank kept increasing, because eventually he became a master sergeant and all these things, we increasingly were the only black family in the military [neighborhoods we were in] — not the only black family, but we were living in better and better housing, where our neighbors on both sides were white, you know, and the majority of the people that I interacted with were white.

And I actually remember the first time I heard the word “nigger.” It was kind of funny. I was maybe [eight] or [nine] years old, outside playing with my girlfriend Debby, stationed on an Army base, I'm not quite sure which one, I think it was Fort Belvoir, might have been a little later than that. But anyway, Debby and I were playing like kids do. We start fighting over a doll or something. And so, when I pulled the doll away from her, she called me a nigger. I had no idea what she was talking about. Well, you're a nigger, too, right? We started playing. We called each other names and then we went back to playing and we were fine.

Later that night, over dinner, I said, “Ma, what's a nigger?” I mean, you could have heard a pin drop. “Where did you hear that word? Who called you that?” My mother went ballistic. Meanwhile, I'm trying not to get Debby in trouble because I still didn't know what the word meant. (laughs) So I wouldn't tell her where I heard it. I mean, it was like, Oh, that's a bad word. Well, would somebody please tell me what it means? (laughs) And so, we weren't — I mean, race relations were different in the military. In the military, your father's rank mattered much more, at least by that time, to the kids. I don't know how it was for my father, but to the kids, it mattered what your father's rank was and the fact that my father was a master sergeant in a neighborhood full of sergeants made a difference. And the sins of the children are visited on the fathers in the military. That's why they wanted to know who Debby was and what she said, because we could have gotten Debby's father in trouble. Except

that I wouldn't 'fess up to who, you know, that it was Debby who said it.

And so, I wouldn't say that our lives were free from racism or anything like that, but we were certainly insulated to a certain degree, because of the hierarchy, the authoritarianism and structure of the military. You simply, you just didn't have kids doing things like that if your father outranked them. Now certainly, if I'd been around a bunch of white kids and their fathers outranked mine, it probably would have been different. But we were protected from that. I also remember Dad abusing some of his military privileges — and I describe it as abuse now, but I mean, GIs used to come do our yard, paint our house, do things. When you're a master sergeant, you could commandeer these young 18-year-olds to do things around your house and that's what my dad did. And so, probably now, that would be described as abuse, but back in the '50s, that was what master sergeants did.

FOLLET: It came with the rank.

ROSS: It came with the rank. And then my father actually turned down a chance to become an officer, because he had what's called a critical MOS. Do not ask me to explain what those initials mean, but he was a specialist in weaponry. And he got a chance at a commission except that the second lieutenant's salary was lower than E8 master sergeant's salary. So he would have had to take a reduction in pay in order to become a second lieutenant. And I remember them discussing it at the family table and deciding he couldn't afford to, he couldn't afford to become an officer, because of the reduction in pay and the impact on eight kids.

FOLLET: Do you remember how your mother — (interruption) Do you remember what your mother said? She was obviously outraged, but how did she explain that to you?

56:35

ROSS: She never did explain it. My mother was not big on explanations. She was big on reactions. So she never did explain to me what the word nigger meant. I kind of figured it out. I was not totally asleep and I, as I said, Debby and I, we continued to play and be best friends. It was something she probably heard at her dinner table. I innocently repeated it. I mean, it didn't make any difference to our relationship as kids, but I think it was my first awareness that there was a difference. And at the time, to be honest, the only difference I was aware of then was my daddy's rank and her daddy's rank. And as kids, we actually knew those things and those were the differences that mattered when you were in the military. It wasn't racial.

I remember one other thing that was special, was that the only time I had black teachers was in military schools. Whenever I went to public schools, all my teachers were all white. And I remember black teachers

in the military, where I wasn't exposed to black teachers in public schools. I went to white public schools, that had something to do with it, for the most part. But I thought that was pretty weird that the only time I [had a black teacher was in the Army schools] — my sixth grade teacher, a man named Mr. Grant, was very impressive and kind of scary. He was really into math education, I remember, being quite scary around how we'd have to study math and stuff. So in many ways, I kind of felt like I grew up in a whiter world than a blacker world, I guess, because of the military, at least, a less racialized world.

I'm not saying my father didn't have to deal with these things, because he was in the Army when the Army got desegregated. He probably had to deal with any number of problems and issues and stuff. But in terms of its impact on me, I'm just not aware of, you know, major issues of racism, not during the military years. Now when I lived in San Antonio, then I became conscious that there was a black and white world out here, but that was in civilian life, that wasn't in the military life.

FOLLET: OK. That probably is a good break.

END TAPE 1

TAPE 2

ROSS: ..tell you about Mississippi.

FOLLET: Oh. We're rolling. OK. Go for it. Mississippi is on your mind.

ROSS: I said I was going to tell you a story about my father and guns. Well, we had this old station wagon, I think they were called "Woodies" back then, with the wooden paneling on the side? And we were leaving from Fort Belvoir, Virginia, to San Antonio when Dad retired, and we were driving the southern route. And so my father — there were about five of us in the car, five out of the eight kids, I think the three older ones were gone, but five of the eight kids were in the car.

We stopped at this gas station in Mississippi. And that was back when the attendants actually came out and pumped the gas. And so while the attendant was pumping the gas, filling up the car, Dad runs into the bathroom to use the bathroom. He was coming out of the bathroom, zipping up his pants, when this white guy calls out, "You used the wrong bathroom. You used the wrong bathroom." And Dad looked at him and said, "No, I used the men's room." You know, he didn't know what this guy was going on about. He really did think, I didn't walk into the women's room by mistake. No, I used the men's bathroom. It turns out that my father hadn't gone around to the back and used the colored bathroom. Dad had no clue, right? And so, originally he and this guy got into a shouting match over this thing and finally, I just remember my dad saying, "Well, what the hell do you want me to do, suck it back in?"

He gets back into the car, slams the door, Mom was going crazy, because she's from the South, you know. One thing black men don't do is have a shouting match with a white man in the South. Dad is totally clueless and does not care. So we get into the car. We pull off from the gas station. Dad pulls off from the gas station. I swear, no more than five miles up the road, this car full of young white kids pulls up beside us and starts, you know, yelling at the car. Meanwhile, the kids are freaking, Mom's freaking, Dad's mad, all right?

And they start yelling at us and then what do they do but they fire a shot at our car. It didn't hit the car, it probably went over it and everything, but my dad stops the dang car. Needless to say, Mama starts freaking again. We're all freaking. The kids are screaming. Mom's freaking. My dad goes to the trunk of the car and gets out his guns. And starts firing at these kids. On this highway in Mississippi. The kids were probably totally stunned that this black man was shooting back at them! So they took off down the road. Meanwhile, Mom and all of us are totally losing it in the car. Dad throws his gun back in the car. GRRR! And then we take off!

It wasn't until years later that I realized the significance of all of this thing. It just didn't sink in then: 1963 in Mississippi and my daddy with

a car full of kids is shooting at white men? I mean, what's going on here? I mean, he did not grow up in the segregated South. He comes from [Jamaica and Baltimore] — I mean, he didn't think about going to the colored bathroom. I mean, it just never even occurred to him. He literally thought, when the man said he went to the wrong bathroom, that he went into the women's room. And he certainly didn't — I mean, he was a weapons specialist, so if someone's going to shoot at his family, he's going to shoot back. He was trained in the Army, for God's sake, and he had a trunk full of weapons. He was moving to Texas and stuff. (laughs) And the fact that we could've all been murdered in Mississippi, I don't think occurred to him. He knew he could shoot better than most people. He trained a bunch of little kids to shoot. He was not the one to be messing with.

FOLLET: Well, you said your mother, she had grown up in the South. She had a different kind of race consciousness, right?

4:30

ROSS: Right. Exactly. Very racialized consciousness. Knew her place. Even though, you know, she'd probably never been in Mississippi before in her life, either, but who could not know what was going on in Mississippi, except possibly my father. (laughs) And even then, I mean, he literally, he had a car full of screaming kids he was trying to get to Texas — that's all he was thinking about. He was not thinking about the implications of being a black man in a station wagon in Mississippi. I'm just convinced all of that never went through his mind.

FOLLET: What did your mother have to say about it? How did she explain it?

ROSS: Explain it? My mother was too busy screaming for the next two hours. (laughs) Explanations? Mom hollered and screamed and hollered until we were well out of Mississippi and halfway through Louisiana before my mother calmed down. And of course, the more she freaked, the more the kids freaked. I mean, it was just — but I can just imagine my father, Oh, God, if I could just drop these people off. If I could just get out — I can imagine, he was having his own feelings about all of this.

And the reason it came up again was that my next trip to Mississippi was in 1991. There's this lesbian couple, Wanda Henson [and Brenda Hensa], down in Camp Sister Spirit, and they were getting a lot of hate mail and hate crimes [directed] towards them for establishing this lesbian camp. And so they had asked me to come down there to talk to them about hate violence and how you fight it and stuff like that. And Congressman Barney Frank, the gay congressman, ended up doing a congressional hearing down there and I had to testify there, and I had to tell them at that hearing that that was not the first time I had been in Mississippi. I hadn't even thought about the '63 incident until I realized how long it had actually been since I'd been in Mississippi, and why I had never gone back or had any interest in ever going back to

Mississippi. But I didn't connect the two incidents until the 1990s, when it had happened 30 years before. I'm sorry, I interrupted you.

FOLLET: No, no, no.

ROSS: That's why I had to tell you this story about my dad and guns, because I think that was just a hoot — now. At the time, I was nine years old and screaming my head off.

FOLLET: It is astounding to think. Mississippi. 1963. Guns and violence, racial — were you — would you describe either of your parents as, like your dad, as a race man?

7:20

ROSS: Not at all. All my dad ever wanted to do was to assimilate. I mean, all he ever wanted to do was to be the best GI he could be. He was a hyper-patriot. I mean, we were the ones that, you know, flew the American flag on Memorial Day. We were the ones that, you know, went to the gun shows and Dad was a classic GI Joe. That's who Dad was. He was never trying to be political at all. Um, and neither was mom. Mom surprised me one time because I was talking to her about some work I was doing with the National Council of Negro Women. And she stopped me, like, apropos of nothing, she says, "You know, I used to be a member of the National Council of Negro Women back in the 1930s." "You, Ma? How come I never heard this before?" "Oh, we just didn't talk about those things." With no real explanation for why they didn't talk about those things, so I got the impression that (siren) —

ROSS: But that's why I didn't ever have any perception of my family as being political. Race men? Are you kidding? I don't think so. Dad, he was a patriot. I mean, the American Legion was so important to him. The VFW was so important to him, Fourth of July celebrations. I mean, even though we did Juneteenth, we also had to do Fourth of July. I mean, the American flag thing. And I think it was the classic story of a black immigrant trying to prove that he was more patriotic than the native-borns. Conforming. Conforming was very, very important to them. So I never talked to them about racial politics of any kind.

9:10

As a matter of fact, I remember when Malcolm X was killed in 1965. I remember my mom saying she thought it was a good thing, because she thought he was embarrassing. I mean, he was a black militant. That was embarrassing. And she didn't like Malcolm X and thought it was good. I'm not so sure she was that fond of Dr. King. (laughs) It's just not my family. Definitely on the conservative side of things.

I would also probably add, though, that you really cannot overstate the difference being in the economic cocoon of the military. You just cannot. I mean, while other families are dealing with housing issues, or school issues or healthcare issues, I mean, the economic draft is real,

and the difference it makes to people's consciousness and where they feel their best interests lie are real. I mean, I think my family's one of those that really define their best interest with that military industrial complex that President Eisenhower talked about. I mean, we were part of that complex. Our whole economic lifestyle depended on the military and so, I always suspected that my father probably never met a war he didn't like, even if he wasn't actively serving in one. I mean, he chose not to go to Vietnam, but –

FOLLET: Did your nuclear family situation differ in that respect from other members of your extended family?

12:05

ROSS: Oh, absolutely. Well, first of all, within my nuclear family, three of my four brothers went into the military. I mean, three of my five brothers went into the military. So, military tradition was very, very high in the family as well. And my son started to go into the military until I kicked his butt and told him I'd kill him first. I wouldn't let him go (laughs) but that's a whole nother story. But my mother's brother, Jim Burton, he stayed in farming — that's what my mother's background was — and lived in Temple. So I'm not aware of any other portion of my family having such high engagement with the military. My Uncle Gant was a retired serviceman. And I believe Laverne's husband was also retired military. I mean, retired military was pretty common in the family, but he married in. I'm not sure of anybody else. None of my mother's siblings that I know of. And if they went in, they didn't stay in like my dad. I mean, Uncle Jim might have been in the service because it was the thing to do, but he didn't stay in as a lifer, like Dad did.

FOLLET: You seem to be saying that the military culture really trumped, created, its own class status and its own racial reality.

ROSS: For the children. Again, I don't know what my dad's reality was.

FOLLET: But he didn't talk about it either? He didn't talk about it?

ROSS: No. This is a family that never mentioned the word nigger (laughs). We didn't know.

FOLLET: I just wondered if you were close enough to other members of the extended family who weren't in the military and that if they made you aware of other economic and racial realities?

ROSS: We never — we rarely lived around them because of moving around, because of the military, so not a lot. I mean, I saw them at family reunions and stuff like that. We did have an interesting result at one of our family reunions, where the white side of the family showed up, but that's a whole other story. Want it now or later?

FOLLET: OK. When did this happen?

14:40

ROSS: Oh, this was well into the 1980s. Every four or five years we have these big family reunions, and usually the family reunions are centered around my mother and her offspring. So if you had my mother, her eight kids, her 37 grandkids, and her 15 great-grandkids, you've already got a huge family reunion, so we'd rarely go beyond that. But this year, I think it was about '85, '86 or something, uh, they decided to take all the descendants of the Lakes and do like a mega-family reunion — all the people who were Lakes or descended from John Lake and what-have-you. And so they did so by putting ads in all the Texas newspapers from Nacogdoches up — not the *Dallas Express News* or anything like that, but the black newspapers and the community newspapers, all up and down the state.

So when I get to the family reunion, I get there late, because I was staying with a high school girlfriend and she has this fabulous home, and she gave me this antique Mercedes Benz to drive, so I was, like, tooling around town, you know, being a player. I wasn't trying to rush to the family reunion. But we ended up having the family reunion at this park, Comanche Park, because it was so big. And the way we enrolled people for it was we put the ad in the newspapers and then you registered by mail and then by mail, they sent you this purple family reunion tee-shirt. And the tee-shirts were really cute because they showed you what branch of the family you were with. It was really quite a production. I was quite proud of the family. And then my brother Charles swears he's the best barbecue man in Texas so he had done this whole spread and this long line snaking through to get barbecue and, I mean, dozens of tables occupied with family members. It was really quite good.

So I show up late to the family reunion, immediately head to my mother's table. My mother's fussing at me for being late, and while I'm looking around, I notice off to the side, there's this table of white folks. Now, frankly, I thought they just happened to be in the park at the same time we were in the park, but I knew we had rented the whole park. So I was like, What are they doing here? Why are they invading our family reunion, kind of thing. And somebody said, "Loretta, they're here for the reunion." And I said, "Who are they?" Nobody had gone over to ask. So the whole family was there gossiping — zzzzzzzzz — about these people that had on their purple tee-shirts, but nobody had gone over to ask them why they were at our family reunion. It was like a big mess. So I said, "OK, I'm going to go ask. I want to know who these people are."

It turns out that one of the children of John Lake had married somebody white who married somebody white who married somebody white. The Lake family — the name was still there. They were Lakes, actual Lakes. And so they'd gotten this notice about this family reunion.

I asked them if they, did they know that John Lake was black. And they said, “We’d heard something about that.” I said, “Well, what did you think when you showed up and all the family was black?” They said, “We were kind of prepared. We’re the ones that came.” And then they just left it at that. (laughs) I think my son or somebody got their name and address of the step-side of the family, so. I thought it was pretty special of them to show up at a family reunion and they were pretty sure it was going to be a black family reunion. And to have it affirmed for themselves that their great-great-great had been a black man, was just, I thought, pretty courageous of them.

And of course, once I break the stupid ice, my mother just embraces them like it was all her idea. (laughs) “Come on over and let me introduce you.” Ya-da-da-da-da. And my mother was the walking genealogical expert, so she was able to trace which of John Lake’s sons was their great-great-great and all of that and tell them all the family history that they probably didn’t know, about themselves and stuff. It was — that was a funny day at the family reunion.

But I wonder how long people would’ve just let them sit over there, without [saying], Who are you and why do you have on that purple shirt?

FOLLET: How did people handle it after you broke the ice, other than your mother?

19:30

ROSS: Everyone was fine with it. It became the gossip of the day.

FOLLET: Of course.

ROSS: You know, it just took over everything after that. We were talking about it. I don’t remember their names. I was just curious. I was not — I’m not that much into family. I was not trying to find a long undiscovered family. I’ve got enough family I know about, as far as I’m concerned. So I’m not looking. My son, being an only child, is quite different, he’s much more into family than I’ll ever be.

FOLLET: Were there differences within your family, kind of intra-racial differences regarding, say, the difference between the Jamaican heritage and the African American heritage, or differences in —

ROSS: Well, the major differences in my family — we had Native American blood, and so we used to make a big deal over which child was born with the Native American features. My sister, by the way, Toni is the one that has the most marked Native American features: the cheekbones, the flat-planed face, the thick, wiry coarse hair. My mother has the hazel eyes, and so we used to make — colorism is one of the things, I guess, that comes up with that, when you talk about that. So my mother and my sister Toni most show our Native American heritage,

which I'm told is Cherokee. I don't know. I'm not claiming to be a born-again Indian. This is just what's in the family tradition and it makes sense. I mean, if we're from Alabama, that's where the Cherokee were, Georgia and Alabama, North and South Carolina. So it makes sense that that would be there.

We probably were less subjected to extremes of colorism, only because we were on the dark-skinned side. We didn't have all those huge variations within our family. I mean, for as many generations as I can remember, everybody's about my color. So we didn't have the intermarriages into the family until, with my generation that started having — but the generations before, didn't seem to happen much at all.

FOLLET: And were there thoughts or comments about the Native American heritage?

ROSS: Never really played a role. I mean, it only came up when we'd ask, "Well, Mom, how did you end up with green hazel eyes? You're pretty dark skinned to have eyes of that color." Or — hair. Hair obsession is a thing in the black community, and so the texture of your child's hair is really important. And so, that's why it came up for both my mother and my sister, because they had this thick, thick strong wiry, extremely long hair. Whereas me, I was definitely from my daddy's Jamaican roots and my hair would never grow any longer than a fuzz until I was 27 years old and I started growing dreads. So hair was always a dividing line. But not shade of skin.

FOLLET: What did the divide mean? Was there a value placed on it?

23:03

ROSS: It was just that you felt somebody was luckier. It wasn't — it wasn't enough of a stark difference to really make a difference. It's just that I used to envy Toni for her hair. I used to be totally jealous of Toni's hair because it grew all down her back and — and here she is, deeply retarded with the great hair, you know? Here I am, supposedly sane and intelligent and I couldn't get my hair to grow.

And hair care is such an issue in the black community, because it's a source of pain. My mother would try to press my hair and used to straighten, comb and press my hair. And the reason I said it was painful because if she missed the hair, then it would burn my scalp. So I ended up with all these burn scabs in my hair every week from my mother trying to press my hair. So there was nothing joyful about Mom doing your hair.

Finally she took pity on me, and probably on herself, because she would have to hold me between her knees in a vise in order to get me to sit still for this torture. She started taking me to the beauty parlor every Saturday. So it was a big ritual: me, Mom, and Carol going to the beauty parlor to get our hair done every Saturday. Oh, that was the greatest

relief in my life, because then my ears stopped getting burned, my scalp stopped getting burned.

And I swear, when I was 14 years old, maybe 14 or 15 years old and I discovered the Afro, I was through with pressing hair. Never pressed my hair since. I think I wore a wig in my senior year of high school. When I wasn't wearing an Afro, I wore a wig. And by the time I was a freshman in college, I was through with the artificial hair thing, whether it was wigs or pressing, or anything, and I wore a 'fro until I started growing dreads. I started growing dreads in 1980.

FOLLET: Where did your mother get the notion that straightening the hair was a good thing to do for you?

25:10

ROSS: She was black. Every black woman did it. So it was not an exception. It was the rule. I mean, Madam C.J. Walker, the first black millionaire, made her fortune through hair-straightening products. She invented the straightening comb. So, it was conforming. There were no women attempting to wear natural hair, unless they had what was called "good hair" — I mean, there was an admixture of enough white or Indian or whatever blood in them that they could get away without straightening their hair. That was considered the good hair club.

FOLLET: Were there magazines, popular magazines around your house? Images? Popular culture images that you and your siblings were taking in?

26:00

ROSS: Probably so, but I don't remember being that much into them. I remember the *Sepia* magazines, the *Ebonys*, the *Jets*, but —

FOLLET: In your family, at home.

ROSS: I mean, I even discovered Dad's hidden cache of *Playboys* one year. Usual, customary kind of stuff. I was more of a serious reader, so magazines have never appealed to me. I was more into reading books. And so was Mom, so.

FOLLET: Did you have a television?

ROSS: We actually did have a television and I think we became one of the earliest families in our community at the time to have a TV, because there was a big deal made about our TV. I think we got our TV when I was about two or three years old, so middle 1950s, and it was this big, huge, black-and-white TV with a very tiny little picture tube. But it was a big enough deal that people came from around the neighborhood to watch our TV. A bigger moment was Mom telling me about being the first family to own a car in her neighborhood, back when she was growing up during the Depression. Because they were farmers, because they were self-sufficient, and because they actually were earning their

revenue off the farm, that she remembers them buying their first car, in like 1931, '32, during the Depression, and what a big thing to be the first black family in the county to own a car. She thought that was a big deal, so I do remember the first black-and-white TV and all the bad television that was on. Shows that the kids today wouldn't know anything about: "The Shadow," we used to call it "Johnny Stack it Too" — "Johnny Staccato" (laughs) — and those early 1950 shows that we watched.

But I was a weird kid. I was a reader. I've always been a reader. And I didn't realize why I was always a reader until recently. I went to Jamaica a couple of years ago for vacation and broke out into this terrible skin rash, went to my dermatologist, and she told me that I was allergic to the sun. She actually called it polymorphic light eruptions — some bizarre name. So she prescribed this steroid cream for me. I get freckles — white spots on black skin.

I called my mom one day and said, "Mom, did you know I was allergic to the sun?" She said, "You didn't know?" I said, "What do you mean?" She said, "Well, when you were a baby and I took you out in your baby carriage, you used to get heat stroke. That's why you were always inside reading when everybody else was outside playing." I said, "I thought it was because I liked to read." She said, "No. I couldn't take you outside. You'd get heat stroke so much." So apparently, I've always been sun- and light- and heat-sensitive. My mother thought I always knew. I didn't know. I thought I just liked to stay indoors and read. And it turned out to be physiological. I thought it was just preferential.

FOLLET: Oh, wow.

ROSS: But I always — my mother said, "You didn't know?" I said, "No, I don't know what you're talking about. I didn't know I'm allergic to the sun."

FOLLET: What kind of reading material did you have available?

30:30

ROSS: Oh, I mean, OK, yeah, I was reading, you know, *War and Peace* — of course not. I was reading Nancy Drew, anything else the eight-year-olds read or whatever. What advantaged me, I think I spoke about earlier — first, I need to speak about education. I went through the first grade [in three states]. I went through the second grade. In the California public school where I was at the time, they had the practice of testing kids for grade placement, and so at the end of the second semester of my second-grade year, they tested me and they placed me in second semester, third grade, so I missed the first semester, third grade. Then at the end of the second semester of the third grade, they tested me and put me in first semester, fifth grade. So I missed all of the fourth grade. So I ended up being two years younger than all of my classmates. That was only a result, in my mind, of not being smarter, but having gone to

military schools, where my reading levels were really encouraged by military schools. I mean, and my mother's an avid reader, so I think reading is just something we did all the time.

And I remember being in a class, my fifth grade class, and the teacher was giving out stars for how many books you read for a week, and I had read about ten books that week, and actually brought in my little poster with the stars on it and they thought I'd lied about how many books I could read a week, but I could. I actually could, I was devoted to reading. I still am. I never go anywhere without reading. And so, to actually have to sustain that. Well, fortunately, the teacher believed me. The rest of the class didn't, but the teacher believed me, because she actually had watched me all semester do all this reading.

I think my mother was a frustrated scholar, too, because she liked to read and always wished she could have gone to college and never did and all of that.

FOLLET:

She expressed that wish?

32:30

ROSS:

Yeah, in a way. How would I say that she expressed it? First of all, she was heavily invested in her kids going to college. I mean, this was — we were never taught that education was first through twelfth grade. It was like first through postgraduate. I mean, you had no option. That was not an option. So I remember [it] being a surprise when we were sitting around in high school and, you know, you ask somebody where you're going to school, and somehow when they said they weren't going anywhere, I was always shocked by that, because we were never allowed to get away with that answer — in fact, it wasn't even an option. I mean, where you were going to school was as normal as, are you getting up in the morning?

And so she placed a really high premium on education, so much so that she used to lord over my father for not having finished high school. My father dropped out of high school to join the service. And interestingly enough, when Dad retired from the Post Office, he went back, used the GI bill to get his GED and then went to St. Philip's College to get a bachelor's degree in math, just to prove to my mother he could. Because she really held it over his head all his life, that he hadn't graduated from high school, and she had. And so, this was her —

But the other ways that I think that Mom was invested in it was that — I think the way she pushed us. I remember having a huge fight — my mother, actually, by the way, did believe in corporal punishment — we were talking about that — the family believed in corporal punishment, not frequently, but you knew when you were getting it. But I remember having this big fight and nearly getting beaten by my mother because I brought home five A's and a B. She was so mad over this B and literally, she had a right to be mad. I didn't try. Anything I tried at, I got an A at. But I figured if I could get a B without trying, why study? She was so mad, she wouldn't let me go [to the prom]. That prom picture

you have. That was the prom that was threatened by that B. I had to bring that B up to an A before she would let me go to that prom, that ninth grade prom. So she was very much into over-achieving academically.

And then, when I went to college, I mean, she lived vicariously in one way for that. But then, on the other hand, she sabotaged it, so she was also very mixed up about it. But all of us who were able had to go to college. And all of us did. Not all of us graduated, but we all went through at least — how did somebody say it? We went to college and not just through college. You know, we had to go. And so, education was real big in my family.

FOLLET:

What were your thoughts about what the education would be for? Did you have a sense of what you would be when you grew up at that young age?

36:00

ROSS:

I didn't make up my mind what I was going to be until I was in high school, and actually it was — senior, eleventh or twelfth grade science class. I had this chemistry teacher named Mr. Pabst. And why does his name pop out right now, I have no idea. But chemistry was also a hard subject for me, and I aced the other classes without studying. Chemistry was the one course I had to study for. So what did I do, stupidly, but think that I needed to become a chemist, because it was the one course I was not bored by, I had to study for it. And so, I thought I was going to be a researcher in a laboratory doing physical or inorganic research, because I knew I didn't like the organic side. I didn't like blood, I didn't like — I had to bleed some Rhesus monkeys once and I did not like that. So I knew I wasn't going into the organic side of chemistry, but I thought I was going to be somewhere in either a chemistry lab or a physics lab, either chemistry or physics, major-minor thing, when I went to Howard. And that was about as clear as my thinking was on it. I really didn't have a devotion to it, but at the same time, I was challenged by it. I loved science fiction. There was a junior engineering society in my high school I was part of called the Jets — Junior Engineering Technical Society, I think that's what Jets stood for at the time. And so I thought I was going to be a scientist.

Now that I'm 34 years from high school graduation, I know that there were other clues I should have paid attention to, because I was into my oratorical society, I loved giving speeches. I liked debates. I was on the debate team. I liked reading *Newsweek* and *Time*, because those were the only magazines that I thought made any sense at the time. *U.S. News & World Report*. My first magazine subscription was *U.S. News & World Report*. So if I'd really paid attention to my passions rather than what I thought was my path, I would've probably gone into political science or communications or something that now I know I should have. Because at the time, there weren't things available like

women's studies and stuff like that that I could do now. But at the time, I thought I was going into hard science.

FOLLET: Were you given messages, either explicit or otherwise, from your family or elsewhere, about paths you could or could not take?

39:00

ROSS: No. We need to talk of the sexual stuff.

FOLLET: Yes, we do.

ROSS: Those were the messages that I got from my family, but in terms of academic pursuits, there were no limits based on us.

FOLLET: OK.

ROSS: There was no urging, girls-must-be-teachers kind of thing and boys-must-be-that. No. The family was not — not that I recall, maybe there were subliminal messages that I simply didn't pick up on. When I told Mom that I wanted to major in chemistry, she didn't blink, she thought it was great. Dad thought anything I did was great, so (laughs). There was no struggle over it. There was no steering of me into a particular career or anything. What was special, I think, for both my sister Carol and myself, is that we were the first generation of women not to work on our hands and knees doing domestic work. So anything that wasn't domestic work, Mom was OK with.

Now, probably, if we were doing this oral history of my sister Carol, she would probably talk about being steered into a nursing career, because nursing was seen as safe, but then, she's ten years older than me, nine or ten years older than me. So, it's amazing how even a decade makes a difference in the life options of black women. Whereas she was probably much more heavily pressured to go into a nursing career, where I was not pressured at all to go into anything like that.

As a matter of fact, she — I haven't told you about Carol yet, and Carol is by far my dearest family member. Carol always had a spectacular voice. I told you her father, Charlie Ward, was a musician. Actually, my father played the piano, too, so music was in my family, but Carol had a special voice, so much so that she got a music scholarship to Pepperdine College and that's where she ended up going to college, and she allegedly sang at Kennedy's inauguration in 1963. Now, I'm not so willing to disbelieve, because once the Elvis story was proven, who am I to say the other one ain't true, too? But I asked her to find some proof of that when I was there a couple of weeks ago and she said she had it, so I've got to get that from her.

41:00

But she sang opera and did this solo, apparently at the inauguration, and I tried to look that up on the Internet and couldn't find any proof of it either, so, OK. Accept it as said until I know better. But anyway, she ended up singing with Duke Ellington, she went from opera to jazz. She

left home — we left her in Virginia when we moved from Virginia to Texas, she stayed up here in the D.C., Virginia, area, and switched from opera to jazz and had a pretty good career for a while as a jazz singer. She ended up getting pregnant and moving back home to Texas. That's when she was encouraged, urged, to become a nurse, because that's a safe, solid career. You know, you've had your fun trying to do the singing thing, now you must become a nurse. And so she did have a lot of pressure to become a nurse. Thirty-eight years later, she's still a nurse. But she also still sings. She's a featured soloist at churches and stuff now.

And her son, that baby that she had, Michael Ward, is now a really popular jazz violinist. He's got his fourth CD out. He did a violin solo on this movie, *Interview with a Vampire*, Tom Cruise and stuff like that. And so, a fairly average family with a few moments of brilliance is how I describe us. We're really proud of Michael. He's doing quite well and he's working on an album, I believe, with Stevie Wonder right now. And so, Carol had a quite, quite a fabulous career and her son's having an even better career. And it was all because Charlie Ward and Alexander Ross were musicians. Well, Charlie was a full-time musician, my daddy just played the piano.

FOLLET: And your mother had had the music store. That's great.

ROSS: Unfortunately, I tested out quite early, and I'm not the musician that most of my family are. I have the ear and I have the largest music collection of anybody in my family, and I actually do have a perfect ear, but that's about it.

FOLLET: You have many other gifts.

ROSS: I know, but I wanted to sing, and I'm always singing. That's the other thing is that with my badly fractured, raspy voice, people around me get driven crazy because I'm always humming and singing. Always when I'm not conscious of it. And so music is my life, I just can't reproduce any of it.

When I was in high school, I did get into the band for a brief period of time, played what they called traps, which are the cymbals and the bells and the xylophone and things like that. But I never really devoted myself to it like I should have, and I think that's because at a fairly early age — though no one actually said to me, Loretta, you can't sing — whenever they tried to sing and my voice was added to it, you kind of got the message that you need to be the conductor or something.

I did join a church choir or something like that, but I've always been a frustrated musician and I'm so jealous of my [siblings] — because my twin brothers, Charles and Ralph, they have a gospel singing group and they've produced an album and a CD, and you know, Michael's got his four CDs, and Carol has her billboards and what are those posters that

people have from performances and stuff? Whatever they're called, she has her little photo album of all those things. And I wanted to be a musician but I never could quite get it.

And actually, I'm better off than my poor son because my son can't carry a tune in a basket. He's tone deaf, totally tone deaf, and I feel so sorry for him because he loves music as much as I do, but he's tone deaf. At least I'm not tone deaf. I just don't have the voice. Music's important in my family and always has been.

FOLLET: Well, you mentioned, on the topic of education, that many of your messages came from sexual experiences, many of your lessons.

46:40

ROSS: And we need to take a break right now — not because the topic is loaded, but I'm getting a little congested and I want to [pause in recording]

FOLLET: OK. Is it hard?

ROSS: It really is, because organizing your thoughts, making sure that I say the pieces that I want to say, doing a little editing as you talk. I mean, it's just a lot harder. And then, I'm a little conscious of the transcription process and so you want to speak in complete sentences and leave out the duhs and the uhs and we normally speak with all those kinds of things in our voices and stuff. That's a little hard. But it's fun.

FOLLET: You can let all that go and just — just be Loretta. That's why you're here in the first place.

ROSS: Well, I have this plaque in my office wall with all that I got down in the Philippines and back during the Marcos rule in the Philippines, there were a lot of political prisoners. And so once I got down there, I was able to buy this art work from political prisoners who were incarcerated during Marcos, and the plaque says, "What right have I to shed tears when others are shedding blood?" And so, I tend to think about that. It was, like, OK, this is hard, yeah, but it ain't nearly as hard as my life would've been 50 years ago. I'm not shedding blood, you know. Keep things in perspective. Anytime you start feeling sorry for yourself, I think about that plaque. What right have I to shed tears when others are shedding blood? So.

FOLLET: Well, there are times for tears. There are times for tears.

48:30

ROSS: That's not to invalidate tears. It's to invalidate the easy tendency we all have to feel sorry for ourselves, and the way to keep perspective on that is to think about who else is having, given a more difficult time?

So you had asked me about sex. Let's talk about sex, baby. Well, the problem was, we didn't talk about sex in my family. I think, because of

my mother's earlier experiences, she was terribly repressed around sex and sexuality. I mean, to this day, and I'm 51 years old, I've never seen my mother any way other than fully dressed. I've never seen my mother in a bra or a slip or panties. If my mother has underwear, we've never seen them. And that is how — she never came out of her bedroom anything less than fully dressed. I'm not talking about breakfast in a bathrobe, no. This is my mother. And so there was no discussion of sex or sexuality in my family.

I remember getting beaten by my mother because she had a douche bag hanging in the bathroom, and I innocently asked her, "Mom, what's this for?" Because it was those old red rubber douche bags that also served as a hot water bottle. But I didn't remember it as a hot water bottle. I said, "Mom, what's this for? Why is this hanging up in the bathroom?" And I remember my mother slapping me. She said, "How dare you ask me that? You know what that's for." I said, "No, I don't. What is it?" And she got so furious with me, because she thought, I guess, I was meaning to embarrass her or something. I don't know, but even asking about a douche bag was a pretty heated subject in my mother's eyes. So we knew nothing at all about sex or sexuality.

My introduction to sex was pretty abrupt. I was on a Girl Scout outing. That was another thing. My mother was high about us being into Girl Scouts, the Boy Scouts, the Cub Scouts and all that stuff. And so, I'd gone to this amusement park in San Antonio with my Girl Scout troop and somehow got separated from them. You know, kids hit the park, we just all run in all separate directions. I ended up being separated from them, walking around a couple of hours and not seeing anybody that I knew.

And so I left the park and started walking in the direction that I imagined was home. Probably I never would ever have gotten there, because the park was way on the other side from home, but I didn't know what else to do. And so this car pulled up with this young black guy in it, and he asked me where I was going and I said, "I'm trying to get home and I'm lost." I was 11 at the time. He said, "Jump in. I'll give you a ride home." Well, he didn't. He took me into the woods and raped me. And I remember him beating me up rather badly because I was fighting and resisting, and I remember he kept beating me until I finally just laid there and submitted to it.

Interestingly enough, it was before the whole wave of killing-the-witnesses kind of thing happened, because this guy was not at all concerned about me living. As a matter of fact, when he got through, he asked me my address, you know, and through my tears and my snot and my blood, I told him, and he literally dropped me off at my street. That's how I got home. He dropped me off at the corner of my street. I came home and I remember that I had on these white jeans and so all this blood was running down my legs.

My sister was in the garage, and that's where our washer and dryer was, and she was doing laundry. And so when she saw all the blood on

my jeans, she said, "Oh, baby, you started your period." I never disabused her of that idea. I said, "Oh, yes. I've got to take these clothes off." And so, I went into my room, changed clothes, brought my white jeans out to my sister, and she washed them, and I never told anybody at that point, about what had happened to me. Largely because I thought I was going to be in trouble for having lost my Girl Scout troop and having accepted a ride from a stranger.

So that was how I lost my virginity. I was totally repressed about it, didn't feel that there was anybody I could talk to about it. I do recall that my periods did start after that and so, it just became accepted that my period started while I was on the Girl Scout trip.

It didn't come up again until I was 14. When I was 14, I was sent to stay with a great-aunt and uncle in L.A., out in California, and it was pretty routine, by the way. Every summer, my mother would farm the kids out so she could get a break. And so we'd go stay with various relatives across the country. So this particular summer, I went to stay with my great-aunt and great-uncle out in California.

And my great-aunt had a nephew named [REDACTED], I used to say, and he began to sexually abuse me. He was 27 when I was 14. And I defined it as sexual abuse at the time but I can honestly say I was a willing participant, because he made a quid pro quo. You give me sex and I'll take you out, kind of thing. And so I spent that summer going to nightclubs, pretending I was over 21, and hanging out with this apparently romantic, much older guy.

And at the end of the summer, when it was time to go home, my periods were missing. And I remember asking [REDACTED] I said, "First of all, two things. Why is it every time we have sex, it hurts so much? I don't understand that. And secondly, what am I supposed to do? I don't have any periods. Does this mean I'm pregnant?" And I remember [REDACTED] saying, "Oh, you're just telling me that because you want me to marry you." I said, "No. I don't want to marry you. I really want some answers here, you know. What am I supposed to do? I'm not having any periods, and I think I'm pregnant." And he was into total denial at that time.

I returned home pregnant, also in denial, because I kept praying that I was going to go sleep and wake up and it'd be over, just like I woke up this morning hoping that [presidential candidate John] Kerry won. Go to sleep on it, hope that it'll be over. In total denial. That went on for a number of months. I think my sister Carol discovered I was pregnant before my mother did, because we shared a bedroom, and it was kind of hard hiding it from her. She chose not to say anything, though, until I decided to tell, and I decided not to tell. I kept thinking it was going to go away.

And then, one morning when I was getting ready for school — I was in the eleventh grade by that time, and I had turned 15 over the summer — I woke up in what can only be described as premature labor. Scared me to death. And so, I thought then I had to tell Mom because I needed

to go to the doctor. My mother went ballistic. First of all, she was in denial. There was no way I could be pregnant. She had kept a guardian eye out on me. She thought it was my boyfriend Lonnie, who it was not, because he and I had never had sex. She went crazy over it.

The bottom line is that I told her, and I was in denial because I told her I could not be pregnant because — that's when I told her about the rape. Of course, I'm not pregnant because this is what happened to me when I was 11 and I never told you and so why else would I go out and have sex and stuff. So that's how she found out that I'd been raped, which was probably not the best condition under which to find it out. We discussed our options at that time, because I had no intention of continuing the pregnancy. I was in my sixth month by then, and so we had talked about going to Mexico. This was 1968. Going to Mexico, because that's where a lot of girls from Texas went to have the babies — I mean, to have abortions.

I should also add that complicating this whole thing was a scholarship I had received to Radcliffe at the time, because I was a pretty good student and because I was a pretty good student, I had become one of the semifinalists in the NMSQT, or the National Minority Scholarship Qualifying Tests. And so as a result, I began to get head-hunted by all these Ivy League schools that were trying to quote "bring in" minority students. And so, I'd already gotten this scholarship offer to Radcliffe. So in my mind, I was either going to have an abortion, which was not legal in the U.S. at the time, at least in Texas — but I understand New York and D.C. had legalized it earlier, but we didn't have access to New York and D.C. We were in Texas. And we decided against going to Mexico, because too many women went to Mexico and didn't come back, and that wasn't a good thing.

And so the decision was made to stick me in a Salvation Army home for unwed mothers. And that I would have the baby in this home, give him up for adoption, and then come back and reintegrate into society, which was pretty much the normal thing that girls did back then. I mean, it was pretty common for girls to go visit an aunt or go visit a cousin in the country and come back and all the rumors about them being pregnant just disappeared.

BEVERLY: We need to change tape.

END TAPE 2

TAPE 3

ROSS: It is so amazingly quiet now. [reference to outdoor construction noise]

FOLLET: I know. That's the way it should be, unfortunately [reference to outside construction noise]. OK. When you say, "We decided," or "the decision was made," who was in on these decisions at the time? Were you?

ROSS: Mainly it was my mother, and there was this wonderful woman who lived across the street from me named Mrs. Jingles, and that actually was her name, and she had been like a play mother to me, and so I remember me, my mother and Mrs. Jingles sitting around the kitchen table discussing our options. My mother was so unbelievably angry that it was all she could do to keep her hands off me. And so Mrs. Jingles was the mediator, kind of thing. And so we found this home for unwed mothers, turned out I was the only black kid there, all the other girls were white, and even though it was constructed as a service to the community, it really was a kind of brutal experience. I mean, the people who ran it were all these Salvation Army types who were extremely religious, so that you had to get up around 5:30, 6 in the morning and pray and pray, and then they saved quite a bit on labor costs because they used us to clean the place and do all the cooking, so it's kind of like a pre-prison kind of situation. We were barred in and weren't allowed to leave the grounds of the place. Our families could visit us there on Sundays but that was it. We were never allowed off of the compound, and it had these high barbed-wired gates around it. So it really felt a lot like I imagined prison to feel.

And so I stayed there for the better part of three months. I went into labor about 2 o'clock in the afternoon on April 8. They rushed me to the hospital — they didn't rush me to the hospital, they took me to the hospital sometime that night, and my son was born at 4 o'clock in the morning on April 9. I recall that my mother was still so angry at me that she wouldn't come to the hospital while I was in labor. My sister came.

FOLLET: Carol?

ROSS: Mm-hm. I tell you, Carol was a much better mother than my mother was, at least to me. And I remember being so scared, so just totally out of my mind, with both labor pains and fear that they ended up gassing me. I imagine they don't gas many mothers nowadays — maybe they try giving them locals or whatever. They gassed me because I was frightened out of my wits and my blood pressure was shooting up and it was really pretty dramatic. Now, I mean, in retrospect, it probably wasn't that hard a pregnancy, because in my effort to hide my pregnancy from my mother, I continued all my normal activities, the drill team, walking to school, I mean I was a pretty athletic kind of, you

know, pretty good in-shape kind of girl, so I don't think it was probably as dramatic as I felt it was at the time.

And what happened was that they put me in the post-delivery room and then they moved me to a ward, and all kinds of crazy things happened in that hospital that night. The first room that they moved me into, uh, my roommate was this young Mexican girl who'd also just had her baby. And I remember waking up from the anesthesia looking down, and there were these bugs crawling on my bed. I told the nurse there were bugs on my bed. It turned out that the poor girl next to me had lice. And so they ended up fumigating the whole ward we were in and [she was] really truly hurt badly. I mean, she looked even younger than I was. I mean I was 15, she looked 12. And just the things that they used to do. The Robert B. Green Memorial Hospital.

Anyway, so later that day, April 9, I got woken up because they were bringing the babies in to the mothers for breastfeeding. And somebody brought my baby in, which I don't think was supposed to happen, because while I was in labor, the people from the Salvation Army had me sign the adoption papers. And yet, I don't think they communicated that to the hospital. Or something happened, and so when they brought all the other babies in to meet their mothers, they brought my baby in. And all I remember basically saying the whole time was that, "He's got my face. He's got my face." And literally, you see my son, my son is like I spit him out. He's got my face.

And that's when the whole thing changed, because I couldn't give him for adoption. I mean, immediately jumped into my mind this image that if I saw this kid 50 years from now, walking down the street, I'd know he was my kid because he's got my face, you know? There's no way I could go through with it.

And then people from the Salvation Army showed up and they were going to take the baby and I wouldn't let them take it. And that's when my mother came to the hospital to persuade me to give up the baby, and we had a big fight in the hospital. Fortunately my sister took my side, you know, This is her call, this is her baby, this is her right. My mother was, like, Oh, no, oh no, you're going to have to give that baby up.

Dad was pretty much a no-show in this process. He was with whatever I decided to do, but he wasn't going to make the decision for me or — he wasn't putting any pressure in any kind of way. I got a sense he kind of thought that it was women's business, you know. He was like — the only way my father showed emotion with my pregnancy was that he wanted to go kill [REDACTED]. He literally wanted to go kill [REDACTED]. He was pretty —

FOLLET: So your family knew [REDACTED] was the father.

6:50

ROSS: He was my aunt's nephew.

FOLLET: But they knew he was the father.

ROSS: At first I didn't tell them, and then I did. And when I did, because they had to know, How did you get pregnant? Where were you? We thought you were safe in Los Angeles. What happened? And so my father wanted to go assault [REDACTED]. That was his thing, to protect his daughter, kind of rationale.

So anyway, I ended up keeping my son and it was kind of funny because I hadn't thought about a name for him. You don't think about a name for a baby you're not going to keep. So when they came with his birth certificate, you need to put a name on it, I actually grabbed the names of my two favorite brothers, William Howard Ward and Alexander Michael Ross, so that's how my son become Howard Michael. I just grabbed their middle names and stuck it on the birth certificate. My son has never forgiven me for that (laughs) to this day for having thought so little about his name. I didn't think about naming a baby.

And so I returned home with the baby and of course everything totally changed. When I went back to go back to my high school, my high school told me that they couldn't readmit me because, while there was a suspicion of pregnancy, that was fine, but when you have the baby, you have proof that you've fallen from grace, and that they wanted me to transfer to a high school for problem children. And that pissed me off. I was like, Excuse me? I mean, this is my high school, and I'm a great student as far as I'm concerned. I was in the Honor Society. I mean, What are you talking about?

FOLLET: Was it someone at the school? Who was the spokesperson for the school?

8:48

ROSS: My high school counselor, a woman who had recommended me for Radcliffe.

FOLLET: Yes. What's her name?

ROSS: I have no idea. I have so forgotten this woman, because she's so associated with a lot of pain for me, but she — I do remember she graduated from Radcliffe. She was the one — and so, she was personally, personally hurt, felt I had personally let her down, and she said that to me.

FOLLET: Because she had been important in making the connection between you and Radcliffe?

ROSS: Yes, because that was her school. She was from Radcliffe. And so, here she found a great black girl she thought would be good for her alma mater. And for two years she had worked with me, nurtured me. I mean, these Ivy League schools, I don't know if they do it [this way] right

now, but you have to prove that you have the right social skills and so I had to go to an unbelievable number of teas and things and wear gloves and this is — I know, it sounds pretty bizarre now, but at the time you had to have the right clothes. One of my cousins, Lois Hoyle, was a dressmaker for white women, and so Lois made me some fabulous clothes that were just wonderful clothes at the time. Just wonderful silks and stuff. And so I had been through all the rigamarole, the preparation and things, to eat with the right fork and stuff that was deemed necessary to enter Radcliffe.

And so this counselor, I cannot remember her name, but I had been her pet up until then, um, was terribly disappointed in me, so she was the one that then decided to punish me. First, by not wanting me readmitted into the school, and then, told me that I couldn't command the drill team that I had founded and that I couldn't be in the Honor Society because I didn't have the right moral character. She tried to spend her time stripping me of everything that she could.

FOLLET: Did you have one-on-one meetings with her about this?

11:05

ROSS: I worked for her. You know, schools used students to do work in the offices and stuff? Well, I was her assistant. I was her assistant. And so, yeah, we spent a lot of time together.

FOLLET: Do you remember specific things that she said to you?

ROSS: Specific. Um, well, I remember her specifically telling me that she didn't think I could be on the drill team and I remember saying, "Well, why not? I started it." And she said, "Well, we don't think you can represent us anymore." I said, "Those girls can't do it without me. I mean, be clear on this. I'm the one who knows the drills. I'm the one that created the patterns, you know. I'm the one that's read the Junior ROTC manual and knows. No one else has done this." I mean, we didn't even have a faculty advisor. This was all Loretta. And I remember organizing this same cousin to make the uniforms and everything and so, it was like, How dare you?

And then, so, the compromise, and I fought over that — first, I had to fight to get to back into school, and they pretty much caved in. I mean, we threatened them with a law suit and had a meeting, the family had a meeting with the principal and they let me back in. But so that's when she started really getting punitive with it, because she'd lost the first, she lost her first battle but was going to win the war, kind of thing. And so then they told me that I could drill the team but I couldn't perform with them in competitions. So then my second-in-command had to lead them in competition but I could do all the drills and behind-the-scenes practices with them. And I should've fought on that. Now that I'm thinking about it, I should've fought on that one, too, but at the time, I felt I'd won.

And so my senior year was just one of unmitigated misery, because it was dealing with the parenting thing. I was 16, dealing with the rejection by the school and the isolation of the classmates. Because it wasn't uncommon for girls to get pregnant in high school, it was uncommon for them to have evidence of a pregnancy, because of the secret abortions or the adoptions. And then I was in a predominantly white high school and I was in the honors class, in which they only had three black kids in the honors class: one of my best friends, Lillian Martin, myself, and this guy named Carl Lewis. And so, after spending years of holding me up as an example to all the black kids, now I'm the fallen angel for the black kids. And so I felt like they visited on me everything they wanted to do to kids that didn't conform.

And I probably brought a lot of this on myself. I remember, even before I got pregnant, in the tenth grade, I wore a dashiki to school and, uh, and in the eleventh grade, because I had come back from California, it was probably when I was pregnant. And I wore a dashiki and an Afro to school, and the dashiki was down to my knee and the same counselor — this was before she knew I was pregnant — sent me home because she thought that I was wearing a militant dress to school. This was during the time when miniskirts were up to the crotch, and she told me that my dashiki down to my knee was inappropriate for classroom. And so, she sent me home and made me change clothes. So, it was kind of —

FOLLET: Was she white?

ROSS: Yeah, of course, white, very southern, very much a lady. And probably acting out of her own class and gender stuff. I swear, I wish I could remember her name. Probably if I got my high school yearbook I could find it, because she was the guidance counselor for the school. But it's probably Freudian why I cannot remember her name right now.

Let me see. What else happened around sex and sexuality?

FOLLET: Now, was she individually responsible for removing the opportunity to go to Radcliffe, or did Radcliffe have a voice in this?

ROSS: Well, Radcliffe had a voice in that because in my senior year, they withdrew the scholarship. I had gotten a full scholarship to Radcliffe, and the tuition was some unbelievable amount back then. Even back then, it was, like, \$20,000 a year or something hugely out of range. And so they told me that they couldn't withdraw the admission because I had been admitted, but they no longer had any scholarships available. And so I was welcome to come if I became self-pay. Well, that wasn't an option. I mean, the thousands of dollars to Radcliffe? And what was so sad is that I had gotten scholarship offers from other schools I didn't even consider. I mean, I didn't even apply to other schools. Schools were writing me because, again, I think some of the federal funding was dependent on them getting a certain number of minority students. So

they were recruiting NMSQT people like basketball players or something. There were recruiters that used to come talk to us.

And so fortunately for me, when I knew I couldn't afford to pay for Radcliffe, my best friend, Lillian Martin, had been accepted to Howard University. And so in the summer of 1970, I mean, long after people were deciding where they were going to school and all of that, I wrote Howard University, begged for admission, and lo and behold, they gave me a full scholarship. I mean, long after the application deadline was over and everything. So in September of '70, that's how I ended up at Howard University. I don't regret that at all. I still got a little thing about, How dare you, Radcliffe?

FOLLET: Can we go back to the, the rape when you were 11. You have told me that you have no memories of your years from age 11 to 14. Do I have that right?

17:50

ROSS: Absolutely right. I don't know what happened in those years. I have no clues. I have a vague, kind of — because I was in high school, I mean, I was 16 [in] twelfth grade, 15, eleventh grade, 14, tenth grade. So, 13 ninth, 12 eighth, 11 seventh grade. Sorry. And seventh through ninth grade is pretty much of a blur. I know I went to Jefferson Davis Junior High School. I was a pretty good student because that's when they start tracking you into an honors class, because I was early tracked into the honors class. I learned how to speed read in the sixth grade, and so I was a prodigious reader. I just read everything all the time. But I'm not really conscious of anything standing out in the seventh through ninth grades, because it really was and still remains a large blur.

Many years of therapy later, I find out that when you do have these early childhood traumas, they tell you the first thing that one does is forget, so that you can survive, and you actually do start training your memory to forget things. Well, I didn't know, but I am not conscious of a whole lot. I do know that in the ninth grade, I started dating this guy named Lonnie Brennan. He was a perfect gentleman, he was a wonderful guy. Played tennis, so that's where I started, I first picked up a tennis racket and we used to play tennis every day. San Antonio is a great place for tennis, and we played tennis a lot and so I do remember that.

FOLLET: Is that blur an actual image in your mind?

20:15

ROSS: It's the absence of an image that's more than anything else.

FOLLET: An absence.

ROSS: That's more than anything else.

FOLLET: Is there a feeling associated with that hole?

ROSS: Not at all. Not at all. I know I lived through those years but you couldn't prove it by me. (laughs) I remember being numb. I remember not really experiencing much, I guess. I remember being in junior high school. I remember high school being very racist — because that was the other thing. And I think I did become particularly, I think I did become more conscious of race and racism then because we went through to a high school that was called Jefferson Davis High School. A high school that celebrated the Confederacy. I remember protesting because they had slave auctions at my high school and they thought it was funny. And I was not amused. I mean, I didn't know a whole lot back then, but slave auctions?

FOLLET: What do you mean, a slave auction?

21:30

ROSS: Where you bid on your classmates and they got to be your slave for a day.

FOLLET: This was part of the —

ROSS: It was part of homecoming.

FOLLET: Now you were one of a minority of black students?

ROSS: Fifty black kids at this high school. My high school had fifty black kids in a student body of 1500. My junior high school probably had a smaller student body but about the same proportion of black kids.

FOLLET: Now how did that play out in the slave auctions? Were whites and blacks involved in this action?

ROSS: We were stupid enough to actually think it was just all innocent fun. I remember I wasn't signing up to be anybody's slave. That was not working for me. Um, but we didn't have what I call real conscious discussion about it. The loss of dignity is just, E-U. I don't think I want to sign up to be a slave.

At the same time, I — oh, I do remember one really disastrous thing I did in junior high school. They had a talent show. Loretta thinking she's a performer. Without ever having a dance lesson in my life, I decided I was going to do this interpretation of a jazz number. I think the song was "A Hole in the Wall" or something by Booker T and the MGs. I thought I was going to do this interpretive jazz number and got laughed off the stage because I was so awful and bad. You know, it was a junior high school talent show and everybody got laughed off the stage, basically. But I remember being totally and utterly humiliated because I just thought I could get into this talent show and do this interpretive jazz thing without one dance lesson in my life. I mean,

dance lessons? I remember being at a Girl Scout party and being taught how to do the jerk or the twist. I mean, dancing was not something that came naturally to me. My girlfriends had to teach me how to do these things. And so I remember that totally humiliating moment.

But I also remember spending a lot of time in the library. I actually became a candy striper during that period. Now that you're forcing me to, I actually can remember stuff. I mean, I just haven't put it together. I worked at Brooke General Hospital and I was in the library, and my job was to deliver library books to the returning Vietnam vets who, a lot of whom were amputees, and so that was my first encounter with the war, was seeing these kids that didn't look much older than me, with missing limbs. I remember I had this cart with the books on it and I had to roll it around and ask them what books they wanted to read. I learned about the Dewey Decimal System through that and how to catalog books and the card files and all of that. And you wore one of these little candy-striped uniforms — that's why we were called candy stripers. And so, I remember that happening.

FOLLET: Let me think. You said from ages 11 to 14, the memories are a blur. Do you remember waking up to something in particular at the age of 14?

25:10

ROSS: Because I was being screwed by this older man. (laughs) Life kind of changed pretty dramatically after that. Um, that's when I kind of woke up. Because life was pretty different after that.

What else was significant about 11 to 14? There was no sexuality then. If someone had said sex to me, I probably would've been screaming with my skirt over my head at the time. I was in a church choir. Our church, they didn't have a choir in the church, they had a traveling choir, a youth choir. And we used to catch buses and travel around. Not the country, but Texas and portions of the South. I remember my first trip to Memphis was with the church choir. That kind of thing. I think there was a lot of forbidden sexual activity on that choir bus. I didn't participate in it, but that's only because you knew not to sit in the back of the bus. If you did, if you want somebody messing with you, and if you knew, that was where you went and sat. But I used to think it was pretty funny that our parents would send us off on all these church trips and that's where they thought we were going to be safest, but in fact that's where a lot of people were getting pregnant, because it was on the back of the bus, in the church bus, on the way to these out-of-town choir trips. I don't think much has changed about that to this day. I think there's still this mistaken belief that if you send your children off to church, somehow you are protecting them.

FOLLET: Speaking of church, was Pastor So-and-So, the man who recognized you on the street years later, was he involved at all in any of the decisions around your pregnancy?

27:15

ROSS: Not in the decisions. Once I told my mother I was pregnant, then she made me go to church and do a public confession, and I was so humiliated by that. I mean, that's what we did in our church. It wasn't — we had confessional but it wasn't the private thing between a priest and the parishioner. It was a public thing. It was all part of the service. You stood up and publicly said what your sins were. And so, I went to church and publicly confessed that I was pregnant. You know, I have not been back to church since then. Not as a worshiper. Since that day. So it was pretty traumatic for me.

FOLLET: Tell me about that. Your mother told you you had to do this, and —

ROSS: I believed her.

FOLLET: So, put me in that day. You walked into church and —

ROSS: You walk into church. I don't remember the order of the services but I do remember, just like there's a time to tithe, there's a time to stand up and say what your sins are for that week. And I think I probably heard pretty normal sinning kind of things, you know, Oh, I didn't come to church last Sunday because I slept in, that kind of stuff. And so, I had to stand up and say, "I'm pregnant and I ask for your forgiveness and I want you to pray for me."

And I remember all of these heads snapping around and, you know, this buzz of gossip starting, and, like I said, I felt totally and completely and publicly humiliated. And I became angry with the church, just angry with the church, because not only did I have to go through that but I knew all these kids in the church that were having sex and not one of them was standing up and publicly confessing. So I was feeling singled out. I was feeling picked upon. I was feeling abandoned, you know, very much abandoned. And I knew I didn't like that experience and I knew I wasn't going to put myself in any position to ever repeat that experience again. So I stopped going to church.

And then going to the Salvation Army Home, where they were praying every morning, every night, every this. I mean, it was just the most — like in a nunnery. A Protestant nunnery, but a nunnery nonetheless. By the time I had that baby, I was through with religion, I was through with church. My mother was angry because I wouldn't go back to church but I was, like, What have they done for me lately? And what have you done for me lately? Which is really kind of mad and bad of me, because my mother — she was crazy but she loved her children. And so, she actually did everything she possibly could for us. But I was still angry at her, too.

And at the time, and even before then, I honestly say I was probably the most questioning Christian there was, because I simply did not believe one of the basic tenets of what they were preaching. Like I said, the intolerance of it. What makes you right? I used to ask them all the

time. I read the Bible, you read the Bible, you think it says this, I think it says this. Who says you're right? Who says I'm right? And, as I say, I thought that people saw religion as a frivolous kind of thing you do on Sunday but you can sin on Saturday, kind of thing. That inconsistency, that hypocrisy, got my nerves. And so, long before this happened to me, I had all these questions anyway.

And then, the combination, I think, of the pain of the confessional plus the lack of true belief I had anyway. I was always the doubting Thomas. I was also, like, Who says this guy is right? Isn't there another interpretation? Why is this? Why is this? And religions as a whole don't handle those questions well. The Church of Christ did it better than most. What I really, really liked about the church was the sense of camaraderie, the sense of community, the sense of looking out for each other. And that, to me, that is the best aspect of church to this day, and it's the part that I most miss about organized religion, is the sense of community. But doctrinally, I always thought they sucked. They never made sense. Christianity didn't make sense. But then, not only with Christianity, but I think I must have been an early cynic.

I believe that anybody who believes in anything too fervently is crazy. So I can't even be a card-carrying atheist. I mean, if you disbelieve that strongly, you've got a problem, too. (laughs) I mean, anybody that just gets carried away with zealotry, I want to go, Aaah, let's get out of here. Check me out.

FOLLET: Where did your support come from? Did — if you felt stigmatized and alienated, did the church rally around you? Did your family? Did friends?

33:00

ROSS: Well (coughs).

FOLLET: Want some water?

ROSS: No.

FOLLET: I don't know what I did with my own.

ROSS: I want some Benadryl because my nose feels like it's going to fall off. I must be reacting to this. (laughs)

OK. So you had asked a question about who supported me. Who I'm conscious of is, first of all, I mentioned this across-the-street neighbor named Mrs. Jingles. Mrs. Jingles was a very special woman. She was a Gullah from South Carolina who lived in Texas. I think her husband was retired military. Our whole neighborhood was a lot of retired military people. And she also was a school janitor, and that's what she did for a living. And she had a daughter named Caroline Jingles who was about three years older than me, and somehow Caroline and I became close, deeply best friends, so much so that after I had my baby,

Caroline was still a virgin, and so she came and asked me about sex the night before she got married. I was like, you know (laughs), this is just too ironic, but she was a virgin until she married Irvin and so she wanted to know what was sex like before she got married. But Mrs. Jingles was a play mother to me just as much as my mother was, and so she was a confidante and we talked a lot.

My sister Carol was certainly there for me and since she'd been through her own pregnancy, under the watchful eye of my mother, she kind of knew what I was going to be going through.

My mother was there in her own way. I mean, once I brought Howard home, my mother acted like it was her idea. I mean, he became her favorite grandchild. He was the grandchild she got to personally raise, unlike all of her other grandchildren. We actually started fighting over who was his parent. My mother — it's probably understandable that she could not really distinguish between the generations, when I — think about it. I have brothers who are 15 years older than me. So for me to have a son 15 years younger than me is not — for my mother, it was all confusing. She had been parenting for a long, long time and so when my son came home, it was, like, she just had another kid. She didn't see it as her kid having a kid.

And so, we used to battle all the time. I wanted to breastfeed. She wouldn't let me breastfeed. She determined when we both went to bed. (laughs) She got to determine these kinds of things. But the thing that she did that was the most painful was that when I went off to college, because I went to Howard University, she decided to sue for custody of my son, and report me as an abandoned mother. And I'm never quite sure why she thought she needed to do that. But the only way I stopped that plan was to tell my dad, who had no idea what was going on, and he was like, I don't think so. That is Loretta's child. That is not your child and you are not his mother and no, you are not going to sue your own daughter for custody of her child. She has not abandoned her child. We sent her to college. He was the sanity in this. And I'm still not quite sure why my mother thought it was important for her to get custody of my son. But it did lead to a strong breach between us, because my mother and I didn't speak for three years after that.

So, who was supportive of me? Actually, by the way, everybody was. I mean, my family was not mean to me because I had gotten pregnant or anything like that. My older brothers and sisters, they were awed. My sister Carol didn't live at home anymore but she still lived in the city, so she was very much there for me. And as I spoke about my girlfriend Lillian Martin, she was very supportive of me. She was with me at Howard. But she was one of the few friends I had from high school that didn't stigmatize me. To this day, we're still great friends.

FOLLET:

In their book *Gender Talk*, Johnetta Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall refer to incest as "our biggest race secret." Does that ring true to your experience?

38:00

ROSS:

Well, what seemed to happen, at least in my family, I don't know, I haven't done a survey of other black families, is that it's far more common than is talked about, as far as I can tell. Again, we were the first generation where we can't find any evidence of it, but certainly, my mother's story about what happened to her and apparently happened to her siblings, uh, and teen pregnancies going back to slavery. I mean, there was something going on that these 12, 13, and 14-year-old girls who were not exposed to the larger world, being pregnant in every generation. [discussion of time]

But this unbroken chain of teen pregnancies that didn't stop until my son, uh, I think is highly significant in my family and part of it was structural. I mean, we were a rural family, and so you ended up with all the generations living in the same house with each other. I mean, I'm thinking of Big Mama's house and in Big Mama's house were her children, her children's children and then another set of grandchildren when we were there visiting, and so you had all these generations together and you had too little supervision of the adult men who had access to young girls in the family.

39:45

And so, I don't think the black community is exceptional in that, but I do think that it is a great untold secret in the black community that we don't talk about the incest that does take place within our families. I mean, my greatest joy is that if I had to suffer incest, at least it wasn't my father or my brothers, because I think it's even much more difficult for girls if it was a parent or a sibling.

As a matter of fact, my son once dated a girl who was being incested — now that they've turned it into a verb — by her father and her brother, and he tried to rescue her from the situation. And it was a tragicomedy. It was just unbelievably hard. She was deeply suicidal. He — it was his freshman year in college and she was a freshman, and she tried to suicide several times while she was in college, and my son thought he could rescue her and brought her home to me. "Mom, you could talk to her about this." (laughs) "My God, kid, I'm not ready to counsel your girlfriend, you know. I can get her some professional help, but I can't be her counsel." "Mom, you know you can handle this. I brought her to you because, you know, so you can help her."

I say, yeah, incest and other forms of child sexual abuse are far more common than is known, but it has all kinds of sociopolitical implications. I mean, you're dealing with the black community that's trying to live down the myth of the mad black rapist, number one, who is a predator on white women, when in fact most black rapists are predators on their own family, but that's not — you know, black women are not victims in a white supremacist construct. Only white women are. We're the Jezebels, so obviously we did something to deserve any sexual abuse that happens to us.

And in the struggle against white supremacy, there's this strong disinclination to air dirty laundry in the African American community,

because it, again, seems to support all the myths about the community that are propagated by white supremacy, so when we started being active and fighting rape and domestic violence and child sexual assault and abuse in the black community and we got pilloried for it and we got attacked for it because we were airing the dirty laundry and in some ways being told that we were cooperating with our oppression.

It's far too complicated for me to talk about why the black community has such an uneasy relationship with sex and sexuality. It's beyond the scope of this interview.

FOLLET: And yet, your mother had you stand up before the congregation and reveal this truth?

44:00

ROSS: Yes, but she had me reveal that I was the sinner, not that I'd been sinned against, if you notice. In other words, I think there's a particular difference between not calling in the nephew and having him be accountable for being 27 and what he'd done to a 14-year-old old, but having the 14-year-old be accountable for what she allowed to happen to her. So I think there still is a gender difference in who is seen as being at blame, at fault, when incest happens.

FOLLET: So your presentation to the congregation was an admission of guilt?

ROSS: Of sin.

FOLLET: Of sin, not a presenting [both voices] not as a victim.

ROSS: Exactly. It was not, I've been victimized, it's, I have sinned. And of course, that's my fundamental disagreement with Christianity, this belief that we are all inevitably born as sinners and have to spend our lives seeking redemption is a crock of BS to me. Who gets to decide that? How can an innocent baby be born in sin, unless you define the sexual act in and of itself as the sin. I mean, this whole thing about "you're unworthy until you do a certain thing" I never believed — I didn't believe it as a kid. I even more passionately disbelieve it now. But it wasn't making sense to me at six or seven years old.

FOLLET: And when you stood up at 15 and confessed that, did it make sense to you then?

ROSS: No, but it seemed — at the time, it seemed like the thing to do. When I told my mother I was pregnant, I was severely beaten by her, because she was acting out her rage. Um, and I felt that the only way to handle this, I mean, the condition, the price for getting her support was to do what she said to do, that was the quid pro quo. And as I said, she was terribly enraged and I had no idea. Remember, she didn't tell me until 15 years later that she had suffered incest. So at the time, I just thought

my mother was a lunatic. Really, I thought she was crazy. I thought that she hated me. I really had no idea how complicated me telling her that I had suffered incest had been. And particularly, given how paranoid she was, because my mother used to go crazy every time my father and I went out. I had no idea. I thought it was jealousy. Every time my father and I got in a car together, we could count on a major scene from my mother when I got home. Oh, she used to go crazy, every time any one of the girls went anywhere. And literally, I always thought she was just jealous that we didn't want to hang out with her, that we wanted to hang out with Dad.

FOLLET: When you say, "went crazy," what would she do?

47:50

ROSS: Beat us. Manufacture a reason to give us a whipping. Just do all kinds of strange things. Want to examine us, kind of thing.

FOLLET: Examine?

ROSS: Examine, like, you know, look at your clothes. I mean, this is what we thought of as bizarre behavior. But we couldn't piece all the story together till much, much later. And she was acting out where she was coming from. She had a lot of healing to do. When I think about her being incested from eight to 16, and never getting counseling for it, never getting any healing for it, never even telling anybody until she told me in the 1980s — this was something that happened in the 1920s. I mean that — and so, she had to raise eight kids. And hold onto this and deal with this all her life. And finally, she decides to tell me, because I worked at the rape crisis center. That was kind of weird. That was real hard for Mom. So now, I feel a lot more generous and forgiving about things that she did back then. But at the time, I thought she just hated me, and I wasn't too fond of her at the time, either.

We used to get our usual spankings when we were kids and all that, but my mother was the one who did all the spanking. It was so funny, my father, he would always spank us when my mother told him to, because he was never around. He wasn't around to even worry about what we did or what we didn't do. He was not engaged that way. So here he was, he'd get home from work, midnight or whatever, he'd have to wake a kid up to whip 'em. (laughs) You know, Dad didn't care for that at all. And so he was totally half-hearted about it. Pop, pop, you're back in bed. You know, Can I get to sleep now? I mean, that was the way he was. While my mother's spankings took on a particular intentionality, a particular viciousness that I thought was just, you know, her going off.

FOLLET: Is this where the cane comes in?

ROSS: No. That was Big Mama that whipped us with the cane. No, no, no. My great-grandmother was in a wheelchair, crippled by arthritis, and so, she used to make you sit down between her knees and she would lock your head between her knees in a knee lock, and then she'd whip you with this cane. And the cane came up because my sister Carol recently had a heart attack and so she has to walk with a cane now and somehow Mom had unearthed Big Mama's cane out of the attic and so my sister Carol is now using my great-grandmother's cane and it's all — it's all scarred and everything. No one's ever refurbished this thing, and so we could probably point to some of the scars on it that our heads caused. No, Mom was one of those that when she whipped you, she was one of those, I mean, that grabbed anything. She'd whip you with an iron, she'd whip you with a coat hanger. Occasionally, she'd stop and get the formal belt. But most of the time, whatever was in her hands.

FOLLET: The knife.

ROSS: Lucky it wasn't a knife, right? Lucky it wasn't a knife. And she expressed her anger at us through spankings. And I was the uncontrollable one because I was one of those that always believed that it was better to ask forgiveness than permission. So I'd always go out and do whatever the hell I wanted to do and then come home and "whatever you're gonna do, I had fun, OK?" That's the last time. That's not the attitude you want in a child. So I probably got more than my share of it, because I was definitely not conforming. If I wanted to do something, I went and did it and then I'd come and take whatever punishment went along with it. I didn't — I mean, I'd calculate whether the fun or whatever I wanted to do was worth the punishment. Yep. I'm out of here. (laughs)

FOLLET: Oh. Well, maybe we'll — unless there's anything else here that's on your mind at the moment, we can leave it with you getting out of there and going to college, going to D.C., and we can maybe pick up with a little bit more high school stuff tomorrow. Um, and then move on to track what you do with all this experience when you turn it into political action, right?

ROSS: (laughs) Oh, that's true. There was a purpose to this story, right?

53:20

(recording room tone to 54:30)

END TAPE 3

TAPE 4 NOVEMBER 4, 2004

ROSS: I tell you, this is very hard.

FOLLET: You know –

ROSS: And particularly right after the election and what happened and how depressing it is that we've got four more years of Bush. This is hard. It really is.

FOLLET: Yeah. You said that at the end of the day yesterday and then again this morning, how hard it is for you to do this. What's hard?

ROSS: Well, part of what's hard is getting in touch with scabbed-over pain. I mean, I'd just rather not touch the scabs and, you know, peel the scabs off to look and stuff. It's never pretty. So that's part of it, but I'm used to doing quick interviews in front of a camera where you do a couple of sound bites and you're through, but hours upon hours of talking — it's a bit different. It's a bit different. It just makes it very hard. I think — I heard a friend of mine once say that she was a photographer because she could hide behind her camera, and now I think I understand that when you're behind the camera, you've got the camera between you and that person. When you're in front of the camera, it's like, you and the camera. There is no intercessor, so.

FOLLET: So although you've been interviewed a lot and although you talk about your life and your realities as part of your political work, this feels different.

ROSS: I think it's a conscious attempt to dig deeper, you know, go beyond the superficial, the public narrative that's easily available, easily accessible. I think I'm working hard to make it right. Maybe a little too hard.

FOLLET: To make it right? In what sense?

ROSS: Well, because I'm both subject and object of this project, and so, I'm invested in the whole project looking good, not just my interview in the project looking good. [Ross is an interviewer for the Voices of Feminism Oral History Project]. And so that, I think, is a little bit harder but I also am putting all of this on myself. I mean, this is not an external pressure. It's my perfectionism stuff.

FOLLET: Yeah, you mentioned that you were trying to speak in full sentences and that kind of thing. But you're — you don't strike me, it doesn't feel any different to me than conversations we have. It doesn't.

ROSS: Oh, thank you.

FOLLET: It doesn't. I mean, I'm not — maybe I'm just being oblivious, but I don't — it just feels wonderful to me. Is there anything I can do to make it easier?

ROSS: No. I mean, the oral history process is really a chance to just investigate your life in an oral fashion, and I don't think it's something that most people do, particularly in front of a camera. I think we're entering such new terrain, and I don't know if it's new to anybody else but it's new to me, to be doing it this way. I think if I were writing a biography or something like that, I'd have a delete button on my keyboard that I could use to edit and pretty things up or say things more clearly, where you don't get a chance to do the undo button on camera. So that adds a little pressure. So I'm OK.

FOLLET: You're OK?

ROSS: Mm-hm.

FOLLET: Well, tell me if you're not.

ROSS: OK. I promise to tell you if I'm not. Right. (laughs)

FOLLET: But let's acknowledge, too, the other piece of this that's hard, that this isn't just any day, and here we are, we're back again on — this is Thursday, the 4th of November.

ROSS: 2004.

FOLLET: 2004. Speak to that as the bigger context of our conversation.

ROSS: When I woke up on November 3rd, I woke up expecting to be in a changed world. I really expected not to have George Bush as president again. I dared to hope. I think I was so much affected by the outcome of the election because I'd let my hopes get so high, where if I'd remained my usual cynical, no-matter-what-we-do-the-Republicans-are-going-to-steal-the-election self, then I would've felt more like business as usual.

But I actually thought, once I saw the turnout — I mean, I stood in line four hours to vote, along with thousands of my neighbors and, I mean, just the passion that was pulling people out. People calling up wanting rides to the poll. I mean, it was just — it felt like a moment where we were going to change history. And for us to have more of the same, that's a big let-down. It was a really big let-down.

Plus, I have to honestly say, I feel abandoned. I mean, not only personally but as a member of the African American community. Ninety percent of the African Americans voted against Bush but 35 percent of the Hispanics didn't. You know, 25 percent of the Jews voted for Bush.

Forty-five, 55 percent of the whites voted for Bush. I mean, it's just like, who cares about democracy in this country, and why do we always feel like we're the canary in the coal mine, you know? It has to affect us worst and first and then the rest of America gets it. And so, I'm tired of waiting on the rest of America to get it.

I guess I'm pissed off, too, because who's going to understand that we got — we keep reelecting this protofacist, and then keep expecting that it's going to be another, some other person that they oppress. And so, let me — I want to talk about something more positive. I'm a little tired of being Bush-whacked. I'm real tired. (laughs)

FOLLET: OK. Is there anything from the material we covered yesterday that you wanted to add to? Did anything occur to you later?

ROSS: No. I went to bed trying not to think about the interview or the election. I got fizzled out on some mindless television.

FOLLET: OK.

ROSS: I didn't review the data to see if there was anything I omitted and I can barely recall it now.

FOLLET: OK, OK. Well, we left off, or I wanted to pick back up with, um, with high school. I'm intrigued with that dashiki that you mentioned. And you've also said that there was integration of different schools going on as you entered high school and that that affected the racial dynamics. Can you tell me more about that?

ROSS: Yeah. Well, I was in high school during Richard Nixon's presidency, first of all. That was the backdrop, so there was the Vietnam War going on at the time, the first Earth Day was in 1970, my senior year, so there was an environmental consciousness happening, the antiwar stuff.

9:17

But the thing that probably had the biggest impact on my immediate life was the fact that part of their efforts to desegregate meant that they were shutting down black schools and bussing the kids over to what had been predominantly white schools. And so in my senior year they shut down Phyllis Wheatley High School, of course, and bussed the kids over to Sam Houston High School, my high school. So almost overnight, my high school went from having 50 black kids and 1500 white kids to having a whole bunch of black kids, and there was immediate white flight, because any white family that could moved out of Skyline, did, and went on to other, less accessible schools. And they didn't do it with any real plan, and they didn't warn the students at Wheatley.

And one of the things that happened in high school was that you elected your cheerleading squad, who was going to be captain of the drill team or the band majors or all of those things the year before. And

so the Wheatley students came over there with their cheerleaders chosen, with their band major, drum major chosen, with their own football team, with their own everything, and they were told over the summer that their high school wasn't reopening, so they had no preparation. So needless to say, they came over to my high school pissed off. And I can't blame them. I really can't blame them.

And so we had all kinds of racial incidents at the school, minor fights. But there was no preparation on either side. I mean, the Sam Houston kids weren't warned that the Wheatley kids were coming. The kids weren't told that their school wasn't going to be there anymore.

And I do remember the tale of two proms. Where we had the regular prom, which I actually didn't care much about, the regular prom, because we always had this battle over what kind of music was going to be played at the prom, and I'm telling you the battle was not between whether or not there was going to be white, Beach Boys music and black, Motown music. It was between the two sets of whites, the ones that wanted the cowboy music and what we called the kicker music, and the ones that wanted the Beach Boys or the surfer music. So there was a big battle between the kickers and the surfers, totally — blacks weren't even included in that kind of cultural war. And then in comes the Wheatley students.

And so to keep the conflict down, the school decided to have two separate proms, one that would be white themed and one that would be black themed. They probably weren't that crude about it, but that's basically what ended up happening.

Well, before the first prom, which was the white prom, these rumors started circulating. (pause for siren) So before the first prom, these rumors started circulating, telling us, "I don't think you should go to the prom. I don't think you should go to the prom" — all this little whisper rumor campaign. And so, I hadn't planned on going to the prom anyway. Remember, I was post-pregnancy, wasn't nobody standing in line really to ask me to go to the prom. But actually, I had a boyfriend at the time named Frank Brown, who had gone to Wheatley, OK, but he graduated the year before, so if I'd gone to the prom, I probably would've taken Frank, but I wasn't going to the prom.

12:52

And then all these black kids showed up at that prom and literally caused what we called a riot. It probably was just a few fist fights and a few cars got damaged but we called it a major riot because it was the most exciting thing that ever happened at our school.

And then there was the black prom, which I also didn't go to, and apparently it went without any incident and so I remember the battle of the two proms.

Earth Day. Earth Day was kind of funny, because it was in April 1970 that they had the first Earth Day and because we were in San Antonio, a lot of people owned horses, people rode horses to school on Earth Day to celebrate the first Earth Day, and then they tied their horses to the bumpers of all the teachers' cars so there was all this horse

shit everywhere (laughs), and that was kind of funny. I was not into that, either, but it was kind of funny.

Now one of the most, I guess, poignant memories that actually didn't happen till many years later, but when I had my twentieth year high school reunion, which would've been, I guess, in 1990, I went back to my high school and there was a wall of photographs up there, and this whole wall was about 20 boys who had gotten killed in Vietnam within a year or two of graduating from high school, and that really was just sad. It was just sad to see how many kids didn't even last a year or two after high school. And they had the photos up as part of our high school reunion.

And I wasn't politically conscious at that time. I mean, let me be clear, too, I wore the dashiki because it was an act of rebellion. I had nothing — I didn't know anything about the Black Panther movement, the Black Power movement. I mean, I had not lifted my consciousness at that point. I was conscious of fighting pregnancy oppression, but that was my right to have an education. It had nothing to do with understanding gender discrimination or anything like that. I mean, in a revisionist way, I could go back and say, Yeah, I was a pre-Angela Davis or something, but I was not. I truly was not.

15:15

And so, I don't consider myself a high school radical. I didn't think I was a high school radical, and I don't think anybody would've called me one. I actually was pretty much a conformist. I just wanted to study. I wanted to get good grades. I wanted to go to college. I thought everybody that was protesting the Wheatley situation was a bit bizarre. I used to say, "Why don't those kids just behave? Why do those black kids have to come over here and, quote, embarrass us?" Not really understanding their resentment and how racist it was for them to have their school just suddenly shut down after a hundred years and bluntly told they no longer have a school to go back to. And to be bussed across town, to go to a school that made no effort to welcome them, no effort to really include them in anything. And so —

FOLLET: So there were differences between the small group of black students that you were a part of, that was already at Sam Houston, and the new group of black students?

ROSS: Yeah. There were clashes, but I don't know if clash is the right word. We were seen as the Uncle Toms. We were the sellouts, because we were already in the school. We were put in the very ambiguous position of defending Sam Houston, which felt like defending racism, and at the same time, my contact with the new students was minimal, because again, I didn't even have contact with the other black kids that were already there. We were in the honors class. So — and the honors class was deeply isolated. I mean, I'm talking about if we had contact in gym or in band, that was it. But in terms of class work, the honors classes were totally isolated. I mean, it's the same group of 30 students from

17:03

seventh grade to twelfth grade. We were that same 30 students with one or two people would move away and one or two people would move in, but it was that same group of 30 students for the five years we were together, so.

FOLLET: And were there racial conflicts among those 30 students?

18:18

ROSS: Not that I'm aware of to remember. But then, that's again, I hate it when black people say, "I'm not aware of racism." At the time, I was not aware of it. Um, there were obvious things that were racist, like no black person had ever been a cheerleader at Sam Houston High School, so I can point that out, but since it wasn't my ambition to be cheerleader, was I paying attention? No.

I do remember that when I started the drill team, I refused to let white women try out for the drill team, and I used as my rationale, and I'm deeply ashamed of it now, but we had these very elaborate drill steps that were like dances. And, you know, I didn't need somebody who couldn't do the jerk trying to do, you know, double time — I don't want to work that hard to teach anybody how to keep up with the drill team. And so I only let the Mexican and the black girls try out for the drill team and it's not like I had long lines of white girls trying to try out for it, anyway, but when they'd show up, I'd take them through a few drills and if they made any kind of errors, I was not willing to coach and train them and invest time in them, that I was willing to do with black and Mexican American girls who also needed help and coaching and training.

And so, I am aware, as I said, I'm deeply ashamed of a serious double standard. But in my mind, and admittedly I was only 14 at the time, but the drill team was one of the things we felt was ours, you know. We couldn't get — there was no black or Mexican cheerleader, *ever*. There was no black or Mexican drum major, *ever*. There were just so many parts of the school that were closed to us by tradition, if not by outright racism, but while I wasn't defining it as racism, I mean, I can say these things now, but back then, all I knew was that the drill team was ours, and I got a chance to set the rules, and I set the bar a little higher for the white girls than I did for everybody else and it was the one place that I had that power and control and could do that.

And the way the drill team started was that I was looking around, and they had Junior ROTC, or ROTC, and I saw the boys out drilling one time in the football field and I turned around and walked up to whatever the drill instructor that was — and said, "Is there something like this for girls?" And he said, "No." I said, "Is there a rule against there being one?" He said, "No." He said, "Come into my office." And I went into his office and he gave me the manual on what it took to develop a drill team.

And so that's how it started. It wasn't like I sat at home and said, "What can I figure out that I'm going to do that's going to be different."

It was not like that at all. It just, you know, once in a while, you get these flashes of insight followed by long periods of mediocrity. Isn't that what genius is? (laughs) And so that's what happened.

FOLLET: And you were the leader of that drill team, or the commander, what –

ROSS: It was called commander. We had all kinds of pseudo-army ranks. Um, we had to practice with rifle stocks, which were just wooden fake rifles and stuff, and those kinds of things. And learn a certain amount of military code and — you're asking me to dig back close to 35 years to remember this stuff — but I just remember the manual, the uniforms, the different discussions on the amount of braids you could have, and whether or not you had one or two pips on your hats. I remember, like I said, having my mother and my cousin make the uniforms because I wanted a certain uniformity in the uniforms, and there was no place you could go buy the uniforms. You can buy the braid, you can buy the tabs, you could buy the insignia but you couldn't buy a girl's uniform for a drill team, so —

Then there was this whole debate on how short the skirts would be, because again, it was the period of the miniskirt and I didn't think miniskirts were appropriate for a drill team, but a lot of girls thought a skirt down to their knees was shameful. They were totally embarrassed, you know. And actually, it was how they were graded, whether or not the skirt was more than one inch above the knee, because we gave them uniforms and everybody tried to shorten their skirt once they got home. (laughs)

FOLLET: So as the leader, you would, what, stand up front and kind of, like a conductor?

ROSS: Well, working with the guy who was the drill instructor. It's like any other band. You have to figure out the routine, and then you have to choreograph them. You have to figure out what group takes this many steps left, what group takes this many steps right, and you — do you want to do things synchronized or do you want to create waves, where people are a half-second off. You have to learn standard military commands. Getting people to march, and halt, do about-faces and things.

FOLLET: And did you stand up and shout those commands? Was that your role?

ROSS: Yeah, oh, yeah. My job was to drill and drill and drill. We were a drill team, so that was my job, was to drill them. I got that from my dad, you know. He was a drill sergeant, so I got it honest. It was effortless to do that. Shouting at people, making them do what I want to do, is easy.

FOLLET: You've told me that — I think you said, "I'm a commanding personality. I have a commanding personality." Is that —

24:24

ROSS: Well, this woman came to SisterSong, one of my later organizations, and she talked about women's ways of leading. And she's a professor at Agnes Scott College, Dr. Isa Williams. And she categorized different leadership styles that women commonly use. So when she named the commandeering style, the commander style, I knew immediately that was me without anybody — I said, "That's me." The whole room, Yeah, we know, Loretta. (laughs) Like I had discovered something that they already knew.

And there are different leadership styles that are available to women, and I'm glad somebody studied them, and, I mean, there's advantages to being the commander style and there's strong disadvantages. It is a very male-patterned style of leadership. It enables you to make fairly quick decisions. It requires a fairly good degree of analysis because you have to take a lot of unrelated facts and knit them into a trend and then take the trend and provide analysis and do it really quickly, and often not in consultation with a lot of other people. So we're good in crises. We're the people that know their heads. When everybody's screaming and throwing their skirts over their head, we're the ones that say, "OK. You break the window out the car. You do this." And then we'll save everybody's life and then everybody will be pissed at us because we told them what to do. But they're alive! (laughs)

But at the same time, it is not a democratic form of leadership, so I have to work hard at more democratic forms of leadership. It's not that I really don't want people's voices included, but I actually have to be convinced and I have to convince myself of this over and over again, that someone who has not paid attention has an equal right to say what needs to be done in a given situation. If you haven't done your homework, if you haven't paid attention, then I have a tendency to devalue your opinion, and I don't think that's a good tendency, you know, because that judges people based on their access to and acquisition of information, yet we live in a society that disadvantages people in terms of access and acquisition of information.

So if you use that, what sounds like a logical reason to judge people, in fact, you're supporting a pattern of oppression, rather than deconstructing that pattern of oppression. Actually, that came up for me again when I was working at the National Black Women's Health Project. We haven't gotten there yet, but we used to have the chief financial officer hand out payroll, hand out the paychecks once they were done. What that ended up doing was tying her to her desk on payday, because we had 20 something staff people coming by at all times of the day to get their paycheck. And of course, they had to get their paycheck on payday. That's all right. And so she was tied to her desk.

And so as senior program person, I decided, why don't we do this, why don't we start a signature system, where any three of the top staff people can hand out paychecks, and we'll have a book where people can sign acknowledging that they'd received their paycheck, and then you're freed up, Aubra, and then Leslie, me, or you, either one of us can hand out checks. We can work it out so that one of us is here all day, so that no one's tied to their desk. Doesn't that sound logical? Doesn't that make sense?

Except one thing. We had a project, the Center for Black Women's Wellness in Mechanicsville of Atlanta, which is the projects. It's a very poor, low-income area, and we had established this Wellness Center there. And there were women working at the Wellness Center that when they were told they had to sign for their paychecks, they went ballistic on me. Why? Because it made them feel like the paycheck had turned into a welfare check. Don't ask me why, because I didn't understand it, that they thought that putting that extra step, signing for their paycheck, was humiliating them.

Then I took it to Byllye Avery who was my boss at the time. I said, "Byllye, what's going on? I mean, most of us would be happy to sign to get some money. What's wrong?" She said, "Loretta, you haven't taken their lack of literacy into account, that for them, some of them can't sign their names, and you've just created a system that highlights the fact that they can't sign their names." And I'm like, Well, what are we supposed to do with this? She said, "Do away with the system. Just go back to the old system." I said, "Byllye, isn't there a better way? Let's teach them how to read. I mean, let's do something different with this. Let's not coddle them in their illiteracy and create a system to disguise the illiteracy, because they'd been hiding it all along."

FOLLET:

What did you do?

30:04

ROSS:

We went back to the old system. I couldn't swim uphill by myself. I was the only one that thought literacy was the answer in that situation. But it's one of those instances where your own class biases comes and bites you in the ass when you're not expecting it. Because I swear, I thought that I was improving a system. I had no idea that it was going to lead to pain and humiliation for a set of the employees. I hadn't really thought about it in that way. I had not looked at the impact of that system on them. Certainly, I do believe we should have given them the opportunity to learn how to read, but we're also talking about women in their fifties and sixties. These were not kids. So the whole question of why they can't read is so loaded that just bringing in a GED instructor was not going to get it, and it is an example of my commander style, not necessarily being the thing that was needed in that moment. And I could envision the system. But I had to learn how to envision the people that I want to work within the system better. I don't know if that makes any sense, but that's what I learned from that –

FOLLET: Oh, yeah.

ROSS: – story, and I’m embarrassed it took that for me to learn that. But I had not encountered illiteracy before in any significant way. You know, I come from a family that puts a premium on education, so I just didn’t know how people cope and disguise their inability to read or to sign their names, or that it could trigger such an emotional response when you’re asked to sign your name and you can’t. So those are the things you learn.

FOLLET: So you carry that lesson with you as you –

32:25

ROSS: All this stuff is an opportunity to either learn or shut down. And I like to learn. Shutting down ain’t fun. So that was high school. What else is there to say about high school. Um, I was deeply, deeply alienated from my senior year. I spent my entire senior year just praying that it would be over, because as I said, I was getting punished by the faculty and the staff, I didn’t fit in any “in” group anymore so even though I was still in honors class, I just felt different. I was the kid that had a baby and I think I was the only kid with a baby in my whole high school that I knew of. And so I felt that I was moving into a more adult phase in my life, and so the kids started seeming very silly to me at the time, with things that — the pranks, the guys that would walk up behind you and popped your bra strap and stuff. I mean, that kind of stuff just felt unbelievably silly to me in my senior year of high school, so I felt really alienated from the whole high school process. And so, rather than look forward to graduation, I just wanted to get it over with. I just wanted to get out of San Antonio. Because by that time, I was pretty clear I didn’t want to live in San Antonio anymore. I wanted to get out of my mother’s house. I was pretty clear. I didn’t even apply to any schools in Texas and even, I think it was Trinity University offered me a full scholarship. I threw the letter into the trash so Mama wouldn’t even know that I’d gotten it. I was not –

FOLLET: This was Trinity in Texas?

ROSS: In San Antonio. I was not staying in Texas, the University of Texas, none of that. I wanted to go as far away to college as I could possibly get and still stay in the United States. And I think if I’d been offered any opportunity to go overseas, I probably would’ve taken that, so.

FOLLET: You told me that one of the reasons you chose Howard University over, say, Trinity and other options that you had was because not only was it not in San Antonio, but it offered an all-black educational culture that you hadn’t experienced before. You’d always been a minority in your –

34:32

ROSS: Exactly. I'd never gone to — well, not never, never is too strong a word — rarely had I gone to an all-black school. There were moments I went to a black school. The last three months of first grade and second grade, I was in a black school, something like that. Or two months out of my sixth grade year, I was in a black school, because again, with the moving, and the things that we did. But I remembered my educational experience being a minority in a white school, particularly those last five, six years of it from seventh through twelfth grade, definitely, that same cohort of 30 kids. And so —

FOLLET: How did being a minority, if you were quite conscious of it, what did it feel like? What was that awareness?

ROSS: Well, I'm not quite sure if one is aware of it, because you tend to take it for granted. I mean, like I said, we lived in Watts, we lived in black communities, but I don't remember having a time when I could say the majority of my time was spent in all-black anything. We were on military bases. We just weren't. And so you're only conscious of being a minority when you're conscious of what it would be like if you're not a minority, kind of thing. I don't know if that makes sense, but —

FOLLET: Sure it does.

ROSS: — but at the same time, you knew that there were privileges that only white kids got. Like I said, I knew that the debate over the prom music had nothing to do with the music I was listening to. It was a fight between two groups of white kids and you knew who had the power and the privilege at the school. That was taken for granted.

But at the same time, I was pretty disgusted by people who wanted to overly assimilate. As a matter of fact, if you notice that I mentioned my girlfriend Lillian as one of my best friends, but I don't mention Carl as much. Carl Lewis was one of those guys, and not the athlete — this Carl was in my class, he was one of those guys that I felt overly assimilated. I mean, he talked in what we called a very proper tone. He was into denying his blackness. He was into dating white girls, which was always problematic. I mean, he showed no interest in black girls. He was just weird, as far as I was concerned, and he seemed to be sad that he was black. And so he was an example of where *not* to go with it.

I'd always felt that even though the system of privileges and stuff was there — I don't know, maybe I had ambitions that weren't about those things anyway. Maybe I did, but I always knew that I could carve out my own path and do what I wanted to do, so I wasn't defined by them, and I think that that's always been with me. I don't even know when I learned that. But I've always known that I was not defined by my external circumstances.

But it's also part of being entirely and totally self-centered, entirely and totally self-centered. The only opinion that matters is your own.

(laughs) You know, whether or not somebody else thinks you should be on the drill team — I mean, on the cheerleading squad or something, it really doesn't matter if you don't care about their opinion in the first place. So I mean, it's not a good thing to be self-centered, but it's also insulating. So that I didn't see myself necessarily competing for other people's good opinion of me.

So looking back, I think I'm — I guess I'm sad that I was not more aware and can say, OK, I can point — or that I wasn't a greater fighter against racism or whatever. I can honestly say, I was frankly embarrassed by the behavior, the anger of the black students coming from Wheatley. I thought that they were mean to us, they were mean to everybody, but they had a right to be mean. But at the time, I was on the other side, so I didn't like them being mean. The only thing that protected me was that my boyfriend was, at the time, Frank Brown, was on the football team at Wheatley and he was the kicker, I believe. And so the fact that I dated one of their star football players helped a lot, probably, so that I didn't actually get picked on as much as would've happened if I wasn't dating Frank.

Frank and I, interestingly enough, had gotten together right after my baby was born, and the whole world thought he was the father of the baby, which Frank, to this day, laughs at that. I mean, we've stayed in touch over the years. He's since married and had five daughters and everything, something like that. But to this day, when Frank walks down the streets of San Antonio, Texas, people ask him about his son, and he's never had a son. He had a girlfriend who had a son in high school, but everybody, half the community still thinks that Frank is my son's father and he's not, and this has just become a great joke amongst us. And then, to make it even worse, they look alike. (laughs) So the community is absolutely convinced that my son is his —

FOLLET: Oh, no. Is his son.

ROSS: — is his son, and he's not, and so it's a great joke amongst us. Which, ironically, he only had girls. He got married and only had girls, so when they say, "How's your son?" he knows exactly —

FOLLET: He knows what they're talking about.

41:00

ROSS: — who they're talking about. And Frank reminded me, actually, I mean, I was really lucky when I was thinking about it, all the crazy stuff that happened in my life, but even during that period, Frank and Lonnie, the guy I dated in the ninth grade and the guy I dated in my senior year of high school, I did not remember this until they both told me this, that they had both asked me to marry them because I was pregnant. They were going to be like the shield, and stuff. I didn't remember none of this stuff. I was, like, I guess I was just too immersed in my own misery. Frank went to the Naval Academy in Annapolis when I went to Howard,

and, like I said, he was a year ahead of me and so we stayed in contact while he was at the Naval Academy and actually came to D.C. a couple of times and we continued to date off and on, not anything special or anything.

And a couple of years ago, he reminded me of that. Do you know how different our lives would have been if we'd gotten married? I said, "Hell yeah, if you'd ever asked me." "What do you mean, if I'd ever asked you?" And then he reminded me. Now he, I remembered. Lonnie I did not remember. But once he told me, he said, "Do you remember when I told you that, you know, Howard needs a father and everybody thinks I'm his father anyway, so why don't we just go and make it?" And I said, "But that'll make it seem like we were lying, when I said you weren't his father, so I can't marry you because everyone will think we were lying." And until he reminded me of that conversation, I had totally forgotten that it had ever taken place.

FOLLET: So before you went off to college, you had two invitations to –

ROSS: To get married.

FOLLET: To not do — not go off to college and to just settle into being a –

45:55

ROSS: Which was also very common, too. It was very — the 1960s and 70s, it was very common to get married right after high school. This was not socially that unusual. Um, and Lonnie and I stayed close friends. I mean, we stayed friends even after we had formally broke up. I can actually say one thing I really like about myself is that I tend to remain close friends with men that I've dated, and through the years, we all stayed friends. I rarely break up with anybody in anger. We might drift apart but we don't hate each other or anything. And so he and I stayed in loose communication for a few years and then he dropped out of sight for 20 years.

I should also add that my mother is the nexus through which people can always find me. Her number hasn't changed in 50 years, so they can always call my mother's number and say, Where's your daughter Loretta? and she'll give them my latest phone number. And so I am able to stay in touch with people pretty easily that way.

Frank went on to become a photographer for a newspaper in San Antonio, because after he got out of the Navy, he went right back to San Antonio, and so he was easily locatable, and then, at some point, my son and he were in the same ski club together. So they were skiing together again, under the assumption that there was a little father-son thing going on. I don't know how my son got into skiing, but that's a whole nother story. And so we were able to stay in touch. So, yeah.

But the craziest part, Joyce, isn't that they asked me, is that I totally forgot that I'd been asked. I spent the next ten years saying, "Why doesn't anybody want to marry me?" I used to think that I was

unmarriageable because I had a kid. So the truth doesn't heal the negative messages you have about yourself. I actually thought I was unmarriageable because I had a child. I didn't even remember that these things had happened until the guys reminded me. So what does that say about teen pregnancy and self-image and things like that? And I'm sure I continue to carry a negative self-image, but I was more stunned that I'd forgotten, and how completely and totally I'd forgotten.

FOLLET: Wow. So in spite of these offers, off you went to Howard.

ROSS: I went to Howard, majoring in chemistry. What a crazy thing to do. Um, in the summer of 1970, I moved from San Antonio to Washington, D.C. I ended up staying in a dorm called the Meridian Hill dormitory, which was kind of special, because it was the first coed dorm for Howard University — coed meaning that that they had 600 girls and 100 men. It was a former huge hotel that the university had bought over on 16th and Euclid, and converted to a dormitory. Well, because it had been a hotel, it actually had quite a few amenities that aren't normal in dormitories, like we had a swimming pool in the basement. There was, like, some kind of fried chicken place still on the premises, a dry cleaners — things that were not normal in dormitories at the time.

And it was off campus. It was a 25-minute walk from campus to this dormitory. I believe the plan was for them to only put upper classmen in it, but my freshmen class was so large that they had to put freshmen in it, and then, because I had applied so late, I think that's how I ended up over there, because they had no intention really of putting freshmen over there.

My girlfriend Lillian ended up on a dormitory on campus and I really wished I'd been in her dormitory, but there was certain kind of status in being in the Meridian Hill dorm, because it was coed. And this was a big deal back then. I mean, it's hard to describe. When we had such rules on dating and men in girls' dorms, all had to be out by 9 or 10 o'clock and they had to sign in and get totally escorted. I mean, there were all kinds of rules on coed visitation, much less coed habitation.

FOLLET: So the rules were different in your dorm? They had to be.

ROSS: They had to be, because they had — well, what was bizarre for us is that they put all the boys, or the men, on the top floor, which I believe was the seventh floor, and then they had floors one through six all women. But then they tried to equalize out some of the amenities, so they had put a big pool table in for the boys, and of course, that's where I learned how to shoot pool, because I used it more than any of the men in the dorm — um, those kinds of things. We used to sneak into the swimming pool. We were not supposed to use the swimming pool. They tried to lock it off to us, but we figured out a way to open it up and go skinny dipping at night and do all kinds of crazy things.

We also were not supposed to be able to have access to the roof, but we got access to the roof one year, well, that year, and there was — this was during the period when there were still riots going on, race riots going on because of — well, Dr. King had been killed in '68, '69 had seen some riots, '70 had seen some riots. And so, there was this riot in Washington caused by police brutality — what else? — and it spilled over from 14th Street, where it had originated, to 16th Street, where we were, which is only two blocks away. So we went to the top of our building and started pelting the cops with rocks and stuff, which, of course, we should have not been doing, but we did. They ended up tear-gassing our building and even the kids who weren't even involved in it got tear-gassed, because they tear-gassed the whole building, both from the top and through the doors and stuff like that. So that's when we thought we were revolutionaries.

But it was that freshman year at Howard that I became politically conscious. I mean, there were two books that were put into my hands almost simultaneously. The first one was the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* by Alex Haley, and the second was *The Black Woman* by Toni Cade Bambara, and I'm not quite sure how that happened, but those were the two books that changed my life.

FOLLET: Were they part of the curriculum?

50:10

ROSS: I was majoring in chemistry. This stuff was — I wasn't taking any liberal, poli-sci stuff. I didn't take those courses until much later, really. No, this was — I don't even remember how. I do remember seeing a sign posted around campus that if you wanted to, you know, serve in the student government or something, come to a meeting somewhere. I went to that meeting and the next thing I knew, I was on the slate for class vice-president, and I became vice-president of my freshman class. Um, and actually there was some, yeah, there was some controversy over who was — whether I could even be on the slate at the time. I mean, this was 1970 — what can I say? So it was probably in the midst of that that somebody put *The Black Woman* in my hands. I read it and it started changing my life. And then, like I said, I was reading *Malcolm X* at the same time, and so —

FOLLET: Did you have to fight to run for vice-president?

ROSS: No, but it was just black machoism at the time, whether or not — because if the president was a man and you know, they were talking about the woman should be the secretary and not the vice-president and all of that. I think it was just mouthing off. I don't think anybody really meant it, or, if they did mean it, they couldn't make it stick.

FOLLET: So you sat down and read those books.

ROSS: Yes.

FOLLET: Do you remember reading them? Do you remember your reaction?

51:55

ROSS: It was like a whole new world had been opened up to me, because I had not thought of myself as — it wasn't — I don't want to seem silly as saying I hadn't thought of myself as black or a woman before I read those books, but the politics of being black, the politics of being a black woman, I hadn't really thought about up until that, you know, till my freshman year in college. I can't pretend that I had any earlier consciousness other than that. I was also reading other stuff. I was taking pre-calculus and physics and all of these other things for my major. I always read a lot, anyway, so it wasn't anything for me to take a book and be through with it the next day, which is basically what I did with both of those.

FOLLET: Do you remember particular insights or particular passages from either of those that just stopped you cold?

ROSS: Well, I think that both of them, dissimilar as they were, identified white racism for me, named it in a way that I had not named it for myself. And again, I'm late to the party. I mean, this was back when the Black Panthers were active, when Angela Davis was either on the run or in jail and George Jackson — I mean, all this stuff was going on around me and I was oblivious to it. So it was my wake-up call. It was, like, that's the only way to describe it, as a wake-up call.

And one thing I didn't say about San Antonio that may partially explain it, San Antonio's race and class structure is special. What makes it special is that the majority of the population has and always will be Mexican American. It's 60 percent Mexican American. Because of that, the African Americans are used as the buffer class to keep the Mexican Americans out of the job market. So our particular racial arrangement is that the town, at the time, and it's probably close to these percentages now: 20 percent white, 20 percent African American, and 60 percent Mexican-American. And so that is why the whole Chicano movement came out of the barrios of San Antonio. They were the ones on the bottom. And unfortunately, blacks were taught a lot of racism to participate in keeping them on the bottom.

53:52

And so in a bizarre way, I was much more conscious of the oppression that Mexican Americans were experiencing than I was that blacks were experiencing, because of the privilege — that's a bad word to use — but the buffer position that blacks had in San Antonio. It's hard to explain that when the paradigm is much more black and white in other parts of the South, particularly. But in San Antonio there used to be signs "No Mexicans Allowed" and I remember seeing those signs long — I never saw a sign that said "Colored Only" but I did see signs

that said “No Mexicans” and so that’s why the Chicano movement grew out of our barrios.

So that’s the consciousness that I brought — if you can call it consciousness — that I brought with me to Howard University. I was not as aware of anti-black oppression as I was of looking at what was happening to Mexicans. As a matter of fact, it was controversial amongst the black girls for me to include the Mexican girls on the drill team. Nobody fought to have the white girls, but there were people who fought me on having Mexican girls on the drill team. And there were black girls that fought me on that. So that’s a really important aspect I hadn’t lifted up about San Antonio.

FOLLET: That’s big, that’s big.

END TAPE 4

TAPE 5

FOLLET: Too in the moment of 19 –

ROSS: I feel so stupid because if I had learned to speak Spanish right then and life would be different for me.

FOLLET: [to videographer] Are we on?
So that racial structure was also a class structure in San Antonio.

ROSS: Oh, very much, yeah, because the racial structure became the explanation for the class structure. And the majority of the blacks, particularly in San Antonio, were part of the military industrial complex, as Eisenhower put it. I mean, we were Army brats, we were Air Force brats. There were five Air Force bases and one Army base in San Antonio at the time. The military *was* our industry and so the blacks who were there were military brats that had spent 20 years, 30 years in the Army. Fortunately, that made them eminently employable by the civilian population and preferred to the average Mexican, who did not have the benefits of the quality education or the military experience or what have you. And that was the way it was in the 60s in San Antonio.

As I said, that's why the Chicano movement, the Brown Power movement, came straight out of San Antonio's barrios. The only ghettos were Mexican. The blacks were allowed to slip into that lower-middle-class, home-owning-class status. I mean, I got so mad at my parents. My parents bought their house fairly easily. Their house was \$97 a month. I couldn't believe it (laughs). At the time, I was living in Washington, D.C., paying like \$600 to \$800 a month for a rat-infested apartment. My parents still were only paying 97 dollars a month in mortgage.

FOLLET: For a house?

ROSS: For a whole house, right. I just thought there was something wrong with this picture.

FOLLET: So that helps explain, I mean, that racial composition in San Antonio helps explain why you would've been startled by some of the messages in *Malcolm X* and *The Black Woman*?

2:40

ROSS: Absolutely, absolutely. And to be self-critical, I had opportunity to pay attention. I mean, as I said, I was addicted to news magazines. I mean, I was pretty good at reading my news magazines and stuff. And so I probably had overly bought into the white construct as an explanation of the world. Being, wondering by the March on Washington, why was Malcolm X so angry? Why? Why? Rather than –

FOLLET: Because you were reading, for example, what magazines?

ROSS: Oh, I told you. My favorite one was *US News & World Report*, which I can't even stand to read anymore because it's so right wing, but I know it's right wing now. Thirty years ago, I didn't know it was right wing. I thought that was a great explanation of the world. *Newsweek*, *Time*. I really wasn't into the pictorial magazines, so *Life* bored me. But I did read *Reader's Digest* all the time, because that was one of the few ones that my mother subscribed to.

FOLLET: But you don't remember who gave you those books?

4:04

ROSS: Oh, the books themselves?

FOLLET: Did you pick them up in a bookstore or was it part –

ROSS: They were being passed around for — first of all, it was so funny. The word that everybody overused and abused my freshman year was “relevant” — except that they couldn't even say it. They used to say, Are you revelant? (laughs) You're not revelant, sister. (laughs) Think about making yourself revelant. And I remember everybody was trying to prove that they were some kind of political radical because it was chic, it was the time, like I said, we'd been tear-gassed or all of a sudden, I got all this rage in me about the power of the state tear-gassing us poor, little, innocent college students who happened to, you know, forgot to mention that we started it by throwing rocks on them. (laughs) We had all these things happening.

Howard had had a lot of student unrest in '68, '69, and '70. The class before us, the class of '69, had started a student strike on campus over doing away with mandatory ROTC, and one other thing they used to do. They had mandatory health and hygiene classes for all the girls. All the girls had to take health and hygiene as if, working on the assumption that if you're a black girl going to college, you did not know how to wash your body. And that's what the class taught you, literally. Health and hygiene. We're not talking about sex ed, we're not talking about anything you could actually use. It worked on the assumption that you were not properly clean.

FOLLET: You took the class?

6:06

ROSS: No. That's what I'm saying. They discontinued it the year before I came. That was what the class of '69 achieved for us. They got rid of mandatory ROTC, which I was kind of disappointed in, but that was, you know, me and my military conservative self, and they got rid of health and hygiene, which I was not sad to lose.

And so, student unrest. Even then, we shut down the campus. We occupied the administration building, what we called the A building, over our own set of grievances.

FOLLET: What were those grievances?

ROSS: Oh, we had the coed dorm but we still had the restricted visiting hours at the non-coed dorms. We even had a strike over how much chicken they fed us. We thought that Howard University must have owned a chicken farm because they fed us chicken every day. Every day we had fried chicken. It was like, you don't ever want to see any more chicken. So we started the chicken fight and that ended up being cast as a political protest against chicken, like we cared. That was how it — that's fun, we were good spin masters at the time.

But there were some legitimate things that we protested against. James Cheek was the new president who'd been brought to Howard University my freshman year, and he was the school's first open Republican, black Republican. And he invited the CIA to come recruit on campus, the FBI to recruit on campus, and we protested that. I mean, the last thing — you know, I'm reading in *Malcolm X* about COINTELPRO, and then my college is recruiting future agents of COINTELPRO? I mean, these were the kinds of things we protested, when we were serious and legitimate and not just protesting chicken.

FOLLET: Who's we?

ROSS: We, meaning the student government, the student government society, the — whatever formation, whatever. (phone rings)

FOLLET: OK. So, we're at Howard. You're becoming aware of black nationalist politics and of black women's consciousness. Where do you go with that?

8:45

ROSS: Well, I was in a lot of student groups. Joining student groups was my thing and so the student government organization was a big commitment of my time, but I was also quite frivolous. I learned, not learned, but I got into playing pinochle religiously at college, and actually put my whole career, scholastic career in jeopardy because I spent so much time in what we called the "Punch Out," which was the student center where we played cards all the time. I'd be playing cards and failed to go to classes quite a bit and stuff like that.

So I lost my scholarship after my freshman year because I didn't keep my GPA up above 3.0. And so, that's how I ended up needing student loans and things. All I had to do was keep my GPA up but I didn't. So I wasn't really smart. I was intelligent. My mother used to say I had a lot of book learning but not a lot of common sense, and that was absolutely true.

Life was also complicated. I was a mother. My son stayed with my parents while I went to college the first time, but I did get pregnant my freshman year, and at least by that time I knew that sex led to pregnancy. I'd figured that one out before. And so I tried to get birth

control when I first came to college, but you had to have parental consent to get birth control if you were under 18, and so I remember sending the permission form home to my mother and she called me angrily and said there was no way she was going to sign for this. I just needed to keep my legs closed, kind of thing.

Well, Loretta didn't keep her legs closed and so I ended up pregnant by the end of my first semester. I knew I wasn't having that baby. I just knew it. And fortunately, the guy I was dating at the time, Charles Diggs, he helped me pay for the abortion, and I was lucky in that in 1970 abortion was legal in Washington, D.C., three years before *Roe v. Wade*.

But through the processes of both finding out I was pregnant, sending the information slip home, having the fight with my mom, I ended up having a late second-trimester abortion. I was well into, almost six months pregnant at the time I had the abortion. By that time, they — I was admitted to the Washington Hospital Center, where I had the abortion. They did a saline abortion. A saline abortion is a late-term abortion where they literally inject you with this needle that feels this long (gestures) into your stomach, thus killing the fetus, and then they inject you with something else that causes you to go into labor. So I literally went into labor to pass the fetus, and then they sent me home that afternoon.

That night, laying on my dormitory bed, I started passing a second fetus. It turned out that I had been pregnant with twins. And so I remember waking up in my bed with violent cramps, violent cramps. I mean, there was labor again, and my bed sheets were soaked with blood, so much that blood was dripping off onto the floor. And so I rushed next door to knock on my girlfriend's door, because I knew that her boyfriend was over there and he had a car, he could rush me to the hospital. And so they rushed me back to the hospital, where I delivered the second child, the second fetus. And I ended up being in the hospital for a couple of days after that because of loss of blood and stuff.

Let's see, what else happened in my freshman year? It was pretty exciting. I got gang-raped in my freshman year. I went off to a party with a guy I didn't know. Fortunately, it was only a couple of blocks from my dormitory. I had gone to one party and then while I was at this party, this guy says, "Well, I know where another party is. Would you like to come with me?" And being stupid, I said, "Yes." And it turned out it was this house full of guys waiting for him apparently to bring somebody home. And so I ended up getting raped and again, I was only extremely lucky in that they didn't mean anything more than what they called "pulling a train." That's what they called it at the time.

Came back. You know, they let me go. I walked back to my dormitory. And I remember being so deeply ashamed of what had happened to me. Because again, I thought my own stupidity made me get into these situations, that I wouldn't tell anybody, again, what had happened to me. And I remember not even going upstairs to shower but

staying downstairs, playing cards, so that I could pretend nothing happened. We played cards in the lounge in my dormitory.

And so those were highlights, low lights, of my freshman year in college. I don't know how to call them. And being only a fair student. I was the only woman majoring in chemistry that year and I remember my chemistry professors not really being very receptive to the idea of me being in their classes. There was stuff I didn't understand and I tried to make appointments with them, and they were so patronizing and hostile. They just weren't that friendly. And they probably could see what I didn't see, that I was not suited to be a chemist. I hated the math. I loved the science but I hated the math. And unfortunately, physics and chemistry requires quite a bit of math, and I didn't care much for the math. I tolerated the math because I thought I needed to.

And when you are a science major, you have to hit your sciences hard from your freshman year. So you're taking three and four five-hour courses. So I was carrying 22, 24 hours each semester because, if you have three five-hour courses, you've got 15 hours and you add two three-hour courses, you still only have five courses, but you're carrying 21 hours by that time, which is quite a load. And so that was freshman year. I remember —

FOLLET: And you didn't — you didn't seek any help or —

16:20

ROSS: Counseling?

FOLLET: — counseling or anything as a result of the sexual assault?

ROSS: No, nor for the abortion. I didn't have the consciousness to seek help on those things. And let's be clear, the anti-rape movement didn't begin until 1972. This was two years before the anti-rape movement, the first rape crisis center had opened up. So there was not that consciousness then. And if there had been, I'm not sure if I would have availed myself of it, but I know I didn't seek any help.

What else happened in my freshman year? I remember having to rush home. Unfortunately, I began smoking in my freshman year, because I had to rush home. My son had injured himself, like, jumped off a car and hurt his knee imitating his older cousin, or something. And I remember this frantic call from my mom, that he was hurt and she had to take him to the hospital, and so I didn't have enough money to fly home, so I got on the Greyhound bus. The last thing in the world you ever want to do is take a bus ride from Washington, D.C., to Texas. It's just the longest and most interminable ride you ever had in your life.

I got home, my son was fine. He had busted up his knee. He was a toddler and he'd gotten on a car, because his older cousin had gotten on a car and tumbled off, so my son decided — he was always like a mannish little kid. He decides he's gonna tumble off the car. But he missed the grass and splattered on the sidewalk. Yeah, my son.

But I remember when I got home, my mother was full of all these strictures for what I couldn't do. I couldn't go out, I couldn't date. I had to be home by 10 o'clock. The same rules I had when I was in high school. And I kept trying to explain to my mother, "Mom, in college, I don't leave for parties till midnight." And she wasn't having any of that. And so what did stupid Loretta do but go out and buy a pack of cigarettes, with no desire to really smoke, but to prove to my mother I was grown, because if I was grown enough to smoke cigarettes, then I was grown enough to stay out beyond 10 o'clock at night. My mother took one look and she said, "As long as you buy your own." That's all she ever said about smoking. "And you still have to go home by 10 o'clock at night."

FOLLET: That didn't work so well.

ROSS: It didn't work. I got a lifelong addiction to cigarettes out of a desire to prove to my mother that I was grown.

FOLLET: And it didn't work.

ROSS: And it didn't work, right. Um, what else happened in the freshman year?

FOLLET: How did you get involved with, um, was it the D.C. Study Group? Was that a campus group? How did that happen?

19:12

ROSS: Oh, the founder of the study group was a Howard University professor, Dr. Jimmy Garrett. Well, let me fast-forward, because I am taking a long, long time. Sophomore, junior years at Howard were pretty much the same. Um, one thing I'm pretty proud of is that I stayed drug free all of my college years, you know, even though this was the time of the drugs and stuff. I used to just — I was so smug, I used to walk around and say, "I've got a natural high. I don't need that." And I really am, normally, really that kind of [optimistic] person, so I couldn't understand why people needed to drug themselves in order to have a good time when I was doing quite well without that. And I never drank. And I could never convince my mother of that, that was the other thing. She just knew that I had fallen into all of this decadence when I was in college and I kept trying to convince her that actually, I was pretty straight compared to all the kids I knew.

FOLLET: Except for the cigarettes.

ROSS: Except for the cigarettes. Um, how did I get into that? Well, let me fast forward.

FOLLET: Good.

ROSS: I went to college, I dropped out after my junior year. One thing — I mean, there were a number of pressures on me. Um, by the end of my junior year, my son was living with me because somewhere, I think it might have been my sophomore year, my mother decided to sue for custody of my son, and that didn't work. I ended up going down to Texas and bringing my son back and just removing temptation from her back. And so, I couldn't live in the dormitory with a kid, so I had to move off campus and get an apartment and ended up getting — actually moving into a house that a lot of other college kids lived in. So there was this big house that we lived in. So that was one pressure.

Another pressure was that President Nixon, for reasons of his own, changed the rules around student loans. Where before, it didn't matter what state you were going to school in, you could get a loan from your banks in Texas to pay for your schooling in D.C., which is what I did in my sophomore and junior years. But at the end of my junior year, that all changed — they started giving preference to in-state students. So if I'd gone to college in Texas, I could continue to get my Texas State Bank loans, which was actually the name of the bank, Texas State Bank. But since I was going to school in Washington, D.C., I was told that I needed to get student loans from banks in Washington, D.C. Well, I had no relationship with a bank in Washington, D.C. My parents had no relationship with a bank in Washington, D.C., and at the time, you know, we applied at a couple of places. Well, we didn't get the loans.

And so, then, in order to continue school, I started doing work-study, which is where you work for the school — I remember working in the purchasing office — and then you were allowed to take one course a semester for free. And that seemed like a very slow and painful way to get through school, one three-hour course per semester to a woman who had been carrying 20, 21, 22 hours a semester. It just seemed like a slow and painful way. And I have to honestly say, I didn't fight at that point. I was ready to get on. I was ready to get out of school. I so regret I didn't — I was 19 but I didn't have sense to stay in school at that time, and I should have fought harder, but I didn't. I, uh —

FOLLET: Wasn't there an incident with a professor who was supervising the work-study?

23:15

ROSS: You remembered that. Oh, well, there was that, but there were other incidents, too. One thing that was also pretty rampant at Howard at the time was the sexual harassment of the students. I have names to name this stuff now but at the time, we didn't. I remember a calculus course I was taking. I told you I was always bad at math, but I was — the routine was that you could take Pre-Calculus, then Calculus I, Calculus II, and then you have a choice between Calc III or Differential Equations. And so, I was taking, I believe, Differential Equations at the time, or maybe Calculus II, I'm not quite sure which one it was, but I knew I was doing fairly badly in the course. I was hovering somewhere between a C and a

D, because I had gotten a D on the mid-term, but I'd gotten a C on a project, so I wasn't sure which one of those grades I was going to get. But what I did know was that I couldn't afford a five-hour D. A five-hour D drops your average so low that I'd have been on academic probation.

And so I go to this professor who is now, looking back, he was probably quite young, he was probably less than 30 but he seemed immensely old to me at the time, and I asked him, I said, "What do you think my chances are. Should I — you know, this is the last day before dropping classes — should I drop this course or can I get special tutoring from you, or what can I do because I can't afford a five-hour D. I will take a C, but a five-hour D, I can't stand."

And uh, this guy basically told me that the only way to really improve my grade was to sleep with him. And I got so mad at this guy, and strangely enough, I think he was — now that I'm telling the story, I think I can piece together what was happening. We had this conversation in the pool room of my dormitory. And now, it occurs to me to ask the question, What was this guy doing in our pool room of the dormitory after hours? I don't know. This was not in his office. He was in our dormitory and I just happened to, you know, walk up to him as he was shooting pool and say, "Professor da-da-da, I need your advice. What can I do?" And basically, he told me that I could sleep with him. And I was so mad at this guy. I was so mad at this guy, I took the pool cue and tried to hit him with it, because that was not what I wanted to hear. And I wasn't conscious of sexual harassment or anything. When I come to you wanting an honest answer about what, tell me. All I need you to tell me is drop the course, or you'll work with me. That's all I needed to hear from you. And this insinuation that there was another deal we could come up with, I didn't want to hear it.

FOLLET: What did you do?

26:20

ROSS: I threw this pool cue at his head — the base of it. Not the skinny end, the fat end (laughs), and he backed up and left the room and I was so livid. I was so livid. And actually, again, being stupid, what I should have done right after that was go drop the course. I really should have. I didn't have sense. I stayed in the course. I kept trying to struggle. Of course, I got not only a five-hour D, I got a five-hour F out of this guy. You know, and again, not really keeping up with the work and stuff. So I think it was certainly my fault, because I could have done a whole lot of things differently. I mean, at the time, there were no mechanisms for reporting this kind of thing. There was no — and it was very common for girls to sleep with the professors.

FOLLET: It was.

ROSS: Yes, and —

FOLLET: And you knew that?

ROSS: Oh, yes. It was widely known that there were certain professors that if you're particularly nice to them. But first of all, I considered myself, in that I wasn't cute, I wasn't — and Lord knows, I had figured out random sleeping around is not good. (laughs) I had already been through enough random sleeping around.

Uh, what else happened before I left Howard? I had one more pregnancy. I had tried the birth control pill. You could get free birth control at Howard University Health Services. So I tried the birth control pill, and found I was not what they call a good contraceptive, because I'd just forget the things — you have to take them every day — I'd forget the things.

And so I ended up being pregnant one more time. That pregnancy, fortunately for me, ended up in a miscarriage. As a matter of fact, I wasn't even sure I was pregnant. I missed two periods and then they started again. And so I thought I wasn't pregnant. And then I go into the hospital because I was getting some kind of infection, and it turns out they had to do a D&C because the fetus had died, but not been passed out. So that was the miscarriage.

And so after that, I said, "OK. No more birth control pills. Let's go with the Dalkon Shield." And they handed it out freely at the Howard University Health Services. And so the Dalkon Shield was an intrauterine device manufactured by A.H. Robins, a little triangular piece of plastic with little edges on it. It was put up against the cervix to block sperm getting to the uterus. But it did have a design flaw in that it had a string hanging down from it that was literally there only to aid the doctor in removing it. That's all it was there for. It was like a wick on a candle. Well, it also acted like a wick, because it allowed bacteria to wick up that string into one's uterus.

And so the problem I had with the Dalkon Shield was that a lot of people, when it's first implanted, it causes a lot of menstrual irregularity, a lot of excessive bleeding, a lot of soreness. I didn't have any of that. I thought I'd been blessed. I thought it was the greatest birth control, effortless, thoughtless, birth control. I thought I was a good candidate for it. And so I kept the Dalkon Shield in for well over two, almost three years. And then I started getting a low-grade fever, I mean, when you're constantly having a fever of 99, 100 degrees, going to the doctors. This was, by that time, I had dropped out of school in '73, at the end of '73, so, '74, '75. In '75 was when I really started getting sick; '76 was when I had the hysterectomy.

So I started going to the doctors. By that time, I'm in an HMO through my job. And this doctor, he was head of OB/GYN for George Washington University Hospital, and he diagnosed me as having some bizarre, rare venereal disease, [lymphogranuloma venereum]. I cannot, for some reason, forget this diagnosis this doctor put on me. And he

kept treating me for this disease that he swore was some kind of venereal disease that returning GIs from Vietnam had brought back. And so it was not your garden-variety syphilis or gonorrhea or anything. It was this thing that I had, [lymphogranuloma venereum]. And for six months, this man had me on various treatments and antibiotics around trying to address the growing infection in my fallopian tubes. And it was not, none of it was working.

Finally, one night — back then I was working for the NFL Players Association — but finally one night, I'm laying in bed, my boyfriend, another boyfriend, had just left, and my stomach just explodes in pain. I mean, like, I'm having the world's worst — worse than labor, and not much is worse than labor. This was worse than labor. And so I called an ambulance but I passed out before the ambulance gets there. Fortunately, once I called the ambulance, I unlocked my door so they could get in.

They take me to the hospital, I wake up post-op [to find] that they have done a total hysterectomy on me, actually a subtotal, because they didn't take the cervix until later, but a subtotal hysterectomy on me and the doctor tells me that was the only way they could think of to save my life, that I was in acute peritonitis, whatever that is, and that I had this Dalkon Shield and they, you know, that my fallopian tubes, both of them, had ruptured. Apparently that's not something that happens overnight, it had been going on for six months. Um, and they had to do this hysterectomy.

So I do recall the next day, while I was still at GW, the head of the OB/GYN department visiting me, bringing in, by the way, two or three students, because it was a teaching hospital, to talk about how rare my case was and, you know, it gave them an opportunity to see a hysterectomy and blah, blah, blah, and they lifted up the sheets and noticed this incision that went from my belly button down. I mean, the incision feels like it's that long, and I asked the doctor, "What happened?" And then he started giving me this totally mealy-mouth explanation, that normally he diagnoses these things well, but I was that one out of ten that he missed.

And that whole stay in the hospital was messed up. I had a severe allergic reaction to penicillin so that my skin peeled. I started looking like Michael Jackson, you know, all of these white blotches appearing on my skin. I lost a tremendous — I was in the hospital for almost a month. I lost a tremendous amount of weight. I went from, like, 130 to about 90 pounds. I was incredibly weak.

My sister had to fly up here and stay with me for a period of time, and thank God she did, because she was a nurse. And she was the one that was pointing out to them my reaction to the penicillin. She said, "Do you think this is normal? She is sitting up here developing a form of leprosy behind these drugs that you're giving her. She's scratching herself to death. Do you think this is normal?" I mean, if she hadn't

come up here and gotten aggressive about my health care, who knows what would've happened.

FOLLET: So really, what was happening was the Dalkon Shield was –

35:12

ROSS: Well, it triggered me being in the hospital –

FOLLET: Malfunctioning, right? It was malfunctioning.

ROSS: Yeah, and it caused the peritonitis, but then the rest of it was just bad hospital care that is visited upon patients.

FOLLET: So was the hysterectomy, um, necessary because of the missed diagnosis?

ROSS: Yes.

FOLLET: Or was it genuinely necessary at that point because of the condition you were in?

ROSS: I believe the doctor — it was not the same doctor — I believe the doctor that did the hysterectomy, when he said it was necessary to save my life — I mean, when you're dealing with ruptured fallopian tubes, I'm not quite sure what you could do. I don't think those things can be patched back together. So I do believe the doctor, when he said he had no choice to do the hysterectomy. The doctor I'm angry at is the one I'd been seeing for six months, who with a little deeper analysis than this rare venereal disease, could've saved my whole reproductive system. And like I said, I'll never forget the fact that he was head of the OB/GYN department. He was not a med student. And so, oh, I became angry and I became pissed off. I was 23, you know, and to be told that you're not going to ever have any kids anymore, particularly when your first one and only one was had under such interesting circumstances, I was mad.

And so fortunately for me I demanded and for some reason they gave me my medical records. I wanted to see what was happening. And I took them to my regular OB/GYN. Now I had an OB/GYN doctor but once I went into an HMO, you have to use the HMO doctor, so I had stopped going to my self-pay OB/GYN and used the HMO doctors. And so I took them back to my regular doctor. I said, "Tell me what happened. This just doesn't make sense to me." And he tracked this doctor's progress in terms of his failure to diagnose. First of all, his failure to remove the Dalkon Shield, and he went in his drawer and pulled out *JAMA* [*Journal of the American Medical Association*] reports and stuff, talking about the problems with the Dalkon Shield. So basically, he said if this guy had been paying any attention to what he was doing, this shouldn't have happened to me. He said, "I know the Dalkon Shield was problematic. Here's this report showing that it is

problematic. As a matter of fact, A.H. Robins knew it was problematic five years before this report was done.”

FOLLET: So you had some evidence of negligence.

38:00

ROSS: Right. And so anyway, so with his counsel and his recommendation, I found some lawyers and we ended up suing A.H. Robins. We settled out of court. We didn't go to court. And I wonder, I've always wondered whether I should have actually gone to court with them. I think I was too quick to settle out of court, because the way this lawyer was telling me, he said, “Well, you're a single mother, you've got a child out of wedlock, so you don't really have a good case.” That was his explanation. And so, accept the settlement.

FOLLET: Whoa. Wait a minute.

ROSS: This \$100,000 you're gonna get is the best you're gonna get.

FOLLET: His argument was –

ROSS: Because I was a black single mother, I didn't make a convincing plaintiff, or whatever.

FOLLET: Now who was telling you this?

ROSS: My lawyer. And so we did accept the settlement. I called my mom and said, “Mom, should I do it?” And my mom said, “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.” Good old wisdom. But I'm happy to say that my case along with the other pre-suit cases blew the lid off of Dalkon Shield. Because I signed no confidentiality agreements and I was telling the world and my lawyer was telling the world and the next thing I know, there was a huge class-action [suit] against A.H. Robins about the Dalkon Shield.

So it was in that moment that I'm conscious of becoming a reproductive rights activist, because I was pissed off. I was, like, whatever — all this that has happened to me shouldn't happen to nobody else. This is just ridiculous. And so I entered the movement, feeling that I'd been the victim of sterilization abuse, but not the classic sterilization abuse where you go in the hospital and you're sterilized without your consent. Well, it was without my consent. I was unconscious. But at the same time, I do not believe the sterilization was avoidable at that point. It was the fact that for six months I'd been going to this joker and his misdiagnosis and maltreatment ended in sterilization. That made me mad.

But that's when I began reading more and paying more attention to how many women were sterilized. I mean, I looked at my sister and my mother. I mean, there were very few women who were ovulating in my

family by their thirties. And so, it was really much more widespread, and that this had to happen to me for me to start paying attention to — Well, Carol, when did you have your hysterectomy? [She] was 29. I was this, I was that. I was, like, What the hell is going on here? And kind of paying attention more so at that point.

What else happened? You'd asked about the D.C. Study Group.

FOLLET: Yes, the D.C. Study Group. When did that come in?

41:15

ROSS: It was about that same time. My first apartment to myself was in the apartment building in Mount Pleasant, in Adams Morgan in Washington, D.C. Adams Morgan was one of the areas that had yet to be gentrified. And it was an efficiency apartment, a nice corner efficiency apartment but still an efficiency. And one day I got home and there was a notice pasted on the door, the entrance door to the apartment complex, that said, basically, that the apartment building was getting ready to be sold, that we had roughly 60 days to vacate because they were going to convert it to condominiums, from rental property into condominiums. And under it, somebody had written another, pasted another notice that says, "Let's meet in the laundry room tonight to talk about this, because this isn't fair. This isn't right."

And so I make my way down to the laundry room that night, offered to take notes, because somebody has to. Next thing I know, I'm the tenant president. No conscious thought. Just, I'll take the stupid notes. But then, you know, it's one of those things about information. You with the information, you end up with the power, kind of thing. That's kind of how that happens. As a result, I don't take notes anymore. (laughs) I got enough work to do. I never volunteer to take notes, any time, any more, ever again. Learned that one real good.

FOLLET: It's true. It works that way.

43:05

ROSS: Yeah, do not volunteer to take the notes. Um, what we wanted to do was to seek out how we could afford to buy the building ourselves, as tenant owners. That was our strategy. And it actually did work. It took them 10 years, but they eventually bought that building at 1801 Clydesdale. They eventually bought the building. And I was told, I'm not quite sure by whom, about this tenant organizing group called City Wide Housing Coalition. City Wide was a group started by Dr. Jimmy Garrett from Howard University and they were going around helping to organize tenant organizations in those places where people were threatened with condo conversion, mainly in Capitol Hill, which hadn't gone through being gentrified yet, and Mount Pleasant, Adams Morgan, because those were the first Washington areas to be gentrified.

So I started going to City Wide Housing Coalition meetings. They were in St. Steven's Church, I believe, one of those —

FOLLET: Yep. St. Steven's Episcopal, oh, yeah.

ROSS: And through going to the City Wide meetings is where I heard about the D.C. Study Group that Jimmy had organized, which was a Marxist-Leninist study group. We studied political economy, [Maurice] Cornforth, [George] Padmore, I mean, just we were reading all kinds of things, trying to analyze what was happening. Our thing was that it was not just condo conversions that we were worried about, but the whole capitalist structure, and what was going on. I think I'd been preconditioned to think about this because, again, of my student activist days, looking at offering a critique of American society, so I probably was susceptible to being taught the basics of Marxism, and actually thought a revolution was going on in my brain at the time, because radical economics was not something that I had encountered at Howard University.

It was through the D.C. Study Group that I met Nkenge Toure, because she was a member of it, and then she was the one who brought me to the rape crisis center as a volunteer.

The D.C. Study Group. We did a number of things. It was about 10 of us, 10 to 12. It was not a large group. Um, it was called a study group because we made a commitment to get together every Sunday morning like it was a church. And during the week we had to read a book, and every Sunday morning we'd get together and talk about it. And Jimmy would do this big lecture thing on it, and it was like we were in class, only the class only met once a week. And during the rest of the time we did political work together.

FOLLET: Who else was there besides Nkenge and Jimmy the professor?

46:20

ROSS: Um, Darby Dubois was in it. Barbara — oh, God, I can't remember Barbara's last name. Oh, my goodness. Barbara Mitchell. Jake Parker. Hope Young. Renee Turner. Yulanda Ward. Um. Probably about four or other names that I'm blanking on.

FOLLET: I think you mentioned that you didn't meet with — there was a white Marxist-Leninist group that you didn't meet with because you said, "They pimped us."

ROSS: Oh, no, it wasn't — that's one, because we were seen as an ML [Marxist-Leninist] group and a black ML group at that, uh, a lot of the white Marxist groups tried to recruit us individually. I mean, when they recruit you, too, I mean, they would sic somebody on you like a virus, and they'd show up at your house, they'd show up at your meetings, they'd start calling you. I mean, it was, like, heavy recruitment, and the groups were the Communist Workers Party, the Socialist Workers Party, the Revolutionary Communist Party, the Line of March, then the old CP, the regular Communist Party, which, by the way, I actually had the

least respect for the CP, largely because they were so disguised. They never came out and said who they were. At least I respected the CWP and the SWP and the RCP, because at least they told you who the hell they were.

But the CP, by that time, and this was the, you know, the mid-70s, had used a lot of fronts, and so they never told you that they were CP. But they'd start talking in this cult-like fashion and you kind of knew. And I don't think they had created the National Alliance Against Racism and Political Repression then, but it was, like, leading up to that, which became their popular-front organization and stuff. But, and so, I always felt that, how can you lead me if you're going to lie to me? I mean, that just — and how can you lead people you've got to lie to? Yes, there is baggage about being called a communist, but if you can't own that baggage, stop being a communist. There's other ways to do this.

FOLLET: So did they come, they came, tried to recruit you individually?

49:04

ROSS: Individually and as groups.

FOLLET: And as groups.

ROSS: And a lot of them had tactics that sucked. Amongst the tactics is, like, listing the D.C. Study Group as endorsing their actions when they hadn't asked anybody, that kind of stuff. Or, you have one conversation with somebody and the next thing you know, your name was listed as endorsing them, or just stuff that really was just not right. It was not ethical. And that was the part, my problem with it. And not to mention that their doctrinal disagreements didn't make sense to me. I mean, the whole debate over Trotsky versus this versus that and whether the Soviet Union had the right line versus the Chinese line versus the Cuban line. As far as I was concerned, none of those forms of communism were adequately dealing with racism. So (laughs) I do not get it why so much heat is invested into imperceptible differences to the larger masses of people.

And then I never believed in that vanguard theory, you know, that this talented intellectual vanguard is going to lead this revolution of the masses, kind of stuff. Frankly, I felt like one of those masses and I didn't get that part of it, either. So there were all kinds of problems I had with their strategies and the way they operated.

FOLLET: So what was different about the D.C. Study Group and the assumptions about a vanguard, or in the assumptions about racism?

50:45

ROSS: Well, first of all, we didn't see ourselves as the vanguard, we were just people who were studying. And we didn't think we were going to be any pre-revolutionary formation or nothing like that. Jimmy Garrett is

the one whom I've always felt was a true paradox, a true genius who deserves a lot of study, because he had at least two Ph.D.s and a law degree, fluently spoke about five languages, is now teaching at a university in Vietnam, living with a Vietnamese wife. He was a brilliant man, just a brilliant genius. An evil genius, but a brilliant genius. Evil in that he was a sexual predator towards his students. So he compromised all this wonderful genius because he couldn't keep his pants zipped up. And I'm lucky. I'm one of the few he did not sleep with. But most of the women in the D.C. Study Group had had an affair with Jimmy Garrett. And I can honestly say, it was probably because he was not interested in me, because I think I'd been stupid enough to have one if he'd showed any interest. Let me be fair to Jimmy. That if he'd winked my way, I might have gone that way, too, because I am seduced by genius. But, uh, by the time I came along, he was already in trouble. He was married to one woman, dating another, kids by another. I mean, he had the most complicated sexual life, mess, that you'd ever wanted to see by the time I met him so, I mean, I was not very tempted to get engaged in that.

But unfortunately, his lack of sexual ethics compromised away all of his political genius. He and Ron Walters were in competition to be chair of the poli-sci department at Howard University. Jimmy likes to couch it as they didn't give him tenure, or the chair-ship, because he was a Marxist. I'm totally convinced that his sexual activity had as much to do with that as his alleged, you know, Marxism.

FOLLET: You said that people, students, weren't reporting that at the time. How would he have been called on that?

ROSS: Because we were gossiping, the students. I mean, even, people gossip even though no one's censored for it. It's still not a well-kept secret. Um, and again, he had an ex-wife and a present wife. I mean, he just had –

FOLLET: So, was he still at Howard when he was leading this D.C. Study Group?

53:48

ROSS: I think he — yes, he was at Howard when he started it. By the time I came into the Study Group, and it was a couple of years old by then, he had been fired from Howard.

FOLLET: And you were mostly –

ROSS: Fired, quit, I'm not quite sure.

FOLLET: But you were mostly community people? You weren't –

ROSS: We were community people. Yulanda and one other person, I think it was Renee, that was a Howard student. Most of us were community

people, you know, pulled in. The other thing that the D.C. group had started was the Southern African Support Project for our anti-apartheid work. And so, people who were doing anti-apartheid work were pulled into the Study Group. People who were doing housing work were pulled into the Study Group. Nkenge was doing anti-rape, so that pulled people into the Study Group. So it was community work that fed the Study Group in terms of recruits and stuff.

FOLLET: What did you read? What did you read that caught your fancy?

ROSS: What didn't I read? Um, there was this series of books by a guy named Maurice Cornforth on dialectical materialism and I don't know why I pulled that of a hat right now, but it was about understanding how to explain history and the actions of people through an economic analysis. I mean, you can remember some of the tenets, you know: the only constant is change; and everything exists as contradictions; and you have to look for the opposing or the contradictory forces in anything. I mean, those are, as far as I'm concerned, proven theories about human behavior, about how society is organized.

FOLLET: Did the group have a particular racial analysis that it brought to Marxism, or did Marxism shed light in particular on race relations?

55:48

ROSS: Well, what we were saying and this is, again, was that Marxism in and of itself failed to explain sexism or racism, because that was part of what we rejected. This theory that the working classes were just going to unite and overthrow capitalism, you know, ignored how fractured the so-called working classes were over issues of race and gender. I mean, we hadn't even gotten to sexual orientation yet, but just — it was hard to imagine this incredible unity of the working class, particularly when you're working class. When you're working class, it's all you can do to survive. You go to work. You work one or two jobs.

I mean, my life at the time was that I worked as a secretary by day from 9 to 5. I then worked as a waitress at a club from 5 to 9. I usually picked up my child from child care — he went to school, then he had an after-school program that he went to — usually around 10 o'clock at night. You know, we had dinner sometimes between 10 and 11 o'clock at night. Put him to bed, and the whole damn thing started at 6 o'clock the next morning. That's what working class felt like to me. So it was kind of hard for me to imagine this very romanticized working class leading a revolution. It was all I could do to get interested in going to church on Sunday, going to the Study Group on Sunday. You know, it just — that never worked for me at the time.

FOLLET: So within the group, you had that contradiction? You agreed? No, I mean —

ROSS: As a group, we disagreed with the leadership of the working-class theory.

FOLLET: As a group, you did?

ROSS: Yeah, that it was an over-simplification and over-romanticization of what was going to happen. It was going to take people from every class rebelling against capitalism.

FOLLET: So is there anyone else whose work especially –

BEVERLY: We should change tapes.

FOLLET: OK.

END TAPE 5

TAPE 6

FOLLET: OK. So, you were telling me about –

ROSS: George Padmore. He wrote a lot not only on the intersection between Pan-Africanism and Marxism. W.E.B. Du Bois we were reading. We were reading a lot about the Pan-Africanist Congresses, because at the time I called myself a black nationalist feminist. I mean, that's a lot but that's where we were. Uh, and what else were we reading? We were reading a lot of Kwame Nkrumah. Kwame Nkrumah was deeply worshiped by all of us. Sekou Toure, but Nkrumah was more prolific in terms of his writing. Frantz Fanon, Paulo Freire — anybody who we thought was a liberationist who was writing. I remember Walter Rodney's book, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, till he was assassinated in Guyana. Um, what else?

FOLLET: Where did the feminist piece come in, in terms of your reading?

ROSS: Well, the feminists became much more — there wasn't a lot of black feminist stuff written until the late 70s, early 1980s. This was a couple of years before then.

FOLLET: Did you come across Combahee –

ROSS: I read Combahee River Collective Statement [“A Black Feminist Statement”] but I had not heard of the National Black Feminist Organization. I probably would've joined it. I didn't even know about that in Washington, D.C. That was a New York–Boston thing, but we didn't know about that.

BEVERLY: Sorry, we're just on again.

FOLLET: [to videographer] OK. How much of that did we get or lose, do you know?

2:05

So you thought of yourself as black nationalist feminist, and I was asking where did the feminist piece come in, in terms of your reading?

ROSS: In terms of my reading, the feminist piece wasn't that manifest. We were getting the black nationalist piece, we were getting the Marxist piece through our readings, but there just wasn't that black feminist literature out there. We remember seeing the Combahee River Statement, which came out, like, '77, '78, but that was basically it. There was Fran Beal, one of the people that we're talking about interviewing in this project, was writing stuff in *The Black Scholar* and in different — just magazine articles and stuff, nothing as significant as *The Black Woman*, for example. There was this — and most of the black women's writings that were coming at that time were anti-feminist. I

mean, I remember, I've got a copy of this book, I believe, *How to Get and Keep Your Man in Spite of the Women's Movement*. You know, that kind of diatribe against feminism was much more accessible and popular than pro-feminist, black feminist argument.

So actually, when bell hooks wrote *Ain't I a Woman* and we got our hands on that thing in 1981, it was like we'd been liberated, because that was the first capturing of black feminist theory that I'd ever seen. And it wasn't that *The Black Woman* was not significant or important, so I don't want to take anything from Toni Cade, but bell was talking more about movement building. And we actually brought bell to D.C. as part of her book tour, and I mean, I remember just dozens of us hanging on her every word, because she was the theorist we'd been waiting for. It was, like, Oh, where have you been all my life? and here she was.

So there was simply not a lot of black feminist theory available up until then. And that was unfortunate, because as I said, Nkenge took me to the Rape Crisis Center — I started volunteering there in '78 and by '79 I was the executive director, and so we were doing a lot of black feminist stuff but we didn't have a theoretical basis, and I guess that's a little over-simplification, but there was no book you could put in anybody's hand and say, "Read this and you'll understand what I'm talking about."

FOLLET: Did gender issues come up in the D.C. Study Group?

ROSS: All the time, but we didn't have no real process for handling them.

FOLLET: Were they controversial within that group?

ROSS: Well, see, the problem is, is that Jimmy's sexual proclivities were always a discussion at the group. There were talks of censuring him, talks of kicking him out, which is kind of hard when he's the founder. We just asked him to at least be honest with these women. I mean, when you've got three or four of them in the same Study Group, do you not expect them to talk to each other? I mean, you're telling different lies to all these women and then there's your baby's mama who's not in the Study Group — I mean, his sexual stuff really had such a negative impact on the Study Group, and one of the outcomes of it was that it drove other men away. The Study Group started out being fairly gender balanced, and towards the end it was all women and Jimmy. You know, like he had a harem going or something. And so it came up in that way.

Probably we didn't challenge him intellectually on his knowledge of politics and stuff like that because he was so way ahead of us in terms of that, but he didn't have to have two Ph.D.s to know what he was doing was wrong, was actively wrong. He wasn't actively married at the time, but we're talking about ex-wives and current girlfriends and baby mamas, and all this stuff, and it was just grotesque, how he mismanaged all of those relationships.

FOLLET: So, this was a study group, but you were also an action group? Were you doing the housing work as a piece of the D.C. Study Group?

6:58

ROSS: Right, right. It was called the Study Group because we actually sat around one day — we did not have a name. We were just folks that came to study together, and we were doing the housing work and the southern African support work and the D.C. — the rape crisis stuff, and then we just sat around one day and said, “We need to name ourselves. I mean, what do we call it?” We just called it the study group. And so, let’s formalize it. D.C. Study Group. That was it, but it was a way to get together to do peer-based learning about social issues. We loved it.

FOLLET: Was this group that was doing the tenant organizing?

ROSS: No. City Wide Housing Coalition was a project of the D.C. Study Group.

FOLLET: OK.

ROSS: And by the way, we not only did tenant organizing, but at City Wide, we were in the leadership of getting D.C.’s first rent-control bill passed in 1974 to get the rent stabilized in D.C., because there was runaway rent inflation happening, which ended up getting much watered down in subsequent years so that to this day, they don’t have the rent control like New York has and other places have. And we led that effort.

FOLLET: What kind of work did you do as a tenant organizer? What did you actually do? Did you —

ROSS: A lot of minutes —

FOLLET: Besides taking the notes —

ROSS: Besides taking the notes. Well, we had to do a lot of research, first of all. First of all, with my own building, we had to do a lot of research into who owned the building and what was the asking price for it to be sold, what it would take in terms of to do a conversion to tenant ownership. Uh, talked to banks about arranging for financing. There was just a whole lot of real estate details. I actually got a real estate license in the middle of this just so I could better understand what the hell was going on. With the University of Maryland, you know, I did a nighttime real estate course just to help understand some of this stuff.

And so there was that level of work that needed to be done: negotiating with the current owners, trying not to get out-bid by the potentially new owners, tenants’ rights. Learning how we could escrow money if they didn’t — but that was all part of their strategy, was to not

keep the maintenance up on the property so that they could encourage us to leave, or, you know, cause us to self-deport, kind of thing.

And so what went from being an excellently maintained building suddenly didn't have light bulbs in the lobby, you know, the trash wasn't getting picked up, or the washing machines would break down and nobody would ever fix them. I mean, it just went from a great building to ghetto in the process of this condo conversion thing. So having to fight that on every level, because that was the kind of harassment that they were putting on us.

But also, going around and visiting other buildings, showing them how they were targeted, because they would get in contact with us. Well, we heard through all these building protests and what have you, and we'd just got a notice from our landlord that we've got to get out in 60 days or 90 days. What can we do? So we'd go over there and talk to them about what they could do and how to do research and how to go down to the Recorder of Deeds and find out who actually owns your property. Because often there's a middle person that you're paying the rent to, you're not actually paying it to the owner. There's some building manager or somebody that — mostly that's all the tenants know. They don't even know the actual owners of the property. Nobody directly manages their buildings.

FOLLET: What impact did you have?

ROSS: What impact did we have? Probably minimal. I think that — I mean, my building was saved. I moved out of there six years before the kids won, before the tenants won, because — I think I told you I lived in an efficiency? Well, my son was five years old. I could not have a sexual life with my son sharing my bed (laughs) or my bedroom, and so I had to move to a one-bedroom and eventually a two-bedroom apartment. And so, but the tenant association stayed going after I left, and I'm happy to say that the tenants eventually bought their building and actually I still have friends that live at 1801 Clydesdale now, 25 years later.

FOLLET: Nice.

ROSS: Because they own the building. And I'm deeply hurt that I didn't stay there and just kept the apartment. I wish I had the money to have kept the apartment anyway, even if I didn't live in it, because it would've been a nice piece of property. It overlooks the National Zoo, beautiful, deeply in the park, overlooking the Zoo. Great property.

But that was the exception, not the rule. Most of the buildings that were threatened with condo conversion, they did flip. They did get converted, because who — most tenants couldn't afford to stay there and wage a ten-year struggle. I mean, this was not an overnight thing. It was a long-term struggle requiring rent strikes, requiring threats,

requiring finding money. I mean, we had to even find out a whole lot about the community reinvestment rules of the banks, that for banks to be able to be allowed to do business in the District of Columbia, our city council had passed rules saying how much money they had to reinvest in the community and we found out that the banks were not doing their investments in the community. So the banks that we were going to for loans were telling us no, but at the same time, they had community reinvestment obligations, so we had to marry those two pieces of information. And find out how to prevent a bank from being licensed to operate in the District of Columbia unless they lived up to their commitments around community reinvestment to help us buy some of the buildings, and so it was a whole lot of work to be doing for free, now that I think about it, because none of us got paid for any of this. It was all volunteer work.

FOLLET: All volunteer, community organizing, that started in — what? The mid-70s for you, and went —

ROSS: For me, it started, I guess, '74, '75.

FOLLET: And went through the 70s?

ROSS: Well, City Wide collapsed in 1980.

FOLLET: OK, and that's —

ROSS: With the assassination of Yulanda Ward. That killed City Wide, as well as killed her. That's a whole nother story.

FOLLET: Could you be — can you tell that story?

14:20

ROSS: Well, I would probably say, and I'm summarizing, that Yulanda's assassination probably is a testament to our own hubris, because while we were doing what we thought was great work, doing all this housing organizing and challenging banks and landlords and stuff like that, I don't think we took ourselves seriously enough. I really don't. I mean, at least in my mind — and forgive me for being a bit naïve — I didn't see what we were doing as that revolutionary. I mean, we were studying true revolutionaries. I knew about the Black Liberation Army but I wasn't them. I knew about the Black Panthers, but I wasn't them. I mean, I was not doing anything. I mean, I'm scared of guns. I'm not the one that's going to say I'm going to pick up a gun and kill anybody, or even organize for community defense. That was not me. That was a little hard-edged for me.

But I felt that what we were doing was all legal, totally appropriate community organizing. You know, we're using the law. We're not trying to break the law. That, to me, felt safe. It didn't feel risky to me. I

felt people who were willing to work outside the law, I had all admiration for them, but I knew I didn't have the courage to be one of them.

And so we were incredibly naïve, because we underestimated the impact of what we were doing. I'll give you an example. Yulanda Ward was a Howard University student, one of Jimmy's students, who probably was one of the earliest people in the D.C. Study Group. She was there when I got there. And she was from Texas, Houston, Texas. She was a sophomore, I think, when she joined the Study Group or something like that. I heard a door shut.

FOLLET: I did, too. That's all right.

BEVERLY: Let me change the — because you mentioned the door, I'm going to change the shot size so that you can cut something out, OK.

FOLLET: Thank you.

ROSS: Yulanda was, by any definition, a prodigy. She was 18 years old, maybe, 18 years old when I met her, maybe 17 or 18. Just an amazing young woman, and she was the one who became the theorist in our housing work. Yulanda, along with some other people from Philadelphia, had written together this analysis that she called "Spacial Deconcentration," where she talked about how the whole gentrification that we were fighting was part of a larger plan, and the plan was born out of the response to the inner-city riots, and the Kerner Commission Report, that I believe was issued in 1968 or something, that recommended that the way to reduce the possibility –

18:03

(recording interrupted — Ross picks up this story again in TAPE 7)

END OF TAPE 6

TAPE 7 NOVEMBER 5, 2004

ROSS: Good morning.

FOLLET: Here we are, it's day three, November 5th, and let's talk about what happened last night. Yesterday we talked about the mood that was kind of hanging over the interview, because it was the day after Bush's reelection. But last night you had a different kind of experience, and I want to know how that leaves you feeling. Tell us what happened.

ROSS: Well, last night, I drove from Smith to Boston to the Center for New Words, which is this [progressive] book store on Hampshire Street, and it was our first opportunity to do a book signing for our new book, called *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organizing for Reproductive Justice*. I wrote it with three other authors: Marlene Fried, Jael Silliman — whose actual idea all of this was — and Elena Gutierrez, and what the book is basically about is telling the last 30 years of organizing that's been done on reproductive health issues by eight women of color organizations. We chose two from each major ethnic group: the African American, the Latina, the Asian Pacific Islander, the Native American. My throat is still sounding really raspy.

FOLLET: It is.

ROSS: But, um, and we told their stories, because in the most popular narratives people don't see women of color as having been active in the reproductive rights, reproductive justice movement, and so we decided to not focus on what happened to women of color, but what women of color did for themselves, and tell the story. And it was wonderful to — first of all, I've been in other people's books and in anthologies and stuff, but I've never had my name on the front cover of a book. And so that felt wonderful and rich, and it was like giving birth and it was a four-year pregnancy (laughs) to write this project with three other authors, and they were wonderful, and it was effortless in terms of integrating our themes, integrating our perspectives, creating a product. I mean, that felt pretty effortless. That's like the first three months of pregnancy. (laughs)

And then, when you get to the cutting down of the writing, you know, we left a third of the book on the cutting floor because it was just too big and we wanted to keep it under a certain price. It was published by South End Press, and we're really happy about that because it's a radical press that really preserved our voices, preserved our perspectives, so the editing and marketing and the promotional and the packaging process, and so we had our first book signing, because the book only came out a couple of weeks ago, at the Center for New Words.

It was a sold-out, I guess, crowd. It was free, but it really was packed and what was really great is that, I think because Marlene is from Boston, we had a lot of her friends, and then a lot of people I knew from the movement who came out. Jean Hardisty from Political Research Associates came out and it was just, like, so special. A women of color group from the Roxbury area that's working on reproductive health issues came out.

FOLLET:

What was the mood?

4:17

ROSS:

The mood was upbeat. I probably started them off on a downer, because I couldn't help but disclose how I was feeling about the election and stuff. And you know, you twin that with being in Boston and driving while black, it doesn't really portend (laughs) for a good opening to the day. I probably shouldn't have opened with that story, but the mood was pretty upbeat. People were asking lots of questions.

Marlene and I didn't preplan what we were going to say, and when you do a collaboration and everybody's fingerprint is on every page, there's no way to really say who did what. And so I talked mostly about the process of conceptualizing and producing the book and Marlene talked about the thematic insights, I guess is the way to call them, that we learned from studying these eight organizations. Most of them, of course, had to redefine for themselves what reproductive rights, reproductive health, reproductive justice meant for themselves. They were impatient with the framing of reproductive health issues and the pro-choice/anti-choice framework, and that's a whole other conversation I won't even get in to. But you found many of them.

One of them, for example, included strong definitions around the environment and their definition of reproductive health. Mother's Milk Project, which is this Native American group we studied, started out because they were seeing toxins in mothers' breast milk, making it impossible for the mothers to breastfeed, and so they started their own research project to actually look at the amount of toxins that were in the river water that they were using, and it turned out that there was a ton of them, and so then they went into a midwifery service, so they were combining reproductive health activism with environmental justice actions.

The Asian and Pacific Islander communities that we studied always had to deal with immigration issues and language accessibility issues and just oh — so it's common — one common theme is, for the groups we studied, is that while they were all pro-choice, it was not about abortion as to why they organized. They organized to serve their communities.

And another myth that we disproved is that women of color reproductive health groups organized in opposition to what the mainstream movement was doing. None of the groups we interviewed had any desire, interest, or plans to fix the mainstream through their

organizing. As a matter of fact they were very ambivalent about whether they even wanted to work with mainstream groups that didn't have their holistic perspective. Some do, some don't. But on the whole, it is not in their top five agenda items.

Um, which also, I guess, led to another thing that we discovered, is that there is a perception that when women of color organized their ethnic-based groups, that this is somehow getting trapped in identity politics and that we have to move beyond identity politics to build a larger movement. And none of these groups, first of all, feel like they're trapped in an identity-politics framework. And they're not necessarily sure that they will ever want to quote "move beyond," because as one of the API groups said, "There will always be a need for an Asian woman's voice on every issue." That will never go away, so how to even frame it, like this is something we should get over, is active reinforcement of white supremacist kind of thinking and stuff like that. So they disproved that myth, too.

So I could talk about the book forever. It was great. It was upbeat. It was good to have that night sandwiched into the middle of this. A long and busy night, but it was great, to be in a community of like-minded folks. There were — probably 10 percent of the crowd were men. That was really good, and just to have a chance to talk about what we're going to do now.

8:34

On the political side, we did have a chance to talk about what's going to happen post-election around reproductive rights, and it's going to be expected that the mainstream groups are going to just close ranks and seize on protecting the Supreme Court as their chief strategy. And so there was some discussion about, well, if that happened, where do we think the movement of women of color will lead? Try to do one of our own Supreme Court-type strategy that looks at it through the lens of women of color or will we continue to do other type of reproductive health work and not necessarily prioritize the policy work and who's on the Supreme Court.

FOLLET: Was there a sense of the group about which is the better path?

ROSS: No. That wasn't the group to ask. It was predominantly white.

FOLLET: Oh, last night was?

ROSS: Yeah (laughs), so. But it is a question that was put out there, and I don't have an easy answer to it. It's something that I'm going to consult with my SisterSong sisters about. As usual, SisterSong is probably going to do an and-and-and.

FOLLET: That's the nature of it. It's all involved. Well, that's great. Well, we'll get to SisterSong eventually, but let's loop back. Let's loop back and trace your path to SisterSong and I'm thinking that — it's obvious we're

not going to get to SisterSong today, and this is our last session while you're here this trip. So, we'll — if it's OK with you — we'll regroup again in December and finish it up. So, I mean, is that OK with you?

ROSS: (unclear) It's OK, but let's see where we go

FOLLET: It's OK, OK. I know you were saying — pardon me?

ROSS: I could be shorter. I could do the Geraldine [Miller, whom Ross interviewed for the project — ed.] thing and give you one-word answers.

FOLLET: Well, I was thinking that maybe we could try a little bit of that today and sort of play with a goal of where to get to, without being totally locked in. And if we — here's my thoughts about today. If we can basically finish up the black nationalist piece and follow your shift into feminism and get through the rape crisis work, and not forget that you were also having a life while you were also doing this political work. I don't want to forget — I don't want to forget that, so that would kind of be my goal and if we find ourselves, you know, into the early 80s and the beginnings of your international stuff, great. But I would like to at least get through the — so if we start with Yulanda's story. I know we said it could easily be at least an hour. But if we were — could we do it justice in half of that? Do you think?

ROSS: Let's try.

FOLLET: OK. Let's try. Good.

12:20

ROSS: Well, first of all, you said, start with the black nationalist stuff, and Yulanda was very much engaged in that. As I told you before, she was a member of the D.C. Study Group. One thing that we joined together and were cofounders of is the National Black United Front. NBUF was a coalition of black organizations, black nationalist organizations. Still going strong and is headquartered in Chicago. Conrad Worrill is its director, but it doesn't have the strength now that it had in the 1980s — I mean, we had the founding conference was in [New York City] was in 1980, 1979, I think it was 1980. And Yulanda was in fact very much engaged in the youth section of NBUF, while I was engaged in the women's section of NBUF. I raise that because I think we started talking about some of the work Yulanda had done? I don't know how much I covered.

FOLLET: We got interrupted really early, so let's start fresh with Yulanda.

ROSS: As I said, Yulanda was from Houston, Texas, young Howard student. Political activist though since she'd been in middle school, because I

remember at her funeral, her teacher, to whom she'd written this essay, talking about "The Jeffersons" and offering a critique of how it caricatured black life, was not representative of black life, and a really serious essay on something I thought was a charmingly stupid show, but she did do a great analysis of it anyway, and her teacher spoke about that at her funeral.

But Yulanda was 17 or 18 years old, I believe, when I met her. In many ways, she was our ideological leader and if nothing else, she was certainly our moral compass, because she was serious-as-a-heart-attack fun, but still serious as a heart attack. I mean, she wasn't any dweeb or anything, but she read all these political books all night. I mean, Yulanda never slept. You could call Yulanda up at 2 o'clock in the morning and she was up reading or writing something. I don't know when this child slept. Because she was assassinated when she was 22, in later years, I've begun to believe that Yulanda was so driven because something — her internal clock knew she didn't have a lot of time. And she was always like that. But that's me being metaphysical. But she never slept.

What kind of work did Yulanda do? She started out as a student activist. I remember she organized this protest at Howard University, carrying black coffins into some ceremony, like, honor's day, whatever day, you know, the academy, Howard University celebrates itself, and she was protesting what she called the "death of academic freedom." Because all of the professors who were Marxist were being fired or denied tenure, among whom was Jimmy Garrett, and I think that's how Yulanda and Jimmy Garrett first got connected. Of course, that was long after my Howard days, but that's my first knowledge of her.

She also organized a protest against Pepsi-Cola. At the time, historically black colleges and universities, or HBCUs, celebrated something called Black College Day, and it was a big celebratory event. I guess supposedly to be that we survived, that they still served the community, something like that. Well, Howard University had its Black College Day underwritten by Pepsi-Cola, which in capitalism of course there's underwriting. But Yulanda led a protest against that because Pepsi-Cola wouldn't divest from South Africa, and her analysis said that how can Pepsi-Cola care about the future of black college children in America when it supports apartheid in South Africa? And we feel that's a contradiction and we don't want your money. Not only that, but under their sponsorship, Black College Day moved within a few years from becoming a serious discussion about the future of black colleges into parades and homecoming queens. Beauty contests. Marching band contests, which they already did around homecoming, so they didn't need a second homecoming, because Black College Day was originated to be a serious political movement to save black colleges.

And so that's where Yulanda first clashed with Tony Brown. Tony Brown — the Republican Tony Brown was on TV every week, now on some American Black Forum or some kind of show and was the dean of

the School of Communications at Howard University at the time, and I believe that Yulanda was a communications/poli-sci double major. And so it became — the animus became quite personal between them. I mean, she mouthed off to him every time she had a chance to about his leading them into, you know, this whole relationship with Pepsi-Cola and all of this other stuff, because it was his kind of, like, baby that he organized on campus. And, he called her an agent provocateur, which was pretty vicious coming from an instructor and, at the time of COINTELPRO, was also quite astonishing, that they would accuse her of being a plant by the CIA or something, to destroy black colleges. It was just — it was overreaction on his part and I've always rather disliked his handling of that situation.

FOLLET: Right. Approximately when would this have been?

ROSS: Nineteen seventy-eight, '79, '77, '78, '79 — I'm not sure of the year, somewhere around then. So that was the kind of work Yulanda did as a student. OK, welcome to community work. She had two things that she focused on, probably three, if you add women's issues to the mix. She was very much engaged with prisoners' rights issues. The D.C. prison was called Lorton. It was like an hour away in southern Virginia, in Virginia, south of D.C., anyway, and she got engaged with prisoners' work, and about conditions and right of prisoners to go to school and stuff like that. I mean, now, prisoners are much more warehoused than they were even then. There was some lip service paid to rehabilitation back then that isn't even paid now.

Um, but her passion was housing work, and she was definitely the leading force, the motivating force for City Wide Housing Coalition. One of the things that Yulanda did — well, in addition to her just doing basic organizing and motivating of people, was that she did a lot of high-quality research. I mean, she was the one that wanted to know her facts. She spent hours reading in libraries, tracing, in almost an investigative journalist kind of way. I could see her at that, but I could see Yulanda as an investigative journalist if she was still alive now, because she had that nose.

She believed in following the money, and so she coauthored, along with this guy in Philly whose name escapes me right now, this analysis called "Spatial Deconcentration," and it was an analysis based upon, first of all, reading the Kerner Report on civil unrest and civil rights and disorders, whatever its name, the Kerner Commission Report, which was a report commissioned by the government after the riots of the late 1960s that suggested that one way to prevent future riots would be to break up the concentrations of blacks in the inner cities. This would not only have the effect of reducing a potential for rioting and this uncontrollable behavior we engage in when we suffer from police brutality. I mean, it might break up that tendency, but it would also have the added benefit of breaking up black voting blocks and it would also

create a way to spread the revenue generated by the black community into more pockets rather than keeping it very concentrated in the inner city.

So they made a number of recommendations in the Kerner Commission Report. These recommendations, when they were put into policy by HUD, Department of Housing and Urban Development, resulted in the creation of two programs, AHOP and RHOP. AHOP was the Area-wide Housing Opportunities Program and RHOP was the Regional Housing Opportunities Program. And millions of dollars were sunk into these programs.

Now, coming back to the communities that needed to be broken up, just because a community is a ghetto doesn't mean people voluntarily leave it unless they have the economic ability to do so, but ghettos, even ghettos are very intact, vibrant communities where people grow up and stay. And so part of the program was to create the incentive amongst these inner city residents to leave.

Well, there were incentives and then there were push factors and there were pull factors. That's the best way to put it. The push factors were created when part of the plan was to shut down city services in that community — fire houses, relocate hospitals, shut down elementary schools. Eventually the community is not only underserved, but it becomes not served at all when you relocate grocery stores and just do away with the services. So that becomes a push factor.

But even then, that's not enough to have economically distressed people move. They're still trapped. And so a program was created to provide ways for poor people to move, and that was called Section Eight, and it became rent vouchers so that based on a person's income, they never paid more than 25 percent of their income for rent. What was popular about Section Eight from the landlord's perspective was that it was guaranteed government income. No matter what condition you kept the property, no matter how little money you invested in the property, if you owned it and you accepted Section Eight, you had a guaranteed rate of return on your property. And so, that made it attractive.

So it was through the AHOP and the RHOP programs that they began distributing money to county governments, suburban county governments, to accept these poor people's Section Eight vouchers. OK, so that became the pull factor to get people out of the inner cities.

So back to Washington, D.C., prior to the spatial deconcentration program, Prince George's County was not predominantly black, and almost overnight, within ten years, it had become so through the use of Section Eight, and the white flight from P.G. County also helped. As they said, Oops. But of course, the county fathers who did this didn't tell the county residents who were white that it was coming, so in many kinds of ways, Yulanda described those situations as bribes. I mean, you can't prove anybody actually pocketed the money, but something went on that needs to be investigated, and she tracked this. As I say, some of

the money that went to these county governments or where it went to at that county level, she followed.

Um, and we felt it was our job to blow the lid on this scheme. First, use the laws to demand the restoration of those city services. We sat in at a health clinic once for three months almost that was being shut down inappropriately over on 14th and Irving Street. I mean, it just — you just suddenly saw all the health clinics, all of the hospitals — we didn't have hospitals in our neighborhoods anyway, so, we had these health clinics — just disappear. Like by fiat, within a year or two.

Instead of having a firehouse every so many blocks, the firehouses were cut down to a half or a third of their number, with longer response times. And we were able to produce studies that show that before they could respond to a fire in so many seconds and now it takes a minute or three minutes and so many seconds to respond to a fire.

Um, schools: kids having to go farther and farther away from home to go to school. The only stores you could buy groceries in were the little Mom and Pop corner stores that have the incredibly high prices, because there were no longer any chain grocery stores in the community where there was one a few years ago. And so, step by step at City Wide, we felt we had to fight each one, and we had to begin resistance to this and expose it. Just expose it. Who said that this community doesn't deserve a firehouse? Who said that this community doesn't deserve a grocery store?

I mean, and — but it was part of the gentrification plan and it worked, unfortunately. So much so that huge parts of Washington, D.C., have been gentrified, starting with Capitol Hill, Adams Morgan and Mount Pleasant, and it's completely, you know — they've gone to Northeast, the 14th Street corridor is unrecognizable now, U Street is now like the hippest, whitest area in Washington, you know. East of the Park. I mean, it's just amazing.

So that was Yulanda's *pièce de résistance*. I mean, she wrote this analysis. It was a big thing, this was in the pre-computer days. We did have computers, but they were little word-processor things.

FOLLET: There's a copy of this in your papers, I'm quite sure.

ROSS: Really? I was hoping that thing survived.

29:00

FOLLET: I think it surfaced. I can't promise you, but I think so.

ROSS: Oh, good. I hope it survived. Um, because I don't know how many copies still exist of that.

So that's what she did. That was her significant political work. What happened when she got killed was that — first of all, we were not paying attention. I think — didn't I talk about us failing to take ourselves seriously, because we were legal and —

FOLLET: Yes, you did.

ROSS: And, you know, we didn't think of anything that was happening –

FOLLET: Yeah, you did.

ROSS: – of what was happening to us. Well, one of the things we failed to add up while we were in the middle of it was that, between our houses and Jimmy's house and the City Wide offices, because we had offices at that time, uh, we had twelve break-ins in a one-year period, averaging one a month, but really we just thought there was a strange crime wave going on in Washington, D.C., at that time and we weren't paying attention. At least, I wasn't paying attention. Maybe somebody else was but I was not paying attention.

It didn't make sense. I blamed my three break-ins — and these were at my home and, well, I had two at my home and one in my car — on bad roommates, because at the time I was always living in houses and renting out the basement or something in order to pay the rent and stuff, and so, thinking that I had a roommate who was a crack head or whatever. But the break-in in my car was the one that finally kind of got my attention, because that was the one where they only took my briefcase and left my stereo. And I don't know many crack addicts who would've been interested in the contents of some file folders.

And, but that was when we were finally beginning to piece it together, because it wasn't — they weren't grouped together like that, they would happen over time and, and uh, we just weren't adding them up until it was too late.

There was one other incident that we thought was mighty suspicious — all of this was in hindsight, but the coordinating body for the spatial deconcentration program in Washington, D.C., is called the Washington Council of Governments, WashCoG. And Yulanda had decided that she had requested under the Freedom of Information Act some documents that they had refused to give her, that they were obliged to give her. I mean, this is a taxpayer-supported organization, and so, we met at Jimmy's house and decided that we were going to go sit in on the WashCoG board meeting until we got the documents that we requested, that Yulanda requested.

31:20

And we met at Jimmy's house about 9 o'clock in the morning. At noon, we were at the WashCoG offices. We didn't even get into the front door when the security guard met us at the front door and handed us everything we were asking for. And again, at the time, we didn't say, Well, how did they know we were coming? I mean, that didn't even occur to us. We kind of felt that they knew we were coming, and they didn't want a big scene. I mean, that's what we were — that's what I was thinking about. Look at them, saving themselves a big scene and bad press. OK, we got our stuff, let's go, kind of thing.

And so all of this went on the end of 1979 and all of 1980. Another thing that happened in that year was that by 1979, I was the director of the Rape Crisis Center and Yulanda had joined our board of directors as our vice-president. So she was also involved in black feminist work at the time. She was one of the people that worked with Nkenge and I — put together this forum on black women in the black nationalist movement. It was a fun forum. What we did, we asked women that had been in the Black Panther Party, the African People's Socialist Party, the Nation of Islam, the All-African People's Revolutionary Party, I know I'm missing some — NBUF, National Black United Front, the National Black Independent Political Party, all the — Burning Spear — all the black nationalist organizations that we knew about, to come and speak in this panel discussion of what the situation of women was in those formations. And simply the fact that the D.C. Rape Crisis Center was sponsoring such a program was totally controversial.

FOLLET: With whom?

34:14

ROSS: Well, with both, first the D.C. Rape Crisis Center, the majority white board of directors couldn't understand, And how does this relate to rape? And then the black nationalist movements, of which we were a part, were like, How's this going to liberate us? What is this about? And they were — the patriarchy and the sexism of the black nationalist movement was —

FOLLET: Was there a precipitating event that led you to organize this forum, a single event?

ROSS: Well, it was in the vein of discovering and beginning the process of naming black feminism. I don't think — none of us used the "F" word in relationship to ourselves at the time. You know, we used to walk around [saying], I'm not a feminist, but arranging for two women to be at his beck and call when he comes to town just because he's the party chairman doesn't sound right. I mean, that — that naming of sexism within the movement.

FOLLET: And you were asked to do that? You were expected —

ROSS: I was not personally involved in none of that because I was never a member of any of those parties or groups except the National Black United Front. This was the kind of testimony that the women were providing at this forum.

FOLLET: From within those other organizations?

ROSS: From within those other organizations, oh, yeah. And, uh, and it was the kind of thing that, it was an open secret. It was popularly known. I

spoke — I thought about one man in the African People's Socialist Party beating his wife in front of his party people because she disagreed with him on a political point of view. I mean, just — there was, so there was the garden variety of sexism, sexual abuse, sexual favors.

We're also dealing with movements that think they can practice, actively practice, polygamy in American society. So, one man with two or three wives with the inability to support any of them. I mean (laughs), so this was also going on. All of these things were going on and we thought they were — not to mention our work at the Rape Crisis Center, one out of four black women is raped by a black man. So that's not being discussed about anywhere in all of the so-called political revolutionary work we were doing. I mean, how can you mount a revolution when your army is at war with itself? And that's how we felt as women. And if we don't unearth, discuss, stop these behaviors, what kind of revolution will we mount? So even if you bought all that revolutionary clap trap, it was not logical to support violence against women, because it can't do anything but undermine the revolution.

And by the way, I mean, to not isolate the U.S. black nationalist movement, this stuff was endemic in the South African liberation struggle and the abuse that was taking place in the PAC [Pan-African Congress] camps and the ANC [African National Congress] camps of black women. I mean, in the Mozambican struggle and the Angolan struggle. So, because we were pan-Africanists, we were paying attention to what women were saying around the world, black women were saying globally. There was the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe, which concluded in [1980], so we had the women from ZAPU [Zimbabwe African People's Union] and ZANU [Zimbabwe African National Union] talking about the sexual abuse they had to go through even while they had rifles in their hands, fighting beside the men. And of course today we're worrying about the women getting raped in Iraq who are in our army, I mean, so —

FOLLET: And were you directly in touch with women in those other struggles?

ROSS: Yeah, because we were part of the anti-apartheid movement, which was a southern Africa movement. It wasn't just South Africa that had to be liberated, but the South Africa apartheid government was sending troops to Angola, to Mozambique, to Zimbabwe, to support white supremacy in those states as well — Namibia also. You know, it was a southern Africa strategy to end apartheid that we were engaged in, and a lot of people mistakenly only associate apartheid with South Africa, but in fact it was the whole southern cone was engulfed in it.

FOLLET: So this was your South Africa support group.

ROSS: Project. The Southern Africa Support Project, out of [the D.C. Study Group]. So, looking at those experiences, looking at what we knew, it

felt natural to have a forum talking about the situation of black women in these so-called revolutionary progressive radical formations. We didn't do it with the intention of hurting anybody. I mean, we weren't really invested in denouncing any one group or putting up any one group or really getting into that kind of sectarian kind of thing. We were talking about what happened to women.

Nkenge and I, by the way, had also organized a network of black women that I called the International Council of African Women, and it was women who were in these formations who came together in a coalition kind of way to talk about the role of black women's health issues, black women's, you know, violence against women issues, black women's rights issues, kind of thing. And so it was through the ICAW network that we had the relationships to bring these women to the panel, to have this thing.

OK. So those were — that was the breadth, some of the breadth of Yulanda's work. What happened was that we had gotten sufficiently paranoid that we had decided that we would stop going places by ourselves, so that if we were out, day or night, we'd call somebody and let them know, try to get somebody to go with us if we had to go somewhere by ourselves.

FOLLET: And we is the —

ROSS: The D.C. Study Group.

FOLLET: OK.

ROSS: It's just the group that was feeling pretty much under siege by now. Um, and so, it was traditional for us — I mean, I have to honestly say we partied as hard as we worked. We loved to party, and D.C. was very much a party town at the time. Uh, it was traditional for us to have a Halloween party, full costume and everything, usually at different people's houses. I hosted it one year and other people hosted it [other years]. And of course, everybody we hung with was not necessarily political. I mean, we did have lives and friends that weren't, you know, wandering around figuring out how to bring liberation or change.

And so the night of November 2, 1980, was the Halloween party. Saturday night. That day, we'd had a meeting of the Youth Committee of the National Black United Front, which Yulanda was engaged with, involved in. So that night when it was time to go to the party, Yulanda went with [three] guys from NBUF, from the New Jersey chapter of NBUF. And she actually stopped by the house where I was to ask me if I wanted to go with her and I said no. And I'll always regret that I didn't go with her, but then I'll say, Maybe I shouldn't regret that. But at the time I had a new boyfriend and I thought I'd even miss the party so I could hang out with this new boyfriend, right? So she came to my new boyfriend's house, she knew exactly how to find me, to ask me if I

43:04

wanted to go with her and I said, “No, I think I’m going to go later” — because I told her I would go earlier and then I changed my mind and decided to lay up. And so she went to the party.

About 1 or 2 o’clock in the morning, I’m not sure of the time, I got another knock on the door, waking me and my boyfriend up. And a friend of ours was there, telling us that Yulanda was dead. And I have to honestly say I didn’t believe him. I said, “I just saw Yulanda. I mean, I just saw Yulanda.” He says, “No, she’s been killed. She’s been killed. You need to come.” And so we rush into our cars and we head out to southeast D.C.

What apparently had happened was that Yulanda was walking with these two men, with three men, I’m sorry, three men, because it had grown to three men from NBUF, New Jersey, by the time they went to the party, and these four men approached them from the front. They had to park a couple of blocks away. So these four men approached them from the front, passed them, nobody paid any attention to them, and as Yulanda and the group of four, well, the group of three kept walking, these men u-turned and then approached them from the rear. Each one of them pulled out a gun. Thinking it was a stickup, robbery, the guys — the four men with the guns made them spread out on separate cars, like there were cars parked along the street. They made each of them lay down, face down on a car. And the three guys who were with Yulanda said that no sooner had they put their heads down on the cars than they heard a gun go off. They looked up, Yulanda was slumped down and the guys were running away.

Um, they don’t remember any struggle with Yulanda. No resistance being offered by any of them. What do you do? Four guys with guns attacking four people. Um, and the bullet had gone into the base of Yulanda’s neck and exploded out of her skull. I mean, just shot from the back upward. Unfortunately, and ironically, on the car of another one of my best friends, on Barbara Mitchell’s car, it happened, because she was also at the party.

Um, they didn’t rob them. Yulanda had all her money and jewels and so did all the other guys. And immediately the police came and said they thought it was a robbery gone bad, that they thought these four guys had planned on robbing them and then when they ended up killing somebody, it scared them and they ran off.

And something about that just didn’t work for us. First of all, whoever heard of a robbery without a robbery? I mean, they still could’ve collected the money, the jewels, the wallets, whatever, if they had really planned on robbing somebody. And if they had to kill somebody, why the only woman in a group of men? I don’t want to sound sexist, but most robbers would not have seen the woman as the chief threat. So there were parts of this that didn’t make sense in terms of the explanation we got that night from the police.

Then, um, the police kept sweeping up random groups of black men from southeast Washington claiming that they had done the crime. By

the time they had gotten to the third set of black men that they had to release, we felt we had to do something, and by this time several weeks had gone by. And so we put together the Yulanda Ward Memorial Fund from the community. We raised over \$40,000 through benefit concerts — Sweet Honey did a benefit for us, you know, just different things that we did to raise money. And what we did was that we hired our own investigator to find out what happened.

Meanwhile, I should also say that there was a deputy district attorney, Evelyn Queen, a black woman who'd been assigned to our case — black group, black woman, that was also part of it — and she — in a way, we could never get a read on Evelyn because she seemed to take us seriously when we said this could've been political but we don't know who, what, why. But then she took the position that if it was political, then I need to investigate you and what you've been doing. And so she immediately demanded from us all our minutes, all our notes, all our files. She wanted everything that — all of our City Wide, Southern African Support Project, Rape Crisis Center, everybody. She wanted all that data.

And we took the position of, well, she's not investigating Yulanda's death, she's mounting a witch hunt on the black left of Washington, D.C. I mean, we're not the ones that killed Yulanda. I mean, whatever happened, we know we did not kill Yulanda. And so, no, we're not gonna turn over all these records, all this stuff, for her to conduct a witch hunt on the black left of Washington D.C., while ignoring who really killed Yulanda.

And so she issued subpoenas because they convened a grand jury and they came to the Rape Crisis Center to serve warrants but fortunately I was gone that day. I was so happy I was gone. But they did, I think, serve Nkenge a warrant because she was still working at the Center at the time. They served Jimmy Garrett a warrant, and Jimmy Garrett — one of his girlfriends, Hope Young, served her a warrant. So they ended up sitting in jail for the entire time that the grand jury was empanelled, because you get there, you take the Fifth, and they hold you for contempt.

And um, but you know, and I have to honestly say that their aggression towards us made it possible for us to raise the money to launch our own investigation. Because it was one thing for a group of, you know, black radicals to say somebody's been assassinated, but when you've got the weight of the state coming down in such a public, visible, we're-going-after-the-black-left kind of way, actually that [may have] worked to our political benefit. I don't know.

FOLLET: So having them in jail helped. It was a publicity thing.

50:15

ROSS: Right. And so we hired our own investigator. I don't remember his name, it was Brent or Brett something or other. Really nondescript fat white guy who one would never have thought would have been able to

so successfully immerse himself in this poor black community in southeast D.C. and find out anything. But in fact he did.

We'd gotten this investigator recommended to us through a lawyer who had worked on the Terrence Johnson case. Terrence Johnson was a young black man in Prince George's County, recently blackened Prince George's County, who was serving a life sentence for murder because he killed a cop who entered his cell with a drawn gun trying to kill him, and he wrestled the gun away from the cop and killed the cop in his cell. But they convicted him of murder. Obviously, and he'd been beaten up. Police brutality was pretty rampant in the Prince George's County jail. And he was the one guy that didn't get killed first. Young law school student. Brilliant kid. Good-looking law school student. Traffic stop. Ends up with his life going down the toilet like that.

Anyway, this investigator had worked on Terrence Johnson's case and Terrence Johnson eventually got released and acquitted.

FOLLET: And so he came well recommended.

ROSS: [Terrence] went back to law school and then committed suicide [a few years later], which was really, really, really sad because it took ten years out of his life, dealing with this. One day, he went under a tree and actually shot his own brains out. Of course, somebody may need to investigate that, too, because that also happened in P.G. County, but that's what I'm told.

Anyway, but [the investigator] came to us with a good reputation for being able to take on the state and prove the facts of a case. He identified, through some mechanism only an investigator would know, one of the guys who claimed that he knew something about it. He claimed not to have been involved in it, but he did know who was involved in it. And apparently the guys, when they shot Yulanda, the three guys from New Jersey saw them run off into one of the projects or apartment buildings and then just disappear. A search of the area never revealed them.

And so Brent turned the name over — of this guy who said he was an informer — over to the police [see p. 145 — ed.]. The police arrested him and through tactics I can only guess about, made him identify the other three guys who were involved, and it turned out he was one of the four who had done it. But they proclaimed their innocence the whole time, that the police were mistaken. The police were triumphalists, they announced they'd solved the case, this is who done it, these robbers, blah-blah-blah, we got them in jail. And so, but the guys who were under arrest, who proclaimed they were innocent, [claimed] they were being framed, whatever, and we actually did believe these were the four guys, though, because our lead had gotten to them.

And another question we kept asking was that the three eye-witnesses all claimed that these people were using expensive guns, like 357s. I mean, huge, big-bore guns, and all of us felt, well, you could sell

a 357 Magnum on the street for a thousand dollars. What would you get in a Halloween costume party robbery that one of those guns couldn't have given you? So that was also what was part of what was crazy about it. The scenario, the amount of weapons used and all of that.

And so, the night before the trial — they dismissed the grand jury, which got Hope and Jimmy and Nkenge out of jail — the night before the trial, we had gotten our attorney together and we were ready to go to court, because we wanted to know — we were convinced that they were the ones that did it. The big question in our minds was, why? More specifically, what political work was Yulanda doing that got her killed so that maybe we won't do that again? I mean, in a very practical way, it's like, you gotta know why. I mean, what was it? Was it the Black College Day thing? Was it the prison work? Was it "Spatial Deconcentration"? It couldn't have been black feminism. I mean, what was it that made somebody so angry that they decided that the way to deal with her was to take her out? And we could not figure it out. For the life of me, I'd love to be able to say we can proclaim, you know, we pinched this nerve and this is how that person responded. We still have not a clue.

And so we got to trial. It was our opportunity to ask the questions. The night — we got to court the next day and we were met at the door and told that there would be no trial. Um, somehow, the night before, all four men had confessed to the crime and so there would only be a sentencing, and that the sentencing would not be public, and I'm not quite sure, sequestered or whatever it is, because the judge had been advised that because Yulanda had done political work, the identity and the location of where these men would be sentenced to had to be kept secret for their safety. And of course, you had all these leftist radicals mad at them.

And so we found out the name of the first guy who committed it, the first informer, the supposed informer. We never did find out the names of the other three, nor did we ever know their fate, where they were sentenced, if they were sentenced, or anything. Now, I mean, somewhere, in somebody's court records, has to be something. We've never been able to launch an investigation to find out what happened. That happened on a Saturday night. Ronald Reagan was elected Tuesday, and Yulanda's death was wiped totally off the headlines of the newspapers.

FOLLET: Had it been in the headlines?

57:33

ROSS: It had been in the newspaper. We made sure it was in the paper, in the [*Washington*] *Post* and wherever else we could get it. And we kept it up in the community papers, the community papers, kept our strategy up there.

Um, the overall impact of Yulanda's death, I remember, it scared us. It scared us. I mean, I'd be lying if I said we weren't scared. But it also

destroyed those formations. I mean, City Wide collapsed. People stopped coming to meetings, were afraid to come to meetings. A lot of people just melted back into their lives, whether they were schoolteachers or bus drivers or hospital workers. Whatever they did in life, that's what they just melted back into. They stopped coming to Study Group, stopped coming to political meetings, and it was hard to fault them. I mean, because we were all scared. I mean, it was really hard to fault them, but if the assassination of Yulanda Ward was intended to kill the grassroots housing movement in D.C., it did so, because no organization grew to replace City Wide Housing Coalition for another decade.

And now, I talk to people who are now in another housing struggle trying to stop the gentrification, but it's so far gone now, so far along now, I'm glad that they're waging the struggle, but they effectively killed the grassroots housing movement in Washington. So then, right after that, the rent-control laws were totally weakened with almost no opposition coming from the community, no organized opposition coming from the community. Section Eight just spread like wildfire, where, you know, people were actually lining up to get the vouchers, not knowing what it represented in terms of destruction of the neighborhoods and the communities.

BEVERLY: We need to change tape.

FOLLET: OK.

END TAPE 7

TAPE 8

FOLLET: You've just mentioned the impact on the political movement, but you — I think at one point, you told me it was a turning point for you.

ROSS: It was. Yulanda's death made those of us who were doing political work really assess whether we were committed to it with our lives. I mean, I had never been in a situation where I thought my life was on the line before. I didn't feel no immediate, like, threat because I don't have what I call a lot of courage in terms of physical challenges. But at the same time, one could no longer be a dilettante in social justice work when somebody dies around you. You were either there or you need to just back off and lead a different life. And we offer no judgment on the people who choose to lead a different life, because this is a life, not only of a sacrifice but just — you're always in a fog because you never know where the blows are going to come from. I mean, I keep saying the one thing we wanted to know was, what work was she doing that caused that? Because Loretta would have been the first one to say, "I don't want to do that anymore. OK? Because I'm not equipped to deal with people who assassinate people." And we could never figure it out.

And while, like I said, Jimmy was more of our intellectual leader, our mentor, but Yulanda was the organizing leader, the person who did the analysis, who really got people up, and would call you and make you show up when you didn't want to show up, and make you write that paper you didn't want to write, or if you're going to show up at the meeting with the excuse about your cat ate something, and she'd be the one to say, "I don't think so. I think you can stay up and work on it tonight. You can do this," you, know, kind of person. And so she was definitely our chief.

And what was sad about her death, one of the sadder things about her death, was that when we returned her body to Texas for burial — she was an only child — her mother refused to speak to any of us because she blamed us for her death. She thought that we had led Yulanda into this, and here we were trying to explain to her, No, Yulanda was our leader. We were not leading Yulanda. And then, it did kind of help, like I said, when the junior high school teacher got up and gave this eulogy about how she was political in junior high and all the teachers stood up and said the same thing, basically, that she was a prodigy, a political prodigy. And so that made us feel better, but it didn't comfort her poor mother at all. And as Yulanda got given some awards posthumously — I think one of them might be in my collection — her mother wouldn't allow us to give them to her. She didn't want them. And so that's how we ended up having Yulanda's awards. Her mother didn't want them.

We never got into Yulanda's apartment, because she didn't get killed in her apartment but the police put police tape and locked her apartment. By the time we got access to Yulanda's apartment, it had been cleaned out, and it was not by her parents. I mean, everything was

missing. And we tried to talk to the landlord and he didn't take her stuff. Last he knew, it had police tape on it. So we never knew what happened to her papers, her typewriter, I think it was my bicycle because she had borrowed my bicycle at the time, so we all had little stuff over there that we never saw again.

Other impacts on the work. The D.C. Rape Crisis Center recoiled, just recoiled, because we were ground central for the Yulanda Ward Memorial Fund institutionally. It was our offices that the press was coming to. We were having a press conference in the D.C. Rape Crisis Center, all kinds of stuff, and in many ways, it just hardened a small minority, but a vocal minority of the board, who felt that we had strayed away from the central mission of only working on sexual assault. Not even violence against women — but no one could tell us that what happened to Yulanda was not violence against a woman — but sexual assault.

And so it almost became like a black-white divide at the Center. And, I mean, there's some reason for believing that. We're developing protocol on cooperating and working with the police to help rape victims, and yet here's this radical wing of the Center accusing the state of having killed Yulanda.

FOLLET:

Wow.

5:59

ROSS:

So there was some legitimacy for concern for whether those two projects can exist in the same institutional space, and I can say that with my reason and judgment now, at the time, I was pissed off. I felt that they only meant the violence that white women experienced. You know, the violences that are in the routine lives of black women apparently aren't as important. And then, I thought even if you do believe that, she was vice-president of our board of directors, this is personal, folks. It's like —

FOLLET:

Yulanda was.

ROSS:

Yeah. So even if you did believe there should be this wall between Loretta's radical political work and sexual assault, she was one of our own. How can we not care about it when the vice-president of the board of directors of the D.C. Rape Crisis Center gets killed? We don't even know if her work at the Rape Crisis Center was part of it. We don't know. And so it felt like a betrayal, to even have to fight that fight internally at the same time we're fighting with the state, dealing with the investigator, trying to explain to community, watching all this work. I mean, it felt pretty overwhelming at the time. I was 27.

FOLLET:

A betrayal by the white women at the Center?

ROSS:

Yeah. A conservative [backlash] — and not only white women, there were black conservative women in that mix, too.

FOLLET: Ah-hah.

ROSS: So, more a conservative wing of the board of the Center.

FOLLET: Did it play into the tensions that you felt from the black nationalist quarters who didn't especially like the Rape Crisis Center?

ROSS: Well, strangely enough, they could understand assassination and COINTELPRO and all that. I mean, if there was a support committee that came together for investigating Yulanda, it was the black nationalist community — ironically, because we're dealing with groups that were liberating us and having shootouts with the New Jersey police and stuff, so they kind of got that part of what we were talking about. So whatever disagreements they had with us, they were not the issue. They were very supportive of what we were doing, because it was an attack on the black community. It was an attack on political activists.

And like I said, we weren't even the radicals. We weren't the ones out there doing weapons training and going out on retreats and talking about bringing down the state and stuff. We were trying to work within the state. I mean, with all of our work, that was what was so bitterly ironic about the attack on Yulanda. We were not using extralegal means. We were the ones using the power of democracy and community protest, but nothing illegal. I mean, the most illegal thing we did was sit in on a health clinic. That was our radical, oh-wow-we're-excited activity.

FOLLET: Wasn't it just last year or maybe two years ago that you established — is it a scholarship in her name?

ROSS: Yes, as a matter of fact. You have a mind for detail. Zami, which is this black lesbian group in Atlanta, has a national college scholarship program for queer youth, and you don't have to be black, but queer youth of color, and high school — people who come out of high school and who organize around it or do something around it, and gives them a college scholarship.

Now, Yulanda's sexuality — as far as I know, Yulanda was probably — well, I don't know, I can't speculate on Yulanda. I know Yulanda had a relationship with men. I know of at least two men she slept with, OK? But at the same time, she was very butch, you know, or at least I experienced her as kind of butch. And so I often speculate that Yulanda probably would've ended up as a lesbian, mainly because she was openly questioning her sexuality at that time but had not quite made up her mind. But she had no use for feminine frills and all of that. She was the Levi blue jeans, sweatshirt kind of girl all the time. All the time. I don't know if I ever saw Yulanda in a skirt in all the years I knew her. So now — but I'm speculating, totally speculating, just because I'm older now and a lot of my girlfriends who were very tomboyish ended

up butch, they ended up lesbians and so, it seemed that that was where she was going.

So anyway, I had a chance to attend the Zami scholarship award program a couple of years ago, because the executive director of Zami, Mary Ann Adams, is on my board of directors of the National Center for Human Rights Education. So I figured, OK, she gives to my board, I'll give to her organization, quid pro quo thing. And once I was there, I got so moved by what they're able to achieve, the difference in people's lives that they're making by making the scholarships available to young queers of color, um, and I thought about Yulanda.

And strangely enough, in that room were, like, five people from the D.C. area who've since located to Atlanta who knew Yulanda. And so I started talking to them about [how] there should be a Yulanda Ward Memorial Scholarship. There really should, because we've got to keep remembering that sister's name, we can't just let her fade into history. And I think she would support giving a scholarship in her name to queer youth of color. And they said, "Loretta, did you know she was lesbian?" I don't know. I don't know. But I still know she would support this. And so last year, we didn't raise that much money, we raised, like, five hundred dollars, and so we're going to continue to try to grow it every year. But it also provided an opportunity to get back in touch with a lot of people who'd been in the Study Group and they all sent, like, little checks, you know, 50 dollars, 25 dollars or whatever, that we were able to get in contact with, as a way of remembering Yulanda.

FOLLET: That's wonderful.

ROSS: It was an opportunity, 24 years later, to reconnect with some of the Study Group people, and stuff. So, OK. What else. I stayed at the Rape Crisis Center until 1982.

FOLLET: Tell me how you got involved in the Rape Crisis Center initially.

13:38

ROSS: How did I initially get involved in the Rape Crisis Center? Well, I was at this meeting, D.C. City Wide meeting, and Nkenge was at the meeting. I think Nkenge was also doing housing work, and she was part of the Study Group. And so, we had come out of St. Steven's Church and we were standing on the sidewalk talking to Nkenge and she said, "Hey, sister, would you like to come to a meeting with me?" I said, "What kind of meeting?" She said, "Oh, at the Rape Crisis Center." I said, "What's a rape crisis center?" because I'd never heard of it or anything. And she said, "Well, I think you should come check this out. Come check it out. I'm working there and I'd like you to come."

And so I ended up going to a meeting at the Rape Crisis Center. Nkenge probably knows more details on it than I do, because I do have selective memory, but I seem to recall that there were members there representing *Aegis*, *Quest*, like Deb Freeman, Jo Freeman, Charlotte Bunch. I mean, these were women that were in the D.C. Area Feminist

Alliance at the time. They were the mothers of the D.C. Rape Crisis Center, and we were talking about services in the District of Columbia. By that time, the Rape Crisis Center was seven years old. I think the first three or four years, they didn't have any funding and it was just a hotline that was operated out of one of the members' houses, one of the members of the D.C. Area Feminist Alliance houses.

FOLLET: Do you know when it was founded?

ROSS: 1972.

FOLLET: OK.

ROSS: And uh, so it was about seven years old. And it was so funny, because when they first started the Rape Crisis Center, people had to give out their personal phone number. If you'd been raped, you call this number. And then you would have to organize volunteers to come sit in your household over a 24-hour period, just to service a hotline line. I tell you the greatest thing ever invented for us was telephone transfer, where we could actually get another number, not our personal numbers, and then give that out and then just, you know, forward the call to the home number so you could sit at home and still answer the hotline line, you know?

FOLLET: What do you think made Nkenge think you'd be interested?

16:22

ROSS: I don't know, because we were always talking women's rights stuff in the Study Group and it was the air, the atmosphere, there was — and I honestly say, this is going to sound so crazy, but of all the women of the Study Group, I think Nkenge and I were the only ones that never slept with Jimmy Garrett. So I don't know why we gravitated towards each other, but we did. (laughs) We were fighting for women's issues, you know, across the board, but I don't know.

I mean, she approached me, I didn't approach her. I would've been intimidated. Nkenge had been in the Black Panther Party and I thought of her as, like, the most serious, intimidating, committed person. She's still — I remember right before I met her, she, well, before I met her, but she was telling me this story about how they had to stand on the street corners and sell those Panther newspapers in the rain and in the snow and stuff, and what they had to go through to start free breakfast programs and stuff like that. It was, like, Ooh, you're a warrior. I don't want to be a — you're a warrior, kind of thing, so I think I never would've approached Nkenge. But she approached me. And so, I ended up volunteering at the Rape Crisis Center. Oh, I was going say how. Back when I got involved in the Center.

FOLLET: It had been started by —

ROSS: A group of white women.

FOLLET: White women including Charlotte Bunche and –

ROSS: Yeah, well, it was started by the D.C. Area Feminist Alliance, DCAFA. Charlotte was a member of DCAFA. But, and it was DCAFA that started having the consciousness-raising sessions in '70 and '71 about violence against women, and they made the decision in '72 to start the hotline, OK? So, it's hard to directly attribute which DCAFA member did what thinking in this group consciousness-raising thing. But these are some of the names of the activists that I remember. I think in my papers, I gave you some of those *Aegis* –

FOLLET: I think so, too.

ROSS: Also named some of the people. And so for the first three years, they operated a simple hotline and then they were able to secure a small amount of funding from the D.C. government, and they made the decision that with this funding, they would intentionally give any job that was created with it to a black woman, or black women, because it was clear that 75 to 80 percent of the clients calling the hotline were black, and so they wanted the staff to come from the community that was being served.

And so, the first executive director they hired was a woman named Michelle Hudson and then, I'm not sure how Michelle met Nkenge but Michelle met Nkenge and Nkenge became the second executive director and then Nkenge called me in as the third executive director and so, it's kind of how — we always tried to replace ourselves as we were doing this. We wanted to keep that black thing going, but it was also part of the prophetic vision of the white women to create that space for black feminism to grow and flourish at the D.C. Rape Crisis Center, which, a decade later, I hurt when people didn't remember this, what they wanted to do, but um –

FOLLET: Now there was, in D.C., there was DCAFA, and you mentioned that there were other groups. The D.C. Area Feminist Organization, is that the same thing?

ROSS: Yes, there was no D.C. Area Feminist Organization [that I know of]. It was DCAFA. Feminist Alliance. D.C. Area Feminist Alliance. I mean, there might have been a group called Organization, I don't know.

FOLLET: No, I think that's what, um, but there was no NBFO in –

ROSS: Not in D.C.

FOLLET: – in D.C.

ROSS: Now, interestingly enough, there could and should have been, because in my later conversations with Barbara Smith, she tells me that they actually had some NBFO meetings in D.C. but that was Boston and New York people coming down to D.C. to a retreat center near there or something, but not really — we didn't know about it.

FOLLET: Was there anything comparable, an alternative among black women at the time?

ROSS: Oh, yeah. I mean, there was —

FOLLET: In D.C.?

21:20

ROSS: Yeah, but it was not NBFO. I mean, three women moved to D.C. from Gainesville, Florida. Faye Williams, Linda Leaks, Ajowa Ifateyo. They were joined by a fourth woman from Boston, Mary Lisbon. And they formed the Black Women's Self-Help Collective. Faye Williams and I think Ajowa had worked at the Gainesville Feminist Women's Health Center and learned how to do cervical self-exams, so they set up this collective to teach black women how to do cervical self-exams. And this was in 1981.

Linda Leaks, who by the way was the woman whose husband beat her up in the African People's Socialist Party, which is one of the reasons she had to get out of Florida and away from this batterer. She started this black women's newspaper called *UpFront*, and so that was, you know, a breakthrough, because we had *Off Our Backs* also being published out of D.C., so *Off Our Backs* served as a model for wanting to do *UpFront* and she carried that project on her back for four or five years, personally financing it, trying to make it work. And I believe they're collected up at the University of Wisconsin's State Historical Society.

FOLLET: *UpFront*?

ROSS: I checked with Jim Danky when I was up there and he said he had *UpFronts*.

FOLLET: Nice.

ROSS: Um, so, it wasn't uniform where we're in the same group doing the same kind of work thing for black women. It was that wherever there was a need, there was apparently, it seems almost spontaneously, sprung up a group of black women to work on it. Um, another group of women had started a street harassment group, teaching black women how to respond to cat calls and street harassment and self-defense-type work. So again, bell hooks wrote *Ain't I a Woman*, which like I said, came out in '81 and just seized our hearts and our imaginations and —

FOLLET: Tell me about that. Tell me about reading that book. Do you remember where —

23:58

ROSS: Oh, my God. Well, we always had a women's book store — not always, but we had a women's book store in Washington at the time and I cannot remember its name, but —

FOLLET: SisterSpace? No.

ROSS: No, SisterSpace — Faye Williams started SisterSpace, the same way Faye started the cervical self-exam stuff, she started SisterSpace — which has been shut down, by the way.

FOLLET: Oh no.

ROSS: They lost their lease on the property in that 14th and U quarter that has been gentrified. Owner is getting offered a couple of million dollars for their space, so they kicked them out, so the bookstore is homeless now. And so it's amazing how all this stuff is connected.

Um, I don't even remember how I got *Ain't I a Woman*. I wish I could pull out a memory saying this person put it my hands. I don't know. All I know is that I got that book. I read it in about two hours because I'm a speed reader, and I hollered, and then I went and tried to tell everybody I could about the book, including Nkenge. And then, I mean, it created a buzz. It was like *Stupid White Men* for our day. It was a buzz. And we couldn't get enough copies of it.

Then we got in touch with bell's publisher and brought her down to D.C. to do a book signing, and that's when bell told me, I'll never forget, she said, "Y'all need to write about what y'all are doing here. You all need to write about it." And we didn't follow her advice. I never follow anybody's advice. We're too busy doing to. She was wonderful. Audre Lorde came down when we started organizing around Nairobi. It was —

FOLLET: What jumped out at you about that book? Do you remember something in particular?

26:05

ROSS: Its clarity. Its clarity. I mean, it's been so long since I read it, too, so let me pull it out of my memory, but first of all, bell intentionally wrote theory in highly accessible form, and one of the things she said in her book signing was that she wanted her book to be our first book, she wanted her grandmother to be able to read it, and her grandmother didn't have a coll[ege degree] — I mean, and I said, "I'm glad you wrote for your grandmother, then I can read it now, because if it had come out full of obtuse theory, I probably wouldn't have figured it out." Bell also got a lot of criticism for writing such an accessible book because allegations were made that she wasn't able to do scholarly

work. So of course she hits back with *Feminism: From Margin to Center* that, you know, still gives me a headache when I try to read more than five pages at a time, but she proved she can do all that postmodernist jargon that is called scholarly writing nowadays.

But if ever a book built a movement, *Ain't I a Woman* did it for us in D.C., at least. It might have had a bigger impact than that. I mean, it's still being read by everybody, so, obviously.

FOLLET: What did it tell you that you didn't know?

ROSS: That we weren't crazy for identifying something called black sexism, that we weren't betraying our race when we called attention to the violence that men practiced against women, that we did have an oppositional analysis to that which was being offered by white women, that it was OK to name things like white supremacy. We did this work of — because there was this fear that if we called it white supremacy the white women you worked with wouldn't be able to handle that and you had to be fixing that and all of that and, you know, so you couldn't name the oppression you were dealing with for fear of hurting your allies. But then you have to ask how allied are they when they can't let you name the oppression. I mean, it raised all those kinds of questions.

And then Paula Giddings came along. Don't forget Paula's book, came along in '84, *When and Where I Enter*. And then, Barbara Smith hit in '83 with *Some of us are Brave*. Or was it *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, came first. She hit in '83 with that, so that is like a golden renaissance period, that early period from, like, 1980 to '85, *This Bridge Called My Back* came out. I mean, it was, like, oh, we were in — I don't know. It just took us to another level. It took our thinking, our passion, our politics. For me, it was clarifying. It was wonderful to read that we were not alone, that we could build movement with these ideas, that there was something called a women's movement.

And, I mean, there were other external events happening, I mean, the United Nations had declared the World Decade for Women from 1976 to '85. We'd been engaged in doing work around that and so the anti-apartheid movement and Zimbabwe got liberated in 1980. So I can't reach into that tangled skein of yarn and pull out the one thing that turned my light bulb on, but I think it was the congruence of all of those things happening together. It was a place, it was a time, it was a spirit, it was a particular set of people. And I'm really saddened when I realize how special that time was in retrospect, because I've never experienced such an exciting period of black feminism again in my life.

Living in Atlanta, we often try to recreate that, study groups around books or *Zami* or other stuff, but it doesn't have that vibrancy, it doesn't have that passion, it doesn't have that sense of community, where we really supported each other's work. If Linda's doing *UpFront*, then all of us drop what we're doing to help her get out *UpFront*, or get it distributed or whatever. We'd all go drop our pants if Faye's self-help group [needed us]. We all got into a van together and came to the

founding conference of the National Black Women's Health Project. I mean, it was just rich. And our youth helped, being young helped a lot, but still.

As I hear black women describe their experiences in other cities, I don't get the impression that they had as much fun as we had in Washington, and maybe because Washington is a more compact kind of a place. Anyway.

FOLLET:

It sounds like a moment of tremendous hope.

31:30

ROSS:

Yeah, but power and growth, too. I don't know about hope, but we certainly felt very powerful. We felt that we were intentionally creating movement. We were carving out thinking. I don't know when Barbara Christensen wrote that piece about black women claiming theory. I mean, just all those kinds of things. Every time you opened up anything, it seemed like you just got another, you know, orgasmic jolt of intellectual juice from somewhere, some source at the time. And it was wonderful, it was rich.

In a way, we're still in it. I mean, I think that the reason *Undivided Rights* has an audience and we got easily published is because we're still in this kind of, like, 15, 20-year renaissance around the writings of women of color and what it's doing to animate the broader women's movement. I think that's still unfolding. But to see it play out on such a large screen in D.C. at a special place called the D.C. Rape Crisis Center, which was the first rape crisis center itself, so the Rape Crisis Center birthed a lot. It not only birthed this black feminist thing but we wrote a manual about how to start a rape crisis center that we distributed thousands of copies around the world, so a lot of groups used our model to start rape crisis centers in other countries and other places.

I remember when I was the director we had a funny visit, because we got this letter from these women in South Africa who wanted to start a rape crisis center. And we wrote and said, Well, when you're in the States, come by and see us. And to be honest, I had kind of not thought much about them coming and what that would mean or anything. And at the Rape Crisis Center at the time, we all worked in one big room in this church, All Soul's Church, and so Barbara, who was our counselor, who was a white woman, sat closest to the door, because she was the intake person, and then I sat, like, at the back of the room near the window. I think two other people were on the sides or something.

And so these white women show up one day, and they said, "We would like to talk to y'all. We're from South Africa. We'd like to start a rape crisis center," and stuff like that. And so, they stop at Barbara's desk. And Barbara, a lovely Jewish woman, she looks up from what she was doing, her little Barbara Streisand-looking [self] — and she said, "Oh, you need to talk to her" [pointing at me], and these heads whipped around and we could literally see these jaws drop.

And it was in that moment I realized, Oh, wow, these women weren't expecting us to be the ones to help them start this rape crisis

center in South Africa. Not only that, I hadn't been expecting them, because I would've, you know — and I was not good that day because we grilled those women on how starting a rape crisis center was going to deconstruct apartheid. Before we could even tell you how to do it, what is that center going to do about apartheid? What are you white women going to do about apartheid? And they were not expecting — these are probably the progressive liberals of South Africa who were not expecting to be held accountable for the nationalist right-wing apartheid system. These were feminists, by God. But they're the closest white South Africans we could get to (laughs).

These poor women got real (unclear) about the apartheid system and all they wanted to do was ask us a couple of questions about our manual, which they had obviously studied in detail. So it worked out to be a good meeting. We ended up there for five or six hours, chatting and challenging, chatting and challenging. I've often wondered what happened to that rape crisis center.

But I guess a theme is emerging in my talking about this, is that black feminism has always sought to connect the dots. We are much more able to articulate that with a more coherent analysis now, but the way we had to challenge the rape crisis center to not disconnect apartheid violence from state violence from personal violence. I mean, we were pushing that envelope in the 1970s.

That's what black women brought to the analysis of violence against women, that we had to talk about the forms the violence takes, and any institution claiming to serve women had to connect those dots, or it was only serving a certain set of women who mostly were not subject to those other forms of violence. They might be subject to personal violence, interpersonal violence, but maybe because they're not at risk of getting shot by the state or passed the provisional colored identity card if they go to South Africa, this was not connecting for them, and I think that always, always has been understated and underdeveloped as a theme when one looks at the impact women of color had on the movement in violence against women. Now we knew we had other impacts that were understated but still, we promoted them.

When you look at the laws that affect violence against women in this country, much of that case law was developed on the bodies of black women. The right of women to defend themselves against their rapist was established. Dessie Woods was the case, a woman who was imprisoned when — sounds awfully like the Terrence Johnson story — she was imprisoned [for shooting her rapist], and she ended up being on trial for murder. So there was a national campaign to free Dessie Woods.

And so the right of women to practice self-defense, the first laws around sexual harassment at the workplace, were often lawsuits brought by black women. I think the earliest lawsuits were brought by black women who were prison guards at Lorton, I was telling you about, one of the prisons Yulanda did work at. The Michelle Vinson case, she worked at Meritor Saving and Loan, and her case established that sexual

harassment simply by existing is a form of sex discrimination, you know. And so, Inez Garcia, she was another woman who had murdered her attacker. I can't remember –

FOLLET: Joann Little.

ROSS: Joann Little was the one Sweet Honey wrote the song about. Um, so we not only dealt with the cases of those women, we also had to deal with the personal lives of those women. I remember when Dessie came out of [the Atlanta] jail, we had to take her home with us and give her her first clothes, because she wasn't released with any kind of resources and stuff, and she stayed at different people's houses for a while till she got on her feet.

FOLLET: Was she in D.C.?

39:45

ROSS: She was imprisoned down South, I think in [Atlanta], but she came to D.C. after she got out. We were her support committee. And she eventually ended up joining the Nation of Islam. We had a problem with that, but –

FOLLET: She did?

ROSS: Yeah, yeah, but anyway, um –

FOLLET: You were the director of the Center. So how did it function as a structure? What kind of operating system did you have?

ROSS: Like I knew anything about operating systems at 26 and 27. (laughs) We had positions. Well, first of all, it was operated as a collective. Everybody made the same salary. We didn't have any discrepancies in the salaries. I mean, we got funding from — funding was from private donations. We had a contract with the D.C. government which was to provide child-safety awareness education in the school system, and actually it was our backdoor way of getting sex ed into the school system, because you can't teach a child safety around sexual assault if you don't teach them about sex. And so it was a backdoor way of getting sex ed into the school. And so we got that contract, and that contract sustained the Rape Crisis Center for its first 20 years. We always have to fight the city council for authorization or, you know, funding of it. I suspect that as the Center grew and became more institutionalized, it got funding from victims' services and police escorts and stuff like that, but in the beginning, it was around, we got contract –

FOLLET: You said there were individual donations that started it?

ROSS: Yes.

FOLLET: Do you know where they came from?

ROSS: We had fundraisers, parties. We got a big — Nkenge started a program called Anti-Rape Week, because after she left as executive director, she stayed on as my [outreach] director.

FOLLET: Oh.

ROSS: OK. And Anti-Rape Week, and so that was where we were coordinating a lot of different institutions to do something around rape all in the same week. So like, so-and-so Lutheran Church would have a rape awareness day at the same time there may be a speak-out here or take-back-the-night march here or sexual-harassment fair here and stuff like that, and so those would generate small but important individual donations.

FOLLET: Yeah, but no one single one or two single —

ROSS: No millionaire donors. We didn't have any big —

FOLLET: Wasn't the Ford Foundation involved somehow in a supportive way?

ROSS: No, no, no. What you're thinking of is a little more tenuous than that. In 1980, June Zeitlin — who was at the Ford Foundation [later], who is now the executive director of WEDO, Women's Environment Development Organization — ran the Office of Domestic Violence for HEW — what is now Health and Human Services was Health, Education, and Welfare. And she got a little money to help us sponsor in 1980 the First National Conference on Third World Women and Violence Against Women. We met with June and she gave us the money, and she required that we write a couple of papers coming out of the conference and that's where, yes, "Rape and Third World Women" was written. I wrote that.

FOLLET: You did. Did you write this?

ROSS: Um-hm.

FOLLET: This is a phenomenal document.

ROSS: Really?

FOLLET: It is magnificent.

ROSS: I never published that. I gave it to HEW and never did anything else with that.

FOLLET: They did —

ROSS: It was excerpted in, or pieces were excerpted in *Aegis* but I never did anything about it. I haven't even read it in 25 years. Do you think I should do something with that?

FOLLET: Oh, it is sensational.

ROSS: OK. I also did one on domestic violence that I can't find a copy of, but it's somewhere in my library.

FOLLET: I think HEW did publish it, I think, right? Didn't HEW?

ROSS: I don't know. I just gave it to June. I hope they did something with them.

FOLLET: Well –

ROSS: And then — oh, I've forgotten to tell you about Prisoners Against Rape. One of the more interesting things that happened when I was at the Rape Crisis Center is that we got contacted by a group of black men who were prisoners at Lorton Reformatory. This kind of was one of the ways that Yulanda got engaged. This guy named William Fuller wrote us. William was a guy who was in prison for rape and murder. He'd been incarcerated for 15 years about that time, and he wrote this oh so moving letter, saying that while I was on the outside, I raped women. Now on the inside, I rape men. I want to stop raping. Can you help me? That's the essence of his letter. We went, Ah, ssshhh — talk about causing a controversy.

First it sat there on my desk for a couple of weeks as I tried to figure out what am I going to say to this guy? My first immediate visceral reaction is, we don't even have the money to help rape victims. How dare a rapist ask us for help? Immediate rejection of the idea, of the concept. We talked about it at the staff level and we talked about it and talked about it with the board, talked about it and talked about it and talked about it. What should we say to this guy? And um, we kind of made the decision that at least we would check him out because, I mean, you could bandage women up all you want to, but if you don't stop men from raping, what's the point? Better bandages? I mean, what's the point.

But at the same time, we were skeptical. We didn't want to be used, because prisoners use visitors to smuggle in stuff and get good marks on their records for early release and all of that, so we didn't want to be used by them, by him or anything, but we thought it was worth checking out. So I remember getting in my car and driving with Yulanda on down to Lorton, which was about an hour outside D.C. and it was my first time ever being in a prison, you know, going through the searches, going through the, you know, everything, and why are you here and why are you here to talk to this person and who are you to him and that whole kind of thing. And here I am explaining with the little brochure.

“I’m from the D.C. Rape Crisis Center and I want to talk to your rapist.” (laughs) It was really, kind of, probably amused the guards — like, yeah, right. But they let me talk to him.

William turned out to be this huge — he felt huge to me — about 6’4”, beefed-up guy, because they beef up, they beef up in prison to keep from being victims, and he was the master rapist in this prison. I mean, everybody was scared of William Fuller. I was scared of William Fuller. Gorgeous, though, very good-looking black man. But apparently when he was 18, he raped, sodomized, and murdered this woman. He was 33 now, and he’d gotten hold of some feminist readings, not black feminist readings, feminist readings somewhere, and his argument was that, I believe that rape is a form of power and control, and I want to know how not to be a rapist. He says, I don’t even think gender matters if all you’re interested in is power and control, because I’d just as easily rape men as I do women.

OK. So what we started doing was setting up what we were going to call some guidelines. The first guideline is that nothing we could do could help them get out of jail, because nobody wanted these rapists on the street again. Not us. We weren’t gonna do it. And so, no, we weren’t going to write any letters to any warden or be used in any kind of way. Secondly, we weren’t bringing anything into this jail for you. I don’t care if you’re dying. We couldn’t bring you bandages, shoes, cigarettes, nothing. There was one thing we were going to bring in to this jail for you and that was feminist literature.

So then we started buying multiple copies of *Ain’t I a Woman* and, you know, whatever books were out there that we were reading, we started buying copies for the prisoners, and he put together, like, five guys, all rapists, like this little clique he controlled. And we started a prison-based version of the D.C. Study Group in prison. And we went down every Friday and we spent the afternoon with them.

FOLLET: You and Yulanda?

49:58

ROSS: Well, we rotated. We, sometimes Yulanda, sometimes Nkenge, you know. And we kind of held a whole Study Group with this group of guys. That went on for about two years. Eventually they formed a group called Prisoners Against Rape. A movie was made about these guys by some filmmaker in Minneapolis. I don’t know who or what, but through correspondence, we heard about that. They became a model for prison-based anti-rape programs.

And for the most part, people respected the rules and the guidelines. Now where it got complicated was when some of the white women started going to the prison, and then they were the ones that started breaking the rules about smuggling things to the guys and stuff. Harmless stuff. Tennis shoes or whatever stuff like that, but William had to kick a couple of guys out of the group because they had started relationships with women who had come down there through the Rape Crisis Center. Unfortunately, they were all white, the women were. And,

so that was hard to manage and just — how come she was a lesbian until she met him? (laughs) you know, kind of cynical stuff was happening. But I did enjoy dealing with Prisoners Against Rape.

Now there was a funny sequel to this story, I guess, epilogue, because I left the Rape Crisis Center in '82. About a decade later, I'm going to guess, about '89, '88, '89, I'm walking down the streets of Washington, D.C., and I hear this big, booming bass voice hollering out my name. My head whips around, and walking towards me is William Fuller. I didn't know whether to run, to cry, to holler, or what, because I never thought this guy would get out of jail in my lifetime.

Um, but he was out. He really thanked me for changing his life. He was working in construction. He actually looked kind of good. He was dressed to go to work with his little lunch box and everything at the time, and looked rather good and stuff. He told me he was continuing to write, continuing to read. He had gone back to school and, you know, thought he might end up teaching and stuff.

He was a transformed man. But he did that himself. I mean, we did not do that for William. He did that himself. Because he came into prison barely literate, and he taught himself to read, and it was through his practice, process of teaching himself to read that he had encountered this feminist literature. And so he was his own mentor. He was the source of his own determination and genius, and of course, I often wondered what would've happened to William if he'd had opportunities.

But at the same time, it brings into conflict your feelings about rapists when you work at a rape crisis center. You don't get the warm and fuzzy feelings around a rapist. And what does that say? And yet, you're coming from the black community where you deal with the myth of the black rapist, and the wrongful imprisonment and death of men for rape, so you're also having to deal with that. But there was nothing, you know, there were no myths around William's rape — he actually did rape and murder a woman. All these other guys in the group did actually rape and murder black women, so —

FOLLET: How did those, something like the myth of the black rapists, stir, or all the racial stereotypes around sexuality, affect relationships among the staff at — was there racial tension between members of the Rape Crisis Center staff? What issues?

53:53

ROSS: Well, the staff was predominantly black. Doreen, Michelle, Nkenge, and my tenures — we always had one or two white women on staff, but it was majority black, and so our tensions, our racial tensions were around leadership coming from an unexpected quarter. Um —

FOLLET: What do you mean?

ROSS: Well, I'll just speak for myself. Here's a black woman with basically a high school diploma hiring a white woman with a Master's in Social Work and supervising her to run our counseling program.

FOLLET: Are you speaking about yourself?

ROSS: I'm speaking about myself, right? Now there are women in that position that would have the right to question, Why does she get to supervise me? Why is this not the other way around? kind of thing. If you just went on professional credentials, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, so — and all of us were in that situation. I mean, Michelle, Nkenge and I and so, yet we had to hire women with Ph.D.s or MSWs to work for us, and so there was always a challenge around leadership and professionalism. At least as I experienced it and I'm sure that Nkenge had some of that.

There was always a challenge around where the resources got spent. The thing that made the Rape Crisis Center viable was that we had this huge core of volunteers who staffed the hotline. We had to keep at least 30 active volunteers a month on the books so that each volunteer got one night a month to staff the hotline. Another volunteer would be the clinic — I mean, the police escort or hospital escort or what have you and stuff. And so, managing the volunteers — and the volunteers were always almost all white, so you're dealing with the clients that are almost always black, the volunteers that are always white, the leadership or management that's black, the board of directors that was almost totally white, and so there was just so many racial issues just within our institution.

FOLLET: How did they flare up? Do you remember specific moments of —

ROSS: Oh yeah, but there were all kinds of things that they flared up over. Again, the broadness of the political vision that we black women were trying to work upon, that was a source of tension. Whether or not we felt comfortable about cozying up to the police, that was a source of tension. Um, dealing — I mean, having to address institutions, like I expected, for example, the people who ran our counseling program to take the lead in developing hospital protocol, but sometimes I found that people in hospital settings aren't as kind to people who present themselves as patients as they should be. And sometimes our counseling people weren't on the right side of that call because they were making judgments about the class and the truthfulness of the woman reporting the rape.

I mean, it was — we did have bloopers. We were the first. And even six or seven years later, we were still inventing stuff. And so, um, so it flared up a lot around political mission, trying to stay on message, developing what that message was. I mean, I made a lot of mistakes as a leader because I was stupid and crazy and arrogant and, you know, very flawed. I thank God I had people like Nkenge and a couple of white women at my back that helped me a lot, but to survive that, I made a lot

of mistakes in terms of managing the Center because I didn't know much.

Now you asked how we were structured. As I said, we had the counseling team, we had the hotline. I managed the volunteers for the most part. Um, then Nkenge basically did outreach, like the educational program. She ran the school program — the contract from the D.C. government, she ran that. She had secured that, by the way, and so she ran that, and all our educational stuff, anti-rape, our advocacy, our prevention of rape stuff. I did the ED [executive director] thing, which is, you know, you raise the funds, you keep the staff paid, you deal with the IRS, you deal with payroll taxes, you deal with the board of directors, you try to write a little theory about what you're doing once in a while.

FOLLET: Who's idea was the —

BEVERLY: Let me change tapes.

FOLLET: OK.

END TAPE 8

TAPE 9

FOLLET: So whose idea was the Conference on Violence and Third World Women?

ROSS: My director of counseling was this woman named Deirdre [Wright]. She was before Barbara. Nkenge would remember her name. But Deidre actually conceptualized the conference. By that time, we had heard from enough women of color around the country to feel that we were approaching a significant mass, maybe not a critical mass, but there were people like Barbara Bullette up here in Boston who was at the Roxbury Multicenter that was investigating the murders of, like, 12 black women that were taking place at the time. Beth Ritchie, who was talking about the criminalization of women compelled to crime — the whole question of women killing batterers — she was working in violence against women. Cherrie Moraga was working in violence against women. And we were all around the country, you know, either the outreach director or the counseling director or something in these growing institutions working on violence against women.

As a matter of fact, the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence had its first organizing meetings at the Rape Crisis Center while I was there. We hosted those meetings and so we had the growth of the anti-rape movement and then — followed a couple of years later by the opening of the first domestic violence shelters in the U.S. But the domestic violence shelters actually opened first in England. They started there first and then came over to the U.S.

And so we began to wonder whether or not we should pull together all these women of color who were working in this very diffuse movement, because it was still diffuse. The National Coalition Against Sexual Assault, NCASA, was still getting organized, getting up and getting it off the ground. NCADV, like I said, we did have a place that they could meet.

So Deirdre actually thought about it and said, “I think we should organize a conference.” And brought it to me and I said, “Oh, that sounds like a good idea.” Sorry I didn’t think of it first thing. But she did. She thought that through and we’re seeing the mail we were getting and the calls we were talking to, that it would be a good idea, and so I embraced the idea and Nkenge and Deirdre organized it.

I remember contracting with Malik — I don’t remember his last name, Nkenge would — to do this logo of the four dolls, the four African dolls. One Latina, one Asian, one Native American, one black. And then the board of directors telling me, Well, we should have him add a white doll because we feel left out. And I had to tell the board of directors, “First of all, this artist donated this work to us. You know, this is the guy that’s got art work in the mayor’s office. He donated this work to us. I am not going to go back there and tell him to patch it. Secondly, the conference is on third world women. Since when do white

women get defined as third world women? What particular part of the third world are you representing?" It was crazy.

We got sued at that conference by a white woman who thought that we had decided that the conference would only be for and about third world women. And this white woman, who was a police officer, sued us for the right to attend the conference. We said, You can participate in it. You can help us provide child care. You can help us with a number of things. But this is a sacred space for creating, for the few [third world] women who work in violence against women to come together. And she actually sued us. We lost the suit. She sued us before the Commission on Human Rights for discrimination, and an all-black commission patted us on the wrist and said, Don't do that again.

She got her point across, OK. But she had no consciousness, she had no politics, because the other white women with whom we were working embraced the concept of what we were trying to do and were very supportive and did provide the child care and the transportation and all the supportive services that we needed to make the conference work.

FOLLET: So, more than a hundred women came?

5:35

ROSS: I'm trying to remember. It was more than a hundred. It might have been as many as 200; I'm not sure. Nkenge would have the count on that. Do you notice that I use Nkenge as my memory?

FOLLET: Yes, yes.

ROSS: Because she has that snapdragon kind of memory that I don't have, and she would remember stuff that is a blur to me.

FOLLET: You're not doing too badly, Loretta.

ROSS: I told you, I wish I could get Nkenge here first, because then my memory would be better.

FOLLET: It's all right. You can follow by asking her some of these things. But what was your –

ROSS: And so, what else happened at the conference?

FOLLET: Yeah, did you have a major issue to organize around, a major goal? Was it just exploratory? What did you accomplish?

ROSS: People always ask me that when we do conferences. It's like, but it's rare to do an awful lot. We talk about (unclear)

FOLLET: What do you remember? What do you remember as a –

ROSS: I remember first of all meeting all of these fabulous women, and I still have relationship with, that are still, many of whom are still in the work, 20, 25 years later, so I remember that. It was 1980 — is that 25 years? Yeah.

FOLLET: Getting close.

ROSS: And so I remembered that, that these were the real troopers, these are the people who aren't the movement tourists who come and stay and take a minute to do the work. And so I remember that. We didn't come up with any startling new definitions of violence against women, though, again, we always used an expanded definition of violences, instead of just one form of violence, one or two forms of it.

Um, we did have a couple of moments of discomfort when the Latina women seized the mike on us, because they thought the conference was too black, and we didn't have the resources to provide Spanish translation or anything. We did this thing by the heel of our chinny-chin-chin, and so they rushed the mike and they grabbed the mike and declared that they were going to organize a Latina caucus to talk about their issues at this conference and it was shameful how these black organizers have not created a space for that to happen. All of that.

FOLLET: Who was the ringleader of that? Do you remember?

ROSS: I don't remember. Maybe Nkenge will, but I don't. It was one of those scary movements, like, Oh, boy, now this is how it feels to be called the oppressor. We ain't the one who oppressed you all. Give us a break.

FOLLET: So they did break off and have their own —

ROSS: Their own conference and stuff and I was talking to a woman, Camacho, she died of, I think, breast or uterine cancer last summer, but another woman. Her name — was it Sherry? I've forgotten. Anyway, she's gone on to found this National Latina Institute on Domestic Violence, the National Latino Alliance Against Domestic Violence, I think it was called. And we were talking just — she was telling me about Sandra Camacho's passing, and we recalled how we met each other in that 1980 conference and stuff, and so, the relationships [we developed there lasted over time].

I don't think we made any new insight, new theory, but we also challenged the positioning of many of the women of color, because as I said, there was something pretty routine about the women of color hired by these institutions in the public outreach position, never on the leadership track, never to become ED, never to be the one to deal with the viability, the standability of the institution as a whole. This little glass ceiling that was happening in the movement when it came to women of color. I think in that room, there were maybe — of all the staff of people that worked in the movement, there were maybe one or

two EDs and I was one of them. And so, drawing attention to that was part of what we talked about, connecting the violences — again international stuff, domestic stuff.

I wish I could go back and push some undo buttons in my life, and one of those undo buttons would be our failure to thoroughly document that conference. I mean, we didn't have access to videotape or anything, but we could've audiotaped. We could have done something. Um, the whole unfamiliarity many activists had with documenting as we go. This is part of our problem. Isn't this a good breaking off point?

FOLLET: It is a very good one. Excellent.

BEVERLY: (recording room tone)

ROSS: Hi, Joyce.

11:35

FOLLET: Hi, Loretta. Um, I don't want to lose sight of the fact that while you're doing all this amazing political work that you also have a life that isn't necessarily consumed by all that work. So from the time you got out of Howard, so in the '70s, you — you mentioned on your bio-form that you had a common-law husband.

ROSS: Yes. His name is Ernest Patterson. We were together from 1973 to 1985, 12 years. I call him my common-law husband because according to the laws of the District of Columbia, when you live together and you have a shared checking account and shared future — we had documents where I appeared as Loretta Ross Patterson — that actually satisfies the laws of the District of Columbia. But Ernest was a really great guy. He was a vegetarian so there was that blending of the carnivore and the vegetarian cultures taking place. He had a tendency to want to date women with kids, which was pretty unusual, and he really liked the fact that I had a little small son and so they — to the extent that my son had a father, Ernest was his father, and they still stay in contact. He also served almost like as a political shield, too, because as I'm an advocate for all this feminist activity, it was pretty handy to have a boyfriend to pull out of the pocket and say, "No, I'm not hating men. I just want better ones." And he was good for that.

He was heading in opposite directions from me. When I met Ernest, he worked for Xerox Corporation, and to this day he works for Xerox Corporation. At the time we were contemplating getting married, he was putting a little bit of pressure on me to turn into what we used to call Xeroids, which are wives of Xerox men, and it didn't work out. I mean, I could get into a long, sordid story about how we broke up but that's scarcely relevant. We did stay good friends, though. And as I said, he's still involved in my son's life. They talk occasionally.

He was a good guy. But he lacked a sense of adventure and risk-taking — another way we were opposite. And I remember his first trip anywhere out of the country was with me to Jamaica on a vacation. I

don't think he's been out of the country since. He was a good stabilizing influence. I mean, crazy as it sounds, feminist as I am, one thing I really liked about our relationship was that I could relinquish control of the finances to him. I don't mind working and earning the money, but — and I didn't become a financial adult until quite recently, so when I was paying the bills, the lights were getting cut off or we'd get these warning notices or whatever, so I relinquished control of finances to him and he kept everything running on time. He was that kind of a guy. And really full of integrity. I would trust him with my last million dollars and go away for 20 years and it would still be there. He's that kind of a guy, so he was a great relationship for me.

I regret, sometimes, that we didn't get married, but we had our challenges. Our biggest challenge was that he had never had children and I couldn't have children, and he desperately wanted his own kid. So much so that he started this affair with this woman who got pregnant and then when she decided to have the kid, then I decided I didn't need to be in the middle of that relationship because it was getting very complicated and, you know, I still had issues, or I still have issues now, but I had issues about being threatened by this woman and her fertility.

So we broke up in 1985, the summer Deborah was pregnant. He got his wish. Once the baby was born, he took custody of the child and so he's been a single parent ever since and so, the baby was born in 1986. That means he's about 18 years old now. Gwan. I met him a couple of times and stuff and he's done a great job raising him. But he's still working for Xerox. (laughs)

And he hurt me in many ways. The thing that hurt — I hurt him a lot, too, I'm sure — but the thing that hurt me most was that he claimed that he didn't want to work for Xerox all of his life. He wanted to do something different. And so he went back to school, got his degree, in um, in video and photography, got a degree in that, and then we sunk a lot of money into buying him equipment, and I even went to classes and learned how to do darkroom work, developing his black-and-white stills for him so that he could embrace this new career. And I wanted him to pull all his money out of his retirement, because he had probably close to 20 or 30,000 dollars in his retirement, and to invest that in opening up his own video business or photography business or whatever, because he really was a good photographer, took some astonishing pictures.

And my biggest disappointment was that he wouldn't take that risk. I mean, after going to school, slogging it for seven years to get this degree, he'd bought all this equipment but it stayed in the closet, it didn't get used, because he never could take that risk to just leap of faith and do that thing, and that's when I kind of realized how badly matched we were. So more than Deborah, more than the baby, I was the supreme risk-taker. I was, like, Listen, you quit Xerox and I will work to support you just to get this started. And I never thought I'd make an offer like that to a guy. And we talked about it for a number of years, but he never did it.

And I often wonder if he regrets not doing that because all of that equipment and all of that investment of time and energy, and passion, just doesn't go anywhere. And now, since he started working for Xerox when he was 18, now he has to be at least 58 or something like that, he's way past retirement age for Xerox, could do something different.

FOLLET: What about a sense of your own sexuality? How did you come to a sense of adult experience, or a sense of your own adult sexuality?

19:44

*****SEGMENT CLOSED UNTIL JANUARY 1, 2020*****

END TAPE 9

- TAPE 10 (Ross and Follet looking through Ross's materials in the processing room at the Sophia Smith Collection)
- FOLLET: And this is the processing room — a lot of the collections are stored here. It's kind of an accessory place. It's an annex. But it's also a workplace, so a lot of the collections that come in while they're waiting to be processed, um, they'll sit here. Like your boxes when we brought them from your house.
- ROSS: They just sat here?
- FOLLET: They sat here, they sat here for a while.
- ROSS: OK.
- FOLLET: And over here is some space, a big, flat work space where the processing starts.
- ROSS: This is my stuff.
- FOLLET: This is your stuff.
- ROSS: Oh, my God. Some of this is personal stuff. Sarah Lawrence College. Oh, my God. You have found stuff. Black College Days, remember what I was talking about? Yulanda wrote about this.
- FOLLET: Yes, yes, yes. (reads) "We must recognize that the destruction of black colleges and universities has been a process over time, the result of a conscientious, calculated program to make education a privilege and not a right.
"Our political line relative to all the above is rooted in our anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist position. We oppose property profit for the few and poverty for the many, and a prerequisite of this is to involve ourselves in the revitalization of the black student movement."
- ROSS: Yes. Those are Yulanda's kind of words. This is more of Yulanda's stuff. I'm sorry. Tony Brown, here's an article about him. Students from the Dean of the School's Student Association. Oh, my goodness. I remember it now. Oh, that should've been about Yulanda's death. No, OK. You're right. That was on Yulanda Ward. I didn't tell about being on the Commission for Women. I was on the Commission for Women for two terms.
- FOLLET: I know. We haven't even mentioned that. You were on the Commission for Women while you were also [involved in] black nationalist politics and the Rape Crisis Center and you're a member of the D.C. —
- ROSS: Oh, I want this "Abortion and Human Rights" back for *Black Abortion*.

FOLLET: Ah-ha. Right.

ROSS: Women of Color Database. Oh, my goodness. This is NCHRE stuff.

FOLLET: Well, see, remember —

ROSS: Oh, my God. (laughs)

FOLLET: See, there's all the boxes that I packed from your house. And what Susan [Boone, archivist] has done, well, you can see what she's done.

ROSS: Yeah, and she had different jobs. Oh, my goodness. Oh, conferences. Workshops and events, my goodness. Women and Racism Conference. Women of Color Reproductive — I guess I do a lot of conferences. All African People — yep, these are organizational files. Some of these are City Wide Housing Coalition files. Where did you get all this stuff?

FOLLET: They're from your house. (laughs)

ROSS: Oh, my goodness.

FOLLET: And see, I think what Susan's done at this point is kind of take everything out of the boxes and then group them.

ROSS: Um-hm. National Congress of Black Women of Canada. Oh, my goodness. I want it all back, I don't want you to have it anymore. Asian Pacific Islanders. Yeah, I didn't know it was like this. History of the Women of Color Movement. See, I need that. That must have been a paper I started to write or something. Joyce, can you squeeze back there and get it?

FOLLET: Yeah, do you want to see it?

ROSS: "History of the Women of Color Movement," right. *UpFront*, right here.

FOLLET: Right here?

ROSS: Yeah, look at that big file called Women of Color Reproductive Rights I got back there. "Women of Color: Invisible Decade of Growth." This is an article I wrote. Oh, my God. "International Decade for Women and Its Impact on Women of Color." Oh, my God. Joyce, how did you walk out of there with this stuff?

FOLLET: Well, it's not like you can't — you'll be able to — you'll know where it is.

- ROSS: Yeah, but I — Mm. Look at this. “1987: the movement is broad, often unconnected, and for the most part, undocumented.” At least I was conscious that it wasn’t there.
- FOLLET: Read that piece again.
- ROSS: “It’s difficult to summarize in a few pages the development of the women of color movement during the Decade for Women. The movement is broad, often unconnected and for the most part, undocumented.” I was just trying to give a —
- FOLLET: An “invisible decade of growth.” the decade of women of color organizing,” right? That hadn’t been documented. Well —
- ROSS: Because what happened was that the Women’s Conference Committee, which is — this is an e-mail between me and Susanna Felder and Rita, uh, asked me — I thought I saw something in here from them — to do a survey — yeah, the National Women’s Conference Committee — of what happened to women of color during the Decade for Women because it was the tenth anniversary of the Houston Conference. The Houston Conference was in 1977. And so, I did the survey, which established that I could only find 300 women of color organizations named as such in 1975 and there were over 1000 a decade later. So, again, indicating what was happening. And then, this is somebody’s speech on Hispanic women. I have no idea whose it is, but it wasn’t mine. And anyway, so I was able to do that survey and then also was able to get data about how many national women’s group have less than 10 percent women of color as their membership base. I was talking about growth and then I did this chronology.
- FOLLET: That’s a chronology of what? 8:50
- ROSS: Of things I found through the research, like when the first Hispanic women’s center established, first Native American women’s studies course taught at Dartmouth was in 1974. Combahee Collective Statement in ’74. I thought it was a little later than that. First women of color ERA mobilization.
- FOLLET: So really, this is a chronology of the explosion of women of color organizing in late 70s and early 80s, right?
- ROSS: I think that’s right. I mean, I need this back. I need all this stuff back. I revoke my permission. I need this stuff back. I haven’t written these books yet. Yulanda Ward. This is her writing (unclear) the last meeting. NBUF College section (unclear) Black College Day 80. (unclear) build NBUF.
- FOLLET: New Jersey —

- ROSS: Yeah. Coalition of Black Students or something. NBUF Student Section. OK. This was — yes, so this is Yulanda's writing. Oh, my goodness. And then this is the community statement we put together, that — Mark Stoney is the guy. I remember his name. And there's the guys' names. I was wrong. We got this. We got this. So Mark Stoney was the first one. (unclear)
- FOLLET: Those are the four who were accused of her death?
- ROSS: Yeah, but this is when they were — they robbed somebody else. They robbed this John Summerland first. I think it's in the file, though, because it was this same four guys. That's what they're saying, I guess. Let me see. Maybe not. There it is. Killed Yulanda Ward. (unclear) Yulanda Ward. It might've been the guys that were with them. So this is the indictment from the grand jury. This is the notice to quash the subpoenas that they had issued against Jimmy, Hope, and Nkenge.
- FOLLET: Oh, when they were in jail.
- ROSS: (unclear) to quash the subpoenas. The U.S. Attorney Evelyn Queen. I remember her name. She's a judge now, which is why I remember it. Refusal to grant continuance (unclear). I didn't know this stuff was in here.
- FOLLET: See, the case won't be forgotten.
- ROSS: It won't. And this is the Spanish version. Here's another motion. Copy of that.
- FOLLET: What's the Revolutionary Workers' something-or-other underneath there? 13:37
- ROSS: Oh, you know, one of those communist groups I talked about always pimping our stuff, so they tried to (unclear) article on Yulanda. Here's a picture of Nkenge. I hope you'll show Nkenge that picture. She was so skinny there compared to now. This is so funny. This makes it real. This makes it real. My goodness. OK, OK, OK. If I look at this stuff much longer, baby, you're not gonna keep it. National Women of Color Reproductive Rights Conference. That '87 Conference. OK, Joyce.
- FOLLET: National Alliance of Black Postal Workers. National Alliance of Third World Journalists. National NAACP. National Association of Colored Women's Clubs. National Black Child Development Institute. National Black Women's Political Party. National Black Coalition. National Black Women's Political Leadership Conference. National Committee for Women. Black Women (unclear)

- ROSS: Well. I think you got a big — oh, those are historical buttons in that collection. They're pretty great.
- FOLLET: What do you think, seeing it like this?
- ROSS: I wish I had organized it. This is great, this is great, but I wish I had organized it, because I wouldn't have let it go. This is all very — and everything you don't use, you're going to give back to me, so that's good. In better shape than you got it in, so that's all good. My God, I can't believe this. I mean, the thing is, I think everybody needs to see this at the time when you feel you've not achieved nothing in your life, and then you see articles you wrote 25 years ago that are still relevant. Asian Pacific Islander Women. Oh, my God. I got so much historical stuff in this stuff. OK. So I want to take it all back.
- FOLLET: Why?
- ROSS: Because it's fun to look at it now that you've got it all neatly organized. (laughs)
- FOLLET: Oh, now that it's all organized?
- ROSS: Yeah. It's really organized now. This is great. And the posters.
- FOLLET: You know what? The posters are under here. I don't think those are your — your posters are under here being flattened.
- ROSS: Oh, OK. That's another process.
- FOLLET: Yep, they're all being flattened.
- ROSS: Oh, my God.
- FOLLET: And then, the next steps are, well, all kinds of things. I mean, further sorting and refining of things and copying materials that are kind of crumbling and falling apart onto acid-free paper so they won't disintegrate. And —
- ROSS: Well, like I said, just send everything back to me when you're through. Oh, my God. Women of color address of (unclear). Oh, one of those — which one? This one came out of — it was the front of that. This History of Women of Color in the very front, right there. But these were all just laying like this.
- FOLLET: Oh, they were? They were just here? OK.
- ROSS: But that Women of Color Reproductive Rights actually seems like something I needed when I was writing my book.

18:24

- FOLLET: Right. Women of Color Calendar of Events. Amicus brief in the *Webster* case. Sterilization abuse. A 1989 pamphlet, "Women of Color and Reproductive Rights." I wonder if this is the one you and Marlene did with the Open –
- ROSS: Look at it. It's got a Kitchen Table [Women of Color Press] letter in there.
- FOLLET: Yeah.
- ROSS: What was this? Barbara Smith, Kitchen Table. I want to follow up on a pamphlet I did. I wanted Kitchen Table, before they went out of business, to do a pamphlet, but we never did get to it. This was the emergency memorandum around Webster. Yeah, this is the back research for doing the pamphlet but we never did actually get to. We did a brochure instead.
- FOLLET: Well. This is the pamphlet in a different form, right? I mean, the evidence of the effort is here, and the research you did is here. Alliance against Women's –
- ROSS: We did do these fact sheets. OK. Again. I'd better get out of here because y'all are not going to keep this stuff if I keep going through it. I can't believe I kept all this stuff. I don't know why there's 37 boxes.
- FOLLET: You mean you didn't realize you had it?
- ROSS: I never realized I had it. When you go from job to job, you don't stop and file everything from that previous thing that you did to keep up with it, and so that's part of the problem, the lack of internal memory. Oh, my goodness. This is just too deep.
- FOLLET: So you would've guessed that it was all lost if you didn't see it over here?
- ROSS: Yeah, yeah, or at least totally inaccessible. I mean, just looking at it in its preliminary organization makes a hell of a difference. Of course, like I said, I wish I'd had all this stuff when I was trying to write. So I got books to write so I got to get this stuff back.
- FOLLET: But you will have it all. Now you know it's here. You know where it is.
- ROSS: Yes. I got to pay for a airline ticket to come and look at my stuff. This is great, though.
- FOLLET: Reproductive Rights Health Conference.

ROSS: Yeah, that was the conference where Maya Angelou came out as being anti-choice. Oh, this is the pamphlet I wrote with Marlene. Here's a draft of it. Here it is. I've got a printed-out version of that, though. I mean, the Open Pamphlet people did it.

22:47

FOLLET: Yes, I've seen that. We've got it here someplace.

ROSS: OK. It's — oh, it's a quarter of 3.

FOLLET: Yep, we should mush.

ROSS: Nobody could ever use that many paper clips.

FOLLET: Oh, yeah.

ROSS: (too soft) paper clips. This archiving thing is deep. In particular to recognize that I'm no Gloria Steinem, you know?

FOLLET: Say that again?

ROSS: To know that I'm no Gloria Steinem.

FOLLET: What do you mean, you're no Gloria Steinem?

ROSS: Because Gloria's done great and wonderful things — is this more of the flattening out process for other people's posters?

FOLLET: That's probably boxes for posters. So Gloria's done wonderful things and you —

ROSS: I just hang in here.

FOLLET: (laughs) I'm afraid we've got the goods, Loretta. We know better.

ROSS: I just hang in here. This is so wonderful. Oh, my God. And so, does the annex extend more than this room?

FOLLET: This is the annex within this building. There is another whole (squeak). What did I do with the key? Here it is.

ROSS: That is funny. I'm glad you made me come over to look at it, because you're right, I wouldn't have seen it in that form.

FOLLET: Yeah, a month from now, it'll be in another form.

ROSS: That's impressive. It's also scary.

25:47

END TAPE 10

TAPE 11 DECEMBER 1, 2004

ROSS: I think this is the most absurd project.

FOLLET: Why? Why is it absurd?

ROSS: Because trying to explain — like my tax guy was over to my house the other night and he says, “Where are you going?” and I said, “I’m going to Smith College.” He says, “What are you doing up there?” I said, “You will not believe this.” And I was trying to explain to him what I’m doing up here. He said, “Loretta, don’t tell anybody else that story because they won’t believe it.” So that’s why I don’t want to tell you. It feels so strange.

FOLLET: It does, huh, it still feels strange?

ROSS: It still feels strange.

FOLLET: What’s the strange? What’s strange?

ROSS: I think, as a whole, we as women don’t get that kind of intentional focus on our lives very much. We don’t get to tell our stories very much. So I think we don’t live in a situation where women’s stories, voices, and stuff are valued and get to tell them a lot and so, that’s strange. And then, personally, it just feels slightly embarrassing. It’s like, OK, all the dreary details of one’s life is so important to somebody else — that feels slightly embarrassing.

But at the same time, it feels restful, like I told you this morning. The only time I can get a full seven hours of sleep is in Northampton, Mass. I don’t know what that says about the rest of my life, but you know. So, it’s only a process. It’s so much easier being on the other side of the camera. It is. I did not appreciate that until now.

FOLLET: Asking the questions, you mean.

ROSS: Asking the questions, yes. And our method is also tied to control issues. Whereas if you’re behind the camera and you’re directing the interview or whatever, I would suspect that one feels more in control. I know, because I’ve been on both sides, that I felt more in control of the process as the interviewer than the interviewee. Now does that bring to the surface control issues for me? Probably, but that’s also an observation. I don’t know how many people we’ll have in this project that are doing, serving both roles.

FOLLET: Yeah, probably no one. You’re probably the only one.

ROSS: I’ve done two interviews on that side, so it feels weird.

FOLLET: Would you change it in any way? Would you change the setup? The dynamics of it?

ROSS: No. No, no, no, no. I'm just exploring how it feels. It's not my — it's not in a complaining kind of a way, just as a weird kind of a way. But at the same time, I appreciate the honor. I appreciate, you know, that this is a wonderful thing to happen in one's life. But everybody that I've told, and I haven't told that many people, but the couple of people I've told about this — Aren't you a bit young? That is true, because I do feel absurdly too young for this, and that just feels crazy, because I mean, I interviewed Geraldine Miller. Geraldine Miller's 84 years old, you know. I'm some 30 years short of 84.

FOLLET: Well, but look at how much you've done already, and this is what it is. This is what Loretta's done by the time she's 51, right?

3:43

ROSS: Right. Hopefully, when I'll be 84, I'll have enough of my intelligence left, pre-Alzheimer's, so that I can tell somebody else what the last 30 years have been like.

FOLLET: We'll do it again. In 30 years.

ROSS: But I have Alzheimer's in my future. It was genetic. My mother has it, so, we have to catch it before I forget it — which, actually, as I told you, I took the camera to San Antonio, and tried to do my mother's oral history. And it was too late, entirely too late. She simply had forgotten most of her life.

FOLLET: That's so sad.

ROSS: She didn't even remember she had eight kids. I mean, it's hard to forget eight children.

FOLLET: Wow.

ROSS: You'd better get it while the gettin's good.

FOLLET: So, we're trying to — let's see about today. [to videographer]: I think Kate, you've got to cut out by 2 at the latest, right?

GEIS: 2:30 would be the latest, yeah.

FOLLET: OK. So, if we do a stretch now and then we can break for lunch and then do another hour or so, if we're up to it and it makes sense, does that sound OK?

GEIS: Yes.

FOLLET: OK. So, we're trying to figure out where we left off, and I think we left a month ago, here we are, December 1. So it was almost a month ago, and I think we left you still at the Rape Crisis Center.

ROSS: Oh, OK.

5:30

FOLLET: We more or less got through the Rape Crisis Center, I think. So, here's my thoughts or proposal for today. If we can do, essentially do the '80s. Um, your early international work, the time at NOW [National Organization for Women], and, and then your life as a part of this. I don't want to lose track of the fact that it's Loretta who's organizing all these conferences and going to these events and leading these organizations, so if we can do those pieces and maybe get at least as far as the Black Women's Health Project, and maybe into it — but that would kind of be my goals for today. Does that sound OK?

ROSS: I can shorten it down, do it résumé style.

FOLLET: OK. So, the D.C. Rape Crisis Center. You left there in '82?

ROSS: 1982.

FOLLET: Why? Why did you leave when you did?

ROSS: Oh, there was all kinds of controversies when I left. First of all, going back to Yulanda's death and what had happened with that, it was really, really traumatic. I actually had described this to some other people, that bringing in our analysis around the totality of violences that women experience and certainly her being assassinated, you know, this wasn't just about gender-based violence. This wasn't just about people being raped. It was about the state, the whole thing, and so there was always a very uneasy kind of — I will say, in many ways, we really politicized the Rape Crisis Center in a way that, while the Center was political, it was not political with a capital P in terms of taking on the state, taking on the anti-apartheid movement, taking on housing, taking on a whole lot of other issues that the gender lens didn't necessarily see as women's issues that we did. So it was a very, very uneasy relationship.

And then, I made a lot of mistakes, to be honest. I made myself vulnerable. One of the things that in hindsight I know that I failed to do was not pay attention to who was recruited to the board of directors, and really, in a very simplistic way, allowing the recruitment of more conservative women of color. And so it became like an alliance of conservative white women and conservative women of color against the radical white women and radical women of color. And in a very primitive way, thinking that just because a person was a woman of color

they had the progressive politics, and dismissing white women who had the progressive politics simply because they were white, it was really a learning opportunity for me in terms of deepening my understanding of progressive politics and race relations. I don't know how else to say it. So that's one of the things that I think in hindsight, I probably would have paid more attention to. I think I was in my — in '82, I would have been 29 years old or something like that, and so I was probably way in over my head anyway.

Also, I had problems. I mean, I had all kinds of problems in terms of spiraling into a really deep crisis because of Yulanda's death. I actually started therapy, professional therapy, during that period, because one of the things that I realized, once I got into therapy, was that even though I was working in rape, I'd never had any therapeutic intervention for my own rape. I'd never dealt with that in any kind of healing process. I mean, I thought political work in and of itself was healing. I did not really take my own advice, you know, doctors never take their own advice. People who work at rape crisis centers don't always take their own advice and go get healed from their rapes. And um, it wasn't until I started personally spiraling down, you know, feeling increasingly suicidal, reckless, I messed up managing some money. I mean, I really —

And then I'd gotten — the other thing that really, on my personal life — I had been sterilized by the Dalkon Shield back in the '70s, '73, and in 1980 was when I got the insurance settlement, or the legal settlement from A.H. Robins and stuff, and you know, it was well over \$100,000, so I started being really reckless — first of all, I put some of it into the Rape Crisis Center and kind of used my own money to cover our cash-flow problems, which is always a mistake, you know. But, you know, traveled a lot, and I got into drugs, and I did a whole lot of crazy stuff.

And the crisis moment came for me — I guess this is an interviewing of personal and professional. My son was in the band while he was in high school. I think it might have been junior high then. And they went on a road trip, the band did, and my understanding was that they were going to come back — one night on the road and then they were supposed to come back. And so I went to the parking lot where I thought this bus was coming to bring my son back and there was nobody there. And I freaked out. I mean, there was nobody there, and then I realized, I hadn't bothered to get anybody's phone number. I kind of like signed the permission slip and sent my son off into the wild blue yonder, didn't know what had happened, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Literally freaked out. I mean, I started driving around town trying to find my child.

At the time, I was in a relationship with this guy named Ernest. Ernest and I were together for 12 years. And Ernest worked for Xerox. This is only relevant because he had a company car. I was in the company car looking for my son, because I didn't have a car of my own

at the time. I remember driving across the Woodrow Wilson Bridge in Washington, D.C., and in a moment of panic, I almost intentionally drove that car off the bridge. That was, like, the triggering crisis. I'm in a panic about my son. I'm self-destructive, and the only thing that kept me from driving that damn car off the bridge was that it wasn't my car. I didn't want Ernest to have to explain why his girlfriend suicided in his car, his company car. I mean, talk about — so that was a good indication that I needed help.

The bottom line to this story? The bus broke down. They got back so late, the band instructor took everybody home. But my son, when he went home, there was nobody there so the band instructor took him home and told my son to call me and let — and of course, my son went to bed and didn't call me and tell me what was going on. And it was just that simple. But —

FOLLET: But you were already at some kind of a precipice.

8:21

ROSS: Right. I do remember a kind of funny conversation I had, though. I had done something similar to my mom. In other words, I had gone out when I was, like, 13 years old. A member of our church got married and I went to the wedding, to the — what is the party after they get married?

FOLLET: Reception?

ROSS: It's the after-reception party, whatever that thing is called, at some hotel. And I ended up staying out till, like, 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning, way past anything appropriate for a 13-year-old, but I kept rationalizing it to myself. Well, I'm with the church. How can she be mad? I'm with church folks, right? Really, we were just, you know, drinking champagne and partying in this hotel room, and there were dozens of us. I mean, there was nothing sexual about it. But I remember coming home and the house was lit up like it was the Fourth of July. There were police in front of the door. My mother was in a total panic because her 13-year-old was gone and missing and she knew I had gone to the wedding. She didn't know I'd gone to the after-party.

And so, that night, while I was looking for my son, when I got home, I called my mother and apologized to her for having totally stressed her out that time, because that was just karmic vengeance happening. I knew it, I felt it at the time. My mother laughed at me and told me to go to bed. (laughs) She was not at all willing to panic with me. He'll be home. Go to bed. Because she'd been through eight kids, so. I'm still — I couldn't sleep all night. I don't even know where Ernest was at that time. I know I had his car, so he might've been out of town or something.

But when my son got home finally, the next morning, I think that was when I decided to go get some therapy, because I'd always been on the edge, and like I said, there was a whole lot of stuff I had not

reconciled, and — but that car and that bridge kind of like — and the thing is, I actually am a fairly rational kind of competent person, so this is such aberrant behavior. This is like, I don't even like drama. I don't like drama queens. I don't like people that get into those kinds of [altered states] and things and so to find myself experiencing one —

FOLLET: When you said you had “always been on the edge,” what do you mean?

16:06

ROSS: Meaning that — I think I told you about, you know, the sexual assaults and all of that. Well, meaning that there had been a lot of trauma in my life, which had not been reconciled. You know, I scabbed it over, buried it, didn't really deal with it. And yet, it kept peeking out once in a while, and totally, um, disrupting my life in many ways. And so that's what I meant by being on the edge, because you never know when one of those — when the scab's going to peel back a little bit, and you're going to feel all hyper, jittery, or something, or restimulated. You know, having someone else's trauma presented to you, that restimulates your trauma. So that's what I meant by being on the edge.

Actually, I used to have this perception of myself that probably was totally false, of being fairly calm, kind of boring. Actually, one of the things I used to think was that my life was pretty boring, because I don't know how to say it without sounding crazy. School work was rarely challenging.

FOLLET: Rarely or really?

ROSS: Rarely.

FOLLET: Rarely.

ROSS: I mean, I made A's without cracking a book. I majored in chemistry in college because it was the only course [for which] I had to study. And so, I interpreted study as interesting. Big mistake. (laughs) So I kind of thought that except for all the trauma, traumatic stuff, life could also be quite boring. Where's the fun? School is not that interesting. And again, I don't think I was exceptional. I think it was the drop-off between the military schools and the public schools. And it's just that if I'd probably stayed in military schools, I probably would've been far more challenged. But once I went into public schools, it just wasn't that [interesting] — I was speed reading, so, you know, I'd get an assignment and be through with it in 20 minutes and, like, What else is there to do? That kind of thing. So I actually kind of thought life was going to be boring.

And so, I think that's one of the reasons I was drawn to political work, because political work was anything but boring. So I was stuck at the Rape Crisis Center.

FOLLET: So when you — was there a particular kind of therapy that you sought out? Can you characterize it in any way?

18:21

ROSS: Well, I was very lucky in that because I went to Howard, Howard has a teaching hospital associated with it, which used to be named Freedman's Hospital, which is now Howard University Hospital, and it has a huge mental health department. And because I was a former Howard student, you know, even though I wasn't a current Howard student, I could actually get private therapy sessions that [usually] cost a hundred dollars a session for five dollars. And I kind of talked my way into the system because that was the student price. So once I presented myself to them and said, "I need help. This is the work I do. This is what's happening," I mean, they bent the rules and let me pay the student price for therapy, which was wonderful.

So I spent a couple of years in one-on-one weekly sessions, and then my therapist scared the shit out of me by insisting that I move into a group setting. I wasn't quite sure I was ready for that. But actually, it was pretty good. I mean, I hope I'm not — I can't say this — we had some very important and very famous people in our group, and I'll just leave it at that — many of whom I see on television nowadays and I don't want to violate their confidentiality. But the group session really helped me, let me become less self-centered, less self-obsessed. More into looking at my relationship with others and stuff like that.

I mean, group therapy is efficacious when it's done well. Also, it destigmatized therapy for me. I think every human being in the world needs therapy nowadays, and I recognized dysfunctionality and what it looks like. I mean, therapy doesn't cure you of anything. It teaches you how to — for me, it taught me how to recognize emotional distress symptoms and do something differently about them. It doesn't prevent the distress. It doesn't heal the pain. It doesn't make your life easier, you know, make your life a bed of roses or anything, but it teaches you to be in better control and to recognize what's really going on. And so I'm a lifelong devotee. I'm not currently in therapy but I know when I get stressed out, I go running to a therapist.

FOLLET: How long did you stay with that group?

21:36

ROSS: For the rest of the time I was in Washington. I started in '82 and I left Washington in '89. So I would've been [seven] years in that group. And then when I moved to Atlanta, I immediately got another therapist so there was no drop-off.

FOLLET: There's a — there's a poem that you wrote.

ROSS: Oh, my God.

FOLLET: That I found in your papers when we were going through them at your house.

ROSS: I can't imagine myself as a poet so I must have been in a really stressed out moment.

18:21

FOLLET: And it comes to mind, now that we're talking about this, so I want to dig it out, because I just happen to have it here. I know I do.

ROSS: I must have felt really stressed out if I wrote a poem.

FOLLET: You were.

ROSS: (laughs) I don't write poetry, as a rule.

FOLLET: Yes, you do.

ROSS: Matter of fact, I hate poetry.

FOLLET: This is a very –

ROSS: I don't hate poetry. I hate *bad* poetry. And so I know I wrote bad poetry, so I don't think I would have –

FOLLET: OK, so it's in the other bag, which I have here. I know it's with me.

ROSS: Do you want to take a minute and look in the other bag?

FOLLET: Yeah, I do, because we're on the topic. You can — [to the videographer] yeah, you can stop if you want.

OK. Here you go. You can read it.

23:11

ROSS: It's a sad thing I wrote.

FOLLET: You can read it.

ROSS: Oh, my goodness.

*The hate nipping at my spirit
Halting my contact
With the oneness of life.*

*Over and underexposed at the same time
In the same place
In what used to be my space.*

*Filling me up so full
There's no room for nothing else.*

*So I got this knot in me
Wound so tight
Bloating me with its growth
And it's grown so big
There's only enough room left*

For me to hate me.

Yeah. That's kind of how it felt (laughs). I had no idea. OK. Well, that's a real clear expression.

FOLLET: Do you remember writing this?

ROSS: I remember crying when I wrote it. I don't know where that came from. I know why it came. That's stunning. But that was it. I do know. Filled with a lot of self-loathing, self-hatred. Vast insecurities. I felt I was parenting terribly badly. It was a really good thing I was in this relationship with Ernest because he was a much better parent than I was. He was much more attuned to Howard's needs than I was. I mean, I always had a complicated relationship with Howard, anyway, but — my son, not the school. But in terms of seeing to his daily needs, Ernest was much more into that than I was. So I felt I was a bad mother. I felt I was a bad activist. That was my drugged-out period so I was into drugs and stuff. Financially, totally a mess because I frittered through that insurance settlement like it was water. I keep calling it an insurance settlement. It wasn't an insurance settlement. It was a lawsuit settlement. I wish it had been an insurance settlement.

Um, really just hit bottom. Just really hit an emotional bottom at the time. No sense of pride in any kind of accomplishment. I didn't feel I had achieved anything. I mean, and those markers for feeling bad still exist in many ways today because I had dropped out of college, hadn't finished that. I'm still pursuing this degree. I mean, it's just —

FOLLET: You're close.

26:00

ROSS: Right. I'm really close now, 30 years later. Um, so, yeah, those were the kinds of things that were going on. But at the same time, you don't — I didn't deal with those things in any successful way, and I continued to do political work, and at some point I began to realize, and that was one of the outcomes of therapy, that I was using the busyness of my political schedule to disguise the fact that I was not resolving a lot of things in my life. And recognizing the dialectic between, like, the crazier my life got, the busier I got politically. Then saying, OK, the world will be OK while you fix some things in your life. And so that was therapy. I did

not work professionally between 1982 and '85, in other words in the formal job market.

Nkenge and I formed this group called International Council of African Women that was about taking black women over to Nairobi to the World Conference for Women. And so I spent a lot of time organizing that and we had a radio show going at the time called "African Women Rising," a weekly radio show we were producing. And traveling around the country during that period. The National Black Women's Health Project was founded so we came down here and came down to Atlanta, and were there at the founding of that and organizing black women, and anti-apartheid work. So, it was really, really crazy.

FOLLET: And you were self-supporting at that time.

ROSS: Well, yeah, self-supporting to a degree. I was living with Ernest, so he was the chief breadwinner. I had finally smartened up and let him become the financial manager, so that I no longer had an independent financial identity. I closed my bank accounts and just put it all into his, because he's a really good guy and paid the bills. He was the one who kept the lights on — Loretta wouldn't — you know, kind of person. To earn money, what I did was type theses and dissertations. I've always been a high-speed typist. At my height, I could type well over 100 words a minute. And so I got severe carpal tunnel syndrome in three years, you know, typing endlessly.

But it's a very good niche field because if you know APA or the different, very particularized formats that masters and doctorate students need for their work, and this was the early, early days of computers, the early, early days when not everybody had a desktop at home, and I did, because Ernest worked at Xerox. We got one of the very earliest home computers with the big, eight-inch diskettes and all of that. So we always had a computer at home. From the late '70s, we had home computers. When they first got introduced, we had some of the prototypes. And so that allowed me to earn — and it's actually quite lucrative, I mean, it's labor intensive, but you do get paid fairly well. I mean, you're talking about two dollars a page.

FOLLET: At that time, that's a lot.

ROSS: Right. Two dollars a page for an 800-page thesis or whatever. So I earned the money.

FOLLET: So do you think — do you think this would've been written in the '80s? This poem? It's not dated.

ROSS: I know it. I know it would've been written in the '80s, because it probably would've been written, probably about when I first started therapy, '82, '83. Because I can honestly say, by '84 I was feeling a lot

better about myself. I was feeling much more — and I mean, that therapy intervention made a quick and immediate difference. I cannot remember — I remember her first name, Ayanna, who was my therapist. Northern, I think was her last name. But anyway, she was not only a special therapist, but there's something special about being in a city where if you're a black woman and the vast majority of people you see are also black women — and political black women. She was as political as I was, and so I wasn't describing a strange, disjointed world to her. She was very supportive in trying to navigate both worlds and stuff. And was, you know, into black feminism and so she was really a great intervention for me. I just can't ever overstate how important she was.

And I didn't realize — again Washington was such a rarified atmosphere for black feminism. When I moved to Atlanta, it was extremely hard to find a black feminist therapist, even though it was a majority black town. And so I didn't realize how special that was.

FOLLET: Interesting.

ROSS: Because you don't have that overlay of black feminist politics in Atlanta. You have the civil rights thing. You don't have the —

FOLLET: And the Rape Crisis Center in D.C. was such a hotbed of black — I mean, home base, a breeding ground — for black feminism, right?

ROSS: It spoiled me. It spoiled me. Exactly. And so, D.C. — but that's what I'm saying. The Rape Crisis Center was a product of its time because it was situated in a context that empowered that kind of discourse, that really lent itself to that, whereas that concatenation of circumstances might not have happened in another city.

FOLLET: And black lesbian feminism at the Rape Crisis Center?

32:22

ROSS: Oh, that was wonderful. That was wonderful. From the beginning, I mean, we've always had lesbians involved in the founding of the Center, black and white, involved in different aspects of the Center, so one really dealt with sexual identity politics at the same time you dealt with heterosexual politics. And so, it became totally important within my soul.

As a matter of fact, getting back to ICAW, the UN had declared a World Decade for Women. In 1975, there was the first World Conference on Women, which was in Mexico City. And the Rape Crisis Center had sent a delegate to it. It wasn't me, but they sent a delegate to it.

Then in 1979, I met this woman named Henri Norris. Henri ended up being Alice Walker's attorney, but what she became most famous for was being the attorney that prosecuted a lot of Dalkon Shield cases, the

class-action Dalkon Shield case. But Henri had this wonderful idea of arranging a teleconference at the 1980 Mid-Decade Conference in Copenhagen, arranging a teleconference that would allow, in live time, for women in Denmark to talk back to women here in the United States. And this was unheard of, you know — the whole use of the technology, the cables across the Atlantic, used in a feminist context. It was a really special project.

So she actually had met me because somebody introduced her to me as a potential investor. Remember I had the [lawsuit] money at this time and so, I gave her some money to help it happen, and then I begged myself onto her team. I said, “Can I go with you? I want to go down to this conference anyway.” And what have you, and so, I ended up going to Copenhagen and, um, I don’t know why I started this story.

FOLLET: It was about — the question was black lesbianism.

ROSS: Oh, right, OK. When I went to Copenhagen, one of the key issues at the Copenhagen conference for me as a black woman, anyway, was the seating of the all-white South African delegation. South Africa had sent an all-white delegation to represent themselves at the conference. Now, someone could have argued that’s an improvement over other countries that sent men to represent women at the conference (laughs). So, but that’s a whole other issue. And, you know, here we are involved in anti-apartheid politics, you know, ANC, PAC, BCM [Black Consciousness Movement] kind of stuff.

And so, the more radical of us at the Copenhagen conference, at the NGO forum, argued against the seating of the South African delegation at the official conference, and we’re leading protests and what have you to that end. I mean, not anything personally against those white women. I guess they were the feminists of South Africa at the time, but there’s something quite wrong. There’s a little something wrong with this picture. And of course, it harked back to the days of Fannie Lou Hamer and the ’64 Democratic Convention and the all-white Mississippi delegation. I mean, for us, it felt exactly the same.

And so, on the official delegation to the conference, the only black women were representing the National Council of Negro Women.

FOLLET: Dorothy Height?

ROSS: Dorothy Height, in particular. And they, for their own strategic reasons, chose not to protest the seating of the white South Africans. Uh, at the time in my little radical mind, I thought that was betrayal. How dare you? Because what it created — if you’re the only black women on the U.S. delegation and you don’t protest this on our behalf and you’re the only ones with the voice in those official deliberations — because, you know, there’s two conferences. There’s the official conference and then there’s the NGO Conference. So our only voice as black women in the

official conference was zip. And so, they did not protest it. It created for us the impression around the world that black women didn't care about what was happening in South Africa.

Now, in hindsight, I know it was a lot more complicated than that, but at the time, I was pretty adamant, 27, 28, so I was adamant that this was the middle-class black women selling out, kind of thing. You know, that kind of radical analysis.

So I came home from Copenhagen, or, as they call it, Copenhägen, pretty much committed to organizing black women to go to the final World Conference for Women in Nairobi, Kenya. Also I met some interesting people there. Barbara Oh, who went on to star in a Mohammed Ali movie, she was my roommate in Copenhagen, so she was very much involved in organizing with me and working with me on that.

And so that's when Nkenge and I formed ICAW — the International Council of African Women — with the goal of bringing together women who worked in various black liberation movements, because that's where we came in, black nationalist feminists then, but in various black organizations, to come together and work for Nairobi. Bringing us back to the story of lesbians, because that's where this all started.

FOLLET:

Here comes Morgan State, right?

38:35

ROSS:

Right, exactly. Um, the government of Kenya had announced that they were not going to provide visas to any lesbians who were coming to Nairobi. Now that begs the question, How do they know when they apply for a visa whether or not they were lesbians or not? (laughs) Do they have a box on the visa application and say, Do you sleep with men or do you sleep with women? No, of course not. But they literally had gotten quite nervous, this big feminist conference is coming to their country. It is going to make all our women become lesbians. And you should see, in the Kenyan pictures, there were all kinds of really homophobic cartoons, anti-woman cartoons and editorials and it was pretty misogynistic what was happening in the public discourse in Kenya. Wangari Maathai, you know, the one who just got the Nobel Peace Prize, she was there with Mandaleyo Yawanawake, which was a Kenya women's organization. And so there was all kinds of stuff going on.

Part of Nkenge and my preparations for Nairobi was not only to go around the country telling black women about the conference and encouraging them to form delegations and go, and what have you, but we sought to do a couple of things. It's very hard for women, or anybody, really, to participate in these international forums if they are not prepared. You've got to know how the UN works, you've got to know how the Plans of Action are developed, at what points you can intervene and have an impact on the Plan of Action, how the U.S. delegation was formed, how to lobby, or to persuade that U.S.

delegation, how to have an influence on who *is* on the delegation. I mean, it's a very complicated process. So part of our intention was to hold, around the country, preparatory conferences, pre-Nairobi conferences, for women, so that when [black women] went there we could go there and really have an impact, not just as politicized tourists, kind of thing.

And so, also, as part of the Decade [for Women], the conferences, the official conference, had produced what they called a Plan of Action. The Plan of Action was conceived in 1975, in '75 at the Mexico Conference. Then in Copenhagen, they did a mid-decade report of progress of the Plan of Action, and then, in Nairobi, the official conference was to produce an end-decade report of progress on the Plan of Action. Well, we wanted black women to have significant influence on what was said in that report, basically saying that not enough progress has been made in terms of addressing our issues.

But how to have that impact. Because of all the lesbian-baiting that was happening in Kenya and the fact that we felt that we were a mixed movement — I mean, we were just as many lesbians as we were non-lesbians in the movement that was organizing — we decided that we would cause to be developed a black women's Plan of Action. In other words, what were we going to do as black women when we got to Kenya? We enlisted Angela Davis and a lot of other women — Salima Marriott — a lot of women got involved.

And we had our final prep-con, preparatory conference, at Morgan State, because I think it was Salima, who's now in Congress or — I think she was in the Maryland state legislature. She's in there now, but then I've forgotten where she was working. It was Salima who had persuaded us to bring it to Baltimore, Morgan State. And that was kind of funny. So we had put together this black women's Plan of Action. People had discussed it around the country. The purpose of the Morgan State conference was to ratify it, in other words, to approve it. So that — it wasn't a binding kind of thing, it was, when we go to Kenya, these are the things we're going to support, these are the things we're going to oppose, these are the interventions we'd like to see, these kinds of things. And so because of all the lesbian-baiting, we put into the Plan of Action that we were going to resist all forms of homophobia, all attacks on black women because of their sexual orientation, those kinds of things.

Well, first of all, this caused a crisis within ICAW, because we had pooled together for the International Council of African Women, women coming from the Nation of Islam, All African People's Revolutionary Party, African People's Socialist Party, National Black United Front, Black Women's Health Collective. I mean, we had pooled together black women wherever they were being activists together in ICAW. So we had our homophobic and our anti-homophobic wing. So the fact that we put it into the Plan of Action as ICAW caused people to leave ICAW, caused a split within ICAW. A lot of people left because

we had a lesbian rights plank. Our points of unity were called planks. So we had a lesbian rights plank in the plan, actually before we even got to Baltimore. So, two or three people left ICAW, left its leadership and stuff. So it was divisive internally.

FOLLET: Leaders left.

44:25

ROSS: Yes. Founding members.

FOLLET: Do you remember who left?

ROSS: Yeah, but I don't want to name them. I have to remember. I do remember one really good friend of mine. She was with the Universal Negro Improvement Association, UNIA, Wadija. And Wadija is just a sweet and wonderful soul. I love her to death, but she couldn't understand why we were [supporting] lesbians, so what's up with this? I mean, her husband and my boyfriend were, like, best friends, and so this was a personal rift as well as a political rift. It was just hard for her to understand. I think it's kind of ironic that her oldest daughter's a lesbian now, but anyway. (laughs)

At the time, Wadija did not get with this at all. And so we had people leave. Now we had some people stay, who were there to fight the fight with us, so it wasn't like everybody who was opposed to lesbian rights left. That would have been a lot easier. Some left, some stayed. But we had a majority, a large enough majority to keep the lesbian plank in the Plan of Action.

So we get to Morgan State, and I had invited Barbara Smith to come down to speak in support of the lesbian plank because I figured she was probably the most prominent out-lesbian, she was well respected. Actually, Audre Lorde didn't come to that conference, but I had run into Audre at [an earlier] conference and Audre gave us our first 50 dollars to found ICAW, because she really supported what we were trying to do in terms of mobilizing black women. I'll always remember how important that faith was that she expressed.

But anyway, so I had invited Barbara down to speak in support of the lesbian plank –

FOLLET: Because you knew it was going to need –

ROSS: Oh, yeah.

FOLLET: – strong support.

ROSS: I mean, we were — what happened within ICAW was just a microcosm of what was going to happen when you get 400 black women together talking about lesbian rights –

FOLLET: So, ICAW –

ROSS: – in 1984.

FOLLET: Prior to this, ICAW is a small group, or you're communicating by –

ROSS: Yes, we're communicating by — we didn't have Internet at the time — we were communicating by traveling, like an itinerant road show, and you know, telephone and mail.

FOLLET: OK.

ROSS: We had a newsletter and we had a radio show. So I mean, you're doing [my papers] — the newsletter and the radio show were both called "African Women Rising." You might have found a couple of them in the archive.

FOLLET: There may be.

ROSS: Anyway, and so we were communicating as best we could. I mean, we had a lot of networks, because we had a strong network of women who worked against violence against women that we knew from the Rape [Crisis Center] days, we had an anti-apartheid network. I mean, our work helped to integrate. Nkenge came out of Black Panther Party, so she had that network. And so –

FOLLET: But I — at Morgan State, there were going to be more than just the –

ROSS: This was all black women, ICAW.

FOLLET: – more than just ICAW.

ROSS: Yeah, ICAW was sponsoring it, but it was hosting the final preparatory conference for black women who were going to Nairobi.

FOLLET: OK. There had already been a split within ICAW over this issue, and now you're taking it to a larger group.

ROSS: Exactly, exactly.

FOLLET: OK. Here we are, Morgan State. Barbara Smith.

ROSS: So we're at Morgan State. Barbara gives a wonderful presentation. I barely remember the details of it. But talking about homophobia and attacks on black lesbians and what it means in terms of the movement and offering a critique of sexism and –

FOLLET: I remember when she was here, you and she were recalling that moment, and you remembered how passionate and effective she was. I mean, do you remember any — can you set the scene? Do you remember —

48:41

ROSS: Yeah, I can set the scene.

FOLLET: OK. Put us there, if you can.

ROSS: Well, first of all, we're in this big auditorium. As I said, there's 400 women there. The black women there — first of all, we have some older politics. We have some politics of whether the white women could come and we decided, no, that we did not need to be distracted. So there were some pre-conference politics around it being only black women in this room. Four hundred black women were there. They ranged from very low-income women who got turned on through the National Black Women's Health Project or other welfare rights work, that kind of thing, the Welfare Rights Organization was there. A lot of black nationalist women were there, representing the UNIA, NBUF, Nation of Islam. I mean, again, it was the ICAW template writ large, so we were pulling in black women from wherever they were situated. Middle-class black women who could write a check to go to Nairobi, just thought it was cute and romantic to go to Africa. The vast majority of the Nairobi representatives, first time ever going back to Africa. So there was this whole back-to-Africa romanticism that was happening in the room.

One very important person who was there — it was really a political coup to get her — was Queen Mother [Audley] Moore. Queen Mother Moore is one of the original Garveyites. She actually was trained by Marcus Garvey. She was well into her late 80s at this time, and she'd been in the UNIA since it was founded. And she got her title Queen Mother from pan-Africanist work she did in the 50s. I mean, that's when Africa designated her Queen Mother. This was not a title she gave herself. This is something that she earned, which is supposed to be one of those really high titles of respect. And Queen Mother Moore at the time, I mean, she was fiery mentally but she was very frail physically, and so she, for her to come to the conference, she had to bring a personal attendant. She walked around with this cane, trembling visibly in all her limbs, but there in spirit, really strong, strong personality, strong woman. And we thought it was so special that the Queen Mother had come, because the entire movement paid homage to Queen Mother.

Except the split over lesbian rights that had darn near destroyed ICAW started playing itself out at the conference. And so here we are in the auditorium. Barbara's up on stage by herself — which is also a problem, we probably should have arranged that better — up on stage by herself, boldly championing lesbian rights. I'm on stage as a moderator, looking over the crowd.

Queen Mother's sitting in the back. And everybody who is opposed to the lesbian plank kind of like gravitating towards Queen Mother and seeking her leadership in leading the opposition, her gravitas in leading the opposition. So they were the minority. Let's be clear. They were a minority within the group, to defeat the lesbian plank. And we have to vote on it plank by plank. And we had no opposition on any other plank by the way, at the end. Fifty planks in this document and not one of them was controversial except this one. And we could see it coming. Um, and so all this little buzz is circling around the Queen Mother, circling around.

So after Barbara makes her talk, then I start calling people to comment, public comment before we vote. And so a couple of people spoke, some for, some against. Couldn't tell which way the crowd was going to go. And then the Queen Mother raised her hand. I swear before God I did not want to call on the Queen Mother, because I thought I knew what she was going to say. I mean, like I said, this is the Queen Mother, Garveyite, pan-Africanist. I didn't know what she was going to say.

Oh, one of the things that Barbara has said, though — and this, I need to say it because I do remember it now, thinking about it — was talking about how important it was for black American women to be in unity. She has said that, and so, we've got more that brings us together than divides us. You know, fighting white supremacy, imperialism, the colonization of Africa, we got real issues out here, and this is a real issue for us. So for the government of Kenya to try to divide us based on sexual orientation is, you know, really working to serve colonialism. She kind of put that analysis of it.

FOLLET: So she made primarily a political argument, as you remember it?

ROSS: Right.

FOLLET: As opposed to a personal appeal.

ROSS: No, it wasn't personal. It wasn't a personal appeal. Don't do it because you love me, do it because if you want to be in a revolutionary struggle, this is the approach you need to have. So she made a really good argument.

So when Queen Mother put her hand up, I mean, I internally groaned, but I had to call on her, right? And of course the whole room falls silent as the Queen Mother painfully rises and leans on her cane, and I can't get the exact quote, but the Queen Mother basically said, I don't understand why these women would want to sleep with each other. I just don't understand that. But I'm basically here to tell you that when you pick on one black woman, you've picked on all of us.

The whole room went silent — then erupted into applause. She had closed the discussion. The people who were expecting her to oppose it

stormed out the room and then it passed unanimously. So this was one of those moments you remember for the rest of your life.

FOLLET: Wow.

55:08

ROSS: And so it ended up being in the plank. Um, so the whole politics of lesbian rights and black feminists. I mean, that's a whole story waiting to be written, waiting to be told.

FOLLET: It sure is.

ROSS: I mean, I've never been a black lesbian or in a black lesbian organization. I have been in an ally position so I'm able, from that vantage point, often to see the most homophobic debates at the same time, to see the most progressive radical debates. I mean, that bridge road — thing about bridge, you can see both ends, kind of thing. But we've never really had, in my mind, a full analysis of lesbian politics, the international arena, what it's meant to black feminist organizing. That has yet to be written. But that was one of those moments that, we cried when it happened. We cried thinking about it, realizing its political significance.

Also, I learned an important message about framing. If that had simply been a vote of whether lesbians should be supported in going to Nairobi, I think it would have failed. But it was framed by the Queen Mother as a strike against black women's unity. And when it was framed that way, it was a winner. And I'm not sure if my lesbian friends liked that framing, but it was a framing that worked to keep us together versus a framing that would have alienated one or the other side.

And that was just one of those sublime moments. My heart dropped, thinking I had to call on the Queen Mother, because whatever she said, it was going to win. I mean, she had too much stature. If she'd said that plank is dead, it was dead. There was nothing we could do. Because even people who were not homophobic weren't going to disrespect the Queen Mother, you know, it's just that simple. You just can't do it that way. And so for the Queen Mother to come out on the right side is really important.

Ironically, when you go to these NGO forums, you have the opportunity to sponsor workshops and submit requests for workshop space and do a workshop. So one of the workshops we decided to do in Nairobi was one on lesbians and African American feminism. And at the time we had submitted the application to do the workshop from within ICAW, and this was when we were still in the middle of the fight. Why are you having that workshop? Nobody's going to come to it. You're taking lesbianism to Africa. That's what we were accused of. We're trivializing the real struggle against apartheid and colonialism with this stuff. I mean, we'd gotten all kinds of criticisms on that. When we got to Africa, to Nairobi, and had the workshop, 300 women tried to

crowd into a classroom that only held 50, and most of them were Africans. These were not American women. These were women from the continent who were having their first-ever discussion on lesbianism. And so, it was quite amazing. It was quite amazing, the whole concept of lesbian rights and what we were doing and stuff.

And Nkenge and I used to look at each other, like, you know, we are the weirdest people to be in this thing. Half the world thought we were lovers, and we weren't. You know, it was just about practicing the politics we believed in, and doing it from a peculiar position. So there were many times when I used to walk into those nationalist meetings and make my totally apolitical boyfriend, Ernest, go with me to establish my heterosexual credentials, so that I could argue for lesbian politics, you know. It was a weird how he had to play that kind of [role]. He's, like, Where am I going now? We got to go to this meeting, honey. You got to go with me. Why do I got to go? So I can prove I'm a heterosexual, so I can (laughs) — because, you know, any black woman arguing in support of lesbian rights —

END TAPE 11

TAPE 12 (first two minutes: set up, camera adjustment, Ross discusses the loss of some of her archives stored in the flooded basement of a friend's house)

FOLLET: OK. So, Nairobi itself.

2:00

ROSS: OK, Nairobi itself. Nairobi itself was awesome. Eleven hundred black women went to Nairobi and that was unprecedented. So many black women had never gathered before at an international conference in history.

FOLLET: U.S. black women.

ROSS: U.S. black women. And so, that was awesome. We had a real impact on the conference. Dame Nita Barrow, I think, from somewhere in the Caribbean, was the secretary-general of the conference, but Dame Nita was probably very unapproachable. She seemed to be unapproachable. She was the secretary-general of the official conference, and one of the things that struck us after analyzing the conference was that while they had a huge closing ceremony scheduled for the official conference, they had nothing for the NGO forum. It was like the NGO forum was like a Cinderella-type stepchild. You know, hundreds of workshops, protester stuff, but no gathering that actually brought all the women together, and I think it was intentional, because the NGO forum was far more radical, far more politicized, than the official conference and so they feared the power of bringing all these thousands of women together. I'm not sure how many thousands. I think there were 20,000 women all told at the NGO forum, so they didn't want that many [radical] women coming together for anything.

Interestingly enough, my roommate in Nairobi was this crazy woman named Donna Brazile. Donna at the time was the executive director of the National Political Congress of Black Women. She was actually its first executive director and this was an organization founded by Shirley Chisholm, I think, in '84 — after the '84 convention, right, Democratic convention — to get more black women into the political process. Mostly bipartisan Democrats or Republicans, C. Delores Tucker and Shirley Chisholm started it. And so, Donna was my roommate. Just serendipitous fate.

FOLLET: Did you know her before?

4:15

ROSS: No, I'd never met her before. And so, Donna has always been a hellacious organizer. I mean, long before I met her, she had organized some big protest march in commemoration of the King anniversary march and all that. So Donna and I schemed one day that, Why don't we organize the closing ceremony for the conference? Just do it. We don't need anybody's permission. We've got to just do it.

And so Donna started contacting people who had money who could help us rent a stage, rent a sound system, pool together all [resources],

you know, and our job was to go around, pool together all the people we wanted to speak at our closing program. I remember we went to get Bella Abzug, and Betty Friedan, and Betty Friedan unfortunately was so drunk, it was hard. I shouldn't have said that. But the reason she came up for me, Betty did, was because one of the things that had just really distracted from the world conference process for women was the Israeli-Palestinian debate.

And unfortunately, at the Mexico City conference, one of the statements that was made that was incorporated into the Mexico City Plan of Action was the unfortunate phrase "Zionism is racism." OK. And so that actually has launched a lot of Jewish animosity against the UN and the whole world conference processes, which still manifested itself in the recent [2001] World Conference Against Racism. You know, being dismissed as, you know, just an exercise in anti-Semitism, da-da-da.

FOLLET:

In Durban?

6:18

ROSS:

In Durban, exactly. That's a whole nother question. Um, but, so all during the Decade [for Women], you had Jewish women trying to get the Zionism-is-racism plank, or statement, repudiated, you know, rebuffed, or whatever. You had women from Palestine and other pro-Palestinian countries or what have you, you know, trying to draw attention to Zionism and the colonization and the oppression of the Palestinians, and so we had to navigate this the whole time during the Decade.

And even in the U.S. preparatory conference — well, at the preparatory conference, we were having the black women who just were contextualizing. The preparatory conferences were for women all over the country. So, American Association of University Women, AAUW, had a prep-com, for example. I remember going to that, and Bella Abzug was there. And we had to make agreements that we wouldn't discuss Israel, we wouldn't discuss Palestine. Because every time it came up, it would totally disrupt whatever other agenda you had during this whole Decade [preparatory] process. It would make [governments] like the United States dismiss the conference, saying they were being too politicized, what have you.

And of course it made the pro-Palestinian women feel that they were being re-colonized by the conference process that wouldn't discuss their issues.

FOLLET:

This is within the United States?

ROSS:

Right, exactly.

FOLLET:

At the preparatory conferences in the U.S.

ROSS:

Right.

FOLLET: OK.

ROSS: And so, at this AAUW meeting, the gentlemen's agreement was that we would not discuss Palestine, we would not discuss Israel, that we were going to discuss what commitments we were going to try to make the U.S. make in terms of gender parity, improving the status of women, et cetera, et cetera. Everything went smoothly until Bella got up there and started talking about Israel, which totally violated the agreement, and there were, you know — the average women who had been in the audience, they had abided by the agreement. Probably as much as they wanted to talk about Israel and Palestine, they chose not to, because we had said we were not going to talk about that issue. That was the agreement. Bella gets up there and breaks the agreement. And so the stunned silence goes around the room because even those who agree with her knew she had violated the agreement.

And so, I remember my first time publicly challenging Bella was in that moment, that this is not fair, you know. You're up there as a Jewish woman — I don't even know if Bella is Jewish, I think she is, because why else would she do that? — you know, talking about this issue. If we'd known that was going to happen, we would've put a pro-Palestinian woman on that stage, too, so at least we had balance. But it's unfair of you to use your position to violate that agreement. And if nobody else in this audience was going to tell you that, I am.

Bella and I got along really well after that, so she didn't hold it against me. But it was wrong. You know, I'm just saying that kind of story to say what were some of the dynamics that were going on.

FOLLET: So this came up again somehow at Nairobi with Friedan?

10:04

ROSS: Oh, yes, so it came up again in Nairobi with Friedan. That's exactly where I was going with the story. Thank you. When we asked Betty to speak, we had selected speakers from around the world, you know. One was from Russia, one was from Africa, India. All I asked them what I wanted them to do was say closing statements about what the conference meant for them, the importance of women's conferences. We were actually not so secretly wanting to put a demand that there needed to be another conference. We didn't want the Decade to just end with Nairobi, because progress has not been made sufficiently on women's issues around the world so there needed to be more world attention on this, et cetera, et cetera.

And so, when we asked Betty to speak, Betty said that she didn't want to speak because there were Palestinian women speaking. At that point, I took the position that I don't want Betty speaking. Like I said, Betty stayed pretty inebriated most of the time. I don't know if she still has this drinking problem, but at the time she was drinking so heavily you could smell her coming. Real bad alcoholism problem, so, yes, so I

had problems with that. But I mean, leaving that aside, you can't blackmail us.

I mean, it's not like you're, in my opinion, representative of American women anyway. So (laughs) I'm not that hurt that you don't want to speak, frankly. I mean, we asked you out of respect. Here's two black women organizing this thing. I mean, you're lucky you got asked to be the one to represent American women, as far as we're concerned, and we only have one American woman, one Canadian woman, one, you know –

FOLLET: Oh, wow.

ROSS: Well, you know, because we had a closing program and we wanted to make it as broadly representative as possible. We could have had ten American women speaking and, you know, lessen the representatives from other people, but we wanted to be fair, have balance, and stuff. And so that's where it came up again. But she tried to bully us into not having anyone speak for the Palestinian women as she spoke. I mean, we did have a Palestinian woman speak. And so she didn't get her way. She at least spoke but she didn't get her way. And we did add Angela Davis to it to get a balance, to the Betty Friedan thing.

And uh, so that's how I became close to — I can't say close, but I got to know Donna Brazile because of the three weeks we spent as roommates in that room organizing this thing.

So anyway, at the end of Nairobi, we're sitting in this — oh, that's another thing I need to say about Nairobi. The city lacked the capacity to host 20,000 people. They didn't have enough hotel rooms, bed spaces and stuff, so there were all kinds of horror stories about people being evicted from their hotels when a more powerful delegation showed up that had the power of evicting people from hotels and stuff, so all this was going on around there. The good news was that we were at no threat of being evicted from our hotel. The bad news was because we were at a hooker hotel. I mean, because only prostitutes used this place before we got there, and it was quite a culture shock to be sitting in the bar, for example, having a drink and having different African men come try to approach you and solicit you, like we were the most highly politicized women in America sitting there getting mistaken for hookers in Africa? I mean, it was kind of wild. Anyway, the hotel stories were funny. I forgot, Nkenge and her roommate — I forgot her name –

FOLLET: Nkenge was there with you? Nkenge and you and Donna and –

ROSS: Nkenge and I weren't roommates. Donna and I were roommates, we had little tiny rooms with twin, narrow cots in them. I mean, they were not the most luxurious accommodations, by no means.

But I was talking to Donna. And I said, "OK, Donna, for the last three years, Nairobi's been the focus of my life. I have no idea what I'm going to do when I get back to the States. I know I want to continue to

work in the women's movement but I don't know where to go after this. I just don't know where to go."

FOLLET: I know where you're going to go with this.

ROSS: Do you want me to hold off?

FOLLET: Yes. Before you do that, before we switch to NOW, I want to ask about the whole third world framework. I mean, I'm trying to think. When did you come to adopt a third world framework? Does the question even make sense? What difference did it make that you were coming to your politics with a –

ROSS: Global framework –

FOLLET: – third world framework at that point?

15:32

ROSS: Well, I kind of remember when it became foundational for me, and that was during the anti-apartheid work. I formally joined anti-apartheid work around '76. I think there was the big Soweto uprising, or one of those big uprisings that happened, and that was kind of like a wake-up call for me. One of the things we did at the Rape Crisis Center that was so controversial is that Zimbabwe was in the middle of its liberation struggle. And we helped to do a Dollars for Bullets campaign for the Zimbabwe struggle, and that just horrified people, because they saw southern African support work as sending bandages and sanitary napkins, and here we're like, Excuse me, they're in an armed struggle. Band-aids and sanitary napkins doesn't get it, and if we don't help them get weapons, who will? It was just, you know, kind of bold.

But anyway, and there was this political struggle between ZANU and ZAPU, two competing liberation struggles fighting for control of Zimbabwe against an apartheid system, so — because remember Zimbabwe used to be called Rhodesia — and there were splits in the black movement over who supported ZANU, who supported ZAPU, you know, Mugabe's forces versus — was it Savimbi? — forgive my memory, anyway, obviously Mugabe's forces won.

But we had started a Dollars for Bullets campaign — well, not started, we'd become part of Dollars for Bullets campaign. I remember this very radical white woman that I still love to this day named Marian Bahnzaf, who was the one who brought it to us and said, "This is something that we're engaged in and we'd like know if you all would support us in this." And Marian was part of the really hard-core radical white left, not really associated with a political party, you know, not one of the CWP/SWP people that we had no use for. They actually saw themselves as, like, the radical underground support for the Black Liberation Army, the people who helped liberate Assata Shakur from jail and what have you. This is probably about as close as I ever got to any of that stuff was working with her, and they ended up with a lot of

political prisoners in jail there, women still in jail that worked with Marian from those days, or what have you.

And so, anyway, so Marian was the one that approached us and asked if we would work on the Dollars for Bullets campaign, and it was just fundraising. I mean, that's all it was, was fundraising to send money to the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe. And so I think my global perspective on issues was directly raised by doing anti-apartheid work, more indirectly by studying Marxism and political economy and what have you.

So by the time I got to Nairobi, I think the urge to build a global African women's movement was manifested for me, and seeing it play out in Nairobi really just sparked something in my soul, because I remember, one of the workshops we had at the NGO forum was over whether or not the word feminism was appropriate for African women, both in Africa and in the diaspora. And again, we thought it was going to be one of those really, really controversial topics, you know. We thought it was going to be as controversial as lesbianism had been.

And it was again, um — we underestimated stuff, meaning that we would request a classroom for 50 people and 200 people would show up and that was another one of those things where if we'd known it was going to be like this, we would have requested an auditorium. We didn't think that many people were going to show up to discuss feminism. And what was kind of interesting was that not only did hundreds of women show up — and we also couched it in, What should be the relationship between African women born in the Americas and African women born in Africa? What should be the diasporic relationship, and was feminism a sufficient bridge to help build that relationship? — so a lot of people showed up. And one of the more interesting aspects of it was certainly, black women from the United States were much more comfortable with the feminist language than black women from Africa — they weren't resistant to it but at the same time, [were] like, Anhh, we don't know about that. That sounds like one of them white women's Western imperialistic kinds of things, and we're not sure if that really describes us, and all that.

And there was a whole lot of controversy, because during the Decade for Women, white women had discovered female genital mutilation and had handled their discovery of it fairly badly in terms of accusing the cultures of being barbarians and all this stuff. And so African women were smarting from how they felt they were portrayed by white feminists. So, obviously, the "F" word wasn't there.

Now, I tell this story because what's ironic is that in 1990, five years later, I had a chance to go to the Philippines for an International Women and Health Meeting with Dazon Dixon. We'll talk about [her] once I met her. And there was a workshop on feminism and these black women were in that audience from Africa, and the debate was who was the most feminist. Because what we were doing, we were bidding — you bid on which country gets to host the next IWHM, International Women and Health Meeting. And so there were these competing bids from women

in Senegal, South Africa, Uganda — Uganda eventually won — all over. And the whole nature of the debate hinged on who had the most developed women's movement, who was the most feminist, and why they were appropriate for hosting the IWHM. Like I said, it was one of the moments, like, Wow, have you all moved in five years, kind of thing, which I hadn't really appreciated. I mean, now that I know Bernadette Muthien and, you know, Patricia [McFadden] and other African feminist scholars, I'm not surprised, but the obvious palpable difference between '85 and 1990 was just astounding, just astounding.

But anyway, so that was my global consciousness. I think I walked into Nairobi having a sense of global consciousness. Nairobi totally persuaded me on the possibilities of organizing women of African descent globally.

By the way, there was another important formation, and somebody else you should interview, that I need to draw attention to. In 1982, when Nkenge and I found ICAW, we met with a woman named Andre Nicola McLaughlin, who's on the faculty at Medgar Evers College right now and has been for 30 years, but Andre formed the International Research Network of Women of African Descent, IRNWAD. So what we were building in the community, she was building in the academy of black women who studied black women's issues globally. And ever since then, every three years, IRNWAD has sponsored global black women's conferences. And they have been fabulous. They had the first one in New York City, hosted by Medgar Evers, then they had one in London, then they had one in Germany, which was really special because it brought black women from all over Europe together, talking about what they're dealing with in their oppression. And a great book came out of that — in German, so I can't read it. (laughs) I'm told it's a great book. I'd read it, but my German's not up to the task.

They've had them in Tokyo and Australia, uh, so they've been able to really — Russia. They had a conference of black women in Russia, bringing together black women from all over the Soviet Union. I mean, just things and places you would not imagine. And one of the most ironic things, blackness is such a peculiar designation globally. What's ironic about the concept of blackness is that when people are suffering extreme oppression and there's some organizing around blackness happening, then you find white people defining themselves as black to identify and show solidarity with the resistance to the oppression. So the Russian conference had all these women, blond and blue-eyed, claiming black blood (laughs), claiming they were part of the black African diaspora.

I wasn't at Russia at the Russian conference but when we were — the last [IRNWAD conference] I went to was 1998, I think it was, in South Africa, and it was interesting to see these white women from the Ukraine, from all these other [Eastern European countries], coming to this international black women's congress, claiming to be black. You know, we were not going to argue with them. I mean, if you think you're black, fine, girlfriend, but they looked so Caucasian it hurts. I

mean, we're not even talking about any, uh, semblance of — they don't even look like they have the one drop.

FOLLET: Yeah, I was going to say, is this one of those quantum blood issues where there's —

26:50

ROSS: No, they would not pass go in anybody's test but in their own minds, but it's just interesting, because you find that also in London, because at the London one, you find that the East Indian, the Pakistani women, any woman who is not white European, they don't use the term "people of color," they use the term "black." And people defining themselves into blackness in order to express political solidarity and stuff. So I find that just fascinating around the world, and going to Andre's conferences really exposes that. I mean, the whole thing, to have a huge delegation of aboriginal women. Even in Nairobi and other [conferences], I really didn't get to see the women from the Pacific Islands and Australia and stuff, but going to Andre's conferences, I saw huge delegations of Maori and aboriginal women coming and talking about their particular oppression.

FOLLET: So as these groups come together around the world, these research groups and these conferences and the huge delegation of African American women and African women, what are the galvanizing issues and where are the points of tension, say, in the mid-'80s?

ROSS: Oh, resistance to settler colonialism serves as a convenient hook for the hat, because all of us are affected by that, either as former slaves [or] as a settler colonial state. People in Africa and Australia are still dealing with those colonial states, so that serves as convenient glue. So it's not gender that glues us so much as the common oppression of settler colonialism, I would say, that serves as a convenient glue. But in a more gender-specific way, I mean, we share bonds for fighting violence against women, fighting for reproductive control, dealing with economic systems that generally have us all at the bottom. I mean, the degree of blackness tends to also portray your position on the economic hierarchy.

And so whatever society they come from — I'm telling you, even my mind's beginning to — there are these people in Japan, [the Buraku], and I did training with them, who actually came over 600 years [ago] from China to be servants to the wealthy people of Japan. They are so culturally integrated now that you cannot tell that they are not indigenous Japanese. Yet in Japan, they are treated like Japan's niggers. And so, it's like the Untouchables of India. For some reason, my mind's not — but anyway, you end up talking to them because anybody that's been niggerized finds themselves in solidarity with black women. And so you end up in conferences talking about what does it mean to be "othered," what does it mean to be totally subordinated within society, having no legal rights, having to fight for control of your

life, your children. You know, dealing with how this oppression affects the men in your life and the oppression. (phone; 30:30 – 31:10 discussion of allergies)

FOLLET: OK. So you had organized through ICAW — some of the pre-conference planning. At Nairobi, what was your role? What did you accomplish, or what role were you personally playing?

31:10

ROSS: Well, Nairobi was a very complicated situation. First of all, there was our commitment to ensuring that these 1100 black women who came to the conference knew what was going on. So at the exhibit area, we set up an information booth that had to be staffed every day from 8 to 8. And so, as the delegation leader or organizer, my job was unfortunately to get people up in the morning, make sure the information booth got staffed, that information got to the information booth, because we wanted to be a central [information resource] — you know, when you're dealing with a conference of 20,000 people, where do you go to find out what are the key activities that black women need to know about? Both what's going on at the official conference and then at the NGO forum.

So we had this information booth going, which really was a wonderful device because it also turned out to be the place where we could meet. You know, the blizzard of events and what have you. Where can you find somebody? Where can you post a note saying, Hey, friend, I'm looking for you, or whatever. It turned out to be the information booth.

But at the same time, it felt largely like being a drill sergeant. You know, people are tired. They were there, up till midnight. They don't need Loretta Ross calling them at 6 o'clock in the morning, saying, "Hey, you got to get up. It's your turn to rotate the booth." So people actually started resenting me quite early in that process. Because, you know —

FOLLET: OK. You're back to your drill corps days.

ROSS: Right, exactly. But we had made a commitment. And we had to live up to that commitment. And there were people who came on the delegation, kind of like political tourists, who weren't planning on working quite that hard, but we paid [for them, we] raised the money to get [them] there so [they] do have this obligation, kind of thing.

FOLLET: In terms of issues, like did the lesbian issue keep resonating there?

ROSS: We had the workshop there on it. But like I said, it didn't really take over the conference or anything, because like I said, it was very eye-opening for a lot of women on the continent who may or may not have been lesbians, I don't know, but this was their first opportunity to have an open discussion about it. So by airing it out, it kind of lessened in importance. It didn't become the great suppressed discussion.

FOLLET: Reproductive rights issues?

34:00

ROSS: Reproductive rights issues. What happened with reproductive rights issues in Nairobi? I don't remember anything in particular. I remember the feminism discussion. I remember the anti-apartheid thing because by that time, the ANC, PAC and BCM had been invited into the official conference as observers. That changed and stuff like that, so that was an important change. Zimbabwe had been liberated, so there had been a lot of important Zimbabwean women who had been in armed struggle. I hadn't really met women who actually carried a gun and participated in the military delivery. So we were fêting those Zimbabwean women like they were the heroes of the revolutionary movement.

FOLLET: You were what them?

ROSS: Fêting.

FOLLET: Oh, OK, yeah. Honoring them.

ROSS: Honoring, yes, celebrating them, and really — these were living sheroes for us, people who we admired. All kinds of them liberated lands and actually militarily defeated an apartheid government. And that's why a lot of people are very ambivalent about the mistakes that Mugabe is making right now, because we remember Mugabe the revolutionary hero, not Mugabe the despot. And so we're really conflicted. And then, in his effort to hold back power, he's really rolling back women's rights, and so a lot of — Patricia McFadden talks about that a lot, and so a lot of things are happening in Zimbabwe that are not good now, but back in '85, we were still turning our eye now toward Angola, Mozambique, South Africa. When are we going to get those free, since we quote "liberated" Zimbabwe?

Um, so I remember that being a major discussion, status of liberation movements. Of course the Israel-Palestinian situation. What was happening in East Timor was a huge discussion in Nairobi. And — was it in Nairobi or Beijing? It must have been Beijing, where we had the other conference. Um, what else was — it's been 20 years. These things feel like that they only happened yesterday, but it has been 20 years.

FOLLET: But when I think about — here you had left San Antonio in 1970, a —

ROSS: Sixteen years old.

FOLLET: Yes, at the age of 16, a middle-class, academically gifted young woman, somewhat personally —

ROSS: Totally apolitical.

FOLLET: – wounded but apolitical. For you, a dashiki was an adolescent rebellion, not a political statement.

ROSS: Right, right, exactly.

FOLLET: And here you are, only 15 years later, having been so highly politicized and working in local and national and international frameworks.

37:25

ROSS: When you put it that way, it does feel kind of strange, but at the time, it just felt like living my life. Um, yeah, I can't think of what other major issues we were — the debt crisis was serious. I remember we were protesting Buraku women — I'm trying to think of the name of the Japanese oppressed women who were — the whole question of the Dalits was coming up and they had begun to find their voice in terms of the oppression of the Untouchables in India. I mean, each of those world conferences was revelatory for me, because you just learn so much about other oppressed people and other oppressed nations that you just didn't know about.

I mean, in America, even with the best effort in the world, it's very hard to really find out information on other countries, and particularly the marginalized people of those other countries is even more difficult to obtain information [about]. So being at a conference like Nairobi and getting a chance to interact directly without the filter of the media or whatever, hearing peoples' stories, hearing about peoples' lives, figuring out how much you have in common, how much something like the concept of the construction of blackness affects all these narratives from these widely disparate places around the globe. I mean, it's just — consciousness-raising is too small a word to describe that experience.

FOLLET: Right.

ROSS: And, oh, yeah, I never — I know I didn't think it was going to unfold like that. I mean, again, I went to Copenhagen, not because I understood that much about global feminist politics, but because I wanted to be part of Henri's team and it seemed like such a neat thing she was doing, the teleconference and all that. And it was in Copenhagen that a lot of things came together. It was a natural. We did anti-apartheid work to oppose the seating of an all-white delegation. I mean, you don't have to be a genius to figure that out.

FOLLET: OK. So here you are. You're at the conference that you've been planning since '82 or so, right, has happened, and you're sharing a room with Donna Brazile.

ROSS: Right. So Donna tells me — I mentioned, as I told her, I had no idea what I was going to be doing. I said I knew I wanted to continue to work in the women's movement. We both lived in D.C. I didn't even use the

“F” word. I did not describe myself as a feminist. I was part of the women[’s movement] who didn’t use the “F” word.

FOLLET: You were?

ROSS: Yeah, I didn’t use the word feminist for myself until later. Uh, so, I didn’t know what I was going to do. And so, Donna said, “Well, Loretta, you know, every time they have an election within NOW, the entire staff has to resign, so there may be some jobs there.” And [I said] “I don’t want to work at NOW.” All the stereotypes came to mind. “Besides, I’m not a feminist.” She said, “Well, you said you wanted to continue working in the women’s movement. That’s an opportunity for you.”

And she was right. NOW had just gone through a very brutal election. Ellie Smeal had replaced Judy Goldsmith as president. Ellie had been president before, Judy Goldsmith was brought in to be the next president, then there was — Ellie had been term-limited out. She couldn’t run for three consecutive terms, so Goldsmith got to serve one term, then Ellie came back and ran two more terms. So probably more than any other woman, Ellie Smeal was identified with NOW. But at the time, Ellie was just beginning her second two-year term.

And Donna was right. NOW operates like a presidential administration in Washington, D.C. When the new administration comes in, every staff person has to hand in their resignation and the new administration gets to decide who they’re going to keep or not. And yet, you can’t get unemployment because you resigned, kind of thing. So it’s kind of a neat trap they have [for] people.

But I wasn’t sure if I wanted to work at NOW. So my strategy was to go back home, continue to type term papers — by the way, I should add that Ernest and I broke up when I came back from Nairobi. Um, so, we can get to the personal story at some point, but we broke up the summer I came back from Nairobi in ’85. But, so I continued to type term papers for people as a way of making a living, and I went to NOW and offered myself as a volunteer.

The first person I met and talked to was Molly Yard. Molly at the time was their political director, directing the PAC and things like that, so Molly immediately put me to work, and Molly and I thrived. Molly has the [global consciousness] — one of those really special Pearl S. Buck kind of stories? She’s the daughter of missionaries in China. She was born in China. Molly thought of herself as Chinese for the majority of her life. Molly is now dying in a nursing home and somebody should’ve done a life story on her if nobody has already.

FOLLET: No, we tried, it was too late. Her papers are here, though.

ROSS: Are they?

FOLLET: Yes. Yeah.

ROSS: That's special.

FOLLET: Isn't that great?

ROSS: I love it. I'd love to write the story of Molly Yard. I tell you, I love that woman. I mean, Molly was still climbing mountains in her seventies. She used to take vacations and go mountain climbing. I can't even walk up a set of stairs at 50 and she's climbing mountains at 70. She was so special. But her background made her see people as people. There was never any hint of racism or racialization in Molly. So it was so good. She was the first person I saw and got to know at NOW, because other contacts and other interactions were not nearly as good. So she was the person I got to work with first. And so, Ellie came to some meeting and [said] that I was a volunteer. There was another woman named Judy who was a volunteer, whose grandfather started IBM, but that's a whole nother story. But Ellie came to some meeting of all staff and volunteers and told us that she had this great idea that we were going to organize this march on abortion for April of '96 and I got back from Nairobi –

FOLLET: Of '86?

45:00

ROSS: Yes, '86. And I'd gotten back from Nairobi, I think it was in October was when the conference was over, September, October, some time. So I'd been there for two or three months, volunteering, checking things out. Not knowing if there was a fit yet, but really enjoying the difference in working in a national feminist organization and the stature of NOW. One of the things that makes NOW stand out from the crowd — and I think that's why people hate them so much, even in the women's movement — is that they are seen as "The Authority" on women's issues. So when Reagan's supporting Sandra Day O'Connor for the Supreme Court, NOW doesn't have to send out a press release: CNN is on their doorsteps. And when the Challenger blew up, they came and asked us about what we felt about the schoolteacher, Christa McAuliffe, dying on the Challenger. I mean, when you're seen as "The Authority" versus you're the wannabes, and that is the peculiar position NOW has enjoyed. And when we talk about the troublesome coalition politics that they get engaged in, [that] is one reason they don't like doing coalitions, but when they do get into them, you find that a lot of their coalitional partners are trying to get NOW's press or trying to get that kind of credibility that NOW has on women's issues pretty effortlessly — I don't want to say effortlessly, but pretty naturally, as the first feminist organization.

So, um, when Ellie came and told us, the staff of volunteers, that she was going to do this march, I thought she'd lost her mind. I literally thought –

FOLLET: Why?

ROSS: I came from a community that still called abortion the “A” word, to the extent that they talked about it. The thought of marching for it like it was a civil rights thing — you know, marches, Martin Luther King. Abortion? Freedom. Abortion? You know, it just didn’t compute. Not that I was opposed to abortion, by no means. I’d had one. This is not about personal opposition. I could not conceptualize it politically. Would it work?

FOLLET: How had abortion figured in the work or politics of the Rape Crisis Center?

ROSS: Oh, we had it all. I mean, we opposed sterilization abuse, because I’d been sterilized. Actually, that’s how I entered the reproductive rights movement, protesting sterilization abuse. It was in the mid-’70s that — ’72, ’73, was when a lot of data came out about the Indian Health Service and forced sterilization of the women. Um, I felt that I suffered sterilization abuse, not because a doctor just illegally sterilized me but the whole Dalkon Shield thing and the way it led to sterilization unnecessarily. So there was no opposition to abortion, but at the same time, we certainly were more against population control than for individual control. I’m not sure if you — we had not articulated a strong reproductive rights position at the Rape Crisis Center.

FOLLET: Did you refer clients?

48:32

ROSS: Oh, yes, of course, when someone needed it. Well, you refer clients for all kinds of reproductive health care after they’ve been raped. I mean, they’ve got to be tested for STDs and the whole thing, yes, so, obviously. But also, it wasn’t as controversial, because the fake pregnancy clinics hadn’t developed yet. I mean, the anti-abortion movement had not mobilized in the ’70s.

FOLLET: And abortion was legal.

ROSS: Right. Abortion was legal so it wasn’t as contested terrain as it is now. We probably would’ve been more definitive in our support of it if the politics had driven it that way but it was not as contested to the extent the anti-abortion movement was mobilizing. It was mobilizing to erect, elect — erect was a good word — Ronald Reagan. But it was a —

FOLLET: But still, you recognized it as the “A” word. So it was —

ROSS: Right. It was one of those things like homosexuality, that’s known in the black community, but ain’t one of those things that’s talked about in the black community.

And so I was very skeptical. I thought Ellie had lost her mind. I didn’t have the nerve to tell her she’d lost her mind at the time, because

I'm a lowly volunteer (laughs), but that just sounds crazy to me. And so, meanwhile, when I was working with Molly as a volunteer, she had me doing a number of things, you know, dealing with the PAC and just different organizing types of things. And so, once Ellie made this announcement, then Molly and I sat down and she said, "Well, Loretta, now we need to construct a way to organize minority women" — because that's what it was called at the time. The term "women of color" was coined in 1977 but it had not been that institutionalized in the majority white movement by that time — "We've got to try to figure out a way to organize minority women to support this, to get engaged in it." And I said, "Well, I'll try. I got great networks. I can run up some trial balloons and see what people say. I'm not expecting a real good response."

And the fact was that in '82, NOW had been defeated by the ERA, the loss of the ERA. And in their last ERA march, only seven women of color organizations endorsed that. So dealing with the data of, you know, NOW — and ironically, as part of the Decade for Women, I had done a survey as part of that decade, and found that there were over a thousand women of color organizations that grew up as part of the decade. Most were short-lived but it really did spur the organizing for women of color across the country. And so I had a good network, you know. I knew how to reach close to a thousand of these women of color organizations, because of the Nairobi work. But at the same time, I didn't have any high expectations that the majority of them would want to support a white women's march for abortion. That just didn't work for me.

So I said, "I'll try." Immediately, I ran into the [same] perception I had: That's a white women's issue; we don't work on that; we don't deal with that, et cetera, et cetera. And so, then that kind of pissed me off, made me even more determined to kind of push us to thinking about it. [My first] ally was Donna Brazile. Donna had the Congress write the first statement in support of the march, and articulated the first black women's organization[']s statement] to directly and specifically support abortion.

FOLLET: The Congress — the Black —

ROSS: National [Political] Congress of Black Women.

52:44

FOLLET: She did.

ROSS: Right, exactly. Whereas the National Council of Negro Women had issued a statement in support of *Roe* in 1973, but it was more ambiguous. It really — they never emerged as a pro-reproductive rights organization. They were more pro-civil rights. They weren't even emerging as that pro-feminist until much later. That is to say, because it was a women's organization started in 1930, that in and of itself did not make it feminist.

And so, anyway, Donna and the Political Congress of Black Women offered the first statement. Well, that statement had a lot of power in terms of being able to take it to other black women's groups, you know, Coalition of 100 Black Women, take it here, take it there, take it to the Deltas, take it here, to show them that people they respected stood up for this. Will you join us?

FOLLET: Now, you were taking it?

ROSS: Yes. I'd literally go around, get on the agendas of these groups, talk to the leadership. Can I speak at your conference? Can I meet with your steering committee, or executive committee? Can we do this? And here, I'm doing this mostly as an unhired volunteer at NOW. So anyway –

FOLLET: You've written a lot about this, the reluctance in the black community to talk about this for a variety of reasons, the silence of black women around the issue. So what worked as an argument, or how did your thinking evolve, or your argument evolve, or your strategies evolve?

ROSS: Well, an appropriate framing actually didn't develop until '89, but we had the early parts of it. Um, the frame that worked was tying it to slavery and tying it to loss of control. That always worked. Even if you did not believe in abortion, every woman, black woman, atavistically knows what the loss of control over your body represents, and that almost always works. I would argue that even in the most heartfelt center of black anti-abortion activism, that argument would still be a wedge issue for them, if we could get into circles to talk about it. Because while the anti-abortionists, mainly led by black men, are waxing poetic on dead black babies, black women have a horror of not having control over their bodies. That is a legacy of slavery, and you can always do this. So I think that's the framing that works.

FOLLET: And that's the framing that appears in —

ROSS: "We Remember" ["We Remember: African American Women for Reproductive Freedom"]. That was written in '89, though. That was four years after the march.

FOLLET: Yeah. How do we get to '89. There's the march in '86, there's the conference in '87, there's the march. OK, so.

GEIS: About four minutes on this tape.

FOLLET: OK.

ROSS: Well, let's just talk about how I got on at NOW.

FOLLET: OK. First things first.

56:15

ROSS:

I got no staff here, still working from a volunteer position. And so, in January, I guess, thereabouts, because I'd been there about three months then, in January, I basically go to Molly and say, Molly, I can't do this any more. I'm typing papers at night, I'm working for y'all in the day. I need to go get a real job. I really need a real job because, you know, I'm no longer in a two-income household. It's just me and my son. Things are pretty rough.

And so she said, "Well, what about taking a job with us?" And I said, "Well, to be honest, that had been my strategy, to come check you all out and take a job with y'all, but nobody made me any offers, and I got to find a job." And so she apparently went and talked it over with Ellie and came back and asked me if I would take the position of the minority rights staff person.

In Ellie's previous administration and in Goldsmith's administration, they'd had what they called the minority rights staff person. The last person who had this job — and it wasn't always filled, because it never was really a priority, kind of somebody they'd pull out for a photo op when they got accused of racism and then bury — so the last person that had this position had been Judy Goldsmith's secretary, that they had promoted to being the minority rights staff person. Joyce was a wonderful woman but she was way in over her head. And she wasn't even that political. She came to [NOW to] be a secretary, not that I have anything against secretaries — I had been a secretary. This is not about being [a secretary], it's about political consciousness. And then, when the administration changed, they made no real attempt to even deal with that position.

And so when Molly said, "Why don't you become our minority rights staff person?" I was, like, Well, that's an attractive offer for all of \$22,000 a year (laughs), but first of all, I'm not a minority. There's this term that we use nowadays, it's called women of color. Secondly, as I've read the literature and seen what's happening around here, you all seem to think the job of the minority rights staff person is to recruit minority women into NOW. And frankly, I don't have that kind of power. Not only that, I don't have that ambition. I really don't know if I want to be the one bringing women of color into NOW. Frankly, I'm not sure if I want to be the woman of color in NOW, much less to be the bridge by which other women walk into NOW.

And that's not to deny — there's always been women of color involved in NOW. Reverend Pauli [Murray] wrote the founding statement and stuff, so it's not like women of color have not always been in NOW, but we're talking about moving into a whole other level. By the time we finished the march, by the way, we ended up with seven organizations that had endorsed the first march, it'd grown to like 87. So I was responsible for bringing in more people into contact with NOW, but still that's different from into the rank-and-file membership.

END TAPE 12

TAPE 13 [tape begins with ordering lunch]

FOLLET: OK. So we are at the National Organization for Women.

1:18

ROSS: Right. And so, I had told them that I would accept the minority staff position if they renamed it and I said, What it seems to me what y'all need is not a way to bring more women of color into NOW, because I see them coming and leaving endlessly. It's like a revolving door. What y'all seem to need is a way to make NOW more attractive to women of color so that women of color don't just keep coming and going and coming and going, but stick. And there are some institutionalized practices that I've observed that may be part of the reason why women of color don't stay.

One of these practices is both the marked and unmarked power within NOW. The marked power is positional — the officers, what have you. The unmarked power seem to be more relationship-based, meaning that not only were these — the coterie of people who ran NOW all came from Pittsburgh, where Ellie came from, the press director was from Pittsburgh, Kathy Bonk was from Pittsburgh. A lot of people, I think — Molly got hooked up in Pittsburgh. I mean, a lot of people came out of the Pittsburgh feminist thing, and they had relationships with each other, history and relationships that meant that a lot of times, the decision-making was taking place over the bridge of these relationships. It had nothing to do with what took place in the office, or what it had to do with what took place in the office is that what looked like a cabal really just ended up being relationships.

I'll try to explain. Let's say we're having a staff meeting to decide on a particular course of action. Well, certain women in that meeting have already talked about this the night before over dinner, just in their normal course of being together. So they come to the meeting kind of like as a united front, so what really looks like debate or discussion is really a smaller group of people imposing their agenda on the rest of us.

And so, learning how to mark the marked and the unmarked power at NOW, and if a woman of color who doesn't have those histories, don't have those relationships, comes in, she feels like she's being victimized by forces that she can't explain. Most normally, she names those forces racism: NOW's a racist organization, white women doing their thing, and what have you.

But it's a lot more complicated than that. Because when you're dealing with unmarked power, it also affects white women who aren't in the clique, who aren't in that inner circle. So it's not always racist. Most often it's not racist, as a matter of fact. It's really, really about power in politics and who has power. Jo Freeman wrote this wonderful article. Jo Freeman was a woman who was involved in the Rape Crisis Center early on, so I knew Jo from then, and she wrote this article, I think in 1970, called "The Tyranny of Structurelessness." And even though NOW was a definitely hierarchical organization, still there was a lot of the tyranny of structurelessness that affected it.

Um, one of the other challenges I had at NOW was somewhat positional because I started a program called the Women of Color Program at NOW and I felt that NOW needed to do a series of activities and events that showed women of color what we were doing in terms of changing our agenda to embrace their issues and stuff. And the way the NOW structure works is that there's the president and then there's two vice presidents, one for administration and one for action.

My program fell under the action vice president. Her name was Sherry O'Dell. Sherry is probably a wonderful woman from West Virginia, sharp as a tack politically, awkward as hell when it came to dealing with women of color. Just did not have those social skills when it came to race issues. But at the same time, would probably not see herself as racist. I don't know if I would call her racist. I would say she was unskilled in terms of dealing with women of color.

So from the onset, my relationship with Sherry was combative, and I'm still, you know — wasn't full of trust for NOW either, so it was a difficult relationship. So much so, that when we organized the march in April, four months later, from my perspective, it turned out to be a wonderful success. Eighty-seven women of color organizations ended up endorsing the march. A fairly large number showed up, but you really couldn't see that because they were dispersed amongst their own delegations and what have you, it really did look like a big white march, 600,000 people, big white march, sea of white, one person of color.

And then, immediately following the march, NOW went into debt because of the march. Those marches cost millions of dollars to pull off, and so NOW had a financial crisis after the march, so that Ellie ordered a reduction in staff. Every department had to lose a staff person in order to try to balance the budget. So wouldn't Sherry choose me? Because they had a lesbian rights staff person, an international staff person, a "minority" quote staff person — these were the departments — chapter development staff person and all that, so. And they started the Lesbian Rights Program the same year they started the Women of Color Program. And so she chose to nominate me as the one to go.

And I had to fight it, and it pissed me off. It was in the process of organizing the march that I actually started using the "F" word for myself, and actually paid my membership dues for NOW so I officially became a member. And actually, it was Donna who came to my rescue, because I called Donna and said, Donna, you know these people have laid me off? I've been here six months now and they decided that they no longer need a Women of Color Program because the march is over now. They've done their thing and they don't need this.

And so, Donna said, basically, You're going to have to organize your base. You're going to have show NOW that it's going to cost them to move on your position. And so, to be honest, Donna made a few calls, I made a few calls, Ellie got a few calls from some highly placed women of color, and that's how my job was saved.

FOLLET:

Who were those people who came to your —

ROSS: Shirley Chisholm called them. Shirley didn't know me from Adam. I'd been to a couple of [National Political] Congress [of Black Women] conferences, but she didn't know me personally. I mean, Dolores Huerta called. She'd just — Donna organized the troops. And like I said, I made a few calls but I didn't have the caché she had, influence she had. So while I won the [battle], I lost the [war], because if Sherry was hostile before that, having to publicly recant the decision to terminate me was bad, and so she and I just had a troubled relationship for the rest of my years with NOW.

FOLLET: In terms of issues, I'm guessing that most of your efforts at this point had gone into organizing the march, right? Were there other issues where you were trying to change the NOW agenda to be more women of color friendly?

10:07

ROSS: Well, there were a couple of things that I had to do in order to do that. First of all, I had to construct a history of women of color within NOW. I actually went through all the records, all of the archives, all this stuff, and created this chronology, timeline, of women of color within NOW, from Pauli Murray's statement to Aileen Hernandez being the president and what happened with that. She resigned as president, and asked the women of color never to join NOW.

FOLLET: Now was that your sense, that that was the place to start, to do the history?

ROSS: Right.

FOLLET: Why?

ROSS: Well, because even working on staff, I did not know the role women of color had played in NOW. So if I didn't know it, then my assumption was that the larger world doesn't know it, and certainly, even the white women in it didn't know it. Nobody knew the history. And so that was one of the first projects that I did after the march, was to construct this timeline. It wasn't written up as a historical document. It was done as a brochure, as a matter of fact, "Significant Events in the History of NOW" — kind of like a chronology.

I also had to match it with records of resolutions passed at the national conferences in support of women of color issues. When did NOW first support welfare rights, immigration reform, other issues that are significant to women of color? And so I put that together.

FOLLET: Was your sense that you were going to show how bad the record had been and they needed to correct it, or how good it had been?

ROSS: Well, see, one of the things that is frequently true of the mainstream organizations that are white is that many of them, first of all, haven't done any work on women of color issues, so that's one thing. But even those groups that have done work on women of color issues don't lift that work up into visibility so that it has any impact on their future work, on the perception of them by women of color.

FOLLET: Did you feel as if you had had support from NOW that you needed to bring women of color into the march? I mean, what was your sense of the racial politics of the organization then?

13:00

ROSS: Well again, racial politics — how do I say it? The hardest thing for me to determine at NOW was when I was battling racism versus when I was just battling power politics. So my feeling was that I was not engaged in a lot of the important decisions that affected me and my program. Kind of like being blind-sided by that reduction in force with no previous discussion that it was even happening.

Um, they had a tendency to go after, how do I say, and validate women of color without running it by me. Like, Oh, Loretta, we're having a national conference and we decided that so-and-so's going to be speaking at the national conference. Well, I may not have had any problem with that person representing women of color at the national conference, but it would've been a really good idea to run it by me first. Because you could end up in some really embarrassing kind of position if you choose somebody that may not be who you want. Turns out that Maya Angelou is opposed to abortion, yet if you choose her because she's a celebrity and she's of color, you make a big mistake, that kind of thing. And so, that kind of routine negligence.

But to be honest, they didn't consult any of their program directors on anything, so I can't say they singled me out for exclusion. So that's one of those usual and customary practices that alienate women of color, but it's not designed to alienate women of color. That's how power politics are run.

But there are things that are decidedly racist: thinking you can just get a woman of color to speak and she's going to say what you need her to say without doing any investigation of who she is, what she stands for, et cetera, et cetera. You know, like, any colored girl will do, kind of stuff. That was racist in my mind.

FOLLET: The selection of Angelou came after having the pro-choice march?

ROSS: Yeah, yeah. And they were talking about it. Had to fight that kind of thing. She never did get to speak, by the way, because I kaiboshed it.

FOLLET: You did?

ROSS: But still, the fact that they would be talking about it without knowing where she came from was interesting, and OK, well, anyway — because

15:46

that actually came out. The same thing happened, though, by the way, with the Coalition of 100 Black Women ten years later, because they had Maya Angelou speak at their first ever reproductive rights conference. Because Angelou — that's when she came out publicly anti-choice, but we kind of knew that before.

Um, so there was the construction of the history, and actually, that's where the whole writing of *Black Abortion* [research in progress] kind of got seeded.

FOLLET: Really?

ROSS: Because the whole thing of writing the history of women of color in feminist organizations and stuff and feminist work really, that kind of idea for that got seeded. I didn't do anything about it other than the chronology, and actually [didn't] start writing about it till the '90s, but —

FOLLET: What about abortion and black abortion jumped out of those records or that process?

16:56

ROSS: Um, when you're organizing women, trying to get them to come to an abortion rights march — and NOW did it again in '89, by the way — you're up against this conspiracy of silence, as Byllye Avery calls it, where we don't talk about things we do, we experience. And so, we're very much part of the context, and I felt one of the ways to break through the silence was show that there were other times in our history when we weren't so silent, when we were more active, when we were not as cowed by the political situation.

One of the other things, or strategies, that I thought it was important to engage in was creating these series of forums around the country, mini-conferences, where women of color came to talk about reproductive rights. I think we did either a total of five or six of them around the country, one in South Dakota on a reservation, an Indian reservation, one in Atlanta, one in California, Chicago, Hartford, we had one — all trying to find pockets of women of color that we could pull together to talk about reproductive health issues that we are talking about.

At the same time I was hired at NOW, the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights, which was RCAR — which is now the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice or something like that, RCRC, but it was RCAR at the time — had started its women of color program, and so there was a woman named Judy Logan White, who was the first director of that program.

I think Faith Evans, who was a man, was very involved in feminist politics — interesting, a man called Faith, but that was his name — and Faith had become politicized. He had come out of the National Welfare Rights Organization but he had become politicized because his wife died, leaving him with six kids to raise. So he lived the life of a single mother and that had a whole impact on his own political consciousness.

So Faith eventually came onto the staff of NOW and had a heart attack and died when he was still on NOW's staff. But anyway.

So it was RCAR. [At] NOW, we worked a lot with the Black Women's Health Project at the time. Lynn Paltrow, who was at the ACLU Reproductive Freedom Project, which was a good ally. So we started having these forums around the country. So we had these forums between '86 and '87, '88, all around the country, trying to generate discussion of reproductive rights issues in communities of color.

Someone once asked me, Well, what was the bottom line for those — that process? What outcome was produced? And at first, I was searching for what issue came up. And really, it wasn't the issues, it was the relationships. Just like the white girls had their little girls' network, those of us who did that work in the '80s, we formed our own little girls' network. And as a result, SisterSong emerged out of that. A lot of stuff has emerged out of those networks we had established.

After we had enough, well, three or four forums, I decided in '86 that we would organize a national conference of women of color and reproductive rights. So we had it in the summer of '87 up at Howard University. I'm not sure how many people came to it, maybe about two or three hundred people came to it. I think I gave you some of the tapes from that.

FOLLET: I think so, too.

ROSS: That has never been documented, by the way, just precious stuff that needs to be lifted up — what were women of color thinking about reproductive rights in the mid-'80s, kind of thing.

FOLLET: And this is women of color, African American women as well as other women of color.

ROSS: Exactly. Though there was a bit of a controversy at the conference when Latina women grabbed the mike and threatened to disrupt the proceedings and stuff. The same thing black women had often done to white women, Latino women did to us.

FOLLET: Why?

ROSS: Well, because the majority of the people at the conference were black, because that's where most of the organizing was taking place in the communities. The Latina organizations hadn't quite developed yet, the National Latino Health Organization and stuff, and so this was a whole bubbling up of activism in the Latino community. The Hartford forum was a seriously Latina forum, because a majority of the people that came to the Hartford forum were Latina. Um, and so, we were seen as the oppressors, kind of thing. We were the ones in charge of the conference, the agenda, the majority, a disproportionate number of the speakers were black, as opposed to Native American, Asian American

and Latina, and so the next movement whose turn it was, was the Latinas' movement, and so they used our conference as a flexing point to — a time to flex.

But really, the larger controversy attached to the Howard conference was the fact that I had enlisted the support of all the major pro-choice organizations — NOW, NARAL, Planned Parenthood. Faye Wattleton was president of Planned Parenthood at the time, so she was very much a strong ally. But I told them they couldn't speak, that we were only going to have women of color speak at this conference. I made one exception, and my one exception was as much political as anything else, and I told Ellie that she could speak to one of the evening dinners, she could be the keynote speaker for the banquet that night.

But for the most part, my message to all the pro-choice organizations was that, send women of color, if they're not the president of their — if they're in your shipping department, you need to have women of color speaking on behalf of your organization for this conference. And that caused quite a bit of controversy, because I'm asking them to put up their money but they don't get the spotlight. They don't get to showcase themselves. And a number of them — Kate Michaelman was pissed. She was pissed. Because she's always extremely jealous of Ellie anyway, and so, Why does Ellie get a spotlight and we don't? Well, Ellie put up 40,000 dollars. What did you put up, Kate, 5,000 dollars? You know, so I'm playing hardball politicking, but you put up 40,000 dollars, you can get a dinner speech, too. (laughs) It was — I actually thought it would've been bad for Ellie, the president of NOW, who did put up the most for it to happen. I thought also [it was] a sign of respect to her to let her speak. Now she sabotaged it.

FOLLET:

How so?

24:30

ROSS:

The night before Ellie's talk Ellie calls me, and I'm in the middle of organizing the conference, thousands of logistical details and speakers and people who are having crises and getting sick. I mean, I'm the conference coordinator. So the night before the conference, Ellie calls me. "I don't know what I'm going to talk about tomorrow. What do you want me to say?" I said, "OK, Ellie. This is what you need to say. This is the framing you need to use. This is how to, you know, win this crowd. This is what they're talking about and if you echo back stories of sterilization abuse and how it's a feminist agenda to let women control their bodies and, you know, we need to fight racism both outside the movement but also inside the movement. These are the kind of things you need to say." I spent two hours with Ellie over that, and like I said, in the middle of my conference.

Apparently, Ellie didn't like what I told her to say, so she calls in — oh, I can't remember her name. She was her press director from Pittsburgh, who writes another speech for Ellie, and it's all the wrong things to say. Classic white women's liberal stuff. What you people need to do. Affirmative action. I mean, it was just so terrible. It was so,

so bad, and it really pissed me off. First of all, because you interrupted my day to ask me what you should do and then you didn't follow my advice. Well, why bother? I had better things to do. Secondly, that you would believe a white woman named Jeanne Clark from Pittsburgh on racial issues over the woman who runs your programs on this issue –

FOLLET: And has been for two years.

ROSS: — right, is just absurd. What does Jeanne Clark, your press director, know about how to speak to women of color? I mean, it just doesn't work. It was just stupid.

FOLLET: This is not a good sign.

ROSS: Right. And so she blew it. She blew it. I had to field the main questions about, Why was she the only white woman allowed to speak if that was all she could do? She lost huge credibility among women of color in that moment. It was her moment to shine and she blew it, as far as I was concerned.

FOLLET: And meanwhile, you were working for her.

ROSS: Right, exactly, exactly. I mean, it wasn't personal, it was just stupid. I love Ellie and I really admire her genius, but she has some blind spots and her blind spot is her loyalty to that clique who don't always give her the best advice. But she's immensely and tremendously loyal, so you have to love her for that.

FOLLET: Did you test her on racial issues by — were there specific moments, specific proposals that you wanted to put through –

27:25

ROSS: Well, when I had to put the proposal to her that they spend \$40,000 on this conference, that was — it wasn't designed to be a test. This is what I need, and this is why it's important. And they agreed with me. I mean, it wasn't easy. Again, this is an organization that's still trying to recover from a march deficit, that's laying off staff, so for me to come up and say, I want you to spend this much money on this program in this moment, I mean, it was a battle. But I don't think they opposed it because of racism, it was just institutionally very difficult to spend those kind of resources in that moment.

But I got a green light from everybody but Sherry. She was the one who opposed it, so much so that there were women of color who were on the board of directors — talking about racial politics again, most women of color on the board supported the idea except those who were close to Sherry. So she began to very cleverly try to use those women of color to thwart the idea, so she couldn't say it openly herself that she opposed it.

There was a woman, and I don't want to speak ill of the dead, named Ginny Montes, half black and half Latina, who has since died, who really was as obstructionist as I've ever seen, in terms of pulling the conference off, so unhelpful. And yet one of Sherry's other responsibilities was to write the *NOW National Times*, the *NNT*. She wrote the conference up as if it'd been Ginny's idea when it was a success. Ginny had, at best, a very minor role in the whole process, and I was able to actually show that *NNT* article to Ellie and show proof about how flawed Sherry and my relationship was.

FOLLET: You did show her?

ROSS: Yeah, because everybody knew who organized that conference. And that Sherry would even lie to that extent. Quote Ginny about how great a conference it was and we had this great idea and da-da-da and my name was not even mentioned in the whole article. It was just incredible. But it also exposed Sherry. Sherry did not get a second term under Ellie. She really shot herself in both feet that time. So that when Ellie became president for her second four years, Sherry was not on the team any more. Patricia Ireland took that spot, as a matter of fact.

FOLLET: One of the things you've mentioned about your years at NOW is observing some unsavory behavior.

30:18

ROSS: Oh, God. Do you want me to talk about that?

FOLLET: Yeah. What do you think?

ROSS: Um, I think I'd rather not, because I'm not embargoing this.

FOLLET: OK.

ROSS: I mean, if I said it, I'd have to embargo it. Do you want that? I don't know. Which do you prefer?

FOLLET: Um, I think — I think, yeah. I mean, when you've mentioned it to me in the past, you've said that it is sensitive and it is awkward, but that it's — isn't it your feeling that NOW shouldn't be protected from that kind of reality?

ROSS: Well, see, my feeling is that while certain things happened that don't make NOW look good in really serious ways, at the same time, these controversies are embedded in a huge antifeminist context. And so my fear is that in an attempt to tell the truth for the record, I provide ammunition for people who would want to attack and discredit NOW. And that is not my goal, and so I'm deeply concerned about that. So if I put into public record things that I know could be used as ammunition to attack and discredit NOW, I'm responsible for putting it in that record,

so I can't disclaim responsibility if someone abuses it, because I could have made the choice not to put it in the public record.

So that's how I actually — it's not about — I guess it is about protecting them more than exposing them. I mean, I could have written an exposé on it and become like one of the noted feminist celebrities, because you can really make a very good living attacking the feminist movement. You can make millions of dollars doing it. And if an insider runs an exposé on NOW, I mean, that's a sure path to being on Fox News.

FOLLET: Is this different? I remember last time we were talking about internal relationships within — was it the D.C. Study Group? Is this different?

ROSS: Yeah, the D.C. Study Group or the National Black Women's Health Project, it's a slightly different situation, because in those two previous situations, you don't have this organized group of people, hostile and trying to attack and discredit the whole movement. I'm not sure if I'm making sense. I mean, there is a well-financed, antifeminist movement out here. I mean, what did Kissinger say? Just because we're paranoid doesn't mean we don't have enemies? (laughs) And NOW has enemies that are trying to discredit it, attack it, knock it off of the front-runner position in terms of being the voice on feminist issues. And I think it would be irresponsible as a NOW member to offer them fodder, to load the weapon for them.

So what I observed, after having said all that, what I observed at NOW, in the most general terms, was inappropriate behavior by some officers. There was a lot of controversy about NOW and whether or not it would endorse Jesse Jackson when he ran for president. The wage gap between the officers and the rest of the staff, at the same time we're on Capitol Hill fighting for pay equity. I mean, those things — the anti-union feeling within NOW, because different people got fired for trying to unionize the staff. Those were things that I don't think redound to NOW's credit. I think that they exposed the fact that we didn't always walk our talk in many ways. And so I think that it will be some future scholar that looks to lift the skirt up on NOW and look under and see if the panties are dirty.

FOLLET: OK. Who were your strongest allies there?

35:30

ROSS: Patricia Ireland was very strong. PI, as we call her. PI came from Florida, I think Miami, was married at the time but also had a lesbian lover so she was obviously bisexual and a kind of ambiguous kind of girl. Had started out as a flight attendant, I believe. Very pretty, very sharp, just very attractive.

But for example, I had a chance to go to Cuba while I was at NOW, and I met with the representatives of the Federation of Cuban Women. And one of the things Vilma [Espín], Castro's sister-in-law, had asked — she was the head of the Federation of Cuban Women — was that

NOW and the Federation of Cuban Women establish relationships. Just relations, like, you know, we'd send feminists to speak at your conferences, you'd send women to speak at our conferences. I mean, let's break through this economic blockade that's going on and just, why can't the women's movement build bridges where our governments can't, kind of thing. It made sense to me.

And in many ways, the Cuban women were much more advanced on women's issues. I mean, you know, free health care, abortions on demand, birth control, women's equity. They had made so much more progress on gender issues than they did even on race issues. So I thought that it was a natural for them, those two organizations — and NOW does that with the Council of Iranian Women or whatever, you know, they establish these kinds of — I don't want to say diplomatic relationships, but sisterly relationships with major women's organizations in other countries.

So I brought the proposal back to NOW. I'd also written an article for the *NNT* that I had to fight Sherry to get in about the Federation of Cuban Women and what I observed about women's rights in Cuba, and contrasted them to what I saw in the United States.

Sherry was totally red-baited, meaning that she thought that NOW would be called a communist front, da-da-da-da, and would not do this. And so she was utterly and totally opposed to this. Fortunately, PI at the time, Patricia, was vice president of administration while Sherry was vice president of action, and so PI was very much in support of it. I think maybe she came from Miami, you know, had a much more nuanced version of what was going on with the right-wing Cubanas and the politics and so she was a strong ally for that kind of particular, very specific kind of thing. It never happened until — I don't know if it even happened, because by the time PI became president I had left, or something, but anyway, I had a very short period.

I may be mistelling history — I don't think now, I mean, now that I think about it, I don't think Ellie did two terms on her second time, but I think she did one term, then she went on to found the Feminist Majority, and then PI came in, because I remember working for a brief year or so under PI while she was president. So I might have gotten that detail wrong, now that I think about it.

FOLLET:

In the interview you did with Stanlie James, you mentioned that your time at NOW was lonely. You used the word lonely. As a woman of color, it was a lonely position. Is that still how you would describe it?

39:25

ROSS:

Absolutely, because it was — first of all, I didn't have entrée into the inner circle of power, which was, as I said, you know, the Ellie coterie that enveloped her. And actually, one of the best things I know about Ellie Smeal was that she didn't like the clique. She didn't like the cult status that her groupies established her as. If you ever got to Ellie directly, one on one, she and I could reason real good and we had no problem. It was the people around her.

FOLLET: Who were those people?

ROSS: Um, Jeanne Clark, Alice Cohan, um, Kathy Bonk, Kathy Spillar. They're still very important people now, and I love and respect them all now. I mean, again, it was not personal. Let me be absolutely clear. It was not personal. But it was about that unmarked powers kind of stuff. And you never knew who last talked to Ellie, who last influenced her, kind of thing. And sometimes, just getting meetings with her. I worked for the woman but I had to go through, like, three layers of appointments to get to her. And I mean, I imagine, I know she's busy and in demand and stuff, but if I contact her secretary and said I need to talk to her, [it would] take me two weeks to get a conversation with her — that doesn't work for me. It simply doesn't work. And you're supposed to go to your immediate supervisor. Well, my immediate supervisor is Sherry Odell, and she ain't the one I need to talk to about this. We're already at war, so, that kind of — so, it did feel very lonely.

There were good women of color on the board of directors, but then there were those who were not. The women of color on the board had never really been organized into a force, and I think racial politics played a decided role in that. One of the more progressive things that NOW had done was — I forget the percentage but they had mandated that at least one third of their board seats would be filled by women of color, or something like that. And the board seats were determined at the regional level, so many chapters coming together from a region, et cetera, et cetera. And so quite often chapters or regions, in an effort to fulfill this mandate, which on its surface sounded like a good idea, would just pluck a woman of color up out of nowhere, get her to run for office, all work to get her supported, da-da-da, and then basically put her in a sink-or-swim kind of position. No real understanding of the sister's history, no real couching of how the history of the politics, and I also have to put this in context, and the Goldsmith-Smeal wars were still going on. Even after Goldsmith lost, there's always been an anti-Ellie faction within NOW, which then became an anti-PI faction, because Molly Yard also became president, you know, and they were seen as all part of the Ellie generation.

FOLLET: You mentioned the different regions having representation. Did you see real regional differences in women's politics regionally around the country?

ROSS: I didn't really study that, so I would say not to be observed.

FOLLET: OK.

ROSS: There were differences. The differences that I did observe, and this is not peculiar to women of color or the politics of race, was in — again, [what] the political split between Goldsmith and Smeal meant was that

some of our largest chapters were either Smeal chapters or Goldsmith chapters. And so New York NOW was in turmoil for a long time over the fight. Chicago NOW was in turmoil over the fight. Atlanta NOW got in such turmoil over the fight that it's never recovered. Years later, there is still no strong Atlanta NOW chapter. They have two or three people come to a meeting.

FOLLET: Were those fights described as Goldsmith-Smeal battles or was there another issue that they swirled around?

44:26

ROSS: Mostly Goldsmith-Smeal. But the people who were the loyal opposition would use issues to attack Ellie on. They would say, "Oh, she's not sufficiently supportive of lesbian rights," so that's when she started the lesbian rights position, and da-da-da. She's a housewife from Pittsburgh, what can she know? Or they tried to recruit me to run for president recently. These same people, right? About three or four years ago, somebody approached me from the Goldsmith side, saying, "Loretta, we'd like you to run for NOW president." I'm, like, Why?

FOLLET: You seem to be saying that there is a real, persistent division within the organization and the division isn't based on ideological principles –

ROSS: No, it's power.

FOLLET: – or a particular political issue, it's power.

ROSS: It's the people in power versus the people who are not.

FOLLET: And it's not — is it unique to Ellie Smeal or is it something that you observe in other organizations as well and it just happened to be going on then when you were at NOW?

ROSS: I haven't been in large national organizations other than NOW to know. Well, hell, I saw the Black Women's Health Project. It's about power or not power. Who's in power, who's not. So let me be clear. I think that's what it was about. I could not find one hint of ideological or political difference between the Goldsmith people and the Smeal people. If someone had asked me — neither side was dealing with race very well. Neither side was dealing with lesbian politics very well. Neither side was dealing with the relationship to anything very well. So it was about — and the way elections are run in NOW is not individuals, it's slates. So if the Smeal slate wins, there's no chance to even get an opposition person in any of those other officer positions. So they very carefully run things in slates.

At the same time, NOW is incredibly vulnerable. I determined while I was there that if I ever wanted to run for office at NOW, all I had to do was bring in 50 new votes and capture that 48 percent that's anti-Ellie, and that would swing it. Because the split, in terms of the voting at the

conference, was like 48-52 always. It's never a wide gap. Kind of like our presidential politics. Never a wide gap. The anti-incumbent and the incumbent. Fifty new votes in the opposition, and you can get anything you wanted within NOW. Any position, you could get your whole slate in. So they're awfully vulnerable because of that.

And people analyze that and see that, and that's why they are constantly recruiting people to try to run against the Smeal machine. Now Kim Gandy is president, who was Ellie's treasurer. So Ellie still has strong influence on NOW and, um, there are people who feel that that needs to be interrupted, probably for long and good reasons, but I'm not the one to be used that way.

And Beth Corbin is one of those long-time NOW Smeal opponents who works at Americans United for Separation of Church and State, and so she was the one who reached out to me and said that people were considering recruiting me to run for NOW and would I put together a slate opposing Kim Gandy when Kim Gandy ran. And I had to tell Beth — and I like Beth, because I knew Beth from doing work with her in NOW. But the other thing about these people: they might fight but they don't leave, you know (laughs), only a few people actually leave. They stay there. And so these enmities have run 20, 25 years. They're not going anywhere.

But when Beth tried to recruit me, I said, "Beth" — and everybody thought she was trying to flatter me — "I've liked your work. You know NOW. You've been there. You're well respected. You could win an election," she said. "That's probably true. It's truer than you know, probably, because I know a whole lot about what could win an election in NOW, I've watched it happen twice, and then been involved in a peripheral role since then," I said.

"But the problem is, Beth, you haven't done your homework on Loretta Ross. Yes, a woman of color could come in and kick Kim Gandy's butt, and I probably could be that person. But you haven't explored whether or not I would want to run against a Kim Gandy. I don't need power that badly that I'm going to do that," I said.

"I'm still loyal to the Ellie machine. Let's be clear. I want you to be clear about that about me. I fight with them all the time, but fighting and being disloyal is not the same thing to me. And I don't necessarily care for the constant loyal opposition position. And you never talked to me, and I've been gone from NOW for 15 years, and this is the first conversation we've ever had. So obviously, I'm an object to you, not a person. Because if you'd done your homework, you wouldn't even have come to me with this kind of crazy" —

FOLLET:

A pawn in the ongoing power struggle.

50:20

ROSS:

Right. "If I ever chose to run for president of NOW, it would be on my timetable, not yours. And it'd be for all the right reasons, not all the wrong ones. And actually, let me tell you a little piece of advice, Beth, if I wanted to run for NOW, the first person I'd ask for help would be

Ellie. (laughs). And so, there's no way I am running against the Ellie machine, and who would want to do that when George Bush just became president (laughs). Talk about the world's worst time to be the president of NOW." So anyway, those are the NOW years.

END TAPE 13

TAPE 14

DECEMBER 2, 2004

Videographer: KATE GEIS

FOLLET: All right. We were winding up on NOW. Why did you leave NOW when you did?

1:18

ROSS: I got a job offer.

FOLLET: Ah ha.

ROSS: I had always been involved in the National Black Women's Health Project. I went to the founding conference.

FOLLET: OK. Stop right there. I want to hear about that conference.

ROSS: OK. Well, in Washington, there was a group of women who worked on health issues. Mary Lisbon, Faye Williams, Ajowa Ifateyo, and Linda Leaks. They had founded the Black Women's Self-Help Collective. I think Ajowa and Linda had worked at the Gainesville or the Tallahassee Feminist Women's Health Center before moving to Washington, and they actually moved to Washington kind of like as a group because they were all down in Tallahassee working together, and Linda was married to this guy [Omali Yeshitela, formerly Joseph Waller], and he was the founder of the African People's Socialist Party, and Linda was his wife. And I met Linda because while they were political comrades, this Joe Omali Waller guy beat her as part of a political argument. That was one of those things that was really disfiguring about the APSP is that the men were given permission to actually physically assault women that disagreed with them. And I think Faye and Linda and Ijowa had been in the APSP. And so, they moved to Washington as a group, which is kind of cool.

They had started the Black Women's Self-Help Collective, which was designed to bring cervical self-exams to the community, and so it was really drop-your-pants-get-a-mirror-and-look-at-your-cervix kind of self-help. They started the Black Women's Self-Help Collective in '81, I believe it was. So they were the ones who got the announcement that there was this conference coming up on black women's health issues and we need to all kind of go there. Because I hadn't heard of Byllye Avery or any of that prior to that.

So we rented a van to get all of us to the conference. Nkenge and I wanted to go because we wanted to use the conference, the Black Women's Health Project conference, as a site to do Nairobi organizing. So we scheduled to do workshops on why black women needed to go to Nairobi.

FOLLET: This is 1983, right?

4:10

ROSS: Right, '83 — part of our ICAW [International Council of African Women] organizing. And so, we went to the conference. It was amazing. I mean, there were at least 1,700 black women there — some reports have said as many as 2,000, but it was huge — on Spelman's campus. I had never seen such a large group of black women together working on women's issues before. I went to the first Black and Female workshop that Lillie Allen did, which taught me their version of Self-Help. We persuaded a large number of people to go to the Nairobi conference from that conference. And so, it was one of those transformative moments.

One of the things that happened at the conference was that the Black Women's Health Project literally was a project of the National Women's Health Network and Byllye Avery, Pam Freeman, Helen Rodriguez-Trias, a couple of other women of color, were on the board of the National Women's Health Network at the time, and so they decided to have this conference on black women's health issues. It was at the conference that women demanded their own organization, which evolved and was formed the following year, in '84, as the National Black Women's Health Project. And so, as soon as they opened up membership, I was ready to join. And so I became a member. They had these fabulous retreats that were called Black and Female that were run by Lillie Allen, teaching people the Self-Help process.

And so, five years into their growth, though, they had grown exponentially. They went from being this conference to becoming an organization, trying to deal with chapter development, all kinds of organizational issues.

FOLLET: Can I keep you at the conference for a minute? Because it seemed — I know, having just read *Undivided Rights*, your book, and everything else I hear, talks about that conference as just turning people's heads around amazingly. What was your first experience with Self-Help like? You were already doing a different kind of therapy. Was this different?

ROSS: Yes, it was. Self-help is very different from formal therapy, though I guess to the outside observer, it doesn't feel differently. They're both touchy-feely stuff. But Lillie Allen, in an effort to deal with her own internalized oppression, had gotten into reevaluation counseling, and modified it and introduced it into the Project.

7:02

Now, the first reason it was introduced, which actually ended up on the cutting floor out of the editing process of the book, she introduced it into the planning of the conference, the Black Women's Health Issues Conference, because of needing to deal with conflict that was happening in the planning of the conference.

The first conflict was what would be the role of white women in this, since this was a project of the National Women's Health Network. When the conference was originally conceived, it was black and white women planning it together. But as the conference-planning process matured and more black women became involved outside of the

network, they began to pressure for it only to be planned by black women. They made the decision to remove white women from the planning process, to have them in a supportive role but not in a decision-making role.

Also, at the same time, real class issues developed amongst the black women, because you had professional black women working in the health field that were drawn to this. At the same time, Byllye was drawn to working with very low-income women, women on welfare. These are women that she had experienced coming through her clinic experiences, that she's the cofounder of, I think, the Gainesville Feminist Women's Health Center, and so she really wanted to focus on the women who were using public health services, which are mainly low-income women. And so, class issues developed. Color issues, colorism, educational issues, all kinds of tensions developed among the black women.

So, Lillie introduced the Self-Help process called Black and Female to the planning committee, and for them to use it as a way of dealing with conflict, self-healing. Then she made it a workshop at the conference. It became a runaway hit. It was only scheduled to be like a one-day, a one-time workshop, and I think she had a room that could've held 50 people; 300 people tried to crowd into the room. So, it ended up repeated every day of the conference, because it was just overwhelmingly good.

FOLLET: Tell me about the time when you were in it and what it was like for you?

ROSS: Well, I probably need to back up and tell you a little bit about the theory of it, and then why –

FOLLET: OK.

ROSS: – give you an idea of why it appealed to me. The theory that underlies “Black and Female,” as I said, it's a reevaluation counseling theory that basically says all human beings are born full of love, joy, and zest — happy-baby kind of thing. And it is the process of growing up that layers on us different oppressions: the oppression of race, the oppression of gender, the oppression of class, all of those kinds of things. And that layering of oppression ends up becoming internalized. It may be externally imposed but it becomes internally maintained. Not that there's still not external controls but it's not what they say about you, it's what you say about yourself as a result of that oppression that matters.

10:29

So, as the theory goes, if every human being is offered a chance to discharge the negative emotions we accumulate based on these layers of oppression, then that will free up our minds, our bodies, our souls, to be our truly creative, zestful, happy selves. And it is the failure to discharge those layers of oppression that keeps people stuck in re-living out that

oppression over and over again. Even as their material conditions change, their responses will not, so, if you've been terribly wounded by racism, then every time a white person says something bad to you, it's going to restimulate that original wound, even though there may not be a connection between the current white person and the original wound.

And so, they use peer-to-peer discharge, peer-to-peer counseling. It can either be done one on one, in a group, where people participate by telling their stories in a facilitated process, things that have happened in their lives that hurt them. And I also think it's not always about the negative, because it's also supposed to be about joyful things as well, but most people focus on the negative.

And through that process, they not only get a chance to discharge some of the pent-up stuff around that oppression, but by either another person of the group providing active, loving listening, quite often, in telling their stories, people figure out answers to their own dilemmas. So that it's not designed to give people advice. Self-Help is not designed for you to fix somebody.

And that, by the way, really differentiates it from therapy. Therapy is designed to give you advice. Therapy is designed to help you fix problems. Therapy is — or you're paying this person to help you fix these things. So, Self-Help is not designed to do that, so that really differentiates it — where you find your own answers.

It can be very ritualistic, meaning that a lot of people have a lot of remembered pain around important rituals: getting married, graduating or failing to graduate, the first time you had your period. How was that? Was it good? Was it traumatic? How was it handled? The first time you had sex? Was it good? Was it traumatic? How did it — So, healing from these remembered hurts is really a loving and wonderful process if one is allowed to do it. And there's a whole lot more to the practice but I'll stop at that.

What Lillie Allen disliked about the way RC [reevaluation counseling] was practiced as she saw it was a number of things. First of all, they did not deal with race and racism very well. The work group she found was mostly white, pretty oblivious to being there and actively listening to a black woman discharge about racism. Frankly, it just ended up restimulating their stuff around racism, so that they couldn't even be there for her, and it was really painful for them to hear a black woman discharge around racism.

But also, and this is as Lillie describes it, not necessarily as I saw Lillie practice it — the whole process of Self-Help was supposed to lead to social justice work, that you get rid of this baggage, this remembered pain, so that you can free up your mind, your body, your soul, your spirit to do more work and service to your community.

FOLLET: So it's not meant to be individualistic?

ROSS: Right. What she saw within RC was what she described as naval gazing. People would get stuck in how bad they felt and felt that the massaging

15:46

and the discharging of that pain was what was political work, and so they did not see the necessity of moving through that so that they could become community activists or better activists. And I'm not sure if that's a fair characterization of RC, because I see a lot of RC people doing political work now, so I'm just reporting what Lillie said about it.

So, you ask how does it relate to me? Well, one thing that I found so enthralling about it was that I'd been doing public work for a number of years by then. I had seen the destructiveness of internalized oppression, particularly when women of color try to get together, because we would get together and then we would brutalize each other from, again, remembered pain. I described that moment in one conference where the Latina women defined black women as the oppressors and had a lot of conflict around that. We had to negotiate that. And so, as a strategy for dealing with internalized oppression, it really appealed to me.

As a process for creating trust and unity among black women, it looked really good, and the fact that through Self-Help, which is really beautiful, people get to know each other in very intimate ways that they don't normally get to. You see Dr. So-and-So and you're a woman on welfare, you're going to make a lot of assumptions, a lot of stereotypes about her. She's going to make a lot of assumptions, a lot of stereotypes about you. But when you're commanded to break down those barriers and talk about what's really going on inside, what's your remembered pain, what you had to go through to end up in either of those situations, you no longer see the caricature, you see the person.

And so, it's a marvelous process. And what I really like about it is that it is perfect cross-culturally, because when I've gone around the world and done trainings on Self-Help, I don't care what culture it is and whether I'm speaking through a translator, women get it. They understand the absolute healing power of getting a chance to tell their stories, what's happened to them.

So, it appealed to me, because I could really see its viability as an organizing strategy, as a way to make better organizers out of all of us.

FOLLET: When you went to the Spelman conference and walked into that workshop, did you know what you were walking into?

ROSS: No. I just –

FOLLET: Can you –

ROSS: I mean, Lillie Allen started talking about her stuff and what she'd gone through and why she was offering this Self-Help process to us, and then she arranged people into groups, broke them down into small groups where we each were to tell our stories.

FOLLET: Do you remember who your partner was?

ROSS:

No, I don't remember that kind of detail. The next thing you know, you got a room full of black women crying their hearts out, because it's inevitable, as you start peeling back the scabs, it hurts, and becoming very emotional. But at the same time, once they dried their tears, it felt like each of us had lost 50 pounds. I mean, it was, like, you have no idea how heavy the baggage is you carry around until you get a chance to discharge some of it. All of a sudden, you felt so much emotionally lighter. Really, a catharsis, a really good, soul-cleansing kind of process.

So, Self-Help became the glue that held the Project together, spurred people's interest. I mean, we always knew about the black women's health issues, you know, obesity and diabetes, the lupus, the sickle-cell disease. I mean, we had a lot of discourse about the medical issues that we were facing.

But those soul issues, nobody was talking about. And I think, mental health was so stigmatized that you're dealing with a community that doesn't take advantage of that unless crisis happens. I mean, thinking of my own narrative, crisis drives me into it, not because I figured out that I needed to heal from a rape trauma. And so it became to me a really good vehicle for getting black women face-to-face to talk to and trust each other.

And so, we immediately came back to Washington from the conference, asking ourselves, OK, we're already in the Black Women's Self-Help Collective. Do we want to stay in the Self-Help Collective or dissolve and form a chapter of the National Black Women's Health Project? And the decision was made to form a chapter, the D.C. chapter of the National Black Women's Health Project, and started our little Self-Help groups there and talking to and meeting with each other.

And so, that's what it meant to me. It was peer-to-peer counseling, I guess that's what you call it — co-counseling is what it's called. Peer-to-peer co-counseling, but it's not like there's an expert who's the counselor and you're the client. Nobody's trained in any kind of particular psychological counseling, but each of us has the ability to provide loving attention to someone when they tell their stories. So that's all you need, the ability to provide loving attention. Active listening, they call it.

And it caught on like wildfire. It caught on like wildfire. And the growth of the Project, as I described, was exponential. It went from being an idea at the '83 conference to be organized as a 501(c)3 in '84. By '89, it had thousands of women clamoring for the Project. When I came to the Project in '89, they had chapters in 22 states, which was just huge for five-year growth. Very few organizations get chapters in 22 states in five years, particularly in the black community. So, that brings me to how I came there.

I had, I think it was '87 when we were approached by *The Phil Donahue Show* to do this story on black feminism. And I was at NOW, because the producer called me at NOW and said, "We've got this idea." Of course, when the media thinks of feminism, they call NOW, right? They called me at NOW and said, "We've got this idea of doing a

show on black feminism.” *Donahue*’s senior producer was a black woman, so she was the motor probably that catalyzed it happening. And so, they called me, this producer, and said “I’ve got this idea about doing a show on black feminism. Who would you suggest as guests?” And so I got a chance to name Paula Giddings, because she had just written *When and Where I Enter*. It came out in ’84.

FOLLET: ’84.

ROSS: Byllye Avery, because of her history of the Black Women’s Health Project. I was on the show. Barbara Smith was on the show. I suggested Barbara as one of the guests. And then they selected this black woman who said she wasn’t a feminist, so they had this one anti-feminist on the show. Even though she was not as antifeminist as they thought she was, but that was the role she was assigned to play. And I’m sure she was a wonderful woman, but I’ve forgotten her name. And so we did *The Donahue Show* in ’87. But that was me getting closer to Byllye in terms of getting to work with her and stuff.

Then NOW did the second march in April of ’89, and so I had to come down here a lot, come to Atlanta a lot, to help them organize. I think they sent 14 buses of women to the ’89 march.

FOLLET: The Black Women’s Health Project did?

ROSS: The National Black Women’s Health Project did. And then we also had a forum at Spelman in ’88. I think it was on black women and reproductive health issues. One of those traveling forums I was talking about. And so that just brought me and Byllye closer together in terms of working together. And so, in the spring of ’89, right after the march, Byllye approached me and asked me if I would come and be her national program director at NBWHP.

25:04

And I actually told Byllye at the time, I said, “Byllye, that’s a mighty fine offer but I actually think I’m the wrong person for you.” I said, “You really should be talking to Nkenge, because she is the organizer of our team. I’m more of a visionary girl like you, and you want somebody who’s a day-to-day organizer, who stays in daily contact with people and remembers people’s names. Those kinds of things that are really important. You need to talk to Nkenge.” And for some reason, Byllye said, “No, Loretta, I want you. I want you.”

And so, I liked the idea because I’d been at NOW five years by then. I liked the idea of moving from working in a white feminist organization to working in a black feminist organization. That sounded mighty attractive. I wasn’t quite ready to leave D.C., though. Leaving D.C. I loved D.C. and I still am passionately in love with that city. I had moved there when I was 16 and at this time, I was 36. And so, I actually thought I’d come to Atlanta, stay a couple of years, and then move back to Washington. And so, I handed in my resignation at NOW and in July

of '89, relocated to Atlanta, to be Director of Programs of the National Black Women's Health Project.

At the time, Byllye was trying to put into place a leadership structure that would allow her to eventually transition out. I had been in Atlanta two weeks when Byllye got the MacArthur genius award. Then she was featured in *Essence* magazine. She got the *Essence* award. I mean, our phones just exploded, people calling and wanting to join the Project. We had no chapter structure in place, no guidelines. People were calling themselves chapters of the Project. They were using our name but they were definitely doing their own thing. Some groups practiced Self-Help, some didn't. There was just no uniformity at all.

FOLLET: So Byllye's sudden popularity sparked all this?

ROSS: No, this was before the *Essence* award. I mean, that's why Byllye thought that she needed a program director.

FOLLET: Oh, oh, I see. OK.

ROSS: Because the five years of growth had been explosive but unregulated, unorganized.

FOLLET: I see, yeah.

ROSS: And then, it just got a lot worse when she got the MacArthur Award, because you get people from — "I'm from Arkansas and I want a Black Women's Health Project chapter. What do I have to do?" "Well, we don't have chapter guidelines yet. We don't even have documentation of our Self-Help process. (laughs) We can show you but we can't send you anything." I mean, we didn't have basic stuff.

And so my job began to put that kind of infrastructural stuff into place, chapter guidelines. She gave me the freedom to hire regional directors so I could ride around the country and define regions and assign a different staff person to handle the regions and chapters in that region to help form another chapters and stuff like that.

Well, I worked on guidelines. The first thing I produced for the Project was a training manual on the Self-Help process. By that time, the battle between Byllye and Lillie was serious, and I described that in the book, probably to a fault. And even the process of writing the training manual, the Self-Help training manual, was so contested because Lillie, probably rightly, read that if we documented the process and published it and made it available to the larger set of people, then her vital role would be diminished. And Byllye had always been the person whose job it was to get the infrastructure of the Project together, where Lillie's role had been to keep the Project rolling and growing through Self-Help. And so, what started out as a very great partnership eventually became very competitive with each other. And in the book, I

describe it as a lot more smooth, as it being more ideological, but it was really personal to them.

FOLLET: And you were there to witness this?

ROSS: Oh, yeah, oh yeah. I mean, I'd seen it over five years.

FOLLET: I see.

ROSS: There was a huge blowup at one of the retreats that I happened to miss, thank goodness, where — I think it was about '87, '88 — where Lillie accused Byllye of wanting to oust her and she did it in the Self-Help mode in front of the whole audience and stuff, and it became very ugly. Fortunately, I still don't know why I didn't go to that retreat but I'm so glad I didn't, because it brutalized all the people there. If you want to talk about trauma, everybody that was there sees that retreat as the most traumatic.

30:33

FOLLET: Because they were forced to take sides?

ROSS: Yeah, yeah, exactly. You've got Lillie bringing the Self-Help process, which feels like the most wonderful thing you ever experienced in your life, but you know, Byllye has been the one that's created the space for the process to even be there, so —

FOLLET: And so, the tension is, if it's a wonderful process and the space exists for it —

ROSS: Who's in charge? Who's in charge? Is it the woman who's the mother of the Self-Help process, or is it the woman who's the mother of the organization that creates the space for the Self-Help process?

FOLLET: It's as raw as that.

ROSS: Yeah. And, I'm glad I had to interview Lillie for the book [*Undivided Rights*], because I actually didn't know Lillie as well as I knew Byllye. Byllye was the visible person. She's the one that I worked with on coalition work, had done organizing. Lillie was the facilitator of Self-Help. So I knew her but I didn't work with her on a regular or routine basis like I worked with Byllye. And so, I had a chance to interview Lillie Allen for the book, and I don't know if it's time that lends a new perspective or what, but Lillie identifies the key breakdown in her relationship with Byllye as being when Byllye opted out of doing Self-Help as a way of holding herself accountable. And so, here is Self-Help, which is so heavily identified with the Black Women's Health Project, but the leader of the Black Women's Health Project refusing to do Self-Help.

FOLLET: And everyone else does do it as a routine part of the organization?

ROSS: Well, there were people who did and people who didn't and that kind of defined the split. The people who didn't described it as a cult. Lillie did build a cult of personality, so there was a lot of truth in that criticism. But disguised in that critique is the fact that Self-Help offers something new, fresh, and valuable, that it was not right, or even viable for these people to walk away from. And so, it's like, We're-about-black-women's-health-issues, We're-about-that-touchy-feely-stuff, kind of split. And it actually played out along class lines, too.

FOLLET: I wondered.

ROSS: Because the more professional, health-oriented women, they didn't want to talk about their remembered pain. They wanted to talk about how to get more black women to get pap smears. Lillie wanted to talk about why black women who knew they needed pap smears weren't getting them. So if they had made it work, it would've been wonderful. And different approaches, but they should've, if the team had stayed together.

33:55

I mean, but they got so competitive at one point, Byllye had a daughter in dance, so Lillie's daughter had to go through dance. Byllye had a white lover, so Lillie had to go get a white lover. I mean, it was just insane how they were literally competing with each other. I think they realized how it was destroying the organization, they just couldn't stop the cycle.

So I had been at the Project for about four months when Byllye tells me, "Loretta, I'm going to have to fire Lillie." Now, Lillie had been on the board of directors, then she had briefly been on staff, and then finally she said that she wanted to be a consultant, the consultant who offered Black and Female retreats. Lillie, seeing the writing on the wall, went and copyrighted the phrase Black and Female. Byllye used that as the reason Lillie needed to go, because how in the world can a black women's organization not use the words "black" and "female" in the same sentence, because you copyrighted that phrase without telling anybody. And Byllye felt that the whole Black and Female process was owned by the Project. Lillie felt it was owned by her. She's the one who brought it to the process. And Byllye was like, Yeah, but you would not enjoy what you enjoy if it hadn't been for the National Black Women's

—
It was really splitting the organization down the middle, because the people who practiced Self-Help really were more leaning towards the Lillie camp and the people who did not practice it were leaning towards the Byllye camp. Now, we were in the middle, because we practiced Self-Help but I was loyal to Byllye, because loyalty is big for me. As Lillie felt more and more embattled, then her inner actions with people became more and more cultish, so much so that there were actually

fights in the office, actual physical fights in the office between the Byllye [and] Lillie [supporters] –

FOLLET: Physical fights.

ROSS: Uh-hm. Like I said, Lillie had in her group people who were quite street smart. If you have a political disagreement with someone, they'll hit you. This isn't let's-process-this kind of stuff. I saw people pulling a gun one time.

FOLLET: You saw someone pull a gun?

ROSS: Uh-hm.

FOLLET: In the office?

ROSS: Yes. She put it on her desk just to let people know not to fuck with her. She didn't point it at anybody.

FOLLET: Didn't have to.

ROSS: Didn't have to. The fact that it was there on her desk in the office sent out a strong-enough signal.

FOLLET: Do you remember what precipitated that?

ROSS: Yep. I was her supervisor at the time. I probably precipitated that. Oh, yeah, I remember exactly what precipitated that.

FOLLET: What did you do that ticked her off?

ROSS: One of the things that needed fixing about the Project was Byllye's inability to say no to anybody. And so we had a large number of people on staff who were unproductive. This person had only gotten her job because she was the sister of somebody who was productive, and Byllye knew their mother, and so she gave this girl a job, but this girl was not ready to do any work. And when she came under my management, I said, "You need to go." I could see it coming, so [I said], "Why don't you self-exit before we have to get ugly?" And so, she put a gun to me on her desk, just as a little message.

37:58

And I go to Byllye. I said, "Byllye, what am I supposed to do with this?" Because I'm not a manager under these conditions, and I honestly see my own class blindness. I mean, I'm not from the streets, you know. We grew up poor but not public-housing poor. It's a whole different thing. I guess my life felt very middle class compared to what I was experiencing. I mean, I didn't realize how rare two-parent homes were. I said, "What am I supposed to do?" She said, "Aw, honey, why don't you just take her outside and have a drink with her. She'll be all right."

That's your management advice? "Take her outside and have a drink with her, Loretta. She'll be OK."

FOLLET: Do we take the gun?

ROSS: Well, she still needs to be fired. She needs to be fired. And so, it became ugly — yeah, really, really ugly, with the staff working against each other, in many important ways, people willing to sabotage each other. It just was really ugly. Meanwhile, while all of this was going on, I decided that the Black Women's Health Project needed to have a conference on reproductive rights. While we were nominally, or officially, a pro-choice organization, not everybody in the membership was there. In fact, probably a good sizable portion of the membership was not there, because we hadn't really come together to talk about those issues. So, what did we call that conference? "Sisters in Session" or something.

FOLLET: Yes.

ROSS: We had that in 1990, about a year after I'd come. And what was special about that was that the Project was able to bring together the leaders of all the prominent black women's organizations to participate in the conference. As a matter of fact, we had a pre-conference meeting of the leaders, a summit, to talk about what we were going to do.

FOLLET: So this is only African American women, right? So the '87 conference with NOW was —

ROSS: All women of color. I saw you have the "We Remember" brochure.

FOLLET: Right.

ROSS: I forgot about that.

FOLLET: Yeah, because that precedes this. How did that come about?

ROSS: The *Webster* decision. The *Webster* decision was a Supreme Court decision which basically authorized states to set their own standards for how women access abortion services. So some states have counseling, you know, pre-abortion counseling, waiting periods, some have parental notification periods, some said, We aren't going to offer any services in our state. Instead of having *Roe v. Wade* being the overriding law, *Webster* allowed a patchwork of state laws to govern abortion.

And that catalyzed a response in people, but particularly among black women. I think because of the march, because of the '87 conference — I think this *LA Times* reporter described the *Webster* decision as "awaking a sleeping giant." And that's what it did. And so, here goes the ubiquitous Donna Brazile again. Donna called me one

41:32

day. We're basically putting out fires around *Webster* and fighting state laws and stuff like that. And Donna called me one day and she said, "Loretta, black women need to take a stand on this. We need to say something as black women on what happened with *Webster*." And I said, "That's a great idea. What do you think?" and she said, "Why don't we have a conference call of black women leaders and see what they have to say?" And so we did. I contacted my network, she contacted her network. We put them together on a national conference call.

It was Byllye, in a typical Avery-esque style, that said, "We need to break the conspiracy of silence. We need to give black women permission to talk about abortion for this to happen." And so, from there, the idea sprung that we needed to do this public statement on why black women support abortion. The suggestion was made that we ask Marcia Gillespie, who I think was editor of *Ms.* at the time, to write this statement and then it would be signed on by all the women who were on the conference call. I actually made a bad strategic mistake in that moment, because by that time, I knew I was leaving NOW and joining the National Black Women's Health Project staff. I never signed my name on the original brochure.

FOLLET: I noticed that. It's not here.

ROSS: Because, you know, I was getting ready to go to work for Byllye. Byllye was representing the National Black Women's Health Project, not Loretta Ross. I should've put myself, Loretta Ross, like everybody else did, but I didn't. I learned an important lesson about protecting your own visibility, which I haven't quite gotten through yet, but that was the first one. So, then the question became, once we got the statement done, how were we going to produce it, pay for it, because we didn't have organizational money in our budgets, so we approached Faye Wattleton. And if you notice, Faye Wattleton's name is not on there. We approached Kate Michaelman at NARAL, and I approached the people at NOW. And they underwrote the brochure with the caveat that none of their names could appear on it.

FOLLET: Faye's is on here.

ROSS: Faye's is on there. OK. That's because Faye's a black woman.

FOLLET: Right.

ROSS: Right. I forget — Faye's on there, but the point was that we were not wanting this to appear to come from a white women's organization. We wanted it to appear to be the agency of black women.

FOLLET: Now did Marcia draft the text?

ROSS: Yeah, she wrote the entire text.

FOLLET: There's a note, I think, that you wrote. I think you were writing it to Marlene [Fried]. I've seen in another place where you refer to it, sounds like really a debate or at least a discussion about the message here, and you were unhappy.

ROSS: Oh yeah, I was very unhappy with that language. But for the sake of unity, I was not –

FOLLET: You said you were outvoted in the debate or something like that, so what was the debate?

ROSS: The basic framing that Marcia used said that because we were slaves and we did not have control over our bodies as slaves, the black woman should never compromise control of her body again. She should always have reproductive autonomy and control. My exception to that framing is that even if we'd never been slaves, we still had the right to control our bodies. I mean, framing it as a because-we-were-slaves thing didn't work for me. As I said, "Well, you would have had to have been enslaved to understand reproductive autonomy?" And so, it wasn't feminist enough for me.

46:25

It wasn't about women's control because of women's rights to control. It's about, Our people were controlled, so our women can't be controlled again, kind of framing. And so, it was not as feminist as I would have liked, but I also understood that my explicit feminist framing would not have worked to pull all those signatories in. So that was the critique I offered. And when I tried to discuss it within the group, they were having none of it. I mean, and they were right. Again, I always learn from more pragmatic sisters that it had to be framed in that way in order to have the massive impact that it had.

By the time we finished with that campaign, getting those brochures out and stuff — I mean, a quarter million of them were printed. And we started out with a print run of five thousand or something, thinking nobody would care. Faye in September of that year got the Congressional Black Caucus Medal of Freedom, which had never been given to a woman before. I mean, it became a huge campaign, and the fact that you have one of the originals in your hands is amazing. I haven't seen one of these originals for a long, long, long, long time. Yeah, Willie Barrow, Cardiss Collins, Ramona Edelin, Marcia Ann Gillespie, Julianne Malveaux. A lot of these women were Donna's friends. And this beautiful artwork. I had forgotten who Donna got to do the artwork on it. [Original pamphlet is in Jennifer Guglielmo Papers, Sophia Smith Collection — ed.]

FOLLET: Who else shared your position that it should have been a more feminist argument, do you remember?

ROSS: Byllye did. I think that Donna did. Probably Faye. But it wasn't a strongly enough held position to make it a reason to divide. There are reasons to split and divide and argue. We were developing our first real show of unity as a black women's movement across this country so that, in my mind, wasn't a strong enough point to argue. Because I raised it on a couple of calls and let it go and then a couple people would speak in support of it and a couple would speak against it and we'd go on and talk about distribution, what we were going to do. But what we did commit to doing, even in the '89 process, was to continue to collaborate together as black women. So that's what led all of those women coming into the Black Women's Health Project conference in 1990, a year later, on reproductive rights.

And then that's — either the same year or a year later, the National Coalition of 100 Black Women had their conference on reproductive rights, which, by the way, the Anita Hill scandal had also happened by that time. And so, Anita Hill was the keynote speaker at the Coalition of 100 Black Women conference. Anita Hill—Clarence Thomas, for those who don't know, and that was kind of interesting, because Anita Hill could have been Condoleeza Rice. I mean, she was a black Republican conservative who became a feminist by the attacks that were launched against her. She had no intention of being lionized by the women's movement. She was responding to attacks.

FOLLET: You watched that happen?

ROSS: Oh, yeah. I was really, really pissed about that. I don't remember the year precisely, but —

FOLLET: Of the accusations?

ROSS: Yeah.

FOLLET: '91. I'm pretty sure it was '91.

ROSS: Yeah. I think it was Bush that nominated Thomas to the Supreme Court?

FOLLET: Yes, it would've been.

ROSS: And so, interestingly enough, I had left the Project and was doing work at the Center for Democratic Renewal, which will be on the next tape, anyway.

FOLLET: Tune in tomorrow.

ROSS: Right. Tune in tomorrow. What pissed me off about that, not only that they would dare to replace a Thurgood Marshall with a Clarence Thomas, who couldn't have held Thurgood Marshall's funky tennis

shoes, but in a very opportunistic, trivializing kind of way. But the fact that when the Committee of the Judiciary, headed by Senator Joe Biden, wanted to block the nomination and tell people why Clarence Thomas was not qualified for the job, a lot of us black groups who had been in the Block [Robert] Bork campaign, reorganized to be the Block Thomas campaign.

And so, one of the things that we revealed in our research on Clarence Thomas was that he had been a registered lobbyist for the government of South Africa, trying to defeat sanctions legislation. I don't know if you recall that whole question on the Reagan administration not wanting to put sanctions on South Africa and how we, in the end, had to fight that, fight our government over the levying of sanctions against South Africa. Well, Clarence Thomas had accepted a contract to be a lobbyist for the apartheid government of South Africa, to oppose sanctions. We provided that to the Judiciary Committee.

Frankly, we thought that would've been the information to derail the nomination, because what the Bush administration had done was split the black community over support for Thomas. To the liberals, he's too conservative. He's certainly no Thurgood Marshall. Other blacks who were more conservative said, "We have a black man on the bench, let's go for it." And so, Biden on the Judiciary Committee had a choice. He had the sexual improprieties with Anita Hill or the apartheid information to use. He used what we call the smart-ass-white-boy strategy. He tried to use a Ted Kennedy allegation against a black man and it didn't work. And that's what Andy Young actually said in the newspaper. You know, you can't tell these smart-ass white boys anything. Which was absolutely true.

If he wanted to stop that nomination, and I believe he did, but if he had the ability to listen to anybody but other white men, he would have understood that just announcing to the world that this man was an agent of the government of South Africa would have killed both his white and his black support. South Africa was a pariah country. How can a black man be a registered lobbyist for the apartheid government, and be nominated to our Supreme Court? It would have killed it. They chose not to use that information and they tried to derail him on the sex scandal stuff and we see that that got nowhere. And so, I was pissed. Smart-ass white-boy Democrats who can't listen to their own base is the tragedy of our democracy. It ain't what the Republicans do. It's the fact that the Democrats are just as racist and don't admit it.

Back to the Black Women's Health Project. We should at least close with that.

FOLLET: Uh-hm.

GEIS: We've got five minutes on this tape.

FOLLET: OK. Good.

ROSS: We did successfully fire Lillie. Fire is probably the wrong word. We just ended her consulting contract. That immediately caused uproar in the Project. There were all kinds of fights and infighting and all of this stuff. Byllye had decided in the summer of '90 that she was leaving the Project, that she was going to move on, and she hired this woman named Julia Scott to become the next executive director. Now I knew Julia from when she worked at the *Ms.* Foundation, and actually, she had invited me and Nkenge to a retreat up in the mountains of Tennessee somewhere to do some reproductive rights training, which was back in the '80s, the early '80s, even before the Project got started — way back, like '81, '82. And so, we felt pretty good about Julia coming in, because she's a registered nurse, feminist politics and all of that.

The first thing Julia does is brings in kind of like a corporate — I didn't realize how corporate Julia had become, because she was like, "OK, you've got all these people employed, you've got all this stuff. You need to cut the budget." Now, we never could quite understand why we were always having a financial crisis. On my watch at the Project, the Project received close to four million dollars' worth of grants from the Kellogg Foundation, MacArthur money, Ford money. I mean, we were getting pots of money so large, no black women's group had ever gotten before, and we couldn't figure out where it was going. I'm not accusing anybody of theft, mostly mismanagement.

And part of the mismanagement to it, and Julia was justified in trimming, is that we had all these consultants on the payroll, so to speak. I mean, board members who were consultants. I mean, it was really messed up how much money was going out to people who should be doing things for free, getting paid, and the conflicts of interest that was producing. And a lot of it was born out of Lillie's loyalty. We can't be an institution exploiting the free labor of black women, so even if they're on the board, we need to pay them. And so, we were bleeding money, but getting huge pots of money in.

And so Julia came in and said, "Oh, no, we're in deficit spending. We need to lay off staff and we need to do all this stuff." And I actually got personally fired by Byllye, so I think I could describe it as reduction in force but actually it was a breakdown in me and Byllye's relationship that caused me to get fired. And if you want, I can tell you a sad and sorry story. In fact, I should end on that.

FOLLET: Yeah, why don't you?

GEIS: We'll need another tape to do that.

END TAPE 14

TAPE 15

ROSS: One of the things that the Project got the MacArthur grant for was to launch its international program. We had already been to Nigeria, Belize, South Africa — just from people requesting that we come and share the Self-Help process with them and the rest of this phenomenal black women's organization. And so we advertised for the job. It was supposed to be under my management. We advertised for the job, and got a pool of candidates. And amongst the pool of candidates was Byllye's secretary, Diane Forte. And Byllye told me that she had decided that it was going to be Diane but she wasn't ready to make that information public yet. So, "On penalty of getting fired, keep that to yourself, Loretta." And at the time, I didn't think it was a big deal. "Fine, Byllye, you made the decision." Diane's from Guyana. I actually questioned her qualifications for it, but —

FOLLET: It wasn't your call.

ROSS: It wasn't my call. I mean, even though I was supposed to, I wasn't making a call about that. And so that's the way it went. Three months went by, and no public announcement about who's getting the position takes place. Meanwhile, I had also restarted the Project's newspaper, called *Vital Signs*, which had started publication and ceased publication and I took it from, like, an 8-1/2 x 11 to a newspaper format to get published, and I'd hired this woman named Valerie Boyd to be the editor of the newspaper. And Valerie came out of the communications/media field, was a Project member, and did a great job doing *Vital Signs* until Lisa Diane White took it over. But I also hired Lisa at the Project. So, anyway, a lot of people we hired. We brought in Barbara Love and Patsy White to teach people Self-Help, I mean, so we did a lot of changing of the guard.

Valerie Boyd had applied for the international job, and called me one night and said, "Loretta, I've been on hold waiting on this job close to five months now" — from the time we announced it to when Byllye made the decision and then another three months — "so it's five months, and I have a chance to work at the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, but I don't know whether to take that job or wait, because I'd really rather do the Project job." And who wouldn't want to run the international department and go around the world at somebody else's expense? I mean, obviously, much more attractive to work in a black woman's organization versus a racist institution like the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*. And she said, "But I don't know what to do." And I said, "Valerie, you know, you should just go and take the *AJC* job." She said, "Why?" And I said, "Because decisions were made on that job and you're not it, and I don't think it's fair for you to turn down a really good job at the *AJC*."

What does Valerie do, but go back and tell Byllye, challenge Byllye. "Why have you kept me on hold for five months? You could have told

me a long time ago if you had no intention of giving me this job.” Blah, blah, blah. Byllye comes back to me and says, “Loretta, you broke confidence. You’re fired. I asked you not to tell anybody.” And she was right. She had asked me not to, and she had laid it out very clearly. And you know, we learn stuff through it, because at the time, I was so hurt, because here I’d been Byllye’s loyal lieutenant, just whatever she said, whatever she did, kind of stuff, even against my own instincts.

And Byllye does operate in a real conspiracy kind of way. She tells certain people some things and certain people other things and you’re not supposed to talk to each other and stuff, and I am much more transparent. I’m not even good at keeping secrets. And I said that to Byllye, too. That’s why she felt she had to say that. When Byllye hired me, I said, “Byllye, I am not good at keeping secrets. If you need somebody that needs to manage things in a way where secrets are important, I am not the person.”

So that’s why she felt she had to tell me, “Don’t say this, Loretta,” and she very clearly said that. But I was hurt, because I felt that she had fired me for telling the truth. I said, “You’re firing me for telling the truth. I didn’t lie. I didn’t say anything that wasn’t true.” She said, “Yeah, but you weren’t loyal. Sometimes being loyal requires you not to tell the truth.” I didn’t understand that lesson till years and years and years later, when I’m having to deal with another employee who doesn’t have any loyalty and I’ll have to fire her.

So, I actually called Byllye recently to apologize to her. Now, how do you apologize to the woman who fired you, for not getting that lesson till 15 years later?

FOLLET: Why did you call her recently about it?

ROSS: Oh, we were talking about something else. She was inviting me to speak at her conference in April and I had to call her back about it.

FOLLET: And so, you apologized for breaking confidence?

ROSS: It took me that long to figure out. As a manager, you need loyalty, too. You need confidence, you need all these other things. And I didn’t feel I was being disloyal to Byllye. Actually, it never occurred to me, but I was, when she had very specifically asked me to keep it a secret. I mean, she didn’t just imply it. She said it very forthrightly.

6:53

FOLLET: What did she say when you apologized recently?

ROSS: She just laughed. “Yeah, I knew you’d get it eventually. You’re pretty smart.” (laughs) I end up apologizing to a lot of people in my life. But I was bitter at the time. I was mad. I felt like — talking about exposé, I wanted to do an exposé on the whole thing, the Byllye-Lillie fight, the way things were — and it really destroyed the Project in my mind, because —

FOLLET: What did?

ROSS: Well, just the whole fighting between Byllye and Lillie and they held on for another six years in Atlanta. And then Julia Scott decided that she wanted to open up a public policy office in Washington, D.C., so that ended up being the tail wagging the dog, and the original office got shut down because it wasn't getting funding while all the money was going to the public [policy office] — and I could see it all happening.

FOLLET: Yep.

ROSS: And you know, it got further and further away from the Self-Help thing once Lillie was gone and so that it became commodified and now, nobody ever practices it, nobody even practically knows what we're talking about now.

FOLLET: Really?

ROSS: They renamed themselves the Black Women's Health Imperative. But you could see what was going to happen. And so, that's how my term at the Project ended, but at the same time, Julia laid off the entire program department, so my firing was couched as a reduction in force. But all those regional program developers and all that I had hired, we all got laid off at the same time, and the whole chapter structure collapsed. Everything that we tried to put in place didn't happen.

FOLLET: And they moved to D.C.?

ROSS: Uh-hum. So now, the Project has a new name and about five existing chapters out of the 22 we had developed, or had been developed. So it's a shadow of its former self. The other sad thing about the Project is the way it tries to forget its own history, so that there is a reason why you can't find records, there is a reason why what records are found people are clinging to. It's all caught up in dysfunctionality.

FOLLET: Yeah, yeah, it is. I mean, there's such a slim, slim amount of material.

ROSS: The funniest thing that happened in my recent days was that Lorraine Cole, who's the current executive director of the Project, and I were at this meeting in Chicago last week, and Lorraine came up to me and said, "Loretta, you got a copy of your book?" I said, "No, I don't have one with me." I said, "But I'm going to a book signing tonight and I can get you one." "Please do, because I need to read the history of the Project." And so the woman who's the executive director of the organization didn't know the history we'd written, and had to buy it, right? (laughs)

FOLLET: That's good she's interested.

ROSS: I think it's more of a protective thing, because actually I think Lorraine Cole is one of the worst leaders the Project has ever had.

FOLLET: Why?

ROSS: Well, first of all, she's come on, even though the decision to hire her — put it this way, this is the way I hear it from Byllye. Once Byllye left the Project, and then Julia managed it, Julia reorganized the board of directors, which is probably necessary because Byllye had board of directors people who had their hands in the till, so that probably was necessary. So that board chose Lorraine Cole as Julia's successor. Lorraine feels totally intimidated by Byllye Avery, the same way that Gloria Feldt feels intimidated by Faye Wattleton's very large shadow. So it was Lorraine who renamed the Project, totally divorcing it from its history, act like Byllye never existed. Because of her own insecurities she obliterated Byllye from the history of the Project. Byllye has no engagement at all with the Black Women's Health Project anymore. She's just been ousted with the support of the board of directors and Lorraine.

The reason that I'm finding out more about this, and I'll quit in a minute, is that tomorrow night I'm going to Boston and one of the groups that has invited me is the Boston Black Women's Health Project, or Black Women's Health Initiative, which is one of the remaining chapters. And one of the women there has told me that the national office, the board of directors, has not met in almost two years, because Lorraine has totally disempowered them. They don't need accountability now from them, that there's no support for chapters. The chapters do their best to stay as far away from the national office as they can. This chapter in Boston is still practicing Self-Help because it's one of the original chapters that started when Self-Help was the thing.

And just things are really, really bad, and the Project had been through three entire staff layoffs. Julia came and then Byllye cleaned out. Then they hired a new woman named Cynthia Newbille who was the last director in Atlanta. When they shut down the Atlanta office, they cleaned house. Then when Lorraine came, she fired the entire staff again and started all over. So, an organization that fires its entire staff and keeps starting all over does not have what you'd call good history.

FOLLET: So is this Boston group thinking of becoming an affiliate of SisterSong?

ROSS: They want to become an affiliate of SisterSong.

FOLLET: Well, there you go. So, we can stay tuned for that, for the sequel.

ROSS: So, tomorrow we start with the Center for Democratic Renewal.

FOLLET: Yes, we do. Yes, we do. OK.

13:49

(pause; resumes recording the following day, December 2, 2004)

FOLLET:

OK. So, here we are on December 2nd. Thank you. And I wanted to flash back to a couple of things from yesterday. One of the things that occurred to me is that a little followup about Byllye Avery, because we had closed up yesterday and we weren't on tape yesterday afterwards, when you said the reason that Byllye stopped participating in Self-Help was because someone had used some of the experiences that she revealed inappropriately, or had broken her confidence or something, right?

15:30

ROSS:

Right, exactly. Well, Self-Help is a very revealing, self-disclosing process where you talk about stuff that you normally wouldn't share in public. And we have rules of confidentiality, because you're not only supposed to not share what you heard in Self-Help with a third party, but you're also not even supposed to re-raise it with the person who said it, because that person may not want to be involuntarily jerked back to that moment that they were disclosing on. And so we have fairly elaborate, fairly rigid rules around confidentiality. And the impression I got, which is why Byllye became kind of skittish around Self-Help, is that stuff she had revealed in a Self-Help mode got later used in the power struggle between her and Lillie Allen.

So with that experience, I'm not surprised that she became rather skittish around, not only the concept of Self-Help but certainly Self-Help with people that she then had to manage, with people she'd had to be in a hierarchical relationship with. I imagine that would be a little discombobulating. And once I understood that that had happened, then I began to appreciate why she felt, at least to me, so distant from that which felt like the soul of the Project, the Self-Help process. But we can all be scarred that way, I think, if somebody inappropriately used a self-disclosure in a political move against you.

FOLLET:

Yeah. I thought in fairness to her, we should put that on the tape, because otherwise, it was left just hanging there. Another thing, if we could just do a little summary on your experience at NOW, at the National Organization for Women. Just a couple of, you know, brief summary statements. What do you feel you accomplished in terms of the relationship of women of color to the mainstream women's movement by your years at NOW?

ROSS:

Well, I'm never, ever sure whether or not I had any impact on NOW. As a matter of fact, in some ways, I think they've taken gigantic leaps backwards. For a couple of years, they've maintained the Women of Color Program. Now it's called the Diversity Program, which is certainly a much more lukewarm, less radical statement of what they're trying to do. I mean, the Committee to Combat Racism is now called Committee for Diversity. That's the Board version of it. It's just not as

18:37

aggressive as I would like to see it done. So obviously, whatever impact I thought — it didn't stick, but that's OK.

At the same time, without, I think, the teamwork between myself and NOW, we wouldn't have this burgeoning women of color reproductive rights movement, because those relationships we formed in the '80s, particularly through the forums and the national conference in '87, those are the relationships of the good-old-girls network among women of color. And if it hadn't been for the use of NOW's resources to pull us all together, we wouldn't be able to say we're at the same point. How many years would it have taken for us to get to the point of having these relationships with each other? We can't say. And so, in a very important way, NOW was very important, despite itself, in terms of building this movement of women of color.

Also, the external pressure we as women of color received in having to respond to their marches also has a catalyzing effect on women of color organizing. So even though we groan and complain when they announce that they're doing this big event and we debate amongst ourselves whether or not we're going to participate, the fact that they have forced the discussion is very significant politically and historically. And so, again, it was probably not their intention at the time they announced this march to create all of this discussion among women of color, but that's what happens.

And so, there's a real symbiotic relationship between what the big mainstream organizations do and what happens in the communities of color that are working on reproductive health and rights, and probably neither side really appreciates it as much as it could be. But, summing up now, and I mean, personally for me, there are some good lessons I learned at NOW. Everything that hurts ain't racism. That's the number one thing for me.

FOLLET: Everything that hurts —

ROSS: Ain't racism. When you're in a situation of power politics and you're a woman of color, you have to learn to distinguish the brutality of power politics from racism. Sometimes it's racism. Most oftentimes, it's not. So, just because it's visited on you and you're a woman of color doesn't necessarily make it racism. Doesn't make it less painful, but it doesn't necessarily make it racist. So that's one big lesson.

Also, the relationship of building movement and the media is a good lesson that I learned. Meaning that, again, it was a privilege to work at NOW because they were the institution that was the definitive authority on women's issues in America. They still are. As I said, whenever anything happens in America, the media wants NOW's opinion on it. It's amazing how that has been created for them over the years and I appreciate that forum. At the same time, the media has a stethoscope that is willing to be used to pry open and investigate and all of that.

And so, you have to be extremely careful when you invite media attention. You have to have your act together. You have to be bullet-

proof, in other words. You can't have any secrets that you're afraid to get exposed, because if the media hears about these secrets and knows about this secret, there are some investigative journalists out there who want to make a career on your secret. So, being really clear about being careful about what you ask for in terms of media attention and media exposure. I tend to actually keep a very low profile now because I've learned that lesson. I'm not necessarily the one wanting to be in front of the camera, because I don't like the idea of the media climbing into my secrets that much. I'm a little more private than that.

FOLLET: Did you learn that the hard way?

ROSS: Oh, I learned that the hard way, yes, I did learn that the hard way. When your every fart is in the *Washington Post* for a while, you learn that's just not quite where you want to be. (laughs) So, yes, I learned that the hard way. That's one thing that I'd definitely take away from my time at NOW, and I learned that I didn't want to run for public office being at NOW, because the whole grooming of women to get them to run for local races or state races or national races, and the sacrifices those women have to make in order to make those choices to run for public office — I learned that I'm not willing to make those sacrifices in terms of privacy and freedom of choices and things. I shudder to think if someone ever got a public list of my video rentals. I mean, I don't want that out there in the universe or be in a position to invite somebody to say that's fair game, you're a public figure, we can go after that kind of thing, or my son's high school records. I don't want none of that in the public discourse.

So, I appreciate women who run for public office. I tend to appreciate more of the sacrifices that they have to make to make the decision to run for public office. They're certainly fighting in a man's world and if they choose to fight like men, I don't pass judgment on them, because that's the hand they've been dealt. And so I learned, I guess, to be a little less judgmental about people who seek elected office. At one time I thought, When they get there, they'll sell out. How come they're no longer radical? Why can't we trust them? Why are we begging them to do their jobs? I mean, I was the world's worst lobbyist because I used to think, Why should I be begging a politician to do what they were elected to do? I mean, that was my attitude, and now I appreciate that more.

But being in the fishbowl of Washington politics, it was wonderful, but it also enlightened me enough to know that that's not where I want to live my life. I'd rather be the queen-maker than the queen, in many ways.

FOLLET: OK. Another of these questions left from yesterday. At one point, you said you pinpointed a certain moment when you started calling yourself a feminist.

ROSS: Oh, I know exactly when.

FOLLET: You know exactly when. When was it?

ROSS: I was on the staff of NOW. We were mobilizing for the first march, the April '86 march, and it was in January or February of 1986, where I finally sent in my 35 dollars and became a member of NOW. And in that moment, I said I was going to start using the feminist word.

26:26

And I rejected the word “womanist” because that really didn’t speak to me. I felt that a womanist — this is my own interpretation, because Alice Walker created the term and a lot of black women were using the term instead of feminism at the time, and so there was this internal debate on which one for me. I rejected the term womanist because I felt it was a copout. It’s like a feminist who doesn’t want to admit so, and it didn’t work for me.

Now, since then and since I’ve now taken women’s studies courses, I’ve deepened my understanding of womanism as a distinct form of feminism and I probably wouldn’t make that kind of cavalier assessment of it now that I did then. But at the time, it was either feminist or not. I didn’t want to be a half-way feminist. I didn’t want to be a compromised feminist. So, using the “F” word for myself felt like a rite of passage, felt like a coming out, because then I had to use that “F” word in all the settings where I was — with my family, with my black nationalist friends, with my feminist friends, with my anti-apartheid friends — wherever I was, now I had to formally use that word. And so it felt very much like a coming out kind of a thing.

FOLLET: And what did it mean to you at that moment to be willing to say that? Did you reframe yourself? Did you reframe your political agenda? What were the implications of that?

ROSS: That although I had actually been a part of the women’s movement, or the feminist movement for many, many years, now I was taking ownership of its good and its bad, its positives and its negatives, its stigmas and its successes. Whereas before, I felt like by not using the word, I could always “other” the movement. We did the great work but that was those white women. When I embraced the “F” word, then I had to, you know, also embrace the dirty tennis shoes. (pause)

FOLLET: OK, we’re back. One more. You mentioned yesterday the — why are you smiling?

ROSS: Because you’re so good at this. I just love it and I’m intimidated by it at the same time.

FOLLET: It’s so much fun.

ROSS: The thought of you sitting there reviewing what we did yesterday and preparing today to ask the questions. I mean, it's a joy.

FOLLET: Everything you say, I could just reach in and pull that one out and expand on that. Oh, God. But the one I can't let pass is your reference yesterday to the Anita Hill case. And, can you summarize your take on it, your feelings at the time?

ROSS: Didn't I cover that on tape yesterday?

FOLLET: Not really. Not what you thought about it. You mentioned that she was pulled in as a keynote speaker for one of the groups, but we didn't talk about your reactions to that really inflammatory moment.

ROSS: OK. Well, let us again recontextualize. This was the movement to stop the confirmation of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court. And in the black community, George Bush the First had decided to use it as a wedge issue, his nomination to replace Thurgood Marshall. And the black community did split over it, because there was a certain part of the community that felt that this was our best opportunity to get a black person on the Supreme Court. Interestingly enough, nobody ever said a black woman on the Supreme Court. That never entered the debate and it never has, as a matter of fact.

30:30

And then, of course, there were those of us who felt Clarence Thomas was no Thurgood Marshall. I mean, there were people like Leon Higginbotham — there were many, many people who were much more worthy to be nominated for the Supreme Court than this barely schooled Clarence Thomas. One of the things that we did, as part of my job when I was at CDR [Center for Democratic Renewal], was research on Clarence Thomas. And he was from Georgia.

FOLLET: I'm sorry. You did, you did cover this and his connection to South Africa.

GEIS: But she didn't — your personal feelings about it. She covered the reasons why you thought that they should have gone in a different direction in terms of the — I think you're right. Your personal feelings about it.

ROSS: Oh, my feelings about it. What were my feelings about it? Well, again, Anita Hill wouldn't have been my idea of a black feminist champion. I mean, she was a conservative, ultra-Christian right winger who got turned on by the other wolves, and so she didn't arouse my sympathy. But at the same time, she was a sympathetic figure in terms of being subpoenaed to testify before the Judiciary Committee, doing so very reluctantly, getting crucified by the right wing because she was seen as turning on her boss, when in fact she'd been the victim of extreme sexual harassment. And if you ever meet Anita and see how drop-dead

gorgeous she is, you can kind of figure out why, when you've got this runaway male ego thinking he can say and do all these inappropriate things with a subordinate.

And so, I reluctantly sympathized with her, even though politically I probably would not have been her champion. I mean, I'm not one of those that's going to support a woman right or wrong. I support her right to be wrong, but I don't have to like what she's doing with that right. I mean, I'm just not going to be there.

But the National Coalition of 100 Black Women had decided to dedicate its reproductive rights conference to Anita Hill — which again was interesting, because I don't think anybody asked Anita whether she was pro-choice or not. I suspect, coming from her ultra-Christianity and her right-wing background, she probably wasn't. But that was a mistake. When I actually did get a chance to meet her at this conference, she was utterly charming. She was gracious as a woman can be. A very charismatic kind of person, a very reserved, polished, role-model kind of a woman, so I really was impressed by her, much more so up close than I had been at a distance, which is rare for me. I hate meeting my sheroes, because usually they can't stand on the pedestal once you know them, so the fact that she looked better up close than at a distance, I thought was pretty impressive.

My feelings about it. Well, my feelings were mixed, because what it did result in was a huge spate of organizing by African American women. There was this huge signature ad campaign, I think it was in the *New York Times*, "African American Women in Defense of Ourselves," where we raised thousands of dollars, like overnight, to get this ad in the *New York Times*, I think it was, in defense of Anita Hill. And it raised the consciousness in the African American community about sexual harassment, something we'd been talking about for close to twenty years, but it took a celebrated case like this to really generate a discussion about boundaries and sexual harassment at the workplace and stuff.

Even though I remember Michelle Vinson, a name that has been lost to history, but it is a really important one. Michelle Vinson used to work at Meritor Savings & Loan in Washington, D.C., and she was the black woman who brought the first legal law suit for sexual harassment at the workplace. And she had come to the Rape Crisis Center for counseling, so that's how we got to know her. So, some future legal scholar needs to find out what happened to Michelle. She won her case, and her case was very important because Michelle was coerced into actually having sex with her boss, and so many times the court tried to dismiss the case because she went on to have sex with her boss. And saying, Well, if you had sex, it had to be consensual, so how can you now claim sexual harassment? But she won her case.

But what Michelle wasn't able to do with her actual case in the 1970s, in the 1990s Anita Hill was able to do it with the publicity, and that just generated discussion around sexual harassment in the workplace, in the black community, and in the broader community,

because I think some reporters even said how the increase in sexual harassment claims just shot through the roof after the exposure of Anita Hill.

FOLLET: How do you spell Michelle's last name? Do you remember?

ROSS: V-I-N-S-O-N. And do not ask me what crevice of my mind that name popped out of.

FOLLET: We're glad it did. OK. I think we can wrap up the '80s, but before we do, I'm going to pull another one of these personal jottings of yours out of the file from the 1980s, and this is a letter.

ROSS: My God, what is that letter now?

FOLLET: This is a letter that you wrote to Mr. Bush, George Bush the elder, three days after his inauguration, January 1988.

37:43

ROSS: What's going on in 1988?

FOLLET: And it reminds me of the poem that you wrote that we looked at yesterday.

ROSS: Because it was written by me or because it's full of self-loathing?

FOLLET: No, it's not full of self-loathing, but you talk about feeling desperate, you talk about the pressure of surviving is driving me crazy, you talk about — can I continue? Or are you feeling —

ROSS: It's OK. I mean —

FOLLET: It's OK?

ROSS: OK. It's OK.

FOLLET: It's OK. You're sure.

ROSS: The thing is, by turning over the archives unexamined, you're finding stuff that I did not know was in there and so, I appreciate your finding it, but sometimes it can be a bit stunning. That's all right.

FOLLET: It's all right?

ROSS: But to me it feels better, because I know if I probably had a chance to purge, I probably would've purged stuff like that and then compromised the project and so I'm trying to be OK with it. My life has been a guinea pig's life anyway, so, it's a little late to start having feelings.

FOLLET: To start having feelings.
?

ROSS: Let me see what this thing says.

FOLLET: I'll let you look at it and see what you think, because I want to –

ROSS: And that was true. OK. I don't know why I was writing this letter to Bush. I think I was pissed off. OK. Do I have to read it out loud?

FOLLET: If you're willing. If you don't want to, then don't.

ROSS: That's all right. Then I can read it real quick. I guess it was one of those things, and I certainly never thought that it would ever come to light. It's one of those things that you write — if I can get the ear of the President, what would you say to him?

FOLLET: Would you be willing to read it, what you would have said?

ROSS: I have no problem with that, I guess. I do have problems with it. I'm just going to do it anyway. Just because I have problems with something doesn't mean I don't do it. That's the story of my life, too.

40:34

(reads from the letter) "Dear Mr. Bush, I work hard every day. I work two jobs seven days a week," which is true, "to make ends meet. I was a teenage mother and my son is now in college for his second year, of which I am very proud. I have never been on public assistance, even though I was 15 when I became a mother. I'm proud of that, too. I was a drug addict. I have not used drugs for seven years. I'm proud of that, too. But now I am desperate.

"Despite working all the time, I seem to be spiraling deeper and deeper into debt, and I am not talking about credit cards or luxuries. I'm talking about food, shelter, tuition. These are things that are driving me to consider either suicide or reusing drugs. They worry me every day. I'm so pressured now I can't think. I'm trembling and crying because I don't know what else one person can do.

"Please, in your efforts to combat drugs and crime, offer single parents like me some real hope and real help. We are doing our share, working hard and sacrificing. My son worked hard to stay off the streets, to get good grades, to go to college, to become an engineer. Please don't just say, 'Don't use drugs.' Right now, drugging myself looks awfully good because the pressure of surviving is driving me crazy. I have to hold on, believe that something is changing. But until there is hope for people like me, real wages, real tuition assistance, real caring for what we do, drugs may be the only temporary relief we have. Please, Mr. President, don't forget us."

I wish George Bush was amenable to listening to that kind of stuff, but I know it ain't never going to happen. But, I think I was writing that to keep from using drugs. That's the closest memory. It's easier to write it than to go back to drugs. And I think because drugs were so much in

there, I must have had it on my mind about how tempting it is to just blank out again. That's what drugs do. They're great ways of erasing life and stuff. I think that's what makes them so tempting to people.

FOLLET: So even while you were starting international feminist organizations, and leading delegations to Nairobi, and heading the first women-of-color program at NOW, you were blanking out in your own life?

ROSS: Well, I was trying not to blank out. I mean, no, I had been clean for seven years at the time I wrote that letter. So it wasn't that I was blanking out, it was resisting the temptation to blank out. That was the problem. People who have been through recovery say you take it one day at a time. Well, I've been 22 years clean, and I still think that there are times when I liked being high better than I liked being sober, because staying sober is not all it's cracked up to be, trust me. (laughs)

And part of the problem is that there's no real support system for a single parent. You can do all the right things, and that's just still not going to be enough. I mean, my job at NOW was paying \$25,000 a year. I was cleaning offices at night. So that's why I was working two jobs. While on the surface you've got this big feminist job with this big feminist institution and you've got this national exposure, the reality is that if you don't clean toilets at night your lights are going to get cut off.

I lived in both of those worlds simultaneously all my life. For me it was rather seamless, even though it represented some of the most immense contradictions that are writ large in our society. Why should a woman be working in a feminist organization and have to clean offices at night to survive? Isn't the feminist movement about paying women better? (laughs) Isn't that one of the contradictions out there? Or why should someone have to go through all of that to keep a kid in school? Isn't society supposed to be rewarding the kids that don't get into drugs? Don't get into crime? Get good grades? Go to college?

Well, where were the rewards for my son? He was a B-C student. He wasn't an A-B student. So there was nothing available for him. He was big, so he probably could've gotten a football scholarship, except he was allergic to grass, and they don't play college football on artificial turf. (laughs) I had a 200-pound football player that I was feeding, but he was on the chess club. He was on the chess team.

It's a lie that the system rewards you for doing the right thing. That's really the lie that I think that letter exposes, because you can absolutely do the right thing and still not live the American dream. So it was a very cynical letter, too. But it was also probably optimistic. I mean, obviously, I believed that if I could get this guy's ear, I could awaken his sense of compassion and humanity and I presume he has it. I think every human being has a sense of it. But now that I see his son's programs, he'd probably say, "Well you blew it by not getting married." So he probably would've put me in a pro-marriage program and said it's still all my fault, now that I see the real agenda. But the theme of suicide runs through my life.

FOLLET: It runs through your life?

ROSS: Runs through my life. There's two things I flirt with on a daily basis, some more immediate than others. One of them is sanity. I choose to be sane every day I get up. But then, it's not a given. It is not a given. And I choose to be alive every day I get up. But again, that's not a given. And I'm at peace with that, because I'm happy to make the choice and to have the choice to make. I feel sorry for people who don't know that there's a choice, and they feel driven into one or the other.

FOLLET: What tips the balance toward choosing sanity and choosing life?

ROSS: Therapy. (laughs) Therapy has taught me that it is a choice, and when I feel particularly close to the edge, I can make different choices. That's what's tipped it for me for a long time. And then, (unclear) I'm still choosing it.

FOLLET: Pardon me? I'm sorry –

ROSS: I said, (unclear) and I'm choosing it. To me, it's crazy to still be smoking, and I do, you know. It's crazy to be getting as little exercise and being overweight like I am, but I've chosen that. So, am I choosing a more passive form of insanity and suicide, or a more active form? I don't know.

FOLLET: As a women's health advocate-activist.

ROSS: (laughs) Exactly. So tell me, because I'm not driving cars off a bridge don't mean that suicidal gene ain't still operating somewhere.

FOLLET: You mentioned back when you were 15, you gave up religion.

ROSS: Yeah, actually 14, but close to 15, because I was pregnant when I announced it in church, and I had turned 15 by the time I had my baby.

FOLLET: Right. And then in your interview with Stanlie, you mention that one of the things that makes African American women's activism distinct is a spiritual component. Is there a spiritual component to the choices that you make?

ROSS: Hm. I don't know. On the surface, I would probably say no, because I'm not a practicing atheist. I'm more like a practicing humanist. Because I actually think atheists are like Christians. They feel that stuff a little too much for me to feel comfortable with. They're a little zealous to die and just like the Christians are a little too zealous, so I don't want to be caught in either of those pants. I want to be somewhere in the middle. And so, I would probably say no. I'm just not comfortable with

proclamations of spirituality. But I love people who are. And so, like, I've got my Rastafarian friends who swear they can levitate if they get high enough. I've got my Christian friends who feel they get close enough to God and they speak in tongues and they feel that the spirit moves through them, and I've got my Buddhist friends who feel these things.

And in many ways, I envy them because I don't feel nothing about a higher power that strongly, and I wish I did. There are so many times when you feel so alone, when you feel that you need to believe in something beyond your own resources. And, I've often wished I had that ability to believe available to me. And so, I really do envy people that have it, but you can't fake faith. It's either there or it ain't. You can't fake it, and I presume that if you started lying to God, He would know, or She would know. I mean, so, my logic tells me I can't fake it. I can't lie. Either it's there or it's not.

Now, what I do believe in — I'm not totally without belief — is karma. I actually do believe in karmic destiny, meaning that, put in the most simplest terms, what goes around comes around. And the reason I believe in that is actually born out of experience. It wasn't that somebody introduced me to the theory of karma, and I embraced it or anything.

I actually had an incident where I was homeless. I was probably one good girlfriend away from living on the streets again, because I had been on the streets, and this girlfriend of mine who lived in public housing took me and my son in, and I had one dollar on me and I was getting ready to catch a bus, and it was in the wintertime. And I was getting ready to catch a bus back to Marie's house, and this woman with this baby came begging. And I'm a sucker for women with children begging, for obvious reasons. But I literally had this one dollar and the bus ride was, like, 60 cents, so I needed this dollar.

51:57

But there was something about this woman that was just — I thought that her situation was worse than mine. It really was. I mean, at least I wasn't on the street begging. I was getting ready to get on the bus. I had a place to go, albeit temporary that it was. And so, I gave this woman my dollar, not feeling special about it, feeling rather foolish as a matter of fact, because then I had to walk back, in the winter, to Marie's house. I got home to Marie's house that night and there was 100 dollars there waiting for me that a family member had sent me. And I have always believed that because I gave, I received.

I was, like, "Oh, that's interesting," but I didn't quite get the theory of karma yet. This was proof that if you give, you receive, and you receive much multiple times, right? Then I started testing it, like any other good scientist. Remember, I majored in chemistry and physics, so, it's a theory, let's test it, right? And I literally started testing it. And I swear to you, every time I've given where it hurts, I get back in such huge degrees that it's like a joke. No matter how fast I give stuff away, it just comes back. It keeps coming back and it keeps coming back. And so, really, I think what's seen as generosity is just enlightened self-

interest. (laughs) I'm not really trying to feed the hungry or help the world. I really like what comes back.

FOLLET: A hundredfold, no less.

ROSS: Right. It really does. (pause)

So those are my feelings on religion and spirituality. My friends all tell me that I'm a spiritual person. I don't recognize that in myself. I'm a tolerant person, meaning that I don't let their spirituality have a negative impact on me. I know I spent a number of years being angry at Christianity because of the way my early church experiences had been, but that circle got healed and closed. I think I told you about that minister who swore he was going to bury me, and that was the most healing, complete conversation. And since then, I can go to church. I can sit up there and enjoy the fellowship, don't feel like I'm missing anything, don't think I'm getting anything special, either. So, I'm at peace with all of it, but that's a far cry from saying, OK, I've been found. Now what really hurt, and this did hurt — did I tell the story of my son?

54:54

FOLLET: Which one?

ROSS: I only have one son.

FOLLET: I didn't mean which son —

ROSS: (laughs) Him being born again?

FOLLET: Oh, you've told me that. Yeah, I know that he is.

ROSS: I haven't said it for —

FOLLET: No, go for it.

ROSS: I noticed, by the way, my son is a missing character in this narrative. I haven't talked about him. I haven't integrated him into this story sufficiently, but that's a different book. Anyway, my son was in his early thirties and was dating his wife, who is a born-again Christian, and so one day my son called me and he said, "Mom, I've been saved." And I said, "Saved? Saved from what?" I didn't have the lingo, right? He said, "I've joined the church. I've been saved in Christ." And I'm like, "That's interesting, baby."

He said, "Mom, can I ask you something?" I said, "Sure." "Why didn't we ever go to church?" I was, like, "Well, before I answer that question from you, you've got to answer one for me." He said, "What?" I said, "Why did it take you 34 years to figure it out? This is really, really late in the game to finally figure out that you didn't go to church, and for it to suddenly become important to you that you didn't go to

church.” And he said, “I don’t know. I just never thought about it before. But now, Val’s asking me, you know, why didn’t we join the church, and I don’t know what to tell her about why we didn’t join the church.”

And I must say, I confess a mild disappointment in my son for his lack of an inquisitive mind that made him just now notice that we hadn’t gone to church. That’s, like, really not paying attention. But also, I didn’t make a big deal of it, you know. It’s like, this is not what we do, OK. It’s like, we celebrated Christmas for a while and then when I kind of seamlessly switched it over to celebrating Kwanza, he was cool because he was still getting gifts. So, he didn’t notice the philosophical switch that kind of happened when he was about seven or eight or so. I love my baby, but he is — an inquiring mind is not his, and not in the larger picture. Now he wants to delve all into my personal life because he considers himself his mom’s protector, but that’s a whole other question.

I explained to him that I had difficulty believing in a higher power and particularly I thought that Christianity had been used as a weapon of oppression, rather than a weapon of liberation, that there is a liberatory aspect of it, and I’m trying to be philosophical and all that, and I’m thinking all this stuff just zoomed over my son’s head. If he hadn’t been paying attention 34 years, this was not the night he was going to get conscious.

And so we talked about it and he said, “I just wanted to know because Val asked me why we didn’t go to church and I’d have something to tell her.” And I said, “That’s interesting. Now how do you feel about going to church?” He said, “Well, it seems to be important to Val.” I said, “Well, is it important to you?” He said, “Well, I don’t know, but if it makes her happy, I’ll do it.”

In a way, I raised a son that’s a little too accommodating. I guess he’s OK because he doesn’t feel strongly enough about it to go one way or the other, and I guess I passed that on back to him. I mean, if I ever got married and my husband felt passionately about us joining a church, I’d probably join a church, just because I love him. It’d have nothing to do with what I feel. I go to weddings and funerals now because I love the people that that ritual is important to, even if I don’t care much about the ritual itself. And so, he’s got that from me honestly. He’ll do these ritualistic things simply because he loves the person that they’re important to. So, that’s me.

FOLLET:

OK. You just mentioned one more thing that I want to ask. You mentioned that you were living on the streets. How did you manage? How did that happen? Was your son with you? How did you survive? How long was this your reality?

1:00:19

ROSS:

I think you have a stethoscopic brain. OK. The year was — ’73 was a year of crisis.

GEIS: Can we just pause. We're going to run out –

END TAPE 15

TAPE 16

ROSS: I'm sure people fall out from my tobacco odors, so who am I to complain, you know. OK. You were asking –

FOLLET: Yes, asking about living on the streets.

ROSS: Nineteen seventy-three, as I said, was the beginning of a long slide. That was the year I dropped out of college. It was not long after I dropped out of college that I tried to take a job at the school so that I could get the one class I was allowed to take. And that didn't last long. I got sexually harassed by a boss, ended up getting fired from the job, because I didn't like this fat slob trying to sleep with me. And it was really routine that he slept with all the female employees and stuff, but I didn't see any reason to put up with him. I probably would've been smart, I would have put up with him, because what I did later was much worse than sleeping with him. But at the time, I was young and feisty and didn't think I needed to put up with him.

1:08

It wasn't long after that that my son and I got evicted from our apartment on Mount Pleasant Street. And actually it was really sad. Well, the eviction part was predictable, but apparently somebody knew I was moving when, you know, I had packed up our boxes and stuff. I knew our eviction was coming and I had packed up stuff. You know, someone broke into our house and stole everything while we were getting evicted, so there was literally nothing to put out on the street. So that was sad, because they even took an old box of toys and photographs. I mean, what can a thief use with that? But it's like I had packed everything up for the crooks so they came and moved me, they just didn't tell me where they moved my stuff to. That had to have been an acquaintance, somebody, because like I said, I was using drugs back then, so I wasn't hanging around with the most respectable crowd, either.

And so, I remember coming home one day, and it was winter, and my son and I had on, each of us had on a pair of jeans and our winter clothes and that was basically it, and I came home to an empty house. And I could not believe it. I mean, literally, I thought we had been evicted. Except in an eviction, your stuff was on the corner, you know, it was on the curb. My stuff was not on the corner. I went and checked with my landlord. They said, We were going to evict you but we hadn't gotten there yet. And so, that's kind of how I figured out I'd been robbed and not evicted.

So, we bounced around, staying with different friends, for about a week. I stayed there until I couldn't stay there anymore, in this empty apartment. Bounced around, staying with friends for a week, and then interestingly enough, there was this woman named Marie Hodges that I had just met at a party, didn't really know that well or anything, but when you're in a situation like that, you started going through the phone book and just dialing numbers and looking for a lifeline, kind of thing.

And Marie was somebody who ended up in my phone book because we met at a party. We had no history or anything. But she lived in the projects out in southeast Washington, Berry Farms they were called back then, if I'm not mistaken. And so, when I called Marie and told her my situation — she lived in a one-bedroom apartment with her son, but she said, "Come on over. Just stay here."

And so, that's how my son and I lived after a week of basically bouncing around. We actually never slept on a park bench or anything like that because I did get to sleep on people's couches for a week. And then, I moved into Marie's couch. André was her son's name so my son shared André's room. Marie had her room and I had the couch out in the living room.

And so, that was when I conceived the idea of going into the service, because the military had just had changed its policy. Up until then, the military would not allow single mothers into the service. They would allow single women but if you were a mother, they did not allow unwed mothers into the service. But they had just changed the policy within a year of that, because I had actually considered the military a long time ago. Not only is it a family tradition but it does provide an economic cocoon with which I am very familiar. So I had considered the military many times, when times got rough, but I was always prohibited because of the single-mother policy. But I remember that they had just changed it within a year. And of course, Vietnam was still going on and so, it was '72 — '73 was the end of Vietnam?

FOLLET: Seventy-five, I think, was —

ROSS: So it was still going on, so they needed more numbers, and so that probably was the pressure for them to change the policy. So I left my son with Marie and I didn't have the money to get to the recruiting office, which was at the D.C. Armory in Northeast and I was in Southeast.

And so, I hitchhiked a ride with this guy on a motorcycle to get to the Armory. Wouldn't you know it, I had this shawl wrapped around my shoulder, so I can only blame myself, had this shawl wrapped around my shoulder on the back of this motorcycle, and this piece of metal that we ran over either got caught up in my shawl or got kicked up by the motorcycle, we would never know, but it and my shawl locked into the spokes of the wheel. We were on the freeway going about 55 miles an hour. The wheel locked, I got thrown off, he got thrown off, I broke this arm, dislocated this shoulder. And as a matter of fact — I'll tell you about this arm, and he broke a leg. I got taken to the D.C. General Hospital, I think, and put in a cast. And that ended my attempt to join the military. If that ain't a sign from somebody, what is, right? It wasn't like I was the most eager soldier in the world. This was an economic option, right?

So, I ended up with a cast on this arm, they popped the shoulder back in place. No health insurance, I hadn't had any Medicare — and

that was the other thing. My pride kept me from going to get public assistance, too. That was the other thing, because I went to get public assistance, actually did try. First of all, waiting in that office for two days, getting pissed at these so-called social workers who ask you the most rude and inappropriate and intrusive questions — I never went back. I never went back. I mean, I was like, anything is better than this. So that's why I didn't get public assistance, because I didn't have the tolerance for putting up with the way they totally humiliate people and attack them as undeserving when people are trying to get public assistance.

But it wasn't that I didn't try. I did sink low enough to try. I said, "That ain't for me. That ain't for me." Come back here with this form. Show us this form. Where is the baby's father? "Well, my baby's father — my baby was the result of incest." Well, we can't do anything unless you contact the baby's father.

This is not happening, people, you know, no discussions. So what was going to happen? Anyway, so, of course my temporary stay with Marie, which we thought would be only a couple of weeks, got extended by a broken arm. And finally after six weeks, I took the cast off, so that's why there's a bow in this arm to this day. The bone is actually bowed. You can't tell because of the body fat, but this right here is the tip of the arm where it bows like that, because I never let it heal straight.

09:03

I took the cast off and tried becoming a prostitute. That wasn't working. That didn't work out well. I had two or three clients and I was through. Again, if I couldn't put up with welfare, guess what I couldn't put up with, was white men trying to have sex with me and treating me like anything. I mean, unfortunately, pride has made me do stupid stuff but pride has also saved me from some stupid stuff, too. I just didn't have the stomach to put up with people that I didn't like very much, even for money, and that's what saved me from embracing a career as a prostitute, even though I did sell some sex for money a couple of times to see if I could get there.

So finally, I got a job typing. I was a good typist, probably should've gone there first, and that's how I ended up not doing a lot of other crazy things. And I also needed the cast off to type. You can't type with one arm, you know. And so, that was my adventure in homelessness, prostitution, the military, and it all happened in a matter of eight months' period. When you've got to hit rock bottom. So it was in that context that I had the one dollar and gave it away and stuff like that.

But what were some of the things I learned from that? Well, first of all, to be a good ho', you got to be a good ho'. You got to be able to suspend all feeling, suspend all emotion, separate your intellect from your body — things that I found out I was incapable of doing. I admire people who can do it. I just can't. I'm not able. And that also, there wasn't a whole lot I wouldn't do to survive. It's just that willingness to do and ability to do are two different things. So, I mean, I wasn't tempted into any major criminal activity. I mean, I don't think I had a

bent for selling drugs or robbing people as a way to survive. I didn't come from a history of that and probably wouldn't have been any good at it, so it's a good thing I didn't go there.

I learned that help comes from very unexpected spaces, because Marie didn't have to put up with me for eight months, basically living on her couch and invading her space, and sharing her life and André's life with my son and I. And interestingly enough, I saw Marie many, many, many years later. Unfortunately, she was still in public housing when I saw her, but André was grown and had gone to Job Corps and we had a chance to chat many, many years later.

What else did I learn from that period? I find that I have never really developed a strong attachment for material possessions. After having lost it all and then starting all over, it's like, OK, now I know I can start all over. So, ain't no need of getting attached to this stuff. I mean, just like that robbery wiped me out, a fire could wipe me out, and so, you just start all over. I mean, the thing that I miss the most are my son's baby pictures. And fortunately, my mom had a lot of those, so we were able to — I kind of went and robbed my mom of my son's baby pictures to restart my whole collection. That hurt to lose those. But, like I said, Mom had plenty, so I kind of secretly snatched those from her so my photo album is from her pictures, not the ones I originally had.

That was the year I got the Dalkon Shield implanted; I got it implanted in '73. Seventy-six was the sterilization, because that was the last year at Howard. So, a long slide. And then there was a long climb back. That three-year period. I was totally disassociated from my family, disconnected from my family during that three-year period or so. My mother had really, really hurt my feelings badly. My mother and I always contested who parented, who was my son's mother. I mean, she went from thinking me being pregnant was the worst thing that ever happened to her life to thinking it was her idea. And while I was at college — I don't know if I told this story. Did I ever tell you about the guardianship?

FOLLET: I think you told me that she tried to get guardianship by accusing you of being irresponsible.

ROSS: An abandoned mother. That I abandoned my son to go to college. And my father, fortunately, heard about this plot and scotched it but, you know. So we always had a troublesome relationship over whose child this really was. And so, one way of expressing her pain was to do probably hateful things. I mean, looking back, I can see that it was her pain causing her to be fairly hateful, but it was sometimes hateful.

For example, my mother is very much into ritual. So, Mother's Day, birthday, Christmas, she always got you a card, she always got you something or that kind of thing. My mother, ever since I had my son, has never bought me a Mother's Day card. Never. And it's exceptionally noticeable when she's buying Mother's Day cards for

everybody else and just can't do that for me, which is no big deal. I mean, at first I thought it was no big deal.

Obviously I cared more than I knew I cared, because one year I sent my mother some flowers for Mother's Day. And I'm thinking, this is a way of healing the breach, and I'm not quite sure exactly what she said, because whenever you send flowers off to somebody, you call and make sure they got them. There's no guaranteed delivery or anything. So, I called my mother on Mother's Day to see if she'd gotten the flowers I sent, and before I could even ask her the question, my mother said, "I hope you're not calling to tell me you're pregnant again." "No, Mom, I'm not calling to tell you I'm pregnant again. I'm calling to see if you got your Mother's Day flowers. Thank you." Click.

My mother and I didn't talk for almost three years after that, because I was just too through. I mean, I was through being hurt by her. I was dealing with a whole lot of other stuff. I was really through being hurt by her at that time.

And, unfortunately, and I'm deeply ashamed of this now, is that really hurt my family for me to disappear. I'm into drugs, I'm into all kinds of weird stuff and then they don't hear from me or their grandson for three years. I mean, that was terrible to do to them at the time. But I was 19. I was expressing my pain, not hers, her pain and mine at the same time. And so, as a result, when my life collapsed, I didn't have them to call on.

FOLLET: Ah-ha, ah-ha, I see. I see.

ROSS: So –

FOLLET: Well, you know, the reason that I'm asking about these things and pulling out this kind of a poem and this kind of a letter and asking about this is, you know, as I said yesterday, to make sure we don't lose sight that it's Loretta the person who's holding these positions and taking these trips and organizing these organizations and coming up with these ideas, that's it's a human being behind all these actions, but also because I'm thinking about the conversations we've had about visibility and invisibility, about silence and coming into speech.

17:47

And I've just finished reading your book, *Undivided Rights*, which is so fabulous, and one of the feelings I come away from that book with, reading the accounts of African American and Latina and Asian American and Native American women and their sort of similar processes of becoming politicized — and it feels to me that there's some indefinable moment in each of those stories where I can almost hear this gasping for breath. It's like Lillie Allen said at the beginning, before there was a Black Women's Health Project, "We are dying inside." And there's this sense of a moment where it can go one way or another.

The choice, whether it's your individual choice to drive or not drive off a bridge, or to be sane or to live that day, there's something

collective in the experience of these communities who we know history has not been kind to in terms of respect or even survival.

ROSS: We are not meant to survive [reference to Audre Lorde's "A Litany for Survival"].

FOLLET: We were not meant to survive. Precisely. And there is some moment where I just have this gut feeling, this visceral feeling and this almost audible gasping for breath, and I'm writing this in the [book] review, that there's this gasping for some kind of fresh air that isn't full of toxic stereotypes and hateful, unfair systems. Does that make any sense to you?

ROSS: Well, what I'm most conscious of now is that I'm about ready to cry, because I really stepped back into some stuff that I usually don't disclose, so, yes, it makes perfect sense. I don't know whether now I'm going to have to put the intellectual hat on, to pull back from the precipice of emotionalism, but I don't know what the studies say on children who suffered extreme child sexual abuse and what that does to our psyches and our heads. I know it oversexualizes us, because there's this imprint of sexualism — if I've invented a new word — that colored a whole lot of my life, that just is absurd.

Now, I like to think I'm just a horny girl, but at the same, time, you know, some of this was imposed, too; it's not my choice. I mean, I had to actually decide whether I was heterosexual, whether I was going to be a lesbian, because I remember deciding these things. Because so much was not in my control to decide, so I remember deciding these kinds of things.

But the gasping-for-air metaphor is so appropriate because oppression doesn't take a break, even when you want to take a break. I remember going to Beijing to the Fourth World Conference for Women, and I had gone over to Beijing with a group of women, and we had to stop at the Narita Airport in Tokyo on our way to Beijing, the way the flight took us. But coming back, I think I left separately from my larger group and so I was in Tokyo by myself.

Because of the vagaries of the flight, I had to spend the night in Tokyo, which — I mean, all of this became drama. First of all, because the flight required an overnight stay in Tokyo, I had to first fight with the Tokyo Airlines people, or China Airlines, I'm not quite sure which one, to get a hotel room for that night. How can you not provide a hotel room when you know I landed at 8 o'clock one night and don't take off till 10 o'clock the next morning? I mean, what do you expect to happen?

This is your schedule I'm dealing with, and so the Japanese woman at the airline counter — see, anti-black racism in Japan still has that 1950s feel about it, where they try to make you invisible. The Buraku people, that's what I couldn't remember yesterday, and the Burakin. They try to make you feel absolutely invisible, and so I had to literally go ghetto on this woman to get a voucher for a hotel room, when I'm

almost sure this was not an exceptional policy. What do you expect people to do? Sleep 12 hours in the airport because the next plane for the U.S. doesn't take off until the next day? When you have a flight coming in from Beijing? What are you supposed to do? It doesn't make sense.

But that actually was not the one that set me off. The incident that set me off was the next day, I decided that I will go into the gift shop in this hotel, and purchase a book. You know, you're on an 18-hour flight, you need something to read, and they had only three or four English-speaking books in the shop. I think that's how I got introduced to something, it might have been Harry Potter, because there were only a few English-speaking books in the place. So I'm standing in line, ready to pay for the book. There's this white woman in line behind me who coincidentally had also been at the Beijing Women's Conference. We didn't know each other. And the woman looks over my shoulder and asked the woman, "Can I help you?" Just looks over my shoulder. And the woman said, "Excuse me, I think she was here first." And that's when I went off. I mean, I had already handled the girlfriend at the airport, but it's the poor woman at the gift shop that got called every kind of motherfucker Loretta knew how to say in that moment.

So that's what I'm saying. You don't get a chance to gasp for air. You're just going through life, you're not planning on doing it. You're not even in a black-white construct, so you don't have your guard up, you're not looking for it, you don't have your defenses up because you're not expecting it, and *bam!* there it hits you again. Now, I don't think the policy at the airport was racist. That was just brutality there, not providing a hotel room for overnight passengers, but that wasn't a racist policy.

Looking over my shoulder, and I told her, "How the fuck can you not see a 300-pound black woman? What is wrong with you?" And of course, in Japan, which is a very polite society, these types of public displays end up humiliating them terribly. And so I ended up really destroying this child, which — she probably was just responding to her cultural signals, you know, the cultural signal of waiting on the white person first over everybody else? But she got visited with Loretta's rage. And I feel bad about that now. I mean, the kid. I know better now.

When you say gasping for breath, it is impossible to go through life on full-alert status all the time without ending up crazy. But you're never allowed to go through life feeling any safety either, because the moment you least expect it, you're going to feel attacked. I mean, who would've thought buying a book in a gift shop in Narita, Tokyo, would precipitate such a crisis?

There were no clues to let me know to be prepared for this, and the way I found out the woman behind me had been at the Beijing conference was that I turned around and thanked her, because if she had not spoken up, then I would have had to attack both of them. What if she had taken advantage of the situation and said, Yes, wait on me first? Then I would have been caught between the two of them. And so she

said, "Well, I just came from Beijing." And I said, "Well, I just came from Beijing." And it turned out we had both been at the women's conference.

Meanwhile this poor child is sobbing in front of us. And you know, I'm feeling responsible for it, but the irony of the whole thing [was], here I am, flaming feminist, reducing this poor child to tears. I'm 20 years her senior, and yet her doing her cultural norm brings such a vicious attack from me, which I can describe as vicious because I did everything to humiliate that person. I felt bad about it afterwards, but she became the recipient of all of my rage. Not that China was easy, either, so she got it all. I'm deeply ashamed of that now. And I don't know who she was. She might have been one of the Burakin, who themselves are the victims of racism in Japan. I don't know. Life shouldn't be so damn complicated.

So when you say "gasping for air," those moments come to mind. And, I mean, accepting that just because you heard that, it doesn't give you permission to go out and brutalize somebody else. But then, how do you keep from internalizing the hurt, because that's what I do mostly. I mean, that's what leads to the self-destructiveness and stuff. How do you heal from that? You can't visit it on anybody else. You don't want to visit it on yourself. What are you supposed to do with it? I haven't figured that out yet. But I really don't take it personally.

We still haven't gotten to CDR, but anyway, I think the human rights framework has taught me that even as that person is visiting their pain on you, you don't have to take ownership of their pain. That's their stuff. That's their trip, and you do have a choice of whether you'll let their bad trip affect you. That's the only control you have. You can't control whether they're having a bad trip. You can control whether or not you let it deconstruct you. I let her deconstruct me at that airport gift shop. I had a choice about not letting it do that. That's the only thing you can do. But that don't mean it don't hurt. That just means you ain't going to let it deconstruct you. So what do you do? I haven't figured that one out yet.

FOLLET: Oh, wow.

ROSS: Have you?

FOLLET: No.

ROSS: Has anybody got any answers? I don't know.

FOLLET: Well, that is a good way to move into CDR and the lessons learned there. But first, do I owe you an apology for bringing up these painful things?

ROSS: No. But I do need a breathing space.

FOLLET: Yeah, let's –

ROSS: I'm still feeling very teary.

FOLLET: I am so –

ROSS: I need a breathing space.

FOLLET: Yeah, let's –

ROSS: And probably you all do, too, because you all are just getting the –
(pause)

Well, one of the important parts about Self-Help is that it gives you permission to cry, to feel, to allow you to truly feel stuff. Talk about the value, the thing that Self-Help brings into your lives, it is about giving yourself permission to feel and to cry and stuff. So, I'm trying not to turn this into a Self-Help session.

31:46

FOLLET: Right. But when you –

ROSS: I don't have to co-counsel you.

FOLLET: Yes, but when you said kind of a rhetorical question, "What do you do with that when you get to one of those moments?" and I was asking myself. Self-Help.

ROSS: That's exactly what you do. You go into Self-Help. You discharge the feeling and you try to discharge it in a safe supportive environment, which I did not have available to me in Tokyo at the time. But I've since been able to tell that story in a safe, supportive environment and not have a wound and be able to look at it, and back off and not have anger at that poor woman and really feel bad about what I did to her, because the response was disproportionate to what she did. But, that's what happens when that rage just erupts uncontrollably and you visit it [on someone else].

FOLLET: But that's what was making me feel like an apology was in order, because this isn't a Self-Help session, it's something else, and yet I've elicited that same story and it feels a little unfair.

ROSS: I'm in control. I can say I don't want to go there. So I'm not into being revictimized. That's real clear. Let me be clear. I have been victimized. I know what being a victim is. I know what being a survivor is. I know what being in charge is. And I try not to confuse the three states. So if I'm having an emotional reaction, it is my emotions that I'm allowing to come out, because I also know techniques for not allowing them to come out. I know techniques for saying, You can't ask that. I know

techniques for saying, You can't go there. I know these things, and I know not to let other people rob me of agency. So if I don't want to go there, I can not go there, so it's your choice to ask the question and certainly my choice whether to respond. So don't take responsibility for that.

FOLLET: Thank you.

ROSS: OK. And I'm just as inquisitive when I'm doing the interviews, too, so. (laughs) You saw how I pried into Geraldine's life or Barbara's life, stuff I knew they don't want to go into, so that's that dual place of being behind and in front of the camera.

FOLLET: OK. So, from the National Black Women's Health Project, you went directly to the Center for Democratic Renewal?

34:48

ROSS: I made a strange stop along the way. I was actually very, very hurt and demoralized by the Project. It was a very painful experience to have been there for the year and a half I was there. I had picked up and relocated my life to Atlanta, so I didn't know what I was going to do. Plus, the interesting thing is that I'm not real good at job hunting. I mean, I've never actually put together the résumé and made the cold calls and stuff like that. That is not something I've done a lot of in my life. I've had some great jobs but it wasn't because — NOW was probably the only job I actually sought. I mean, I did that by becoming a volunteer. It still wasn't the put-together-the-résumé-go-seeking thing, and so I felt I was cast pretty adrift.

And there was a wonderful intervention that happened. And that is, I had gotten a notice that they were having this conference up in Boston as a tribute to Audre Lorde, and it was in the fall of 1990. I don't remember the exact month, but Dazon Dixon — and by the way, I had met Dazon in 1987, because I had her come speak at the '87 Reproductive Rights Conference and so we had developed a good friendship. She was certainly my support system when I moved to Atlanta, because that's where she lived, and we quickly became best friends in Atlanta. She was impossibly young when I first met her. She was 19 or something like that, working at the Feminist Women's Health Center. Great, great friend and ally.

So Dazon and I decided that we would go to the Audre Lorde conference. Well, we had no money. So, what does Loretta do, she gets in her car to drive from Atlanta to Boston, which is a huge drive. I know it's 12 hours to D.C. and then another six or seven hours from D.C. to Boston, so it was a huge drive. We also brought with us another woman named Robbie [Bowman]. Robbie was a former homeless woman that I hired at the Black Women's Health Project who also got fired along with me. So it was me, Dazon, and Robbie in my car, and we decided at the last minute that with no notice, we were going to stop in D.C. and pick up Nkenge and take her with us.

Well, Nkenge is not a spontaneous woman, and that's putting it mildly. She is one of those people that's really organized, has to have notice in advance of things, and so here we show up on her doorstep, just suddenly saying, "You're going to Boston with us." And she tries to weasel out of it, block it, use her children as an excuse. Her daughter at the time is 18 or 20. You cannot convince me that your 18-year-old cannot be left for a weekend by herself, or your 20-year-old. I mean, you just can't convince me of that. And so, we literally kidnapped Nkenge — it was, like, one hour's notice — and forced her into the car.

And so we drove up to Boston, didn't have any place to stay originally, but fortunately there was this woman named Eve Stern. Eve is Stern family fortune, very wealthy woman, who lived in Cambridge and had a fabulously huge house. And so, some of us stayed with Eve and then some of us stayed in Roxbury with Barbara Bullette and some friends. And we'd known this whole Boston crew of black feminist women. They came to the 1980 conference that we did on violence against women — that's how I got to know Barbara Bullette — women who had worked on violence up here in Boston.

And so, they also formed a group called Passages to Kenya, for the Nairobi conference. And again, this good-ol'-girl network is working, right? It was great to reconnect with Audre. I don't know if you remember this, the conference was only a couple of years before she died.

FOLLET: Right.

ROSS: It was just wonderful. It was so healing to be at that conference. I cannot just tell you how wonderful it was to be at that conference, a tribute to Audre. It was just so healing. That's the only way I can put it. Definite healing of the soul. So that was the intervention along the way and I don't think I could've repackaged my psyche as effectively as it happened without having come up here into the company of my sisters at that Audre Lorde conference. So it's really, really significant for me.

39:51

Another thing that happened was that the International Women and Health Meeting also took place that fall in the Philippines and Dazon and I organized a delegation to go to it of women working against poverty. She's unemployed, I'm unemployed. She had just founded SisterLove the year before.

But we were able to secure two fellowships from the Ford Foundation to go to the conference, which was really kind of special. But it was also very disempowering, because the way it happened was that we called Margaret Hempel at the Ford Foundation and asked her if she knew where any money was to go to the Philippines. So Margaret turned our phone call into a request. She said, "Why don't you all put together a list of women of color who you think should go to the IWHM and I'll see what I can do." So we labored over this list we put together. We worked a balance of black, of Native American, of Latina, Asian American, trying to work out this balance. And then we waited. And

then when Margaret got back to us, she said, “Well, I can only send you and Dazon.” And we actually felt pissed, and that was sad.

We did succeed in getting one more scholarship out of Ford, and I had intended it to be for Sherry Wilson, who’s a Native American woman who’s a friend of mine — one of the cofounders of AIM [American Indian Movement] — and was a good friend of mine at the time and I really wanted Sherry to be able to go. But Sherry was up in Canada at Oglala, I don’t know if it’s the Oglala Sioux but some kind of siege was going on in Canada where Native Americans were being attacked by the Canadian government, so she was up at the siege, and couldn’t get away.

She said, “But there’s this young woman who’s really an up-and-coming kind of woman that if you’ve got the scholarship to give away, I’d like you to give it to this woman.” I said, “Who is she?” She said, “There’s this young woman in Chicago named Andy Smith.” I said, “OK. I don’t know anything about her, but if you recommend it, Sherry” — and Sherry I had met in 1980 at the Violence against Women Conference. Again, that’s how the networks work. And so, that’s my introduction to Andy Smith, was taking her to the Philippines with me and Dazon.

FOLLET: And she was in Chicago at the time?

ROSS: I believe so. I think that’s where she was originally from. And so we became the only three women of color at this International Women and Health meeting, and I was so outraged by that that after we got home, we wrote this really scathing letter to the Ford Foundation, because the Ford Foundation had funded, like, 40 or 50 white women to go from the U.S., but only could find enough money for three women of color? And wouldn’t have found that if we hadn’t approached them first. It wasn’t that they reached out to us first. We reached out to them. Gave them a list of 20 women of color they could have funded, who all did reproductive health work, and should have been at this conference. To get there and find all these white women funded by Ford, and only three of us? We were pissed.

FOLLET: How did you know to go to Ford in the first place?

ROSS: Because they had funded the Nairobi work. It was really funny. Nkenge and I had done all this work on Nairobi and even found all this funding for people to apply for to go to Nairobi. Only we forgot one basic thing, to get our own grant in. So three months before the conference, everybody was going but us. We didn’t know how we were going. We had published a whole newsletter of funding sources and when we applied for the funding, they all told us no. Because they had already given grants to women we had recommended. It was the most ironic thing in the world. (laughs) Lesson from that: Get your money first, then tell all the people. But we didn’t think in those kinds of terms. (unclear)

And we had this whole newsletter on telling people how to go. And not getting grants ourselves. It was kind of ironic.

We had no idea how we were going to get to Nairobi and I actually panicked and started selling stuff. I sold my book collection and I started selling albums and we were having yard sales and fish fries. I so regret that I devastated my own science fiction collection by selling out those books for 25 cents each.

FOLLET: I don't believe you parted with books.

ROSS: I know. I would have sold my son first if I had known. I actually parted with books. The first and only time I've ever done that, too. And so then, about 60 days before Nairobi, Ford announced these fellowships for women to go to Nairobi.

FOLLET: Ah-ha.

ROSS: And Donna got one, so that's how I got hooked with Donna.

FOLLET: I see. OK. So that's how you knew to go to Ford. OK. So, back to the —

ROSS: So that's how we knew to go to Ford. That was actually, I think, my first interaction with the Ford Foundation, was in '85, with these fellowships. And that's another thing. I mean, a lesson to the funding community, if you're going to be helpful, be helpful in a more timely fashion. I mean, to announce these fellowships at the last minute, then you end up recruiting a whole lot of people who don't even know anything about the process, but they successfully applied for a fellowship, where all these women had been doing work for three or four years had to compete against people who didn't even know what was going on, but saw an opportunity to apply for a fellowship. I mean, it's just not right.

So, when I got back, I got a call from a guy named Dan Levitas. Danny, at the time, was the executive director of the Center for Democratic Renewal. CDR was founded in 1979 as the National Anti-Klan Network. As a matter of fact, it was founded in 1979, there was this Greensboro massacre where there was an anti-Klan march in Greensboro, North Carolina, and these Klansmen shot and killed five of the protesters and it was all caught on videotape but they were acquitted by an all-white jury. And so, black activists coming out of the civil rights movement felt that there needed to be an organization that permanently monitored hate groups, that never takes their eye off of them, because who needs their violence?

Peaceful protests, murder, all-white jury acquittal — I mean, that was such a cliché in the South. It was just ridiculous. I think the country was stunned that it was still happening in 1979, that even when you catch them on videotape, there's no more persuasive evidence than these men standing up there with rifles on videotape shooting into the protest

and then getting acquitted. What's up with that? And yet, people have the nerve to be mad about Rodney King.

Anyway, moving right along, so Dan is this Jewish guy who had become the director of CDR, and I don't know how Dan heard about me. I have no idea. But he called me one day and asked me if I would be willing to work with CDR, become their program director. I had nothing against that, and so, in December 1990, he introduced me to Leonard Zeskind, who was their research director at the time. Lenny is by far the most prominent, most intelligent, Klan- and Nazi-hunter in the world, in my opinion. I mean, he really understands the far right, the white supremacist movement. He became my mentor into this process. And so, my test was to do about an hour's worth of reading, go to Lenny, because Lenny was in Pennsylvania, and see if I can give a presentation on why we need to fight the Klan.

What really attracted me to the CDR job was the fact that in all of my other political work, I had had to work on women's rights and racism, or housing and racism, or apartheid work but also racism. I never got to work directly on racism and white supremacy. That was not the focus of all the other work. So I really was attracted to that. What scared me about CDR was that it was firmly embedded in the civil rights movement, and I had grown up in the women's rights movement. I didn't know any more about the civil rights movement than your average white person, which is saying very little. I knew Martin Luther King had a dream, he had a march. That's about what I knew about it. I had been in the black nationalist movement. I had not been in the civil rights movement, and so I wasn't sure that, feminist that I was, that I would be comfortable in such a male-centric movement, because it is still very male-centered. And no intention of dealing with gender, in those days — anything dealing with gender.

But I found Danny and Lenny quite attractive politically. Danny because he was tireless, he had huge passion. I mean, he set standards for how you do work and he was really a serious fundraiser. I also had some learning to do with him, too. But Lenny was just — I worshipped him like a god, because he really, really knows his stuff and he has excellent people skills, and he got the MacArthur genius achievement award.

FOLLET: He did.

ROSS: Yes, he did.

FOLLET: Nice.

ROSS: I'll always sit at his feet. So I became the program director, the program director at CDR. My job was to go around and deal with community response to hate groups, not the hate groups themselves, but how does the community respond if there's been a hate crime? What do they kind of do proactively to deal with hate? How do you keep young white kids

51:39

from joining the skinhead movement? That kind of response. How do you deal with communities of color that are violated by these hate groups and the white community remains silent? I mean, these were the kind of programmatic activities that we engaged in. And we also wrote a book as a team, called *When Hate Groups Come to Town*, a handbook of effective community responses. And as a team, we wrote that.

For the first two years, Danny was my supervisor, and Lenny was the research director, and so I learned a whole lot under Lenny. One of the things that I certainly attribute to Lenny in terms of my learning curve was understanding the relationship between white supremacy and anti-Semitism. And I really didn't understand that. I mean, I used to say stupid things like well, aren't Arabs Semites, too? So, how can an Arab person be anti-Semitic? I mean, what are you talking about? This wasn't working for me. And so, understanding how the term anti-Semitism was really coined to mean the hatred of Jews. Not the hatred of all Semites, the hatred of Jews, and what that meant and what are the parallels between anti-Semitism and racism and white supremacy and Christianity. I mean, just the whole deconstruction of white supremacy, I learned that through Danny and Lenny.

Unfortunately, after two years, Danny decided to leave CDR and they hired this black woman named Beni Ivy to be their director. Now I'm not going to talk about the process by which that happened, but she came in as interim director and then the next thing I knew, she was the permanent director, without ever having gone through an interview or anything. And they hired a black woman to run a research center who hated to read, so that was a whole other thing. We did not have a great relationship. But she actually didn't have a good relationship with anybody because within three months of her coming, Lenny left.

FOLLET: Oh, dear.

ROSS: Which was the foundation of the center. He'd been there from the beginning. She drove away a lot of people. But anyway, back before I get to the Beni file, let's talk about Danny. One of the things that happened was that we would monitor members of the hate groups. By monitoring them, we would investigate them. We sometimes used phony names and aliases to get their literature, to find out about them, so that we could write reports on what their activities were. I mean, these were not groups that necessarily want the public to know everything they were up to, so our job was to investigate them, to expose them. And I had no problems with that.

I tended to objectify people in hate groups. We're talking about the Nazis, we're talking about members of the Klan, members of militias. We're not talking about people who are racist because they don't know any better. We're talking about people who are dedicated to wiping every Jewish and person of color off the face of the earth so that they can construct a white kingdom, and they explicitly say it that way, so I had no problems objectifying people who only wished my death and

destruction, and I actually had coined this stupid phrase that I'm deeply ashamed of now. I said, "They're like roaches. When you turn on the lights off, they scurry around. When you turn the lights on to expose them to the public, then they run and hide." I don't feel good about that comparison.

I remember Lenny putting a really profound book in my hands. I can't remember the author's name, because he died recently, about ten years ago, but it's called *Lost Tribes and Promised Lands*, which is this huge history of the world told through Jewish eyes, and so I learned about the pogroms of the sixth and seventh century, and the whole creation of the "other" and the role Christianity played in that, and the ghettoization of Jews.

I actually had a chance to go to Prague one year. There is this network called the Network of East-West Women, which is eastern women working with women – I mean, western women working with women in Eastern Europe, formerly Communist Europe, and I was one of the founders of it, so I went to the founding conference.

And one of the things we did while we were in Prague, was that I had a chance to visit both the Children's Holocaust Museum, which had the artifacts of children who had died in the Holocaust which, by the way, was terribly moving and sad, and the only feeling I can compare that to was once I was in Cuba and I visited a museum on African slavery, that had the actual manacles there and the bloody shirts and the visual evidence of slavery. You get this oh-my-God kind of feeling.

Well, this museum did that to me. But even worse, even worse, right across the street from the museum is this Jewish cemetery. And Jews were only allowed a certain amount of land on which to bury their dead. So each grave in the cemetery has bodies stacked up, one on top of another, sometimes ten or 12 bodies deep, and each headstone has each name of each person interred inside. That's when I broke down and cried. I mean, because when you have been so dehumanized that you can't even bury your dead in their own plot of land? That's when the Holocaust became real for me. I'm not Jewish. I don't profess Judaism. But I don't think seeing Auschwitz or anything would have moved me as much as seeing that cemetery. For some reason, that was the moment.

And actually, Danny and I had a great conversation about anti-Semitism once, because again, I'm struggling to understand it.

GEIS: Can you hold that thought? I want to change tape.

END OF TAPE 16

TAPE 17

(setup; discussion of rate of interview; getting to airport on time)

FOLLET: So, what time are you comfortable leaving here? It's 45 minutes to the airport. You've got to drop off your car.

1:15

ROSS: And I could go on a later flight. There is one at 5 o'clock, too, so I could go on a later flight. You know, we're only up to 1990. What year is this, 2004?

FOLLET: Yeah, well, we've got CDR –

ROSS: I hope I'm not wasting the time. I feel like I'm telling some of the –

FOLLET: We've got CDR and NCHRE, which as I say, if at this point, if we had to –

ROSS: Leave NCHRE –

FOLLET: – leap over something and just use it as a segue to SisterSong, if I had to make that choice, that's what I would. So let's — OK. Let's see what we can do in a half hour or two, to do a condensed version of CDR.

ROSS: OK. Are you ready? What was my thought?

FOLLET: Seeing those gravestones.

ROSS: Oh. The gravestones, yes, in Prague. What one other thing that Danny and I had debated was I never really could understand the anti-Semitism thing. I really couldn't. Even though I felt it, I still didn't understand how it manifests. There's a lot of questions, at least in my mind, and probably in the minds of many African Americans about their relationship to the Jewish people, while Jews have always been there in the founding of NAACP and the struggle to end slavery, but at the same time, Jews sold the insurance that insured the slave ships that profited off of slavery. So there's always been this ambivalence in our minds. And then Christianity doesn't help, because we strongly relate to Jews because they had been enslaved in Egypt and Moses led them out of slavery. And so the Jewish story feels like the black story. The black story feels — the Holocaust feels the same. I mean, so there's all kinds of ambiguities in the black-Jewish relationship.

So here's this black woman and this Jewish guy trying to work out being together in a relationship in terms of doing this work against white supremacy. So we were very good for each other but we were also very challenging to each other. One of the things that Danny said to me that really was profound, though, was — I was still questioning about anti-Semitism — Oh, and what had happened, there was a triggering

incident. Louis Farrakhan, who I've had little respect for, I've always felt he killed Malcolm X. I mean, I've never been a member of the Nation because I'm not the one, but he did say some really vile anti-Semitic things. I think he called Judaism a gutter religion or something like that.

So, B'nai B'rith had called CDR and asked us if we would issue a statement denouncing Louis Farrakhan. And it was my call to make as program director. And so and Danny and I debated it, and I took the position of, No, we're not going to issue a statement denouncing Louis Farrakhan. And I said, "It's not because I'm at all sympathetic to Louis Farrakhan and I do believe he's an anti-Semite, but if you notice, we don't issue statements denouncing anybody. We have never issued a statement denouncing Louis Beam, member of the Klan, Richard Butler at the Aryan Nation. I mean, denouncing people is not our business. That's not what we do."

That created the firestorm of controversy, because I was personally called anti-Semitic for not denouncing Louis Farrakhan. I got totally pissed off, because my position is, We're the only black organization in America that has fighting anti-Semitism in our core mission statement, and so calling us anti-Semitic because we won't be at your beck and call is racist, because we are not your beck-and-call group, you know. Why don't you pay attention to what we do do, instead of why we won't do what you want us to do in this moment, and stuff.

[Danny] was very conflicted, because he understood my point, but he's also Jewish, so he was like, But yeah, Loretta, all the Jewish groups are denouncing Farrakhan. Well, that's their choice. And that actually is importantly politically, because right after that, then you started seeing in reports from the Southern Poverty Law Center and all these other hate group [monitors], the reports of black racists, that's what they called them, who — they were posing as grave a threat as the white racists. And to me, that was just plain old bullshit.

And it was another manifestation of white racism. As despicable as the Nation of Islam is, you cannot attribute one white death to them. You can talk about them killing Malcolm, but there are thousands of black people who have been lynched by the Klan. How the hell can you compare those two things as being equal? I mean, suddenly white supremacy doesn't matter anymore? It's all just about hate? And that's why I always thought there was this bad, slippery slope between just calling it hate. It's way beyond hate. People hate smokers. People hate dogs. I mean, hate is not the right word to talk about the construction of oppression. Hate is one of the vehicles. It's not it, you know.

And so, we ended up in this whole controversy over why Loretta wouldn't denounce Louis — and I actually asked Reverend C.T. Vivian — he's the board chair of CDR, and had been the national field director for Dr. Martin Luther King. I asked C.T.'s advice just to make sure my reading on this was right, and since he was the original founding board chair of CDR. I said, "C.T., should we issue a statement denouncing —" He said, "No, that's not what we do. We're a civil rights organization.

We're trying to talk about unity. We're talking about people coming together. You don't build unity by denouncing people. And why would we? We haven't denounced anybody in our first ten or twelve years of existence, you know. Why do it now?" But in the Jewish community, my name quickly became mud.

FOLLET: Really.

ROSS: Because I said we wouldn't. Simply because I said no. And I said, "I will do an exposé on Farrakhan if you want me to." I personally despise the man. Like I said, I'm clear. He had denounced me for doing that black women in the black liberation movement forum. Remember, we had those women from the Nation of Islam come talk about the sexual abuse and stuff that was happening in the Nation of Islam? So, it wasn't like I was a Farrakhan fan, and he certainly wasn't a fan of mine, by no means.

But that is quite different than when B'nai B'rith demands that we denounce him and we say no, then we suddenly get lumped with him. That, to me, is racist. And what I really disliked about it is that all of a sudden, the black boogeyman masquerading as an anti-Semite became the number-one white fear of America. Another reusing of black men, and black men in a very demonized way.

So that's when I started saying there is as much racism in the anti-Klan movement as there is in the Klan movement, it's just better disguised. (laughs) That wasn't a popular thing to say, but still, the relationship weathered the storm. It was just one of the insights I was learning about: just because someone says they're fighting hate groups doesn't mean that they're really fighting racism.

FOLLET: Did the organization let you make that call?

9:30

ROSS: Yes, they did. It was our public stance. But it came at a big personal price. I mean, I still get — Jewish friends of mine that walk up to me and ask me questions about that stupid stuff.

FOLLET: Wow.

ROSS: And it's like, I'm a black woman so I must be supporting Farrakhan. I mean, with no real read or nothing. And when they do, I just look, like, You know, this just ain't right, it just ain't right. So one of the things I did, though, was there was a Jewish woman named Michelle Lesser, who was one of my interns, and she and I wrote a wonderful analytical piece called "Blacks, Jews and White Supremacy" that brought racism and anti-Semitism together and analyzed how both function under white supremacy. So, you know, an opportunity to do some good learning together.

FOLLET: I hope there's a copy of that in your papers. We'll find out.

ROSS: I know I have a file on it in my office. I don't know if I put it in the papers.

FOLLET: Still, you mean. Well, good. So — later, if not now.

ROSS: And anyway, so the other thing I learned from Danny — and I know I'm not telling you the story quickly, either — is that I started talking about, we monitored hate groups in terms of getting their literature, going to their rallies. I actually went to a lot of Klan rallies, the only black person there, so that was kind of interesting.

And fighting the Holocaust denial movement was also a part of our movement. There's a whole movement of people who deny that the Holocaust either didn't happen or was vastly exaggerated. You know, Hitler was a victim of bad press kind of thing, and only the victors are telling the story kind of thing.

And so, there was this Holocaust denier named David Irving, who was coming to the States. And somehow, Danny got hold of David Irving's home phone number, and used his home phone number to call David Irving's wife and say that David Irving had missed his plane but had not shown up at his engagement in the States. And it created, I'm sure, massive confusion for David Irving and his wife. I mean, just probably sent her into a tailspin. And they would do things like that, you know, cancel their plane reservations, if they could find out which limos, cancel that, just messing with them.

And so, he came into my office chortling about, Guess what I've done, I called David Irving's wife and told them that he missed his plane, and blah, blah, and blah, blah. And my mouth dropped open. I was like, Danny, I can't believe you did that. And he said, "Why not?" I said, "Because there's some things we're not allowed to do. How we do the work is as important as doing the work. And you're not supposed to get into that man's personal life like that. Send his wife and kids into some kind of tailspin about where Daddy is, even if you disagree with him. You cannot injure the dignity of the cause by using such slippery, weasel-like tactics." You know, he didn't get it?

FOLLET: Really.

ROSS: And that's where gender made a difference. Really. There were only a handful of women who did this antifascist research and antifascist work in the U.S., and we used to talk all the time.

One of things we discovered was that for the men, it became an *I Spy* contest, and they would act very possessive over information. They would send in infiltrators under deep cover, and this was dangerous to infiltrate one of these groups and to maintain this spy network of infiltrators. And you couldn't help but feel like you were playing this real cloak-and-dagger game and run this spy network so you could find out who was doing what, who was meeting with whom and what have

you. And then you would get that piece of information but you'd decide not to hold it so as to not blow your person's cover, and the whole nine yards. But the problem is, it ends up being a big-dick contest. Who has the best spy network? Who can find out the choicest tidbit? Who decides when it gets released? Who decides who reports that David Duke liked pornography? I mean, these are — black pornography, by the way, which is bizarre. You know, Klansman into black pornography. I don't want to be his therapist.

But for them, it was a power game as much as it was righteous work. And he had crossed the line and didn't understand the difference that I think a woman looking at this would say, You don't do that to somebody's family.

FOLLET: Were there other women at CDR at the time? What was the balance there?

ROSS: What was the balance there? There was a woman who was a bookkeeper, and there was me. No, there was another woman, because I hired Rose Johnson who was our Georgia organizer. She was from Gainesville, Georgia, and did a lot of the Georgia work, and eventually started doing the burned churches work, where there was this whole rash of fires in black churches and stuff like that, so, so there were three women, and then there were two men in research, Danny and the accountant. So, I mean, it was rather gender balanced. It wasn't disproportionate in terms of gender. But the research and monitoring work, I felt, were very male-dominated, and that wasn't a problem, it being male-dominated, it was in the effort to run spy empires. They crossed lines that I didn't think should be crossed.

FOLLET: Did you speak up?

ROSS: Yeah, if I wanted. It was crazy. I didn't want to be associated with that kind of tactic. I didn't want the cause associated with that kind of tactic. I mean, people didn't die for us to sit up here and do to their families what they did to ours. Yes, they killed Medgar Evers but that doesn't give us the right to go back and make his wife crazy. I mean, how are we any better or different than them? That just wasn't right. And so, I just tell that story to say that to me, that's an insight I learned, which I didn't know I needed to learn. Except seeing it through Danny's eyes. So then —

FOLLET: You said you were beginning to learn more about connections between hate and anti-Semitism and racism, and I know that I've seen the poster that you designed, "The Pillars of White Supremacy." I think you kept it in Atlanta. I don't think it came here. We could check. But I went to look for it and I couldn't find it so I couldn't examine it, but I'm assuming that it represents the world view that you came to in your time

16:21

at CDR, about how these systems of power intersect. Can you explain what understanding you came to?

ROSS: Well, part of the problem that I was trying to address was how to describe to the general public how white supremacy works. And there's a lot of conflation that happens where people would confuse a George Bush with a David Duke, as if they represented the same ideologies, the same thought pattern.

So I wanted to have a way of fairly simplistically explaining to people what distinguished the thought patterns of the different trends that form what we call the white supremacist movement. And I was actually asked to do that poster by my boss, Beni Ivy, who then denounced the poster. She loved it until somebody said they didn't like the fact that I had put the Bible on it. And so then she denounced it, but that's a whole nother story. I mean, we had gotten it approved, gotten thousands of it printed and everything, and then somebody said, "Well, Loretta, you shouldn't have a Bible on there." Because I used a Bible as a symbol for the religious right. And so the poster project got totally buried.

FOLLET: Oh, wow.

ROSS: Anyway, that's a whole other story. But in the poster, I talked about the far right — which is the Klan, the militias, the neo-Nazi movement — and their analysis is that the world is biologically determined and separated by race. And so the Klan would say, We hate affirmative action because white men get injured by it, for example. It's about the white race.

Then you have the religious right, which has links and ties to the far right but aren't the same set of people, who would say, Well, we hate affirmative action, not because we're racist, because in our moral view, it injures the people who it was intended for by making them weak morally, OK — and any kind of welfare system or immigrant rights system — it weakens them morally.

Then you have the ultra-conservative movement, which is the third pillar of the poster, that doesn't use race, doesn't use religion, but in fact uses economics to say the same thing. We hate affirmative action because the country can't afford it. We hate welfare because we can't afford it. We can't let these immigrants in because we can't afford it.

FOLLET: Which groups or people do you associate that group with?

ROSS: Hm?

FOLLET: The ultraconservatives. Who is —

ROSS: Well, again, there's bleed between the three. I mean, the Christian Coalition would be in the religious right, but the state chairman, the

Louisiana state Chairman of the Christian coalition was David Duke's campaign manager. So, there's bleed all through it, OK? You're going to find people who are in the ultraconservative camp who are going to be part of the Christian Coalition and the religious right. So, I'm not doing it to say there are rigid lines separating them.

There are different rationales for the same theory separating them. Different justifications for the same theory, and that's what makes it all part of a white supremacist construct that starts up being anti-black, anti-people of color, anti-woman, pro-white, pro-Western civilization. I mean, these are the things that the far right would say are based on race, the religious right would say based on religion, the conservatives would say based on the superiority of our economic system.

And then you've got the traditionalists. These are the people who say, "It's just our tradition." And that's where a George Bush would end up, in the traditionalist system, much more so than — George Bush the first, anyway — much more so than the ultraconservative or the religious right. Now, George Bush the second is a throwback, because he actually has moved to the right, away from the traditionalists, to span that bridge between the religious right and the ultraconservatives. You know, so he's a throwback to the systems. He's not nearly as moderate as his father was. But together they form white supremacy.

But you cannot attack the policies of George Bush the first with the same strategy that you would use to attack David Duke's policies, because they're using different rationales, different justification, different ways of operating, for promoting the same policy. I mean, it is the same policy, it's just with a new spin. And that's what we were, I was trying to teach with that poster, that you have to be able to differentiate between the trends within the white supremacist movement.

And so, the policemen who beat up Rodney King may be racist, but it is absolutely wrong to call them a member of the Ku Klux Klan. Because if you ask that person personally, they will tell you, "Not only do I not dislike [black] people, some of my best friends are black." You're not ever going to find anybody in the Klan saying that, you know. So, to respond to white supremacy, you need to have a more sophisticated analysis. So I did that work for five years.

I probably want to close in talking about the epiphany I had while doing that work, unless you had a question.

FOLLET: No, go for it.

ROSS: One of the things that Lenny Zeskind did that was very, very, profound — at least in my mind — was construct as part of his spy network a safe haven for people who wanted to leave hate groups. And so, he would be the first call a lot of the people who wanted to leave hate groups would make. And so, I actually was troubled by that, because I always felt that, Well, what do we know how sincere their change of heart is? I mean, this guy's been in the Klan and this guy's been a Nazi, and this

woman's leading skinheads to beat up people. How sincere is that? And I actually was following a couple of my own vectors, which I hope I don't forget to talk about.

I was looking at gender in hate groups. I wrote this article called "Sisterhood in Sheets," looking at how women were emerging into the leadership of hate groups. Kathleen Blee and I talked a lot about her research, and other women started writing on it as well, about the role of "sisterhood in sheets." But I found that it was interesting that women in hate groups, though they wouldn't use the feminist word for themselves, they were doing quite feminist things, meaning taking leadership, growing their own skinhead groups, not just entering the Klan as the "wife of," but independently joining, demanding leadership, demanding voice, even within hate groups. I thought it was quite interesting that feminism would erupt in such an unlikely quarter. But anyway, that's a whole other question.

I also did research on — it was called "Women's Watch" — that was a research project aimed at looking at Klan and Nazi involvement in the antiabortion movement. Those were some kind of gender vectors that I was — and I would suspect that if I had not been a woman in my position, those projects maybe never would've happened, because it was only looking at our routine research with the gender lens that caused the information to be focused in on and be talked about.

But anyway, back to the epiphany. Um, so, I was troubled by this work and again, when I'm troubled, I tend to take 'em to Reverend C.T. Vivian, because I kind of consider him a mentor, a person who'd been through the civil rights movement. He told Dr. King what to do, so what better source do I have? And C.T. actually put it to me quite baldly. He said, "Well, Loretta, you go around the country telling people to give up hate. Well, you need to be there for them when they do." My, gosh. I don't need that. I wanted you to support me in opposing Lenny, not tell me it's my job to go where he wants to go, right?

26:39

But anyway, so I began to be Lenny's backup in terms of — when people called him who wanted to exit hate groups, his main interest in them was milking them of their information. So he would handle them and record hours of interviews with them. What do you know about so-and-so? What do you know about — Well, on April 16, on this day, what was going on, that kind of stuff. Totally deprogramming, purging them of information.

But the people still need to have their lives put back together, because when you leave hate groups, it's not just like quitting the Kiwanis Club. You're leaving with a lot of secrets, sometimes secrets about criminal activities. People get assaulted and sometimes murdered for leaving hate groups. They tend to hate what they call "white race traitors" even worse than they hate black people, because they see black people as subhuman. We're animals. We're not supposed to be able to think for ourselves. When a white person betrays the cause, they're doing so intentionally, because they're the smartest people on earth. So that's how they see it.

And so, even after they've emptied their minds and souls of all this information, they still need help. And so, it was part of my — it became part of my job to help them reintegrate back into society. And in many ways, it was like a nonprofit witness protection program, because they couldn't call on the state or the government for help. I mean, they didn't want to. These are people who [didn't have] a whole lot of trust, even after they gave up hate, in the federal government. They see themselves as a revolutionary force against the federal government.

And so, my job was to contact Churches of Christ, Presbyterian churches, Lutheran churches, Methodist churches, groups we worked with all along, to see if they would take people in, provide housing, provide clothing, provide some money to get out of the state, those kinds of things, develop a support network for them.

And we had some interesting times. There's this couple out of Wisconsin called Ken and Carol Petersen. I think they were in La Crosse, Wisconsin, or Janesville, Wisconsin, as a matter of fact. And they had been in the Ku Klux Klan and Ken and Carol decided that they were going to leave the Klan. Well, the minute they told their Klan buddies that they were going to leave, somebody came by and did a drive-by shooting into their house and what have you. And so, Ken and Carol left that night. They said, "OK, we're out of here and you know, you're shooting at the house. The next time you might not miss. Let's leave." And it was, like, October or so. It's kind of cold in Wisconsin at that time.

And interestingly enough, Geraldo Rivera had just, like, four months ago before that, done this show in Jamesville with the Petersens where he'd gotten his nose broken, when the Nazi threw the chair or something on the stage. And so, anyway, the Petersens were rather hate-group celebrities at the time and stuff. But I don't know what happened in their heads, but somehow being a hate-group celebrity wasn't working for them, so they were going to leave the Klan. Ken had joined it first and Carol had the typical wife story. She joined because her husband did. She was no true believer. Ken was. But they decided to leave.

And so, I remember going to Janesville to meet with and work with the Petersens, and while we were there, we wanted to hook them up with some churches and talk about moving them to La Crosse or some other places in Wisconsin, and see if they can relocate. While we were there, *20/20* decided that they were going to do the story about them leaving the hate group. The producer from *20/20* decided that it would be so cute if we shot it like 2 o'clock in the morning with Ken Petersen in a top coat with his hat pulled down over his head, looking like an *I Spy* thing. I tell you, this big-dick thing runs through everything. I mean, it was chilly, it was cold, right? While the producer's there talking to Ken, and Ken's got his hat pulled up, and down, and his collar pulled up and, you know, like he's escaping Soviet Russia.

FOLLET: They're going along with this.

ROSS: Right. Because it's all being staged, right. Meanwhile, Carol and I are standing off to the side. Now, I had a coat because I knew I was going to Wisconsin, right? But Carol didn't have a coat, because she had to leave the house really quickly. She didn't get a coat. And so — and this taping went on for hours, like, two or three hours — and so, after about a half hour of her shivering next to me, we started trading off the coat. You know, I'd wear it for a half hour to keep warm, she'd wear it for a half hour to keep warm. Because I just couldn't stand standing out there with her shivering. And I think that was part of it. It was like, it's kind of hard to hate somebody that just wore your coat, you know, kind of thing. And Carol's OK.

But anyway, that wasn't the breakthrough for me. A few months after that, I get this phone call at the office and this deep gravelly voice says, "Hello. I'd like to talk to Leonard Zeskind." And we've always filtered calls because we get a lot of hate calls, people threatening to blow us up, blow up our children. C.T.'s house had been fire bombed when he founded CDR, so we always had a certain amount of caution. And so I say, "Who is this?" "This is Floyd Cochran." I'm like, *The Floyd Cochran*? I was stupid. I said, "*The Floyd Cochran*?" He said, "Yes. I need to speak to Leonard Zeskind." Floyd Cochran was the national spokesman for the Aryan Nations. You've heard this story before. I'm sorry.

FOLLET: No, no, no, please do. I want to caution you, though, that it's —

ROSS: 3:20.

FOLLET: In terms of, yeah, but the story, absolutely.

ROSS: And he was calling us from Idaho, where the Aryan Nations was headquartered, in Hayden Lake, Idaho, and he'd just been kicked off the compound by Richard Butler. And the reason he'd been kicked off the compound was because Floyd's second son had been born with a cleft palate and his Nazi friends told him that his son was a genetic defect and needed to be put to death. And this caused Floyd to wake up, kind of like, Who am I hanging out with? Now, Floyd had been a Nazi since he was 15, and he was 33 now. And he'd been kicked off the compound and didn't know where to call, and so he was calling to find Lenny Zeskind.

So I gave him Lenny's number. I think Lenny wanted to talk to Floyd. And that was the other thing. Lenny never objectified these people in hate groups. He always saw them as working-class white boys who didn't have a clue, limited education, a lot of them. Lenny was a working-class Jewish guy who never went to college. He was brilliant, just brilliant. So, he related and stuff like that. So, I was the one who had issues with them, but he never did.

And so he talked to Floyd and did the deprogramming for a couple of months and then it became my job to handle Floyd. Well, handling

Floyd became a little intense because first of all, Floyd wanted to do this national tour apologizing for the skinheads he had recruited into the hate movement. I think it was triggered by the fact that two skinheads he had recruited into the Aryan Nation in Allentown, Pennsylvania, named Freeman, had come home and murdered their entire family. And even though Floyd didn't participate in the crime, he certainly felt responsible for bringing these, what had been two good guys, two good kids, into the hate movement, for the things they did.

And so we ended up doing a tour that was very public. And what kind of shows — we did the *Springer Show*, we did *Good Morning America*, we just did a whole lot of different shows. It was big news: Nazi recanting and what have you. Floyd messed with a whole lot of lives. He went to Montana to testify in support of gay rights legislation, adding gays into hate crimes legislation, which was the scariest thing he'd ever done in his life. We spent a lot of time together, just touring all the cities we could go to. And he was big news. Here's this former Aryan Nation's person and stuff.

Floyd and I got to know each other quite well. He was married, though he was separated from his wife, with two kids, because she never joined the hate movement with him. He kept that part of his life separate, kind of thing. But he was also sleeping around on his wife badly and all kinds of stuff. And so, finally, on one of our trips, Floyd said, "Loretta, where's the movement I can join?" I said, "What do you mean? You can join the civil rights movement." He said, "No, no, no. I don't think the civil rights movement is for me."

37:14

I said, "Why not? You don't have to be" — and he actually said, you know, he said something that made me think you had to be black to be in the civil rights movement. You had to be a woman to join the woman's movement. But I'm trying to disabuse him of that stereotype. "I don't think so," he said. "Where's the movement I can join?" So, here goes Loretta, trotting back to C.T. What am I going to go with this guy now? He wasn't moving. What am I supposed to do?

And that's where C.T. tells me this wonderful story about how Dr. King never meant to build a civil rights movement, he meant to build a human rights movement, so I go trotting back to Floyd and say, "You're supposed to join the human rights movement." And then it dawned on us that none of us know anything about human rights, so that's how NCHRE [National Center for Human Rights Education] was thought of.

I left CDR in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing. Oklahoma City happened in April 1995. I remember, and I'll try to tell this in five minutes or less. I remember the morning of April 19 very well, because before I could even get to work — by this time, Lenny had left CDR, so I was now in charge of research and programs, and that's why I had the title of Program Research Director. And I had two researchers on my staff, both white. Anyway, they were white because they were good infiltrators, and one of them was a woman and she was real good, but she had this deep Southern accent that I could barely understand. But

she got people to tell her things that — because of their own blindness around gender.

Anyway, before I can get to work, I heard the news of the Oklahoma City bombing. Now, Noah and Maryann had been — one of the things we routinely monitored was hate lines. They used to have Dial-a-Hate messages where you could listen to, “This is the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. This is our calendar of events. This is what we’re going to do.” We used to monitor those routinely to know where Klan rallies were going to be, or hate things and stuff like that.

April 19 was a very significant day because it was close to Hitler’s birthday and there was always a big Aryan Fest up at the Aryan Nation on or around April 19th. April 19th was when the Waco [Texas] incident happened with David Koresh and that situation. There was this guy in Arkansas who had committed a robbery, killed a couple of black people in this robbery, this white guy. He was executed on April 19th. There was something dealing with The Order [white supremacist group in Pacific Northwest] that it happened on April 19th, so April 19th was a huge day in hate-group culture.

So, when I heard the news of the bombing in Oklahoma City and it was a federal building, I said, “That really sounds like our boys. This just sounds like our boys.” Right? But meanwhile, CNN is wondering if it’s Arab terrorists and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. So when I got to work, I asked Noah, “Noah, review the tapes for this week. Let’s review them again and let’s see if anybody said anything about April 19th other than the usual and the customary.”

And so Noah goes and reviews the tapes and he brings me this report that says, Loretta, April 19th is, like, all over the place in terms of hate groups and what they’re saying — and the Internet, I mean, it’s everywhere, April 19th. And so I take this to my boss, Beni, and she green lights me having a press conference on Friday morning — this is Wednesday, so by Friday — where we say, We don’t think this is Arab terrorists. We think this is home grown, right? So we have the press conference, like, 10 o’clock Friday morning. By 2 o’clock, they had arrested Tim McVeigh that day.

And — race and gender plays out again, isn’t that our theme? I opened the press conference up, you know, giving them my theory, you know, saying, April 19 is too significant [in the] white supremacist movement, this is why we think, these are the details, this is the background. I mean, we got a bank of reporters here. I mean, this one time we didn’t have a problem getting any press, right? We had a bank of reporters here. Blah, blah, blah.

So then Noah, who is white, I said, “Noah, why don’t you come and play the tape for us that you recorded.” Noah comes and plays the tape. All of a sudden, all of the cameras not only switch to Noah, but all the questions switch to Noah. And Noah looks back and says, “Wait a minute. I don’t know this stuff. I only know what I recorded. She’s the one who gives the analysis.” Right? And we had to spend the rest of the press conference making these damn reporters respect a black woman

being an authority on hate groups. Noah had been with me three months. It was just the fact that they were relieved that they had a white guy to ask questions of. Race and gender plays out again.

But I left CDR not so long after that. Not only because I was getting intrigued with the human rights framework, which I was, and I've written about this, too. When a woman does hate group research, especially a single woman, she is far more vulnerable than men who do this work, particularly married men, and most of the men who do this work are married. The reason being is that married men can use their wives' identities to hide behind. You know, Lenny can get a phone in his wife's name. Danny can buy a house in his wife's name. So that they just can't call up information or even Google them and find out where these people live.

Well, Rose and I were both single parents. We could not get a house in somebody else's name. We couldn't get a phone listed in somebody else's name, and so we were much more exposed and vulnerable to the backlash than they were. And I never could get them to understand that, that it's different when you can't hide your identity.

One of the ways it showed up was that my poor, really naïve mother, who never really understood about this work I was doing in the first place, gets this phone call from someone who says that they're in the Texas militia. And they proceed to interview my mother about my life, and then invite her to a militia meeting to prove to her daughter that they're not racist. Mom didn't even think nothing of it. She didn't call me to tell me.

44:41

Here's another Mother's Day story. Mother's Day, I call my mom to wish her Happy Mother's Day. She said, "Oh, Loretta, just a few weeks ago, I was talking about you to this guy who said he was in the Texas militia. Did he ever call you?" (laughs) "No, Mom, he never called me." And my picture was all in the Klan newspapers and all kinds of stuff. I mean, basically, I was outed in a big serious way.

And so, interestingly enough, I didn't feel so much under threat, but I didn't like the fact that they knew where my parents lived. And I have no idea what my mother told them. And when I expressed my concerns to my dad, my dad just pulled out all his weapons out of the closet and put a Smith & Wesson sign in the front yard and he just basically said, Don't come mess with us. But still, I felt that they did not need to be exposed to extraordinary risks simply because of the work that I did. That was hard. It was really hard.

And so, Oklahoma City was kind of like the straw that broke my back in terms of my work and making me want to do something else. I'd been there for five years, felt we'd had some impact, but also felt there was a need to move on, just to put a period to this.

I also thought that we needed to start teaching about human rights as part of the anti-hate group work but I couldn't get my boss to understand that, because the answer to Floyd's question — What movement should I belong to? — was the human rights movement, that you can't build a human rights movement if you don't know about

human rights. And so I felt that we needed to add a program component around human rights and move beyond the civil rights framework that we were using at CDR into the larger human rights program. And she didn't get it, she didn't understand it. So in December of that year, I left that job and in January, I opened up NCHRE, and we can talk about that tomorrow. Does that close it for you?

FOLLET:

It does. It does.

47:40

END OF TAPE 17

TAPE 18 DECEMBER 3, 2005 [first minutes setup and room tone]

FOLLET: The lingering question from yesterday that stands out for me is your comment about the gender-specific work that went on at CDR when you were there, probably because you were there, and specifically the Women's Watch Program to trace the relationship between the white supremacist movement and abortion politics.

2:50

ROSS: Talk about those?

FOLLET: Please.

ROSS: OK. In 1992, I had begun to notice that, first of all, as part of our monitoring process, we collected all this data: the names of people who were in the white supremacist movement, membership lists, organizational lists, ties; plus, we analyzed their strategies and tactics, their kidnappings, their murders, their fire bombings, the things that they did which were routine in the white supremacist movement. And I began to suspect that as the antiabortion movement used these tactics, that they were learning them from the white supremacist movement. And then we had some people that were clearly crossover people, like John Burt down in Florida, who was very much involved in the antiabortion movement down there, admittedly had been in the Ku Klux Klan — so, therefore, clear indication that there had been some crossover.

And so I began to wonder whether or not we had in our data base people who were involved in the antiabortion movement. So then we began the process, I began the process, of collecting their arrest records at the clinic sieges: people who were blockading, barricading clinics and, you know, throwing their bodies and gluing the locks and things like that. I began to collect those names and then comparing them against the names in our data base and that's where I began to prove that there was crossover, because it was more than just tactical, it was actually personnel that was crossing over, and seeing who showed up on both lists.

And so, we named the project Women's Watch. Ironically, we began the project collecting the data six months before the first doctor was killed, but you could see it coming. You could see it coming, as if they're going to absorb members from the white supremacist movement, create this violent vigilante subculture, then they were going to escalate the violence, the Army of God people were the same as The Order, I mean, in terms of what they believed and stuff. And so that became Women's Watch. We were lucky enough to get funding from the Merck Foundation to help pay for it and had interns working on the data compilation.

Eventually, we issued a report called "Women's Watch." What it basically proved was that the violence in the antiabortion vigilante

subculture ebbs and rises. Sometimes it's more heightened than others. And it seems to be pretty closely connected to what was happening in the national political scene. When Ronald Reagan was talking about passing the Human Life Amendment to the Constitution, then the violence went down because they thought that they were getting their political agenda passed. But, of course, when they looked like they were losing politically or legislatively, that's when the assaults on the clinics and the doctors and the staff at the clinics went up. And so, there was this ebb-and-flow kind of process happening, where we could trace the violence over time and tie it to the political scene.

One of the, I guess, interesting things about the research is that the violence rebounded on them, because as the vigilantes became more violent, then they lost the peaceful protesters who just wanted to quote "save the babies," coming from churches and wanted to use prayer and not the violent confrontations, not the violence, didn't want to be associated with murders, as a matter of fact. And so, it really backfired on them in a serious way, and in terms of destroying the clinic siege movement. They really shot themselves, as well as others, in the foot when they used that.

But I think that because I was a feminist looking at that data in a new way, it occurred to me and probably wouldn't have occurred to anybody else, a number of researchers after "Women's Watch" got produced starting looking at the links between the far right and the antiabortion movement, but I know we were the first to not only suspect the tie but prove the tie, through crossing over of personnel records and arrest records from the white supremacist movement.

FOLLET: What was your understanding of how abortion figured into the ideology of these movements, into the politics? Was it just a convenient tactic? Or is there something more substantive to it?

ROSS: Well, go back to the far right, the religious right, the conservatives, and the traditionalists. The far right were very explicit in saying that they wanted to prohibit white women from having babies, because white women having babies was the future of the white race. America is being overrun by these mongrel races and so, they had a very race-specific –

FOLLET: I think you just said prohibit white women?

ROSS: From having abortions.

FOLLET: Oh, OK. You said from having babies.

ROSS: I'm sorry, from having abortions.

FOLLET: So, start over. The far right –

ROSS:

The far right had a very race-specific policy of wanting to prevent white women from having abortions, because they felt that growing the white race is part of their master strategy on making America a white Aryan country. And so, they were very explicit. And then they were very anti-Semitic because in their newspapers, they always accuse Jewish doctors as being part of the conspiracy to abort white babies, and so, they married their anti-Semitism and their misogyny and their racial politics together very explicitly. And at the same time, they very explicitly supported abortion and sterilization for women of color. So they were very clear.

9:22

The religious right, having pretty much the same analysis but using a religious basis, defined abortion as a moral sin. Now, of course, they were speaking probably to a white population, much more so than — I mean, women of color by definition in most of those fundamentalist churches are sinners, no matter what we do, so I think they were speaking to a particular set, too. But they would be the ones to say, “Well, we oppose abortion for all races and reasons.” They’re the ones that get the little — they’re the ones that hold up the little black babies saying, “I saved this baby from abortion.”

And I feel so sorry for that child whose adoptive white parents see them as an object of a political agenda rather somebody who is truly loved and treasured for being who they are. I mean, that’s just sad. I mean, I’ve often wanted to go up to them and say something to them, but I figure that child’s going to have a hard enough life as it is without me making that woman or that man any angrier, because they are incredibly angry and incredibly bitter. And they hold these babies up like they’re dolls or something. I mean, it’s just scary, and I really do think that adoption agencies should screen better, and really examine the motives of people who adopt black babies and whether or not they’re using them for a political agenda or whether they really are prepared to love this child. That’s just scary.

But then, the ultraconservatives, well, they split, because there’s the libertarian wing of the ultraconservatives that feel that the government should stay out of it anyway, so they’re calling for less regulation of abortion, as opposed to more. But then, the more, uh, paleoconservative wing, like the Pat Buchanan wing, they recite religious values or the cost of raising babies or something like that as their justification for it.

And then, the traditionalists, you know, like Kinder, Kuche, Kirche, it’s like, What is a woman’s place? To stay in the home, have children, raise the family. And so, they’re the ones that oppose abortion based on what they call tradition.

Now, as a whole, the right wing uses abortion as a very effective weapon with which to both mobilize its base, attack the women’s movement, be a line in the sand, in the culture wars, I mean, it’s just, is very easy for them to marry anticommunist politics, which of course, I won’t say ended, but certainly diminished, after 1989 with the fall of the Soviet Union, with anti-woman politics caught up in both lesbian rights

and abortion, and anti-gay politics and that way they build their big coalition, their broad [movement] — the gun owners, they bring everybody into their tent using these wedge issues that some of us would define as a culture war.

And interestingly enough, they have evolved so much into government intervention into people's private lives that they're scarcely recognized as conservatives now, because for the government to make all this intervention, you have to call for bigger government. You have to have huge deficits, federal spending, and all of that. And so, the conservatives of the 1950s would not recognize the conservatives of today, when conservative really did stand for smaller government, free enterprise, you know, individual rights and stuff like that, where now, they're talking about Big Brotherism is a conservative value. It sounds rather proto-fascist to me, so. I'm not sure if I answered your questions.

FOLLET:

Uh-hm, yeah. Did you — beyond noticing these connections and documenting these connections between the antiabortion politics and the white supremacist movement — did you try to develop particular strategies to address it? Did the position of CDR, in your mind, have to change in order to address the abortion component, the women's component, of hate movements?

14:30

ROSS:

Well, let's keep in mind that CDR was firmly embedded in the civil rights movement, so gender issues was not a priority institutionally. And so, my projects were kind of like stepchildren. They were tolerated but not encouraged. They certainly didn't get the institutional support, let's say, the burned churches project got, because that was firmly in the civil rights movement, talking about assaults on churches. Assaults on women: not as prioritized.

And it was really funny, because by that time, the executive director was a woman, a black woman, and I told her once that I was concerned about how "Woman's Watch" and (unclear) and stuff weren't getting the same kind of resources put into them, even though I was bringing independent grants to support them. And she said, "Well, nobody can accuse me of gender discrimination." (laughs) And I said, "Beni, it's not about being accused of gender discrimination, but institutionally, this place is not equipped to look at women's issues and it really needs to look at women's issues. And she didn't have a background for it. She came from 14 years working at the Martin Luther King Center for Social Change. She came out of the civil rights movement and it was really hard to change her perspective, so.

FOLLET:

And she was thinking that because she's a woman, she couldn't be accused of gender discrimination?

ROSS: Right. (laughs) And, actually, we had that same thought, discussion, when Lenny [Zeskind] resigned as research director and I was asked to take his job. I combined it with the program research department but there was like a \$10,000 gap between what Lenny had been making and what I was presently making. And so I took that to Beni and she said the same thing. She said, "Nobody can accuse me of gender discrimination. I'm a woman." I said, "Wait a moment, Betty, you don't get it. It's my gender that matters right now." (laughs)

FOLLET: My \$10,000.

ROSS: Right. And it's the fact that the man had the position and he was paid this. The woman now has the position and she's getting paid that. It's my gender that matters, not yours. (laughs)

FOLLET: Did you get the raise?

ROSS: Pretty much so, pretty much so. I mean, and I'm sure she's strong as a manager — well, first of all, I didn't bring literally years of experience or anything that Lenny had. As a manager, she had to worry about the budget, but as far as I was concerned, that was her problem, because she took two full-time positions and merged them into one. It wasn't like my program responsibilities went anywhere, and I still had the [program] responsibilities, so I felt that two full-time jobs should be compensated much better than one full-time job when you're combining them. So, she didn't really get it in terms of gender politics.

FOLLET: At the same time that you're doing the work at CDR, you're continuing to be involved in the larger women's movement and on an international scale from your work since Nairobi, et cetera has continued. So, I want to see where this takes you and your involvement in some of those major international women's events of the early 90s. So, for example, I know that, or at least I think — tell me if I'm right — that you attended the International Women and Health Meeting in Uganda in '93, and that you, in addition to monitoring the South African elections in '94, you also went to the Cairo Conference, and then in '95, you went to Beijing. Is that right?

ROSS: But actually, the international stuff, as I said, started earlier. Of course it started earlier, but in the 90s, there was a founding of the Network of East-West Women, which took place in Dubrovnik, formerly in Yugoslavia. We had our first meeting in Dubrovnik. And so, being involved in — because once the Soviet Union fell and the so-called democratization of Eastern Europe [began], we had a key question, which is whether or not women's rights, which had improved under communism, would continue to be sustained under this pro-democracy movement. I mean, the free healthcare, the abortions, the free childcare,

19:23

the family leave, the things that many women in Communist Europe enjoyed. Well, we watched them wither away and get attacked under democracy. And so, what did that mean for women's rights?

And it was kind of interesting, because you talk to women from Poland and Czechoslovakia and Hungary, and all of those countries and they were so excited about the pro-democracy movement and here's women from the West saying, "Yeah, girls, but it ain't all it's cracked up to be. Trust me on this." And so, over time, during working with the Network of East-West Women, as they saw the countries roll back women's rights, outlaw abortion, family leave just disappear, all kinds of gender discrimination reappear in the workforce and in the marketplace and stuff like that, they became a lot more cynical about it.

FOLLET: What role did you play in the creation of that network?

ROSS: Simply going to the founding meeting and meetings and helping to structure it and talking to people. It was kind of interesting, because I was the only black person involved in the process. For many of them, it was some of their earliest or first encounters with African Americans from the U.S., and in a feminist context.

FOLLET: Now am I right that some of the others from the U.S. were Linda Gordon?

ROSS: I don't remember Linda at that meeting.

FOLLET: Meredith –

ROSS: Meredith –

FOLLET: Meredith Tax. Who else?

ROSS: Nadine Strauss, or Taub, I think is her name. Oh, I'd have to pull out some records to remember them. Irene Crowe [Taub] is one of the ones that had suggested that I get involved in it, but Irene didn't actually make the meeting.

FOLLET: Irene pulled you in?

ROSS: Uh-hm.

FOLLET: And who was Irene?

ROSS: Irene is the founder of the Pettus Crowe Foundation, a good friend of mine in Washington, D.C. And Irene had been approached for funding for the meeting, and uh, she's known that I'd been interested in communism and post-Communist studies and stuff like that in terms of

where my passions in research were. So she said “Loretta, have you got any interest in going for this?” And I, kind of, Well, I’ve never been to Eastern Europe before. Yeah, why not? And so she was the one that recruited me directly. I’d have to look at the old records from then to remember. But the Network is still going strong.

FOLLET: Are you still involved?

ROSS: Not actively, not actively. I get the e-mails — we’ve got a listserve and all of that — but really, one of the projects I never got a chance to invest any time in was that I was going to do some kind of project around African American history in Eastern Europe, some way of trying to convey that sense of history, because they know Dr. King and that’s about it. And the fact that there’s so many parallels — because, for example, I was in Yugoslavia when the war broke out and we literally had to hopscotch out of the country. I mean, our plane took off from Dubrovnik, landed in Split, landed in Belgrade before we could get out of there, and so, I mean, and to see the racialization of what looks like culturally identical people, and the whole process over which that takes place, looks so much like the construction of racism here that I think there’s something we could both share and learn from, from more dialogue with people in Eastern Europe.

FOLLET: Explain that racialization that you observed there?

23:55

ROSS: The creation of the racial other to justify going to war against your neighbor, your brother. I mean, we’ve seen it in Rwanda, we’ve seen it in Kosovo, we’ve seen it all over the world, around ethnic cleansing and ethnic battles, and it’s a familiar story here, and so I thought there would be a lot that could be exchanged and learned from that.

What I found, though, in an interesting way, is that Eastern Europe on the whole is much less racist towards black people than Western Europe, and the way I explained that, at least to myself, is it’s not so much the novelty effect, because there simply aren’t that many black people that they’re exposed to, but it’s more the cultural continuity effect.

Those are cultures that because of communism, the Iron Curtain or whatever it’s called, they maintained a lot more cultural continuity. They are clearer about who they are, their cultural rituals, their practices. There’s less of that melting-pot-diffused, I-don’t-know-who-I-am-but-white kind of stuff that you see in Western Europe and in America, but they’re very, very clear and very proud of their cultural traditions.

And I find that people who are clear about their own culture are less intimidated by others, at least in Europe, and less worried about encountering a different culture. A different culture? OK. You got your culture, I’ve got mine. So what? It is people who don’t have a cultural

basis, cultural foundation, a sense of cultural identity, that are absolutely intimidated by strong expressions of someone else's cultural basis and identity. So, that was just precious to observe.

So, Dubrovnik is one of the most beautiful cities in the world and to think of it being bombed during the war was just sad, and I'm told by people who've been back there that they've done a considerable amount of rebuilding of it, but it was awful to see it bombed.

So, I wanted to really get into that work but I didn't get a chance to. But I did get a chance to do some other work and so I did continue to work in the women's movement. I'll always continue to work around organizing women of color and being engaged, working on reproductive rights. And so, we did a lot of mobilization around — where'd you say I went in '93? I can't remember.

FOLLET: Uganda.

ROSS: Oh, Uganda, right. The International Women and Health Meeting. Those happen every three years, and I've been going to those almost since their inception. I think I told you about the people in Brazil fighting for — in the Philippines fighting for Uganda. And so, we ended up going to Uganda.

Uganda was troubling in that it is a country that has been devastated by AIDS. I mean, so many people — people talk about the South African story, but they haven't really told the Uganda story. First of all, it's the bread basket of Africa, geographically. It is the lushest, richest, most fertile land on the continent. I mean, spit trees growing. Uganda is just beautiful, beautiful country. Very little desert, just wonderful farm land, valleys and what have you. At the same time, it is nearly depopulated because of AIDS. Not war, but because of AIDS.

And the high number of people that we met in '93, because we had some workshops on AIDS and went to visit some AIDS projects and stuff — and the government has done a very aggressive job, by the way, in terms of public campaigns around safe sex and stuff like that. In Uganda you see huge bulletin boards and television ads and frank talk about sex that you simply don't see in the U.S., for example. But we did these workshops — we actually shot a film of the workshops we did with women who were working in AIDS in Uganda, and every one of the women on our video was dead within three years. And that was just — I haven't been able to watch the films since then. So that was very hard. It was very, very hard. I mean, that's something that SisterLove, we — I'm involved with SisterLove Women's AIDS Project — I don't know if we've even talked about SisterLove yet.

FOLLET: We haven't yet. We haven't yet.

28:56

ROSS: Yeah. SisterLove was founded by Dazon Dixon in 1989, the year I moved to Atlanta. So, I became her founding board member, and I've

been involved with them ever since. It is through women and HIV/AIDS work that I've actually done a lot of my international work, and one of the things that we try to do within that is to infuse HIV/AIDS discussion into the reproductive rights movement, which is, should be, automatic, but it's not, but we also need to infuse discussion on reproductive rights into the HIV AIDS movement.

And so, that's the bridge that SisterLove seeks to build and so, that's how we — why we went to Uganda. I mean, that was our agenda for going to Uganda, was to foment that discussion and make the international women's health movement take up more of the discussion of HIV and AIDS as a reproductive rights issue. And, I mean, obviously, there are a lot of reproductive health issues, devices and drugs and runaway technology, population control strategies and all that, but nobody was really dealing with HIV/AIDS in the early 90s as a reproductive health issue. And we felt that that was very important.

Then, in '94, there was the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, Egypt, and so we organized a delegation and for all of these things, we organized delegations.

FOLLET: "We" being —

ROSS: Dazon, I, and Nkenge, some combination of the three of us. Because as I said, coming from that Philippines experience, where it was only Dazon and I, we said never again in terms of only having one or two women of color trying to represent an entire country of women of color. And so every time one of these major events would come along, we'd seek the funds to take at least 10, 15 women, and then we usually had a fairly generous process of determining who the women were, in terms of making it fairly democratic, making it — I don't want to say through a competitive process, but having an open way for people to apply to become a part of the delegation. So it wasn't just our friends that we were selecting to take.

FOLLET: So was the funding base changing and the terms of the funding changing by now?

ROSS: Well, interestingly enough, whenever there's a UN conference, there generally is foundation support to go to that UN conference because of the imprimatur of UN and the funders are convinced it's important for people to be there. The critique we offer of funding is that there's never any money to do the work once we get home. Yes, it's great to go to Cairo for three weeks, but what if you want to bring Cairo home? Then you can't get a grant. You can get a grant to take 30 women, but then you can't get a grant to do the work with those 30 women once you get home. So, that kind of schizophrenia in the funding has always been frustrating. There's always money when there's a big UN conference,

31:31

generally, you can find money to go to it, to take a big delegation to it. But then when that delegation gets home, that's another thing.

And that actually is why these ad hoc coalitions of women of color that we formed to go to these things always died, because we formed a huge coalition to go to the ICPD in Cairo, and once Cairo was over, there was no money to continue the work. We formed another huge delegation, coalition, to go to Beijing in '95. Beijing was over and there's no money to do the domestic work and that's why we formed SisterSong, because we got tired of that yo-yo. And I'll talk about SisterSong in a little while.

But, um, so there was the ICPD in Cairo. One of the more contentious issues about the International Conference on Population and Development was that the emphasis was on population and not development. And we who saw the lack of development of both the developing world as well as the underdevelopment of our communities within the North or the West, as we called it, was one of the major problems that women encountered. I mean, why push birth control on a population that doesn't have basic health care?

That really reveals the fact that you're really just about reducing their fertility, not ensuring that they have longer lifespans. And what studies have revealed over and over and over again, is that when a woman is convinced that the children she has will grow beyond five years of age, she will have fewer of them. If she's offered an opportunity for education, she will have fewer children. If she's offered employment opportunities, she will have fewer children.

And so, this first forced feeding of birth control and dangerous contraceptive devices and sterilization — and there's all kinds of sterilization abuse taking place by the way, still, globally — was really a race-directed population control program, because it really had no connection to getting basic health care for women.

Addressing the debt crisis that ended up with their governments paying more money back to western countries than [they were] able to invest in their own infrastructure around healthcare, and stuff like that. And so, when you try to talk about family planning or contraception or abortion outside of the context of what's happening to that country as a whole, to those communities as a whole, then you're really erring on the side of supporting population control. You're not talking about women's true empowerment. And so, our analysis always said we had to be that voice talking about development as a necessary condition for women to control the size of their families.

FOLLET:

Were you a minority voice at Cairo in putting forth that kind of argument within the U.S. delegation? A minority internationally? How did the factions break down and do you remember a specific moment or debate or workshop where push came to shove on this issue, and you took a stand?

ROSS: Well, actually, I don't think we were a minority voice in saying we were a minority within the U.S. perspective or the western perspective, or the U.S. perspective, because it's on the question of development that you find the most divisions between Western Europe and the United States. Western Europe invests a whole lot more of its GDP in developing other countries than the United States ever has, and so, we have strong differences between Western Europe and Japan and the United States in terms of development of the third world, or the developing world. So the minority opinion is always the western, the U.S. opinion. It is always the pariah country when it comes to these international conferences, the debates on human rights, the debates on development, the debates on the debt crisis. I mean, the United States is in a permanent pariah status until it changes its policy.

And by no means were we the minority; we were joining the rest of the world when we spoke out in the way that we spoke out. We echoed what was being said in Western Europe and quote "the third world" and Japan about the necessity of development being a precondition of population [reduction]. And of course, the U.S. was saying, Reduce the population and then you develop, which is absolutely the wrong way to approach it. Half your babies and then those babies you have can finally figure out how to go to school. Well, not if there's no schools. And those babies aren't going to build those schools. So it was just the wrong approach.

37:10

So we didn't feel that we were isolated, because we were joining the opinion of the rest of the world. It was the U.S. and particularly the official delegations of the U.S. government that were in fact isolated in having this fairly pejorative view of women, and particularly women in developing countries.

FOLLET: Did you go as a member of a U.S. delegation? Or how — what was your status?

ROSS: I love being the loyal opposition, so we always go as an NGO, non-governmental organization. Um, I had learned from the 1980 conference [Copenhagen Mid-Decade Conference for Women] that I never actually wanted to be on a U.S. delegation, because I am convinced that the opinions offered by the National Council of Negro Women [in 1980] might not have been their private opinions. When we were talking about the seating of the white South African delegation, but it was the official delegation opinion and they had to toe the party line?

And, I mean — not that anybody's ever asked me — let me be clear, too, I don't think a radical like me would ever get asked to join a U.S. delegation, so it's not like it's ever been offered. But at the same time, I don't think I would accept it if by some miracle it ever got offered, because I don't know if I would want to be the mouthpiece for U.S. foreign policy, which I would so fundamentally disagree with. So, I

mean, talk about a conflict in my soul, I don't think I could bear that conflict. So we were always the NGO delegation, going to the non-governmental conference, offering our workshops and what have you.

Now we did lobby the U.S. delegation to support different opinions and stuff, and it was probably at the ICPD in Cairo that women of color, coming from the NGO side, probably had their largest impact. This was a Clinton-appointed delegation, so it was by no means a more hostile, as hostile as the Reagan-appointed delegations that we'd had to deal with in Nairobi. In Nairobi, his daughter Maureen Reagan headed up the U.S. delegation. Alan Keyes was her strategic advisor — the same Alan Keyes that ran against Barack Obama [in the 2004 Illinois Senatorial race]. And so, dealing in Nairobi was a lost cause, you know. We tried, in terms of lobbying the U.S. delegation, but Clinton appointed the delegations to both Beijing and Cairo and so, we had more access, more opportunities to have people listen. I don't know if we had overall more impact, but the positions they were taking were not as hostile, were not as anti-woman, as the positions under Reagan. I don't think Bush from '88 to '92 had any international conferences that he appointed a women's delegation to, so we didn't have to deal with the Bush administration, but we did have to deal with the Reagan and the Clinton ones.

FOLLET: What you're saying, um —

ROSS: But I would also add, in the interview with Luz Alvarez Martinez — she headed up the lobbying effort for ICPD, and so I'll make sure I'll ask her that.

FOLLET: Oh, fantastic. What you're saying echoes the idea that comes up in this interview with Brinda Karat — does that name ring a bell? Brinda is the head of one of the largest women's organizations in the world, AIDWA, the All-India Democratic Women's Association.

ROSS: Oh, my goodness.

FOLLET: And this is an interview of her done by Lisa Armstrong here at Smith, and it's about Beijing. The interview was in '95 in preparation for Beijing, and what Brenda reports seems to echo your analysis about the pariah status of the United States and, by extension, the UN, even, because what she is saying is that with the fall of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a U.S.-dominated, unipolar world, that the UN itself has been diminished in significance and that there is a pervasive process of cooptation that is showing up in the preparation for Beijing, that it's now at a global level.

As she says, "All international conferences now have very strong U.S. hegemonic roles." She goes on to say, "This puts the third world

countries at a disadvantage for two reasons, because outside funding from the U.S. and the Group of Seven via the UN undercuts the process of even choosing delegations within those countries” — which is what she’s experiencing at the time in India. And then she says that, “Just the slogan of sustainable development comes to mean sustainable development as a consumption pattern of the west” —

ROSS: Development means McDonald’s.

FOLLET: — “and that it’s linked to growing population, linked to growing numbers, basically meaning fertility control of third world women.”

ROSS: She said this so much more beautifully than I did.

FOLLET: Not a bit, not a bit. But yours is not a, you know, yours is not a lonely opinion.

ROSS: Women of color in the U.S., we echo and resonate with our sisters. We’re transnational women. I mean, we come from other countries. We exist in both spheres at the same time. I remember having to attack Undersecretary for Human Rights John Shattuck one time, and I use “attack” loosely. We were both at the symposium at the Carter Center, and he just made some little off-hand comment. It was a conference on the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights that the U.S. had finally ratified in 1992, I believe. And so, he made some little offhand comment about, “Well, if we don’t watch what we’re doing, America’s just going to be like Haiti.”

44:07

And it was such a disparaging comment. And I literally had to take him on from my seat on the stage and say, “Listen, Mr. Shattuck, some of us think comparing the U.S. to Haiti is patronizing, that some of us in this audience are Haitian American, and for you to say that — and I’m not, but, you know, you just can’t go around and glibly dismiss another country and dismiss our responsibility for creating the conditions in Haiti. Excuse me. I mean, who do you think you’re talking to?”

But, yeah, we are transnational feminists. We always have been. And that gives us multiple vantage points that go up against that American hegemonic presence that attempts to reshape the world in its own image. And, like I asked in Eastern Europe, “Are you sure you want to replicate the form of democracy the U.S. has? Well, let me tell you what its faults are, and you’re going to start seeing them in your own societies.” And sure enough, that’s what’s happening.

I mean, the saddest thing that I heard recently, is how many members of not only the religious right but the far right are over there being offered fat contracts to rebuild democracy in Iraq. Excuse me. These are the people who haven’t got the practice of democracy down in the United States, and they’re going to go over to Iraq. (laughs) Give me a break.

It doesn't pass the laugh test, the test that John Kerry couldn't make himself say. It needs to pass the laugh test. I wish he'd said that in the debate, when he said, "What global test?" The laugh test, where you don't get laughed out of credibility, when you don't lose total legitimacy. He was not the quickest person on his feet. But everybody knew what he was talking about. It doesn't. It just doesn't. These are the people who are doing their best to limit democracy in the United States are being asked to participate in the construction of it in Iraq. Poor Iraqis.

But back to the point at hand. We always not only had to be the loyal opposition, but offer the critique of U.S. hegemonic influence, both — not only in terms of what it does in the U.S. but what it does overseas.

What really troubles me about the women's movement, as a matter of fact, is that it is in its own way is an imperialist movement that thinks they can fix problems overseas without holding our own government accountable for the creation of those problems. And when you go to these world conferences, the people say, "Don't come to Egypt and try to fix female genital mutilation. Don't go out there and try to talk about malaria, or whatever, you know. If you could just get your government off our backs, we could fix these problems ourselves. So you're really less help to us than you imagine yourself to be, because it's like a newfound missionary kind of thing."

Well, we can help these "poor struggling people" in these underdeveloped countries but we will not write one letter of protest to the congressperson who voted to remove the aid funds for that country. Well, why don't we kick the bozos out of office who are destroying these countries, rather than going over to these countries and offering bandages for the destruction that our hegemonic process causes.

And so, there's always been this imperialist tinge to the women's movement and that leads to the resistance of women in other countries to embrace the concept of feminism. Because when they see it coming with western biases — with codes for calling their country barbarian and assuming that the agency of women is not there in those countries to address these problems, that they can't be saved unless western women come in and save them — I mean, these are the kinds of behaviors that we often display, and a lack of acknowledgment that we have as much to learn from them, if not more, than we ever have to teach anybody.

And so, as women of color in this mix, we've always tried to be the critical eye that says, "Excuse me, we can't let you do that to Africa. Not in our name. Not in our name." And if you want to really talk about helping Africa, convince the people in one of those red states not to be a red state, and that's where the work as American feminists is that could really make a difference. The whole world is laughing at us, both for our presumption of hegemonic power but mostly for our presumption of moral authority, for there's been nothing moral about how we conduct foreign policy and its impact on other countries. There's nothing moral about that.

FOLLET: One of the ways I've heard you put it is that, as a woman of color, you connect the dots.

50:47

ROSS: Yeah, that's our job. That's our job. Because women are more than their plumbing. And unfortunately, we're dealing with a social system that, one — either the left or the right — they're always trying to reduce us to our plumbing. We're a lot more than whether or not we can have babies, or not have babies. And so, we always have to say, You have to keep the whole woman in the picture. You got to talk about whether or not she has access to health care and housing, education, employment, all of these other questions, to determine whether or not she has a baby, whether or not — these are all the kind of decisions that go into a woman's mind when she's choosing whether or not to terminate a pregnancy. And so, you just flatten her out to, Is she capable of contracepting?

I actually got stunned when I first heard, this guy from the Population Council said, "Well, we judge people based on whether they're good contraceptors or not." A good contraceptive? What the hell is that? You know, we're no longer even women. We are objects that can be judged on whether or not we contracept well or not. Give me a break. This is a woman-friendly policy? And this is from our side. Much less what the other side calls us.

And so, as women of color, we're always having to offer that critique, both within the ranks of people who call themselves pro-choice but also within the ranks of people who are opposed to women's rights. So, if it seems sometimes we don't know to turn the fight off, it's because we're fighting on so many fronts at the same time. It is hard to forget that not everything is a fight. I don't know if any of that made any sense.

FOLLET: Well it takes us, it puts us smack in the middle of your human rights work.

ROSS: Um, I decided, actually, at the Beijing conference. I was invited by this fabulous woman I met —

FOLLET: Shula?

ROSS: Sheila Koenig. Actually, I need to back up and tell the story. Right after the Oklahoma City bombing, the Stanley Foundation in Iowa had a meeting called the Future of Human Rights, and I guess this was in response to the growing hegemony of the U.S. and changing of the UN and all of that. There was a woman who was the program officer at the Stanley Foundation named Ellen Dorsey, with whom I've worked — she's from Pittsburgh and I had worked with Ellen doing anti-Klan work in Pittsburgh. She lived in Pittsburgh. Before she moved to Iowa, she

was in Pittsburgh. And so, Ellen looked at the invitation list for this conference and just saw too many white men in suits. She was just really frustrated. Here you got 30 people coming to this conference and 27 of them are white men in suits. I mean, many of us had long suspected that white men would not lead the human rights revolution.

And so she decided to invite three other people to the conference and got us on the invite list. Myself, at the time I was at CDR, Shula Koenig, who was the founder [of the People's Decade for Human Rights Education] (taping stopped; sound of chainsaw)

END TAPE 18

TAPE 19

FOLLET: So we were beginning to talk about the formation of NCHRE, National Center for Human Rights Education, and we just took a minute to look through the interview, the transcript of the interview, that you did with Stanlie James pretty recently, and I think your take on it is that it's pretty comprehensive.

1:46

ROSS: That was done in July 2002, so it's two years old, but in terms of the rationale for the founding of the NCHRE and what was going on and what was our strategic focus and all of that, that's all there in that interview, so I don't think I need to repeat it for the purposes of this, anyway, unless you want me to.

I mean, certainly moving from women's rights to civil rights to human rights is kind of like a philosophical progression for me, and NCHRE was founded with a black feminist ethos, so we were very interested in not only founding an organization that would do human rights education, but that would be run in a human rights way, which is somewhat revolutionary, because a lot of organizations don't walk the talk. And so, it's always been a challenge to run an organization where management has to be totally transparent, where people's salaries aren't big secrets, where people's salary levels are determined by their need, not their positions. So these are kind of the interesting things we've had to consider in running NCHRE. But I'm stepping down from NCHRE.

FOLLET: Before you leave NCHRE, let's do focus on two of things you just said. One is the evolution from women's rights to civil rights to human rights. Can you explain that evolution in a few short sentences? I know the answer is no, but —

ROSS: Let's see what we can do. Well, obviously, I had been very enmeshed in the women's rights movement from the earliest days of my activism, and had felt fairly comfortable working mostly in women's rights organizations. And when I wasn't working in one, I was founding them, so that's what I had done.

When I was offered the job at CDR, I really questioned whether or not I could take that job. Not because the work was not fascinating — getting an opportunity to do antifascist, antiracist work is tremendously exciting — but at the same time, working in a very male-dominated environment. And I used to joke, I don't have a problem sleeping with men, but I don't know if I want to work with them. (laughs) It's just different, when you're used to working in a feminist environment. And it wasn't as bad as I thought it was going to be, even though it was very male-centric.

But it was my introduction to the civil rights movement, to the civil rights framework, which I was not that familiar with. And the honest fact is, just because you're black doesn't mean you know civil rights.

It's like any other discipline. You have to study it. You have to be have been embedded in it to really know the movement, the players, the thoughts, the themes, and so you have to do your homework. And so I found myself doing a quick study on the history of the civil rights movement, my whole time while I was at CDR.

FOLLET:

And how would you characterize the civil rights framework?

5:19

ROSS:

As one that seeks to use U.S. constitutional remedies to address discrimination, but it is really mostly focused on discrimination, not on full justice. So that it looks at racial disparities, seeking to equalize those or eliminate those, but at the same time, overall disparities. For example, if two employees, one is white getting paid \$15 an hour and one black getting paid \$5 an hour, there's two ways to fix that. You can either raise the black person to \$15 or you can drop the white person to \$5. Under a civil rights framework, either way you go eliminates discrimination. But the problem with that framework, an antidiscrimination framework, is, What if the job should have been paying \$15, and the solution is to drop everybody to \$5? You have achieved the condition of nondiscrimination, but you haven't delivered full justice.

And so, it was wonderful to fight against discrimination, to fight for equality, but you have to ask the question, Equal to what? Have we really achieved full justice? But still understanding the discrimination framework and the constitutional remedies and why the civil rights movement chose the Supreme Court strategies and married it to mass mobilization strategies and economic boycotts and stuff was a great learning opportunity, a chance to meet the stellar people of the civil rights movement, and certainly a man that I totally admire is Reverend C.T. Vivian.

I mean, I never had a chance to meet Dr. King or any of those people, so meeting the Fred Shuttleworths, the C.T. Vivians, the real people that are still doing work. That's the other thing. They're not just resting on their laurels but you still see them engaged and involved in struggle. And I had a chance to meet, actually, and work with, Jesse Jackson when he ran for president in '84 and '88. So I had a little introduction into the civil rights movement, but not a large one. It was more of a popular uprising in terms of an electoral strategy.

And so, when Shula Koenig introduced me to the human rights framework and she started, so I — once we met in Iowa, she invited me to join her delegation to Beijing, and we were already going to Beijing, so I had a whole crew of people going to Beijing, but I joined Shula's delegation. And she assembled women from more than 20 countries that were talking about what it would mean to bring human rights education to their countries, and some of them already had functioning human rights education centers, some of them not.

And then, as I was doing a presentation at one of our workshops about the status of human rights in the United States, which of course is pretty dismal from a person of color position, everybody kind of looked at me and said, “Well, Loretta, what are you going to do about that?” Because, again, as long as Americans don’t know about human rights, all of us are going to suffer. And so it was in that October meeting that I — in Beijing — that I decided to formally found the National Center for Human Rights Education. And so that meant a transition from women’s rights to civil rights to the fullness of human rights, because human rights is eight full categories of rights. I mean, civil rights, political rights, economic rights, social rights, cultural rights, sexual, developmental, and environmental rights. So, you have to connect the dots, as I often say, when you talk about human rights.

One of my staff members, Sarah Brownlee, came up with the phrase “Undivided Justice.” “Human rights delivers undivided justice.” And so, actually, that’s where I got the title of our book, *Undivided Rights*, as a way of seeing the benefits of using the human rights framework. And for anybody who’s like a walking coalition, where you care about more than one issue at a time, the human rights framework is perfect, because you can talk about women’s rights as human rights, or the rights of young people as human rights, or environmental justice as a human rights issue, economic justice as a human rights issue, and on and on and on. And lesbian rights are human rights.

So, it connects all the dots. It heals all the divisions. Strategically, it unites divided social justice movements that exist in a series of parallel but unconnected movements. I’ve heard people describe this as movement silos, like, where if you’re in women rights, you have no contact with environment with environmental justice. You have to contact with LGBT, and really getting out of those silos, so that we can form a more united front against this broad range of assaults that we’re all experiencing.

So for me, the human rights framework felt like the movement that I have been waiting for, and just as important, it moves beyond the limited constitutional protections and remedies that you’re seeking into global protections and remedies, to use the UN system for redressing wrongs or preventing violations. For example, if we, as a country, believe that Saddam Hussein had committed all of these crimes against us, well, we could certainly have prosecuted him under the International Criminal Court. But the U.S. of course has refused to sign on to the International Criminal Court. But it does provide vehicles for addressing terrorism, for addressing human rights violations, but also for ensuring that people’s rights are respected. The World Health Organization and the role they play —

I mean, the fact that we have an international telephone system and you can make a call to any country in the world that has a telephone system is because of the UN. Because we don’t have — each country doesn’t have its own airspace regulations so that planes are not bumping

into each other as you cross from one country's boundaries into another, is because of the UN system. So I believe that the American public is denied the opportunity to understand how important the United Nations is in our life, and we tend to take its benefits for granted, the fact that we can mail that letter to anywhere or we can fly anywhere or call anywhere. We take that for granted, and all we hear is the right-wing diatribe against the UN, Oh, they're gonna invade our sovereignty, they won't support us when we want to go to war, and all of that.

And the only way to really address that is through human rights education, teaching the American public about our responsibilities and obligations to the global community that also reinforce our obligations to ourselves. What should we demand of the human rights framework? What obligations does it spell out for our government towards us? Also, what obligations do we have towards each other as just human beings sharing a planet? Trying to all get along, in that famous phrase.

FOLLET:

One of the ways you express that in your interview with Stanlie is by talking about the, um, on the one hand the limits of diversity and tolerance as an approach. And you talk about how you personally, through your work against the white supremacist movement, came to understand that objectifying others and hating the haters wasn't adequate. And some of your work with the Floyd Cochran's of the world led you to have what you describe as a faith in love as the answer.

13:30

ROSS:

Well, actually, I'm not original. Didn't Paul McCartney and John Lennon and Mahatma Gandhi all say that before me? But I didn't believe it. I didn't believe. I really — and as social justice activists, we're animated by anger and oppression, and we get terribly angry at the people who we perceive as oppressing. And so we tend to objectify people who seem to manifest all those things that we despise, the brutality towards each other, the violence against women, the bad treatment of children, the destruction of the environment. I mean, you name it, we're angry at those people. And when you use anger as your animus, you feel kind of hollow inside, like, What's going to get me out of bed every morning? What's going to stoke the passion so that I can continue to do this incredibly demanding work? It is so much easier to melt into society than to be the sand in the gears.

And so, when I began to appreciate the beauty of the human rights framework, one of its most stunning characteristics is that it builds on our common humanity, not what divides us, but what unites us. We're all human beings. We're sharing an environment. We're sharing a planet. We're sharing a mutual destiny, and we're sharing an obligation to take care of each other.

And historically, human rights is seen as kind of like an ideal, mamby-pamby, you know, let's-just-love-each-other kind of [idealism]. But in this post-9/11 world, human rights, in my mind, has emerged as the only system that makes sense. Terrorists are much [less] likely to

become terrorists, suicide bombers, for example, if they feel and are convinced that they have hope in their lives, that they are not destined to be eternally living in refugee camps, that their children are not going to be shot by snipers, that their houses are not going to be bombed by U.S. bombs. I mean, if they are convinced that we are not out to destroy them, chances are they will be persuaded not to try to destroy us, whereas this current downward spiral of violence begetting violence and state-sponsored terrorism fighting individual terrorists has put all of our futures at risk.

And so, human rights, in my mind, moves from that idealistic politic into the real politic. It is the only thing that seems to make sense right now in this entirely globalized world, where all our problems are transnational. You cannot think of a purely American problem. There's no such thing as a purely American problem. They're all transnational. They're all globalized and the solutions to these problems have to be global. And the human rights framework offers a value system, mechanisms for dealing with these problems, a legal regime, and it has the support of popular people's movements around the world that have used it.

17:40

I didn't really speak about getting the chance to monitor the '94 South African elections. That was of course a life-altering experience. I had been to South Africa before, researching a far-right organization there, and when I got invited to come monitor the elections, that was just another special opportunity and, like, one of those things where you never thought you'd ever be there in that situation, watching this country transition from apartheid to democracy and watching Nelson Mandela get elected president.

But what was life-altering about that for me was that I watched people who had never voted in their life stand in line under brutally hot conditions for three days to vote. I mean, three days in the sun, standing in line. Americans didn't like standing in line three hours to vote, much less three days. I mean, day and night, they're sleeping right there in line. Not having the concession stands. I mean, if someone came through with some fresh oranges, that was like what they got to eat in those three days.

And after South Africa, I committed to never not voting again in my life. I don't care if it's a vote for the city dogcatcher, I am there. Because before, I used to take voting for granted, and if I felt it was sufficiently compelling, I'd vote, but I also felt that my choices were often Tweedle-Dee or Tweedle-Dum, so, if I voted, it didn't really matter because I'm still going to get the same kind of neoliberal system.

Whereas South Africa really not only taught me the importance of voting, but the importance of nuancing what I'm voting for. I actually had to go through this in a forum. We had a forum on gay marriage in Atlanta a couple of months ago, before the election, and one of the panelists, I won't say her name, actually had the temerity to say that it

doesn't matter if you vote, because what's the difference between Kerry and Bush?

And she got really mad at me when I responded to her, and I said, "Listen, if you can't tell the difference between a neofascist and a neoliberal, we're all in trouble." Now, admittedly, both of them are not necessarily working in our interests, but one of them you have a chance to dialogue with and the other one is determined to eradicate us. And it's kind of hard to really negotiate with a fascist regime, where at least you can negotiate with one that purports to be democratic. So, if you don't know the difference — and I thought it was very irresponsible for this former member of the Black Panther Party to be up here telling people that it doesn't matter if they vote, in an audience of young people. I mean, that was just not good.

And then I also think that there are many people who say they believe in human rights who are amazingly cynical. Well, if you don't believe that it's going to work, why are you in our way? Because you need to be retired somewhere and doing something where you're not an obstructionist to those of us who do believe in the power of people, who do believe in the power of this vision.

And so, one of the hardest audiences to provide human rights education to are the critics, the nay-sayers, and the cynics. And amazingly, these are the people often with the most privilege in American society. You never find poor people being cynical about their rights. You never find oppressed people being cynical about their rights. It's always the pampered privileged elite: Oh, it'll never work. America will never get human rights. Why are we bothering with this?

I mean, it's like, Well, you don't feel it's an emergency because your human rights may not be threatened right now, but if your butt was on the line, you'd feel the same sense of urgency as all the rest of us whose butts are on the line.

FOLLET: And yet you have a sense that the role of race and gender privilege here — you've said several times that waitin' around for white men to fix this system is not the best approach to achieving social justice, and yet you also understand whites and men as part of a larger system.

21:55

ROSS: Well, they're fundamentally important to fixing the system, but they are not the ones to figure it out. That's part of the problem.

FOLLET: So if I were to ask you, for example, we talked about connecting the dots. Is one dot more prominent than another? If you had a — is there a prime mover to the systems of these interlocking systems of oppression?

ROSS: Um, there are people coming from the women's movement, the feminist movement, that feel that patriarchy is the original form of oppression and all other types of oppression are predicated on the template of patriarchy. That could be true, I'm not sure. There are people, the race

people, who think that racism is the original, overarching form of oppression, and the racialization and the othering and all of that is the primary template. I'm not convinced of any of that.

I'm convinced that whatever the construct, there will be an effort by some people to get on top at the expense of pushing everybody else down, and they will use any variety of means and justifications for it. I don't think it's natural. I think it is socialized. I don't think that it is inevitable that we build a conflicting, competitive society. I do think that it is possible to construct cooperating communal societies. I do believe that. Again, just like I don't believe babies are born hating. I believe that's all taught, and what can be learned can be unlearned.

So, no, I can't single out any one aspect of oppression and say that it is the engine that drives all the others. I tend to see an intersectional system. They work in an amazing calculus together and you can't separate any one variable and say, Without this one, the whole system falls apart. Well, actually, they're locked together and they interlock together and so you really can't separate them.

FOLLET: So the role of class, for example, and economic realities –

ROSS: It's all in there.

FOLLET: – is on a par with –

ROSS: – with class, is on a par with race, is on a par with gender, which is on a par with sexual orientation, which is on a par with ethnicity, is on a par with Christian nationalism. I mean, it's all working together, and I can't — I think the whole process of trying to rank oppressions is again a western construct that just never worked for me. Why do I have to say, This is number one, this is number two? Whose rule is that, you know? That is just a western desire to impose a hierarchical order on that which cannot be put in rank order that way.

I get that question a lot from people in the media, If there is just one thing you could fix, what would that one thing be? And I often have to say, You're asking me that question? (laughs) I mean, if there were any one thing. There's never a magic bullet. There's never any — it's a complicated world we live in, and I can understand the human desire to simplify it, but you just can't simplify it so much. We live complicated lives in a complex world and there is no magic bullet to solve any of our problems.

FOLLET: And you yourself have always, it seems to me, been a bridge person, in a way that — your form of social activism seems to either reflect that belief or the belief comes out of the way you organize. So, for example, when you were at the Rape Crisis Center in D.C., you worked in prisons with batterers. When you –

26:14

ROSS: With murderers. They weren't batterers. They were murderers. They had murdered women.

FOLLET: At NOW, you were working within the mainstream white women's movement. You are — you seem — does that — is that a fair characterization, a bridge person, and does that come out of your belief in the interrelatedness of these —

ROSS: Well, that's probably how I would describe it now, but I certainly didn't start out describing it that way. I think what preconditioned me for that was that, first of all, we talked about my life story. I was a military kid. I was always the kid that had to fit into an existing social setting and cultural, geographical setting. I mean, moving every 12, 18 months, and then I went to white schools, so I was always minoritized, and so my friends were just as likely to be white as they were to be black. There was never an opportunity to develop only black friends in a white school setting. I mean, at least not for me, because we were in the honors section.

Um, and so, nothing in my life caused me to objectify people of other races because it was just — and then San Antonio, where it's 60 percent Mexican American, 20 percent white, 20 percent black, so even the blacks and whites in San Antonio were always the minority. And so, it was totally accidental, but it was wonderful in terms of preparing me to do the work that I do. And so it wasn't something I had to learn. It was something that I grew up with that I can now apply, that it wasn't like, Oh, now I've got to learn how to get along with white people because I grew up in an all-black environment. That's not true. Nor did I have to learn how to get along with black people because I was living in an all-white environment. That's just not true. And so I was drawn to work that brought people together.

Now, the Prisoners Against Rape story, just quickly, was we — while I was at the Rape Crisis Center, we got this letter from a guy named William Fuller, and I told — did I tell this story already? And he was a rapist and murderer, and he had gotten hold of some feminist books and he wanted to learn — the way the letter actually said it is that, "On the street, I raped women, in prison I raped men. I'd like to learn not to be a rapist." I mean, this caused no degree of consternation at the Center when we first got this letter.

And so we eventually helped him found Prisoners Against Rape, and we were working with men who were serving 15 years to life, for not only rape, but rape and murder. And so that caused a revolution in how we saw things, because heretofore, we'd only worked with the victims of sexual assault, we had not talked about the perpetrators of sexual assault. And again, we had objectified them. If anybody had asked me, particularly given my own personal experiences, I don't think I would've predicted that I'd be in a prison teaching rapists. But then, I

didn't think I'd be working with members of the Klan. I didn't think I'd be working with these opposites in any kind of way.

But what the human rights framework does, putting it all together, is that one has to always see the humanity and protect the human rights even of those you oppose, because you can't advance anyone's human rights by violating someone's human rights. I mean, it just defeats your purpose.

And so, the early anti-rape work prepared me for that. Certainly doing the anti-Klan work and working with the Floyd Cochran and the Carol and Ken Petersens of the world prepared me for that. And then when the human rights framework said, You *got* to do this, it just made sense. Because it's like, Oh, OK, I've been doing it all along but I never called it that.

Um, but there's nothing special, I don't think, about me that makes it good. I was lucky that I had the environment that I had, the opportunities that I had, and I have to honestly say, though, that I probably enjoy cross-cultural work much more than I do monocultural work. I don't know if I'd ever really want to work in an all-black environment, because I'd feel like something was missing. But I wouldn't want to work in an all-white environment, either, because something would be missing. I kind of like mixing it all up. But then I'm the kind of girl that can't drink straight orange juice, I always want to pour grape juice in it or something. (laughs) I like mixing up stuff.

FOLLET:

I know you are a voracious reader, and you read a lot of science fiction, have for a long time, right, and you say, "I love alternative universes," right? What about that vision? What is an alternative –

31:50

ROSS:

My alternative vision. OK. Well, there's a couple of alternative visions out here. First of all, I was an early *Star Trek* fan. I mean, when they wrote *Star Trek* in the 60s, they were singing my song. And I remember episodes in which they explored how money no longer mattered, race no longer mattered, and what they showed was almost a perfect unanimity among the human race, because they were dealing with so many extraterrestrials. So I used to say, God, does ET have to come to the world for us to figure out that humanity needs to get along, when we got a bigger problem out here?

I mean, and so, the *Star Trek* vision. Gene Roddenberry, I love that man. He really captured the future world I'd like to live in. And certainly, I want Scotty to invent the transporter so I can get beamed up and around the world, because I'm so tired of flying. So that rather utopian but not totally utopian — because even in *Star Trek*, they had to deal with jealousy, anger, competition, envy. I mean, they had to deal with the same old human stuff we have to deal with, but they had evolved as a social construct into having female captains and, you know, not having the gender and the race discrimination and the stuff that we have to live with.

So I'd like to imagine that that's a form of humanity's future, that that will end up — as opposed to the dystopian futures, you know, the Terminator thing, where you end up in Armageddon and we kill each other and we're going to have to start over from the ashes, kind of dystopian futures that some sci-fi writers write. That doesn't appeal to me. Actually, that feels too much like what we're living now, so I like the really alternative ones that project a rosier future. But at the same time, I am somewhat of a realist. The science fiction I write is actually more reality-based than what I read, sometimes.

FOLLET: You write science fiction?

34:42

ROSS: Uh-hm.

FOLLET: There's —

ROSS: Never revealed it.

FOLLET: There's a new piece of knowledge.

ROSS: OK. You want to hear it?

FOLLET: Of course.

ROSS: This is truly off of the popular narrative. I have imagined a universe — well, the title of the series is called *IGGC, Intergalactic Garbage Collectors*, OK? I have imagined a universe where our racial problems have been writ large across the universe. So I guess that I'm more — maybe I'm writing a more dystopian future than the ones I like reading about. This is where I am. And in it our divisions of race and religion have been propagated around the universe, so there is a Lutheran planet, there is a Catholic planet, there is a fundamentalist snake-worshipping planet, you know, those kinds of things. There's a Jewish planet — well, no, actually there isn't a Jewish planet: there is a fundamentalist Jew planet. On and on and on, all emanating from colonies of earth where they did not like the religious freedom and tolerance that earth was into, and so in order to maintain their own purity of theological thought and what have you, they decided to colonize other planets so that they could create planets where only the people who believe like they believe lived.

Well, black people didn't fit into this game, because we are too many religions. I mean, some of us are Buddhists, some of us are Christians, some of us are fundamentalists, some of us are Catholics. So, we're a little bit of each planet, but as a whole, black people didn't end up with a planet. Are you surprised? Interestingly enough, neither did Jews. Neither did Jews. Again, they're multiracial, they've got their

thing. So, there's a fundamentalist Jewish planet, but Jews, the majority of Jews, did not want to live on the fundamentalist Jewish planet.

FOLLET: OK.

ROSS: And the franchise, voting rights, only occur when you're planet-bound. They only happen when — you're only entitled to them in the federation of planets if you are a citizen of a planet. So there's two groups of people who are not planet-bound. The black people, who are IGGC, International Galactic Garbage Collectors, OK, who deal with planetary waste from all these planets, but — by the way, for these planets to keep absolute control over their population, they have to put very rigid limits on what technology is available, what communication is available to their planet-bound people, because they don't want to be contaminated by technology in their drive towards religious and racial purity. And so, the IGGC people are space-bound, ship-bound people, and multigenerational ships live in space and they make their living collecting planetary waste. What this also produces in them is access to forbidden technology that is forbidden from many of the people on the planets, so they've got this little side game going, where they —

FOLLET: Because they need to get around to do this?

ROSS: Uh-hm, because they have to deal with faster-than-light travel and they're encountering all these different cultures. They're not just limited to one culture. The other space-bound race are the merchant class of Jews, who sell goods and services to all the planets. So you've got the blacks and the Jews who are the generational ship-bound races dealing with these fundamentalist, very orthodox planets and stuff. In the first — it is really pop science fiction, it is not meant to be deep, OK. Let's be clear. I wanted to write something really popular, really quick, nothing deep. I'm not trying to be Octavia Butler. I wanted to write, you know, really pop fiction. Pop science fiction is my goal. Something I could read on an airplane, be through with in an hour and make me smile, OK? So that's what I write.

But in the first book, the people of the mother ship are having a generational fight, because the black people have access to technology and weapons and stuff — they have to fight off pirates and all this other stuff and they have to have weaponry — the younger people on this ship are really impatient with the older generation because they, the younger people, want the older generation to seize a planet for black people. And they have the weapons and the technology to do so.

And it's all about the vote. We can't get the vote because we don't have a planet. We can't participate in the deliberations of the federation without a vote. So, the way to get the vote is to get a planet. So why don't we seize a planet, and stop being this ship-bound, disenfranchised set of people? And the older generation is trying to portray to the

younger generation that, We have much more freedom than anybody on a planet and why would we give up our freedoms for the illusion of freedom by becoming planet-bound? Again, equal to what is the question. So that's the IGGC universe and, uh, when I have spare time, I write on it and I enjoy writing.

FOLLET: Do you have a conclusion in mind? Do you know where it's going?

41:02

ROSS: I have so little time to write on it. I mean, I've written the first three chapters of the first book, and so I imagine it in my mind all the time, but I have very little chance to work on IGGC. But I keep this fond fantasy in my mind that when I retire, I can write pulp science fiction.

FOLLET: There you go. But we know you're not about to retire. We know that you are about to take on yet another responsibility. So let's see if we can pick up the thread of the organizing around reproductive rights and women of color, organizing on this planet.

ROSS: Yeah, really, on this planet. Let's stay on this planet for a minute.

FOLLET: And going back, we can pick up this a lot of different places, but I came across something that you wrote in 1988 — here it is — September 1988, in a statement entitled “The Politics of Color in the Sexual Assault Movement.” But what you say is that “Women of color are confused about who we are, about what our movement is, where we're going, and how to empower women of color in a racist society.” So this is the mid- to late-80s, and you have not just watched, but been part of, the evolution of that women of color formation into something that's quite a bit more mature and politically coherent, if we think even of SisterSong.

ROSS: Well, I know the dominant thing that was puzzling me at the time and maybe — not all women of color were confused but I certainly was and that was an expression of that, was, I was working at NOW. The offer from the National Black Women's Health Project hadn't materialized yet, and a key question was, How much impact or effect will women of color have on these mainstream organizations? Because I was the third generation of women that tried to change NOW, and while there were a lot of rewards in that work, I felt that the change was incremental at best. It was like moving the Titanic fast. It just wasn't happening. And so, I think the confusion that I was feeling was, Well, where do we go to seek the empowerment of women of color? Is it by working harder within the mainstream? Is it through establishing our own organizations which give us a lot of autonomy but really re-marginalizes us, because we're really way away from the centers of power and influence when we do that. How do we bring our communities into this discussion? How do we work with men?

I mean, none of these questions did I have any answers to, and so probably I wrote that in a heightened state of confusion. Where do we go from here? I hadn't discovered the human rights framework at that time, so I could not see a vision of where to go. I was probably pretty clear that wherever I went, I was probably going to be in the company of my sisters but still, how I was going to get there had not [been] revealed and what would be the destiny at the end.

It was also a period where it's much easier to define what you're fighting against than what you're fighting for, and so I was very clear on what I was against, but I was not at all clear on, What if we won? What kind of world would we emerge with?

FOLLET: And at the time, you were against –

ROSS: Racism, sexism, homophobia, nationalism. I hadn't learned about the white supremacist movement yet, so I probably would've just said racism instead of white supremacy, because I had not nuanced that.

FOLLET: This is also at a time when the conservative movement is gaining ground and that has to be influencing your –

45:50

ROSS: Oh, yeah, this is at the last year of Reagan's presidency. It was a terribly depressing time. He visibly had Alzheimer's in office. I remember the invasion of Grenada and how that hurt, because we knew about the Grenada revolution and the assassination of Maurice Bishop and Bernard Coard. Talking about the ironies of quite another distraction, but — they had a hurricane in Grenada. The hurricane Ivan came through Grenada [in 2004]. Devastated the penal [system], the island, and really destroyed the prison where all these counterrevolutionaries were in prison who had assassinated Maurice Bishop.

And so Bernard Coard was the guy who invited the U.S. to invade Grenada, and as a reward, the U.S. imprisoned him for the assassination of Bishop. And he has been in prison for however many years, 17, 18 years. So now, he's — on my e-mail, I get an appeal from the support committee of Bernard Coard, talking about him being a political prisoner and he's being terribly abused by the Granadan government and could we send money to help Bernard Coard. And I'm like, Do these people think we have no memory? Do we just forget? Are we just supposed to have the usual amnesia Americans are accused of (laughs) and forget the role that — I'm sorry, it's just — because we worked hard in support of the Grenada revolution, and so that was a real body blow.

So, I was probably very confused. I mean, it was clear that George Bush was going to succeed Ronald Reagan, so the national political scene looked dismal at the time. I actually remember, when Ronald Reagan got elected, I was going around telling all my younger friends, Well, you know, in '72, we thought the worst thing that could ever

happen, that Richard Nixon would get elected. And then came Ronald Reagan, and we thought that was the worst that could happen. Then came George Bush the First, that was the worst thing that could happen. Then came George Bush the Second, that was the worst that could happen. So now, I've learned not to panic (laughs), because there's always something else around the corner. But, um, you know, in a manic-depressive way, I was feeling probably very bitter, very burnt out. I mean, that was the — '88 would've been my third year, working in NOW, my third, close to my fourth year working in NOW.

FOLLET:

But what you've seen — and you say this in *Undivided Rights*, that in the mid-80s, women of color were trying to work within mainstream women's organizations, with not much success. That by the mid-90s, a decade later, there was much more mobilization by and among women of color to the point where at the SisterSong Conference in 2003, you were able to say from the podium that you thought there was a self-sustaining movement among women of color, where women of color didn't need the white women's movement anymore.

49:00

ROSS:

Exactly. And we were at the beginning of that shift, but the shift hadn't really manifested itself. Remember, in '88, the Black Women's Health Project was only five years old, I mean, four years old, because it was incorporated in '84. The National Latina Health Project hadn't developed. I mean, all of these organizations we can talk about now had not developed in the mid- to late-'80s, most of them. And so there wasn't any real evidence of a women of color movement. There was evidence of women of color leaders, but we were leaders without a constituency. We had a vision that a large number of people hadn't bought into. So, leaders without following is not necessarily leadership. It may be vanguardism, but it ain't leadership. And I never believed in vanguard politics.

It was a very bleak kind of view that I was looking at, probably, at that time. I could not see what was going to happen. I knew what I hoped to see happen, but I didn't see it. But by the 1990s, particularly by the time we looked at the Cairo Conference in '94, you could see a lot of change on the ground. You could see a lot of difference, that you could see a critical mass beginning to assemble itself. And that caused me to be increasing more optimistic about what the chances are of building a women of color movement.

And I should stop and say, there's still debate whether we're talking about a women of color movement or should it be a black women's movement? I was never actually drawn to the concept of only a black women's movement. Frankly, I thought the National Council of Negro Women and all those other — the sororities and the Deltas and the Links and all those groups — did what could be done around building a black women's movement, and I wasn't really drawn to being in those organizations, which are really kind of middle-class and color-struck,

so, never really felt drawn to those. But the potential for organizing across ethnicities as women of color really was appealing to me. It always has, and that's where I've always wanted my work to be.

So in 1997, two years after Beijing, this woman named Luz Rodriguez with the Latina Roundtable on Reproductive Rights got invited to a conference on AIDS in Asia. I'm thinking it might have been in the Philippines — I'm not quite sure what the conference was because I didn't go. And along with it, Dazon got invited to it. There were a number of people. Barbara Skytears Moore, a Native American woman, got invited to it, and they had been invited by Reena Marcelo, who was then a program officer in the reproductive rights program at Ford, and she's a Filipino woman herself. And Rena asked Luz to convene a series of roundtable discussions to discuss what it would take to build a woman-of-color reproductive rights movement in this country, which I think is a very visionary thing for Rena to have done.

And so, Luz and Dazon — and I think Dazon is the one that named it, because of SisterLove, it got called SisterSong, totally confusing the rest of the world as to the difference between those organizations. But they convened a series of roundtables — I was not involved in it at that point — talking about, What are the health needs of communities of color? And women in these communities of color are — particularly looking at a lot of medical conditions that aren't diagnosed in communities of color, are treated too late. I mean, why does a woman of color get AIDS and there's only 12 months from diagnosis to death, but a gay white man gets AIDS and there's 15 years from diagnosis to death? I mean, what is happening here? Is it late diagnosis? Is it something biological happening? Or is it social? I mean, looking at all these kinds of questions.

And at the end of these consultations and roundtables, the decision was made to form a collective of women of color organizations that work on reproductive health issues, choosing four from each major ethnic group: four African American women, black; four Latina, Hispanic Puerto Rican; four Native American indigenous; and four Asian Pacific Islander. And bring them together and call them SisterSong to work on reproductive health issues in their communities.

But a funny thing happened once they brought us all together. We were selected to be one of the four, representing the African American community.

FOLLET:

We being —

54:47

ROSS:

NCHRE, we being NCHRE. And, well, we were selected for — because the other thing, they were persuaded, they wanted to use the human rights framework in their reproductive health activism and we were invited in to be the trainer of the other 15 groups on the human rights framework and reproductive rights activism.

But what happened was that once the 16 groups came together and Rena was offering \$4 million, which is her entire portfolio, which never has been offered to women of color like that before in the history of funding for America. And it really pissed a lot of white women off, too, who normally counted on Ford to support their projects and historic funding of [the] reproductive [rights] project from Ford. And she just cut it [off and said], “No, I’m giving my entire portfolio to women of color this year.” Created a whole firestorm at Ford.

And then, on top of it, we’re saying, “Well, we’re not going to take the money under the conditions you put out there, because we don’t want to work on external reproductive health issues when our organizations are dying. I mean, this is the classic funding trap. You give us program money but not capacity building money. So, yes, we can go out here and talk about reproductive tract infections” — which is the words she wanted us to use, because we had no problems with it, because the International Women and Health Coalition had defined reproductive-tract infections as a less stigmatized way to talking about STDs and HIV and AIDS and so, we didn’t have a problem using the language.

But we had a problem doing all this external program work without any institutional support for our organizations, because that’s what kills us. You know, we get paid on how many trainings you do around healthy love parties but then they won’t pay the staff person to do the healthy love parties, or pay to help you develop your financial records or your board of directors [and] then accuse you of bad financial management. You know, it’s just — it’s an endless cycle of contempt, how women of color often are treated by foundations.

And so, we pushed back on Ford and said, “We love your idea, Rena, and of course, we’d be crazy to turn down this \$4 million but this is how we need it to come to us. We need to do three years doing capacity building of these 16 organizations.” Half did not have their 501(c)3 statuses. About a third of them are all volunteers. They didn’t have paid staff. Most of us didn’t have functioning boards of directors, financial control systems in place, non-foundation, revenue-generating systems. Most of them didn’t even have computers or fax machines (laughs), so it’s a bit much to expect us from this very weakened state to deliver this national program for you.

And Rena, the angel that she is, totally agreed. And so she gave us \$4 million to build our capacity. And that’s what we did, and we formed SisterSong, the Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective, basically as a capacity-building collective at first, to strengthen our organizations — all got their 501(c)3s, we hired consultants to show us how to do organizational development and do fundraising and leadership development and learning Self-Help, because we also decided to use Self-Help as part of our process when working out conflict amongst ourselves. Because any time you form a coalition, you’ve got conflict. And that was the beginning of SisterSong. It was

not easy, by no means, because some people — well, about half the people in the original 16 groups — we who were on the ground got a chance to select who those groups would be. The other half were selected by Ford.

END TAPE 19

59:00

TAPE 20

ROSS:

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

1:00

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

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

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

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

FOLLET:

Is this —

4:03

ROSS:

Chu Chu Flanders, yeah, at Ford.

FOLLET: Oh, it's not Floyd, it's —

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

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

ROSS: You're getting ahead of the story.

FOLLET: OK. All right.

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

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

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

ROSS: Right.

FOLLET: Right?

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

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

FOLLET: So let's keep struggling now.

8:55

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

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

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

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

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

FOLLET:

So what was your advice under those circumstances?

ROSS:

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

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

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

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

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

13:00

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

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

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

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

14:42

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

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

FOLLET: The energy there was unbelievable.

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

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

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

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

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

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

FOLLET:

At least she paid attention, right?

19:45

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

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

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

ROSS: National coordinator of SisterSong.

FOLLET: National coordinator of SisterSong?

ROSS: I'm returning to my roots.

FOLLET: Your roots in reproductive rights work.

ROSS: Uh-hm.

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

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

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

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

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

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

FOLLET:

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

25:14

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

ROSS:

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

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

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

FOLLET:

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

28:33

ROSS:

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

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

FOLLET: To her credit.

ROSS: Yeah.

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

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

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

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

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

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

32:00

FOLLET: Yes. Right.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

FOLLET: You are.

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

FOLLET: You are?

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

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

ROSS: And I love it.

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

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

34:46

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

FOLLET: I think we can.

GEIS: OK. But what —

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

GEIS: Uh-hm.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

44:50

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ROSS: Oh, honey.

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

48:40

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

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

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

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

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

FOLLET: OK. OK. OK.

ROSS: But I know my limitations.

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

52:05

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

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

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

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

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

FOLLET: I think so.

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

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

ROSS: (laughs) wisdom. My irreverence.

FOLLET: Irreverent, that too.

ROSS: (laughs) (unclear) my work.

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

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

FOLLET: Oh, Loretta —

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

FOLLET: Loretta, thank you so much.

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

FOLLET: OK.

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

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

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

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

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

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

FOLLET: That's true.

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

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

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

FOLLET: True.

ROSS: And so we're silenced because —

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

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

END OF TAPE 20

TAPE 21 FEBRUARY 4, 2005

[first two minutes setting up]

FOLLET: All right.

ROSS: Hi, Joyce.

2:00

FOLLET: Hi, Loretta. OK, so here we are, once again. It is Friday, the 4th of February, 2005, and we are here to wrap up this story. And one of the big pieces we hadn't covered before is the March for Women's Lives from last April. We were off doing intergalactic travel instead.

ROSS: I think we wandered a bit (laughs).

FOLLET: OK. But the March for Women's Lives last April, April of '04, was a momentous event, and you were in the thick of it. How and why did you become involved?

ROSS: Well, my story with the march actually began with SisterSong. We were organizing our first national conference and it was in November of 2003 at Spelman College in Atlanta, and sisters from SisterSong kept calling me as the national coordinator of the conference, saying, Are we going to discuss the march? Are we going to discuss the march? And I at first told them, "No. I'm really tired of the white girls and their making plans and not telling us about them until they want us to participate. And we're on our own agenda. Let's stay focused on our own agenda."

But this groundswell of desire to talk about whether or not women of color were going to participate in the march kept springing up until finally in September, I think it was, I rearranged the agenda at the last minute so that we had a plenary session to talk about the march. And then I invited representatives of the four sponsoring organizations — which were Planned Parenthood Federation of America, the National Organization for Women, NARAL/Pro-Choice America, and the Feminist Majority — to send their women of color representatives to speak on this plenary so we could talk about the march. Well, it was telling that not all of them had women of color to even send. They didn't have women of color in senior management positions that could represent the organizations to persuade women of color to participate in their march. So —

FOLLET: None of them did?

ROSS: No, not all of them did. Poor NARAL/Pro-Choice of America was really the worst. This young Asian American lawyer, Ederlina Co, had been hired one week before our conference, and she was put on the stage, put in the position of defending why NARAL had no women of color to send to

SisterSong. I mean, it was a terrible position to be in. She was really afraid, she was afraid we were all going to attack her for the politics and the policies of NARAL.

So, we did the plenary at the conference. The plenary was good. It offered the participants — we had over 600 participants — so it offered people a chance to query, What's going on here? Why are you all doing it? What's the purpose of the march? Why should women of color participate? — those kinds of things.

And then, kind of behind the scenes but not so behind the scenes, [by then] I really did want SisterSong to participate in the march, but I wasn't quite sure under what conditions. Because I had been involved in organizing the other marches that NOW had organized in '86 and '89, and so I kind of knew the routine and knew it was pretty important that there be visibility of women of color. I agreed with the march organizers, but at the same time, it had to be on our terms and our conditions, because I had moved on. And so —

FOLLET:

What were those terms?

5:54

ROSS:

Well, that's what we discussed at the plenary. That first of all, the name of the march had to be changed. It was originally called the March for Freedom of Choice, up until that point. And that was due to a real controversial battle of wills between Planned Parenthood and NARAL on one side that wanted the March for Freedom of Choice and NOW and the Feminist Majority that wanted a different name, but no one had come up with what that different name would be. So eventually, I think people just caved in and said, OK, we'll call it the March for Freedom of Choice.

But we women of color felt that the abortion framework, the choice framework, was just too narrow a vessel to talk about the threat to women's lives. We're dealing with the Bush administration, an immoral and illegal war in Iraq, the Patriot Act, poverty — I mean, all these things would not be challenged by just talking about freedom of choice. I mean, if we made abortion totally available, totally accessible, totally legal, totally affordable, women would still have other problems. And so reducing women's lives down to just whether or not choice is available, we felt was inadequate.

FOLLET:

So was it already the assumption among the four planners that reproductive rights needed to be the focus of this march?

ROSS:

Well, not reproductive rights. That's what I'm saying. Not even the broader reproductive rights framework. It was really about choice and abortion. Not the right to have a child, but the right to terminate a pregnancy. That's all they wanted to talk about. And so, we had dissatisfaction with the name of the march. We had dissatisfaction with the fact that there were no women of color involved in the decision making about the march. And then, if they wanted women of color to significantly

participate in the march, then they had to build our capacity to do so. We're representing organizations that have one, two, three staff people, so which one of our projects are we going to drop so that we could participate in their agenda? That was not a tenable solution for us. And so, we had the plenary and then the march organizers sponsored a post-plenary discussion caucus dinner where we sat around, about 20 of us sat around, and hashed it out with them.

The bottom line, to make this story short, because I do tell long stories, is that they changed the name of the march in that caucus session. We came up with the name March for Women's Lives, which, interestingly, was not a new name. This was the same name that we'd used in the '80s, when I think the vision of women was more radical and more encompassing back in the '80s, and I think the conservatism of the times had narrowed us down.

And we came up with the agreement that they would add women of color organizations to the steering committee, and two organizations chosen were the Black Women's Health Imperative, formerly known as the National Black Women's Health Project, and the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health. We also wanted them to put an Asian-Pacific-American group, National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum, on the steering committee, but they balked at that. That did not work.

FOLLET:

Why?

9:31

ROSS:

Because every time they added a women of color group to the steering committee, they had to finance the capacity of the women of color to be on the steering committee. In other words, National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health and the Black Women's Health Imperative each got paid between \$40,000 and \$60,000 so that they could afford to be on the committee — so that the person whose time was delegated was compensated for that time so that they could continue to support their programs while they were doing it. So it was a financial thing. It wasn't [that] they were mad at API women or anything, but they balked at spending even more money on empowering women of color to be on the steering committee. And I just did not win that fight.

The other thing that they asked — they meaning Alice Cohan, the march director, very specifically — was that I would come on as march co-director. And I actually balked at that because, as I told Alice, I had no interest in organizing your march. I mean, I'm interested in organizing women of color, and if I participate in the march, [it] is to do that, to ensure the fair and equitable participation of women of color. But worrying about Port-A-Potties and march routes and negotiating with the police and dealing even with the internal politics of these four organizations — I'm not interested in that.

And I should say at that point, that this march was unusual in that it was a collaboration between these four organizations. That had never

happened before. The previous three pro-choice marches had only been organized by NOW. And so, for NOW to embark on this collaboration was unusual, to begin with, and there were all kinds of turf politics besetting this process that I was totally uninterested in. I had one agenda, and that was how are women of color going to participate and get treated once they participate.

To make a long story short, I encouraged them, out of the \$3 or 4 million they were spending on the march, that they would spend about \$200,000 to ensure the participation of women of color. And so that included the grants, the sub-grants to the National Latina Institute as well as the Black Women's Health Imperative, a grant to my organization and to SisterSong so that they can buy my time, because, as I told them, [if] "I spend six months working on this march, my organization will die. I'm its chief fundraiser, so you have to replace the revenue that we would've earned, that I would have raised in that six months." And they agreed to that. And I said I needed help to do this. And so they also had to pay for Malika Redmond, who was on my staff, to be my assistant. And so in all, it was about a \$200,000 package that I demanded of them and got, and I'm really proud of the fact that they didn't balk.

I think they were a little desperate at the time, too, because when they announced the march, they immediately got into trouble, and this was — they made the decision apparently in January or February of '03 to have the march. The march date was April 25, 2004. And they immediately got into trouble. They wanted to organize the march so that they could send a signal to the Bush administration that the marginalization of women's issues was unacceptable, the continuing attacks on women's reproductive rights was unacceptable. President Bush became the first president to criminalize an abortion procedure with that badly misnamed partial-birth abortion ban, and they wanted to send a message to the Bush administration.

But they also wanted to send a message to their own movement, that there is a huge women's rights movement out here that does care deeply about these issues and we care about them when we vote. And so they wanted to mobilize their constituency. They were in trouble, though, because of the high-handed way things had happened. These four organizations decided they were going to do this march, and then a lot of people perceived that they were imposing this on the rest of the women's movement. And so, it wasn't only women of color who were saying, How dare you? You didn't ask our permission and now you want us. But it was other women's health activists. There was the women's health movement that felt, I'm sorry, abortion is not our only issue: we're dealing with breast cancer, we're dealing with infertility, we're dealing with attacks on midwifery. I mean, why aren't we talking about all the issues that affect women's health?

Even within their own ranks, I mean, Planned Parenthood Federation has 750 to 800 affiliates or something like that, and so they weren't all happy hearing this voice from on high saying that you're going to drop

13:30

everything you're doing for the next year and mobilize people for the march. They had battles on a lot of fronts, within the women's health movement, within their own organizations, and then with women of color at the same time. So I think the smartest thing they could have done was decide how many battles they could fight at the same time, keep their focus on taking on the Bush administration and their policies, and try to quash as many of the in-the-movement controversies as possible.

So, with that in mind, Alice Cohan's offer to me to be march co-director I think was extremely political, because she knew I had some limited influence in the women's health movement and in the women of color movement, but I said to her, "I don't want to be march co-director. I'll be the director of women of color." And she said, "Well, Loretta, you can't do that." I said, "Why not?" "[Because] I've already told people you're going to be the march co-director." I said, "Well, now, Alice, isn't that cute? You've already made a public announcement that I'm going to be the march co-director before you've closed the deal with me?"

FOLLET: In your mind, what was the difference between being co-director and being director of women of color, or however you just put it?

16:01

ROSS: The level of responsibilities. I mean, pulling off a march is a huge task. I mean, I had been there for two, three previous marches. It's a 24-hour job, definitely requiring that the person be located in Washington, D.C., because of all the staff management, park police, logistics. It requires that. And I didn't want to be there. That was not my interest at all. And so I told Alice, I said OK. And her position is, "If I announced that you are only going to organize women of color, then it looks like we've demoted you." I said, "Well, don't you have a problem, because I didn't accept that. I didn't accept march co-director. I said if I was interested, it would be to mobilize women of color."

So we compromised. I got the title of march co-director. I took on some of the co-director responsibilities, you know, largely, helping to manage this unwieldy coalition of these groups, and I became, like, the ombudsman. I could come into the meetings and say just about anything I wanted to say to these women to try to get them — it was like herding cats — get them all moving in the same direction.

FOLLET: The other major sponsors?

ROSS: The sponsors of the march, exactly. And dealing with the national mobilization. I mean, I became like a presidential candidate without an entourage, hitting three or four cities a week, mobilizing people, giving the pitch, giving the spin, like an outreach director kind of thing, convincing people to come on board, seeing to the endorsements — because the endorsements were slow to come in because of all the controversies and stuff — seeing to the co-sponsorships.

FOLLET: What kind of reception were you getting initially?

ROSS: Oh, it was great. It was great. Once they changed the march name and they added women of color, they really — and it broadened it. And then we had this big debate controversy over adding those seven words around the logo, you know: choice, access, rights, family planning — I cannot remember all seven words, but each one of those — health care — I mean, there was a fight for what those seven words around the logo would represent. But once we got past that, and I'm telling you, it wasn't until — this decision happened in November — it wasn't until January that we agreed on the logo and the march was like three months off —

FOLLET: And who staked out which positions on that? What were the arguments for and against some of those seven, or arguments for and against broadening it at all, among those key players?

ROSS: Well, NARAL turned out to be the most conservative of the groups participating in the march planning, while I would say Feminist Majority turned out to be the most radical, and Planned Parenthood and NOW were somewhere in between the two. But the camp, before they added the other members to the steering committee — and by the way, the ACLU came on as the seventh organization in January —

FOLLET: So by that time, it was the four initial ones, ACLU —

19:46

ROSS: Black Women's Health Imperative and the National Latina Institute. And it'd been a two-two split between Planned Parenthood and NARAL often taking the more conservative position, and Feminist Majority and NOW taking the more feminist and radical position. And I think that was entirely predictable. I mean, when you look at the antecedents of NARAL and Planned Parenthood, they didn't necessarily come out of the women's movement. Planned Parenthood at best comes out of the health movement, the family planning movement, that until they hired Faye Wattleton, they hadn't had a woman president since Margaret Sanger. Feminism is not equivalent to supporting family planning. Just because you support family planning doesn't mean you're a feminist. You could be a population control person. And so they were, not so surprising, less feminist — even though I think the larger world sees them as feminist because of their support for family planning, we feminists don't necessarily see them as such.

FOLLET: And NARAL?

ROSS: NARAL comes out of the campaign to decriminalize abortion. Their original name was the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws — that's what NARAL originally stood for. And they haven't much grown out of that, so they're singularly focused on abortion, often to the

exclusion of other women's reproductive health issues. That again does not make them feminist, in my opinion. To the larger world, they're seen as feminists. To themselves, they're probably seen as feminist. But a feminist, in my opinion, has a connected analysis that looks at the attacks on abortion, and links to the attacks on women, that talks about misogyny, that talks about sexism and patriarchy and these kinds of things. It's not just about decriminalizing abortion.

And the Feminist Majority, of course, was representing the far more feminist, more radical position within that setting. I mean, I don't think any women's studies scholar would call Feminist Majority or NOW radical organizations, but within that setting, they were.

FOLLET: Let me ask you. You've also observed that besides the historical roots of these organizations, that there's something about their structure that inclines them to a certain kind of politics, that a couple of them are 401(c)3s, whereas others are membership-based organizations. Does that feed into this debate over broadening the march agenda?

22:02

ROSS: I think the structures of these organizations played a role. NOW, which is a (c)4 organization, not a (c)3 organization — so that they can be explicitly political and really is very responsive to the needs of its membership, because it's membership driven — wanted the march to be much more explicitly political, so that we could name the Bush administration and the policies in critique of and the things we want to change and to talk about how we wanted an electoral change with the election.

Where[as] Planned Parenthood and NARAL being — well, Planned Parenthood probably more so than NARAL — being (c)3 organizations, were much more leery of giving a direct political message. They want to say, We're marching for family planning, we're marching for health care, but you can't talk about the Bush administration. And they kept loading the meetings with all these lawyers that just weren't making sense to those of us — I mean, why aren't we marching if we can't even tell the people who's marching with us why we're marching? It just doesn't make sense, that we're just marching-for-a-better-America kind of message that the lawyers wanted to impose.

And there's a legitimate basis for their fear, because the people who oppose women's rights are very vicious. They do go after people's tax status. Witness the later attack on the NAACP and their tax status. So there's a legitimate basis for their fear. But also, I think that there was a degree of cowardice, that there are ways to craft a message that can both satisfy the requirements of the IRS and speak the truth to your followers.

But when you start getting into too much gobbledygook, then you're not making sense to anybody. How can you mobilize for a march, tell people to come to Washington, and you can't tell them why? And you're also not taking advantage of the tremendous amount of rage and anger out there, both against the Bush administration because of their domestic

policies but because of the war in Iraq, and the debt crisis and the global gag rule preventing family planning funds from being spent to save women's lives. I mean, when you can't speak truthfully to the people you want to mobilize, it makes organizing really hard, unless you're really practiced at deception.

FOLLET: So tell me about a meeting where this would be hammered out, or the decisive meeting. Were there seven individuals representing these organizations plus you?

25:15

ROSS: We should have been so lucky. What happened, quite frequently, is that the organizations with the deepest pockets were the ones who were packing the meeting, so there'd be, like, seven people or eight people representing Planned Parenthood and one person representing Feminist Majority, or six people representing NARAL and lawyers, public relations persons, all these other people. And so, what looked like a democratic process really wasn't.

And what kept astonishing me is how often organizations like Planned Parenthood or NARAL would send men in to shout us down, just fight with us. Like, wait a moment. We're feminists. We're not intimidated by men. I don't care how many men you pack into a meeting and tell us we're crazy. We're not listening to it. And so, it was quite an unfeminist tactic to send five men into the meeting to represent your position and then, you know, you end up in a shouting match with men bellowing at you in a so-called feminist meeting. It was just unholy in a way. And so bitterly ironic that they didn't recognize how they were exposing their lack of feminist consciousness by the bullying tactics that they were trying to use to impose their agendas on the rest of us.

And unfortunately, this had been going on the whole year leading up to the march. I mean, I got in at the last six months of it, but this had been going on the whole time, from the minute they decided to make the decision to have the march [as a coalition].

FOLLET: So you came on in the fall of '03?

ROSS: November of '03.

FOLLET: After the SisterSong, OK.

ROSS: Right after SisterSong.

FOLLET: These issues were on the table and still undecided?

ROSS: They did not — because of controversies and turf wars amongst them, they didn't even hire the first staff person for the march until September, even though the decision had been made in January to have the march. So they had nine months of having no staff to organize this march. I think

Feminist Majority Foundation pulled a coup because they could and they should have.

And basically, Alice Cohan, who works for Ellie Smeal of the Feminist Majority, Ellie put her on a leave of absence and said, “Go there and staff that office. Build this march.” And Alice was the only person in America that could’ve done it, because she had organized the last three pro-choice marches and the ERA march from the 1980s, so Alice is like the premiere march organizer in the feminist movement. And so Ellie literally shoved Alice down their throat, even when they were complaining, We need to take in résumés, we need to interview people. And Ellie was like, “You will not screw this up.”

None of the other organizations except for NOW had any experience organizing marches. They were trying to establish this bureaucratic process where they got to veto every march decision without any experience just because they had the deeper pockets. Planned Parenthood is a multibillion dollar organization. And [Ellie] literally shoved Alice down their throats, but it was to save — salvation of that march.

So Alice started hiring her first staff members in September. At that time, the march was what, eight months away? And so all of the politicking, is what we call it in Jamaica, almost sabotaged the march. It succeeded despite these people in an astonishing way.

FOLLET: What role did you play when you came on in pushing any of these questions towards some resolution, the questions about the breadth of the mission?

29:08

ROSS: I had the freedom to tell them when they were silly, because I didn’t have any desire to work with them in the future, you know. I’d gotten my money up front, so they couldn’t hold my check hostage to how they felt about me that day, or whatever. So I had the freedom to just cut through the BS and say, “Listen, you all are acting silly. This is more [about] turf. You’re more concerned about whether or not your organization gets visibility than whether this march succeeds — this trying to manipulate the march staff and to put people on the staff that’ll be more loyal to Planned Parenthood or to NOW than to the success of the march. It’s not making sense.” So I had the freedom to be the ombudsman. And Alice was smart to have someone like that because I could say things to them that she couldn’t say, because she had to like be the good cop, I got to be the bad cop — and I loved that role, by the way (laughs).

FOLLET: So you were free from certain kinds of pressures, but what other pressures were you under?

ROSS: Well, the fact that once they had decided that they had gotten women of color, they really weren’t prepared to make any other commitments beyond what they had already made. And so, this is a classic. I’m around the country, mobilizing people to come to the march. We’ve got women of

color around the country trying to mobilize themselves to come. Painfully raise the money. There were no scholarships provided or anything like that, so SisterSong provided \$25,000 worth of scholarships, out of our \$60,000 budget. So this was nearly half of our annual budget we gave away as scholarships for the march.

And then, two weeks before the march — no more than two weeks before the march — the deep-pocket kids of Planned Parenthood and NARAL decided that they were — they liked the publicity of providing free buses for women of color. Well, excuse me, you could have done that six months ago and made my job a whole lot easier. And then, it really made organizing on the ground look bad. So you've got women of color organizations selling bus tickets for \$50 and then at the last minute, there's an announcement that there's free buses, so the people on the ground feeling like the women of color are trying to take advantage of them by charging them \$50 for something they could've gotten for free.

So, it really — the process worked against itself. And I had asked Planned Parenthood and NARAL if they could pay for buses and they had adamantly said, No, we can't afford it. We can't afford it. But when SisterSong made the gesture and made it public that we were going to provide scholarships, then they felt embarrassed and they wanted to provide them. But, you know, it didn't have to be that way. So that was typical of the kinds of problems that they were causing me.

Some of the organizations — well, in particular, NARAL — never wanted the new march name. So almost up until a week or two before the march, their web site still had the March for Freedom of Choice, so we had two march names out there competing against each other. You go to Pittsburgh and say, Are you going to the March for Women's Lives? They'd say, No, we're going to the March for Freedom of Choice, thinking that there were two different marches.

And so, while they were — we won the argument, we maybe didn't win the long-term battle, because they didn't ever buy into the larger message. And NARAL has a new president, by the way, Nancy Keenan, so we may see if she is as stubborn as Kate Michaelman is.

FOLLET: Were you at a meeting where the final decision on that name and all it represented [was made]?

33:00

ROSS: That happened at SisterSong. No, I wasn't at the meeting in Washington. We chose to name it at SisterSong and when Alice got back to Washington with the rest of the representatives, she called me back within a week or two and said, "It's done. The name is changed." And so, I wasn't at the Washington meeting, nor had I witnessed the fight that probably preceded that happening. But NARAL was in a very weakened position after SisterSong — I mean, the fact that they didn't even have a woman of color to send to the conference. And I think Planned Parenthood kind of peeled off. I mean, it no longer was tied to it as it had been up until the addition of the new steering committee. And of course, the women of

color organizations that had been added kind of tipped the balance, and so they were more isolated after that. But they continued to fight. They never really caved in, and that's why they never changed their web site. And that's kind of like the backward sabotaging.

Another thing that was problematical was the spending of resources. As I said, it takes \$3 to 4 million, minimum, to pull off a march off like this. And at the outset, the organizations have made an agreement that each one would put up an equal amount of money, like \$125,000, to provide a half a million dollars' worth of seed money for the march. Well, that affects a NOW, with a \$2 million budget, much more than it affects a Planned Parenthood, with a billion dollar budget, right? I mean, just — the scale is so obvious, the difference of scale is so obvious. But we were very frustrated that the organizations with the deeper pockets weren't putting their money into the march organizing, as they were putting it into their self-promotion.

For example, we never had enough money to make tee-shirts — you know, posters, banners that said March for Women's Lives — the paraphernalia you have to produce. Yet both Planned Parenthood and NARAL easily spent close to a million dollars with signs for the march for their own organizations. And those signs totally littered the mall. I mean, it was embarrassing. We couldn't even step off the march because there were so many NARAL signs blocking the march route. We had to have trucks come in to move all this wasted trash so that we could step off the stupid march. Yet, we didn't have enough march signs. We didn't have enough march tee-shirts or march volunteers and so —

And they even set up their own march organizing office, NARAL did, that competed with the march organizing office. And so [people] were calling, [and NARAL was] saying, You're going to come work on the march, and they were being directed to the NARAL office, not to the march office. It was just — it was sad. It was sad to watch this disarray.

And eventually, to make a long story short, we ended up with 1,150,000 people at the march, the largest protest march in U.S. history, and we're very, very proud of that. But I've often wondered how big would that thing have been if we'd all been pulling in the same direction at the same time. How big could it have been if we hadn't spent months and months and months fighting with each other over stupid stuff like who's going to speak to the media and which media firm gets hired and who's going to do the congressional lobbying. You know, just —

And then the partners were keeping secrets from each other, for example, and they got into this, what I call the celebrity tug of war. NOW and the Feminist Majority, I think, because of their history, has a lot of influence with Hollywood, and so it was NOW that was producing the celebrities, or actually Ellie and the Feminist Majority that were producing the celebrities and signing them up, or what have you. And so then people got into tugs of war over who could claim who brought which celebrity to the table.

That was just crazy-making, fighting over the agenda, the order of speakers: who spoke on the morning stage, who spoke on the afternoon stage and which order, who got the most prominence, da-da. I cannot tell you the hundreds of fights that took place behind the scenes to make — now, of course, we had to provide a public united front but even that was not seamless, like I said, with the competing web sites and the competing march offices [and] people who decided that, without telling the march staff, that they were going to have pre-march events the day of the march. Well, it's kind of hard to already have the march, so that if you decide that you're going to have some prayer breakfast or youth caucus or whatever the morning of the march, you're disrupting things. You're not helping things.

38:25

And so, it was really — and that wasn't just the four organizations, because the National Latina Institute was very much involved in a youth delegation that wanted to have a separate youth gathering place, and then create a feeder march into the march. Except that there's a problem with that. How do you stop a million people so that your march can integrate into it? You can't do it that way. And so, it took a lot of negotiation to get them to cancel their feeder march.

I mean, people who hadn't done this in the past just had all kinds of crazy ideas about how they could make themselves visible in the march, and they were willing to sacrifice the coherence of the march to accomplish what they thought was their own agenda. And they ended up self-marginalizing themselves, because the only way any of the feeder marches that everybody wanted [could happen] would be to feed them in at the end. Well, it took four and a half hours, close to five hours, to step off a million people. So, yes, we'll let you have a feeder march but if you're going in at the end, you're going to be five hours after the second stage has started. That's just logistics. That's nothing to do about how we feel about you, but it's impossible to stop a million people once they start marching, for any reason. And so there was all of that.

I was personally disappointed — I don't know if this is going to be embargoed or not — but the women of color groups we urged to get on the steering committee, it went to their heads, meaning that there were so many turf wars already happening amongst the four groups that had started this process, that the women of color stopped, felt that they had to play hardball the same way the white girls were playing hardball, and insisting on their prestige and their visibility and their thing. And it wasn't done, in my mind, in a really cooperative kind of way.

FOLLET: Are you speaking now about the Black Women's Health Imperative and the —

ROSS: And the National Latinas. For example, it had been my plan all along that we would have a coherent women of color delegation. My experience from the previous marches is that if you do not create a coherent, consolidated women of color delegation, you end up with women of color

buried in a sea of white faces, so it looks like there are no women of color there. I made that mistake in '86, not pulling together a women of color delegation. I did one in '89. It wonderfully increased the visibility of women of color, so that was my strategy for this march. Well, the Black Women's Health Imperative decided that they wanted to be the front organization of this women of color delegation and they wanted all the women of color to carry Black Women's Health Imperative signs. That's [wrong] — you can't use women of color that way. That's like Planned Parenthood wanting all the marchers to carry Planned Parenthood signs, and NARAL wanting all the marchers to carry NARAL signs. Well, it doesn't work here, either. And so we had struggles around their perception that they needed to protect their visibility instead of being in solidarity with all the women of color that were coming.

The National Latina Institute was largely preoccupied with the youth delegation, so they were problematic with the feeder-march concept and separate venues, and they kept going out and telling the press there were no young people coming to the march unless they organized them. Like, excuse me? You're organizing 3,000 young people? We've got 600,000 young people already signed up to the march without you, so for you to be in the press saying that you're the reason that young people are coming is absolutely incorrect. And it really fails to honor the work being done by the NOW campus chapters, the Feminist Majority campus chapters, even the Planned Parenthood Vox Young People. I mean, you just can't go out there and say you're the voice of young people because of your young women heading up reproductive rights organizations. That's just — it's not right. It's a bit opportunist to say the least.

FOLLET:

How did any of this — these turf battles, which obviously included the Health Imperative and the Latina Health group [National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health], did they translate into political agendas besides just organizational elbowing?

43:04

PAGES 331 and 332 CLOSED UNTIL JANUARY 1, 2020

FOLLET: The political argument that we hear is that since the earlier marches, the ascendancy of the right wing and their anti-feminist agenda justifies circling the wagons around abortion, even necessitates making access to abortion the main piece of a feminist agenda. How does that argument sit with you?

48:31

ROSS: Sounds like a new spin on an old neglect. I believe that the rightwing or conservative forces have been successful in not only in mobilizing their followers but intimidating us — we, their opponents — making us believe that we must sound more like them in order to be successful. One of the things that I've always argued with people is [that] to accept the concept, even if you're focused on abortion, to accept the concept that abortion is a tragedy, that it should be rare and safe and unnecessary and we have to create the conditions for not having abortions in America — when you concede that point, you're conceding the ground to the opposition. I don't think we should be describing abortion as a tragedy. We should be triumphalist about it, saying it represents the power of women to control their own lives, instead of saying, Oh, it's a sad thing and nobody likes abortion.

And so, I think the growing conservatism of the reproductive rights movement happened in response to the right wing but it did not win us anything. All they did was keep shifting the faithful further to the right and we kept following them instead of standing firm on our radical feminist vision, which is abortion on demand without apology, and the state has an obligation to pay for it for poor women, just like the state has an obligation to pay for health care for all poor people. The more we abandoned that, I feel, the weaker we became, the more triumphalist the right became, and then the attacks just accelerated.

I mean, women of color have always argued that if the so-called pro-choice movement had fought the Hyde Amendment in 1976 that defunded abortion for people on Medicaid, if they had fought the Hyde Amendment with the same passion that they fought to have these marches, then we wouldn't have this continuing erosion of abortion rights. Because any time you allow the state to decide who can have an abortion and to start peeling off categories of people — because first they went after poor women, then they went after young women, then they went after abstinence education, I mean, it just kept going on and on and now they're trying to do — well, under Reagan's administration, they tried to do a constitutional amendment called the Human Life Amendment, of course saying that that life begins at conception, kind of thing.

There was an interesting book, I've forgotten the name of it, by William Saletan, where he did an analysis of how even the pro-choice language itself was conservative [*Bearing Right: How Conservatives Won the Abortion War*, 2003]. What had happened was that down in Arkansas, they were fighting to keep a constitutional amendment within Arkansas from being written into law, and there was this woman named Brownie Ledbetter who was head of, I think, Arkansas NARAL at the time — I'm

not quite sure about that but that's what I remember. And she did some polling and found out that Arkansas — because it was part of the Confederacy and very much anti-federal government because of the desegregation and the states' rights stuff — well, in Arkansas, if you linked abortion rights to keeping the government out of the state, or keeping the federal government out of the state, which is a libertarian-type spin, then you were able to win over more supporters from the right. That, in other words, even if they did not support a woman's right to control her body, they would support a states' rights argument that the government should not control what decisions a person makes. Of course that was the same argument that was offered to defeat, to oppose segregation, desegregation [to defeat desegregation]. So, it resonated in that state.

Well, what Saletan's book argues is that NARAL, witnessing the success of that argument in Arkansas, decided to nationalize that strategy. And instead of arguing what government obligations there were to ensure that abortions were safe, accessible, affordable, and legal, they started arguing what the government should not do in terms of telling women what to do with their lives and their bodies.

It was a great marketing strategy, but I think it's philosophically bankrupt, because you're reinforcing very racist, antigovernment tendencies. And when you do that, that's like opening up Pandora's box. The government said with the Hyde Amendment, Well, if abortion is a private decision, then the government has no obligation to pay for that private decision — which is absolutely ludicrous. I mean, it's my private decision to catch a plane every day, but the government has an obligation to make sure that plane stays in the air. So there is a relationship between the private decision and the protection of private decisions and the enabling of private decisions where the government does have an obligation.

54:14

But the states' rights-type argument that NARAL promulgated took the government out of the question. The only thing that government should do is not recriminalize abortion and we'll take care of the rest. Well, we weren't able to take care of the rest, particularly for vulnerable populations like poor women, women of color, Native American women who get their services through the Indian Health Services. Even women in the military, fighting for our country in Iraq, cannot get full reproductive health care at military hospitals because of the Hyde Amendment.

And so, NARAL pushed onto the entire movement a framework that was more conservative than the original radical feminism of the abortion rights movement, and that narrowed down what we were talking about in terms of defending women's rights. It got narrowed down to only defense of keeping abortion legal. And if you heard the endless press interviews that they talked about, it was all about, We're at a razor's edge on the Supreme Court, they're going to recriminalize abortion, we're on a razor's edge at the Supreme Court, they're going to recriminalize abortion. And all the rest of the messaging around the multiple threats to women's lives were barely voiced in our media strategy.

So it was one thing to make all those changes internally, as uneasy as those were, as difficult as they were, but it didn't matter if our public message has not changed. And that was really hard to deal with, when we were organizing the march. I'm not sure if I answered your question.

FOLLET:

Where are we on time on this, on this tape? OK. I want to go to, next, to the question of to what extent the agenda really was changed internally and to the way that race and class politics play into this. But I think that's going to take us more than five minutes, so let's take the chance to take a break and change tape.

END TAPE 21

TAPE 22

FOLLET: OK. Say that stuff again about the tee-shirts and the posters and the —

ROSS: Well, people who came to the march were having trouble finding March for Women's Lives tee-shirts, or we never were able to produce any March for Women's Lives bumper stickers or even a sufficient amount of buttons. We got approval to print only 5000 women of color posters, because the people with the deepest pockets, Planned Parenthood and NARAL, were spending all their money producing Planned Parenthood and NARAL paraphernalia. So that's why you had these huge litter piles of Planned Parenthood and NARAL signs and paraphernalia everywhere. And I'm telling you, the march stuff became an instant collector's item because we'd never had a chance to print —

FOLLET: They let you print only 5000?

ROSS: See, each budgetary expenditure had to be approved by the steering committee of the whole, and so if they only approved enough money for 10,000 tee-shirts, that's how many tee-shirts got printed.

FOLLET: And how many people were on the steering committee?

ROSS: The seven.

FOLLET: Just the seven. And your role in relationship to the steering committee was —

1:20

ROSS: I wasn't an official steering committee person. I was at [nearly] every meeting, but as I said, I was the outsider spitting into the tent rather than the insider spitting out. And they were smart strategists. They would line up their ducks, they would line up the arguments. And even if they lost the vote, that didn't mean the decision was made because they just reopened it again the very next meeting.

FOLLET: What's your take on the race and class politics of all of this? I mean, you said initially that when you were approached about becoming co-director, you said, "No way." You said, "The white girls started organizing this march without including us. I'm not going into that fray." But you did. And what's your take on — besides the organizational politics and those kinds of turf wars — the race and class dynamics behind any of this?

ROSS: One of the things I had observed when I was director of NOW's women of color program back in the '80s was that it was very common for white women to treat each other quite brutally in the pursuit of power politics, and quite often the issues of women of color became road kill

in those fights. So, sometimes what we call racist behavior was in fact not racist behavior because it wasn't directed towards us. It was the normal brutality with which white women treated each other that spilled over on us. That ain't racism, that's something else. That's the violence of power politics, but it's not racism.

And so, with the march, it was very much the same dynamic, that when the needs of women of color were neglected, or our voices weren't respected, quite often it had nothing to do with intentionally disrespecting or neglecting women of color. It had everything to do with the turf battles happening between the organizers. And so, at least for me, the race and class dynamics were not the main determinant of things.

Now there were some racist incidents that I can call clearly racist. Ellie Smeal made the suggestion that Faye Wattleton speak at the march. Faye Wattleton was the first black woman to head up Planned Parenthood — in my mind, their most successful president since Margaret Sanger, and she was the first woman to head it since Margaret Sanger as well. And a firestorm of controversy erupted over Faye speaking, mainly at the leadership of Planned Parenthood, because Gloria Feldt felt that if Faye spoke, then it would eclipse her. But she couldn't say so directly, so instead she sent her minions to the meeting to argue how inappropriate it was to have a past president of Planned Parenthood to speak, when the current president of Planned Parenthood [would] speak. Kim Gandy quipped something really cute, she said, "Well, I've got Ellie Smeal and Patricia Ireland speaking, and they're both past presidents of NOW. I'm not bothered by that, so why should you?" It was about insecurity around her leadership. And Gloria's been president of Planned Parenthood for ten, 12 years or something, so one would have thought she'd gotten over that by now. But Faye cast a very large shadow.

So in the debate over whether or not we would ask Faye Wattleton to speak — and I really regret that I didn't think to ask Faye Wattleton, to put Faye Wattleton's name in the hat, but Ellie did — but in the debate, anyway, one of the NARAL people turned to me and said, "Well, Loretta, if it's just a woman of color you need, we'll find you a woman of color." And I honestly say, I was stunned, because that was so primitive and so racist — like women of color are just substitutable parts and as long as you've got a colored face up there, it doesn't matter who that colored face is.

And I had to literally turn to this woman and say, "Excuse me. Faye Wattleton is not just another woman of color. She is the most well-known woman of color on these issues in America. There is no other Faye Wattleton, and the fact that you think you can just offer another woman of color to keep her off the stage is racist. I mean, the way you said it, the way you even think about it, is racist."

5:02

FOLLET:

Who said this to you?

ROSS: Mary something-or-the-other from NARAL. Mary Jean Collins, I think her name was, but I'm not sure. And so there were some things that were decidedly racist, but for the most part, I wouldn't characterize the things that happened to women of color as racist. But then, we had this debate over, of course, women of color speakers for the march, and they felt that once they got Whoopi Goldberg they had satisfied their women of color thing. Now, some of us, as women of color, weren't that happy about the choice of Whoopi, but we didn't feel we were going to fight them over it. But the fact that you had this celebrity and that celebrity and this white speaker and that white speaker, and that women of color had to fight to get speaking spaces on the stage and stuff like that? At one point, they had no woman representing a woman with HIV/AIDS on the program, so I had proposed Juanita Williams, who eventually got on the program, but it was a fight to the death to get her that space.

FOLLET: What were the arguments against it?

7:33

ROSS: Oh, well, you know, we've got 300 people who want to speak and 60 speaking slots, so we have to — not paying attention to the fact that 40 of these speaking slots they had laid claim to, putting this celebrity or this person from Planned Parenthood or this person from NARAL or this person from NOW or the Feminist Majority — at that point, they were all about the same in terms of, as far as I was concerned, in terms of making sure their own visibility was protected. And so, there were racial dynamics on that.

And then, there's a big difference between morning stage and the afternoon stage: the afternoon stage is seen as the serious stage and the morning stage is the kicks-off-the-march stage. And so, then they wanted to isolate all the women of color that I put up there to the morning stage. Fortunately, that dynamic was disrupted when Hilary Clinton could only speak on the morning stage. Then all of a sudden everybody wanted to be on the morning stage. Then we got shuffled to the afternoon stage. And then the end of the afternoon stage and so, it was, like, 5 or 6 o'clock at night before the women of color delegation got a chance to speak.

And actually, I was appointed to be the representative, and I broke that down. I said, "I'm not going to speak. Instead, I'm going to pull up on the stage all the women of color who helped make this march possible and we had a big banner called Women of Color for Reproductive Justice. And so, instead of using my one minute that — my speaking time was supposed to be three minutes, it kept getting cut down to, first two minutes and then one minute — so rather than using it to speak, I used it to pull all the organizers up on the stage so that they would get their moment, and it was really crazy stuff.

To get backstage, you had to have backstage access, and only if you're a member of the steering committee, or, like I was co-director of

the march, I could escort people back to the stage and I had full access. But when it came time to take the women of color I identified that were to carry the banner up on the stage, I had to fight with the darn gate guard. "Excuse me. I'm co-director of the march. You're our employee. I'm not fighting with you to get these women up on the stage," and that kind of thing, and kept getting pushed back, and I'm supposed to go on at 2 o'clock [then 3, then 4], 5 o'clock.

So the race and class dynamics were there, but I think they got trumped by the power politics. I really don't think that there was the intentional racism so much as the power politics that were distorting everything. That wouldn't be fair to say that them pushing the women of color back was racist. It was more [the politics] of, Does this celebrity get up there? What about all these representatives from Congress? What about me? Do I get to speak my three minutes? What about me? What about me? What about me? kind of thing, was going on.

FOLLET:

So in the end, what's your take on your original inclination that it was important, as you discussed at the '03 SisterSong conference, that it was important for women of color to participate in this march? As it shook down, what were the gains and losses, and at what cost?

10:48

ROSS:

Well, certainly, SisterSong got strengthened by its march participation, and the way we got strengthened was not only the increasing visibility we got — because we were able to impose our will on this huge process and get the march name changed and women of color added to the steering committee — but it also affected our finances. I mean, we got a couple of grants we hadn't even asked for simply because we'd been involved in the march organizing, and so I thought that was a good post-march effect.

We did some very unusual and unique things as part of the march. We worked with Pacifica Radio and we did live broadcasts of the women of color who were at the march coast to coast during the entire march. There'd never been a live broadcast of women of color coast to coast like that on any issue, but much less on reproductive rights, abortion rights and stuff. And so we were able to have incredible radio coverage of women of color as a consequence of the march. And Luz Alvarez Martinez with the National Latino Health Organization coordinated that for us.

I think our increasing visibility of SisterSong during the march is part of the reason we've had such a tremendous growth spurt in our membership. [When] SisterSong first pulled together the conference, we were 15 organizations. Now we're up to 70. So I think that our visibility — I mean, the conference had a lot to do with that, too, but I think our national visibility with the march organizing — and the fact that this small committee group of women of color were able to really change the direction of the movement, is important.

We also offered our reproductive justice analysis, the one that talks about [how] the controlling the fertility of women is directly tied to attempts to control the populations of communities of color. And so now we hear a lot of the people who participated in the march using the phrase “reproductive justice” that they’d never used before. It’s becoming the connective framework that ties economic justice, human rights, reproductive rights, immigration rights, those kinds of things, together. And so, that’s a really good outcome, because people are using our analysis more. I recently met both representatives sent from NARAL and Planned Parenthood who wanted to know more about this reproductive justice framework and how can we use it now. Some of us within SisterSong think that’s a cooptation move, rather than a true conversion, but only time will tell.

Other things that happened: Well, certainly, the visibility in the Black Women’s Health Imperative and the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health shot up. One of the big, by the way, debates of the march, and probably this was the bitterest fight, was who would get the names. Let me explain. Whenever you assemble a million people anywhere, you want to capture that data. You want to know who those million people are. You have no way of knowing in advance, unless you’ve got people on every bus, every plane, recording people. You capture them at the march. And so, the goal was to get the names. The strategy was to seed the march with sufficient volunteers with clipboards to collect people’s names. And the reason the name collection is important is that if people have sacrificed to come out to a march, then they’re great candidates for direct-mail appeals thereafter, and all four of these organizations use direct mail as a way of raising money.

So one of the bitterest fights was who would be in charge of the volunteers that collected the names, what would happen to the names once they got collected, and would they be evenly shared. I should probably go back a little while. Planned Parenthood had appointed itself the collector of the databases from all the participating organizations, and they were the ones in charge of doing the direct mails for the march.

The march, by the way, had a lot of trouble getting financing. The foundation community as a whole provided minimal support for the march, I mean, much less than had been historically the case. And so the march had to become self-financing, and the best way to do that was through direct-mail appeals. Each direct-mail appeal that they dropped raised between \$500,000 and \$700,000 net. Net.

And so Planned Parenthood — in my mind, quite immorally — used the databases that they had aggregated from all the other groups to do their own direct-mail appeal for Planned Parenthood. And so the appeals from the march kept getting delayed because of different excuses Planned Parenthood kept offering that didn’t make any sense to us. So the first one didn’t go out until December, while in our mailboxes we were getting appeal after appeal after appeal from Planned Parenthood,

to go into Planned Parenthood's coffers. And so that was corrupt. When people [who] shared their mailing lists with you had made an agreement that this was to be used [only] for the purpose of the march, you should not be using it to enrich your own organization. Yet that's what they did.

So one of the controversies was the agreement for the names we collected for the march. Who's going to get those? How will they be shared? I'm telling you that story to say that one of the benefits for the National Latina Health Institute for Reproductive Health as well as the Black Women's Health Imperative was that they got access to those names as a member of the steering committee. Now the other five organizations, and I'm including the ACLU, have huge direct-mail operations already, and are quite efficient at raising funds through direct mail, but the other two organizations don't have those operations in place. And yet having access to those databases could help them jumpstart by light years their whole direct-mail operations.

FOLLET: And those two organizations will have access?

ROSS: Um-hm. Because the agreement was that all seven steering committee members would have equal access to the names collected at the march. Now I haven't followed up with them to see if they've been able to use the opportunity, because it is an expensive investment to go into direct mail. You lose money in the first four or five years you're doing it. And so I'm not sure if these organizations have the capacity to take advantage of the opportunity, but certainly — I mean, I'd like to have those million names.

18:15

FOLLET: Well, that's my next question. (both voices)

ROSS: I don't have access to them.

FOLLET: SisterSong, after all, existed by the time the march was organized and had been around for —

ROSS: Seven years by then —

FOLLET: For seven years by that point, and SisterSong represents the evolution of women of color organizing around reproductive rights. Is it fair to say that this is a development that was happening parallel to, separate from, in spite of, in opposition to the organizing that is being done by the more white, mainstream organizations?

ROSS: Well, I think the fairest way to characterize SisterSong is to say we're independent. We're not organized in opposition to the mainstream. We're not trying to be parallel to the mainstream. As a matter of fact, we expect the mainstream to parallel us. I mean, we feel that we have

the winning message and the winning strategy. We have a unifying framework for protecting all the aspects of women's lives, not just the reproductive rights but as I said, their political rights and all of that stuff.

There was a very specific reason that I did not propose SisterSong as a member of the steering committee, and that is we did not have total unity within SisterSong on whether to participate in the march. Remember, we don't even have total unity within SisterSong on whether we all support abortion rights, because we have a left, right, and center, too, and we have people within SisterSong who are founding members, very precious to us, who are opposed to abortion. So without having perfect unity within SisterSong, it didn't seem right to me to fight for space for us on the steering committee, when we had not necessarily achieved that level of unity, and that the role of SisterSong would be to create the spaces for other women of color, and so that's the role we played.

So we didn't — we weren't really seeing to our own visibility in that process. We weren't trying to say, you know, SisterSong, SisterSong, SisterSong. We were saying, Our role is to facilitate other women of color. And I'm pretty proud that we did it that way. Of course, in hindsight, I wish we had access to those million names, but at the same time — and there's no way that any of those other seven organizations are going to share it, because every one of those names represents dollars in their coffers. So I probably wish I had at least said, OK, to the extent that, even if we're not on the steering committee, to the extent that these names are shared, we should be allowed in on that deal, but I didn't — to anticipate making that part of the front-end deal. And they weren't giving up anything else once the deal had been signed and delivered.

So SisterSong, I think our pride and our accomplishment is in the fact that we were able to get the national analysis shifted to move beyond just the pro-choice, freedom-of-choice language into the more holistic reproductive justice language that we wanted. We were able to certainly empower a lot of women of color to go who normally wouldn't go. We paid for buses.

22:20

FOLLET: SisterSong did?

ROSS: Yes, SisterSong did. Buses for women of color to come from Pittsburgh, from Atlanta, from New York. We paid for buses, which is something that no women of color have ever done before, and that felt very empowering.

Part of the — you asked about race and class dynamics. Part of the dilemma for me was that we put these demands out there, they met our demands in terms of changing the name of the march and including women of color. So then our problem was then, now we had to deliver our part of the deal, and really mobilize women of color to participate in

the march. So we started monthly national conference calls of women of color to talk about participating in the march, so it really put a drain on our resources.

I mean, SisterSong's entire agenda was held in abeyance for the first six months, basically, of 2004. I mean, we didn't have a chance to do post-conference organizing, following up with all the success of our own conference, because we dropped everything to participate in the march, and so it wasn't until July following the march that we had our national membership meeting, which probably should have happened much earlier, published our first newsletter, *Collective Voices*, so we didn't start getting back on track with our own agenda until the second half of 2004.

FOLLET: But did you find when you went out trying to encourage women of color to participate that there were existing groups ready and willing? How much convincing did you have to do? What kind of arguments did you need to make?

24:04

ROSS: Well, it was mixed. Some of the groups were really enthusiastic and they didn't need much persuading, particularly after we explained to them the more inclusive framework that the march was being organized around. Once we said, Yes, your issue's there, whether your issue is teen pregnancy or HIV/AIDS or immigrant rights or gay and lesbian rights, we were able to say, it's there. It's in there. Like that commercial: "It's in there." OK. And they were the ones that were not hard to persuade. The groups that were more difficult to persuade were those that had bad history with the first four organizations. So if they felt that they'd been scorned or neglected or tokenized by some previous interaction with Planned Parenthood or NARAL or Feminist Majority, then they were much more skeptical about participating this time.

FOLLET: And which ones would they have been? Do you remember specifically?

ROSS: Which groups?

FOLLET: Yeah, um-hm. Who were the most reluctant?

ROSS: Well, they don't represent any particular sector because — and see, that's part of the problem, is that sometimes things go sour at the local level, between the local NOW chapter and a local group of women of color, that the national office doesn't even know about. And so, it was not one group that they had problems with. There were some Planned Parenthoods that are much more into a population-control analysis than a women's-empowerment analysis. And so, if that's happening in Florida and we're trying to mobilize women in Florida, then — and I'm just using that as an example, I'm not saying it did — then they've poisoned the ground in which you're trying to sow new hope, new

optimism, new energy. And so, it was a very specific, case-by-case basis by which you could either get a lot of support or some resistance, and my job was to turn that resistance into support.

It was very hard to know in advance which one you're going to get when you show up in town and you're trying to — I mean, part of the organizing was organizing forums, discussions, meetings with leaders. Sometimes I had to go to the same town five times in order to first meet with the key women of color leaders in the community and then reinforcing the message that they needed to mobilize.

Let me try to give you an example. We ended up with close to 150 people of color, women of color organizations endorsing the march. It is far easier to get people to endorse the march than to actually mobilize to come. So the endorsements were great, but I had to turn those endorsements into seats on buses — that's a lot harder. And so, if there was resistance in a locale to participate in the march, I still maybe could get their endorsement, but it didn't translate into mobilizing.

A classic example is the Delta Sigma Beta sorority, which, ironically, had endorsed all the previous marches, but for some reason they were quite skittish at the national level of endorsing this march and we never actually got that endorsement. The local chapters were endorsing but not the national, and I am totally persuaded this is because of some bad history somewhere between the current national leadership of the Deltas and some of the four organizations, but where I could never get clear on that.

The National Coalition of 100 Black Women is another key example of a problem area. The National Coalition of 100 Black Women is the most explicitly feminist black organization. I mean, they've had — in their founding principles is support for abortion rights and feminist activism. And yet, they felt insulted that they had not been consulted to participate in planning the march. [As if to say] We're the leading black feminist organization in America, we have chapters in twenty states: why weren't we even asked to participate in this process until towards the end, even at the last minute?

28:12

And so their — their meaning the Fab Four — lack of understanding of the politics in communities of color, the feminism in communities of color, not just the politics, the feminists of communities of color, was very disconcerting and less than helpful. And so, we had to set up a special meeting with the representatives of the National Coalition of 100 Black Women and the march steering committee to try to heal that breach, because the last thing we needed was a group of black women out there actively saying, Don't go, because we're going to be ignored and tokenized again, like they're ignoring and tokenizing us now.

And so, those kinds of mine fields were out there under my feet all the time and like poor Ederlina [Co], I felt like I was having to apologize for the decisions made by women that I had no part in making, but as their representative, I had to own their decisions as if

they were my own, because it's a question of being in integrity with the job that I've taken.

But I have to honestly say that that six months I spent, not only commuting from Atlanta to Washington on a weekly basis but being immersed in the feminist politics on a national level really affirmed my decision to leave Washington, D.C., 15 years ago and move to Atlanta, because I left that mainstream women's movement when I moved to Atlanta. And if I ever had any regrets about leaving, the march cured all those regrets, I tell you.

FOLLET: The situation you just described about being between the Coalition of 100 Black Women and the larger movement is a position that you have found yourself in repeatedly over the years. And I want to ask you about that. You are a believer in allies, and you're on the upcoming program for the Allies Summit that NOW is sponsoring. SisterSong welcomes allies, whereas other organizations — Incite, I think, perhaps — steers clear of having —

30:57

ROSS: White women involved.

FOLLET: — white women involved. You've described some pretty tough going, but you remain committed to this kind of a position. Alice Cohan came to you for a reason. You accepted it. You will, in spite of these experiences, be on this program for the Allies Summit. What message will you bring?

ROSS: Well, first of all, let's talk about the position of being the bridge, like Cherrie [Moraga] calls it in her book —

FOLLET: Yes. Please do.

ROSS: — [*This Bridge*] *Called My Back*. And I've actually tried to live that out. When you're a bridge and you're trying to bridge diverse worlds, then people are going to walk across your back, going in both directions, and they may not even notice that they're crossing a bridge. They just notice whether they get to the other side or not. And that's a position I've chosen to be in over and over again. I actually like that position because I like being in that bridging place where you get to see both worlds and see what common ground and what unifies us versus divides. And so that's a very good position to be in. It's not a good position to be in though if you want to be noticed, because like I said, people are not going to notice the bridge they walk across. They just notice that they're on the other side. And that's part of it, the positioning.

But part of my commitment to it is philosophical. I learned early in my days at the Rape Crisis Center that the race doesn't matter nearly as much as the politics. Because in our process of choosing other executive directors to head up the Rape Crisis Center, I once made the mistake of

choosing a black woman over a white woman when the black woman had the skills but the white woman had the politics. I found out that this black woman was as reactionary as any conservative you'd ever want to meet in life. And I learned way back in the early '80s not to privilege race over politics. You need someone with the right feminist perspective. Skills can be learned.

And so, I think that there's a role for allies in building a human rights movement that meets the needs of women of color. I think it's about the human rights of all of us. I'm not saying this well, but what we all have in common is our humanity, and the social constructs of race, class, and gender only serve to divide us rather than to unite us. I also believe, though, that just because they made it up doesn't mean it doesn't hurt — that we are divided by race, class, and gender, and sexual orientation and ability and age and a lot of other things. But I try to be wary of being trapped in identity politics [although] the politics are useful so that you know who you are with the fullness and appreciation of what that is. But everyone you need to know will not be like you, and it's actually best that way, or we'd all be some kind of improbable set of clones.

34:30

And so, once you know who you are, then you need to be able to identify and work with people who know who they are, and are all moving in the same direction that you're moving in. That's what's called movement, and not cult. That would be a cult if they all thought alike and moved in the same direction. But the fact that we think different thoughts and come from different identities and places, and yet we're all moving in the same direction — that, to me, is a women's movement, or movements, actually. And that's OK.

So my particular talent, I guess, if you can call it that, and certainly, my gift, is an incredibly thick skin, so I don't react to comments that other people would call racist. I really don't care, for the most part. I try to see into the heart of individuals because I think that none of us will ever learn the social skills to be appropriate interracially all the time, because they're not taught. These skills are not taught.

And so, when someone — God, this is a real incident — when someone walks up to me and looks at my dreadlocks and says, "Oh, I love your hair. Do you wash it?" I try to focus on the first half of the sentence and not the second half, because if you only focus on the second half, you may commit violence on that person. But if you focus on the first half, and the intent behind the comment, trying to see into the heart — what does she really mean? I know she didn't mean to accuse me of never washing my hair, so what does she really mean? She really just lacked the skills to offer a racially appropriate compliment.

And I think that's what years of activism have taught me. Certainly in the 1970s, if someone had said that to me then, I probably would have gone to my hyper-nationalist days and, you know, called her a couple of racist names and hurt her feelings. I have a lot of personal

power, so I can reduce people to tears quite easily if I choose to. I choose *not* to all the time because that's an inappropriate use of power.

But I worked with and against real racists. I mean, I did anti-Klan work. I know what the real racist looks like, and so I try not to confuse people with poor social skills with people who really intend my death, and knowing the difference between the two. Unfortunately, that's not something that a lot of women of color have an opportunity to learn and see. And so, the do-you-wash-your-hair comment deeply hurts them, because their experience of white supremacy is the expectation that when a white person says something inappropriate, they meant it to hurt.

And so, if you're still in that angry and hurt place, you're not prepared to be a bridge. Now, I always said that I need to write a sequel to Cherrie's book and Gloria — Gloria Anzaldua wrote that with her, too — but that instead of calling it *This Bridge Called My Back*, I should call it *The Bridge That Never Ends* (laughs), doesn't have a beginning or an end, it just goes on forever, trying to bridge all the diverse sectors of humanity.

That's the work I like doing, because it works out really well. And I think it also is related to my personal life. Remember, I grew up in a world that was neither white nor black, but bridged. So I'm sure that my personal life, the moving around and being in different communities and having to deal with a lot of different people all the time, kind of preconditioned me for seeing the feminist movement that way.

FOLLET: So, what — since your back is holding up, it seems — what message will you bring to that summit? If you could push one message coming out of the march and out of all the prior experience, what will it be?

ROSS: Well, it's interesting that you would talk about the NOW Women of Color and Allies summit, because right now the organizing of this summit is embroiled in the same old tired controversies that I had to experience in the '80s when I was trying to organize the women of color reproductive rights conference at NOW. We estimate that it will probably cost about \$60,000 to have this summit in the way that we want to have it, which is really low budget. I mean, the [budget for] the SisterSong conference was \$150,000, so \$60,000 is a very minimalist estimate. The NOW officers have decided to allocate only \$20,000 for the summit, probably for their own financial reasons, and have encouraged the women on the steering committee to solicit the other \$40,000 from women of color organizations.

Well, that has erupted into a firestorm. The women of color organizations said they're trying to ask for money from them, saying, Why should we make NOW's conference work? If we had that kind of thousands of dollars to spend on a conference, it wouldn't be to make NOW look good. And so, I'm getting this blizzard of e-mails from women of color about NOW, saying, Loretta, what can you do? Can you go talk to them and tell them that they may need to fully finance this

thing? They just can't announce to this world that they're going to do this Women of Color and Allies summit and then not finance it. It's kind of like how Congress does, you know, they pass a law and then they don't pass the appropriations acts to make it work. So NOW has put itself into that same position. It's announced to the world that it's having this Women of Color and Allies summit, but they're not putting in place the money to actually make it work, and they've instead shifted responsibility for raising the money onto the women of color within NOW. And they're not at all happy about it.

And I've been basically trying to keep myself out of the fray because, as I said, at SisterSong I've got my own problems. I've got to build SisterSong. I am not put in this world to fix NOW. I did that in the '80s. I'm not going there again. But they are trying to pull me into the fray, and it's just sad that these organizations don't seem to learn. They don't carry the institutional memory of how to create better relationships with women of color.

FOLLET:

So, as you don the hat as the new director of SisterSong — which you've done since we talked last, right? — coming out of these experiences, the march specifically and these others, what's your message for SisterSong? What are your hopes for SisterSong? What's the role of SisterSong now among women of color and within the larger women's movement?

43:00

ROSS:

Well, SisterSong feels that — we have a couple of primary roles. First of all, we need to create the spaces for women of color to meet, network, and organize, because there aren't that many spaces for us to do that on a national level. So that's why we hold the conferences, the meetings, the training meetings and stuff like that.

Secondly, we need to strengthen the existing women of color organizations. What's really sad about the reproductive health organizations among women of color is that they're terribly fragile. They're underfunded, understaffed, and yet they have huge missions: trying to service the community in which they're embedded, represent the voice of marginalized or silenced women, have an impact on even local or national politics, and sustain themselves. I mean, these are a lot of hats to wear, and so SisterSong feels that one of its primary functions is capacity building for our member organizations. And capacity building can be anything from getting the first information technology — I mean, when SisterSong started, about half our organizations didn't even own computers, fax machines. Just getting everybody up to speed. Most didn't have their 501(c)3 status. They were fiscally sponsored by somebody, if they even had the finances to know they were fiscally sponsored. And so, capacity building continues to be a primary issue for SisterSong.

But on a national level, our biggest dilemma and question is, now that the march has passed, now that we were able to show and

demonstrate that we could have a significant impact on national politics, do we want to be there — when for our first seven or eight years, we had no interest in national feminist politics. And does that move us off mission if we continue to occupy that space of being the voice for women of color on a national level? And will that detract from our mission of strengthening women of color organizations, creating spaces for women of color to organize, changing public health policies that affect women of color?

These are the core things that SisterSong organized around, not fixing the mainstream reproductive rights movement. Yet we're poised between that tension of — we know that if we don't pay attention to the mainstream movement, our neglect of them may create more harm for us. And so, it's a dilemma we have not yet resolved in terms of, do we stay with the agenda that got us here and made us survive, now eight years, or do we give into the seduction of being a national player, which sounds good and looks good, but will it in the long run affect the health of women of color in a positive way in our communities? Or will we just be on this presidential commission or this task force or have our name in the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times* — but will it actually save a woman's life, the way we're doing it now? I don't know.

And so, what role SisterSong plays is yet to be determined. We talked about it extensively at our annual membership meeting last July. Our next annual membership meeting is this coming July of 2005 out in Oakland [new date: October 15–16, 2005]. And I don't think we have an easy answer for that.

When I say seductive, I'm not just talking about seductive in terms of visibility, but the more visible you are, the more access you have to funding. And funders, to be honest, aren't that interested in just sustaining women of color organizations. They really want to see what kind of impact are you having on the mainstream and how influential are you and how powerful are you, and if you can't point to the clippings from the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times*, then they read powerless, because the fact that we're in our own ethnic media doesn't necessarily affect or impress readers. So, we haven't figured out how to change the nature of the game yet — I guess that's it — one of the rules of the game. How can SisterSong change the rules of the game so that those things we prize as an armament of women of color are really valued by the mainstream?

FOLLET: What would be those nonnegotiable things that you prize?

ROSS: Well, first of all, we have to very, very careful not to do anything to threaten the existence and sustainability of women of color organizations, because we really prize the fact that over the last 30 years, women of color have built their own organizations. And so, we have to be very careful not to go into a direction that threatens the survival of those organizations.

49:00

It's kind of like a brain drain that's happening in the developing world. If the best of our leadership is sucked off into the mainstream because they can offer better-paying jobs, you know, job security and what have you, well, what's going to happen to SisterSong? We don't know. So that's the kind of thing that we see as a threat.

If the mainstream starts moving in a more conservative fashion, which is very possible given the climate, we see that as a threat to SisterSong. A classic example happened during the march. The governor of South Dakota [Mike Rounds], I don't remember his name, has tried to enact a state law that would ban all abortions in the state of South Dakota, with no exceptions — no incest exception, no life-of-the-mother exception, no rape exceptions. And South Dakota Planned Parenthood decided, for reasons of its own, that it would not fight this campaign by the governor for a couple of reasons. First of all, he tried to do it last year and it failed, and it took a lot of their energy and resources to ensure its failure. But the reason it failed was that the South Dakota Supreme Court ruled it was unconstitutional. And so they took the position, when the governor tried this tactic again in 2004, that they weren't going to sink all their resources into fighting it, because it probably would be ruled unconstitutional anyway.

Well, for SisterSong, we didn't like that decision. Again, if you allow them to get any kind of encroachment on women's rights, even in the air to be discussed and then even ruled unconstitutional, some women are going to die while that whole thing is being debated, and usually it's going to be the youngest, the most vulnerable, the poorest that are going to die.

And so, Charon Asetoyer with the Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center out in South Dakota, when I called Charon to talk about her participating in the march — actually I was trying to get Charon to speak at the march — Charon said, "There is no way I am coming to that march. As a matter of fact, I'm telling everybody I know not to come to that march, because we're getting screwed by South Dakota Planned Parenthood over their intention not to fight this constitutional amendment banning abortions. So we're in this fight by ourselves with no resources, when the rest of the so-called pro-choice community isn't working with us. They're deciding that they don't need to put their resources there."

And that's the classic SisterSong dilemma, because am I going to go and tell Charon, You're wrong, let's follow the lead of the major organizations: they've got the lobbyists, they've got the analysts, they should know better? Hell, no. Charon is like, Anytime we don't fight, we have to accept the responsibility for women who'll die because we didn't fight. And I think Charon's right.

52:07

But blow that up to the national level. So where should SisterSong be, trying to ensure that no future Planned Parenthoods do that? Or do we just need to stand there in solidarity with Charon and put all our energy and focus on making [sure that] Charon has her sustainability

protected so that she can wage the good fight. I'm not sure if I'm making sense.

FOLLET: Oh, are you ever.

ROSS: That's a classic SisterSong dilemma, and I don't have an easy answer for that. And because Planned Parenthood, just to finish our story, is a federation of independent Planned Parenthoods, I can't even go to Planned Parenthood Federation of America and say, Make your South Dakota Planned Parenthood fall into line, because they're a federation. They're all autonomous organizations. They don't have that internal discipline, where the national office can impose a strategy or agenda on the rest. And so, with that particular situation, it doesn't look like a good use of SisterSong's time to try to work on the national level.

FOLLET: How many minutes? Ten. OK. I have a couple of wrap-up questions, but first, let's see if we want to finish this tape with anything else about SisterSong. Are there any key principles that are baseline for SisterSong? Do membership organizations have to sign onto any basic principles that would define a SisterSong position?

ROSS: Well, we have published and developed over time what we call our Principles of Unity. And they're fairly low-level, meaning benchmarks, for what it takes to be a member or ally of SisterSong: be committed to the health care of communities of color in general and women of color in particular, to understand that the health care situation of women of color is highly political and so you have to not only work in a direct service kind of way but you have to work in an advocacy kind of way. You have to intentionally want to be part of a collective process, so if you don't believe in collectives, SisterSong is not the place for you.

And basically, in SisterSong, we say we don't want every woman of color to join us, we just want the ones that believe in working in a collective way, that believe that we can do collectively more than we can do individually. And so, that's produced some tension over the years. There have been groups that have joined SisterSong that have dropped out because working in a collective is not for them. We keep a seat at the table for them but we know that everybody doesn't have to do the work in the same way. So we have our Principles of Unity.

Then, SisterSong is also organized internally among ethnic lines, so that there's an African-American mini-community and Latina mini-community, et cetera. And so the Latina mini-community established the Latina Principles of Unity that complement the overarching Principles of Unity.

And then we had, as I said, created the concept of allies — because SisterSong was never — when we first conceptualized — in seven years, we never dealt with allies. It was only as we started mobilizing for the national conference and people started saying, Well, how can we

join, how can we support SisterSong? that we started envisioning the concept of allies. And even then, we hadn't quite planned it out.

So we accepted the membership of non-women of color and men and allied organizations and that was all great, but our lack of planning became obvious at our July 2004 membership meeting, when we had a caucus for everybody except the white women. So all ethnic groups are in their own caucuses and I walked down to the conference room, there were white women sitting around, saying, Now what are we supposed to be doing? And so, in that moment, we had to create the European mini-community. Well, you know, we hadn't thought out, Well, it's OK to have them as members and allowing them at the conference but we hadn't thought this out: where is the community they can belong to? And so we're still unfolding and figuring this out as we go.

But one thing I can say that's pretty clear in my mind about SisterSong is that we're not organizing so that we can join the mainstream. We actually think we have the analysis and the process for doing work collectively, but the mainstream needs to join us. And I think the march was emblematic of that switch: when they were just organizing under the banner of freedom of choice, they couldn't get traction for the march, they couldn't get it off the ground. The minute they adopted the broader SisterSong framework, then the march just exploded, it just took off — and really changed the dynamics of what was going on.

FOLLET: That analysis: is it safe to say that your recent book, *Undivided Rights* — does that represent Loretta Ross's analysis? Are you entirely comfortable with the argument in that book?

ROSS: Absolutely, absolutely.

FOLLET: OK. Can you briefly summarize it? Could you say in a few words, if this were a 30-second sound bite, how would you — the analysis of SisterSong is:

ROSS: Well, the analysis of SisterSong is that in order to protect women's lives, then we have to pay attention to all the things that threaten women's lives, that we would call human rights violations. So our analysis is human rights-based. It keeps the real woman in the center of the lens — not all the things that are happening to her, but her self, her needs, her realities — in the center of the lens, and our fundamental belief that we have to work collectively together in unity in order to produce change.

I'm not sure if that's 30 seconds, but that's the SisterSong analysis. It's a human rights-based approach in terms of its framework, in terms of its process. We believe very much in Self-Help and conscientization, consciousness raising. And as we often see it at our meetings, in order to heal others, we first have to heal ourselves. So, it sounds complicated

but it really isn't. It's our commonsense approach to ensuring that women of color and communities of color are offered the best chances for positive health outcomes, and these best chances are achieved when they are sufficiently empowered to see about their lives, empowered through information, empowered through access, empowered through economic stability, and empowered in a number of ways.

FOLLET: And reproduction is at the core of that?

ROSS: Well, the short answer to that is that SisterSong fights for the right of women to have or not to have a child. Both of those are important to the health of our communities, and one of the things we do react to are externally imposed attempts to limit our fertility, what we call population control, which is what all communities of color in this society have been subjected to throughout the history of America. And so, we have made the mainstream movement at least pay lip service to the concept that it is equally our right to have a child as it is not to have a child. And if you're only fighting for the right not to have a child, then you're not doing it in the SisterSong way.

FOLLET: And the difference between rights and justice?

ROSS: Rights, first of all, can be expressed in a number of ways.

KATE: One minute.

ROSS: Oh, I'd better not get into a long explanation, then. Rights. Rights are those things you are entitled to. Justice are those things you actually achieve.

END TAPE 2

TAPE 3

[first :25 set up]

FOLLET: OK, we're running. Before we go into last-minute wrap up, the one remaining question I have to ask about SisterSong is, How critical is foundation support to SisterSong?

ROSS: Well, foundation support is very critical to SisterSong, because we're talking about the sustainability of our organization. Now, certainly, we could work without money. We have, and we will continue to do so. But having the money to hire staff, to get technology, even to meet, is vital. I mean, every one of SisterSong's committees is staffed by people from seven or eight different organizations, so even to have a committee meeting we have to have travel funds to bring people together.

And so, who we are and the way we're structured requires quite a bit of investment of support, and part of what's frustrating for us at SisterSong is that while we do get foundation support — particularly from Ford Foundation, they've been really good in supporting us — we still have to watch non-women of color organizations get far more support for their women of color projects than real women of color organizations. And so, we might get a \$5,000 grant from a foundation where a Planned Parenthood might get a \$50,000 grant from the same foundation, supposedly to work with women of color.

And so, we're competing with the mainstream for funding for women of color work, and that's not comfortable, and we rarely win in those competitions because we don't have the historical relationships with funders. So much funding is dependent on relationships, not the projects or quality of work we have done. And so, that means that organizations that have no proven track record in working with women of color are more likely to get funded to work with women of color than women of color organizations.

And so, that's part of the terrain we have to deal with at SisterSong. But then internally, SisterSong the collective has to be clear and cautious about competing with SisterSong its members. There's only a few foundations out there, and so SisterSong the collective doesn't want to go after money that actually should be going to one of our member organizations — because you can't compete with yourself and win in that sense. And so our funding strategy, as it's evolved, has been to go after the larger grants that probably wouldn't go to one of our smaller organizations, to go after the \$100,000-and-above grants that in all likelihood would not be given to an organization whose entire annual budget is \$200,000.

And so, it's a process working out all of these details. At our membership meeting this July is where we're going to formally vote on whether to adopt the federated structure. The federated structure seems like it will work best with autonomous organizations who share a brand

name and a common mission and purpose. But we don't have all the answers yet. We're trying to figure that out. It's part of the joy, I guess.

FOLLET: OK. You've got your work cut out for you. Um, so it's wrap-up time. We get to, or have to, I guess, because all good things — not that this is the end, but it really is our last tape, and so I want to just invite you to say whatever. Are there people, events, issues that we haven't touched on that you want to be sure are part of this?

4:16

ROSS: Well, as I was rereading the transcript from the first ten tapes, I guess, I was bemused by the fact that, without intending it, I was self-censoring, that there are details that I'm not giving to the archives, that I'm [not] casually leaving littered around for people to read at their leisure. And I think that's part of the oral history process, though, that you self-disclose but only to a point, because you don't necessarily want to make your entire life available for casual scrutiny for anybody that can use the web and browse through the litter of one's life. And so, even though I felt that I was being pretty self-revealing in the process, in reading back over it I thought, Loretta, there's still a lot you didn't put out there. And I'm not going to do it now. (laughs)

FOLLET: You're not going to tell me what question would unlock that that I haven't thought to ask?

ROSS: No. And this oral history feels like emotional, political, and psychological exploratory surgery. You don't know what you're going to find when you make the incision and you peel back the skin and you look in. And I think that it's designed to both create a narrative, and I think one of the byproducts of the creation of that narrative is to create a certain level of discomfort, with being the focus of a camera and so much intentional focus. And I can honestly say, it's not the most comfortable place I've ever been. I never thought that telling the story of one's life personally and politically would be such a scary process, but it actually is.

And it's going to make me be very gentle and kind to people I interview in the future, too, recognizing that it's not my right to dig into every crevice just because I have a curiosity to know about what's behind their silences, when they aren't talking about something I happen to know that they should be talking about. To not let my needs as a researcher or oral historian compromise my belief in their autonomy and their integrity and their privacy. So I've learned a lot being on both sides of the camera in this process.

But I've also learned how precious it is to catch the stories, to capture the stories, to know that through this project that we are creating a permanent record of women whose lives — without this record and their contributions, without this record — may be forgotten in a generation or so. I mean, I know I'm part of a generation of women of

color who've done a lot of work but not necessarily work that's been recorded, that's been documented. And so, it's very special and precious, what we're doing, but as a subject in it, it's very scary.

FOLLET: So if we jump ahead that generation and imagine a reader looking at the transcript 20, 30, however many years from now, what would you like to say to that person?

8:54

ROSS: That I hope that this future reader understands the tremendous complexity of [what] choosing to be a political activist, choosing to be what I call a professional feminist, represents in someone's life — that we're not perfect people. And certainly there's a tendency to romanticize political activism and not see the fullness of our lives but to flatten us out to doers of great deeds or bad deeds or whatever, but that we're not perfect people.

I know I'm not a perfect person, but we have the opportunity to engage in perfect struggle. So you don't have to be a perfect person to engage in perfect struggle. If you're in a righteous struggle, that's good enough. That's enough perfection. You don't have to be perfect yourself. That you bring all your flaws, all your problems, all your contradictions to the work and that's OK, because those flaws, contradictions, and problems are fuel for trying to create a more perfect world for people to exist in, and recognizing that you're not aiming for personal perfection, but existential perfection. I don't know if that's the way to say it, but perfection of people learning to be in harmony with themselves and the universe and each other — that's the perfection you're aiming at, not whether or not "I never make a mistake" and stuff like that.

Um, leadership is something I wanted to talk about because there's this perception that leaders are people who get this mandate from somewhere and are totally persuaded that they're the only ones capable of doing what they did and this can't get done without them. And I think that's a whole crock of BS. Leadership is your opportunity to serve to the best of your capacity. And if you're not clear about the serving part of leadership, you're certainly not clear about the leading part of leadership. If you strive to be in good service, then you will automatically be a good leader. If you strive to not be in good service, then you're going to automatically be one of the world's worst leaders.

I don't know what else to say. I find that a lot of people enter social justice work as a refuge. It's often as a refuge from dealing with the contradictions in their own lives, so that they don't have to pay attention to the contradictions in their own lives, if they can martyr themselves to the movement. But it's those contradictions in your life that actually make you a better servant. So don't ignore the contradictions but use them, see them and use the social justice movement as a prism from which to examine them. Put them under the microscope, because quite often those contradictions are not only yours but they're universal. They

can serve to animate the work and keep it in integrity with you and with the larger universe. I don't want to sound too metaphysical, but I think that's the way it works.

FOLLET: That's a beautiful, a beautiful way to end — and I'm tempted to let that just drift off into the sunset, but I feel as if we should acknowledge Hopeton's place in your life at this moment.

12:57

ROSS: Oh, I haven't talked about my current boyfriend, have I?

FOLLET: No.

ROSS: Hopeton. Hopeton McBean. What an improbable name. When he first told me his name, I almost cracked up. I said, "God, we could never get married because I'll be damned if I'll ever be a Mrs. McBean."

Hopeton. I met Hopeton in 1999, I believe, in Jamaica. I'd actually gone to Jamaica with a dear friend of mine named Juanita Williams. Juanita has AIDS, full-blown AIDS, and in 1998, she hovered in a coma for over six weeks, because we really thought she was going to die. She'd been diagnosed HIV-positive some 15 years ago, so, it's a miracle that, as a black woman, she's still here. And when Juanita didn't die, and in fact started making a full recovery, I made a commitment to her that I would take her to Jamaica to celebrate her life. And our birthdays are very close together in August. And so we started in August of 1999 going to Jamaica together, just in celebration of both our birthdays and her life.

And it was on our first trip together to Jamaica that we went to this concert on the beach, Trelawney Beach, that was infinitely boring, and I was bored by the fact that it was a bunch of kids, dance hall kids, younger than — ten, 15 years younger than — my son, so I was not having a good time. But Juanita was, because this was her first time to Jamaica. It was romantic on the beach, the concert, lots of guys, lots of male attention, kind of thing.

And at that concert, I met Hopeton. Hopeton was not there as a concertgoer, he was there as a security for the concert, as a matter of fact. And I'm pretty cynical about guys that try to talk to you in Jamaica, because a lot of them are looking for a quick U.S. passport. I've been going to Jamaica since 1980, so I was pretty familiar with the dynamics.

But Hopeton was different. First of all, I think he let me know he was a provider. I don't know if that makes any sense, but most of the male role models that I love in my life are provider types, guys who really feel that their job is to take care of their families, come home with food to feed the families, make sure that those kind of basic human necessities are taken care of — food, shelter, clothing, education, et cetera kind of guys, and I'm very much a traditionalist in that I kind of like men that understand that part of their role. And I have no problem

being the complementary mate that works, within limits, in the feminine role.

And so I only met Hopeton two days before I was leaving Jamaica. Juanita and I had been there three weeks by then and we hadn't — so I met him two days before I was leaving, and it was the night before my birthday, and so, obviously, I at least, I could not take on somebody the first night I met him. That would've violated most of my social upbringing. And so on my birthday we reconnected and we started dating then. And six years later we're very much still in love.

It has its challenges. Hopeton is younger than me. He's about 14 years younger than me, only a year older than my son, and so I had immense problems at first conceptualizing dating a guy that really is my son's peer. He was persuaded that that's all in my mind. Age is supposed to be, as far as he's concerned, just a number, and actually, about three or four years into our relationship, I brought my son and his wife down to be on vacation with us while we were there, and when the two men were in the same room together, I realized that there was a generation gap between my son and my boyfriend. (laughter) Age really does not matter. My son was still acting out the child thing and Hopeton was the one keeping him straight. And I said, "Oh, OK. There is a difference here."

And so, I'm very happy being in a relationship with him. I like the fact, probably most, that it's a long-distance relationship, because I probably would be far less patient with the relationship if it was in my personal space, if I had to share a home with this person and all that.

Last December, December of 2003, we got engaged. I don't know why we did that. He had started asking me to marry him fairly early in our relationship, but I'd always put him off. And then I must have had some kind of brain fog coming over me last December because I told him yes, and then immediately once I returned home, I called him back. I hadn't been in the country an hour. I called. "Do you mind if we're engaged for ten years?" He said, "Why?" I said, "Because I think it's going to take me about another ten years to make that commitment seriously." And he laughed. He said, "This is your timetable. You know how I feel. This is your timetable."

One of the things that I like about him is that he's very comfortable with who I am and the way I am. For example, a couple of years into the relationship, I said, "Hopeton, you know, I'm thinking about losing some weight." He said, "Oh, that's all right, but you didn't ask my permission." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "You didn't ask my permission to lose weight." I said, "You have figured out a way for a man to say permission to me without getting knocked to the floor for that, for basically saying, 'You were that size when I met you. I like your size, and if you want to fix it, that's on you. But don't do it because you're thinking you're making me happy.'" So he's that kind of guy.

And then, I am a very challenging person to deal with. I'm moody, I'm temperamental, I'm impatient. I've still got anger issues around

men that I'm dealing with. He has to deal with all of that. And so I asked him once, I said, "How do you manage that, because you're calm, you're placid, you know. I'm dealing with depression, I'm all over the place, and you're just steady." He said, "Well, I'm Aquarius and mine's a water sign, and water just wraps itself around whatever space and vessel is available." I thought that was a great metaphor. And he lives that way. He really is that way.

I think one of my hesitations in moving our relationship to the next stage is the fact that I am very much an overachiever, very ambitious kind of girl. I actually, when I go to Jamaica, I can only spend the first week resting and then the next two weeks I'm antsy, because I want to do something. I want to be about something. I want to do — and he's a laid back kind of guy. He's very much a laid back kind of guy.

And so, I think there's a clash of ambition. He's not ambitious. He's very comfortable with his life. He's the center of his universe in terms of kind of the informal mayor of Montego Bay. Everybody knows him. And huge family and huge family connections, and I've been embraced by his family, feel like a member of his family, and the first couple of years of our relationship, I found myself wanting to push him. I wanted to — Don't you want this? Don't you want this? Don't you want to do this? And it's only recently I've learned to let go of that.

I mean, just like he accepts me as I am, I have to learn to accept him as he is, and not try to mold or make him into being some vision I have of what my mate should be about, and all of that. And that's easier said than done, easier said than done. But so far it's worked out very, very well. He's met a lot of members of my family. I've met a lot of members of his family. We get along. And I think, again, because of the distance in our relationship, the geographical distance, every time we're together it's a celebration, versus an obligation, and that keeps it like a permanent honeymoon kind of a thing.

And so that's what made me realize, Loretta, why would you want to change this? You get married to this guy, the honeymoon's going to be over. (laughs) And so, he laughs at me when I say that, but I think he also appreciates my perspective on that, and so, he's very important in my life right now.

Um, but on the other hand, he's not well integrated into it, and as a matter of fact, the few times we've talked about politics, I really get the feeling that we would not agree on much politically, and so I tend not to talk about politics with him. Classic example was: they had recent elections in Jamaica for prime minister between P.J. Patterson and Edward Seaga. And Edward Seaga, in my mind, is like the Ronald Reagan of Jamaica. Well, Hopeton is a Seaga supporter. And so once I discovered that, I was, like, Let's not talk about politics so that we can keep our relationship going, honey, kind of thing. And so, we have a lot of good vibes together, but —

FOLLET:

But some contradictions as well.

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

24:27

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

END TAPE 23 END INTERVIEW