

*Civil Rights History Project
Interview completed by the Southern Oral History Program
under contract to the
Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History & Culture
and the Library of Congress, 2016*

Interviewee: Michael D. "Mac" McCarty

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Location: Los Angeles, California

Interviewer: David Cline

Videographer: John Bishop and Guha Shankar

Length: approximately 1 hour, 37 minutes

START OF RECORDING

Female 1: From the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

David Cline: Today is the 26th of June 2016. This is David Cline from the History Department at Virginia Tech and also working with the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. We are working on the Civil Rights History Project today of the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. Behind the camera we have Guha Shankar from the Library of Congress and John Bishop of Media Generation and UCLA and we are so honored to be at the home of Michael McCarty today in Los Angeles and if you could introduce yourself for the tape, we would appreciate it.

Michael D. McCarty: Michael D. McCarty, storyteller, [inaudible] mouth, will run it. [Laughter]

DC: And Michael, where and when were you born?

MM: Chicago, Illinois, September 7th, 1950.

DC: Okay, fantastic. So let's start just with your childhood and your family and tell us a little bit about your people and where you came up.

MM: I grew up, I grew up on the West Side of Chicago. I was born on the South Side, we moved to the West Side when I was about three years old and the greatest influence in my life, I like to say, is my mom. I am a read-aholic because of my mom. I can remember my mom reading me and telling me stories from the time I was about two years old. And we always had books and my mother used to say, if you can read you can do anything. And the other thing interestingly enough that she instilled in me is the idea that if you saw something wrong, you had an obligation to do something, something about it or to let somebody know who could. [Laughs] And that would come back to give her a little nip later on in life, because I took it to heart.

So I grew up, it was me, my mom and dad, I have two older brothers and an older sister. And when I say "older," fourteen, twenty, twenty-five years between me and my siblings. I was a surprise. [Laughs] My mother used to say she thought she had gas. [Laughs] So grew up and I went to Catholic schools. My mother was from Barbados and so I went to St. Finbarr Elementary School, St. Ignatius College Prep on the, all on the West Side of Chicago. I was going to be a physicist. I was a--I loved math and science and that was my dream was to be a physicist and to be an astronaut.

I became a revolutionary. [Laughter] Just a little bit of a detour. [Laughter] But all behind that idea of my mom. You see something wrong you should do something about it. And we got the newspapers, we got-- At one point we got the *Sun Times*, the *Tribune*, the *Daily News*, and the *Chicago Defender*. So we were well read. And so I had an awareness of, as the Civil Rights Movement grew and developed, I had an

awareness of it from reading the paper. Watching, of course, seeing things on the news, seeing all these activities going on.

But then there's the things that happen to you. I grew up on the West Side of Chicago, near an area of Chicago called Cicero. Cicero was one of those sundown areas. If you were black, don't have your butt in Cicero after sundown. You would be hurt, you could be killed.

DC: And these are things that you grew up knowing.

MM: Yeah, yeah. Or you sort of knew those things and at the same time, as a kid I remember me and a buddy, we rode our bicycles into Cicero. Inadvertently. We needed some air in our tires or something like that and stopped at a gas station to put air in the tire. Next thing you know there's water, you know, somebody's hosing us to get us out of the area. But the incident that was the real kicker for me-- I was in the Boy Scouts and as a Boy Scout you're trying to get merit badges. So one day me and three of my friends, we wanted to get our cycling merit badges, so we left our area around 13th and--it was 13th and Pulaski, it was a major street--and we were going to ride out past Crestwood, Illinois. And we figured that would give us the necessary mileage to get our cycling merit badges. So we're riding, riding and on our way back we stopped at this water fountain across the street from a little league [5:00] game that was going on.

So one by one we stop at the water fountain. I'm the last one. And I'm there trying to guzzle all the water in there and all of the sudden I become aware of my friends, because as each one drinks, they would ride on. All of the sudden I look up and they're waving at me and pointing and yelling and I look. The little league game had stopped and the stands and the field had emptied and this is an all-white scenario and they're all

running and I still have this image of this woman, white woman, couldn't have been much more than five feet tall, running and called me everything but a child of God with, I don't know, a brick or a ball or a bat or something in her hand.

I rolled real fast. Caught up with my friends, passed them. Now the thing that I find interesting, I don't think I ever told my parents about that. All right. Because that was the way things were. And we got away, we went on about our business and life went on. And then later I was in high school, maybe sophomore year and me and a buddy went to a party on the South Side of Chicago, over in the hood. We walk into this project, a high-rise project and we walked into this building past these guys and we turned the corner where we thought the elevator was. Get in. Turn around, there's these guys, this gang, and they proceeded to beat the snot out of us for however long.

They literally beat us until they got tired. Now, at one point, the guys who were kicking my butt kicked my butt out onto the street. I guess they wanted some fresh air. [Laughs] And at one point the guy is going to shoot me. Because everybody is, like I said, they're literally tired. I'm laying face down on the ground, he pulls me up out of that, puts a gun to my head and pulls the trigger and this girl, to my mind an angel, snagged it, "No, Johnny, don't do it," snatches his hand. And so he pistol-whipped me.

And at that point in time pistol-whipping, bullet in the head, pistol-whipping is cool. So he tells me to run and I can't run, I can't even stand up, but I crawl real fast, not even fast, just crawl away. My friend is still in the building. I don't know what's going on with my friend. I see a police car stopped at a light and I stagger over to the car. Now at this point I'm bleeding, I'm starting to swell up and I stagger over to the car and frantically tell him what's happened and he looks at me and says, "So?" White cop.

So I get into the police car. Because this is what's supposed to happen. He's supposed to help me. And I tell him where to go and he goes, pulls up in front of the building and tells me to get out of the car and go into the building and find my friend. Meanwhile the remnants of the gang are sitting outside the building. They see me. They get up and they're coming to the police car to extract me and finish what they started. I said, "Look, arrest me, take me away from here," so he took me to the local police station, which was only a block or two away, as I recall. So I'm thinking, this is an aberration. So I go into the police station and I never even get a chance to say anything.

Now I'm really swelling up. And the cops, all white, start laughing when I walk in. Now my friend had managed to get in somebody's apartment and he called his mom and we met up at the police station and went to the hospital and got--. He got stitches and stuff like that, but that was my personal wakeup call. And then I became involved in the Youth Wing of the NAACP. Me and my buddy Tyler, we started a black student organization at St. Ignatius, because St. Ignatius is like a very prestigious college prep, 95 percent white, on Roosevelt Road, in the black community, right across from some projects, but there was no dynamic, there was no interaction.

DC: And was your street and neighborhood largely African American or was there?

MM: All black.

DC: All black, okay.

MM: All black, by the [inaudible].

DC: So and then you'd go to school during the day in this totally different environment, yeah.

MM: Yeah, totally different environment, totally different environment. And it's having its own issues that we have to deal with. Because a lot of the hostility that comes is because people don't have familiarity and people react based on stereotypes and that was the kind of thing that we were constantly confronting.

DC: Had St. Ignatius ever had a black student club before?

MM: No. Not that I--.

DC: How did they react when you wanted to do this?

MM: Well, [Laughter] actually it's interesting. At first there was interest because, you know, Jesuits have a history [10:00] of raising cane within the church and fighting for and starting revolutions. The Mexican Revolution of 1810, Hidalgo, I think he was a Jesuit, that helped kick that off and I know there were other Jesuits involved. So one of the things they arranged, the school arranged, there was a panel, it would be two or three black guys and one white guy sometimes and we would go to other Catholic schools in the area and have discussions about race relations. So initially, you know, it was supported to a degree. And then it--.

DC: What are the years here? That this was--?

MM: Let's see. I started, I was at Ignatius from [19]65 until I got kicked out in March of [19]69; that would have been my senior year. But that's a good story. We'll come back to that. So this is taking place, so [19]65-66 was my freshman year, so [19]66-67 is when we started this organization or thereabouts. And we would have meetings, we would have discussions, we would read books and what have you. And then, [laughs] as was happening at that time, black student organizations in schools, high schools and colleges had a list of demands, and we wanted black studies.

Black history at that time was Booker T. Washington and slavery and not even then Harriet Tubman so much. But it was very, that was it. So we wanted black studies. We wanted outreach to community. We wanted more minority students in the school. So we submitted our little list of demands. They basically said, hah, get out of here. So we organized a walkout. And this was a big thing at the school, because this is a school where judges and folks sent their kids, so it was a big to-do. So we led this walkout and the day of the walkout there was press. My mother found out about this on the news that evening. I came home--. Fortunately my father worked the graveyard shift, he wasn't home, otherwise we might not be having this conversation now.

So I came home and my mother was sitting there with my brother and sis--. One of my brothers and my sister crying because she just seen this and she knew there'd be consequences. Because it cost more to go to this high school than to some of the local colleges, okay, and they had invested a lot. I was going to be the first one in my family to go to college and I come, right on. And my brother decided to fill in for my dad and he burst into the room, he was going to kick my butt, and I started talking until he listened. I had done what my mother had taught me to do. And in time, she and my father both came to understand that.

So the next day, went back to the school and we were informed, my father took me to school and we were informed that myself and Tyler had been expelled from the school and that was the end of my high school career. Now, I'm going to just sort of, here's the thing, it's an amazing story. We went on with our lives. I became, we both became members of the Black Panther party and eventually, after the party he worked for unions. I did a variety of things. Thirty-odd years later we get contacted by one of our

classmates, Greg Meyers [?], and he said, "Mac, we're going to get the school to apologize and give you your high school diploma," and thirty-nine years later that's exactly what happened. He had put together this movement, reaching out to just about every black student who had ever gone to the school that was still alive and the school apologized and gave us our high school diplomas.

DC: Amazing.

MM: Yeah. Thirty-odd--. What was really cute is that--?

DC: Did you go back to get it?

MM: Yeah. They flew us in. They flew us in. They had a big event, over 200 people. They had it at the school. We got commendations from the mayor and two members of the U.S. Congress. But the thing that I find the cutest is one of Gary's granddaughters, had to be about five years old said, "Granddaddy, how come it take you so long to get your 'ploma?"

DC: [Laughs] He had a good story to tell.

MM: Oh yeah.

DC: Great response. Yeah, yeah, that's amazing.

JOHN BISHOP: I'm going to pause this. [Recorder is turned off and then back on.]

DC: I wanted to ask about, because those times in Chicago, were you, I mean, you guys were in school, but were you aware [15:00] of King coming to town and organizing and--?

MM: Oh yeah, he was in my neighborhood. When he came, he stayed around the corner. In fact, my buddy Tyler, he got to see him. He got to see him because he was

right across from Douglas Park. He was on Hamlin, he stayed on Hamlin and right across from Douglas Park and Gary was walking from the park towards his house and Dr. King was talking out the window to some of his staff and he looked up and said, "Good morning, Dr. King," "Good morning, young man," it was, yeah, yeah, yeah.

And I remember, I actually do a story about it, how King said, I have dealt with racism throughout the South and I ain't seen nothing like racism in Chicago. You know, there was a priest who taught racism from the pulpit over in Mayor Daley's neighborhood; I can't remember his name, but I have it somewhere. In fact, because I remember while we were in high school one summer, we had this job, and we were going to the--. [Laughs] We were in Bridgeport, knocking on doors trying to sell something. [Laughter] Somebody didn't like us. I don't--. So we're doing this, we're getting doors slammed in our face, or what have you, and then one of our white classmates, this is all through Ignatius, one of our white classes, Mark, classmates, he says, "Come on," he drives up, says, "Come on, come on, you all get in the car," because he had overheard this group of white folks saying they're going to ground us up and do us bodily harm. Yeah, that was our last day doing that job. [Laughs] Yeah, Chicago is still considered the most segregated city on planet Earth. Very much so.

DC: Yeah. I mean, do you remember there being a change of any kind when King and those folks came in or there being talk about it or--?

MM: Oh, I remember, yeah, yeah. Yeah, there was, I remember--. Before the demon--, there was going to be a march. Before the March began, King was hit upside the head with a brick. Before the march began. And the level of violence, the level of

animosity, he said, I mean, and he'd been hosed down, he'd been dealing with the Klan in the South. He'd say, "I ain't seen nothing like this," [laughs] ah, Chicago. [Laughs]

DC: So tell me about, so you got kicked out of high school. What next?

MM: Well, then I became a fulltime member of the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther party.

DC: And when had you first come in contact with the Black Panther party?

MM: Well, I'd said I read. And so in, let's see, the party formed in October of [19]66 and it was I think around [19]67 that they went to the Sacramento capital to protest the law, [19]67, [19]68, to protest the law that would, that they had been using to bear arms, legally, and that was in the news. I mean, that was an amazing thing. And the pictures of them standing on the capital steps with their weapons and the fact that they were patrolling the police with their guns and with their law books, all right so, and I read *Ramparts Magazine* among everything else. In addition to everything in *Jet*, I read *Ramparts* and other magazines and newspapers that dealt with the social, dealing with social injustice.

So I had a great awareness of the existence of the Black Panther party and what they were doing out there. And then when they came to Chicago in October, October, November of 1968, I got the word that there was an office, 2350 West Madison, right on the corner of Western and Madison. I beelined there. For the political education classes to find out about the party. And a guy I knew, a friend of mine, I used to run track when I was in high school and this guy, Billy "Che" Brooks, who was the Deputy Minister of Education, he ran track for Marshall; that's how I knew him. And when I arrived at the office there he was and so I became a part of the education cadre, which was quite

apropos. We taught the political education classes. We read, we discussed. We--.

[20:00]

There was a reading list. Everybody had to read. But we had to read everything on the reading list and we discussed, had these discussions and then we would lead these political education classes. We would sometimes give talks. There were times when Fred would send me in his place to a debate or to give a speech, which was more than a notion, because Fred was a phenomenal, phenomenal speaker and leader. So those were some of the tasks that I became involved in when I was in the party.

DC: And when you're talking about Fred, you're talking about?

MM: Deputy Chairman Fred Hampton, one of the most amazing, like I said, speakers, a motivator, a leader and someone who taught me the true meaning of commitment, totally committed to this. I mean, Fred was, the thing that was so amazing about Fred, Fred was 21 years old when he was assassinated. But Fred was, as they say, an old soul. I mean, in high school he had been organizing out in Maywood at the various high schools. The blacks couldn't swim at the pool. Fred said, "Okay, we got to do something about this," that's what he was about. He was about doing something about things. And he was also someone who was open to learning new things, taking new approaches. Friend of mine, when he came to join the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther party, there's a stereotype of the Black Panther party as being an anti-white organization; no, we were anti-injustice, and one of the things that make a party dangerous was the idea that we saw beyond this concept of race and race being a tool that was used to divide people who should be working together.

So my friend came up to join the party and is like, "So give me a gun, I want to kill some white people," and Fred said, "No, brother, that's not how we do things. All right. Here are some literature. Take a look at this, and if you're still interested, come back," which he did. But many people aren't aware of the fact that's Fred Hampton of the Illinois chapter that started the Rainbow Coalition. Oh, there, that really, we had the Rainbow Coalition, the Black Panther party, the Young Lords, the Young Patriots.

Now, people don't know about this. The Young Lords had been a Puerto Rican street gang that become political; the Young Patriots were poor Appalachian white folks, and you can see in *American Revelation 2*, it's on YouTube, you can see the meeting where Bob Lee and Hank Gaddis, who were our field secretaries, had gone into this community, into the poor Appalachian white community, to talk to these people about why poor whites and poor blacks should be working together. And there was this meeting and Bob Lee is talking and at the end of the meeting this Mike, I can't remember, Mike Gray, Mike Gray was the director; he interviews this old guy and says, "Well, what do you think about what the Panthers said?" and I paraphrase it like this, well, if them Black Panthers going to support us, I guess we should support them Black Panthers," and a week later, a week later Bob Lee was in the area by himself doing some organizing and he was stopped and arrested by the police, put in the police car to be taken away. Young Patriots saw what happened.

They saw what happened and they put the word out. Before that police car could go, they came and surrounded it. Men, women and children, white men, women and children, surround, and they made the police let Bob Lee go. Poor whites, black folks working together, that was a dangerous thing, for the powers that be. And that, that

outreach started. The Young Patriots, the Young Lords, there were other groups that were, became associated with it; they started organizing their own Breakfast with Children programs. They started having their own political education classes. They started talking about why we should not be fighting with each other, why we should be working together. Oh, that was a dynamic, and that was inspired by Fred.

DC: Mm-hmm. And why was that threatening? To the powers that be.

MM: Divide and conquer is the oldest tool in the book. What do you do?

[25:00] Here you have people that should be working together, and enter COINTELPRO. All right, enter COINTELPRO. So what do you do? You drop. You have people drop misinformation. Oh, oh, so and so. One of the other things that the Black Panther party was doing was working with the street gangs and getting them to stop exploiting the community, and it had become political. At the time the biggest gang in the country, not just Chicago, in the country was the Black P. Stone Nation, the Blackstone Rangers, later called the El Rukns, and Fred and Bobby Rush had these meetings to try to get them to shift their focus and become political. The FBI, under the COINTELPRO program, all of this is, well, we didn't know at the time that William O'Neal, our head of security, was an FBI plant. But someone would call the Panthers or write a letter; someone would call the Black P. Stone Nation. Yo, yo, so and so, they're trying to set you up.

To keep us from doing this, working together. And it almost worked. All right, it did not get to the point they would have liked it, but people got to see-- We didn't know this thing was happening, but we knew something was going on. All right?

DC: Were there other plants or suspicions that there were other--?

MM: Yeah.

DC: So did it kind of work, in terms of creating paranoia?

MM: Well, in a manner of speaking, you had to be, because once--. It was a given that we would be infiltrated. It was a given. But when you started seeing things happen and then all of the sudden you have these people who are prodding this, so a level of justified paranoia was indeed evident, and that did, ultimately, have an effect on the party, in fact, on the movement, in general.

I like to make reference this book, *The Burglary*, about the peace activists who broke into the FBI office in Media, Pennsylvania, March 8th, 1971, the night of the Ali-Frazier fight, because they broke in that night because they knew, well, they hoped that that would allow them ease in getting into the office because everybody would be watching the fight, and that indeed was the case. They are who discovered COINTELPRO in one of the files that they took. And then we found out all manner of stuff that was going on, I mean, oh my goodness.

Whoo, I can't remember her name. There was an actress here in LA who was a supporter of the party. She would fundraisers, what have you. J. Edgar Hoover ordered the FBI office here in LA to neutralize her. They started a rumor. She was pregnant, she was married. They started a rumor that the baby wasn't her husband's. And the baby, the baby died. The woman committed suicide. The LA FBI office was commended for having successfully destroyed this woman's life. Okay. Oh, whoo! Yeah, yeah.

So that's the kind of thing. And here we didn't know, like I said again, we knew but we didn't know, but our approach was, we are going to keep doing positive stuff. We are going to keep serving the people and helping the people, thus the breakfast program, the free medical clinics, which J. Edgar Hoover said that the most dangerous thing we did

was the Breakfast for Children program, because the government wasn't feeding any children at that particular point in time. In fact, [laughs] the subsequent programs that came were essentially the government saying, okay, we, we can't have these Panthers showing us out. We're going to feed them.

DC: Head Start.

MM: Yeah. Yeah.

DC: So what other programs?

MM: So, and it's very interesting. At the fortieth anniversary of the Black Panther party I went, I was in Oakland and there was a report by people from other chapters, and it was very interesting, because at the time, we were immersed in wherever we were. All right, there was some national stuff, there was the local stuff, you got the paper, you read about stuff going on, but unless you were at some other business, some other place, you didn't know it was going on. [30:00] So, so in Illinois we had the, we had Breakfast with Children programs all over the city. We had the Spurgeon Jake Winters Free Medical Clinic over on the West Side. There was a Prison Visit Program, because a lot of people who had relatives in prison couldn't go to visit them, because they didn't have a car or transportation. So we had buses that would take people to go and visit.

In other chapters, in other branches around the country there were dental programs, there were food giveaways, there were clothing giveaways, so there were all, wherever you were--. But here's something you probably don't know. So in Chicago there were these two sisters who were in charge of the breakfast program, so they were always working to try to organize to get donations, donations of food, donations of

money. The Panthers, we provided the bodies and then churches and community centers provided us a space. But it was a constant search to get food and money. So these two sisters went to meet with these white businessmen, multimillionaires. Okay.

To get support for the breakfast program. So they did their presentation. And this is what they were told. "You're not violent enough. If you, as an organization, will engage with violence altercations with other black organizations, we will give you all the money that you want," think about that. Well, we didn't go for that. But invariably, we weren't the only organization to whom that offer was made and there were prob-- No, there were other organizations who took the money.

So again, here we are saying, "Okay, we want to do this good thing," say "Oh no, no, no, we need you to kill other black people. We need you to engage in violent altercations with other blacks and we will support you," yeah, it's-- I only found that story out a few years ago. I was in Chicago and I was having my birthday party and I stayed in touch with my friends from the party and one of the sisters told us about that. Whoo.

DC: Wow, yeah, so much meddling from outside, yeah, yeah.

MM: Oh, yeah. COINTELPRO. I've given away literally dozens of copies of that book, *The Burglary*. Eso Won is the local black bookstore. I go in there and just like grab a whole bunch of them and give them to folks. Because these, these things, people don't know about this. People don't know about this. All they know is the stereotype.

My daughter's a teacher in Chicago and she has these kids, she calls them her "surrogate kids," it's one of her neighbor's grandkids, and she takes them out to stuff, and I give them books, and things like that. And so one of them, the oldest boy is in high

school, and for Black History Month, these two white boys had done a program, a presentation on the Black Panther party and in their presentation they stated that the Black Panther party had been a gang. And this young man raised his hand and said right away, said, "No, no, the Black Panther party wasn't a gang," and these two students and the teacher, teacher essentially told him to shut up. This young man and three other black students, black boys stood up and threw up the fists. I'm going to be giving them some books [laughter] when I see them, when I go back to Chicago.

But there are so many stereotypes about the party. Just a few weeks ago, right after Ali, within a day or so after Ali passing away, these, on a sports program this guy was saying, "Yeah, Ali was in the nation of Islam and yeah, they were an anti-white organization," and the other guy said, "Yeah, like the Black Panther party," huh.

DC: Yeah. It's all wrong. Should we take a break for a second? [Recorder is turned off and then back on]

JB: Okay, we're rolling again.

DC: Okay. Can I ask about, and this can sometimes be a hard thing to talk about, but sort of gender roles and sex relations in the Black Panther party and I know, as you say, it was different in every chapter, so were there any issues in Chicago or [Laughter] you know? [35:00]

MM: Well, how did, I think Kathleen Cleaver stated that the men in the party were a product of the society and the system, but a friend of mine wrote a book, Jacoby Williams, he wrote a book, *From the Bullet to the Ballot* and how did he say, he said, "There were some folks who would try to play that male dominant thing, but the sisters wasn't having it," all right, they wasn't going for that. So within the Black Panther party

you had, in fact, at the height of the Black Panther party probably the majority were women in the party and women were in leadership roles and not, not just in the traditional secretary role, but in other--field secretary, field marshal, whatever, things like that and women had very, very prominent roles within the Black Panther party. The idea being that freedom is for everybody, and if anybody is oppressed, there is no freedom. So you can't oppress women and claim to be for freedom. So--, and sisters in Chicago, please, [laughs] and every place else, because you see, you watch the films, you see that the majority and the sisters were there, the sisters were there cleaning their guns, they were there with the breakfast program. They were there with the health clinic, they were there with--, whatever had to be done, there was no men's role. I cooked breakfast. I served. Men did that just as much as, if not more than, all right, because there was, but there were no gender roles like that. Yeah.

DC: Okay. Cool. What were the biggest difficulties, challenges that you all faced?

MM: Boy, that's a goody. All right, let me just, no particular order. The biggest difficulty, the ultimate difficulty was that, as one of my buddies who left the party said, "We were willing to give our lives for our people and their freedom. We wanted to change the system, this oppressive system, but for the most part, the people for whom we were ready to give our lives, they didn't care about that. They wanted a bigger piece of the pie," so education, getting people to be aware that there was a system that was oppressing them was a great obstacle, that was a great obstacle.

And then, having to overcome the obstacles of fighting against a system that had unlimited resources and here we are, some folks from the hood, saying, "We're going to

take this on," and we did. And we did and we raised scunion. But it was, what did they do? They would arrest us. They would bust into our offices and destroy--. And it's interesting, in our Chicago offices, in all the Panther offices, one of the things they always destroyed whenever they saw it were our supplies for the breakfast program. Okay? Our supplies for the breakfast program. But it drained us. It drained our resources. When they did things like the New York 21 or in Connecticut, with the, I can't remem--. There were six or seven, seven p--. Wherever they did those mass arrests, so that meant there were lawyers, there was bail, and these things were a constant drain.

DC: Or suspicion zone, too and create this unity--?

MM: Oh yeah, yeah, that's it. Then COINTELPRO, dropping this, dropping that. So it was a constant drain on our resources. And when you think about the fact that this was an organization that was started by these two college students that managed to become an international organization--. A few years ago I was in Australia and New Zealand and wherever I go I read, I read about the culture. So I'm reading about Māori culture, I'm reading about the Aboriginal culture. And I read how when they were having their fights, their [40:00] movements, they'd been inspired by the Black Panther party.

One of my storytelling friends, Baba the Storyteller, he does a lot of work down in South Africa, and a few years ago he went to Peru, and he contacted the Afro-Peruvian community before he went and he asked, "Is there anything that you want me to bring you from the U.S.?" "Information about the Black Panther party," so the party is still an influence around the world. I mean, in Indian, all these places where it had an influence,

but there were so many obstacles, but the approach was, okay, pick an obstacle and let's kick it in the butt. [Laughs]

DC: --someplace. But also bringing people in and so you know, there was the focus on the Lumpenproletariat, right, from the streets. Can you talk a little bit about the folks that came to you or that you went to and how that worked?

MM: And this was an amazing, this was the other, another amazing thing about the party; we were a blend of the community. Yes, you had the Lumpen, you know, the street folks. But most of us were students, high school and college students. All right? And then you had folks who were teachers, worked at a post office, had businesses; you had this multi-layer of people who were coming, all coming together and all working together. And that in and of itself was an amazing thing. And then the alliances that we had with other organizations, both black organizations and organizations of other colors, so all of these people came together, and this was one of the great strengths of the, the Ten-Point Platform Program, because we were organized, we were focused around that.

And that gave us a common goal. Now. Talk about Fred and his level of leadership for a second. Because here you have a group of people and there were some of us who couldn't stand in, to be in the same room or even zip code of some others, because there's personality differences. But because of Fred and the leadership, because of the organization around this Ten-Point Platform and program, we were able to transcend those differences that would normally had not only broke us apart, but we never would have come together.

But because of this focus and so okay, what are you here for? We're here for the people, we're here to serve the people. We're here to ferment revolution. We're here to

change this injustice that we're facing, that all of us are facing. It didn't matter, it didn't matter the shade of your skin or what have you, you were being oppressed. It didn't, okay, you could have great, you could have a Ph.D. and the police will still whip your butt. You could be an illiterate gangbanger and your butt would be whipped. So we had people who came in and we all came together and we had that common goal.

And that was one of the great strengths of the party, was having that kind of focus and having the leadership that saw that, that saw the big picture and then broke it down, because that was the thing, because in our political education classes we broke things down. So you know, yeah, we studied Marx and Lenin. We read Mao, we read all this other stuff, but we broke it down to you and your children and you're trying to feed them. You want them to get an education. You want them to be able to walk and go to wherever they need to go without being harassed, by anybody. Be it the police, be it by gang, whatever it was and here, we want to put an end to all that.

So yeah, one of the strengths of the party, one of Fred's strengths was that ability, because you have leaders, you have leaders who are great orators. You have leaders who are great organizers and motivators, all right. It's a rare leader that encompasses all of those things and then some and Fred was one of those people. That's why he was targeted for assassination. He was one of those people who brought people together and he, he did that in a conscious way and it may not have been his first notion, because for a lot of people who came into the party, the idea of working with [45:00] whites was not forefront, because there was that natural distrust.

But then seeing beyond that, seeing beyond the artificial distinctions and saying, okay, we have to make a conscious effort to not buy into that. We've got to change our

mindset and that's a challenge to do. But with a leader like Fred and the, again, that whole mindset of the party, it happened.

DC: Can you tell me about the assassination and--? I mean, the reaction.

MM: Oh, yeah. December 4th--let's go back, December 3rd; the night before there'd been a rally at our Peoples Church, over on Ashland. Fred gave one of those speeches. "I am a revolutionary," and he gave that speech, that he wasn't going to die, fall slipping on a piece of ice. He was going to die serving the people. So after the rally a bunch of us came to Fred's apartment, me being one of them. And we came and we ate and we talked, we discussed, probably argued and what have you and I remember falling asleep on the couch. About 2:00 a.m. I woke up. Left to go to my parents' home.

Taking a bus. So left about 2:00 a.m. Got home. Got home, hardly laid down in bed. Got the phone call. There'd been a raid. Fred had been murdered. The night before the raid, William O'Neal, our head of Security and an FBI plant, had given Fred six times the lethal dose of Seconal. Fred was going to die regardless of whether they put those two bullets in his head at the end of the raid. Because of what O'Neal had done. All right. They were so scared of Fred, they killed him twice. So I get the call, go over to the apartment and Hanrahan, Edward Hanrahan, who had organized this under the direction of the FBI, in their arrogance, they hadn't secured the apartment, and so we came in and saw what was going on and word spread through the streets of what had happened and people started coming to see it.

Now, as I mentioned, Fred was still alive at the end of the raid. He had never regained consciousness; he'd always been groggy, because of the Seconal. At the end of the raid when all the other Panthers were in the front of the house getting ready to be

taken away, one of the Panthers heard one of the cops say, "He's still alive," and then bam-bam. Two bullets to his head. "He's good and dead now." The blood ran from-- Fred's room was in the back, off the kitchen and the blood ran out of that room through the kitchen into the dining room. All right. Fred was a big guy. We brought people in and Hanrahan was saying there was this great shootout that had happened.

The only bullet that had been fired was Mark Clark, who was sitting at the door as a guard. He was the first person shot and when he was shot, his shotgun dropped and discharged into the ceiling. That was the only bullet that was fired from inside. Now Hanrahan had been telling everybody, all, everybody, "Look at all these bullet holes that these--" They were nail holes. They were nail, nail holes.

Another, just to sort of jump ahead, but to get this point across, a suit was filed against the Chicago Police and the FBI, which the survivors won. All right, the survivors won because they should have, because they were wronged. People came for days, from all over, not just Chicago, but people started coming from other states. Because anybody who could see, could see what had happened there. And even people who were not necessarily supporters of the Black Panther party could see that this was murder, straight-up murder, and it galvanized [50:00] support for the party and other chapters and branches started opening up, and at the same time there was also more infiltration going on.

Just sort of jumping around, I mean there were actually chapters and branches that were started by FBI plants. Okay. Because who knew, who knew? But the murder of Fred, I mean they murdered Fred with intent. Because he was a dynamic-- Fred was about to become a national leader. He'd just come back from California. He was

probably going to be on the Central Committee. Because he had this, he had this gift, he had this gift. I mean, I can't emphasize this enough. The ability to get people to transcend their personal differences and what happened ultimately, what was the thing that actually destroyed the party, was these personal differences being influenced and prodded.

With Fred that might not have happened. J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI were very focused. They didn't just do things randomly. Later, my wife and I left the party in 1970 and in December of 1970 I was working for the Post Office and I'm sitting at my station and my supervisor comes up and says, "Mac, you got to go to the ninth floor," and that was like, the ninth floor, dadadadadum. Nothing good happens on the ninth floor.

Two FBI agents, they wanted me to rejoin the party and be an informer. And I told them what they could do with that idea and they told me, "We can make your life very difficult. Either you'll work for us or you won't work," I wasn't working for them. A few months later, I get a document in the mail. How many guns I own, how many rounds of ammunition I bought, conversations I had with somebody about revolution in a bookstore. All right. Even about my having led this walkout and gotten kicked out of high school. All right. They was all up in my beeswax. So I had to leave my job at the post office. I'd go apply for other jobs. My applications would disappear, or a job that I had been, I'd interview well, all right, you're perfect for this job. All of the sudden, no, we found somebody else. Over the next two years I had three apartments broken into eight times. They had a woman calling my wife like she was my girlfriend.

I mean, it was, it was a daily thing, a daily thing. And to think about it, I wasn't even in the party anymore. I had left the organization. But they could destroy my life

and so they attempted to do so. All right. And who knows how many other people were subjected to things like that? And who may be bought into it. All right. So yeah, it was--. It was a challenging time. But being in the Black Panther party was my rite of passage. It was one of the highlights of my life. It shaped the course of the rest of my life. And I'm happy with that.

DC: So why did you--?

JB: We have to stop--. I need to take a breath after all that. Want to get some water or something? We can start again. Very moving. Thank you.

DC: Why did you and your wife leave the party at that point? Was your wife also in the party?

MM: Yeah, yeah, my first wife, my first wife. And she, she was pregnant, and like I said, one of Fred's great abilities was to bring people together, and when Fred was murdered, that ability, that's not something that you can transfer to anybody. Yeah, somebody can give a speech for somebody, but you can't be an intermediary between people. And for a variety of reasons, direction, issues, Fred had a way of using my abilities in a way that maximized who I was. Other people didn't have that skill; they had me doing other things. [55:00] And at some point we decided, we decided to go. We just decided to leave. And I went back to school and so did my first wife. And then we had our daughter. And then we had our daughter. And then they came along and said, "Okay, play with us, do things our way or we can make your life difficult."

Now, what I did, ultimately, because it was hell, like I say, it was 1972 was a year of hell for me, [19]71, [19]72. So I joined the Army. I said, you're going to watch me, you're going to observe me, I'm going to go someplace where you can observe me. I'm

going to play soldier, I'm going to get these people off my back. And so I went into the Army and I had basic training and advanced individual training, AIT at Fort Polk, Louisiana. So--.

DC: This was a dangerous time to join the Army.

MM: Well, Vietnam had wind--. They weren't taking anybody else to Vietnam at the time.

DC: That was kind of --. [Laughs]

MM: And I was doing some--. I'm smart. And I'm calculating. I said, okay, G.I. Bill, I'll go to school, I'll go in here, I'll learn some stuff, I'll get some stereo equipment. I had my--. But I knew that would come and watch me, so I played soldier and I got--. So my first day, my first day, December 8th, 1972, Fort Polk, you've got the guys who were gangbangers, who were, you know, go to the Army or go to jail. You got the guys who were going for the G.I. Bill who were nervous. So you got guys looking tough, guys looking nervous, and me. I was smiling, because nobody's messing with me. All right.

And the sergeant comes up to me and says, "Young man, you don't seem to be fazed by this," I said, "Sarge, it's just another day," he said, "I like your attitude. I'm going to make you Platoon Guide," and they told me my job was to make our duty rosters and give orders, and they told me they would punish me if I did any work myself. I said, "Let me see, you want me to tell people what to do and not do the work myself? I'm a Virgo, I can tell people what to do," all right, so I got promoted. So I go to my advanced unit, I got the same job. So one day I'm walking past my basic unit and one of the

permanent duty guys comes up to me and says, "Mac, these government people have been coming around here, they've been asking all kind of questions about you."

I said, "Okay," I knew this was going to happen. The very next day, my first sergeant comes up to me and says, "Mac, the government people want to talk to you," okay. I told him a story. And I got some people off my back. And that was the end of that, that was the end of that. I had one of the FBI agents in tears, after I got to, "I've seen the error of my ways and I'm here to serve my country." [Laughter]

DC: And you learned the power of story that day. [Laughter]

MM: Yes, indeed. Hey, story is my gift, story is my gift, story is my gift. And now I share these stories. Because again, people don't know. And we're dealing with the same things. Here we are, it's forty, fifty years later, we're dealing with the--. One of my friends, his wife was a teacher in Atlanta and she noticed that a lot of her kids, they were lackadaisical when they came to school. They didn't have breakfast, they didn't have breakfast. Dealing with the same issues. You know, we're dealing with police brutality. Anybody. You want to shoot somebody black? Go right ahead. Yeah, we're dealing with the same issues. And the Black Panther party and what it stood for is still relevant because those same issues are there. We want freedom, we want land, we want education. We're still needing these things.

I'll tell you a story that would be funny if it wasn't so sad. So, since 1992, I've been a professional storyteller. Every February I'm doing Black History Month programs, elementary schools and middle schools. Every year, up until about two years ago I stopped asking this question, because I hated the answer; I would ask this question, "Name me a famous person in Black History." And the number one answer is Martin

Luther King. And then I say, "Why is he famous?" and this look of puzzlement comes over faces, and [1:00:00] for twenty years I got this answer, at least once, "He freed the slaves," I got that answer from a parent in Watts one time. And it's frightening. It's absolutely frightening.

Another time I was at a school, a middle school, and I'm telling these stories about overcoming racism and prejudice and this seventh or eighth grade black girl raised her hand and said, "What is prejudice?" I didn't know whether I should be happy that she didn't know what it was or sad/pissed because you're in seventh or eighth grade. You should have studied the Civil Rights Movement. You should have studied slavery. You should have studied the Black Power Movement. But apparently something was missed and here it is, 2016 and we're still confronting. In fact, in many ways, it's like a re-inspired racism. Part of it inspired by the fact that people are pissed at Barack Obama, a black man is president and it's like, how can we just mess up everything and everybody?

And it's uncanny. It's frightening. And even more reason now for things like this, things to make people aware, for people to stand up and learn from the past, because we can't forget these things, and we have to go on. The struggle indeed continues. We are and have been in a state of perpetual war. We've been in a fight--. Black folks in particular, but really poor people or not real rich people have been in a perpetual fight; slavery, indentured servitude, all these various things that are used to keep the masses of people down. We fight, we lose some battles, we win some battles. We win a few battles and we think we've won. But no. I mean, just in the last few years they've taken the teeth--. the Civil Rights Movement, we [inaudible], and they'd like say, "Oh look, let's

take this away, let's take that away," and people see it happen and say, "Oh," instead of saying, "What?" and challenging these things.

Again, what people forget, because you have people who say, "Well, that affects black people," what is the poem from Germany? They came for the trade unionists and I said nothing. They came for the gypsies and I said nothing. They came for the Jews and I said, did nothing. And then they came for me and no one said anything. I'm paraphrasing the heck out of it.

DC: No, you got it, you got it. Yeah, that's it.

MM: But people don't make those connections. I wish I could remember. There's this great story about farm animals and this cow is, or pig is trying to say, "Help me," and all the other animals say, "No, I'm not helping. It doesn't have anything to do with me," and something happens to this animal and it affects the farmer and he kills the pig and he kills the chicken, all because they thought they were disconnected from this.

So when you have people who start making those connections, those are dangerous people for the powers that be. And they will try to do things to disrupt them, embarrass them, neutralize them, but we've got to keep, we've got to keep on, we've got to keep on.

DC: So this is connected, I think, but, and you used that phrase, "Black Power," a few minutes ago. What does Black Power mean to you and has what it means to you changed over time? [1:05:00]

MM: So when Stokely Carmichael made that popular back in the day, the idea was that here you have a community, the black community--. Of all groups, the dollar leaves the black community the quickest. Asian groups, white groups, other groups, their

dollar stays in the community for a while before it goes out. Black dollar, gone. So in the black community, usually the stores and shops and what have you, were not owned by the people of our community. So Black Power initially was the idea that, all right, we have got to take charge of our lives. Everybody does it, everybody else does it. We weren't doing it. All right. Not in the concentrated way--. There have always been folks, there have been the Marcus Garveys, there have been people who have organized things and said, "Okay, we've got to do these things," and then government comes in and busts it up in some way, shape or form. So Black Power was saying, on several levels, economically, take charge of our communities. Culturally, take pride in who we are.

Because I mean, between the skin bleaching and the--. I have it in my office, I remember this thing that we used to say as kids; "Act your age and not your color," and we, there was a whole little thing that we would sing, we would sing this and there were a bunch of things like that, "Act your age and not your color," "I'm your friend and not your bud--." Some nonsensical things that we would say, but disparaging who we were.

All right. And back when I was growing up, you wanted to start a fight with somebody, call them "black," call them "black," that was, those were fighting words. Those were absolutely fighting words. So Black Power at the time, it meant black economic power, it meant black pride, it meant taking charge of our education. All right. Starting in the homes. Starting in the homes. Teaching about who we are. Because for most black people--. No, no, I take that back. For society, Black History, most people think starts with slavery. They don't know about the Mansa Musa, the richest man in history, from the kingdom of Mali.

They don't know about all the inventors, the scientists and all. There was a program in the [19]90s, I think it was, could have been in the [19]80s. There were these students, it was a middle school or a high school and they were getting, the black kids, black boys, were getting lousy grades. That summer they were put in a program where they learned about the role, historic role, of people of African descent and the sciences and engineering and all these great things, mathematics. The following year, those boys were getting A's and B's. Right? Just that simple opening, an awareness.

And so that's one of the things, I told you I like to give away books. I like to get kids interested in math and science, because you open up the possibilities and we need that in such a bad way. Just as much as we needed it back from day one. So like I said, we've got this war, we've got this perpetual battle and we have to be conscious; if we win a battle, we can't let up, we can't let up. We have to keep striving.

JB: Okay, you're going. Your question's on--?

Guha Shankar: I wanted to ask you about the button, who that iconic figure is?

MM: Fred Hampton. And Fred Hampton is one of those people--. Why I love doing these things is letting people know about Fred. Because Fred was an amazing person, on so many levels. And I encourage people to look, Google him. [1:10:00] There's a couple of books, *The Assassination of Fred Hampton* by Jeff Haas and then for *The Bullet to the Ballot* by Jakobi Williams, where they talk about Fred and the activities that he did and here, like, again, this was someone, he was committed and for him activism was like breathing. It's what you do. I think it's a quote from Ali, "Activism is my price for being on the planet," the price I pay for being on the planet, and Fred took

that up and I think, I think he probably started in seventh or eighth grade. But by high school he was full b--. I mean, he was organizing adults and carrying on, in high school.

People like this are rare. They are rare, I mean, rarified air. And the fact that he was targeted and snuffed out at the age of twenty-one shows you how amazing this individual was. I mean, this young man--. People sought him out to be part of stuff. Because when he came, he came with it. There was--. He used to say, you can't be, "There's no part-time revolutionaries. Is you is or is you ain't?" all right, if you is, fine. This is what we do. We pour our lives into this. And Fred literally poured his life into it.

He knew he was going to die. I mean, think about that. He knew that he was going to die. He knew that he would be killed. And he did it anyway. All right, most people tell you, no, don't do this, something bad might happen. And he said, "Yeah, something bad is going to happen, I'm going to do this anyway," because, as he said, he would die for the people and he did and I feel that part of my mission as a storyteller and someone who knew him and was inspired and influenced by him, is to share him, to keep--. There's an African saying which I paraphrase. Until the panther tells his story, only the hunter will be glorified. So I tell the story.

DC: I was going to ask this before, I forgot to ask you, but the immediate aftermath of Fred's death, what was that like within the party? What did you all do who survived that?

MM: It was galvanizing. We loved Fred. And this is what, how I like to say it. If Fred said, go through that wall, you'd go through the wall to say, you got another one? All right, all of us in the party loved Fred. Now, think about that. All right. You have leaders, but you know, your leaders got a little stuff here, a little personality, quick--.

Everybody loved Fred. Everybody would do whatever they could--. You know, Fred said, "Do this," you'd do it. He was that kind of person, because he showed you, I mean, his life, his life was service, his life was full commitment and so you wanted to match that, or try to. And was, oh, he inspired, man, he inspired. Because we, we still get together, those of us who knew Fred, when I go back to Chicago, we're still inspired by Fred.

We're still inspired by Fred. So his death galvanized us and it galvanized the city. The activists in the black community in particular, but the activist community in general, all those organizations, the Young Lords, Rising Up Angry, the Young Patriots, even the Blackstone Rangers and some of the West Side gangs, they all, in that time all friction, petty stuff went poof and people starting working, people started organizing. [Sigh] It would have been lovely if it could have been sustained, but it didn't last. Like I said, there--.

DC: Too many other things.

MM: So much COINTELPRO. All right, COINTELPRO and, and again, they killed Fred with intent, because he had that special oomph, that special quality, [1:15:00] and it's rare, I mean, you look, I don't care what organization you look at, be it political, be it a business, you know, you see a group of people, you see people bickering with each other. With Fred, there was no bickering. He was, he was an amazing human being. He was an amazing human being, as they say, an old soul and he had the rarest of qualities. Like I said, he brought all these leadership qualities together and then some. And then he had, he had that extra special oomph. So--.

DC: It was interesting, what you were saying before about if he had, if he had survived, what, what the influence would have been on the party.

MM: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, that's why he--. When I told you about my friend, when he came to join and he thought he wanted a gun to shoot white people and carrying on, now the way Fred dealt with that, think about that--. No, he could have said, no man, that's not the way we do things. Or he could have just laughed and said, yeah, I know how you're feeling. But he said, "Listen, we do things differently. Take this. I want you to look at this and then make your own decision," he wasn't trying to flip his will on him. "Take a look at this. See if this fits. This is the way we do things," I mean, again, that's dynamic, man, that's powerful. And he, that's what he was. So I'm repping Fred.

DC: Right on. [Laughter]

JB: I have a question about the sustainability thing, which I think you've been talking about a little bit before and what of those programs have been free? The after school program, the lunch program, did they get morphed into something else? Or did they just sort of wither away? Or what--?

MM: Well, actually, like I said, the government ended up starting, you know, breakfast programs and lunch programs at schools. Free clinics, there are a lot of free clinics all across the country. In fact, okay, this is really, this is really, really neat. So I came out of the service, I was stationed in Korea for two and a half years; I got introduced to Oriental medicine and I came out of the service, I became an acupuncturist.

And I ended up setting up an acupuncture program at this free clinic that was run by one of the doctors who had worked at the Spurgeon Jake Winters Free Clinic on the

West Side. And so, after the party's demise, he started this free clinic. And as far as I know, it might still be going on. So I was with the program, I set up this acupuncture component in the [19]80s and like I said, as far I know it might still be going on. So--.

At other organizations, just recently, I mean, when I say recently, a couple of weeks ago a friend of mine contacted me, he said, "Look, I'm going to be starting up this program over in East LA. I want to talk to you about the breakfast program."

DC: Coming back.

MM: Yeah. Yeah. So again, the awareness, as people become reminded of or aware of the things that the party did, it's like okay, let's do this. Because the idea is to do something. You see something, there's a problem, what can be done to rectify it? You know, yeah, you've got to scream about it, okay, but what can you do to make it right?

DC: So this is kind of ridiculous, well, it is ridiculous, but Super Bowl, Beyonce' performs and wore a beret and people flipped out. What did you think about that?

MM: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I loved it! [Laughter] I loved it. In fact, ooh, check this out, check this out, you're going to love this, you're going to love this. So. In April I was in New York. I put, I have a one-man show that's called *The Happy Panther* about my Panther experience and I did it at the Provincetown Playhouse Theatre in New York, where Paul Robeson used to perform; I was very honored to be there. So. I put it out on Facebook so that people knew I was going to be doing this program. Well, one of my friends, who is an artist and organizes these programs said, "I'm going to get you

[1:20:00] on this radio show," and there's this program on SiriusXM, *Sway in the Morning*, okay.

I didn't know nothing about no Sway. All right. So I said, "Okay, a radio show, I've been on radio shows. Let me know where I'm supposed to be, I'll be there," and so she makes the arrangements, said, and then I get this notification, the limo will come and pick you up, I'm like, what? Limo? What's that? So.

DC: But all right. [Laughs]

MM: I said, "Well, let me, who is this Sway guy?" so I put in Sway, and you know how when you, when you're Googling something, at some point--and it's something that's very popular--very early on, a couple of letters, [Sound effects] it pops up and three letters in [Sound effects] up pops *Sway in the Morning* and I click on the page and there he is with Obama and there he is with Snoop Dogg and there he is with Goldie Hawn, who was on the program before me and this brother, New York Panther brother, Odinga, who had just gotten out of prison, he had been inspired by Beyonce's tribute and he said, "Hmm, I want to let people know what the Black Panther party got to say, because I want to know," and so that's how myself and Sekou Odinga ended up on that program.

And it was a great interview. He's an international program. And it was really funny, because like I said, I didn't know anything about it. My grandnephew, who lives in New York, I sent him the link to it and he wrote back to me, "Unc, I didn't know you had it like that. You chilling with Sway?" and I recovered quickly, I said, "That's the way I roll," [Laughter] but again, what she did and you know, people have issues with

this and issue with that--. I'm looking at the big picture. An entire generation or two were saying--

DC: What's that about?

MM: Yeah, what's that about? And their--. I had--. after the program, people, I recommended some books, people contacted me, what were those books that you said? What were those books that you recommended that we read? Because I am an advocate for literacy; I want people to read. Knowledge is power, if you utilize it and so right on, Beyonce, because it shook people up and it pissed people off and I like that. Because there are some people who need to be pissed off, on a daily basis. [Laughs]

DC: Amen. [Laughter]

GS: I have one more question for you. Could you talk a little bit about your storytelling and how that ties into oceans of activism for you?

MM: Oh, yeah. Oh, man, I love my life. I've always been a storyteller. When I was in high school, that's when I formally started telling stories about black history and culture, because I would read these books and I would find out these things that weren't anything I'd ever heard in school and why didn't I know about these things? And I would share it via story. And then in 1992 I discovered there was such a thing as professional storytelling; I've been doing it ever since.

And I realized that via story. Because you see, the power of story is this. Storytelling is non-judgmental. If I give you a lecture or if I'm a preacher, I'm saying to you, I know, you do not. Listen to me. Storytelling is a sharing. I have this story. It means something to me. Perhaps you'll like it. It's like sharing a plate of cookies. Here, I made these oatmeal cookies, or I made this sweet potato pie; I'd like to share it with

you. Hope you like it. If you don't, fine. But I'd just like to share it with you. And that's where you come from with storytelling. You're not condescending, you're sharing.

And there's a power in that, because therefore the listener takes from the story what they want, what they need, what they will, and they don't feel imposed upon. And so, once I got into the storytelling and I saw its power, as I was telling you before, I work in prisons. I teach storytelling to inmates. I teach them that their stories are important, that their stories have value and most of them, many if not most of them, they don't think they have stories to tell and I don't think their story has any purpose, any meaning, any, who wants to hear this? [1:25:00] And I tell them, "Everybody has at least one story that they need to tell, either because they just need to tell it or there's somebody that needs to hear it."

And I've had guys in prison tell me, look, they tell me, I've never asked them why they're in prison, but they tell me and I've had guys tell me, "Look, this is my story, this is why I'm here in prison," and it might be a murder, a horrific case and they tell me, "If at any time you find that sharing this story will be of help to someone, you have my permission to do so. It's more important that help happen than me being embarrassed by the horror that I committed," that's a large step. That's an amazing step for people to take, an amazing step for people to take. And we all have these stories.

I remember I was working at a homeless shelter, downtown LA, and again, I've got this group of people, about a dozen or more people, many of whom said, "Oh, I don't have a story, I don't have a story," and there was this one woman who absolutely resisted telling a story. Actually, I thought she was a staff person. Middle-aged black woman, dressed very nicely, spoke very well and finally she shared her story. She had, she got hit

by, she lost her job, she got sick, she lost her insurance and she lost everything and she ended up homeless and she talked about how she used to really be down on homeless people because she thought they were lazy and there she was, in that situation. And it was a powerful story that she shared. But she kept saying, "I don't have a story, I don't have a story," but her story was one of the most powerful stories.

And so one, I tell stories to inspire. I tell stories to motivate. And then two, I teach people how to find and how to tell their stories. And many of us do, most of us do, who are storytellers, that's part of our mission, that's part of what we do. And it's amazing to see the light that happens when somebody all of the sudden they're telling a story and these guys are listening to them. I had a session; it was the last session and the last session is the guys telling stories and most of the guys are telling funny stories and this one guy gets up, he walks up and he says, "I'm sorry, Mike, I don't have any funny stories," and he gets up and he tells this story about how he and a buddy were jumped on by a gang; his buddy was shot. They're in a hospital. His buddy is having surgery, when his phone rings; it's his girlfriend, his pregnant girlfriend. Something's wrong. She needs him to come and take her to the hospital. He takes her to the hospital. The baby's born and the baby dies. And I'm watching the rest of the guys in the room.

One guy telling, there's fifteen guys listening plus me. And everybody is focused on him. Now sometimes somebody will be sort of chattering in the back or not really paying attention, but everybody is locked in. And they're there for him. And that's the power of story. We hear a story and I tell them, "Stories lead to stories," because when you listen to a story, you're reminded of things. There might be a direct correlation between the story or none whatsoever, but all of the sudden the memory is triggered and

you remember something, it's like [Gasp]. When I was doing a workshop with veterans at the V.A. and this guy remembered a story from when he was in Vietnam, that he hadn't remembered since then. And that's that power of story. Of sharing your story.

Because storytelling is a dynamic, three parts. There's the storyteller, there's the story and there's the listener, and you have to have all three parts. And it's interesting because the thing that distinguishes storytelling from theater, a play doesn't care about the audience. A play is the play. But storytelling, as I said, is a dynamic. It doesn't happen [1:30:00] without an audience, without the audience. And the audience defines the story. The storyteller tells the story and all of the sudden there's this dynamic that grows and all of the sudden as the storyteller, I'm saying, I might have told this story a hundred times, a thousand times, all of the sudden at this one particular audience something different comes out and it's because of that dynamic that happens and that's the power of story and storytelling, you are literally in somebody else's head. Because when I tell a story, all right, if I'm telling a story about something that happened to me, you weren't there, you don't know what these people looked like. You don't know this room. You know, I describe a park and a baseball game; you don't know exactly what that was, but your mind creates an image based on my words. I'm in your head.

DC: Like the power. [Laughs]

MM: Yeah. I'm in your head. I'm in your head. And so my story has become your story, because it's my story, but it's your images.

DC: So do you see these guys in prison realize that they have power then?

MM: Yes.

DC: Through this?

MM: Yeah. There's this bulb that goes off and it's an amazing thing to behold when it happens. It's an amazing thing. I mean, I see these guys come in. At first they're, either they're skeptical or they're entertained, because I'm a great storyteller, what can I say? You know. But then all of the sudden they, when they come to that realization that, [Gasp] one of the guys wrote this and remind me, I'll give you a copy of it, he said, because I have them tell their stories on day one and all of the sudden he's telling this story and he's sort of telling the story and he looks up and he says, "They're all listening, they're looking at me, they're all listening to me, oh wow, oh wow, I can tell a story," and it's a [Singing] "Ahh" moment, it's a realization.

And I tell them, it's like developing a super power. It's like developing a super power, because when you can tell a story, you can paint those pictures and you can take command of that. You have developed the skill that is useful at every level of your life. So for these guys, some of them told me, "So now when my kids come and visit me, I have a story to tell them," all right, "I'm not searching for words to say. I can tell them about this class. I can tell them about what I learned. I can tell them about the stories that I remembered," okay, so there's this whole thing that happens and it's, it's so amazing. I mean, it's absolutely amazing. When I see it, when I see and as I'm talking to you I'm seeing these various faces, because there's been hundreds of guys that I've worked with and I see these faces and they're happy.

I remember the last session and these guys were coming in and they came in; they had purpose. They had purpose. They came in with determination and sometimes I have to like, okay, who's going to be the first one? These guys came in and they said, "I'm first and he's going to be the second," they had already worked this all out. And it was

like, bam, bam, bam, bam; they're getting up. One guy, he got up and he said, "You all know me. I'm never getting out of here," and the story was about how he found his spiritual path in prison. And how, like another guy in another story, he made determination that he was going to be happy, he was going to be joyous and he would share it with whoever would allow him to.

Another guy told this, oh, amazing story about the mask that they must wear in prison, because he said, "You just can't be you. You've got to put on this front; you've got to put on this mask. Rarely, sometimes you might find some people that you can be you with, but it takes time," and these guys, they tell these stories and it, and it's just amazing. And they have these--. I use this thing called a "story bag" with all these miscellaneous, odd, little things and I had one little bookworm, it's a little book and a little worm and this guy ended up taking, every week he took this story [1:35:00] and it became an allegory of his life, and every week he took it further and further, to this bookworm, who became a butterfly, who was trapped in this room, who eventually got out of the room and eventually died, but it died free.

All right, so, it is amazing, this little, simple thing, telling a story, but it has such tremendous power and these guys come up to--. A couple of weeks ago I ended a class and this guy, thirty-eight years old, been in prison since he was sixteen, so he's been in longer than he was out and he said, "I'm probably never getting out," all right, and he's thanking me. He's thanking me for helping him to find and tell his story. [Laughs]

DC: Very powerful, yeah.

MM: Yeah. [Laughter] God, I love my life. [Laughter]

DC: The happy Panther.

MM: Yes! [Laughter] I'll show it to you. I have one picture of me and Fred.

DC: All right. I'd love to see it.

MM: He's up on the--. On the platform giving a speech and the typical Panther pose is, you know, and there's me. [Laughter]

DC: Right on, love it. All right, cool. So let me just thank you, this has been an absolute pleasure.

MM: Thank you. I'm very happy. Hey, like I said, telling people about Fred and the Party and letting people know about their own stories, the power of their own stories, that's why I'm here. Yay!

DC: Right on.

FEMALE 1: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Judith Jacobs - ATC

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