Civil Rights History Project
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Interviewee: Norma Mtume

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Interviewer: David Cline

Videographer: John Bishop

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START OF RECORDING

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

Daniel Cline: It is the 27th of June 2016 today and we are here in Los Angeles, California. This is David Cline from the History Department at Virginia Tech and working with the Civil Rights History Project of the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. We have with us John Bishop of Media Generation behind the camera. Also, Guha Shankar of the Library of Congress is here with us, and we are so honored to be here with Norma Mtume. And if I could ask, this is the one time I will coach you at all, to introduce yourself with a full sentence, "My name is" or "I am" and where you were born, and what year.

Norma Mtume: Okay. I am Norma Mtume, currently. I was born in 1949 in San Diego, California, Norma Stoker, and later I married so my name was Norma Armour. At the time I was in the Black Panther Party, my name was Norma Armour. So, I just,

for historical purposes, my children, or my grandchildren, I wanted to make sure that those names were on file.

DC: On file. Thank you.

NM: Thank you for coming.

DC: And can you tell me about the adoption of Mtume?

NM: Well, I married an Mtume, who changed his name in the sixties, as a lot of us were doing. We didn't want our slave names anymore, and so he chose Mtume. His name is Omowale Mtume, and it means "the son returns," and it's Kiswahili and Nigerian.

DC: That's powerful.

NM: Yeah. Yeah.

DC: Wonderful. And if you could tell--let's start with your childhood, or even before, your parents, and tell me a little bit about that.

NM: All right. My mother was Doris Simms [?]. She was born in Louisiana but raised in Arkansas and Louisiana. Came to California during the World War II, moved to Vallejo where, you know, folks were going to where they could work in the war industry. My dad was born in Longview, Texas. He went to the military and after he got out, he moved to San Diego, became a librarian of all things [laughs] and I lived in San Diego until I was about four. Then moved to Los Angeles with my mom. My folks split up, and so I had been in the Los Angeles area most of my life. Moved away when I was in the Party for a few years, moved up north, came back home to roost, and pretty much been here since.

DC: I wonder if you can tell me a little bit about the racial geography of Los Angeles during those years, and if that shaped you at all?

NM: It did, and I'll tell you my first experience, even thinking about me being in the skin, really, a lot. Where I lived in Los Angeles, it was primarily African Americans, or negroes, or coloreds, or blacks, or you know, as we became over the years. And very few Latinos, who were pretty much all Mexican; one or two Asian. As you came further west, we had more Japanese. You went further north, more Korean. But where I lived, it was mainly black people. Very poor neighborhood; I grew up in South Central, around 21st and Naomi for those of you who know Los Angeles. And almost everybody came to school with cardboard in their shoes when they started wearing out. I mean, it was no--. You didn't think of yourself as super poor until you were able to get out of that environment and see what other people had because the other people around you, they pretty much had what you had, or didn't have what you didn't have, rather.

When I was in high school in the mid-60s, started to become a little bit more conscious about what's going on there, what's going on around the world. Some of our older brothers, and neighbors, and friends--and as we got to be seniors, some of our boyfriends--were drafted, went to Vietnam. I think that opened a lot of folks' eyes, especially when we saw the guys, the ones that made it back. They didn't come back quite the same, and a lot of them have never been the same since then. Like I said, very poor. I managed to get a scholarship, two hundred fifty dollars [laughs] from high school to go to college. You know? Go figure. That would buy about a book and a half these days. So, I went to Jefferson High School, which was basically all black. We had two Caucasians, [5:00] two brothers, that--. I mean, we remember the Cromwells [?] because

they was the only ones in this whole school! But that's kind of what the neighborhood was like. We were poor, and then when riots started, when people started really, really feeling like, "Enough is enough. We really don't have what we need to survive," folks got angry and they started doing what they thought they needed to do to get some attention.

DC: What year did you graduate high school?

NM: I graduated in [19]67.

DC: Okay.

NM: In 1967, yeah. So, it was just after we had the big Watts uprising. After I graduated, I went to Cal State LA and we had a very active Black Student Union there.

DC: Had you done anything in high school? Were there any organizations yet?

NM: I didn't. I was too busy trying to pull myself up by my bootstraps, not knowing at the time that I really didn't have any boots to put straps in. I was going to college. I was going to be a math and PE teacher, majoring in math and minoring in PE. Then I started meeting some of the students on campus who were active in the BSU, and I met my first husband, Albert Armour. He was very active in the Black Student Union and later became a Black Panther Party member, and that's how I got involved with the Panthers because I really wasn't involved in very much before then.

DC: Are you able to go back and try to remember the first time that you became aware of the Panthers and trying to figure out what the ideology was or what this was about?

NM: I know he had Panthers stickers on his car. He had a little blue VW bug and when he would come to the house, and then he would have a Muhammad Speaks

newspaper with him. So he was just always--. He was getting information from everywhere, and he would come to the house, and my mother would just be really, really upset. She didn't want him coming over anymore with that, you know, that Black Panther and that Black Muslim stuff. He took me to an anti-war protest rally, the big one that was out in Westwood, and I believe it was in [19]67, late [19]67, or summer of [19]67--and it's when it disrupted. It just erupted and they started beating heads and stuff, and I'm standing around looking. I've never been exposed to anything like this [laughs] before. So finally, they're dragging me, "Come on, come on! We got to get out of here." So, I was actually there at that rally and that was my first time saying, "This really isn't right." I didn't watch a whole lot of TV. I was always into the books and reading, and I didn't have time.

So, I saw that. That was early [19]67 and my husband became a full-fledged member of the Party. He dropped out of college. I was still going to school. He kept trying to get me to come around and do things, but I just didn't have time for that. I had another avenue that I was going to take, but in December [19]69 when the police raided all the Party offices here, he was in one of the offices and they beat him up pretty badly. He was in the hospital for a while, broke his arm, damaged one of his eye sockets pretty badly, and then that got my attention. That woke me up. And that was in December, and by January I was volunteering at the local office on 41st Street--what was left of it. We still were trying to function out of there.

I started doing typing for the officer of the day. I would type memos for him or whatnot, and then I worked in the breakfast program. And the clinic was starting here, and I always had an interest in the body and in health. I guess that's why I liked physical

education, other than it was just fun. I liked to play. And so, I was assigned to work at the clinic and I became the coordinator, the person who ran the clinic. That was some experience. I was 19 years old. [Laughter]

DC: It's amazing how young everyone was and what you all took on.

NM: Yes. Yeah, yeah. But I had a lot of help from--there were a lot of professionals who were willing to lend their time and talents and skills. Marie Branch was an RN and she taught at UCLA, and Terry Coopers [?] was a psychiatrist, and they helped us to get residents and doctors to volunteer, nursing students and nurses to come and volunteer at the clinic. We didn't have any paid [10:00] staff there and that's how we ran it.

DC: These are all African American health workers?

NM: No, no. Marie Branch is African American. Dr. Coopers is white. But we had an assortment of--. It was a real good mixture of diversity that we had there.

DC: Can I ask you, since we're on that, about other sort of coalitions that formed at that time, partners that you worked with?

NM: Well, there were the student nurses, health educators. Some of the doctors who were really liberals, they had their associations that they were with. I was just really, really focused on running the clinic and that was a full-time job because besides caring for the community, we had to care for the Party members. And now, I'm doing work with Drew Medical School and looking at health disparities and we're the sickest people in the world, the community that I come from. We have--. Well, the sickest people in this country, and a lot of our illnesses compare real closely to what's going on in some third world countries, in terms of our birth rates, stillbirth rates, low birth weight

children, and miscarriages, and things like that. But I'm just saying that to say that I didn't really have time to do a whole lot of other things. I was focused on running the clinic and the health of the Party members and the people that we served at the clinic, and that was more than a full-time job.

DC: So, let's start from the beginning because at 19 years old, [laughter] you'd had a year of college at this point or so? Yeah.

NM: Mm-hmm.

DC: And are assigned this task.

NM: It was a lot of self-study.

DC: Had the clinic opened yet?

NM: The clinic--I was there, the clinic opened. It had a mix [?] opening day.

DC: Okay. And then you were told, "You'll be running this." [laughs]

NM: Yeah and my main--.

DC: So, what happens? [laughs] What happens on day one?

NM: You just get it in gear. You do a lot of self-study. You do a lot of reading, and like I said, I had a lot of mentors from--especially from Marie Branch, who was the nurse and the nursing instructor. She gave me things to read. She just taught me. I mean, she taught me how to eat yogurt. I didn't even know what yogurt was. I'd never had yogurt [laughter] when I was 19 years old. That wasn't what we ate. But you know, various uses for it, and a lot of natural healing practices, we discussed as well. I don't know. It was just, you learned. You got books. You found people. We didn't have an internet, so you had to hustle and get that information the best that you could, and it just--I learned a lot in a little bit of time.

DC: Okay, can you describe the physical place of the clinic, the first clinic?

NM: It was a storefront. We had a lab tech student whose father was a construction contractor, so he had been working with his father for a long time. He came in and built the lab out for us, and we were able to put up partitions so that we could have different operating rooms. So, he built out the lab and he built us a pharmacy area. We worked with the pharm--. That was one of the things that the doctors did, was to work with the pharmaceutical reps who came to their place and asked them to give us samples. So, that was where we got most of our medication so that we could give it to the folks who came to the clinic for free.

So, we got it built out. I'm not a good judge of square footage, but we had three exam rooms, a little reception area, an area for the pharmacy, and the lab, here in Los Angeles.

DC: And what was the location?

NM: It was at 32nd and Central. Yeah.

DC: And completely free.

NM: Well, we had to pay rent for the building, but--.

DC: Right, but for the--.

NM: And our utility. It was free. Everything was free. We didn't charge for anything. People could give donations when they came in, but all care was free.

DC: So, did it take some outreach to let people know that you were there and--.

NM: Oh, yes.

DC: That there weren't strings attached?

NM: Yes, yes. And we did that outreach in the community, but when folks came out to sell--went out to sell--papers as well, there was information about the clinic and there were articles in our newspaper about the various clinics around the country. And we collected donations on the street for the clinic too, so folks got to learn about the clinic that way.

DC: Do you remember any of the sort of "why we're going to do a clinic," the justification or the ideology that said that this is important?

NM: Yes. It was one of the points of our ten-point platform and program. I think it's number four, that we want decent healthcare. We want healthcare that keeps us healthy to start with, but gets us well [15:00] when we get sick. And so, we were just carrying out our platform, that we said that the reason that we existed. We knew that we had substandard housing, education, healthcare. We were the most that got beat up by the police. We were going to prison more than anybody else, although those were the things that we really were--stepped out--to address.

DC: I'll come back to the clinic, but I want to ask about daily life of a young woman in the LA chapter of the Panthers. What was it like? What was daily life?

NM: The young woman with a two-year-old child. Well, let's see. Maybe he was a year and a half when I finally--. After my husband got out of the hospital and I started coming around more, eventually I gave up my apartment and I just moved into the Party facilities as well, me and my son. Shortly after, I got pregnant with my daughter. That's Albert Armour III and Leilah Armour. And so, when we went in the Party, there were a lot of women just like me. They had children. So, we had to make provisions so that the children could be safe and cared for, so we had a nursery for the children because

we worked long, long hours. I mean, we would be up in the morning, 5:30, 6:00, in order to get ready for the breakfast program. So, we'd get the kids fed, and then folks would go off to their various work assignments. I would go to the clinic. Other folks would go to the field. Other people might be working in the office where we put together our fliers, our posters. A few of the main writers for the newspaper were from the Los Angeles chapter, so they would go to Oakland for a few days of the week to work on the newspaper. So, the children had to be taken care of, and so that was first and foremost. So, we made sure that we put that in place.

So, you'd go out, strike out to the clinic about 9:30 or 10:00. You worked there until like 6:00 or so, and we often had evening clinics as well because the regular people, they'd have to go to work, and so they can't take off work because they lose money. So, we had lots of evening clinics, and that's how we were able to get a number of our doctors to volunteer as well because once they got off work, then they could come and volunteer their time at night. So, there were days when you may be at the clinic until 10:00, 10:00 or 11:00, cleaning up and getting ready for the next day. Then if you got back to the centers early enough, you ate dinner. You had political education class maybe. And if you were on guard duty, because everybody had to have a guard shift. We didn't want what happened to Fred Hampton to happen to us. You just didn't know. Somebody had to be watching all the time. So, we would come back from our daily assignments, and if we didn't do political education class or have some other kind of meeting, or a rally or something that we needed to go to, you were lucky. You might get into bed by 12:00, 11:00 or 12:00. [laughs] Get a couple hours' sleep, then you get up for

your couple hours of duty on security watch, and go back to sleep. Then you get up, and you do it all over again.

DC: Wow. Yeah.

NM: So, the work ethic that we got [laughs] at such a young age, how we learned how to work like that, nobody can outwork us these days. Later when you go on to a regular job, they just can't do it. They're not used to that kind of work. I'm not saying that that's something that you should try to sustain for a lifetime [laughs] because it's really hard and it's wearing on your body over time. But that's what we felt that we needed to do, and that's what we did.

DC: You mentioned Fred Hampton, and can you talk a little bit more about the harassment, and fear, and intimidation, and targeting that you all experienced?

NM: Yes. We had--. We were harassed and targeted by the police, but other groups that we had different ideological or perspectives. One example was one day, and we did this--. Everything was communal; the laundry, everything. If you were assigned to do laundry duty, you might have four or five people's, and their family's, the kids', laundry to do. So, my girlfriend and I were going to do laundry one evening and as soon as we pull out of the parking space, there's the police. They just stayed right there and waited for you to drive off [20:00] so that they could stop you and harass you for some petty traffic infraction that they say that you might have committed. And so, we're sitting there and one police goes to his car, and then he comes back, and he's got this whole portfolio of photos. So, he starts asking me these people's names, people that are in the Party, and then, he had my license so he knew my name, so he, first he pulled up my husband's picture, and said, "Who is that?" I said, "Oh, that's my brother." So, I

think for the longest--without them doing any deep checking, they thought that we were brother and sister. Eventually, I think they caught on, but for them they--every time you left, you would look to see if there was a patrol car or an unmarked car on the street.

And I think the women got off a little bit easier sometimes than the guys. The guys, they just knew soon as they walked out the gate with their papers under their arm, they were going to get harassed. Or they were going to get arrested, or they were going to get beat, or whatever. So, it was constant. And at night, especially after the raids on the various offices and all, you just, you didn't know if you were--if your number was up next--but you just, if you had that commitment, you stayed. People that didn't, and they figured, "I want to do something else with my life. I don't want to give it up this way," then they leave. So, people came and they went. Some people stayed longer than others.

DC: Did you have strategies for coping?

NM: Drinking and drugging? [Laughter] This might be one of the things I tell you to take out. [laughter] But, no. I mean, we--. When we had a chance to cool down, we might have a party or a birthday party or something.

DC: This is stress. This is high stress.

NM: It is. It's high, high stress. It's a wonder some of us didn't stroke out or something. No, I mean, we--. I recognized early on that there were a lot of folks who had alcohol problems, and later on started using different types of drugs. But then, we have to remember that these are people that came in from the community. People that joined the Party, they were already doing those kinds of things. When they came into the Party, they were directed, clean up, because it wasn't allowed. You couldn't be a drug head and alcoholic every day and do the work that you needed to do. So, that wasn't

condoned. But because we were who we were, some of us slipped back into those habits. But, no there were--.

We had a psychiatrist who worked with us. Like I said, Dr. Coopers was a psychiatrist and up north, we had a Dr. Shapiro, I think his name was. And every now and then, somebody would really kind of go out there. But everyday, having mental health services, or therapy, or support groups and that kind of stuff, other than just commiserating among yourselves, not that I can recall, no.

DC: What about being a woman in the Party? And I know that numerically, I think, right, sisters made up the majority at certain points?

NM: Yeah, at certain points. It wasn't the easiest thing. I mean we, based on principles, we tried to make all things equal, that women could do what men could do. And the men cooked, the men cleaned. There were men assigned to the children's centers and whatnot. But like I said, the people that were in the Party were people who were not in the Party and came into the Party, so they brought those same behaviors, and some chauvinism. Not just men in our community, but all over the world, the patriarchal societies. So, that was something that you constantly had to deal with. I would think at points it was a little bit alleviated, little bit more alleviated, because eventually more and more women came into the leadership positions. It was something we had to deal with.

DC: Is there a special bond now among the veteran Panther women?

NM: Oh, yes. Yes, yes they are, and it's like you were in high school and you have four or five people that you bond with. I mean, you don't bond with the whole class, but there are four or five of us who are--still talk and commiserate about things that are going on now and reflect on things that were going on [25:00] then. A couple of us

were having this discussion about how our work ethic and how we "served the people body and soul," was one of our slogans. After a while, especially when you get closer to my age, you just have to start to pull that back and say, "Wait a minute. I've got to take better care of myself. I can't give all of me away everyday, all day anymore. I've really got to reel that back and now spend more time with my grandkids, and my children," and just--. But yeah, we do. We have a good bond and it's those kinds of friends that you probably never, some people, will never make in life. These are people that you trusted your life with, for real. [laughs]

DC: How did you--? Go back a little bit for a second, but you talked about your parents' initial reaction to your boyfriend who would later become your husband. How did they handle your involvement in the Party?

NM: My mother--. Well, we had a free busing to prisons program, and my oldest brother was in San Quentin. We were here in Los Angeles, so my mother had never been able to go and see him. So, when we had a bus trip that was going up to San Quentin, I got my mom signed up and she and I went to visit my brother in San Quentin and she--before that and after that--she never went. After that, it was no problem. What we were doing in the Party was all right. She got an idea. And over time, she got an idea to see some of the things that we were doing. So, she was okay with it. And my father, I think he was just more afraid for my safety. He came to accept it after a point, too.

My first experience with discrimination that I can recall, my father used to take my brother and I to Texas every year, and we would drive. And normally--he lived in San Diego--we would stop in El Paso for halfway, and we would get a motel. Of course,

that was like in [19]55,[19]56, so it was a black motel you would stay at. And then you would get up the next morning, get you some breakfast, and drive on.

DC: Is that "The Green Book" that had--? Do you remember? I think it's called "The Green Book" that listed African American-owned motels for cross-country trips?

NM: I don't know. My dad just knew because being from Texas and going back and forth all the time.

DC: Oh, okay. He knew the right places, yeah.

NM: Yeah. But this one particular time we were going, I was about nine years old. We got to El Paso and the Black Baptist Convention was going on, so all the black motels were taken up. So, we had--. There was no room at the inn, so my dad said, "I've got to stop and get some sleep." So, he said, "I'm just going to pull over on the side of the road here. We'll get a couple hours of sleep." He pulls underneath some willow trees. Well, you know how the willow trees are going? I said, "Daddy, I can't sleep. [Laughter] The trees are calling me." And I kept on, and finally he just got up and started driving. Well, it was morning. He said, "I need to get some coffee and we need to get something to eat." Well, everything still said, "No coloreds allowed" and "Whites only" and "Black water," I mean, "Colored water," "White water." So, my dad, he said, "We've got to stop." He pulled up to the restaurant and my stepmom was saying, "Oh no, Calvin. You can't go in there. You can't go in there." He said, "No," he's from Texas. He knows how to handle it. So, he goes around to the back door. In about 15 minutes, he comes back and he's got coffee, and donuts, and food, and stuff. He says, "I mean, that's what you have to do. You just have to suck it up. You and your family have

to eat, and you just go and do what they tell you to do, and you come out, and we get in the car, and we drive on." I'll never forget that as long as I live. That was my first introduction to, "I really am treated differently than other people."

DC: Do you remember what your thoughts were in your young mind, just right at that moment?

NM: Yeah, and I was wondering, "Well, why does dad have to go in the back?" And then when we actually got to my grandmother's house that year, we're passing this beautiful park with a nice swimming pool. We said, "Ooh!" And you know, Texas is humid. It's like July, and "Ooh, we can go swimming there!" Dad says, "No hon, you can't swim there, but there's a black pool down the street." And we pass this beautiful high school. I said, "Oh, Dad, is that where you went?" He says, "No." We go on down the street, and you can--. The stark differences in that park and the other park, but the thing that really got me is we were going to go to the drive-in one night. So, we get to the drive-in movie. We have to go all the way in the back. The black people had to sit so far back that they had bleachers. You had to get out of your car [30:00] to see the screen. I mean, all of that in one trip. So, that's really imprinted in my mind. I'll never forget that.

DC: How old were you, about?

NM: About nine. Eight or nine.

DC: About nine. Sounds like that had a big influence.

NM: Yeah. Yeah, and later on, you start to reflect back on that. But when I get back to my community, it's the same so you don't really think about it that much anymore until you get older and start getting a little bit more consciousness about, "Well,

there's a whole bunch of this stuff going on all the time, and we need to do something about it."

DC: What were some of the other survival programs that the Party had in place in Los Angeles?

NM: We had a food program where we gave away free bags of food, groceries to folks who were in need. This is kind of pre-food-bank type of situations. We had a free clothing program, free coats program in the winter, especially in those places like Chicago and New York where it got really, really cold. Could you imagine kids having to go to school and they don't have coats to wear? What else did we--? We had so many. We had a seniors' program, "Seniors Against the Fearful Environment." It was called "SAFE," where we would escort seniors to the bank, and to the grocery store, to doctor's appointments. In the clinics, we had outreach programs where we would actually go out into the community and do some services. That was kind of novel, and I think we learned that from watching what they were doing in Cuba and in China, the barefoot doctors who went out into the community to work with the people to keep them well and to get them well. Gosh, I have a whole book of what our programs were.

DC: Right. [laughs]

NM: A legal program, where we helped folks who needed attorneys, to find attorneys, pro bono or at lower rates, and we actually had people in the Party who essentially were paralegals. They helped prepare for the upcoming cases and whatnot. We had free educational programs. We had the school, which we were so proud of, in Oakland. But before you went to school, you went to the nursery, and I'm sure that Ericka will talk a lot about that. But as soon as mom was well enough after having the

baby, and strong enough, well, now the baby would go to the nursery. Folks were assigned to work there. They were like, assigned there 24-hour on duty for the nursery, and the shifts changed week to week, or however they had it set up, and the same with the school. When you were two and a half or so, you were potty trained, and you went to the school and you started your formal education. You go to school in the daytime, and at night you go to the dormitory, and folks were assigned to be there. And so, that really freed us up to continue to work these long, crazy hours we were working.

DC: And this was how your kids came up?

NM: Yes. Picked up on Monday morning with their little bags. The van would pick them up, and they'd be at school all week, and they'd drop them off on Friday night with their little dirty clothes. And you'd clean them all off, and you'd put them back on the van on Monday. I mean, you could go and see them during the week if you had time to drop in, but that's--. And they were ecstatic. They were in heaven. They were treated like little queens and kings, so it was fine with them. [Laughs] Some of my comrades now would tell me how angry their children were--my kids were, especially my oldest boy--when we left. They were really upset that we left and they had to leave the school. So, it was like their little haven. [laughter] And so advanced that when they came out, I was able to put them ahead of--a grade ahead of--where the schools wanted to put them. I brought them to Los Angeles, and they wanted to put them in school according to their ages, and I said, "No. They're going to be bored in there." So, I took them to San Diego and they put them in the grades that I asked them to put them in, and they have all done well.

DC: The clinic here, what was the name of the clinic?

NM: It was the Alprentice Bunchy Carter People's Free Clinic.

DC: And can you tell us who Bunchy Carter was, and the naming of the clinic?

NM: Bunchy Carter is the person who--. He and John Huggins, they started the Los Angeles chapter. So, in his honor, and commemorating him, we named the clinic after him. And I had the opportunity to go to a luncheon that was held for his mother about two months ago, and she was like a [35:00] Freedom Fighter from way back, so I could see where he got his desire and understanding about equal justice for folks that were disenfranchised and had so many unmet needs. His mother just--. She worked in programs in starting and running civil rights-type, issues-based programs here in Los Angeles for a long time.

DC: A long time, yeah. Yeah. Did you ever meet him or did you, was it--?

NM: I was able to meet him one time at a rally, because that was when I was just kind of coming around a little bit. My husband was trying to get me to formally join and I wouldn't, but I met him at a rally once and just very impressed by the way that he carried himself and the way that he commanded the other guys to do things. Not commanded in a "you do this" kind of thing, but the way that he--the leadership that I saw shining out through him, just that one time that I met him. I was really impressed with that. And then later on, learning more about him and reading his poetry and whatnot, you get to get a better sense of who the man really was.

DC: What were some of the challenges? I mean, we know the circumstances of his death and different ways in which that story has been told, I suppose. What where some of the challenges in terms of relations with other organizations at that time?

NM: Well, there was the, probably mainly the US Organization, Ron Karenga's group. And my ex-husband, Albert Armour, was at UCLA when that--he was going to school there when--that occurred. So, hearing firsthand from him, and one of my best friends from high school was in the Party and was there at UCLA when that happened. It just puts a sour taste in your mouth and in your heart. It's not right towards that group of folks.

DC: Right. Just for the record, could I ask you to describe what happened?

NM: My understanding is that, and Ericka can give you a much better account of it because she was--her husband was--there, was killed with Bunchy. There was some difference in ideology about how things should be run in terms of the Black Student Union and what was happening with the black students on campus and whatnot. And the Panthers, our ideology was based on what had happened in some other revolutions. We drew from, some from the Russian, some from the Chinese, and some from what happened in Cuba, and tried to--and things that happened in South America and islands--and tried to put it together to make it work for what we have here. The dialectical materialism would--. You know the rhetoric. And the US Organization, they were very Afrocentric, referring everything back to Africa, and that's not something that we did at that time. So, just rifts occurred. Even when I was pregnant with my daughter and I was out selling papers one day, I was attacked by people from the US Organization. I mean, I just happened to grow up with six brothers and they couldn't handle me, so. [Laughs] We were on the street corner, so they weren't going to try to do too much but they did try to attack me and I was able to fend them off.

DC: And did those kinds of things happen a lot?

NM: Those kinds of things happened. They would catch one or two people by themselves and people would beat them up, and yeah, that kind of stuff happened, here in San Diego where US and the Panthers were there too, because I don't think that they were around in all the cities where we had chapters. But I mean, and over time you--. I considered myself to be someone who has practiced forgiveness in her heart, and whatnot. That one with Karenga is just really hard because he did some other things after that. He even--. What did he have as his--? I don't know if it's his wife or some other people, other women from the US Organization that he was holding like captive, and I mean just, and he never fessed up to what he did. I mean, and he did, and he was convicted, and from what I recall he was convicted. And he's still a big-time professor down in San Diego and running around the country espousing his views and whatnot, and I just, I can't abide. [40:00] I don't have hatred. I don't have enough room in my heart to be hating anybody, but he's somebody that I don't ever have to be in his presence and I'm just fine with that.

DC: So, gunfire actually erupted that day, you said--.

NM: Oh, yeah. Yeah. It came to a head because I guess these meetings were going on, and you know, harsh words and whatnot happened. And from what we believe, what I believe, and a lot of other people believe--other people probably have more proof than I do--that Karenga gave the order for those guys to shoot Bunchy and John there, and operating in collaboration with the police probably, but that's another whole issue that I don't feel like he's really cleared himself of.

DC: And was it not long after that that the offices got raided? Was that--? Or is that quite a bit later?

NM: That was early on in the year, and I can remember the offices were raided in December, but that occurred earlier in the year. I'm thinking like February, in the winter, if I remember correctly. Yeah. And that was before I was actually in the Party because I didn't come along until late [19]69, and so he was killed before I came into the Party. Well, they were killed; Bunchy and John. Yeah.

DC: So, do you remember how people reacted to their deaths?

NM: Like I said, I was not in the Party.

DC: You were not in yet. Okay.

NM: Yeah, but what happened then, it just--the carryover afterwards--it just kind of kept on. The sentiments between the Panthers and the US Organization got even worse. And at that time, you'd go out and you would be collecting donations or selling papers, and there were special corners where you would have more foot traffic and you would probably get, have more sales and whatnot. On one corner, would be Black Panthers and the other corner would be the US Organization, and one corner would be the Nation of Islam, and another corner would be the Holy Ghost Christian. [laughs]

DC: Where were the [inaudible]? [laughter]

NM: They were at the airport mostly. [laughter] Yeah, so I mean, it was --.

DC: Just the street corners.

NM: Yeah. It was the time. I mean, it was very interesting period of time in the sixties and seventies just watching all the different ideas that people had about how we should be in this country.

DC: Now we didn't have the gang situation that we have now, obviously, in LA, but the Slausons were around.

NM: We had gangs before the Party, and like I said, the community came into the Party. And once you came into the Party, you weren't gang members anymore. We had the Slausons, the Pueblos. We had the Body Snatchers. We had the Roman Twenties. We had a lot of gangs, but the Party attracted a lot of those folks because, I mean, they were out there. They had the misplaced aggression. They were mad and upset. They knew something wasn't right, but they were taking it out on the wrong folks, and once they got a little bit of consciousness under their belt, then they saw, "There's another way for me to channel my energies." And no, we didn't have this gang kind of situation here in LA until the Party left, and then the powers that—be brought the--dumped all the crack here, and the gangs, and it then spiraled.

DC: Were there any times when, because I know this from some of the chapters where you are bringing in people from the streets who have legitimate reasons to be angry, and a lot of--and you're trying to be disciplined, right, but things spill out. Was there any difficulties? [laughs]

NM: Yeah, you know. Sometimes people would explode, but I mean, and you'd try to handle it diplomatically. And we all know that we all came with a whole bunch of different types of baggage, and you just try to deal with it case by case, or you know so-and-so is liable to go off at any time, so don't go talking crazy around him, especially today because such-and-such happened. [laughs] And over time, hopefully some of those temperaments change. And some of them, they didn't, and they left or they were asked to leave, or kicked out, or whatever.

DC: And did that happen?

NM: Yeah. People got kicked out. People got suspended. People left on their own.

DC: So, you mentioned earlier but you--. So, you started [45:00] with the clinic here and then you got reassigned up north, right?

NM: Yes. Well actually, here I was working with the finan--. I mentioned that a few of the women actually went up north every year, every week, to work on the newspaper. Well, the person who was in charge of the finances here knew that I was pretty good with math, and so she became my mentor. She trained me how to handle the finances as well when she was gone. So, I was doing the clinic but I was also doing the finances. So, that's what I was doing here, both of those. And then, when there was a call for all of the chapters to move up north to work in the political campaigns that we were starting, I was assigned to the George Jackson Free Clinic in Berkeley and became the director there.

DC: Did you go with the whole family? Is that when the kids were in school?

NM: Well, actually, my two-year-old was already there. He went when he was about two and a half, or maybe close to three. He was already up at the school, and my daughter went with me, because she was only a few months old when we moved. So yeah, when I went there, I became in charge of that clinic and it was operated pretty much the same way. We had a lot of folks that I collaborated with there though, because Berkeley's just a heart of collaboration, and unity, and getting things done. We had the Berkeley Free Clinic. We had the Women's Health Collective. Haight-Ashbury Free Clinics sent folks over to teach us about substance abuse, so that was my first training in drug abuse. Is that where your dad grew up? [laughs]

DC: My dad and his friends know the Haight-Ashbury Clinic. We lived right around the corner.

NM: Oh, okay. Yeah, so we got a lot of help from them, and there was an organization called Community Services United, which was a coalition of nonprofits who received funding from Berkeley City, and we met monthly to--mainly to let each other know what we were doing so that we could avoid duplication of services, so that if you wanted to go and ask for money, you wouldn't ask for money that the City was already funding something for. And so, that, yeah, there were a lot of people that we worked with, and we worked with UC Berkeley [which] had a group called the Black Health Science Caucus. These were pre-med students who came and volunteered their time and worked in the labs, and worked in the clinic, and taught us how to do different lab work. Here in Los Angeles, but more so in Berkeley, I and some of the other clinic workers, we were taught a lot about medicine.

I tell folks we were probably practicing medicine without a license, but we had physicians there who were overseeing what we were doing. We worked with a lot of Vietnam vets who were corps men as well. So, they had a lot of on-the-ground skills about how do you work with folks in emergent-type situations and whatnot. So, we learned how to draw blood. We learned how to do stitches. We worked on frankfurters. We worked on wieners [laughter] to do stitching because the skin is real sensitive and it's like real people's skin, so. We did women's exams. We did vaginal exams and I have a very personal experience with that, that we would practice on each other, and then we would send our labs out. So, mine came back positive for cervical cancer, or something irregular. So, I said, "No," so we did it again and sent it out again. It came back again.

So, I went to my gynecologist and sure enough, I had to have surgery. But that's how I found out that I had cervical cancer, and I forget that I'm a cancer survivor these days because I caught it so early, I just never--.

DC: Caught it so early.

NM: Never think in terms of being a survivor, but I am, and that's how I found out.

DC: Through the clinic. That's amazing.

NM: Yeah! But the Merck Manual, I mean it just tells you about all the different diseases and illness and whatnot. We just read the stuff like it was a novel or something. We just collected all of this information.

DC: Was *Our Bodies, Ourselves* out?

NM: Oh, hey. I got one on the shelf still! [Laughter] I've given it to all my girls, my daughters, my granddaughters. Yes, the Women's Health Collective book, yeah. And we tried to teach people to take care of themselves as best they could. Don't get sick, and then you don't have to worry about getting well. As much as you can, I mean, some of it's hereditary and you just have to watch out for those types of things to stay ahead of diabetes, and watching your sugar, watching your weight, and that kind of stuff, exercising. So, we were trying to do [50:00] all that.

DC: Was that part of the Party platform too, to maintain personal health and rigor?

NM: Mm-hmm. Let's see. What was it? One of our, what I used to tell people, "Woe to those who treat their bodies as though they don't belong to themselves." It was something from Mao or something [laughs] but we changed it around a little bit.

But, yeah. Folks needed to be well. They needed to be well, and we had a communicable disease control program, too. We had an outbreak of shigella at one of the sites, and we worked with the pediatricians. We had pediatricians from Children's Hospital who came and ran the pediatric clinic for us. Some of the residents came and did that, and we were taught that you need to separate them from other people until they're asymptomatic, and then they can go back. Because if everybody's living communal, if one person gets something, then it spreads like wildfire. Same thing with chicken pox. Two or three kids in one facility, you know everybody was going to get chicken pox. Everybody, we'd just confine there until--. [laughs]

DC: Bring in the ones that hadn't had it yet and--.

NM: Yeah, let the kids go ahead. Let them get it. [laughter] And then, during the time of the sixties, free love, free speech, free love, flower children, I think we probably treated more STIs, STDs at the clinic than we treated a lot of--especially at Berkeley--than we treated other things, but we had control in the clinic. I liked that. We were bringing in folks from all over the country, so as soon as you got to town, you had to come and get your medical screening, and you got screened for gonorrhea, syphilis, chlamydia, whatever, did you have a yeast infection. You got treated if you had something that someone else could catch by you having sex with them. You were put on a list and you were not to have--that list was published--and you were not to have sex with anyone that was on that list.

DC: This was in the Party?

NM: There wasn't no HIPAA laws in the Party! [laughter] But I mean, that's how you controlled, because it was rampant. I mean, in Berkeley there was, in the Bay

Area, there was just a lot of STDs at that time because everybody was "free love." [laughs]

DC: That's wild.

NM: What a time.

DC: That's wild. I never heard that before. So, we are in Berkeley.

NM: Yes.

DC: So how long were you all up at, were you up there?

NM: I was in the Bay Area from [19]72 to [19]77 and I ran the clinic from [19]72 until about [19]74 or so, and that was, by the time that Huey left the Party, then Bobby left, and then Elaine became the person in charge, and she knew that I had the experience. The person who handled the finances here was then handling the finances there, and she knew that I had the experience from Los Angeles, so she asked me, "Would I come and become the Minister of Finance?" So, I left the clinic and started handling the headquarters' finances for the Party.

DC: Were you there when Elaine was made president, that evening or day when she was announced as the head of the Black Panther Party?

NM: I probably was. Actually, I was just recovering from surgery so I may not have been. I was there in the area, but I may not have been at the particular event. Like I said, I had a relapse and so she asked me while I was recovering, "Would I take over the finances?" Because that's when the big shift in personnel, I guess you'd call it now--. [laughs] And so I told her, "Yeah." So, that was like in late [19]74, I started handling the finances.

DC: So, you worked out of headquarters in Oakland?

NM: In my home.

DC: Oh, at your home.

NM: Yeah, and Oakland headquarters, but yeah, I did a lot of the work from where I lived as well.

DC: So, can you tell me what that was like, especially that transition?

NM: Yeah. Well, like I said, I was used to handling the finances here, so it was just on a bigger scale there. I had to make sure that the funds were accounted for when folks came in from getting donations, selling papers, if people gave us donations; to make sure that all the properties, the notes and the rents were paid, utilities; and people had money for food, and they had the clothing if they didn't have other kinds of income. But everyone who had some kind of income, this was one of the edicts that Elaine came up with. Everyone that had some kind of income paid a tithe. Whatever you got, ten percent went into the pot for the various survival programs and to maintain the facilities where you lived and whatnot. So, I was responsible for making sure that the money got collected and [55:00] distributed, bills paid properly.

Later, we were able to incorporate the school and get grants, so then I had to learn to be an accountant and do bookkeeping officially. Before, I was just keeping things in ledgers, but I had to learn to actually do the accounting records and keep those together, and bring them up to the point of [inaudible] balance and then give them to the CPA to do the 990 tax returns. And so, that was my introduction into the real nonprofit world, and so I did that from [19]74 until [19]77 and since then, I've been doing health and finance. [laughs]

DC: So, did you--? A couple of questions. One is, I'm just curious. So, you were married. Was it difficult to maintain a relationship during this time?

NM: Yes. When I moved to Oakland, my husband was still stationed in Los Angeles, and I was in Oakland for probably a couple of years. And yeah, it was just strained. It was strained and we never really got back together until we both left the Party. So, we went our separate ways, and the kids, I'd have the kids one weekend, and then he'd have them because he did eventually move there. But he became stricken with multiple sclerosis, and was--. What he could do was limited. He actually became my assistant in the finance area because he couldn't do a lot of fieldwork. So, we worked there very closely up there, even when we weren't living as husband and wife. We made friends over the years. Yeah. It was difficult. There were a number of folks that came in a couple, and I don't know if any of them left that way, but that's not to say, with the high degree of divorce in our community, that it wouldn't have happened anyway. [laughs]

DC: Right. [laughter] We'll talk about that later. So, can you tell me the story of leaving the Party? [laughs]

NM: Yes, I will. Huey came back from Cuba, and things were just starting to be so different because when Elaine took over, we started doing more, would you say mainstream-type funding. We even had a law enforcement grant to run some of the services that--. We had the school nonprofit, then we had a nonprofit that was like a social service wing that worked with all these other programs. The clinic fell under that. The seniors program fell under that. Clothing, food, other programs outside of education fell under that social service wing. So, then we were used to--. We were getting into

operating more legitimately as far as other people were concerned, but it also helped to bring in monies that made our program sustainable.

And when Huey came back, things just changed. He had some different ideas, and he--. I don't know. He may have just been so brilliant that it was just, you know a lot of brilliant people, they just kind of--especially those that are so forward-thinking, "This is my idea"--that he was so forward-thinking, and in a way could kind of see ahead. That if we kept going like this, this is where we would be, and it had to be that kind of visionary. That can put a lot of strain on a person, especially when you're trying to get other folks to see what you see, and we're too dumb. [laughter] We're not that intelligent. The general person can't understand it like that, and what that does to a psyche and a mentality of the mental health of a person. So, he kind of started acting differently, and so people started leaving. The women started leaving.

And then, when he came back, he had this charge that he left because of in the first place that he was supposed to--shot a prostitute, I believe--and so the witnesses, there was one witness. Finally, they publish her address and whatnot. So, he sent somebody out to kill this person. I'm putting all this stuff together in my head, so he's not around to say that he didn't do it, but [1:00:00] this is me, okay? But when he got there, when they got there, the person, they went to the wrong house. The lady's house they went to had a gun, when they were trying to get in, and she started shooting through the door. So, she shot some of the guys that came to get the witness, and one of the guys died on the spot.

Now, see, we all live communally. So, the guy that died had the same address on his license as where I was living. So, once they get his prints, then they get the search

warrants and whatnot, then they come and they come to not search, but they come to bust in my house, and then they go search everything. And there were guns around almost all the houses. They belonged to the Party. They wasn't our houses, most of them. And most of them were arsenals. Most of them had some stuff, but they were only parts. I think at that time, they felt that if the barrel was here, and the trigger housing was here, and this was someplace else, that they couldn't put any kind of charges on you. Well, that wasn't true. So, when they went up to this closet that my kids played hide and seek in, I didn't know what it was. They were just little suitcases, valise cases in there. They came and they just started carting out all kinds of stuff. I'm like, "Oh, my goodness. I'm going to jail. [Laughs] I'm going to jail."

But it was an eye-opening time. It really was. That he would order something like that to save himself. Why not just stay in Cuba? And so, that was, things just started spiraling after that, and then people started leaving more and I went to jail and then I got kicked out. [Laughs] Because now, Huey had to fight his case, so why spend the resources to fight my case if he's going to need the resources to fight his case? So, I was on my own.

DC: They kicked you out of the Party?

NM: Yeah, yeah, with what I had on my back. So, I left and I fought my case for a year, and I ended up getting sentenced to two years in California State Prison, which I did about twelve or thirteen months, and then I went to work furlough. And while in work furlough, there was this Jewish woman there that worked with parolees. While I was in prison, that was an interesting experience too. I had never, I didn't even have traffic tickets on my record, you know? [laughs] So I went, "Do not pass go. Do not

collect two hundred dollars. Go directly." [laughs] So it was at the time when it was not, "use a gun, go to jail," but "have a gun, go to jail." You know how the wind shifted back and forth? And it was right during that time, "have a gun, go to jail." They couldn't--. My fingerprints weren't on anything. And so there were a couple of people in the jury, we got a chance to poll them afterwards, and a couple of them said that they really didn't believe that I had any control over it, but that's what it would take for you to be guilty: to have knowledge, possession, and control. So, it was my house, the utilities were in my name. They said I had control of it. But, anyway.

DC: So where were you incarcerated?

NM: Here in Frontera California Institute for Women. But when I went there, I stayed in the reception center for three months. Normally, they transition you in, do your physical, psych, and you're out in two or three weeks. Well, they were watching me, making sure that I wasn't going to incite a riot or something, or--.

DC: Foment revolution right there.

NM: Yes! Yes. They should've known I was so far of it. That point in my life was like, that was the last thing I was thinking about. And so, when they finally moved me to the main campus, they put me in a cell by myself because they didn't want me in--. And that was right fine with me because there were some folks up there that you wouldn't want to sail with. [laughs] I mean, because they were always doing things. They would be going to jail in jail for their activities in there. Nothing political. Brewing hooch and doing whatever other kinds of things that get you locked up while you're already locked up. [laughs]

DC: So, did word circulate that you were a Black Panther?

NM: Mm-hmm.

DC: And what kind of response did that get from others inside?

NM: I got a lot of respect from everybody. The administration were giving me a hard time initially, but eventually I became secretary for the Women's Advisory Council, and I had a pass. I could go in and out of administration. I had a typewriter in my room. I went [1:05:00] and enrolled in a college class. I got my AA degree while I was there. I transferred my credits from Berkeley and Cal State LA and got an AA, and took a couple other classes. But when I got out at work-study, this woman sent me on interviews and I had four interviews, and I was offered jobs by three people. And so, I went back to school, got my bachelor's in healthcare administration, and kept working and went back. Stayed in school and got a master's in health administration, mostly in administrating substance abuse programs. And then at the age of 55, I went back to school and got a marriage and family therapy degree, a master's. [Laughs] So you know, I just kept moving and didn't look back. It was something, being in the Party. I wouldn't have the skills to do the things that I've done since if I hadn't been there. That was a just really unfortunate that happened and that I had to deal with, and be away from my family for that amount of time, but it's over and you chalk it up to experience and just keep moving forward.

DC: You were saying--.

NM: Yeah. I didn't know that I'd ever put that on film.

DC: [laughs] Yeah.

NM: So.

DC: I wanted to ask about the other nonprofits, especially SHIELDS for Families, but I don't know if that was first in the progression.

NM: No. Well, I work with some other nonprofits here in Los Angeles, but in, I guess [19]90, I was working for the County Alcohol and Drug Program. I stayed with them for about a year and a half. I waited too long to become a government employee. [Laughs] I couldn't go through just pretending to work. Because I mean, I've talked about my work ethic. I couldn't come into work and push a paper from this side of the desk to the other side for the evening, tomorrow come in and move it over here, and act like I'm doing something. So, my supervisor and I, we'd be writing grants. We'd be there late at night. We'd come in on weekends and we had over twenty million dollars of funding to come in and support substance abuse programs, and specifically women's programs for women who had substance abuse problems and their children were born prenatally exposed to drugs. We were there when Diane Watson introduced a bill into the state legislature asking to have funds set aside for the four county hospitals in Los Angeles to address that issue. Because at King Hospital, over twelve hundred children a year were being born prenatally exposed to drugs, primarily crack.

DC: Mm hmm.

NM: So, the bill passed, became law, so the doctor who was a neonatologist at King called us at the county. She had worked with us on the proposal and said, "You know, I know how to treat the children, but I don't know how to run a drug abuse program. You guys are going to have to come out here and run it." So, my boss and I left the county, came out and started running the program. Initially, it was under the auspices of Drew Medical School, but after about a year or so, we formed our own 501(c)

and started getting our monies directly. We started with a grant of about a half a million dollars a year, fourteen employees, and after twenty-four years, when I retired, we had three hundred and fifty employees and about twenty-five million dollars in funding.

DC: Can you tell us about the first--?

NM: Twenty-eight or twenty-nine programs. [Laughs]

DC: Can you tell us about the "first building," in quotes? [Laughter]

NM: The first building? We were given an old trailer. It was set on the land of Drew Medical School, but the trailer belonged to Martin Luther King Hospital, County Hospital in South Central that was built right after the riots as a direct result of that. But the building was so old and dilapidated, it should have been condemned. It had been sitting empty for a long time and you just had to watch where you stepped. Certain places, your foot might go through to the bottom [laughs] but we pieced it together and made it work. So, we ran our program out of there for a while and were able to get funding from the Department of Health Services to help us renovate that trailer and to build us another one so that we could expand. So, we just started with the one program for women who had drug abuse problems who had children zero to five, and they came into the program when they were pregnant or right after they had a baby that was tested positive [1:10:00] for drugs. Then, we'd work with them on the substance abuse issues.

Then, we started seeing that they were coming in close to homeless or homeless. So, we went out and found some apartments, got some money from HUD, put together some packaging, and bought two eighteen-unit apartment complexes that we could house some of the women in, and they just kept coming in homeless. And so, we found another project in Compton, eighty-six unit. So, we bought that so that we could house more, and

more of them were coming in with mental health issues, so we got a psychiatrist to come and work with us. So, we started looking at the behavioral health, the other behavioral health concerns. We were able to get funding from the Department of Mental Health to help with that, got more funding from the Department of Substance Abuse where we used to work, and they were one of our main funders at the time and still are. Started doing vocational services because most of the women maybe had a four to six grade education or reading level.

DC: So, all these are so related.

NM: They're similar programs that we had in the Party.

DC: So, housing, education, yeah.

NM: I mean, so the thread--. And what I did at SHIELDS is I was the health officer for the longest--. We had a major AIDS grant and I was the primary person working on that. So, as well as the financial piece, I became the chief operating officer, so I had some programmatic responsibilities from time to time. But yes, the programs that were and still are run out of SHIELDS, they kind of mirror the kind of work that I did when I was in the Party. So, I can't ever regret what I did because it set the stage and helped me to build the skills to do what I needed to do when I came back here.

DC: And you worked through all these major epidemics. I mean, drug epidemic, AIDS, crack, gang violence.

NM: Yeah. And SHIELDS was very instrumental because it's in Watts. We started right there on 120th and Compton. It now has probably seventeen, eighteen sites, and we're in about twenty schools doing mental health services as well. So, we're all over the South Central Lynwood-Watts-Willowbrook area, and even down, not far from

here we have a resource center. Yeah, I watched--I've seen a lot of things come and go and I've seen so much cyclical stuff happening. Now, with healthcare reform, which I'm really happy passed, we're having some unexpected consequences as a result of it. There's still a lot of bugs to be worked out, but we went from--. We're now going back to what they call a "medical model" where they want substance abuse services to be treated in the medical facility, and we fought to change that back in the eighties and nineties and were able to have substance abuse looked at differently because there are some aspects that are a lot different. That's not to say that it couldn't be treated, and it's good to have integrative care. It's just we're really concerned that they're now going to be excluding the people that have done the treatment services for so long and upping the requirements for them to have degrees. And a lot of these folks are recovering people who have, they've learned certain sets of skills and they--. We just don't know what's going to happen with that now.

DC: Is that difficult when you see things cycle back?

NM: Oh, it is. I think about "Mother May I?" You know, you take two baby steps forwards and ten giant steps backwards and you think, "You know, I did all this. I stayed up all those long hours for what?" Sometimes you wonder, "How could we have let it roll back like this again?" But I think we'll work out that medical piece, as long as Trump doesn't get elected. We'll be able to [laughs] work through some of those things. But I've retired from SHIELDS, but I was asked to become part of community faculty at Drew Medical School, which is a--.

DC: Full circle again, yeah.

NM: It's a different type of tract of instructors. There are people like me who have been working in the community with nonprofits, running nonprofits for years and years, and what we are commissioned to do is to work with the medical students, nursing students, MPH students, to help them understand the community better, help them to understand better the social determinants of health.

DC: What a phenomenal program.

NM: Yes.

DC: Are there others in the country doing this or this--?

NM: No, no. We're the only one. [1:15:00] So, and because we think it's so important, that they need to learn those skills. It's so unfair to send the students out into the community to work in, especially ones that aren't from this community. They don't know. They don't know that just because you give this person a prescription, doesn't mean they're going to take it. First of all, it doesn't even mean that they're going to buy it because they may not have the money. They may not trust you because they keep thinking about the research and all that kind of stuff that's happened with people of color over the years. So, they don't trust the medical system or they don't--they can't--read what you've just written and given to them. It's just all kinds of dynamics, and then you go home with the family dynamics, and they say, "Oh, no. You don't take that. Here, you take these herbs and mix it with this bark and do that. You don't take that medicine." So, it's all these other social determinants of health that the students have to be trained on and even the existing, the current professors, it's a hard thing because a lot of the old guys, they're not trying to change what they're thinking. So, when you go and try to teach the students, then they get in the classroom and then they tell them what they've

always told them, and I keep saying we've got to think of a different way to do something because obviously, what we're doing is not working because my people are still dying from illness. Something's not working somewhere, so we need to [laughs] tweak this a little bit.

DC: But to turn to those who have actually been working in the trenches, that makes so much sense.

NM: Yeah, yeah. So, it's been interesting and I've been able to--. Drew falls under the auspices of UCLA, so I work with some doctors and nurses there, especially in the research department, and I've been working on some of the committees to look at diversity in the medical education curriculum, and how do we train the physicians and how do we train the existing instructors? How do we train the students about some of these concepts that we think that they need to know about working in our communities?

DC: Amazing. So, that's what you're doing now.

NM: Yeah, I do that a little bit, yes. I'm also on some advisory boards for diabetes and stroke prevention and things like that, but more health-related things now.

DC: And when I heard you'd retired, I didn't think that that would last long.

NM: How do you retire from a passion? I keep trying. I learned to say "no" more. I haven't learned to say "no" all the time yet, but I'm going to get there one day. [laughs]

DC: Coming back to the Panthers for a moment, what are your thoughts about how the Panthers are remembered or thought of? And this is again, like working with kids and what people now. I'm curious what your thoughts are on that.

NM: Things that I think that I'd like to see them remembered for?

DC: Yeah. I'm interested in what you think, you know, maybe the Panthers are misremembered or misrepresented, or what you would like kids to know, especially.

NM: Okay. Well, the whole piece about the guns and self-defense, I mean that was important because if you're dead, all the rest of this doesn't count. There's not even no need to look at anything else. So, we have to make sure that we're safe first, but that wasn't the hype. That wasn't the ultimate of what the Party was about. We had a plethora of survival programs, and we called it "survival pending revolution" because we knew it would be a long, protracted struggle before we got to see any of the changes made that we knew needed to occur in order for us, our people, to start living a better life. And when I say "our people," I'm talking about all poor and oppressed people in this country and the world because the United States, they have their tentacles all over the place. But I'd like them to know that the Party was interested in children, and in adults, in every facet of our lives to make sure that we had the best life possible. And we did what we could to make that happen for as long as we could do it.

DC: Is there anything that I didn't ask that I should have asked?

NM: I don't think so. [Laughter] I don't think so. It's just my children, you know, it's interesting that children have a different take on things. My daughter, she's right out there. She's [1:20:00] an educator, but she's really for making sure that the children of color get what they need, and runs into a lot of obstacles in the educational systems because of that. But what she remembers most about the Party was the camaraderie, and she still has friends that she still collaborates with. And when she left, she was only about, I think maybe she was six or seven years old.

DC: Right. But she grew up in it, yeah.

NM: Yeah. And she's still in touch with those people and those are like lifelong friends, friends forever. [laughs]

DC: Right, right.

NM: But yeah, I'd just like young people to know that. And I'd like for them not to make some of the mistakes that we made, to be open to hear our stories, to see where we stepped in the ditch so that they don't have to step in that same ditch. They can move around it and go higher and farther than we did.

DC: Good. I did think of one thing else I wanted to ask you. We talked a little bit before we started the camera about working with other likeminded organizations, especially the Brown Berets. Could you talk a little bit about what those kinds of coalition building forces were?

NM: Yeah. I can remember working in some of their rallies and just coalescing with them in activities and events that they were having, and having similar ideologies. And I can remember some of our Party members going out and working with Cesar Chavez and the farmworkers, and just forming coalitions with who was ever open to talk about, "Let's make some changes in this country because we know if we can make them here, hopefully that'll be able to extend out through the rest of the world where people are oppressed like they are here." So, like I said, I was mostly focused on the health piece. I didn't get a chance to be out more, and at that time, more people in the top leadership were doing that. I didn't really become in the party's executive committees until I became the finance minister at Oakland. So, a lot had happened before I got to that point.

DC: Yeah. Good. I just wanted to ask about that.

NM: Yeah. Yeah, but there was a lot of coalescing going on with the Gray Panthers and with the seniors, and in the universities, and yeah.

DC: And the anti-war movement, and the student--.

NM: Oh, yeah. The women's movement. Yes, yes. All of those.

DC: Fellas, any questions?

Guha Shankar: No. [Inaudible] about that coconut water. [laughter]

NM: Help yourself.

GS: Well, I guess I did have one question. You know, you mentioned talking to young people today. What you could tell them that might demystify some of the other sort of unfortunate and pernicious mythologies about the Panthers? But in your own mind, looking back on forty years ago when you walked in that door of the Panther Party, did you ever see that trajectory taking you to where it was now?

NM: I did not. I did not see myself as a visionary. I guess I still don't. Maybe in some regards, I might be, but I was more a day-to-day grinder. Get the work done. Make sure the books are okay. Make sure the health is okay. I guess maybe, is it the left side of my brain is just totally taxed and I haven't really exercised the right very much? I'm trying to do more of that now and stepping out and thinking about different things that might occur, but I never felt like I really had the time to allow myself to let my mind go there. It was like, "Okay, here I am today," and then you go three or four years and you look back and you say, "My goodness. How did I get here? I didn't expect to be at this point." And a lot of times, you didn't even know you were going to be alive the next year. So, that kept a lot of us, I think, from thinking ahead like that. To be thinking that I would come out of the Party, especially after being in prison, and being able to keep

moving ahead and moving up, and still being able to do the same types of work on a broader scale as I came back to this community is just not something that ever even crossed my mind. But I'm glad that I had that experience and skills to be able to come and do that.

DC: Well, we're grateful to you for the work that you've done.

NM: Well, thank you. Thank you.

DC: And for sharing your story today.

NM: Thank you for inviting me. Okay?

DC: Absolutely. Absolutely. Thank you.

NM: Okay. [1:25:00] [Laughter]

F1: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

END OF RECORDING

END OF INTERVIEW

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