

Civil Rights History Project
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Interviewee: Roberta Alexander

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Interviewer: David Cline

Videographer: John Bishop

Length: approximately 2 hours, 10 minutes

START OF RECORDING

DAVID CLINE: Two. Are you ready? Okay. Good morning. It is June 29th, 2016. This is David Cline of the History Department at Virginia Tech and also working with the Southern Oral History Program at UNC in Chapel Hill. This morning we are recording for the Civil Rights History Project, and we're in San Diego, California. This project is sponsored by the Library of Congress and also the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. Behind the camera today we have John Bishop of Media Generation and UCLA. We're also joined behind the camera by Guha Shankar of the Library of Congress and Jessica Jollet of Pillars of the Community, which is a local organization we'll hear a little bit more about, here in San Diego. So we are incredibly honored to be able to be able to spend

some time this morning with Roberta Alexander. This is the one time I'll coach you at all in our entire conversation, but if you could introduce yourself with a full sentence, "I am" or "My name is ..." and your name and where and when you were born and then we'll talk.

ROBERTA ALEXANDER: I'm Roberta Alexander, and I was born in December nineteen forty six, in Berkeley, California.

DC: Great, so Roberta, I'd love to start with you telling us a little bit about your family background and how that may have influenced you as you grew up.

RA: My family background definitely influenced me and my brother and sister very, very much. My great – no, not my great grandfather -- my grandfather was a slave, and that seems hard to imagine if you try to do the math, but he was born in 1842, and he died in 1942. And...the article that was written about him in a Omaha newspaper said, wrote about his having been a slave, and my father had known he had been a slave, and also wrote about him having participated in the Pony Express.

My father grew up on the, between the Omaha Indian Reservation and Sioux City, Iowa. So most of his life, he -- his younger life, he identified as not a member of the tribe, because he knew he wasn't a member of a tribe, but all of his friends were kids from the reservation or the kids in Sioux City, Iowa, who were like the children of packing house workers, because his mother would go there to work in the packing houses at that time.

DC: How did he come to be associated with the reservation?

RA: Because of his father. His father actually spoke- my grandfather spoke Winnebago, Omaha and Sioux and according to my dad, Sioux and Omaha are closely related languages and Winnebago is more different. And according to family lore is he got this job on the Pony Express, which would not have lasted very long, because the Pony Express was only

in existence for about a year and a half. But, because he could speak the Indian languages and could go through some areas where other people couldn't go - and he did it on the condition that he would tell the white people nothing about what the Indians were doing.

DC: So they ended up living there?

RA: So yes, so they ended up living there, but it was mostly my grandmother who was home. My grandfather was... did lots of different things. He was an itinerant musician, actually, and he played the Jew's harp, and he travelled with a guy named Giles who played the twelve string guitar. He also was a bootlegger for a period of time. He also rustled cattle and sold cattle. So he was not home very often, but he did manage to have ten children! And my grandmother was a little Scot Irish lady who ended up on, living mostly on the reservation.

DC: Amazing family background. And so... and then your own father and his siblings?

RA: So my father was born in nineteen fourteen. So if you do the math his father was pretty old when he was born. My father had nine siblings, five girls and five boys [total] and three of the girls died of different things. One of the flu - the flu pandemic, another of tuberculosis and the third one in a fire, when they were home because they were often home alone [05:00] when she was working in the packing houses in Sioux City, Iowa, and I think she was ironing or something and there was a fire. So she died in that.

DC: And did he stay, your father, in that area?

RA: Well, that's an interesting question, because - no, in the end he came to California. But growing up, he... at one point we did an oral history with my dad, and at one point he said, "home, what was home? We were always staying with different people." So if you think about it his mother also died fairly early because she had tuberculosis. She died when

he was fifteen, but growing up, he was sometimes in Sioux City, Iowa, with his mother. He was sometimes on the reservation, with his mother. At other times, he was with his brother, Earl Alexander, and at another time he was in Flint, Michigan, with another brother, Mark Alexander, who worked in the automobile plants and was very religious, and my father sort of ran away from there, but he worked as a bellhop in Flint, Michigan. So, between the years of ten and fifteen, he must have lived in ten or fifteen different places and done just as many jobs. Um, there's one [job] in particular that I would like to tell you about: When he was about twelve, he decided to work -- to ride the rails and get work in the harvest in Minnesota. And when we had the reunion for our family on the reservation, we could see that the rail lines go right through the reservation. It would have been easy for him to hop on, so he did, twelve year old, twelve -- thirteen years old, he goes to Minnesota riding the rails. He gets off someplace, and he asks around, "Does anybody need any help doing the harvest?" So he finds this farmer and the guy says, "Yeah, I need some help and this is where I live and come out at six o'clock," or something like that, and I'll get you set up. And he gave my dad some money to buy some food, but he didn't give him any money to get out to the farm. The farm was about five miles out, or he didn't offer him a ride, I should say. And my dad gets out there and the farmer's doing chores. So my dad helps him do the chores with different animals, you know, the chickens and milking all the cows and everything. Then he goes into the bunkhouse and the farmer's wife brings him food. He always talks about food, because that was really important, because he said he was hungry ninety-nine percent of the time. So he says, "She brought me sandwiches and some milk, and I thought, 'Oh, this is cool,' and the farmer offered to pay me fifty cents a day, and that's terrific." So he notices that in the bunkhouse, there's a bunch of all grown men, and they're all white, of course. So anyway, one of them comes up to him and he

says, "So what are you doing here, coon?" or some kind of, you know, derogatory term really, my dad would say he didn't know what that meant, at that stage, and he says, "Well, I'm here to work the harvest." And the guy says, "Really, you're here to work the harvest?" "Yeah." "What's he paying you?" "Fifty cents a day." And the guy says, "Fifty cents a day and you're doing chores on top of it?!" He says, "Yeah," 'cause he's so proud of himself and the guy says to him - they're Scandinavian, by the way, my father said, they're Swedes, Norwegians and so forth - and the guy says, "You can't work for fifty cents a day, you're a worker, just like we are. You have to get a dollar a day, just like we do." Then my dad says, "Oh, oh, oh, this is terrific!" you know? But he's kind of nervous because the guy was calling him a "shine" and a "coon" and all of these things. So, next morning at breakfast... my dad explains his breakfast [was] sausage, biscuits, gravy, pancakes, bacon, eggs! And he says, in the middle of all of this feast, this guy stands up and tells the farmer, "We understand you're hiring this boy for fifty cents a day?" The farmer says, "That's right," and he [the farm hand] says, "No, you can't do that. Either you fire him or you give him a dollar a day," and then the guy [farmer] says, "Well, I don't know what to do," ...he [the farm hand] says "No, actually, you give him a dollar a day or we strike." [laughter]

My dad's going, "Strike! He's going to strike! I barely finished my breakfast!" because he knew what a strike was. He had lived in Sioux City, Iowa, with his mother in the late teens and in the early twenties, and there were strikes at the packing house, and he would describe all of the people who were on strike. And it was amazing, 'cause he listed [10:00] Mexicans, Syrians and Poles and Russians, as well as a few black folks and a few Indians. And at that time there was a real campaign of terror against the strikers. So, for example, my dad would never sit at night in front of a window that was not covered. Ku Klux Klan would march down

the street, and he felt they targeted his mom, but then he's, because she had these black kids, but then he said, "No, they targeted everybody, and they would throw rocks in the windows and terrorize folks."

So, back to the breakfast. He says, "Strike! We can't go on strike. I have barely finished my breakfast!" and the guy says, "Nope, we're going to do this." So, the owner says, "Well, okay, but he's got to carry his weight." So, my dad starts working with them and he's running as fast as he can. It was what they called "shocking grain," so the grain would be cut, and then they would pick it up and tie it up and pile it in piles [shocks]. So he was running. So, the guy says to him, "What you doing running like that? You're not supposed to be setting the pace! You see him [another worker]? You go as fast as *he* goes and you don't go any faster." He says, "OK, I'm just trying to prove--" [coughs] excuse me, "I'm just trying prove that I can keep up my -- keep up with everybody else." So the long story short, he works there for about a month, he makes about thirty dollars, and he's so happy, he's getting ready to go home. And the guy says, "Okay, so now you understand we're the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and you need to join [us], and so you can get a membership for ten cents a month, and here's your card." And so my dad gave the guy thirty cents and he had a little red card for being a member of the IWW and at that time, I guess he might have been the youngest one, and also he was a black kid up in the Midwest. And so it was a pretty, it was a pretty special designation.

DC: What an amazing story! [laughter in the background]

RA: So that's just one story!

DC: We've just started! I can't wait, can't wait for the rest of this. Fantastic! Yes, thank you!

RA: I think, I think that story is very important because he had -- although his mother was white, he was always around the Native Americans and the African Americans who were living in Sioux City, and he said he didn't know very many white people. And yet, he had this experience where these grown white guys, you know, stood up for his rights. He was a little scared, because they were known for, like, they would burn somebody's field down, you know. They were anarchists, I guess, in part. And, you know, he was frightened by the whole thing, and he was also confused, and he spoke up when they, he spoke up to the guy, he says, "You know, you guys are calling me shine and coon and all those -- that makes me feel kind of funny. I would prefer you just call me by my name," and that was kind of interesting, and most of them did, but they would forget and call him those, those names anyway. But, I think that was a very formative moment for him, as well as having experienced - as a child - his mother's work in the packing house and the strikes -- strikes there, which were very multiracial, multiethnic.

DC: Now, did he tell you these stories when you were growing up? Did you know these stories of the unions?

RA: I only knew some of these stories. I didn't *really* get any of the details until we did an oral history on him in nineteen seventy-five. I knew about the Indians because they showed up in Los Angeles once. A whole family, didn't tell anybody [they were coming] and they just arrived, and we took care of them. Half of them -- half my cousins had TB, and they were put in sanitariums. But we had other cousins who would stay at different, different brothers' houses in L.A. So I knew about that, and we would do stuff like the squaw dance and things like that. And we would eat fry bread when they came. Yeah.

DC: So, you, you had some awareness of this heritage.

RA: Oh, yes, I did have awareness. Yes, I did.

DC: So how about... you say, your father eventually ended up in California, but can you tell us a bit about your mother?

RA: Okay. Can I tell you a little more about my grandmother?

DC: Absolutely.

RA: So, my father only went to about the fifth grade, and my grandmother was a real fighter from -- and this is another part of making my dad who he was. For example, he loved school. He even talked about how he liked his teachers. [15:00] This is when he would have been in Sioux City. And they had a substitute one day, and the substitute was mean! And she was hitting the kids on their fingers with a ruler. So he got hit once, and then I don't know what he did. He doesn't even remember what he did. But he came back... *she* came back and hit him again. And he said to himself, "She's not gonna hit me no more." And she took -- he snatched the ruler out of her hand, broke it in half and threw it out the window. Well, this substitute teacher kind of had a fit after that happened. Very upset and was kicking him out of school. He went home and told his mother what happened. His mother came back [to the school] and, you know, they had inkwells at that time and she just picked up the inkwell...she told off this woman for treating the children badly, and she threw the ink at this teacher. And then they marched away! Another time they were trying to get enrolled in school and they didn't have shoes. And they [the school] said, "You can't [be in school and not] have shoes," so Mother said, "Well, let's just go," they left and he needed to find work anywhere, anyway. And that's when his education stopped. So imagine, Sioux City, Iowa, and you don't have shoes. So my mother's family -- that's another story.

My grandmother comes from Vilna, which is Lithuania. We grew up understanding that it was sometimes [part of] Russia and it was sometimes [part of] Poland, and they were Jewish and they emigrated. Well, the family was very, was revolutionary. They were anti-Czar, and the family back there [in Vilna] was Orthodox Jew - the family that she grew up in, but she and all of her, almost all of her siblings eventually came to the United States after nineteen oh five revolution.

And my grandfather was Russian, and I don't know where he was from, but [a] Russian Jew. But, he was a very angry, bitter, mean man. He had a shoe repair store in St. Louis, and when my mother later met my father in California, he disowned her, my mother, because my father was black. Well, we said Negro at that time, and so my grandmother decided to leave him because she was not going to disown her daughter.

DC: Wow!

RA: Yeah! And this whole -- all of her siblings -- they did not practice Judaism as a religion, really. But they spoke Yiddish, that was their main language; they were culturally Jewish and they were all very, very progressive and involved in the movement in some way or another. My grandmother worked in the garment industry. [pause]

My grandmother was very upset with the Jewish religion because, for example, the boys could go to school and she couldn't, so my grandmother was essentially illiterate. She could read a little bit of Yiddish, and she could, and very little bit of English her whole life. But they were always very, very progressive. And my parents met because at some young Communist League party in Los Angeles. I have a lot of stories about how my father decided to become a Communist, I don't know if you have time for them?

DC: How about one or two?

RA: One or two! So my father, when he was maybe twelve, did a short job in the -- in the packing house, which was, and [it] just involved opening the door so somebody else carrying a big hunk of meat could get through. And he worked as a shoeshine boy at different places for a lot of his life, at that age and as a shoeshine boy, somebody came by. Some young woman, he said, came by got a shoeshine and then left him a copy of the Communist Manifesto. So he's trying to read the Communist Manifesto because he's kind of impressed. Nobody ever gave a book before or anything, but he didn't have the skills to do it. So he asked his boss and his boss says, "That's terrible! That's terrible stuff!" He [my father] says "OK," and he throws it away, [20:00] and then when his boss is not there, he picks it up again. And he had a very good relationship with the banker in town and even figured out how to borrow fifty dollars from the banker for his brother to buy a truck. He had this nice relationship, so he figured the banker could help him. So he shows the banker his copy of the Communist Manifesto [laughter] and the banker says, "That's terrible revolutionary crap, terrible, terrible!" So my father throws it away again. But, then he starts thinking, "Well, this is kind of an interesting book," and he keeps trying, but he really can't read it. And at some point, this young woman comes back and she says, "How are you doing with the book?" And he says, "Actually, I can't read it, I can't read well enough. I'd be happy to talk to you about it, but I can't read." And then he was invited to a party and was rather amazed, you know, that the party was all white people. And he mentioned Jews and Russians and Scandinavians and things like that at the party. But everybody was nice to him and inclusive, and they started, when they heard his stories, they could not believe his background and that they were very friendly, and that's how he started to get involved.

And then later on working in the packing house, because he then got a real job in the packing house when he was sixteen or seventeen. And I guess he was talking to these folks [the Communist League] at the time and talking to the workers in the packing house, and packing houses actually haven't changed that much. He said we would be in a foot of manure and there would be blood everywhere, and your hands would be very slippery and it was extremely dangerous. And there were always people at the doors ready to take your place, and they were always training new people. And they worked ten to thirteen hour days, and they had twenty minutes for a lunch break, and he talked about how they would drink blood just to keep themselves going. Some positions were not on a conveyor belt, but other positions were, and they would start at two hundred and fifty goats -- not goats, sheep going by in the morning and [then they would gradually increase it, and sometimes it got up to three hundred and fifty. And so he talked to the guys and said, "Well, what we gonna do about this cause it's so dangerous when it gets" because people would cut, you know, cut themselves very seriously -- no brakes. And he says, "What are we going to do?" And somebody said, "Well, if they go over three hundred and fifty, let's strike." My dad said, "Okay." Maybe he was the guy who said, "Let's strike." Anyway, of course, they went over three hundred and fifty. My dad said, "Hold the line," and they all walked out. So it was a wildcat strike. *He* got fired and blacklisted, and everybody else went back to work.

But, what's really interesting about that story is, if you read the book "Fast Food Nation" very little has changed. In fact, I mean, these packing houses are larger, but the jobs are very close to being as dangerous, and they talk about the speed of the line, exactly the same stuff, [but] mostly immigrant workers now.

DC: And this was in Los Angeles, right?

RA: So the packing house was in Sioux City and then [he was] in Omaha. And, then the Depression was very, very difficult, and after he got blacklisted, though, that's when he came to California. Yeah.

[recording paused]

DC: So perhaps, talking about California and how your parents met and then your own childhood?

RA: Okay, so my parents met in the young Communists League movement as well.

DC: And how old were they?

RA: They were probably in their young twenties, and it was -- interracial couples was illegal at that time, so they had a common-law marriage. And my mother was kind of the person who kept my dad going, but she wasn't the person with the big stories who gave the speeches and things like that. He worked in California, all up and down the Central Valley with cotton compress workers organizing for the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations]. And he also worked with the ILWU [International Labor Workers Union] organizing African American workers. And, I think, especially interesting for this project was that in the late forties and early fifties he was the director of the Civil Rights Congress in Oakland, California. And they worked on police brutality, housing rights, and they were attacked by the Oakland Tribune-Noland newspapers.

DC: They talked about lynching is genocide. This is a very [25:00] important and little known organization.

RA: Yes! Yes! And what I think what's really important is yes, he did identify as a Communist, but what the Communists did was organize for people's rights, for decent wages, for a place to live, against police brutality, really basic people's rights. They weren't armed and

going out to shoot people to have a revolution. Their idea was, let's help the people where we are now and that's part of the organizing effort for the Congress of Industrial Organizations, the CIO, was to be much more inclusive, in terms of who was able to who was unionized in an official way, yeah.

DC: And your parents had met as young Communists. Did your mother retain those politics as well?

RA: Well, she did. They didn't retain those politics. I mean, they both quit, probably in the very early sixties 'cause of lots of different issues that were going on. She did a lot of support stuff. Like I remember as a child going door to door selling *People's World* and going to a few demonstrations, like about the Rosenbergs [Julius and Ethel, executed for espionage in 1953 during the Cold War era]. It seems, too, I would have been pretty small. And my dad, even after he stopped working as an organizer for unions and became a shoe repairman, he would go hang out at the laborers local in Los Angeles -- which was kind of a sold-out local -- and [he] then organized the workers to sort of struggle within the union to change. And he organized an organization called the Laborers Fraternal Order. And they had a logo, you know, they had these buttons, and they had a logo with a brown arm, a white arm, and a black arm. In fact, I have a brochure that shows you that.

DC: Again, that was called the Laborers Fraternal Organization?

RA: Laborers Fraternal Order, I think, yeah. And it was a support group. They had, they had a baseball team. It was community, little bit like pillars of the community.

DC: So can you tell us a little bit about your own... obviously, just a very typical childhood [laughter]! Tell us a little bit about your childhood.

RA: Yeah, well, my childhood was kind of interesting because I was the youngest. And so my brother and sister remember suffering more than I did. Some of my earliest memories when my father, my father went underground, he kind of, he disappeared during the McCarthy era. And, of course, I didn't really know what that was about. But we lived with my Uncle Mark in Perris, California. P-E-R R I-S, which one was one of the few places where black people could buy land in the thirties and the forties.

DC: Whereabouts is that?

RA: It's off [Highway] 15...or is it off the [Highway] 163? Not too far from Riverside, south of -- southwest of Riverside. So it's a dry, rocky area, very hard. You wouldn't make a living off the farm. And so we were country, you know, we were country. Country kids, and we looked like it in a couple of photographs that we have. My brother, at the age of twelve dug a well, this'll give you an idea. He *dug* the well. He still had the share before he died to show us what he had done. And everybody in that family worked very, we worked very hard. I was like the assistant. So "Bertie, go get this - Bertie, go get that," you know. I was that person because, you know, he needed somebody. My sister worked very hard and they were very frugal. The family was very frugal.

I didn't feel like I suffered at all, right? I felt...I thought everything was fine. But, once a week we would go to the grocery store with my uncle's truck and take everything that they were throwing away. And we would bring that food back to our little farm -- it was a five acre farm -- to our little farm and sort through it and decide what we could keep to eat and what would go to the pigs. And we kind of did that, you know. My uncle also worked as a custodian on Camp Pendleton, and he got fired. And he got fired because he was my father's brother. Period! This particular uncle was not political and they were very religious. [They attended]

one of these sort of, it's a church of God and Christ... [30:00] what do they call them? They would sing, they would find the Holy Ghost, they would kind of like have fits and stuff and speak in tongues and everything.

GUHA SHANKAR: Pentecostal?

RA: I don't know. I don't know. Technically, there's a couple of words for them. Anyway, they had this rusty, dusty little church with benches that had splinters and everything. And according to my brother sister, we went like three times a week, not just on Sunday, but during the week. I don't remember so much about it, except I did have nightmares for about three years of the devil chasing me.

What else did I want to tell you about this period? Oh, yes, we were followed. We were followed - my brother, my sister and my uncle would be often followed when we were driving around, because the FBI would be in some white, not white, black, Ford or Chevrolet. And they would follow my uncle - like we were *doing* anything! And so my uncle decided one day - he wasn't political, but still he wanted to mess with these guys. So he...he went and parked in a cul-de-sac. It's country, but it was like a dead end, under a tree, and then just stayed there. So they [the FBI] have to be in the sun, and this would be a hundred degrees [laughter]...in Perris, California. Then sometimes he'd go out and say, "What're you guys following us around for?" So I remember that, and then we did eventually move. We moved to Venice Beach, actually, 'cause my mother...my grandmother, lived near. And so my mother took us off the farm and we moved to Venice Beach, and that was kind of a nice period. It was the one time I saw my grandfather -- one time, I only saw him one time -- because my uncle came to town. He called his father and he said, "If you want to see me, you have to see Etty also and the kids. " And so they came...he came and that was only time that I saw him. But I also knew that I was missing

my father so much I decided to run away. I was like five, or four, and I filled up a pillow with all of my necessities, and my mom said, "Okay," and then I ran away. I maybe made a block and a half! I don't remember how it ended, but I didn't get very far.

So, as I was growing up...eventually my father had a heart attack, and so he came and lived with the family, and he learned how to be a shoe repairman just by apprenticing himself for free with a shoe repair fellow who taught him the trade. And we got a little shop, and we all worked in that shop, all five of us. Of course, I was still kind of young, so sometimes I would be in the back reading my books, you know? And then sometimes I'd be on the cash register. And, eventually, by the time I got to high school, I knew how to do some repair. I could put the heels on, and I could sand them on the machines, do a lot of that [kind of work]. So we spent a lot of time, a lot of time there.

DC: And where was the shoe shop?

RA: Well, the first one - well, we had one on Denker St. [sic, Denker Avenue], but then we had one on 39th and Western... on Western, and then the last one was across street from the City Hall. And one day, I don't remember the year, my father's name appeared in the Los Angeles Times, because he was being called before HUAC - House Un-American Activities Committee. And a few months later that shoe repair shop got shot into, during the night. And the other thing that happened is we had been going to this camp called Anytown, and it was a very nice camp. It was organized by the National Conference of Christians and Jews - NCCJ. And my sister -- it was very nice -- my sister was elected the mayor of Anytown and she was very proud of that. And there were kids from all different high school, so it was a real mixture of people. And the director of that program called her in and she asked her, "Is that your dad?" My sister said, "Yes." She said, "You can't be the mayor of this organization

anymore.” So that was devastating for my sister, and my sister remembers everything as we were poor, we didn't have stuff, I had to... she had to run the shoe shop for a whole week once when my parents were ill, and she, you know, she was like in the eleventh grade or something. She held down the entire fort, but she felt she suffered a lot behind that.

So also in these years, I started to demonstrate in the civil rights demonstrations.

[35:00] But, before we get to those demonstrations... like probably everybody you're interviewing who's my age, the first conversation that my father officially had with me about politics was when Emmett Till was murdered, because we saw the *Jet* [magazine]. He showed me [the photographs of Till's body in the magazine] he says, “Bertie,” -- that was my nickname -- “you have to understand what this whole country is like.” And we had the *Jet* magazine and the pictures and everything. That's my first political conversation that I remember ever having.

DC: Do you remember your reaction to seeing the pictures or to your father talking to you about it?

RA: I was horrified! He said, “You know, things are not the way you may think they are. And I want you to know this is something that has... has just happened.” I was just absolutely horrified. I knew I felt different because I... we moved around a lot and sometimes, when I was quite young, I was in schools with all white kids, and I felt somehow different. I ended up making good friends with the other black girl in the third grade and she was also tall because that made it... [laughs] I was very tall for my age! But I was not aware of that kind of violence. And my father, there's another thing he had done. He, of course, was very aware [because] when he was thirteen or fourteen, a friend of his, a good friend of his brother, was murdered by the police in custody, beat up and murdered. And nobody wanted to do anything about this. And my father collected money for the funeral, tried to get up a church. The

churches were intimidated and would not allow the funeral to be at the church. And they managed to do it -- I don't remember where. And something [else] he pointed out: He says, "You know, the prostitutes were really good. They really contributed a lot of money," because they understood what that kind of hardship was and that kind of brutality. So that's when I started hearing some of those stories from my dad. But that was the first conversation...

Emmitt Till.

DC: And did your dad...

JB: I'm going to pause.

[Recording pauses]

DC: I have to remind you where we are...

RA: Emmitt Till.

DC: Emmitt Till, yes.

RA: Right... something else that affected our childhood a lot was our parents interracial marriage, because that was very unusual and people would stare at us, and then we would smile back and stuff, but we were very aware of that. And my brother actually looks kind of like just a Jewish guy, and he would get into fights with people, saying, "No, I'm Negro!" He would actually get into fist-fights with them [laughs]! I don't know if these were black or white kids, but my father said that his mother always told them, "You're Negro, don't let anybody tell you that you're anything else," and that's pretty much what my father told us as well.

DC: Do you have a single memory of that? Or that was just something?

RA: That was just a recurring theme. It's particularly interesting because I'm the darkest of the siblings. So my sister could conceivably pass, and my brother very easily would

pass. I mean, he would fight *not* to pass as white, so that was very important. And then I went to a lot of different schools. But then I started going to Berendo Junior High School and Berendo Junior High and then to Los Angeles High. And our neighborhood, we eventually moved to an area of Los Angeles, which is like Adams and Vermont, and it had been primarily African American neighborhood but it rapidly changed into an immigrant neighborhood, mostly Central Americans. So, I learned Spanish! So when I took Spanish in school, I talked to -- I talked to my neighbors and made friends with them, and at LA High I was in very, very mixed classes. There were a lot of Jewish kids coming from, you know, like the Fairfax area, there were a lot of Japanese kids, some of whom had been born in the internment camps, and lot of -- there were a lot of African American kids, and we all we got along pretty well. I mean, there would be a fight in that school once every couple of months nothing like you see today. But of course, we weren't very tracked and in junior high and part of high school, that's when I started to -- to do dancing. And it was through the dancing that I met some wonderful people who also were very involved in folk music, and I just was kind of like a weirdo, you know, cause I like this old-time folk music and all of this stuff. [40:00]

My brother... my brother and sister, they were kind of like listening to Motown, but I was doing my own thing and eventually learned to play the guitar and the banjo. I like different kinds of music, and I'm so happy to realize that my, I had an Uncle Earl who was a fiddler and played old-time music way back in the early nineteen hundreds. He probably had a better ear than I have, but it's okay.

DC: So this is... so what year did you graduate high school?

RA: So I graduated... so I was involved in some of the demonstrations in Los Angeles at Woolworth's and some of those kinds of things, and I decided I wanted to go to

Berkeley, and I graduated in nineteen -- in nineteen sixty-four. So I arrive in Berkeley in the fall of nineteen sixty-four.

DC: Can I back you up just a little bit then to your early high school and you and your family's reaction to, well, we talked about Emmitt Till, but back in '55, and Montgomery or in, you know, '60 when the sit-in movement really starts to go throughout the South, were you tracking that in Los Angeles? Were you getting news?

RA: You know, basically we were constantly looking at all of this happening on the news, but that's the extent of it. You know, we were just very excited about it all and watching it on the news and seeing how all of this was progressing.

DC: Okay, Okay. So sorry to interrupt, but sixty four... Berkeley.

RA: Sixty-four. Because I had seen that there had been demonstrations at the Sheraton Palace to, I think it was to integrate the staff there and all kinds of things had been happening at Berkeley, so I figured that was the place to go, and I managed to get in. They accepted me late because my grades weren't as good as they were supposed to be. But they got good enough because they saw my senior grades, and I went to Berkeley. So when I had got accepted, all of -- all of the, like dorms and the co-ops and all of that, they were full. So my dad drove up with me and introduced me to different people that he knew from the movement in Berkeley and the first student at Berkeley to really befriend me and helped me was Bettina Aptheker. And she was, like, maybe she was a junior, maybe she was a sophomore, but she invited me to her house and she introduced me -- introduced me to a couple of people. And her father [Herbert Aptheker], of course, is like a renowned Communist scholar, member of the Communist Party back then and did a lot of African American history work. And I had heard of him, and I kind of knew that, you know, these were established people, but anyway, she was

very friendly. She had me over for dinner and helped me plan my classes, and [told me] who the TA's were, and who/what I should do. And that made all the difference in the world. I think if you were walking into that school and you didn't know anybody or you didn't have a group to associate with, you would really be lost. And so Bettina got me started and I met a lot of very interesting people.

DC: And did you just happen to meet her or is that through your father's connections?

RA: No. Somehow, it wasn't "just happened." It was through my father's connections, although he didn't introduce me to her directly, he introduced me to his friends, which were people like Jessica Mitford [author and civil rights activist] and, I don't know, Roscoe Proctor [co- founded the National Welfare Rights Organization] and a lot of activists from the Bay Area at that time.

DC: Okay, so you really followed through your father's tracks.

RA: It was through my parents. It was through my parents. So I met people who were in the Dubois Club and also in the Communist Party at that time at UC-Berkeley. So what happens at UC-Berkeley in the fall of 1964 is the Free Speech Movement, and the Free Speech Movement is largely because students at Berkeley were mobilizing in support of the civil rights movement in Oakland and San Francisco at the time. And... and some of the people I met actually had been Freedom Riders the summer previous and so when they tried to take down our tables and violate our right to free speech, we had a pretty massive movement, and I got arrested in Sproul Hall. And I was seventeen at the time, but I told them I was eighteen so that I wouldn't go off all by myself to Juvenile Hall or something. I just gave them a different year, and my parents wouldn't have to come up to the Bay Area. So I participated in that, [45:00] and that was very exciting. Very, very exciting moment.

Then, the next thing... the next major thing that happened at Berkeley is I decided I wanted to study abroad in Spain in 1966 and 1967. Of course, during this period, we were demonstrating against the war in Vietnam, we were demonstrating for civil rights. Very, very active. It was a very, very, very active period. So, I decided I wanted to study in Spain. I was a Spanish major, by the way, which was rather an odd thing to be, but it was because of where I grew up. Is there a problem?

DC: Let's take a quick break.

[Recording pauses]

RA: Well... through the eyes of seventeen year old. I was ready for all of this. In many ways, this is why I went to Berkeley. I was very excited about the demonstrations. I was always out there passing out leaflets as a member of the W.E.B. DuBois Club. And it was pretty early in the semester that the Free Speech Movement started... well, got started, because it got started really quick. All it took was them to try to stop us setting up the tables, and I don't know what they wanted to do that for, because we really organized behind it. And so, of course, Mario Savio was one of the key figures, and we had rallies just about every day. Bettina Aptheker also spoke. I spoke once, as well, started to get my feet wet a little bit with, you know, giving speeches and things like that. And it was mainly, it was mainly the Free Speech Movement in '66 - *not* 66, in '64, of course, that I remember. And exactly what happened between then and going to Spain, I actually can't remember all of the things that we were involved in, but [I was] constantly involved, constantly doing things. So when I interviewed to go to Spain, they said, "Well, you got arrested in the Free Speech Movement and you're going to a country that is a dictatorship." And I said my purpose is to go study. So I go, and I get to Spain, and to Madrid and it truly was a repressive regime. You saw there were so

many different kinds of police and there were these police that you called the *grises* because they wore grey, and they would be standing on corners with sub-machine guns. You didn't easily meet other political people at -- we studied in what they call the Facultad de Letras y Filosofía... [Filosofía y Letras in the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid].

DC: Did the Berkeley folks warn you at all? Like, be cool [laughs]?

RA: No, they asked the question, but I answered it to their satisfaction. Okay, so I would find out there was a demonstration a day later, because the way the Spanish students organized things is they would throw out leaflets. The demonstration would happen, and it'd be over because it's not something that you, you know, you wait at the front of the campus and you pass out leaflets -- that was *not* happening. And mostly they were demonstrating against the Franco, the Franco regime, and against the dictatorship. And I did eventually meet some Spaniards who were progressive and involved in some of this. And I says, "Well, what should I do?" And they said, "Well, you should work with the American students because we're working with the Spanish ones." So, okay. So what do we do? We set up a table, [laughs] and we put it up in the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras. And we took signatures of people who were opposed the war in Vietnam because we figured we better not touch Franco's Spain. And I do believe that the purpose of collecting those signatures was to take them to the [US] embassy, and that was naive on our part. But what was very interesting was with our little table there - and I don't even remember how many days we were there - the press came, different people from the press. And they said let us know if you ever get ready to do anything, because they wanted to be present, right? We say okay, fine, we'll let you know. So I was really mostly depressed most of the time that I was in Spain. I didn't, you know, find a boyfriend, and I unfortunately didn't study flamenco guitar... whatever! But eventually, by the spring, I had quite a few progressive

friends. Well, they're revolution, considered revolutionary at that time, and that was getting to be more and more fun. So they were planning to have big demonstrations [50:00] against the war in Vietnam on April 28, 1967 and they asked me if I would give a speech and I said, "I don't know, maybe I'll write a letter and you can read the letter."

So the director of our program was Carlos Blanco Aguinaga, and he actually left Spain in the thirties as a refugee, as a child of Spaniards, when the war was lost and he lived in refugee camps in southern Spain and he became a very prestigious professor in the University of California system. And Spain didn't even want to accept him as the director of our study abroad program. But UC actually insisted that he be accepted, so he actually, he, when he found out that I was some kind of an activist, cause I avoided all authority, I didn't go anywhere near him, he called me into his office like in October. And he says, "Roberta, Ronald Reagan is coming to town and *you* could go over to the airport." And he starts drawing me a diagram of the airport [laughter], and he says, "And you can put a sign up under your -- you can put up a sign under your coat, and then when he gets there, you can open up your sign against the war in Vietnam and against Ronald Reagan!" I know: "Man, this guy's crazy!" Fortunately, Ronald Reagan didn't come because I think I might have gotten home sooner [laughter] if he had actually come.

But anyway, Carlos Blanco had a separate meeting with the -- with the American Embassy, because they didn't meet with him with the rest of the directors. They met with him separately, and they basically told the directors of the programs, "We can't protect your kids if they get involved in these demonstrations. So you need to tell them to stay out of the demonstrations." So Blanco has this meeting with all of us, and he tells us the same thing. And then afterwards, I tell him, "Well, you know, they've asked me to give a speech," and he says,

“Roberta, I know you'll do the right thing.” He didn't tell me, “Don't give the speech.” So the day of this event, I go and they've taken over a whole building and they have a sign, [hanging] like from the fifth floor to the second floor, you know, “Yanquis fuera del Vietnam [Yankees out of Vietnam]”. Mind you this is 1967 and in Europe people were burning little American flags and things like that. So I go into the room where it's supposed to happen - the room is packed, the sound system doesn't work. But they say, “Don't worry, they'll get quiet.”

There's a person before me, nobody was listening to everybody, it was just chaos. And the reporters were asking me, “What are they saying?” This is Spanish, you know? And the international reporters are asking me to translate for them. So it's my turn to speak -- I wish I had saved that speech! But, as soon as I get up there, I get the standing ovation and then I make my points. Oh, they got quiet, of course! And I get all of these, all of this applause, and everything's just great, I'm so popular because I'm just like revolutionary student from the United States. And then it's over, and like five students come up to me, and they say, “Okay, now we have to run out the back way through this little forest where we have a taxi, take -- waiting for you and that taxi -- what you want to do is go to the train station, go straight to Andalusia, so that you don't stay away for a couple of weeks, so this whole thing will cool down, and then they'll forget about you.” And I'm going: I am five feet ten inches. I am this color. I had also gained a few pounds, like I was so depressed I was just eating at all hours. I know! Hmm, okay, let me think about it, and I go back to my apartment. I do take the taxi back to my little apartment, and I wasn't supposed to be living in an apartment, I was supposed to be living in a pension, because I broke all the rules. And I found my friend who lived in a pension a couple of blocks away, and she came over and she said, “You know what? When...when I got back to my pension, the woman who runs the pension said that the police had been there

looking for me, and this woman was a Franco sympathizer, but she told them to come back. "Oh, she'll be back in four hours," knowing that she would probably be back sooner. So she alerted us that the police were looking for us. So we say, "Oh, the police are looking for us, oh, what're we going to do?!" And so we call Carlos Blanco Aguinaga and he says, "Come to our house."

And so we pack up our suitcases and it's at an hour in Madrid where there aren't very many taxis. So we take this special kind of taxi and we have suitcases. And my friend, who is with me was blond, and then there's me, [55:00] and there was a third person on the list who is Carol Watanabe, a Japanese girl from Hawaii, because she had done a few things with us. So we're in the cab going to the director's office and with our suitcases in the back, and the guy is listening to the radio and he heard the announcement comes on: "El gobierno de Espana esta buscando estas mujeres - una chica de color, una Japonesa, y una rubia," you know. And so he looks- the chica de color is particularly exotic for Spain at that time - it was very provincial - so he looks in his rearview mirror [laughter]. He doesn't say anything, but he drops us off. And so there we are at the director's house, and we probably stayed there two or three days. It was very clear nobody's going to forget about us. Because they were making enquiries at the university. There were different levels of sort of spies at the university - repeatedly. And the American Embassy as well was making enquiries, "Where are they?"

So we say, OK, let's just face the music. So we went back to our apartments. Well, she [my friend] was in a pension, and I was an apartment. So I get to my apartment and I'll leave out the story about eating my yogurt, walking past these people downstairs and all of that. There were some guys, and I just walked past them a couple of time and then eventually they come up and they say... knock, knock, you know, "Are you Roberta Alexander?" [they are in]

plainclothes... I say "yes," And they say, "Well, we're the plainclothes police and we're supposed to take you in." I say, "Okay," and then we walk from my apartment to the Puerta del Sol, and we stopped for coffee. From my apartment to the Puerta del Sol which was mostly downhill, and it was a central jail. And at the Puerta del Sol, at the jail there, you go downstairs, its like a dungeon, and I'm down there... I'm down there by myself because my friend hadn't gotten there yet. And somehow they had figured out, the other prisoners, 'cause they had arrested a number of people because they were doing it before the May Day demonstrations, so they did it preemptively. So, there were a lot of people in the jail and they figured out that I was from the United States. I tried to pretend like I didn't speak Spanish. That didn't go anywhere, though, and they started singing. "We shall overcome!" So to make that long story a little bit shorter: I was deported, but I think it was more like I was kidnapped by the Spanish state under the orders of the American State Department. Because everybody we asked said -- I said, "Why are you arresting me?" "We don't know. The American Embassy wants us to do it." They said that... they said that at every level: "We don't know, we don't have anything to do with this." And we were put on a train [on which] there was a row of police with their -- my friend, obviously, eventually showed up -- with their machine guns. At every stop, at every stop, there would be *Guardia Civil*, the guys who wore the funny hats, right outside our car. I mean, we were twenty, and, they took us to Irun. We crossed the border to Hendaye, and Carlos Blanco was there waiting for us. He had made that trip. He had driven up to give us money and to... to set us up.

So there's a little more to the story. We take the train to Paris, and there were some immigrant workers, like from Morocco, and we're trying to tell them what happened to us and we're sharing food, and there were some newspaper articles, and we were trying to show them, and we get to Paris and I say, "Okay, everybody, you hand me your... hand me your bags

because we don't have money to pay anybody to help us," and there's a whole bunch of people gathered around. Guy comes up and he says, "Are you Roberta Alexander, Carol Watanabe and Karen Winn?" We said, "Yes." And he says, "I'm from CBS and we have a limousine to take you to the Hotel George Cinq" - which is the fanciest hotel in Paris - "but what we need you to do is give us an interview tomorrow morning at five-thirty so that we can have it in the States for the... for the evening news." Then we say "Okay" [laughter] so then we are taken off to the Hotel George Cinq.

DC: That's a nice hotel!

RA: Yes, we were so fancy, we got to eat and all of that! And, the one unfortunate thing is my parents -- [1:00:00] somehow a radio station got through to me. A Los Angeles radio station got through to me when I was under house arrest [in Spain] during this whole bit, because they took us out of jail and put us in house arrest. And I gave them an interview and my parents heard it 'cause I hadn't been able to get hold of my parents and then, of course, they see this. Well, then, when I got to Paris, I called them and they see this interview on CBS and they were very proud. But there was reason to be afraid. Had it been Latin America it may not have turned out the same way. So, they gave us a very, kind of, like, human interest interview, a very friendly interview. And we got to New York and we came back. We got back and went straight back to Berkeley.

DC: How is that your reception at Berkeley? Students following this?

RA: Some people followed it. I was very disappointed in the people around the Duke Boys Club in the Communist Party because they were not -- they were kind of like, disinterested. I didn't see the -- I didn't see the fervor. It's about when I left. I was -- subsequently I went around and talked to Abraham Lincoln Brigade people. My uncle was in

the Abraham Lincoln brigade, actually. And so I talked to them, and so then, I don't know, they invited me to go to a celebration of the fall of the Nazis in Germany, and they wanted each delegation to have one older person and a youth. And so these Abraham Brigadistas said, would you like to be the youth? So I went to this thing in East Germany to speak at like something before, you know, three quarters of a million people. But, it was a very, very, very interesting trip because what they did is, they fed us wonderful food. We had translators, but there was no -- there was no good political conversation. It was just kind of... dead. The only time I really had a good time was when I ran into some printers from Cuba, people who were studying printing in East Germany and they were from Cuba. Well, I could talk to them by myself, for one, and they were, like, full of the, you know, this was sixty -- sixty-seven, and they were very enthusiastic and interested in talking about all of these ideas, but I got an idea of kind of what the Soviet bloc was like, and it wasn't looking too good to me. Then I spoke in front of a crowd... these Germans, you know, they timed everything, you know, your talk, can be seventy -five seconds, but don't sit down until the interpreter finishes because they're simultaneous. Yeah, it's like simultaneous, but it's not exactly so. The German... German takes much longer to say anything, and so the simultaneous interpreter would take a couple sentences longer. When I finished, I forgot and I sat down. The Soviet youth was about fifty years old, you know [laughter], and it was just all not looking too good to me. So it changed my attitude toward that whole deal, so I came back to Berkeley.

JB: I'm going to pause.

[Recording paused]

JB: We're rolling again

DC: 1967...back to Berkeley.

RA: Okay, okay. 1967, back to Berkeley. I completed. I quit my associations with the Duke Boys Club and sort of the Communist Party group and I got involved with an incredibly sectarian, revolutionary quasi-revolutionary intellectuals group for a little while. That didn't last. And, I found out, and then I got into another one of those groups and the other one of those groups which wasn't quite as narrow. They says, "Well, we don't take black people. Black people have to join the Black Panther Party." That was the Revolutionary Union. Bob Avakian, he was the leader. And that's probably just as well, was just a good thing. I had much better feelings at this point about the Black Panther Party than I had had previously, because they'd started doing the community programs. They started doing breakfast for school children and all of those kinds of programs. And I liked the ten-point platform. I thought it was relevant, still relevant today.

DC: What was your initial impression? You said that it wasn't as positive at first.

RA: Well, I just thought at first, and this is really colored by [1:05:00] a sort of narrow view of what's correct. I was just -- was not impressed by what I had heard Bobby Seale speak. And I was thinking about today, we want our share of the pie or something like that and I thought, "Well, I'm a socialist. I want to divide up the pie between everybody." But actually, you know, our piece of the pie maybe wasn't that wrong. In retrospect, I mean, I just didn't respond to it. So, I started to be involved in the Black Panther Party by first going to the breakfast for school children program. And it was at a church in Oakland, and it was at the church where's there a famous photo of Charles Bursey, you know, serving people. Charles Bursey, I think, serving people eggs and bacon and we worked really hard. And that was a lot of fun doing that, you know, getting up, cooking the food, and then we also would go around asking for donations of the food. But the leadership of the party at that time, they were pretty --

they were pretty sharp and they found out pretty quick play that I could spell. I could type fast you know, and I was pretty well educated. And so they assigned me to work on the Black Panther newspaper. So I was in the office. I think it was Shattuck. I think it was Berkeley was. But I was in the national office and it was technically Berkeley, but I think it was considered the Oakland National Office, it was South Berkeley. And so that's where I met Big Man [Elbert Howard, BPP founding member] because he was the editor of the newspaper. And that's where I spent a lot of time.

Now, if you're a Black Panther, it's not like I go to a meeting a couple times a week. It was full time, we pretty much gave our entire life. We'd show up in the morning, or people would have slept there all night and we get your assignments from the officer of the day, who could have been a seventeen year old, you know, deciding. There was a woman named Marsha and I'm sure she was seventeen when she was telling people, "You go here, you go sell newspapers. You do this; you do that." So I did a little bit of everything. I sold newspapers. I did everything, but basically I ended up working on the paper. And so Big Man would pick the articles, and I would type them into the adjuster writer, which was this old machine that would line it up. And I would correct the spelling and put in a few periods, that kind of thing. And then about -- not about once a week we would go to the printer's, which was in San Francisco.

DC: And what was that?

RA: It was the Tenderloin district, and we would spend maybe twenty-four hours there laying out the paper, you know, because you have your copy and then you'd run it through this wax machine and then you could put it down and then you do your headlines, and then Emory Douglas [BPP Minister of Culture] would show up, who's the artist for the party. I hope you're interviewing him. You are?

DC: Now we are!

RA: The artist for the party. All of that art was Emory Douglas, and he'd come in with different art things. And he had a better eye, of course, for how to lay things out. And then we'd on. Then we'd go home exhausted. And for some of that time, I lived in North Richmond behind a church [laughter]. And for some of that time I lived in another area of North Richmond. Now, the reason I ended up in Richmond, part of the reason was one of the problems that I had in the Black Panther Party was being harassed by the guys. It was, just being harassed, you know, it was kind of the thing, like "we're all revolutionaries and everything belongs to everybody including, you know, you should be doing some, you know, revolutionary sexual favors for me." I did not buy that. And I got into a relationship with a nice guy, but in some ways it protected me as well. Well, so you know, I liked him, but there was also some protection. His name was Bobby Bowling, and he was from the Richmond area. So...

DC: Can we talk a little bit more about the gender relationships? We've got a few hours.

RA: Everybody's story will be different depending on where you were and when you were there. So I was there in 1969. Eldridge Cleaver was already gone, and I had... I wasn't impressed by his book, *Soul on Ice*. Somehow, raping white women didn't seem like a revolutionary act to me. Although I could see that he was brilliant. I had worked as an overseas operator for a while because I was working, you know, I worked in canneries and stuff because I was [1:10:00] gonna organize the industrial proletariat for a while. I worked as an operator, and he had -- he had those kind of phones that you have on a boat, and he was rude to us. And you, you knew it was Eldridge Cleaver,

because who else is going to have a black accent, you know, with this “over and out” phone. And all of the leadership when I was there, they were men. And Huey was in jail, too. So the people who were the leaders were Bobby Seale, David Hilliard - “Masai” (very important person), Hewitt, Ray Hewitt and... it was the three of them, above all, and Big Man was like the next tier, but it was like this group, and then there might be one or another coming in and they made the decisions, so they were smart. They were very smart, they had lots of interesting ideas, so they called the shots. But there was like a class division. They were up there drinking, I don't know, Chivas Regal, and we were drinking Bitter Dog, which was, I'm sure you all know, tawny port and lemon juice, and there wasn't -- it actually tasted pretty good, it's probably gut rot, but we were drinking it... they're drinking Chivas Regal and we were drinking tawny port and lemon juice! That was one item.

And...they all hit on me one or another time. But David Hilliard was very persistent, and I had a real problem with him. I was told to drive him home. Yeah, it was David, I was told to drive him home from something one night, and he says, “Well, let's stop by your house,” and I foolishly kind of did, and I was supposed to be getting ribs ready for a picnic the next day. One problem, though, is I didn't know how to do it. Forget my mom's white, right? Moms was Jewish, and my dad may have known how to do it, but I didn't know. So he makes this a big deal, makes fun of me, whatever. We get the ribs in the oven, because you get them cooked, and then later you put them on the barbecue, you don't cook them on the barbeque. And then he starts looking, and then he's just – it's very, very uncomfortable, and he makes a lot of advances. I say, “No, no, no, no, no.” And he doesn't force it, so I drive him back to his mother's house

in West Oakland. And I go to the party to the picnic the next morning. And all these people come up and say, "Where is the chairman?" Because everybody knew that he had gone home with me, and I... I am inferring that everybody assumed that I had slept with him and he was coming back, you know, with me. No! I held... I held the line on that. And I have subsequently been told that we saw we had agency with you, Roberta. Course I didn't know what they meant by agency, but, I mean, this is far, subsequently, what do you mean by agency? Well, you have some control over what you do. So that kind of stuff really bothered me, but it stopped once I got into a relationship.

Okay, So okay, then there's the big united front against fascism in nineteen... it's in the summer of nineteen sixty-nine because I was in the party only in nineteen sixty-nine. They had figured out that I could give a pretty good speech, I guess. They had me doing political education classes and they asked me to speak at this event and it was in a big park and there were... people came from all over the country. I thought it might be a little premature to say it was a fascist country, but it's okay. So I gave a speech about women at the United Front against Fascism, and Eldridge had come out with women are our other half, not our lesser half, but our other half, so that all sounded very good. But I talked some about--

DC: A little bit better than what he had been saying earlier, perhaps.

RA: Saying and doing. So I use that. And I, I think I talked about relationships evolving. And yes, there's problems, but with the brothers, because part of the issue was there was the Women's liberation movement. And then there was questions whether or not women should be in the Black Panthers or should they be in the Women's liberation movement, because, clearly, you know, there were all of these issues in the Black Panthers and I... I

believed at that time that the right place to be was in the Black Panther Party. So I gave the speech after his speech. Angela Davis came up and introduced herself to me [1:15:00] because she hadn't yet hit headlines. And it was the strangest thing, that somebody's a PhD student at UCSD. It was just like, so strange. But she told me Carlos Blanco Aguinaga told her to introduce herself to me [laughter], but after that they decided at some point that Big Man and I would go to Japan together. There was an invitation from the Zengakuren [league of communist and anarchist students founded in 1948] Cordon and there were tickets, so they decided to do this. And I talked to Masai and I said, "Look, Masai, I'm not going to talk straight nationalism," because sometimes the Panthers would be more nationalistic than other times. Most of the documents are international, very, very international. But that wasn't always how everybody saw things. And he said fine. So I'm sort of the tag team with Big Man, you know, and so sometimes I'd say "Now, Big Man, we have to do it this way or we have to do it that way." So, but before that happened, we get to the airport in Tokyo and there's like, some kind of cloak and dagger scene going on that we can't possibly understand. But one group comes, and they pick us up and "Hey, we have to get out of here fast and we get on. We get in some car and they're driving. Then, this is Big Man's memory, mostly said, driving so fast in this kind of scary but anyway, we find out a few days later that these people are misinterpreting what we were saying and that they were the Red Army. And I don't know if you remember, but the Red Army did stuff like blow up railroad tracks and that kind of stuff and the Black Panther Party was not doing that kind of thing, and so we had to disassociate ourselves from them. And it's very hard, you can't read anything in Japan, and you can't hear any words that you might understand, you know, because it's a European language. And so we got set up with a group that did films for the left. It was called Ogawa Productions, and they had relationships with

everybody on the left. And the left was very divided in Japan at the time. Their universities were occupied, and then somebody be thrown off the fifth story or something like that. But with these people, we got around. We also found out, I don't know, in my mind, we realized that we should have known, we only had one-way tickets, so we had to figure out a way to make some money. So we tried to do that, we did that by charging for interviews.

DC: So what did you understand as your mission? I mean, what was you know, the point of the trip?

RA: That's a very good question. Our mission was, that's very interesting. We saw our mission as to get out the story of the Black Panther Party. And I think we also sought to learn about what's happening in Japan and come back and... and share it. And there are a lot of things happening Japan that we were very unaware of.

DC: Were there are others going to other countries. Or was this the major...?

RA: Well, this was an accident. See, they somehow contacted the Black Panther Party national headquarters. And so we have a ticket. And a lot of things I think happened like that. Nineteen sixty-nine was a particularly chaotic year. The Panther Party had already grown so much. Something that I have not mentioned is that it was clearly infiltrated. Um, there was provocateurs going on. People will show up, "Oh, I just got out of prison. I want to join the party." And in Richmond, this guy came up to me. I was driving mind you, a little white Rambler. You know, these were legal, square, innocent looking cars, and he says, "I want to put some knives in the trunk of your car for now." And I said no. And do you know the next morning on my way from North Richmond in this area, it's completely abandoned before you can get onto the freeway going towards Berkeley, in Oakland I hear a siren. I pull over, and within thirty seconds there were seven or eight [police] cars there screeching in, you know, like

and they searched everything. And I don't think it was a coincidence that it happened the day after this guy wanted to put stuff, wanted to get in my trunk, put whatever he wanted in my trunk. I think I was pretty lucky to get out of that one. So, they got an invitation to Japan, so we go to Japan. It happens to be that this journalist from Denmark [1:20:00] comes and gets to know the Black Panthers, and then they have a trip to Scandinavia, and they're going... in the... in the reunion they're going to have a panel on foreign relations. Now there was other stuff that was much more official. When they go to China, they really met, you know, leaders in China and I guess, in Algeria, they were recognized. Well, you know, while Eldridge was still part of the Panthers before the... before the split, so yeah, so we just. "Okay, you're going to go to Japan now." It wasn't like, "Okay, we want you to do this, this and that," you know. And I think that there, maybe at one time they would have been that organized, but not in 1969. So what we did is we wanted to spread the message of what was happening with the Black Panther Party. We wanted to support the movements in Japan to the degree that we could figure out who's who and... and then we had to earn our keep, earn our tickets. And so we actually had some very interesting trips. We met with little old women who are probably half my age now, who were sitting in and sleeping in on American airport strips, military base airport strips. We met the second and third sons of farmers because the system for inheriting land was the first son inherits land. Second and third [sons] then are pretty much a separate caste, actually. And they would go to the cities and do construction work, people wouldn't marry them. It was very much a caste-like system. And we met with the Korean immigrants and workers in Japan and had no idea that there were all of these things going on. The one place... and this was thanks to these film, this film production company, they had relationships with all these people, and they help set it up. We were followed the entire time, except in my memory when we were with one

particular interpreter. I mean, they were these Japanese guys, and they were out there waiting. We'd catch a cab and they would follow us. And once the cab wanted to tell us, he didn't know where it was, we thought it was being racist, and we insisted because you would write down what it was. And he was all up someplace, and he stopped and asked and in the car behind stopped and asked, you know where they're going and they just followed us. Everything we did was public. But whatever! We just followed. The one thing that everybody was united on it that time was... was to fight the construction of the new airport, because it was on wonderful farming land and there were already enough air bases that that could have been accommodated with some of these U.S. airbases. And there would be, there were demonstrations of hundreds of thousands of people. And ... and we spoke at that, too. And it was really interesting because in their demonstrations, you know, the Japanese, they lock arms and they tend to run. But not everybody. There's a role for everybody. So for the old folks, they would collect night soil. You know what night soil is? They would collect night soil and the cops would run. They would have a net over them to try to protect themselves from rocks and stuff. But it didn't protect them from the night soil, so they would be throwing this shit. It would go through; there would be a real problem. And other people would be running, and I can't remember. But when your demonstration is over, since you're running most of time, you feel pretty good, you know [laughter]. I don't know how much was accomplished where they were massive demonstrations. And... and we spoke there. We also met with farmers, peasant, peasant farmers. And we saw a lot. We saw a lot of amazing things in Japan when I got back.

DC: So how long did you end up staying?

RA: You know, I think we were there at least a month, maybe five weeks. I have the notes someplace, some notes, just where we had gone. And Big Man didn't come back with me.

Big man had to go to -- he went to Europe. There was something he was supposed to do or tell. I don't know. There was something he was supposed to do. He didn't come back to me, with me. I get back and then, of course, they have a separate customs just for me with a Japanese guy there, and they ask for my telephone book. And I said, "No, you can't see my telephone book." And so whatever, I got, I got past, [1:25:00] got past it. And so that was really the last big thing that I did in the party. I quit not too long after it, and...

DC: Was it easy to get out?

RA: You just walked away.

DC: Okay.

RA: Now, but this is... this is what happened the whole time. But first of all, there were levels of activities that I wasn't involved in, in the Panthers. The office was metal plated and there were sandbags in the office, so I kind of and I want to remember that I'm kind of oblivious to all of this. And then there were other stuff. There was gun stuff going on, and I was not part of it. They sent me to be trained... to the shooting range or something. I shot a .357 Magnum, one time. I thought my arm was gonna fall off. And I shot an F-sixteen. Does that sound right? One time, and I thought my shoulder was gonna fall off, and it was noisy. I didn't want to have anything else to do with it, and I did not. So I'm sure some of the people you're going to be talking to know much more about all of that, but I, really, in a naive way, didn't. But what I did notice is about once every two weeks there would be fire engines on each side of our block. One here, one there, and that was kind of weird. What's the fire engines there for? And then a newspaper, it was not the Berkeley Barb, but another one - I don't remember the name, but I have it somewhere. A Berkeley newspaper found the Berkeley police plan for how they would vamp on the office. And one of the things that I remember, actually,

you could find that on the Internet now... I think that's where I found it. One of the things that I remember, is that they would have the fire engines there because somehow they would blast their way into downstairs. And then they would take these machine guns or whatever they are, and they'd go like that. And then the upstairs would be on fire, and I'd be up there, typing that shit, you know, on my little AdjustWrite, and so I go, "Whoa!" you know, I kind of saw, you know, this is this really is... I mean, I had been writing. Fred Hampton hadn't been killed yet, but so many people had been arrested that year. So many offices had been vamped on, I don't know, but reading this made it really come home. And so, one, I did not want to die for the Black Panther Party... one. Two... I felt the party was infiltrated, and a lot of times, you know, those infiltrators are the ones that bring you the guns and encourage or even carry out some of the crazier activities. I never had in my mind a way to have a revolution that we could shoot our way into, in this country, that could be done through violence. Even though I got revolutionary terms and all that, that violence part of it, I never, you know, I can't even shoot a gun! And third, I was pregnant, and I did not... was not ready to take the responsibility of having a child. And so for those three reasons, I told them I'm going to go visit my parents, but I didn't come back. Subsequently, David Hilliard figured out where... who had my, all my books, because I had this huge library, you know, Mao, Lenin, all the revolution, Marx and stuff. And he came in, intimidated those folks and took all my books [laughter]. So the one thing is, I think this was a period in the party where there was, like, a purge kind of thing going on, so somebody would leave and they call them a "running dog lackey," several other words. They never published anything like that about me. I sent them everything I had from the Japan trip, and I was sorry that I did that. But, somehow subsequently, a lot of that's been recovered because we had a woman who was doing research on that project for us, and she... she found

out a lot of that information. So then I was back in the United States and with my parents. I lived there for a year, and I talked to Carlos Blanco because I... I was doing a typing job at that point, and he says, "Come down to San Diego, because we're starting Third College." Can we stop for a minute?

DC: Sure.

[Recording paused]

DC: Bring you back to where we stopped, which was Third College in San Diego.

RA: Okay, so I gave you the wrong name. It was Lumumba Zapata College. Okay. So what had happened, in fall of '68 and '69, is students at that college, including Angela Davis, and African American students and the Chicano students – they got together, and they said we want a college that represents, will teach us our history, as well as white students that were involved in it as well.

DC: And these were students who originally at San Diego State?

RA: They were already at UCSD... UCSD. Because the way they were developing UCSD was to have colleges, so that the university wouldn't feel so inhumane or you know, there would be an intimate touch. And they actually... and this is when there was a lot of organizing going around all over for ethnic studies departments and all of that, and I went to a lot of those demonstrations. I do remember those. And they were granted Lumumba Zapata college, but that was the temporary name. So the university called it Third College. So when I called Carlos Blanco, he says, "Come down. We can get you a job at Third College." So what am I, twenty three?! They have me interview for the Resident Dean position and the people on the interviewing committee are students and a couple of other people. And they give me the job of Resident Dean [laughter] of Third College the first year of its existence!

DC: Start at the top, like it!

RA: Yeah, so okay, so to be Resident Dean, one of the perks is you have this house and around the house, which is, you know, like a seventies kind of, you know, flat house thing and all around the house are the big dorms. Okay. And they've been doing recruiting of students to come to Third College at all levels, but especially the freshman level and recruiting faculty and staff and administrators. Okay, so far, so good. But from the very beginning, this effort was infiltrated, so that there were a couple of administrators who the university insisted be hired, even though the committee, the so called, you know, committee led by students, faculty and staff didn't want that person to be hired, they [administration] insisted some of these people be hired. And this individual stood up at the very first meeting and started talking about the black people don't have the same... you know, this is *not* serving black people, this is just serving you whites and Chicanos. And so it was very divisive from the very beginning. And, here I am in this fish bowl with the students around, and amongst the student body the same thing had already happened. In fact, there were guys kind of very similar to some of them who showed up in the Black Panther Party. "I'm out of prison," you know, the kind who stare at you and they never take their eye away, because that's how they've learned to behave, you know, to intimidate, to be the alpha individual. There were... there were those, and I very early on was attacked because look at my background, you know, I grew up in a Latino area, been in the Black Panther Party, I've been to Spain, I dance with my progressive friends, I even sing folk music, you know?! And I was attacked for having relationships with everybody. I was even told at a BSU meeting - Black Student Union meeting, "Roberta, as far as we know, you like Chicanos better than you like black people," you know, it was that kind of thing. It was extremely divisive. And we had courses like Third World Studies, we had some fabulous

professors, and I don't think there was a university in this country that had - to the degree that we had it - that amount of control, had that potential to be something fabulous. But, I'm quite sure it [the disruption] was probably part of the COINTELRO [COunter INTELligence PROgram] – an FBI illegal surveillance program] just like the Panthers had suffered from the COINTELPRO program. There was no doubt about it, and it turned into like -- I have a tendency when things are really bad, to forget. But I was threatened one night, at one night at gunpoint and I left and I went to Carlos Blanco's house. He just keeps coming up, you know [laughter]? [1:35:00] And they go, "Roberta, don't you remember? This is what they said. This is what they did. They said they're going to get you and stuff. And that's why you... you know?" Okay, yeah. And so it was very... it was a very, very difficult time, so I quit after nine months because among other things, I was not a good Resident Dean. I was supposed to be putting on dances and things, and I was supposed to say, "Oh, you broke a window. Okay, your family's gonna have to pay for it," and all that kind of stuff. And I was awful... it was absolutely awful, it was the wrong job, I didn't like it. I actually probably quit before I was going to get fired.

So I quit, and I applied to two places for graduate school. I applied to the School of Education at Harvard because they had sent me some advertisement when I was a senior at Berkeley and I applied to literature department at UCSD. Well, Harvard offered me a full scholarship to be in their Masters program, and I figured that wasn't going to make it because it was cold back there, and I was a little insulted. And so I did the program at UCSD. I got a PhD in Comparative Literature.

DC: Let me ask you, one quick question just going back for just a second. Did your...because you were talking about folks challenging you, sort of, on the variety of your

interests and your background while at Third college but did this - did this come up in the Black Panther Party as well at all?.

RA: You know, not so much, but it came up around food. Okay, so you heard my story about the ribs. So in the in the-- no, there were a lot of light skin, there were a number of light-skinned people. There *is* antagonism based on skin color in the black community, and people who are lighter-skinned are seen as, you know, more privileged. And some people find it more attractive or all that kind of stuff, and there's a long history of that in this country. *That* didn't make itself apparent to me while I was in the Black Panther Party. But, having been raised by a Jewish mom who wasn't even that good a cook we once in a while had to cook for everybody. So me and this other girl and her name was, I want to say, Shelly, her name was Shelly! And she was very light-skinned and her-- clearly her mom was white too -- it was one of those things, and we had to cook. So I had a specialty, which was tuna casserole that comes out of the *Joy of Cooking* book with Kellogg's Frost, not Frosted, but flakes, that you put on top to give it that little crunch and probably cream of mushroom soup. No...[laughter] that did not go over. Me and Shelly were the only people eating that thing, nobody. We heard about it later [laughter]. I did my best!

DC: What's this – mayonnaise?!

RA: But you know. The other contradiction for me, I'll be honest, you know, is very often there were so many times when African American men would be with white women, especially in the educated zone, you know, that I would kind of like...ummm! And, but that it's kind of hard because my mom's white, you know, so there is that it's a very, very, very complicated dynamic. And working on the project that I've been working on recently, I hear a

little bit about it, sometimes. It's not hostile, but, you know, that's a dynamic and it's out there... status based on skin color.

DC: Right? Well, thank you for answering that. So back, to... so starting your graduate program.

RA: Right! So that was just a lot of fun. You know, the graduate program at that time - there were grants. I got a Ford Grant which, you know, if you read Naomi Klein, it was a lot dirtier than I may have thought of, but it didn't... they didn't influence what I was doing, and I got a PhD in Comparative Literature. But I probably was in the wrong area because my... my dissertation was the fictional portrayal of popular movements. So I read these different books, you know, about Haiti and Cuba and Mexico and the United States, about slave rebellions and revolutions, and that's what I wrote about. But then after I got that degree, I only applied to one college, and I recognize that I didn't want to be in the academy, you know, I didn't want to have that "publish or perish" and the kind of competition that I saw [1:40:00] within faculty members and, you know, that whole process.

So I actually started teaching adult school for a while. I taught adult school, mostly ESL for a lot of refugees from Vietnam for about twelve years. And that was interesting, too, to hear their stories, because that forced me to see things in a little more complex way. And then, fortunately, I was recruited to organize the ESL program at City College, and that's where I was the last twenty-five years, and I feel like at City College, my contribution was primarily becoming the department Chair, and I was there at the time, for the English department, and I was there at a time when I could really turn around the composition of the faculty. So that we have increasingly diverse faculty, progressive faculty, a very dedicated faculty, and the department functions well, and that's quite a good legacy, because there's a lot

of non-functioning, dysfunctional English departments out there and every other kind of department. So that was good. But also at City College, I also was responsible for about four or five years for the labor studies program. It was... it was a program that was floundering for a while. It's always a difficult program to make successful in San Diego. And so we offered an AA – an associate's degree -- in labor studies, and so it would be a class in the history of labor. And now there is a class that I wasn't involved with that in organizing. And then there's lots of classes like worker's compensation and disability and a lot of things about law, you know, and how to be... as well as leadership classes. And I introduced the occupational safety and health classes, and those are very important, and we got a bigger variety of people to come to those classes, and we worked with people from the UCLA labor program to organize those and people from up there came down to teach a number of those classes. One of the reasons I think it's difficult is because I'm not sure the leadership of all the unions really want to develop the next generation to take their place. That's one. Now, that would be different for different locals and different leaders. Another one is, many of them have their built-in classes that they give for shop stewards or whatever, so there's some, you know, overlap or redundancy. Yeah!

So that is... that is one of the one of the struggles. I used to go to the meetings of the Central Labor Council regularly, and they would say, "This is good, this is good, this is good. This is good." But then they didn't send the people to the classes. So it's always a struggle to keep your classes, classes is full. Now there is a labor studies program in Los Angeles - LA trade tech, I believe, which is very successful. Y'know, we're trying to follow some of his examples, but it hasn't taken off, so any time there's a fall in enrollment, we have a fall there. However, they are doing some very interesting things now. They're developing internships for people, and they're working with CPI – Center... what does it stand for?

JESSICA JOLLET: Center for Policy Initiatives

RA: Yeah, it's... it's a local Center for Policy Initiatives. And so they're getting a lot of really good hands-on experience and they're getting paid for doing it as well, so there *is* a pretty good cohort of people who are going through that. So those you know, that covers twenty five years of my life, but there was a lot of work, and I felt it was I was able to do productive, really good things there. I also start-- I also taught in the Chicano Studies program, and there was a little bit of, you know, there was a little bit of conflict! But, yeah, yeah, some people wanted to keep me out, but she had no reason, that administrator, to do so. I says, if you don't want me to do it because I'm not Chicano, just say that and I won't do it, you know, because, you know, but that wasn't it. Oops, I'd I mess something that. You know, it didn't turn out to be a problem. Actually, that was one of my favorite places. Black studies I would have liked to have taught, but it just didn't work out...just didn't work out because I was "Big English Person".

DC: Did Third College survive?

RA: Yes, [1:45:00] in a sense. It's now called Thurgood Marshall. And I think most of the curriculum, you know, there's some, still, there are still some elements from Third College, but it certainly is not the revolution experiment... the revolutionary experiment that it started out to be.

DC: It's not "Lumumba Zapata."

RA: It's not Lumumba Zapata. I don't know that it's serving Latino, African American and poor folks population in the same sense. Yeah, I mean, look at the-- when I went to Berkeley, there was not even one percent African American [student population], right? I think we're getting close to that, too on the UCSD campuses, I mean, it's very, very low.

DC: It was up and falling... has fallen? Was it up higher?

RA: Yeah, for a while it was up higher. Well, with Third College and with affirmative action, but that has fallen to as low as it was in 1964. On some of these campuses, [they] have a lot of Asian [students], but yeah, they do not have that kind of representation. It's... they do have quite a lot more Latino and Chicano, but see college is very mixed. It's still much more heavily Latino now, because that's what's happening with the demographic. But yeah, no, we've gone back, we've gone back. I mean, to think that the packing houses are in many respects just as bad as they were when my father was working there in nineteen thirty two or something. And not [up] in unions. To look at the police brutality that we have now and the murders just as...

Well, I... I don't have off the tip of my tongue what's happening in the South, but in Oakland, California, it's similar to where we are now. Not very cheery, but there is some good stuff! Okay, alright. There's some good stuff that I think is very important. And I don't think it's just unique to San Diego, but it... it is a little bit unique to San Diego. There is a... there is a community organization called Pillars of the Community and I'm now relatively active in at least one aspect of that organization. It's a faith based organization but you... Muslim ... see my family, we got the black, we got the Jewish and pretty much the only thing that was left that people would be mad at, would be the Muslim [laughter]. So my son decided to fix that, and he converted to Islam a long time ago... twenty years ago. So now I got the Muslim thing, and so I got grandsons whose mother's from Gujarat. Gujarat [India] is an interesting place to be Muslim. So I got Urdu-speaking grandsons who wear their *kuffiyah*. Then I've been to weddings with the *yarmulke*. We got it all covered!

DC: To the reservation... back to the Indian reservation!?

RA: Yeah, that's right, the Native American stuff. Yeah! So our family kind of just happened that way. So it's a faith-based organization [Pillars of the Community], but there's a lot of people who are not Muslim who are served by the organization and also work within... within it. They have a storefront in Encanto in southeast San Diego, which is not unlike the Black Panther storefronts that we used to have, except this one doesn't have two stories, and there's a lot of community activities that... that take place, just probably more prepared to go through all of them. But one of the emphasis is helping people who get out of prison adjust and succeed in life outside of prison. Other things that they're doing is they're organizing within the community to get people more politically active. A major thrust -- a campaign now -- is the San Diego Thirty Three campaign, and that's because in the whole state of California -- I'm not sure the whole state of California is aware of this -- there's a penal code -- penal code 182.5, and that penal code is the gang documentation and is based on one of these California initiatives that got passed in the early 2000's. And it says, if you have... if they can demonstrate that you've done two or three things, then they can say you are a gang member. So those two or three things can be, if you happen to be wearing the color green, if you happen to be standing [1:50:00] in your neighborhood in front of your grandmother's house - which somebody decided is a gang house, if you happen to be talking to a gang member, which could be your neighbor, right, that's enough! And God forbid, you do rap and put it on the Internet, right? That's enough. You're a documented gang member, but you don't know that and the documented gang members are from the ages of eight--

JJ: Nine.

RA: Ages of nine up, and there's thousands of them in the state of California. And so the District Attorney in San Diego got it in her head that she's going to test this out. So she

arrests thirty-three African American men about two years ago, including Aaron Harvey and Brandon... Brandon Duncan. Aaron Harvey at the time was in Las Vegas, getting ready to study real estate and become a rich guy selling his real estate. And he hears all these helicopters and shit and they land, and the machine guns and SWAT. And he goes out and he says, "You guys making too much noise [laughter]. You must have lost your guy by now. Whoever you're looking for is long gone." And then it turned out they were looking for him. And [he asks] "What am I charged with?" And there's this whole series of violent and... events in San Diego, you're charged with all this. He says "I wasn't even in San Diego." "We know you weren't in San Diego, but you're a documented gang member and a gang carried it out, and we're gonna put you in jail, and we're charging you with all of these things." Did it include murder?

JJ: Not in that case, just shootings.

RA: Shootings. [He's put] in jail for seven months. They know perfectly well he had nothing to do with it and didn't have... and didn't even *know* about it. And he says, "Well, what do I get out of it? Why me?" he says. "Because your reputation went up with these, you know, with this violence or whatever, your street cred or whatever." And he's not even living in San Diego. So I don't know why they wanted to mess with him because his family came together, and they joined forces with the Pillars of the Community and Reclaiming the Community, another project which is broader than Pillars in San Diego, and did not just let him be stuck in jail. Because what most people do, they do not have legal resources and they make a plea bargain because they're facing fifty years in jail, in prison. And they say, "Well, you just say you're guilty and we'll give you eight [year sentence] or whatever."

DC: So they admit to something that they did not do?!

RA: People admit to it because they're terrified!

JJ: There's one young man that was 19 years old. He was the same exact case as Aaron's. [unintelligible] He was documented off Facebook posts. He signed a twenty year deal, so he's serving twenty years now.

RA: And he didn't have connections. So, between the family community and their own good sense, they [the Harvey family] didn't sign a deal, and they spent seven months in jail being shackled, being handcuffed, going back and forth, you know, to jury cases and so forth, and finally being freed. But as a consequence of that, there's a pretty decent movement in San Diego now addressing these police activities. So Pillars of the Community is involved in that. They also do things like workshops. [They address issues like] what are your rights if you get stopped, what can you do? What should you *not* do? What you don't have to do and all of that and what the consequences are. And two years ago -- was it two years ago? That my son, the Muslim, came up with the idea to do a rap CD, because he's of the brand that doesn't even listen to music, let alone rap. And they... they have connections, with so many relationships with so many community folks that they got major rappers from San Diego to put together a rap album -- that was a meaningful rap album -- to speak to the people in the streets who like listening to rap. Now when I put it on, you know, still rapping is kind of hard to listen to [for me], but it's a community activity. So then where I'm involved is... wasn't the rap album [laughter] ...the sound technician or anything. But another program we started last summer was just getting people together [1:55:00] to write their story, any aspect of their own story that they want to do, but make it a story, not your whole long life. And we... and then, the goal of doing that would be [that] we would invite your family and some friends, small gathering (we weren't looking at five hundred people, didn't want that) and friends, and you would read it to them. And we've

done that three different times with three different groups, and it is an amazing process to go through, absolutely amazing, because these people, we didn't ask them to, but they all found sometimes their most traumatic incident in their life, and sometimes their most, moment of achievement and an awareness of where they had been. And so coincidentally, not exactly on purpose, it's all people of color, more or less ... it's all African American, it's Chicano and we work together. But we work together and you have to trust [each other] because you're trying to write and you read it to somebody else and somebody else tells you what they think, and maybe you can, you know, make this a letter... it'll work.

And so there are all kinds of stories. Some of them are neglect; some of them are seeing your mother murdered in front of you. Well, one of them is *that*. Some is being bussed to another school system and what that does to your morale, you know, if you get bussed to like a white school, education things. One was an incredible [story of] educational achievement. The guy had a background in prison and breaking the law and all kinds of stuff. Aaron Harvey, one of the important people, important in that he's gone so public and brought the issue public for the San Diego Thirty Three, wrote a story about visiting his uncle in jail. And then he'd gone with his mother, and then the second part of the story, it's him who's in jail, pretty much the same scenario. People with some serious prison experiences. I mean, I learned, I had to say, you know, I don't know what it's like to live in a family where your parents are drug addicts and [so I asked them to say] what did that look like? What was it like when you guys came home, you know? So I learned so much and at the same time, these are people who are thriving and struggling to thrive. I mean, they're struggling with life now, it's not easy. Coincidentally, at least half of them are related to City College in one way or another. I have a Palestinian colleague who was actually, helped start that program. And she just gave a story about how

well, if people say where are you from, she says, "I'm from Detroit". [And they respond] "NO! Where are you *really* from?!" You know? And then ... then how she's gotten stereotyped and sort of branded and how... how that's an issue for folks -- how to identify yourself. So it's a wide variety. So okay, so these people read their stories, and that was very successful. And then we've gotten the opportunity because here we have a press called City Works Press, and it's an independent press. And now those stories, they're going to get published.

DC: Great, fantastic.

RA: Yeah! And Ericka [Huggins], I'm not sure if she's going to get it in on time because we have to get it. They said she would write a blurb. Big Man wrote a wonderful blurb about it and how important it is to get these stories out. And, I don't know if you know Jimmy Santiago Baca, Luis Rodriguez? Both of them, they're very important Chicano writers, but one of them had experience with gangs. The other one, a lot of experience with prisons and stuff, and that's what they wrote about. You know, we teach them a lot in our classes, and so it's... it's really an exciting project. We're gonna pick it up again and see where it goes. So it's modest but altogether, we included everybody who wanted to be included in the publishing part. We included everybody, nineteen authors.

DC: So there's... there's one very explicit connection there. You're talking about the blurbs with the Black Panther Party. But can you tell me about, have there been other opportunities for sort of bringing in lessons of your own experience with the Black Panther Party to the work that's going on in San Diego now?

RA: Now, you know, I've gone to classes pretty much. I've gone to classes and then last year, and I've talked to classes and given presentations. I'm being asked to be involved in a

panel at San Diego State. I've spoken twice at UCSD, [2:00:00] and it was usually at times when there was organization going on. Once, shortly after there were some awful incidents at UCSD. I don't know if you're familiar with them, but there was like, I don't know, effigies of like Ku Klux, no, not effigies, Ku Klux Klan, but very threatening kinds of stuff. Do you remember what it is?

JJ: Well, first they had the "Compton Cookout" [racially-themed, racist party held by UCSD students, including members of the Pi Kappa Alpha fraternity]

RA: Yeah, they had this so-called "Compton Cookout".

JJ: They had nooses [unintelligible].

RA: Nooses on the campus. Yeah, and then graffiti, you know, anti-black graffiti. So I've spoken to UCSD a few times, and I have those things coming up. When "Big Man" came down, I presented him and spoke to those and yeah, that's pretty much the extent. I'm not a star. I, you know, I just happened to be in a lot of places.

JJ: [laughter] Sorry, you did this huge amazing thing and you...

RA: No, I'm not a star! I've just been in some places. I've done things my life where I didn't know what the risks were, always. Yeah, I was in the Panthers for a year, a serious year. And I met some people who I respect very, very much. But I did not establish the ongoing relationships, particularly with women. Part of the problem with the Panthers, one of the problems -- we didn't take care of ourselves, you're going to hear this Ericka Huggins: We did not take care of ourselves. We were just running all the time. And some of that included

personal relations. And I'm talking only about my year, 1969, in Oakland headquarters. I cannot speak for what was going on every place else, and later.

DC: So how did that manifest when you said not taking care of yourself?

RA: Well, part of what I was thinking about is not taking care of resources, for me anyway, having good relationships with other women in the party. There just wasn't any time. You're just running around all the time, or you go home and sleep if you had your own home or you'd sleep there. We were always doing something. So for example, I don't think I spoke to anybody else about the sexual harassment. Now, that seems a little silly. You know that's, it shouldn't have been that way.

DC: What about the stress or mental health repercussions of being in high stress, life situation?

RA: You know, I never thought about it. I think my way to deal with high stress is to forget, like, the details. I think my highest stress was actually Third College, believe it or not, and I've forgotten the details. I'd forgotten. I can just tell you, you know, Carlos Blanco and his entire family tells me that I was threatened by guns. I would not have said. I would say, "Somebody was intimidating me and I left," but I didn't remember the guns and everybody else did, you know? So it's kind of like, yeah, there's... there's an emotional toll, but I think I just sort of suppressed that emotional toll and keep on keeping on. There's an emotional toll also. You know, I always said well, those people who say-- I had a teacher in high school and he said -- it was like some stupid class like, I don't know, social adjustment or something. This was a light skinned black guy. He wore a, some kind of toupee. It looked like shoe polish to us on the back of his head. And one day, he said, "The kids who are worst adjusted are the ones who are

born out of wedlock.” Well, for sure, I was born out of wedlock because it was illegal [for my parents] to be married and mixed race. And I said, “Oh, he's crazy because I have the advantage of being both,” and the born out of wedlock, well, that never gave me trouble. But being mixed-race in a time of identity politics *is* a problem. And I have to be really honest, I got a lot of Jewish in me. I was very close to my grandmother. You know, I walk through the world as African American, I'm fine with that. My grandmother even would ask me. I says, “I got a boyfriend.” She would say, “Is he Jewish?!” [laughter] You know, it's just there, so when we're talking about Israel and Palestine, yes, I agree. And my grandmother was very upset with Israeli policies regarding Palestine, very upset, and she would be in arguments with all her Jewish old lady friends all the time about that. But then I'm... I don't want to hear anything that sounds a little bit like anti-Semitic, you know, even though I might even be getting kidded [2:05:00] like by my Muslim grandkids or whatever. “No, what're you talking about?! You've got to understand the history of the Jews,” and “Yes, what their... what large aspects of the government is doing now is really bad. But, don't forget, there's people in Israel who don't agree, and they have to be pretty brave if they're fighting against this mainstream.”

So this is what, I'm always navigating that. I do not like to go to anything that's strictly racial based. I don't go to the African American faculty staff meetings -- so kind of over that -- and I don't go to the one hundred percent Chicano things. And I'm always invited... I'm always invited to those things. It's probably stupid of me not to go, but I don't want to go to anything that's so racially, that's so racially-based. That's just, you know, I think that's, that's not the Pant -- well part of it, you know, the Panthers -- what's interesting about the Panthers is they did reach out to other groups. It was, “Yes, we want to be a black group, but we want to reach out to other groups, not, you know, attack them and fight over the crumbs,” and I think that's very,

that... that's very important and they did do that. And, you know, once in a while nationalism would come in, but, but there's reasons for black people to have a chip on their shoulder. You know, it's [you] have to discuss why that's there... if chip on the shoulder is the right expression, [actually] it's not!

DC: Well...

RA: I think I got most of it.

DC: I think we could talk for hours more and would love to do that. But we should probably start to wrap up. Is there something that... is there anything that you thought I was going to ask that I didn't ask, that I should have asked today in the conversation?

RA: I'll think of that, tonight for sure. [pause] We covered a lot of territory. I would just like to add that my sister also is pretty much dedicated her life to health care for the African American community and has organized a lot of things. My brother, because she became a medical doctor and neither of our parents had gone to college, my brother became -- he actually suffered the most in the McCarthy period, because the FBI even came and visited him in San Luis Obispo when he was in college and everything. So he kind of stayed away from that activist kind of thing. But he became the CEO of no, the chief medical officer of Kaiser [Permanente] of... of a whole section of Kaiser in Los Angeles and I think he actually changed the culture of the hospital. At least that's how people talked. And they... they used, and they'd talk, "When Dr. Alex..." because he had a relationship with the staff, with the custodians, with the nurses and the doctors, okay. But they says, "When Dr. Alexander first came we used to talk amongst ourselves and we say, 'Is he a brother... or what?!'" Then they figured it out... yes, yes, yes! He

was, you know, in his heart, above all, you know, and in his allegiances and who he thought was, you know, was important. And that's the legacy of the family. And my other regret is that I didn't-- I interviewed my aunt. I interviewed my brother, interviewed my sister. This is after my father's death and after my mother's death, and I interviewed some cousins, but I never interviewed my mother. And that was a big mistake because I think she was the solid rock behind that whole operation, holding the family together, going to a Holiness Church in Perris, California. She had to go too, you know, with my uncle and aunt. And how did she do it for life?!

DC: You've carried her with you, though.

RA: Yeah, it's that quiet part. That quiet strength that she had.

DC: Well, thank you so much. Thank you for everything you've done. And obviously, but also for spending time with us today and telling this incredibly important story. Thank you. Fascinating story.

RA: Yeah. Thank you. And I want to pick your brains about what to do with my all my stuff. I got more.

[END]