

Henrie Monteith Treadwell

Niece of Modjeska Simkins, owner of Motel Simbeth
Columbia, South Carolina
December 7, 2018 10:15am

Thank you again Henri Treadwell for meeting with me today. We are in Columbia, South Carolina. My name is Candacy Taylor and I'm a cultural documentarian for the Library of Congress and we are here to talk about Modjeska Simkins. It is December 7, it's about 10:15am and it's 2018. Please state your name.

I am Henrie, H-E-N-R-I-E Montieth, M-O-N-T-E-I-T-H, Treadwell, T-R-E-A-D-W-E-L-L.

Is that hyphenated?

No.

Okay. Can you tell me the first time you heard about the Green Book and the first time you heard about Modjeska being connected to it.

I always knew about the *Green Book* because Motel Simbeth and the fact that I would go out there when she there or when she wasn't there. So I knew about it for a long time but as you are growing up in that environment you don't really recognize the significance of what's going on around you, but I was delighted to see the interest in the *Green Book* become elevated in the nation and to see that Motel Simbeth was a part of it. Probably the research of the future will be to determine precisely where that motel was located now and to see if we can do some kind of historic landmark or something there. But it's been fairly difficult to figure that part out.

So first of all figuring out where it was and where that land is.

Right.

So let's go back and please tell me who Modjeska Simkins was, who she was to you and anything you can tell me about what she looked like at the age when you first knew her.

Aunt Modjeska was my mother's older sister. They were best friends. My mother was Rebecca Monteith. And the Monteith family was a very close family and so we saw a lot of each other so I saw my aunt several times a week, and spent a lot of time in her home and she would also come out to the homestead. She was a woman who sometimes people have said at her age, I looked like her. I have a daughter who looks exactly like her at this young...you know Monteith's have this long face, some kind of...the eyes are brown, so it's a look that has really transcended generations. She was a lovely woman, a woman of many words yet precision was I think, characteristic of the use of her language. She was sharp, witty, able to spin a phrase in a moment, to take you from something very

serious to a moment of laughter. Which I think was so important and continues to be important in facing the struggles that we face. You can't be sad all the time. You have to find the joy in it. And she was able to do that. She was a woman who worked in South Carolina as a teacher. When she married, she was no longer able to teach according to the laws of the time, and she began to work in her husband's businesses and eventually came to work in the Victory Savings Bank. But I'm skipping over many, many things because she became interested in her work after teaching and going to the Tuberculosis Association and finding that the health issues faced by African Americans, or blacks, or negroes, or whatever we were being called at that time, were really atrocious. There was no hope, no help. And one of the things she did when she began that work was to go into the communities and have the women write the old wives tales. How do you cure this? How do you take care of that disease? What do you do when someone dies and those handwritten things are at the University of the South Carolina. I turned them over to them. Always wanted to do something with them myself but...

So she collected them in hope that they would live on? Did she plan to publish them?

I don't know what her plan was for them. But I think, I understand as a person also in public health is that you find out what people believe before you began to try to intervene, and so you can use that wisdom in community to you can say it's okay to do that, but we also need to do this new thing. That was my thinking of why she collected them. But I think it was genius in the way she worked with people and how she got to know people to establish a comfort level. So I was intrigued by those. It was nothing earth-shaking in it, but it is the handwriting of women from the communities in that time.

And establishing a practice in how she approached solutions.

Exactly. And I think she began to see in that work, and this is when she became an advocate. She began to see that there were so many injustices. We can talk about Civil Rights or whatever, but there was health injustice, social injustice and no way out. If one just wanted to treat a disease that doesn't cure it we know now that the poverty that she saw, the economic constraints that people were living in, the lack of proper sewage, water, food. All of those things, housing...really fired her spirit.

Now Aunt Modjeska came from a family too. Her mother established the school for black children in Columbia and so there was a history of activism. There was also a history of knowing who you were. Aunt Modjeska's father, my grandfather, moved his family out of the city of Atlanta out to where the family homestead was because he didn't want his children drawn into service in the homes or other menial types of jobs so he moved them out on thirty acres, forty acres, built a house and that's where they stayed. So I think in some ways, they had this little cocoon, that they grew up in with a family that was fiercely independent, they knew who they were, they knew what the dangers were, but they didn't live in fear, they lived in to problem solve.

[8:20]

And so the school was formed and my mother taught in that school for a while. My grandmother also established a church, Second Calvary Baptist Church.

This was outside of Atlanta?

No, this was in Columbia [South Carolina]. They've always been in Columbia. I'm the one who has left and come back, now and then. But all of these things happened in Columbia. And she is...I think, they were given permission by virtue of watching what they're parents did to move the needle forward on Civil Rights to also themselves establish their own work in the area and I think Aunt Modjeska just took it as far as she could. And that in fact made her a pioneer. You can look at the school to segregation lawsuits across the nation that started in South Carolina. As a child, I know my aunt would bring out to the home, boxes of clothing, boxes of food that they got from the north for us to separate and put into appropriate piles so that they could be delivered to people in Clarendon County etc...In some ways, she helped me at least to grow up in the spirit of advocacy, recognizing what was wrong and really doing something about it. She was so active, I think that you cannot look at Civil Rights activism in South Carolina and not really see her fingerprints on much of it because she was everywhere. Sunday afternoons when many people were sitting on the porch after a meal, if they were fortunate enough to have one, I was in a car with her riding down to some church in some rural community because she was always on the go, always speaking, and just a funny person, riding along the street [she'd say] *That look like one of them preachers over there who isn't doing that he needs to do.* You know, it was just kind of a rolling show with her. But she was so accurate in her perceptions and her conclusions about things.

So she set up several NAACP chapters throughout the state?

Yes.

Can you tell me what you know about that?

Probably not more than that, except the challenges that she began to face when others that were concerned about her leadership.

What does it mean to set up a NAACP chapter. Do you go to a community and find folks of color and say this is something you should join?

Right. That is the way it works. Yes, and you get people who are able, willing, and not afraid to become identified with that type of activism which now it's safe, safer than safe, but of course then, it was not.

My second project was called American Roots, and I was looking at beauty shops throughout the United States and beauty shop culture. And I had heard that especially during the Civil Rights Movement that some black people wanted to be a part of the NAACP but for all kinds of reasons they felt like they maybe had to shield themselves from it too, so they would have their mail, [their NAACP mail], mailed to the beauty shop. That's the address they would give. Have you heard of this? Do you have any reference? It was just kind of hearsay. I just wondered if you ever heard that?

I have heard that and it is absolutely true. I say that we did not live in fear but we lived carefully. And so people could join an organization but you had to be cautious. There was so much retribution against anyone who stood up for their rights. Aunt Modjeska was involved with her brother, Henry Montieth [assumed spelling] in the form of the Victory Savings Bank which became the source of revenue for individuals who lost their jobs, because they were involved in activism or couldn't buy houses or cars, etc...because they had no access to capital. So in some ways she became a person

who worked...you know we need political organizations, the NAACP, we need food and clothing for families, so that was part of it, we need access to capital, there was a bank, and of course they always worked on educational issues. They really worked in a very comprehensive manner. [phone rings]

They worked in a comprehensive manner, which today, is just coming back today, people want...in my field, being public health, we talk about the social determinants of health and working on everything around the person to make them whole and healthy. I think that's the way Aunt Modjeska worked. She established this pattern of working on everything that affected people so that they could, in fact, be active members of a movement. It was a difficult time. I still have in my memory, the faces of people who would come up from say Clarendon who had been burned out etc...who would come to the house and [have] looks of terror and hopelessness on their faces because of what was happening but to the degree possible Aunt Modjeska and colleagues worked to put people back together again. But we know many never got totally healed because it was just too searing, too jarring, too painful. I think she was a woman with tremendous insight and heart and so she couldn't...I think some people use movements to get people mobilized and out there and let's go after a cause but they don't look at what the needs are of the people who are in the movement, and she was one who looked at the person as a part of the movement as well as the movement itself and the goals of the movement.

She was married?

She was married. She did not have children. I think in some ways my mother shared me with her. When I was sick, they would take me down to her house and she would be the one up all night nursing me with a cold or something, so I think that was a part of it, but I think she also treated many people out there as people for whom she had responsibility, her children. We always talk about in the family, her oatmeal raisin cookies that she would make for us, so she was regular person, she would cook wonderful meals. Her husband...she'd cook his salmon and corn cream which he loved and ate every day. It's just what she and what he did.

He must have been a unique person to...it sounds like...I've listened to some of the tapes of her talking and did as much research as I could about her and she talks about being on the road, she was busy, she was on a mission and she wasn't the traditional housewife.

No. I think theirs was not the traditional marriage. All I know is when I was there, he was there, he was one we loved because he would give us more money than she would and more candy than she would, just a very nice man. I think whatever else it gave her a bit of cover to have a husband, I believe. Sometimes you need that. He was a well-known business man here in the city so one would not bother Andrew Simkins without really thinking of consequences, so I'm sure...

What kinds of businesses did he have?

He had gas stations, and corner stores and liquor stores etc...

Do you know how Motel Simbeth came along, because apparently it was the combination between another man and her name because her name is Simkins, [which was the "Sim" part of Simbeth]

Did you send me...someone sent me information on Bethel [co-owner], maybe it was Bobby. Yes, we've been trying to track that part of it down, too. But it's almost... somewhere, someone has the documents on that hotel, you know, they show up in somebody's attic at some point.

18:10

They may have unfortunately, the documents in her home when everything was taken...stolen, so we lost that. But somewhere there is someone or something with information on the hotel, but it was a combination. I knew him well, he would always come to the home.

What was he like?

Jovial, nice, tall, dark skin, very pleasant person. He was sort of like family, because he was around so much.

Do you remember...what age were you? Was the motel just always there?

No, no. I don't recall my age. I know it was a time when some of my first real memories of when James Brown would come through and stay at the motel and he would take me and my brother down to the shows with him.

How old were you?

Must have been around ten or so. Very impressionable. Eyes wide open.

Did you know who he was?

Yes! Of course, I knew who he was. And when he said, "Let me take these children on down to the show with me and we were just so happy. And we would sit behind the stage, behind the curtain and watch the show from the stage and then we'd come back home. And other performers, it was similar, they would do the same.

Did Modjeska know James Brown? I mean just to let some rock star take your kids [laughing].

Yeah. I guess they felt they knew him well enough. I didn't hear any hesitations about it at all. I think the way the relationships were, I can recall being at the motel and James Brown, as many people, would have his own cook or something with him and aunt Modjeska would cook a lot up there, but his own cook would be in the kitchen cooking and he would be sitting there telling her what to cook and I'm sitting there watching all of this. It was like, normal, everyday, you never really...someone should have said, *you should mark this time in memory*, but I had no idea that it would become so important.

Was he in his "I'm black and I'm proud" phase or was this before the "Please, Please, Please"

I think it was the "Please, Please, Please" stage.

And he had his processed hair.

Yes.

Do you remember anything about what he was wearing?

No, just as I saw him...shirt and collar.

When he would drive you, do you remember the car?

Oh, he'd have these big Cadillacs, you know, there'd be a couple of them. He'd have his band members with him. So we're getting in these big Cadillacs that we never would have dreamed of riding in and go down to the shows and come back afterwards. And it was really very nice, he always treated us so well. And he didn't have to do it. But you know it was a time in our history when people really took an interest in other peoples' children and I'm not suggesting that time is gone, but I'm saying I was fortunate enough to be a part of it because he could have just driven off. And that would have been that, but he didn't and it was that extra step, because he was taking responsibility for two minor children. I think when he took us and he sat us in these chairs right there at the stage we were always in the corner of his eye. So it was really a lovely time.

That's amazing. I love that story and I think there's something about, like you said, not that that time is gone but it is different now. I don't see that happening now because of all kinds of reasons. So we're going to say for the tape it was Frank E. Bethel who was the co-owner of the Motel Simbeth. I read about the shootings there. I was wondering what you know about that. I have a quote, I don't think I have it here but when I watched old videos of her that were taken maybe in the '70s of Modjeska saying "That KKK...they better not come up this front porch." She just had this kind of fierceness and this fearlessness. But do you remember this? I think there were three shootings in a week?

Hmm mmm.

But the newspapers were very vague it.

Well no one ever was identified. She would say the shootings occurred...my own sense is that then the Sherriff would come. I think that we were never sure, because she would come to the house out there after the shootings and we were never sure it wasn't the Sherriff himself and his minions causing the problem and then coming to help and I think at some point they knew there was no help coming to make this stop. We were just never convinced...let me say it a different way, about who it really was, the source of the shootings but clearly there was no real attempt to stop it and therefore so it really threatened the survival of the institution.

But we don't know what may have happened before that week? Did she upset somebody? Was she battling with any locals?

No, no, nothing new had happened. It was just...these were the things you expected really and I think that, you know because people knew Modjeska and that motel was far enough out there that it wasn't bothering anyone and no one needed to be concerned with it. And I would say there was never anything else in her life that caused anyone to react in such a manner. I really believe it was around property because it just didn't make sense otherwise. The only other violence against the family was when I was going to the university and they threw the dynamite in the wrong yard, but those are the only two incidents.

What was that?

I was integrating the University of South Carolina and they were, I guess, attempting to frighten me and my family, so somebody threw some sticks of dynamite in the yards out there around on the homestead. Those are the only two incidents of violence that I ever recall happening.

Was the Simbeth...do you know what the clientele was, primarily?

Just regular black people.

But primarily black.

Yes. Always black.

So there wasn't integration happening there?

No. No. No. I think somehow people must have known. I never saw anyone there except black people. You know, just regular black couples and families. It was a nice place.

And there were about 10 or 11 units?

Hmm mmm.

And Modjeska would cook?

Yes.

Was there a restaurant? Or would she just cook for the people?

I can't recall that. I can't recall all of the details of how everything happened. I just know that I would see her in the kitchen cooking. I suspect that she cooked and people came up to eat the meals. I don't recall a huge staff out there that would have been able to do things like the room service etc...so I don't know.

Do you know roughly about the staff? Were there just a few people?

Just a few. And I do not know who they are really or were. At some point, I think maybe I'll take an add out in the newspaper and see if anybody shows up and says they knew someone.

Yes, because they are probably passing. We are losing them.

Yeah.

[26:46]

So I have here that she was born in 1899, Modjeska, and she talks about growing up and remembering that her great grandmother and grandfather were slaves and her father was just five years after freedom. When she talks about she says this kind of shapes her world view around...and there's no mistake where she came from and there was always a

fight to make sure we maintain our freedom and independence. So she learned this as a very young child. Do you know much about her mother?

Her mother, my grandmother was the most fierce woman you would ever want to meet. She was a strong woman, tall, light-skinned, fair, many would think she was white. Everybody called her Mrs. Montieth. White people called her Mrs. Montieth. She would not respond to anything else. She was a strong figure. She was a matriarch. When her husband died tragically of a heart attack at an early age, she carried on and raised children. All who wanted to went to college. One [went] to medical school. Two of the girls got Master's Degrees. And then she oversaw the operations of two farms. A farm here and a farm in Pontiac. And we, when I say we, Modjeska included, and we'd go to Pontiac, they slaughter hogs and chickens and things and my grandmother was the reigning matriarch she'd have everybody working, doing something. And she was one who did not believe that people should eat the hog chitterlings. So she'd dig a big hole in the ground and put men around to pour sand over them so nobody would get them. And I know that there were people who were standing around because I could see them saying *Oh my God, she's not going to let us have those*. But you know, she was that kind of woman.

Was that a class issue?

My grandmother, there were just things she didn't want people to do, it wasn't about class. [She was saying] *I want you to have a pork chop, not anything else*. She wanted people to...and I'm not suggesting that it's one level or another, I'm just saying her idea was I want you to have pork chop, pork roast, don't settle for anything less. And that's the way she raised us. She was a woman who...[people] often ask me about the plants around the house and I dug up one of those plants when we could get there. My grandmother had a switch bush, and I have a switch bush now in my yard, which I've never used on my grandchildren, but she was a fierce lady and without a doubt she set direction for her children. My mother filed a lawsuit to equalize pay for black and white teachers, here in Richland county and she won. So pay was equalized. My uncle started the bank, the Victory Savings Bank. Aunt Modjeska was everywhere doing everything. So you know, they got it from their parents, without a doubt, so there was nowhere else to go to get that sense of, not only advocacy but urgency and they worked at it every single day. Did we have fun? We had lots of fun. My grandmother also knew how to bring the family together and aunt Modjeska might be the picture on our little softball team but you know the older folks would choose between the children and we'd have teams and we'd be down in the yard, under the pecan trees and they would have cooked a big meal, and ice cream and all that. And we played together. But they were also very serious. We might have a family meeting before or after. There was some intentional focus on family. So while aunt Modjeska was here and there and young, she always came back and they were always drawn back. She and her mother were very close and one of the last, and her mother died in aunt Modjeska's home, she had a heart condition and went there and finally passed.

But one of the times that she and her mother were off at Pawleys Island when Hurricane Hazel came through and we had a home there on the beach, which was destroyed. But aunt Modjeska and her mother had been there vacationing and I recall them rushing back saying, we don't think we can make the night there. And it was true, the home was gone the next day, so they did get away just in time. But the point I'm trying to make is there was constant interaction back and forth in the family. Aunt Modjeska spent her fortune pursuing civil rights and justice, for those not only in South Carolina but across the nation. She was a warrior known for her work across the nation and she gave

everything she had. And we're still trying to make sure that her legacy stays in place and appropriately so.

I'm glad this will be recorded for the Library, because it's such an important story, and one that I didn't know. I wanted to talk about her...I don't want to just say colorful, but her attitude and response to the confederate flag [laughing].

[Laughing] "Let that damn rag stay there. Let the damn rag wave, at least you know what's in the hearts and minds of the men and women inside!" She would make that statement all the time.

And she's talking about the Confederate flag on top of the state building.

[33:34]

Yes. She would not get drawn into a "take it down" argument. *Let the damn rag wave.* And she was so right. It's so easy to hide racist attitudes. So as long as it was there, you knew about that, so you went ahead and worked on other things to kind of mitigate some of that impact. So her language was colorful and well known. Everyone knew how she felt about it, and she would say, "Let these fools sit there, leaning back, wiggling their toes and wagging their mouths and she just had a way of describing it, you know. She was clear. And I think that a part of that attitude, it really wasn't about the flag, it was about not being distracted by some proxy over there, when in fact you need to be concerned with the issues. And I probably cannot say that I learned anything directly from aunt Modjeska but I think I learned a lot because I began to see that you don't worry about the fly on the wall over there, if in fact on the way to the wall there's an open sewer, there's a this, there's a that, there's something else. You deal with those things, and let the fly alone. The fly will go when you've fixed all those other things. And so I think, her work in public health and my work in public health have been very similar. But again, did I know I was following in that...? No, not really, but probably. And I think that the way Modjeska, my mother, and others, they followed their parents as they were. And that is a part of what we risk losing in our families because we aren't so clear on that pathway, establishing that pathway.

I think what was so significant when I read that, and I think she even goes on to say about the Confederate Flag, something like "ain't no other country going to put up a flag for those who lost."

Yeah.

You know I've been all over this country and I see more Confederate flags in the North, in California and upstate New York than in Texas or even South Carolina. And she's so right, because taking the flag down doesn't mean that all the things going on inside there have changed, because people didn't change, and the people who fought for the flag are still there...But as we reengage with this...and I think a lot of times, like what you're saying, is a distraction from real issues. But Modjeska went after the Democrats, or they went after her and she defended herself, I don't know. Maybe you can tell me more about that?

I think that Modjeska spoke truth as she felt it, to anyone. She did not move away from any issues because of party, race, or gender. If something was happening that she felt was wrong, she stated that. And I think that becomes a part of the issues she had from time to time, [with] the NAACP and others. Modjeska simply spoke the truth as she saw it. And she was not wrong. But there were times you don't always win something, whatever winning is. But you just move to the side and go

around. It's like the white elephant. Is it there or is it not? We don't know, just walk around and go on your way. So I think...She took on the [Democratic] party and she took on the people in the party, but she would take on anyone who she felt did not see things her way. And when I say her way, I'm saying the way she saw as a pathway to justice. She was not a stubborn woman. Not at all. She was a negotiator. She was someone who was willing to see different ways to a win, but she would not yield to something that she felt was incorrect. And I think she probably had more of a win-win philosophy than many people had. And I think at the end of the day, she did win. Her legacy is clear. Her work, her footprints are there and a part of what we can do is to help others see how you make your way through all of the things out here to justice. I welcome seeing the Confederate flag wherever it is, because I know who you are. So I say, if that's what you want to buy, buy one, put it up, raise it high. Because then I know how to deal with you. And it's a lot easier than if you don't buy that flag. If that's what it takes to give somebody manhood or whatever and that's probably the way she would say, "If that's what makes you man, do it." And that would be fine, but she didn't run from a fight. She didn't start a fight, but she was certainly engaged if she felt she needed to.

I think that's the misnomer about the North versus the South. So many people think the Jim Crow South was so cruel and we find so many examples of underhanded tactics in the North that were even more insidious, and you couldn't see it so clearly but it was the same thing, if not worse, happening. So yes, I think it's refreshing when you see it and know it and know exactly what it means. I don't know if at some point we get...I know there's a school right, the Modjeska Simkins school that is trying to teach another generation of how to be...I mean nobody is going to be like her, but that fearlessness...it's not that you know your history, it's how you engage with it moving forward and how you have less tolerance for [racism] and you can see when things are not...people may say they believe one thing, but their actions or what they vote on, means something else. So holding people accountable at the risk of...the fact that she was a negotiator she would tell you the truth whether it seemed like you liked it or not, right?

Exactly.

So what do you think about...can you talk about the school and maybe what the future, how you see people becoming that effective?

I think that we are in the midst of discussing the degree to which that school furthers the legacy that the family feels is important. So very frankly, we will be looking at different ways of teaching and allowing people to learn about her past that do not engage with that school. I have some specific reasons for having reached this conclusion with my family. There have been a number of publications that have come out of that network that operates that school. The family has not been consulted in anyway in those publications and many of them are filled with errors around the family and around Modjeska. We cannot allow this to continue. There are things that concern me. The errors concern me, certainly. Some things are just factually, historically, incorrect.

And how did you find out about it?

Probably like anybody else, I just happened to stumble in to it, no one said anything about it, and so I think we have to look into the fact of people trying to hijack the history of someone, and the legacy of someone, for whatever reason. We are...one of the publications speaks a lot more than it should, and it probably shouldn't speak at all about some of the entanglements with the Communist Party, etc... Modjeska was not into that per say, she happened to be in programs with people, you know that happens. I'm on programs and I don't know who everybody is all the time. But if one

writes those things in a certain way it appears that's where she was mentally, politically, ideologically and that is not the case. And so as a part of our trying to capture history, we also have to make sure that it is correct. So, to answer your question in another way, one of the meetings that I had yesterday was around what kinds of activities can we initiate that will allow us to continue the teachings around the principles of advocacy and strategies for advocacy through a variety of activities and how we also begin to restrict the ability of people to use her name in activities that they are implementing. Because we have never given permission for that. And I was the executor of her estate, and I've never been approached. There are so many issues out there that one can attack and work on I've spent a lot of time working on issues of men of color, people in prison, all kinds of things, finding wedge issues to work on, but I think as I begin to narrow down things that I do career wise and politically, this is something that must be settled and I'm working with some of the young members of the family to also have them also step in and begin to be the monitors of what happens.

It seems like just even the use of her name, they shouldn't be able to have rights to that.

I would agree. And the simplest thing, someone could say the "Modjeska Simkins Ho-house" And we can't have that, so I think we have the opportunity for so many good things to happen and we don't want, even at the school to have something so tragic or unforeseen to happen and we have no control over it, but it may tarnish the legacy forever.

[46:10]

And I believe there is some tarnish, already. So we are not losing sight of work that can, will, and must be done. But we are certainly going to take a closer look at how it must be done and who's engaged.

Wow. Well thank you. I didn't know that was happening so I will adjust my thinking and writing accordingly to that.

Thank you.

I'm glad we covered that. We're wrapping up here. I just want to look at my notes...so just for the tape, she taught medieval history and civics at Benedict College?

Hmm mmm.

And she fought to equalize teacher's salaries?

Yes, and my mother was the one to file the lawsuit. And the interesting...the collateral damage was [that] she won the lawsuit and so teachers of color, black teachers, got the same pay, but then they allowed whites to punish my mother for having brought the law suit.

How did they punish her?

They punished her by never allowing her to have say some of the summer teaching programs, where she could earn extra income. They punished her by giving her the worst classroom in the building, you know the furthest away, etc...And this is known, it's historically documented that that's what

happened. But you know when you talk about...we were talking earlier about not living in fear and being careful and cautious, it wasn't always the whites. So that's was part of what we also struggled with. But it's also a struggle today. Look at outside of my family. I look at prisons and say "all these folks who are in charge here are black." You know, it's not any different than it was when they were white. So I think we have some soul searching to do, as a people, to figure out what was this whole civil rights movement about, if we have ended up with the same damage, and worse?

I agree. The thing about white supremacy is, no matter what race you are, it's such a powerful engine...

Yes.

Right, and whether you...there have been hundreds of years of marketing...even when you look at the Oscars and they say they need more black people at the table, that's not the solution....

No, no.

Because if the black people at the table had bought into that narrative then it doesn't do us any good. It's attacking the narrative and dismantling that, I think that's the priority. It's not just because somebody is black. For me, the mass incarceration [issue] is the Civil Rights crisis of our time.

I taught a course that was exactly titled that.

Really?

Hmm mmm. It's one of those things that we still haven't awakened to as well as we should and you know I think one of the issues around it now is that so many of us are employed in that system. So the solution is not just to shut it down, but where do we put people whose incomes now depend on it? I am amazed sitting in a room with women who would be of a certain social class and you find out where they're working and a third of them may be working criminal justice, at some level. So you see this really requires a major fix and I'm not sure we'll do it, and I won't say other things on tape.

Yes, I understand and I look at Michelle Alexander's work she says this something like this "not something we can tinker with," it's going to have to be a mass revolutionary status." The thing that's most shocking to me...knowing...learning about this and being focused on this issue for many years now, it has been going for decades, right?

Yes, yes.

And it's so much a part of...and my book ends looking after the Green Book, it ceased publication 1967, that was when Nixon went on steroids with his "War on Crime" initiatives, and when you look at Clinton's Crime Bill.

Yes.

And it makes me think of Modjeska Simkins because she would be the one to have called that out and said, "I don't care that he's a Democrat..."

Exactly.

This is wrong.

Exactly.

Right? And we didn't have enough of those people like Modjeska Simkins watching over both parties and understanding the damage. It's irreparable damage that has been done. And when I go to these Green Book sites, when I go to the South Side of Chicago where 53 people had been shot that weekend, and I go to Detroit, and Baltimore, and Cleveland where I see this million dollar blocks where 80% of the people there have pretty much been incarcerated and it breaks my heart because it's not just something that's happening now, it's generations of institutionalized schools..

Exactly...

...and lack of opportunities that we can't fix in our lifetime. And I don't know how...I think in 100 years people are going to look back on this time and say well how did we have Barack Obama and have almost a third of the black [young male] population in jail?

I believe that the writing on his legacy is yet to be done because I don't...so many people say he [Obama] wasn't allowed to do this, that, or the other. I don't know, but when you're in your second term, you do what you want to do, and we didn't hear the fierce knocking, even if you couldn't change it, could we have started the drumbeat which might have made the difference in the election because people may have heard that and more would have been tuned in. But if you're asking me to get out and go vote for that lady over there [Hillary Clinton], and everybody around me has been in prison and nobody has a job and junior just got in detention....not quite appealing to me at the moment. And I think that we have not...we're still tinkering around the edges and there's still too much fear and we are sitting in being fearful of what somebody may do and in the meantime the other side is going full steam ahead. And I, as you, am very worried about future generations. Are we just lost? I'm not sure that we aren't. Because you look at all the...I was also listening to...reading again very painfully about the foster care situation under Hilary Clinton, children who were away from their parents, and it was televised and I read it in the Times or something, both, where if you were incarcerated for a certain amount of time your children were permanently taken from you, and you had no ability to stop that, and you have no rights to approach that child now that you're out and on your own and doing well. You can't legally even find that child without repercussions, so there's a lot of pain here and we have certainly come a long way but we're losing people on the wayside every year and that's something that Aunt Modjeska would never have stood for, but we don't have enough people who are willing to really get up and stay there. I don't know why that is. I don't know what the fear is. It cannot be that they don't understand. So what is the fear?

I don't know. Like I said, if we could just have Modjeska's spirit of fearlessness in so many people who are motivated, because there's people out in the streets now...when I was on the road right after Trump got elected, so many of my white liberal friends would call me in tears... "Oh my God!" And well you know, I wasn't surprised.

Mmm mmm.

And people in my life were not surprised. And they said, "Oh, they're going to round up all the Muslims!" And they're in tears and I said "They have been rounding up black people for forty years..."

Hmm mmm.

...and nobody cared, nobody said anything, nobody called me tears.

Right.

You know at some point, I'm losing patience, but I'm grateful at least that there are more people who seem to have the veil lifted. They're like, "Oh my God! There's a crisis!" Ok, but how do we channel that and get that spirit of Modjeska in them and say, "I'm not going to sit here and listen to these attempts and trying to make these "on the fringes" like you say. I want something to happen.

Yeah.

And I don't know what it was that Modjeska did that pushed people. She just did stuff on her own.

Absolutely. That was it. She was someone, when I say fearless, I mean that, she would go at it at any angle she could get to it, day and night. Call people in the middle of the night. Wake them up and tell them what she thought. And all of those things make a difference because then people say, *I wonder how many people she's got behind her?* And she did have them behind her, but she didn't wait for somebody else to make the call, she made the call. And I think that's what we have to look for, who among us will make the call? Today. And not sit and call a committee meeting. It's time to move on. I think that it's also going to take some realignment of communities to come together, we have this serious discussion about immigration. I talk about people who are crossing the borders between prison and community every day. The numbers are not different but yet we do not relate those two, someone should relate those and then say we have all kinds of borders in this nation and we're building more, there's even more people that come across the international border. So there's some realignment that has to happen. I don't think there's trust and I think there will be people to work to make sure that trust does not develop, but the issues are the same. Everybody's locked up. And when they get out they are not going to be whole. Many, never again. That is a part of the tragedy, that many of these young men who have been locked away, they will never be whole again...nothing we can do to make them whole. But we can make them healthy and we can make them well. But their potential has been stolen.

Yeah, Michelle Alexander talks about having an Underground Railroad for people who have left prison to coordinate efforts for people to help get them back into society, but the trauma of prison...and you look at Bryan Stevenson's work and what he's found, you're right, they will never be okay. The name of my book is Overground Railroad and I would like to partner with Ms. Alexander about how to get people on this track as an Overground Railroad back into society and to have the stigma, the box, and all of those things, the felony box on applications taken off and I know Michelle has been trying to do this work for years, why it hasn't happened on a mass scale yet...I know Obama tinkered with trying to bring people out of jail...

Yes, that was tinkering, that was tinkering. He had many years to do lots of things to let people out and he did not. And I think, whenever he's ready to talk about it honestly, the question is "Why didn't you? You could have." Nobody would have...you know you can quietly let people go, but he didn't. And so it makes me think, and I do believe this, that many of us still think that there's something wrong with those people who are in prison instead of understanding that there's something wrong with us for letting them be there, for letting the conditions exist that sent them

there. Well everybody can't just sit by the side of the road and be good, because you don't have enough to help you sit there. I don't know.

I did a special journal on public health on prison health and we did it because nobody would talk about it and so we thought if we talk about it on health terms it's hard to fight it. People come in and out they have conditions, we've got to treat them here, treat them there, somethings are infectious. So it was a way of putting it on the stage. I think people have to find more ways to putting issues out, and don't just put it out for one group of people, put it out in different sectors, so that if I'm over here doing ant farming, I know what my role is, if I'm doing something else, I know what my role is. We often are talking to each other or to one group and I think that's where Modjeska was so effective, she didn't know groups, she just knew populations and need and she spoke to everyone and I think that's why she was so effective. It's just important to talk to everybody. [END]

1:01:50