Robyn Sealey LRC Oral History Project 10th February 2009

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This is an interview with Robyn Sealey and itâ\200\231s Tuesday the 10th of February, 2009. Robyn, on behalf of SALS Foundation, we really want to thank you for taking the time and agreeing to be part of the LRC Oral History Project. I wondered if we could start the interview by...if you could talk about early childhood memories, growing up in South Africa, and where you think your sense of social justice and injustice developed?

Ok. Well, Iâ\200\231’m the oldest of four children. My father was a mining engineer and so as a consequence of his job we moved around the Reef a great deal and in fact my mother used to say that...well, we moved thirteen times in ten years and she would say that that was better than a house fire for destroying all your possessions. Iâ\200\231ve often wondered where that sense of social justice came from because it certainly wasnâ\200\231t something that was practiced in my white community. I guess what I think is that growing up we had women who worked for my family and they were like part of the family, and so if you were any kind of decent human being you would relate to other people as human beings and so how could you not respond as a human being to someone who had a different skin colour? My parents were not progressive, particularly my father, but my mother was a nice woman...but, you know, they were pretty much like people of their generation. I think the other thing that was very formative for me was, my sister and I went to an all girls private school called Auckland Park Preparatory, APPS. The nickname was Orky Porky Pigsty. And now that was an amazing institution, very progressive for its time, and although there wasnâ\200\231t any over sort of political/social indoctrination or education, somehow it came through. And Iâ\200\231ve often wondered how they did that because it was very subtle. But in all honesty I think that my political feeling was guided by the women who worked for us, in particular one lady whose name was Lena, and worked for my family for many years, and then subsequent people to whom I wasnâ\200\231t that close, I guess because I got older, but still.

How did Lena make a difference, do you think, to your sense of social justice?

Well, she was like another mother. She was always there, she was the one who probably more than my mother, directed the house, ran the house, who made us breakfast in the morning. We didnâ\200\231t have a toaster but we used to toast in the oven, and one incident I remember was every morning weâ\200\231d say: look, Lena, the toast is burning! And she would quickly bend down and of course it wasnâ\200\231t burning. But she handled that with aplomb, and one morning it was in fact burning and she ignored us (laughs) and there was this smoke coming out of the oven. But you know, she was just extremely loving and always there. Went through a lot of our childhood incidents with us. If our mother wasnâ\200\231t around and we fell off our bicycles sheâ\200\231d be the one swabbing your knee...so I think...I still believe...I guess I’ve never understood how people donâ\200\231t relate to other people as humans, you know, despite the skin colour issue, so...and maybe for us, the whole dichotomy between my fatherâ\200\231s very staunch, conservative views, and then the practical reality of seeing a person of other colour,

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and the truth about that, just also helped for me to make a decision, what is the ultimate truth, his or what I observed.

|And moving around, Iâ\200\231’m sure you got to meet different people with different backgrounds, and talking about your peer groups, and Iâ\200\231’m wondering from that early experience what you gauged in terms of what was going on in the country, did you have a sense of the disparities, etc, from quite an early age or did that develop later?

I think that we...most of my parentsâ\200\231 social circle was conservative, these are min ing communities after all, you know...slave labour essentially. And it always puzzled me that youâ\200\231d see black people walking, not on a bus, but white people would drive, or quote un quote â\200\230servantsâ\200\231 would be in the back of a house in dismal conditi ons, a shower without a door or...they were concrete blocks, you know what the servantâ\200\231s quarters were like in the back of these places...if you had a servantâ\200\231s quarters. T hose were the lucky people, otherwise people were living in townships and had to come in every day. Just a whole degradation of a certain part of your society which just didnâ\200 \231t feel good at its most basic level and wasnâ\200\231t right. I think the primary school that I’m talking about instilled in me a great sense of justice about what is right and what is wrong, and so in my world is always very black and very white and itâ\200\231s come from seeing those things. Itâ\200\231s either right or itâ\200\231s wrong, which can make you a bit of a moral pain in the neck, but...Iâ\200\231’m glad it worked out that way in terms of attitude towards race relations in South Africa, anyway.

So in terms of growing up, at some point did you challenge your parents and their views, how did that develop?

This is very corny but a book that was very formative for me was Alan Patonâ\200\231s Cry the Beloved Country, which I think I read when I was in standard eight...so what is that, grade nine now, I think...

Ten.

Isnâ\200\231t grade 12 the highest one? So...ya, tenth grade, right. And when I think back on it actually, I’m surprised that that was a book prescribed in a public high school, because by then weâ\200\231d left private schools and I was at Parktown Girls High School. And looking back on it I’m surprised that that was a book that was a vetted book. Although the women who taught in the English department were Wits graduates and so they were obviously more enlightened than a lot of others. So, ya, that book was very formative. What was your original question?

Well, I was wondering whether you challenged your parents at some point?

Yes, well...(laughs) I didnâ\200\231t so much on the political front in high school, but af ter high school I went to Wits and I did International Politics, Social Anthropology, sub majored in Anthropology, majored in English and International Politics, and sub

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majored in Film and Drama. And I ended up in one of the most conservative departments on campus. It wasnâ\200\231t the Politics department, which was extremely liberal, it was the International Relations department, which was totally out of the ark.

Thatâ\200\231s interesting...

But at that point, you know, I was also reading newspapers, listening to people talk and so on, and so there was a point at which politics was banned at the dining room table because it just became this screaming match between me and my father really. And so yes, I did definitely challenge his beliefs. My mother was conservative as well but in a more humane way than my father was.

What period were you there at Wits?

In the early eighties, so...I graduated in â\200\23183, I did a BA first and then I did BA Honours in International Politics in this...it was truly the most deadly boring year of my life. But I did my Honours thesis on Zimbabwe, and apparently itâ\200\231s still in Jan Smuts Library. And my little reach for breaking a code was to have as its...part of the foreword was â\200\230aluta continuaâ\200\231, which means the struggle goes on, and I didn â\200\231t think
that anybody every picked up on that (laughs). So it was the time when people were rioting on campus, when you had those white thugs coming on campus...I was actually sitting at a bus stop one day waiting to catch a bus down Jan Smuts Avenue, and some of these white thug guys, I donâ\200\231t know where the heck they came from or anything, were coming to start beating up students, and I was sitting there, I was on my own not doing anything and as they approached me the one guy said something to the other one and the response was, oh, no, itâ\200\231s ok, sheâ\200\231s a white woman, w eâ\200\231ll leave
her. They didnâ\200\231t realise that I was a student, I guess, I donâ\200\231t know why, b ut anyhow, I
remember all that. And also at the time I met my husband to be, Mike Sinclair, was also in the International Politics department and suffering greatly because he was very progressive, he was a lecturer, and he had done some very interesting work in Atteridge township in Pretoria. And that included setting up the first legal clinics there and getting things like sewing groups together and just trying to bring black and white students together in meetings so that there could be exchange of information and people could just realise what was really going on. And so, I started to help with some of those events and organise some of those things. And thatâ\200\231s when I started to mee t
people like Dikgang Moseneke from Mike (Sinclair) and names now of a lot of people...Iâ\200\231’m just so hopeless with names, and I have forgotten all of them pretty much.

So when you started university would have been 1981, maybe?

Ya...yes, because when I left high school I went to university reluctantly because I really didnâ\200\231t want to study, but my father insisted. So I finished my first year, I scraped by...for example, I went into my History exam, sat down, I had done absolutely no learning whatsoever, read the questions, realised I hadnâ\200\231t a hope in hell
in answering them, put down my paper and walked out. So I failed that and then I went to a kibbutz in Israel and I worked there for six months, took a break, and then

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while there realised that education is everything. And came back and re-registered for the second year. So I was older than most of my cohort by at least a year. And so I finished my degree in â\200\23183 and the Honours in â\200\23184, ya.

Ok, so when you graduated what did you do after that? What was your trajectory?

After that I worked for a brief period as a researcher in South African Institute of International Affairs and John Barratt was the head of it at that point, I remember. And the thing I remember most about that period of life was this was when the first word processors were coming out, and a word processor was literally as large as that chair over there (laughs). They still had telex machines, clack clack clack, going on, they were using telex machines, no faxes. Oh, Iâ\200\231’m remembering something else! As part of my Honours studies I got a scholarship or some funding from Wits to do some research on...oh, I’m confusing two events...that money I used to do the research on my Zimbabwe project. But what happened in my Honours year also was I hooked up with an American AFS student and she was interested in exploring more about so-called â\200\234colouredâ\200\235 culture and so we spent...we went down on the train to Cape Town
and we spent about two or three weeks in Cape Town speaking to people like Alan Paton, we interviewed Alan Paton, and Franklin Sonn, and a bunch of other people, and that was a really, really interesting experience. Especially Alan Paton, I mean, you could be in a room with him for a while and, I mean, the man had, just the power of speech was just...a poet, I guess, so of course. Alan Boesak, interviewed him as well. God I canâ\200\231t remember...who else...? Ya...So then, ya, South African Institute of International Affairs for a short period of time, and then I went to work for a woman called Anna Starke who had her own consultancy...And then I decided (laughs) I can do this, so I started my own business and I sold subscription services to American companies, foreign embassies and South African companies, particularly Sullivan Principle signatories. And what I did was I went around and identified key people in the black community and...this is all sitting in my attic there, I canâ\200\231t remember any of the names, but Ligale was one that comes to mind...people of that ilk, and Iâ\200\231d put together a report every month of what the socio-economic trends were
in the black community, and of course nobody had any connection at that point, they werenâ\200\231t reaching out themselves, so somebody like me could actually do that and...I wouldnâ\200\231t say make a living on it, but definitely make a project of it.

Gosh. And this was based on the Sullivan Principles?

Well, no, it was...the Sullivan Principles came in and thatâ\200\231s how I identified potential
companies who might be interested in buying the service. But so my idea was just so that there would be some kind of communication between the real world and those people sitting in corporate offices...youâ\200\231d read newspaper articles about how people
didnâ\200\231t un...people had no clue, corporate South Africa had no clue as to why it was that there was dissatisfaction or unhappiness or what the issues were, what the gripes were. Just simple, basic facts that they could have found out for themselves if theyâ\200\231d
read black newspapers, but they didnâ\200\231t even do that. So my service was a sort of a synopsis of the local black publications and then an interview with somebody as well about a particular issue of that month. And the LA Times did an article on that

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actually. So that was a good thing. I wish I could remember the other names.
(interruption; interview resumes dfter a while)

So you mentioned starting this very interesting project and Iâ\200\231’m wondering how long that continued for and what was the trajectory thereafter?

I did that for about eighteen months and then Mike (Sinclair) was offered a job in Washington DC, so thatâ\200\231s when...and so that stopped. So when we...that was...when did we come here? I think â\200\23186...ya...because I was twenty-six, and Iâ\200\231’m not doing the math...so that stopped when we came here, and Mike (Sinclair) worked for the IRRC...Investor Responsibility Research Centre. And thatâ\200\231s how I came to work for the LRC because I was unemployed at the time. We had a small apartment in Dupont Circle, just around the corner from the fire station, woo woo woo, night and day. And we had nothing, no money, no furniture, nothing. And I used to go to the Georgetown Safeway with my trolley, as we say, or cart, as they say here, and ride around looking at all the things we couldnâ\200\231t buy (laughs). So thatâ\200\231s how I came into touch with Arthur Chaskalson. Because I guess...Iâ\200\231’m not sure the connection, I think Mike was travelling backwards and forwards to South Africa still doing work for IRRC at that point, and he must have, I guess, met Arthur (Chaskalson)...because Mike (Sinclair) knew everybody, and is still really well connected. But anyway, one day I got a phone call, it was Arthur Chaskalson and he said, oh, I hear from Mike that youâ\200\231re lookin g at loose ends and youâ\200\231ve got nothing to do and weâ\200\231ve got this little organisat ion that isnâ\200\231t going anywhere or doing anything, I need somebody to run it, are you interest ed?
Yes! So thatâ\200\231s how that started, working for SALSLEP.

So this was 1986/87 maybe?

Yes, and again I can confirm all these dates...I can make a list of dates if thatâ\200\231s of any use to you. So thatâ\200\231s when I first met Reuben (Clark, Snr). And of course Reuben (Clark Snr) worked for Wilmer Cutler and Pickering in this incredibly impressive large building on M Street, and Reuben (Clark, Snr) couldnâ\200\231t believe his eyes when he first met me, he said: oh, you could be young enough to be my granddaughter (laughs). Who is this person? I was twenty-six, so...so thatâ\200\231s how I came to work f or LRC, indirectly of course, we never thought of it...we could not put it like that, but thatâ\200\231s certainly what I saw my brief to be, in terms of US tax law, 501(c)(3) statu s, which SALSLEP had at that point, you could not raise money for one...you couldnâ\200\231t be a pass through organisation, itâ\200\231s still the case for any one particular organisa tion, you had to be able to channel money to different things but, you know, in all honesty, we had one group at that point, and that was the LRC.

And so when you started was it just Reuben (Clark Snr) and Jamie Kilbreth at that point, or was it only...?

Oh, no, there was an already...the thing was this, there was already an established board, but there was nobody doing any work. So my understanding was that Reuben (Clark Snr) had done the groundwork for pulling together the board. But Reuben (Clark Snr) was a full-time lawyer. And so the actual work...and this is where, I

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think, Felicia (Kentridge) also became concerned, Felicia (Kentridge) knew Reuben (Clark Snr) , Felicia (Kentridge) was...Felicia (Kentridge) is the most dynamic woman, and quietly in the background, doing everything that she was doing, including trying to get the whole US organisation on its feet. And so she was particularly concerned about the fact that SALSLEP had essentially died at that point, it was a name and nothing more. So the board members were very, very prominent US lawyers but every single one of them with other commitments. Actually the person who ran Reubenâ\200\231s (Clark Snrâ\200\231s) life was this crusty secretary called Lenore
Beaver, who was about five feet high, had a cigarette in her hand all day long, and in those days you could smoke in the office, in the early eighties, but she knew where Reuben (Clark Snr) was, what he was supposed to be doing, what should be on his desk, where everything was, at any time of the day or night. Reuben (Clark Snr) could not manage paper, (laughs) it was like a blizzard, whenever you were looking for anything or youâ\200\231d put anything down, he had this monstrous desk, it was a complete nightmare, but Lenore (Beaver) knew where to find everything. She was a complete tyrant too. Anyway...so at that point people like Lloyd Cutler, Erwin Griswold, Leon Higginbotham, Bernie Segal, Reuben (Clark Snr)...gosh, whoâ\200\231s the other guy, Robert...Clare...they were on. But the money supply had completely dwindled to nothing coming in, and so that was my brief. Start raising money.

Why had the money supply dwindled? What had happened?

Because there was no staff. It had become merely a letterhead and...become a letterhead essentially. It had run off, I think, Reubenâ\200\231s (Clark Snr) work at that point
in setting it up but someone needed to take care of it and nurture it and run it. So I think I was the first staff person, I know I was the first staff person.

So if you had to like look back in starting up, your brief was to raise the money, how did you set about doing that and if you could...particularly I would be interested in if you could talk a bit about people who have passed away, such as Bernie Segal, etc, people that we wonâ\200\231t be able to interview, and your memories of them, in particular .

Is Leon Higginbotham still around?

Iâ\200\231m not sure. Iâ\200\231d need to look into that.

Well, in all honesty the biggest problem that SALSLEP faced was its own Board. And Iâ\200\231d done some...SALSLEP sponsored me to go to GW (George Washington) to do some basic fundraising courses. Reuben (Clark Snr) and I thought that was a good idea and we did it, and I learned a lot through those courses and also had some innate sense about what need...about how to run an organisation. And our board was very distinguished, but itâ\200\231s what I called the Emeritus Board. So you could use them...a board has several functions, and in a fundraising organisation you need a working board or you die. And thatâ\200\231s essentially what happened, it was a non-working board and the organisation had died. But the problem was to get the board to realise that and then to bring on new people with fundraising experience or time to give their name to the cause. I was twenty-six, I didnâ\200\231t know anybody or anything, and so I didnâ\200\231t have

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those connections at that time. So the next step was to square away some legal issues because there were still some legal issues around the 501(c)(3) status, get publications together to pass out about the organisation, start identifying sources of funding, which were two-fold...well, they were three-fold, and we were more successful in two than in the third. The main source of funding came from foundations, and then the secondary source was from corporations with ties in South Africa, the Sullivan Principles. I called it guilt money. Youâ\200\231re there, you pay. And the third was individuals and that was where the most work was required and we were really successful. And it was my hardest battle throughout the time that I was there to get a working board. So...ya, Iâ\200\231’m not quite sure what to say beyond that except that once...and Felicia (Kentridge) was very helpful in trying to...in helping me trying to get those things accomplished. The other problem was the name. SALSLEP, itâ\200\231s a mouthful, so I spent many hours trying to get people to agree that we change the name so we had something quick and easy and that the acronym actually meant something. But that didnâ\200\231t work until a lot later. We were more successful at later stages in, particularly with Jim Robertson...in getting the more working members on the board. So one of the first things I did was, was to go around to each board member and say, you know, this is what Iâ\200\231’m thinking, this is what Id like to do, can you crack you r
rolodex, can you help here, what do you think of this? So I interviewed, especially all the local ones, up in Washington DC, and they were all very supportive within their time constraints. I forgot to mention Lloyd Cutler as being on the board, I think. And Wilmer Cutler and Pickering was an extremely generous firm, because not only did they give me free office space, but they covered all postage, all telephone, all fax, my parking, they just quietly paid the bill, and that was a huge amount of money, I donâ\200\231t
know what the value of those in kind contributions were. They prepared the tax returns, they gave me a paralegal to help as the secretary...so extremely generous and I donâ\200\231t know that theyâ\200\231ve ever been given enough recognition for that. So I just tried
to do what Iâ\200\231d learnt, which was change the board, be more direct in raising funds, and try to increase the base on the personal side, and things really began to move once Jim Robertson became the president, and we brought on people like Margie Marshall and Judy Bullitt (Thomson). Have you interviewed either of them?

Would it be Judy Thomson now?

Yes, well, she was Judy Bullitt at the time.

Yes, Iâ\200\231ve interviewed her.

And Judy (Bullitt Thomson) is just such a firecracker, you know, organiser, doer, and she gave an enormous amount of time and energy, and we would do things like organise cocktail parties and receptions in New York City, and whenever we could grab an LRC person coming over, like Felicia (Kentridge) or Arthur (Chaskalson), and some really prominent people were drawn into this organisation. But it never translated into significant amounts of money, but it was something that needed to be hammered away, year after year after year, and it was either at some point in this process decided that I needed to go back to school because after five years I was burning out, and not feeling actually that I was making any progress at that point. And Felicia (Kentridge) knew all my concerns and constraints. And so I went back to

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school part-time, so I was working part-time at SALSLEP. And eventually I went back to school full-time and thatâ\200\231s when I resigned and Ann Satchwill came on...

So you went on to do a Masters?

MBA, yes, at George (Washington)...at GW. But individually it was a great group of people. Everybody brought something, even though it might not have been what we necessarily needed at the time, the funding base was increased by two hundred percent. I canâ\200\231t remember exact dollar figures, Iâ\200\231d have to go back and take a look at it. Ford Foundation money came in and needed to be managed, so that was part of my function. Individually Iâ\200\231'm thinking...some people definitely gave more than others, and thatâ\200\231s fine, you expect that. Generally it was the younger people who were more generous with their time and their contacts.

When you started off ...was Reuben Clark (Snr) at the helm?

Yes.

And then how long after that did Jamie (Kilbreth) take over?

Maybe a year and a half. And then Jim (Robertson).

So during the time you were there, the five years or so, it was really, first it was Reuben Clark Snr, then Jamie Kilbreth, and then Jim Robertson. And Iâ\200\231'm wondering whether you could talk about during those three different time periods, what were some of the key issues and concerns for you working with each one of them, and how the board started to change.

Well as I say, Reubenâ\200\231s (Clark Snr) heartâ\200\231s always been in the right place, and everybody can credit him with getting the organisation going. But it had fallen to the wayside, and so my greatest concern was to get a running organisation going and to...an organised organisation. Reuben (Clark Snr) has great vision, but not great at the day-to-day running of things, and thatâ\200\231s why he needed someone like Lenore (Beaver), who just kept him where he needed to be. But an extremely generous man. So for me personally it was a struggle always because I didnâ\200\231t...it was me and nobody but me, and I tried to use...I used volunteers and I would get interns out of GW and other places because I needed help just with the basic administrative stuff. Because it was a huge job. Nobody really realises how much work was done here in the United States or in the UK by the two people who ran those offices. They did the work.

When you say the UK, you mean LAT?

Ya. I mean Jill Williamson. So, Jim (Robertson) was again, at the height of his professional career or building up to that, and so very committed, a little scattered but

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again (inaudible)...and Iâ\200\231’m having difficulty remembering all that much about Jamie (Kilbreth) because I remember Jim (Robertson) more than anyone else. Because I think we achieved some of our greatest successes with Jim because the board was changed at that point, and we got Judy (Thomson) on and we got Margie Marshall...you know, Margie Marshall for crying out loud...and I think we were more productive but still I do echo Jimâ\200\231s (Robertson) concern about the whole thing feeling like an old boyâ\200\231s club. And I guess I have to bear some...take responsibility for some of the blame for that because I honestly didnâ\200\231t know what my power was in terms of being able to influence things. I realise in retrospect, twenty years later, that I could have done anything, so if Iâ\200\231d said, yes, we will, or if Iâ\200\231d fought harder for it, it would have happened. But, you know, these were people with big egos, and believe me thereâ\200\231s some massive egos there....big reputations, and I was, in some ways, intimidated by that.

In terms of LAT, I wondered whether you could talk a bit about that, at what point that got started, because it was after SALSLEP, and was it after you joined?

Yes. I just want to say one thing though about Felicia (Kentridge) and...well, I have to say that...although it was frustrating for me on some level to keep battering the same old issues because they were, and at the end of five years I really didnâ\200\231t have any energy to do it anymore, [still believe passionately in the cause, and one of the most beneficial things I did, I think, was to take Jamie (Kilbreth)...one year I took Jamie (Kilbreth), Jim (Robertson), and I organised the whole trip for the people out of the LAT, Oxfam people, Jill Williamson, Guy Stringer, and we did a junket down to South Africa, and we were there for ten days, I think, or two weeks. It was brilliant. Because once you take people down there, thereâ\200\231s no way that they canâ\200\231t buy in to everything, and they come back with a different understanding. But I wanted to say something about Sydney (Kentridge) and Felicia (Kentridge) because to me personally they were very good friends, not only Felicia (Kentridge), as a working partner on the whole SALSLEP thing as a sort of very supportive, understanding person, but also to me personally. They were extremely generous to me both in the UK and here, and Iâ\200\231ll never forget that. And Judy Bullitt (Thomson) was too, I have to say...Judy Thomson, Lady Judy. So sorry, come back to your question...

I was going to ask you about the LAT and how that started and the relationship between SALSLEP and LAT in relation to the LRC?

Right. Well, I hope you get to interview Jill Williamson, and Iâ\200\231m sorry to say you wonâ\200\231t be able to interview Guy Stringer because he has Alzheimerâ\200\231s and Iâ\200\231ve lost touch with him, which I feel bad about. But the LAT was the same situation in the UK as it was for SALSLEP in the US. Felicia (Kentridge) again, very instrumental in that whole setup, some very well known British people with South African connections, very highly placed, and Jill Williamson and her husband, Andrew (Williamson), who did what Wilmer Cutler and Pickering did here in the United States for the LAT there. They gave up a cottage, they paid the electricity, they paid all the telephone bills and everything else for the LAT, for years without very much acknowledgment. And Jill (Williamson) did the same thing that I did, again a lot of hard work with many times with not much back patting. And she continues today but as a board member. Some

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really remarkable people involved in that. And thatâ\200\231s whatâ\200\231s so fascinating to me
about the LRC and so on, is how theyâ\200\231ve managed, that the people involved in the
LRC are just remarkable individuals. You know, if you take them individually theyâ\200\231re
remarkable. Then you lump them all together, itâ\200\231s just...itâ\200\231s just such an incredible
bunch of human beings. I'm really glad that youâ\200\231re doing this because itâ\200\231s...itâ\200\231s a pity
that itâ\200\231s not more well known what an incredible human endeavour the whole thing is.
But LAT got an enormous amount of support from Guy Stringer, who was at one
point the head of Oxfam. And the, I think, of all the people Iâ\200\231ve ever met, probably
the most remarkable man. And Jill Williamson and others can speak to him more, and
I hope that they have, Felicia (Kentridge) and so on. The thing thatâ\200\231s also remarkable
about this LAT, LRC, SALSLEP thing, thereâ\200\231s an amount of collaboration that really
was required for the whole thing to work. It wasnâ\200\231t just one continent, it wasnâ\200\231t just
one person, for it to be successful many people had to buy in on many levels. And
they did. So...I will always keep that...itâ\200\231s something I'll always take away. I'm
trying to think who else I worked with...Jill (Williamson) and I collaborated a great
deal, and she and I are to this day extremely close. Sheâ\200\231s in her sixties now and has
two grown children. But we phone each other several times a year, exchange cards,
and up until recently have seen each other every year by one person going overseas
and coming across. And the fundraising scene in the US and the UK are different,
because in the UK you can reach down to individuals very quickly, and I remember I
stayed there for a couple of months at one point, in the early nineties, with Jill
(Williamson) and with the Kentridges, on and off between the two of them, and they
did a whole telephone raising thing through the BBC, which you couldnâ\200\231t do here.
Like a Telefon thing. And Richard Attenborough did the little blurb on that and
sponsored...that.

This is for the LRC?

This is for the LRC, ya. And thatâ\200\231s the kind of thing that I tried here for the US, you
know, we needed to get a spokesperson and Judy (Thomson) was pretty good about
trying to push that through too, but we were never successful.

Iâ\200\231m also wondering, Robyn, Felicia (Kentridge) is ill and I wondered if you could
speak a bit about her role and how pivotal that was, because my sense is that she was
really crucial to actually getting the huge amounts of funding from Ford, Rockefeller,
Carnegie, particularly at the beginning, and I wondered whether you could talk a bit
about her role?

Again, just a remarkable human being I think. Because if I remember correctly the
whole thing was her idea, and yes, that initial funding did come from those sources.
But a lot of us collaborated on getting from other sources as well, which they couldnâ\200\231t
have done without. Just very...I guess what I take away from Felicia (Kentridge) is
this quiet determination. I never heard Felicia (Kentridge) raise her voice even under
the most trying circumstances, it just...she knew what had to be done, she would get
it done, she would strategically figure out who, how, what, when and where, and then
do it. I have a lot of time for her, I have a lot of good memories. And then just again, a
very good personal friend, on the personal level. I guess I was sort of the same age as
her children so (laughs)...if you approached her for advice on things she would give it

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freely and just a good person, did great work. She got, I remember, an honorary doctorate from...Haverford College here in the US, for her work...one of the reasons being for her work for the LRC.

Do you know who instigated that?

No, I canâ\200\231t remember. But Reuben (Clark Snr) might. Iâ\200\231’m thirty years young
er than
Reuben but Reuben will remember far more!

And what about Arthur Chaskalson... what was your relationship with Arthur?

Arthur ...I remember his wife too, because Arthurâ\200\231s wife Lorraine (Chaskalson) was actually one of my English professors, and she taught a course on poetry, and I was just hopeless at poetry so...but I remember her because she had this flaming mane of red hair and she was just an interesting person, and I remember that Arthur (Chaskalson) came to Columbia for sabbatical once, if I recall correctly, and so we tried to build some fundraising around his presence, which is what we did with everybody who came. Remembering Lee Bozalek, Arthur (Chaskalson), Felicia (Kentridge)...

Geoff Budlender?

Geoff...

Fikile Bam maybe?

No, I think Fikile (Bam) was after I had left. Arthurâ\200\231s (Chaskalsonâ\200\231s) anot
her really
curious person. obviously intellectually so incredibly able and capable but he shied away from the fundraising. He was like, you know, if you approached a pony behind a fence, and you came at him with a carrot, he would turn tail and run (laughs). He hated it! But he felt obliged to do it, and so he and I travelled...I remember we went to Chicago on trips, New York, and the most that Arthur (Chaskalson) could do with any comfort, which was not a lot of comfort, was to stand up in front of group and say a few things about the LRC. And then that was it, he didnâ\200\231t want to have to do anymore because heâ\200\231s just shy. And I remember one of my biggest zoning sessions with Arthur (Chaskalson) was with this very high profile group of people that weâ\200\231d set up in Chicago through George Burditt...George Burditt was on the board as well. He was a Chicago lawyer...and Arthur (Chaskalson) just â\200\230diedâ\200\231 at the dinner
table
that night. He just couldnâ\200\231t find it in himself to come out and say anything. And I
was
feeding him lines and feeding him lines and he just was in extremis, he hated every minute of it! and I was just like: oh, Arthur, come on please do it! And he just couldnâ\200\231t. And the next day he was profuse in his apologies, he said, I’m sorry, I k
now
I disappointed you, I just couldnâ\200\231t do it. And so I realised, that some people, thi
s is a
natural thing for them and others were not, and Arthur (Chaskalson) hated the whole fundraising thing. So, we didnâ\200\231t do that again. Geoff (Budlender) was different. An

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Felicia (Kentridge) was different obviously, and she and I hit the corporate scene when she came, and ya...Iâ\200\231m sure there are others, I just canâ\200\231t remember th em right now, but again, I have nothing but the highest esteem for Arthur (Chaskalson). He just hated fundraising. And you know, I donâ\200\231t blame him (laughs).

Robyn, when I interview SALS board members, for example Jim (Robertson) and Reuben (Clark Snr) and Jamie (Kilbreth), they remember going to South Africa and having just an incredibly, incredibly... wonderful time, but also learning experience for them, not being South African, and I wondered whether you could talk about some of the trips you might have taken with them, with SALS board members, or even your own trips to meet LRC people, and what your experiences were? Because you were there at a very crucial time in the history of the organisation but also the history of the country as well, during the eighties...

Well, you know, as I said, my problem is remembering names of things and actually remembering the incidents because this just feels like such a long time ago. But my belief was that if we got people down there then they could do nothing but buy in...Judy Bullitt (Thomson) also went by the way...if you went to a township, if you...we went to Khayelitsha, we went to Soweto, we visited LRC offices in Durban, in Johannesburg, in PE. Who goes to PE and goes to a township and cannot look around and...or Grahamstown...and just be devastated by what they see? Who listening to some of the cases that the LRC took on, you know, whoâ\200\231s heart could no t break just by listening to any of those things? And that once they had experienced those things, how could you not come back fired up and wanting to do something? So what I tried to do was organise the trips...we usually started out in Johannesburg, and the idea was to introduce them to each office, take a particular case that they were working on in that office, and then go to the site and meet some of the people involved, some of the principal characters. And then in the evenings, to get them closer to people on the LRC or meeting people in the community, black and white, so that theyâ\200\231d have a real good sense of what we were trying to accomplish and why it was necessary. So we did that in Johannesburg LRC with Chris Nicholson was the Director, I believe, at the time in Durban. Grahamstown was...Jeremy Pickering. Did we go to East London? Was that with East London? Grahamstown was Jeremy Pickering. East London we must have gone to first because then we went on to...

Jeremy Pickering was also in PE and then went on to...

PE, right, not East London. So we must have done PE first. And then Cape Town, go into Crossroads. We also tried to time it around LRC annual conferences so that they could get everybody in one place. And such a remarkable of South Africans, an assembled group of South Africans. Look where they are today: Geoff (Budlender) and Chris (Nicholson) and the rest of them...Fikile (Bam), Mahomed (Navsa)...is Mahomed (Navsa) still around?

Heâ\200\231s a Judge in the Supreme Court of Appeal.

Right, exactly, for godâ\200\231s sake!

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Heâ\200\231s also a Trustee.

Ya. So just that those people have done what theyâ\200\231ve done with their lives. Itâ\200\231s hard to
remember exactly what happened in a period of two weeks, but they did call me Mrs Hitler, because I had the Americans, I had the English contingent, and so they were...the other person involved in England, Iâ\200\231'm thinking of one trip, it was Jill Williamson, Guy Stringer, his wife Mary Stringer, who is in herself a remarkable individual...

Joel Joffe?

No, he wasnâ\200\231t on the one that I did. But whoâ\200\231s the little guy from...Iâ\200\231ve forgotten his
name, heâ\200\231s another LAT trustee...heâ\200\231s on the tip of my tongue (Cyril Glasser)...a
lawyer from Sheridanâ\200\231s...it will come in a minute...a character, a complete character.
And then Jim (Robertson), Jamie (Kilbreth), me, and everything was planned to the day because...well, the other things was we were trying to save money so I was trying to keep it short but...and so we had to hop from place to place pretty smartly and buses would be arranged...you know, our little mini buses would be arranged, and so I would say, weâ\200\231re leaving at eight, and the bus is leaving, youâ\200\231re on it, weâ\200\231re going
(laughs). So ya, I did get a reputation for being a whip cracker, but I think people felt they were fairly well organised so we accomplished our goals. We didnâ\200\231t have a lot of
time for R and R but you know, South Africans know how to enjoy themselves in the evenings, and so I think they also...Americans got a better sense too not only of the seriousness but the fact that, you know, we could celebrate.

The other thing thatâ\200\231s often been said is...when I read the Ford Foundation archives,
there were some criticism of the SALSLEP board in that there werenâ\200\231t enough women, and then there was also criticism of mostly the LRC board, the trustees, that there werenâ\200\231t enough women, there werenâ\200\231t enough blacks, etc, even as staff members. Whatâ\200\231s your sense of that?

I remember that, and certainly I was, in some ways, came to feel that. You know, it was a very contentious time in South Africaâ\200\231s history, yes, and raising money with that is an issue, and sending a message back was a difficult one. And SALSLEPâ\200\231s board reflected the same thing. They were all men in the beginning, and all white men, and I canâ\200\231t remember at what point Leon Higginbotham came on. And then also Nate...(Nathanial Jones) Iâ\200\231'm forgetting his last name...and was an African American...god, Iâ\200\231ve forgotten his first name...Iâ\200\231ve got the letterheads up stairs. And
then finally a woman coming on. But it was also a contentious time in South Africa, which made it difficult for me because I was a white South African really trying to raise money for anti apartheid reasons, and Americans did not like that. They thought it needed to be a black South African. And I was shunned in some quarters. Gay McDougall for example did not like SALSLEP at all, and I was tarred with the same brush. No-one every spoke to me, asked my opinion, or anything else, it was automatically lumped with what was seen as a white thing at that time, which was Arthur (Chaskalson), Felicia (Kentridge), Geoff (Budlender) and so on, and I do

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resent that, I mean, I resent that to this day, because it was a sweeping judgement, that was made really without discovering anything about the people or any new direction that you might have been trying to take. I think Gay (McDougall) came to soften her position eventually, with a little more knowledge, and her husband is now on...

John Payton?

Ya. And John (Payton) had just come on at the time that I was leaving. Or he came on after I left. So I always regret that because I think it was...huge opportunities were missed for collaboration and for better understanding, and I again, I take responsibility for the fact that I never went out and said, hey, listen, you know, why donâ\200\231t we talk about some of these things instead of this stuff flying in the backgr ound,
which no-oneâ\200\231s actually coming up face to face and addressing. And the issues that arose between the BLA and the LRC also made it difficult. Because at one point we did try to assist the BLA...

The SALS?

Ya, through SALSLEP. But there was a lot of hostility and suspicion as a result of, you know, obviously a high level of collaboration between SALSLEP and the LRC.
And again I think that was unfortunate and I hope it doesnâ\200\231t persist to this day, i t may,
Iâ\200\231m not sure, but...

At the time when you were there, was there sort of some indication that perhaps a lot of this sort of animosity between the LRC and the BLA may have been due to competition for funds?

I think so. I think so. And I think thatâ\200\231s primarily what it was. But the BLA had i ts
own issues too at some point in terms of leadership. There were things going on...

Oh?

And so, you know...there were things that could have been done better all around, ya...and you only realise that in retrospect, I think, and it does create tension, missed opportunity, and bad feeling. So...ya, those things are regrettable.

Iâ\200\231m also wondering, Robyn, in terms of...you were there at SALSLEP until 1991/92 would that be right?

Ya, I think so roughly.

Right. When change happened, when apartheid ended, how did the board see its role?

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Well, what began to happen too was, it became more difficult to raise money because people in the United States were saying, oh well the problemâ\200\231s solved. And of course it wasnâ\200\231t, itâ\200\231s still not solved to this day. And so there was, I think, my feeling was, not only was the general feeling among people, among board members that maybe the job was done, but certainly amongst people who were...I could no longer do the guilt card on the Sullivan Principles people. And thatâ\200\231s frankly what it was and it was successful and I believe true. It further complicated the issue of raising money from individuals because we could no longer play to that, peopleâ\200\231s emotions on that level, quite to the extent that we had been able to in the past. And so fundraising became more difficult, the board became somewhat distant and it definitely affected things. And I think funding dropped precipitously after that. I'm not sure what the numbers were or where it is to this day. And Iâ\200\231m no longer sure...I remember at one point SALSLEP, the percentage of the LRC budget was pretty significant, and maybe thatâ\200\231s being done now more by the LAT or directly through grant money from the European community. I think that did happen.

Iâ\200\231m also wondering, when you left, did you regret it?

Left SALSLEP? I regret it because...yes, I regret it in the sense that I really was burnt out, I donâ\200\231t think I could have done anything more that was beneficial and it was time for someone else to try. But...I regret the fact that my studies became my primary focus and so I literally, I mean, my ties were cut pretty definitively and I didnâ\200\231t stay in touch as much as I now wish I had. Although I did stay in touch with people like Felicia (Kentridge) and Jill Williamson and people like that. And I certainly miss feeling like I was doing something that was worthy, really worthy. So ya, I had mixed feelings. I donâ\200\231t regret anything that happened, I wish weâ\200\231d been able to be more successful in some ways on a number of issues, like making a good working board, being better at fundraising, particularly on the individual side, resolving a misunderstanding about the conflicts between BLA, LRC issues, and then personally maybe doing a better job myself about trying to do some of that resolution here in the States. But...it was a good experience. I had nothing but undying admiration for the people whoâ\200\231ve done what theyâ\200\231ve done.

Since youâ\200\231ve left there, so that was around â\200\23192, itâ\200\231s been a long time, besides having contact with Jill Williamson and Felicia Kentridge, Iâ\200\231m wondering whether you have a sense of whatâ\200\231s happened to the LRC and where itâ\200\231s at, at the moment; Have you heard anything?

Um...as I said, all my ties with South Africa really ended at that point because what happened was...my direct ties ended, my family had left at that point, my siblings had all left South Africa and theyâ\200\231re all here in the United States, although Mike (Sinclair) did travel back and still does to this day. But I lost my direct sort of knowledge. So the little that I now know comes through Jill (Williamson) or from what I occasionally read about someoneâ\200\231s appointment to this or that, or that Chris Nicholson in the latest trial or so on and so I have name recognition but I donâ\200\231t have any detailed knowledge of how the LRC has progressed. Iâ\200\231ve heard about the funding issues, I know what

some of the organisational issues are between the two external funding bases but I’ve not kept up with the organisation. But to some extent that wasnâ\200\231t only my fault

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because I did request repeatedly through Ann Satchwill the annual reports but I never got one.

Oh...

Ya. And so...that was a little weird. So my knowledge to this day is kind of stopped in the early nineties as to what that is that theyâ\200\231ve achieved since then.

Right. And it was a period, it was about five years, but it was a very important period, because in some ways I think you really started SALSLEP on a certain route, a certain trajectory, didnâ\200\231t have a staff member, and also in terms of the history of South Africa that was a very interesting time, it was sort of the height of repression with the States of Emergencies and then immediately thereafter the changing of the old guard as such. When you reflect and you look back, what do you think you took away from those five years working for SALSLEP and your association with the LRC?

You know, itâ\200\231s interesting because I think it was extremely meaningful and Iâ\200\231ve been thinking to myself since you and I have been talking about setting this interview up for the last year (laughs). Iâ\200\231ve been thinking, how am I going to translate this for my children so they understand, my eight and ten year old, exactly what an important part it was for me, personally...you know, the LRC, and so few people are aware of this, was so enormously instrumental in creating change in South Africa. And South Africans are not aware of that, and itâ\200\231s only if youâ\200\231ve worked with some of those people or watched them doing the work, to be honest, that you came to appreciate the value. And thatâ\200\231s why I still to this day, I get upset when I hear criticism of the LRC, because yes, there are things that might have been done differently, but still, if you have a look at what was accomplished by the people at the time, all working together, with people of different colours, across different racial lines, enormous adversity, itâ\200\231s almost a miraculous thing, what they did. I never feel anything except the greatest admiration for every one of those people, from a secretary to the paralegal to the whatever, all the way up to the top, because it was not a risk free business, particularly in the beginning. Enormous personal sacrifice a lot of those people made. Just an incredible commitment to their fellow men. And how can you not admire that? And how can that not have meaning to you personally? And I guess that thatâ\200\231s what sustained me in the times when I felt particularly frustrated in not being able to accomplish what I thought our goals ought to be, in SALSLEP, was the fact that even if it was a small thing that you did, it made a difference to making things right, in what was so obviously fundamentally wrong in that country. So ya, it was...it was...I can remember the day watching (Nelson) Mandela come out of...walking up that road, and I didnâ\200\231t feel that it was finished or over, what needed to be done, but certainly I guess Iâ\200\231d like to think in a small way I had a little role to play (laughs) with that...all the change that happened there, in a very minor way compared to all the people who were on the ground, but still...

When you said that people in South Africa are not aware...even in South Africa are not aware of how the LRC contributed to change. If you could put that into words,

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how do you think that the LRC contributed to change in South Africa...social change?

Well, is it too much of an exaggeration to say that they brought down the pass laws?

No, not at all.

Right. So for crying out loud, that was the beginning of the breaking of the dam! Once that started the rest just had to cascade. But that they strategically chose cases and situations where they thought they could make a change and make a difference to people who had no voice, and were absolutely powerless to change their situation. Itâ\200\231s the injustice of the things that occurred to the man in the street, you know. Just the nameless face, just person in the street. Itâ\200\231s giving a voice to those people. Not only with big issues like pass laws but fighting for a wage that wasnâ\200\231t paid, or whatever it was, it had value and meaning. I donâ\200\231t know how you get people to...is there going to be a book coming out of this?

We donâ\200\231t know yet...

Because thatâ\200\231s certainly one way of...there should be some kind of film documentary, I think actually. Because people of this information age donâ\200\231t read any more, but they do watch. What you guys need to do is you need to find some South African filmmakers and there are. Thereâ\200\231s a guy who was at King Edwards High School whoâ\200\231s made a big name for himself...Iâ\200\231ll get his name for you. I mean, those are the kind of people that I wanted to reach out to here in the United States so that they could append their names to the work that we were doing, big famous film stars. You get someone like a Brad Pitt who will put his name behind something, people go and watch. And maybe that would...sorry, what was your original question?

Well, you know, I think youâ\200\231ve answered that: how did you feel personally that the LRC contributed to social change? Now that apartheid has ended and as you rightly say, things still havenâ\200\231t changed. Iâ\200\231’m wondering what are some of your concerns for South Africa, from where you are now looking back and looking at South Africa and the changes that have happened, the changes that havenâ\200\231t, and where you think an LRC, what role they could possibly have?

You know, I have to say that I am absolutely unqualified to answer that question now, because whatâ\200\231s happened since then, particularly since Iâ\200\231ve had kids, Iâ\200\231ve become America centred...I mean, I think of myself as a citizen of the world more than I do as an American or a South African, because I just have friends all over the world and Iâ\200\231ve lived in different places, and...but I have lost touch, Iâ\200\231’m not up to date on daily events, I canâ\200\231t make...I used to know the political scene, I used to know every person

who did anything in terms of politicians and the social issues and I donâ\200\231t anymore. I
guess, what I see from afar these days...I donâ\200\231t read the South African newspapers
every day, Iâ\200\231m out of touch. I guess what I see obviously is what any outsider migh
t
see and I would be concerned more about issues of crime and employment and how

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you address the employment issue is because once youâ\200\231ve addressed those, other things fall into place. If people are employed, theyâ\200\231re not looking to hit other people over the head in terms of...so I donâ\200\231t think I can really answer that in a meaningful way.

Robyn, Iâ\200\231’m wondering whether we could conclude by me asking you about a particular memory, it could be memories as well, of people, whether itâ\200\231s at SALSLEP, it could be Jim Robertson or Jamie Kilbreth or Reuben Clark Snr, or even someone in South Africa, or whether itâ\200\231s Felicia Kentridge, Arthur Chaskalson, etc, that you particularly hold dear to you, a memory that somehow sort of epitomises what it meant to be part of that group of people doing the kind of work they did?

Itâ\200\231s a really hard question because my head right now is filled with loads of pictures, itâ\200\231s like watching an internal movie, flash flash flash. You know, I canâ\200\231t say thereâ\200\231s any one thing...I think the things...that I will always remember is not so much the uplifting part of it because there was a lot of uplifting stuff, but is more of the sadder part of it, when in any situation where we were, where you could see fellow South Africans obviously suffering or under extreme duress, depending on what the situation was, and...that happened wherever we went, whether it was in an LRC office, watching people waiting to go to speak to a lawyer, hearing them telling their story, there was never...I guess the thing that I, to this day, find inexplicable was, in all these situations I never saw anger from black South Africans. I never saw anger, I never saw screaming, shouting rage, or anything else. I just say decent people presenting the facts in a situation where theyâ\200\231d been wronged, or I saw people just relating an issue...and whatâ\200\231s coming to mind right now is in a township somewhere, I canâ\200\231t remember, I think it was somewhere in the Cape, and we were on our trip with Jamie (Kilbreth), Jim (Robertson), Guy Stringer, all of them, and someone was just telling us the story of what had happened and why the LRC was involved, and I canâ\200\231t remember the details of the story but I can just see the faces, and I can see the face of the woman telling the story and I can see the children running around in the background, and I can see the living conditions, and those are the things that I take away with me. I take away the memories of decent, normal human beings just, you know, trying to find a voice and make it right, just basic human conditions which needed to be righted for basic humans...that doesnâ\200\231t make any sense, what I mean is, you know, just doing the right thing for someone because thatâ\200\231s what they needed.

Robyn, Iâ\200\231ve asked you a range of questions, I’m wondering whether thereâ\200\231s something Iâ\200\231ve neglected to ask you, which you feel really ought to be included as part of your Oral History at the LRC?

I donâ\200\231t think there are any things, the only thing that I...the only thing Iâ\200\231m thinking is, Iâ\200\231’m hoping that in this Oral History Project, the leadership needs to be given credence for the fact that they did what they did...

By that you mean Arthur Chaskalson and Felicia Kentridge, etc?

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Right. But that itâ\200\231s the worker bees who built the hive and that some of them did that
at enormous personal cost, and I donâ\200\231t mean just in terms of physical danger, I mean
in terms of neglecting their families in order to accomplish what they thought needed
to be done, and issues like that. And so that in this whole Oral History process
everybody get a chance to say what they did and to be acknowledged...that their
contribution be acknowledged.

Thank you very much, Robyn, I appreciate it.

Robyn Sealeyâ\200\224Name Index

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