

Robyn Sealey**LRC Oral History Project****10th February 2009**

Int This is an interview with Robyn Sealey and it's 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?

RS Ok. Well, I'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. I've often wondered where that sense of social justice came from because it certainly wasn't 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 wasn't any over sort of political/social indoctrination or education, somehow it came through. And I've 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 wasn't that close, I guess because I got older, but still.

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

RS 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 didn't have a toaster but we used to toast in the oven, and one incident I remember was every morning we'd say: look, Lena, the toast is burning! And she would quickly bend down and of course it wasn't 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 wasn't around and we fell off our bicycles she'd be the one swabbing your knee...so I think...I still believe...I guess I've never understood how people don't relate to other people as humans, you know, despite the skin colour issue, so...and maybe for us, the whole dichotomy between my father's very staunch, conservative views, and then the practical reality of seeing a person of other colour,

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

Int |And moving around, I'm sure you got to meet different people with different backgrounds, and talking about your peer groups, and I'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?

RS I think that we...most of my parents' social circle was conservative, these are mining communities after all, you know...slave labour essentially. And it always puzzled me that you'd see black people walking, not on a bus, but white people would drive, or quote unquote 'servants' would be in the back of a house in dismal conditions, a shower without a door or...they were concrete blocks, you know what the servant's quarters were like in the back of these places...if you had a servant's quarters. Those 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 didn't feel good at its most basic level and wasn't 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 it's come from seeing those things. It's either right or it's wrong, which can make you a bit of a moral pain in the neck, but...I'm glad it worked out that way in terms of attitude towards race relations in South Africa, anyway.

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

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

Int Ten.

RS Isn't 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 we'd 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?

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

RS Yes, well...(laughs) I didn't so much on the political front in high school, but after 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

majored in Film and Drama. And I ended up in one of the most conservative departments on campus. It wasn't the Politics department, which was extremely liberal, it was the International Relations department, which was totally out of the ark.

Int That's interesting...

RS 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.

Int What period were you there at Wits?

RS In the early eighties, so...I graduated in '83, 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 it's still in Jan Smuts Library. And my little reach for breaking a code was to have as its...part of the foreword was 'aluta continua', which means the struggle goes on, and I didn't 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 don't 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, it's ok, she's a white woman, we'll leave her. They didn't realise that I was a student, I guess, I don't know why, but 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 that's when I started to meet people like Dikgang Moseneke from Mike (Sinclair) and names now of a lot of people...I'm just so hopeless with names, and I have forgotten all of them pretty much.

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

RS Ya...yes, because when I left high school I went to university reluctantly because I really didn't 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 hadn't 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

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 '83 and the Honours in '84, ya.

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

RS 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, I'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 "coloured" 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 can't 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 can't remember any of the names, but Ligale was one that comes to mind...people of that ilk, and I'd 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 weren't reaching out themselves, so somebody like me could actually do that and...I wouldn't say make a living on it, but definitely make a project of it.

Int Gosh. And this was based on the Sullivan Principles?

RS Well, no, it was...the Sullivan Principles came in and that's 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...you'd read newspaper articles about how people didn't 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 they'd read black newspapers, but they didn't 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

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

Int So you mentioned starting this very interesting project and I'm wondering how long that continued for and what was the trajectory thereafter?

RS I did that for about eighteen months and then Mike (Sinclair) was offered a job in Washington DC, so that's when...and so that stopped. So when we...that was...when did we come here? I think '86...ya...because I was twenty-six, and I'm not doing the math...so that stopped when we came here, and Mike (Sinclair) worked for the IRRC...Investor Responsibility Research Centre. And that's 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 couldn't buy (laughs). So that's how I came into touch with Arthur Chaskalson. Because I guess...I'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 you're looking at loose ends and you've got nothing to do and we've got this little organisation that isn't going anywhere or doing anything, I need somebody to run it, are you interested? Yes! So that's how that started, working for SALSLEP.

Int So this was 1986/87 maybe?

RS Yes, and again I can confirm all these dates...I can make a list of dates if that's of any use to you. So that's 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) couldn't 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 that's how I came to work for LRC, indirectly of course, we never thought of it...we could not put it like that, but that's certainly what I saw my brief to be, in terms of US tax law, 501(c)(3) status, which SALSLEP had at that point, you could not raise money for one...you couldn't be a pass through organisation, it's still the case for any one particular organisation, 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.

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

RS 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

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 Reuben's (Clark Snr's) 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 you'd 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, who's 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.

Int Why had the money supply dwindled? What had happened?

RS Because there was no staff. It had become merely a letterhead and...become a letterhead essentially. It had run off, I think, Reuben's (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.

Int 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 won't be able to interview, and your memories of them, in particular.

RS Is Leon Higginbotham still around?

Int I'm not sure. I'd need to look into that.

RS Well, in all honesty the biggest problem that SALSLEP faced was its own Board. And I'd 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 it's 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 that's 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 didn't know anybody or anything, and so I didn't have

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. You're 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, I'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, it's 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 didn't 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 I'm thinking, this is what I'd like to do, can you crack your 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 don't 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 don't know that they've ever been given enough recognition for that. So I just tried to do what I'd 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?

Int Would it be Judy Thomson now?

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

Int Yes, I've interviewed her.

RS 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

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

Int So you went on to do a Masters?

RS 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 can't remember exact dollar figures, I'd 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 I'm thinking...some people definitely gave more than others, and that's fine, you expect that. Generally it was the younger people who were more generous with their time and their contacts.

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

RS Yes.

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

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

Int 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 I'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.

RS Well as I say, Reuben's (Clark Snr) heart's 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 that's 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 didn't...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.

Int When you say the UK, you mean LAT?

RS 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

again (inaudible)...and I'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 Jim's (Robertson) concern about the whole thing feeling like an old boy's club. And I guess I have to bear some...take responsibility for some of the blame for that because I honestly didn't 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 I'd said, yes, we will, or if I'd fought harder for it, it would have happened. But, you know, these were people with big egos, and believe me there's some massive egos there...big reputations, and I was, in some ways, intimidated by that.

Int 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?

RS 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 didn't have any energy to do it anymore, I 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, there's no way that they can't 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 I'll never forget that. And Judy Bullitt (Thomson) was too, I have to say...Judy Thomson, Lady Judy. So sorry, come back to your question...

Int 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?

RS Right. Well, I hope you get to interview Jill Williamson, and I'm sorry to say you won't be able to interview Guy Stringer because he has Alzheimer's and I've 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

really remarkable people involved in that. And that's what's so fascinating to me about the LRC and so on, is how they've managed, that the people involved in the LRC are just remarkable individuals. You know, if you take them individually they're remarkable. Then you lump them all together, it's just...it's just such an incredible bunch of human beings. I'm really glad that you're doing this because it's...it's a pity that it's 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 I've 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 that's also remarkable about this LAT, LRC, SALSLEP thing, there's an amount of collaboration that really was required for the whole thing to work. It wasn't just one continent, it wasn't 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...it's 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. She's 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 couldn't do here. Like a Telefon thing. And Richard Attenborough did the little blurb on that and sponsored...that.

Int This is for the LRC?

RS This is for the LRC, ya. And that's 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.

Int I'm 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?

RS 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 couldn't 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

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.

Int Do you know who instigated that?

RS No, I can't remember. But Reuben (Clark Snr) might. I'm thirty years younger than Reuben but Reuben will remember far more!

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

RS Arthur ...I remember his wife too, because Arthur's 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)...

Int Geoff Budlender?

RS Geoff...

Int Fikile Bam maybe?

RS No, I think Fikile (Bam) was after I had left. Arthur's (Chaskalson's) another 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 didn't want to have to do anymore because he's just shy. And I remember one of my biggest zoning sessions with Arthur (Chaskalson) was with this very high profile group of people that we'd set up in Chicago through George Burditt...George Burditt was on the board as well. He was a Chicago lawyer...and Arthur (Chaskalson) just 'died' at the dinner table that night. He just couldn't 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 couldn't. And the next day he was profuse in his apologies, he said, I'm sorry, I know I disappointed you, I just couldn't do it. And so I realised, that some people, this is a natural thing for them and others were not, and Arthur (Chaskalson) hated the whole fundraising thing. So, we didn't do that again. Geoff (Budlender) was different. And

Felicia (Kentrige) was different obviously, and she and I hit the corporate scene when she came, and ya...I'm sure there are others, I just can't remember them right now, but again, I have nothing but the highest esteem for Arthur (Chaskalson). He just hated fundraising. And you know, I don't blame him (laughs).

Int 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...

RS 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, who's heart could not 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 they'd 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...

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

RS 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?

Int He's a Judge in the Supreme Court of Appeal.

RS Right, exactly, for god's sake!

Int He's also a Trustee.

RS Ya. So just that those people have done what they've done with their lives. It's 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, I'm thinking of one trip, it was Jill Williamson, Guy Stringer, his wife Mary Stringer, who is in herself a remarkable individual...

Int Joel Joffe?

RS No, he wasn't on the one that I did. But who's the little guy from...I've forgotten his name, he's another LAT trustee...he's on the tip of my tongue (Cyril Glasser)...a lawyer from Sheridan's...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, we're leaving at eight, and the bus is leaving, you're on it, we're 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 didn't 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.

Int The other thing that's often been said is...when I read the Ford Foundation archives, there were some criticism of the SALSLEP board in that there weren't enough women, and then there was also criticism of mostly the LRC board, the trustees, that there weren't enough women, there weren't enough blacks, etc, even as staff members. What's your sense of that?

RS I remember that, and certainly I was, in some ways, came to feel that. You know, it was a very contentious time in South Africa's history, yes, and raising money with that is an issue, and sending a message back was a difficult one. And SALSLEP's board reflected the same thing. They were all men in the beginning, and all white men, and I can't remember at what point Leon Higginbotham came on. And then also Nate...(Nathanial Jones) I'm forgetting his last name...and was an African American...god, I've forgotten his first name...I've got the letterheads upstairs. 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 (Kentrledge), Geoff (Budlender) and so on, and I do

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...

Int John Payton?

RS 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 don't we talk about some of these things instead of this stuff flying in the background, which no-one's 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...

Int The SALS?

RS 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 doesn't persist to this day, it may, I'm not sure, but...

Int 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?

RS I think so. I think so. And I think that's primarily what it was. But the BLA had its own issues too at some point in terms of leadership. There were things going on...

Int Oh?

RS 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.

Int I'm also wondering, Robyn, in terms of...you were there at SALSLEP until 1991/92 would that be right?

RS Ya, I think so roughly.

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

RS 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 problem's solved. And of course it wasn't, it's 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 that's 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, people's 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 I'm no longer sure...I remember at one point SALSLEP, the percentage of the LRC budget was pretty significant, and maybe that's being done now more by the LAT or directly through grant money from the European community. I think that did happen.

Int I'm also wondering, when you left, did you regret it?

RS Left SALSLEP? I regret it because...yes, I regret it in the sense that I really was burnt out, I don't 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 didn't stay in touch as much as I now wish I had. Although I did stay in touch with people like Felicia (Kentrige) 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 don't regret anything that happened, I wish we'd 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 who've done what they've done.

Int Since you've left there, so that was around '92, it's been a long time, besides having contact with Jill Williamson and Felicia Kentrige, I'm wondering whether you have a sense of what's happened to the LRC and where it's at, at the moment; Have you heard anything?

RS 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 they're 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 someone's appointment to this or that, or that Chris Nicholson in the latest trial or so on and so I have name recognition but I don't have any detailed knowledge of how the LRC has progressed. I've 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 wasn't only my fault

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

Int Oh...

RS 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 they've achieved since then.

Int 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, didn't 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?

RS You know, it's interesting because I think it was extremely meaningful and I've been thinking to myself since you and I have been talking about setting this interview up for the last year (laughs). I've 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 it's only if you've worked with some of those people or watched them doing the work, to be honest, that you came to appreciate the value. And that's 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, it's 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 that's 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 didn't feel that it was finished or over, what needed to be done, but certainly I guess I'd 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...

Int 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,

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

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

Int No, not at all.

RS 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. It's the injustice of the things that occurred to the man in the street, you know. Just the nameless face, just person in the street. It's giving a voice to those people. Not only with big issues like pass laws but fighting for a wage that wasn't paid, or whatever it was, it had value and meaning. I don't know how you get people to...is there going to be a book coming out of this?

Int We don't know yet...

RS Because that's certainly one way of...there should be some kind of film documentary, I think actually. Because people of this information age don't 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. There's a guy who was at King Edwards High School who's made a big name for himself...I'll 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?

Int Well, you know, I think you've 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 haven't changed. I'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 haven't, and where you think an LRC, what role they could possibly have?

RS You know, I have to say that I am absolutely unqualified to answer that question now, because what's happened since then, particularly since I've had kids, I've 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 I've lived in different places, and...but I have lost touch, I'm not up to date on daily events, I can't 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 don't anymore. I guess, what I see from afar these days...I don't read the South African newspapers every day, I'm out of touch. I guess what I see obviously is what any outsider might see and I would be concerned more about issues of crime and employment and how

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

Int Robyn, I'm wondering whether we could conclude by me asking you about a particular memory, it could be memories as well, of people, whether it's at SALSLEP, it could be Jim Robertson or Jamie Kilbreth or Reuben Clark Snr, or even someone in South Africa, or whether it's 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?

RS It's a really hard question because my head right now is filled with loads of pictures, it's like watching an internal movie, flash flash flash. You know, I can't say there's 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 saw decent people presenting the facts in a situation where they'd been wronged, or I saw people just relating an issue...and what's coming to mind right now is in a township somewhere, I can't 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 can't 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 doesn't make any sense, what I mean is, you know, just doing the right thing for someone because that's what they needed.

Int Robyn, I've asked you a range of questions, I'm wondering whether there's something I've neglected to ask you, which you feel really ought to be included as part of your Oral History at the LRC?

RS I don't think there are any things, the only thing that I...the only thing I'm thinking is, I'm hoping that in this Oral History Project, the leadership needs to be given credence for the fact that they did what they did...

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

RS Right. But that it's the worker bees who built the hive and that some of them did that at enormous personal cost, and I don't 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.

Int Thank you very much, Robyn, I appreciate it.

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