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The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

Fatima Cortez Todd

Fatima Cortez Todd: The Work is Unfinished

Women's Movements in the United States

Interviews conducted by
Amanda Tewes
in 2024

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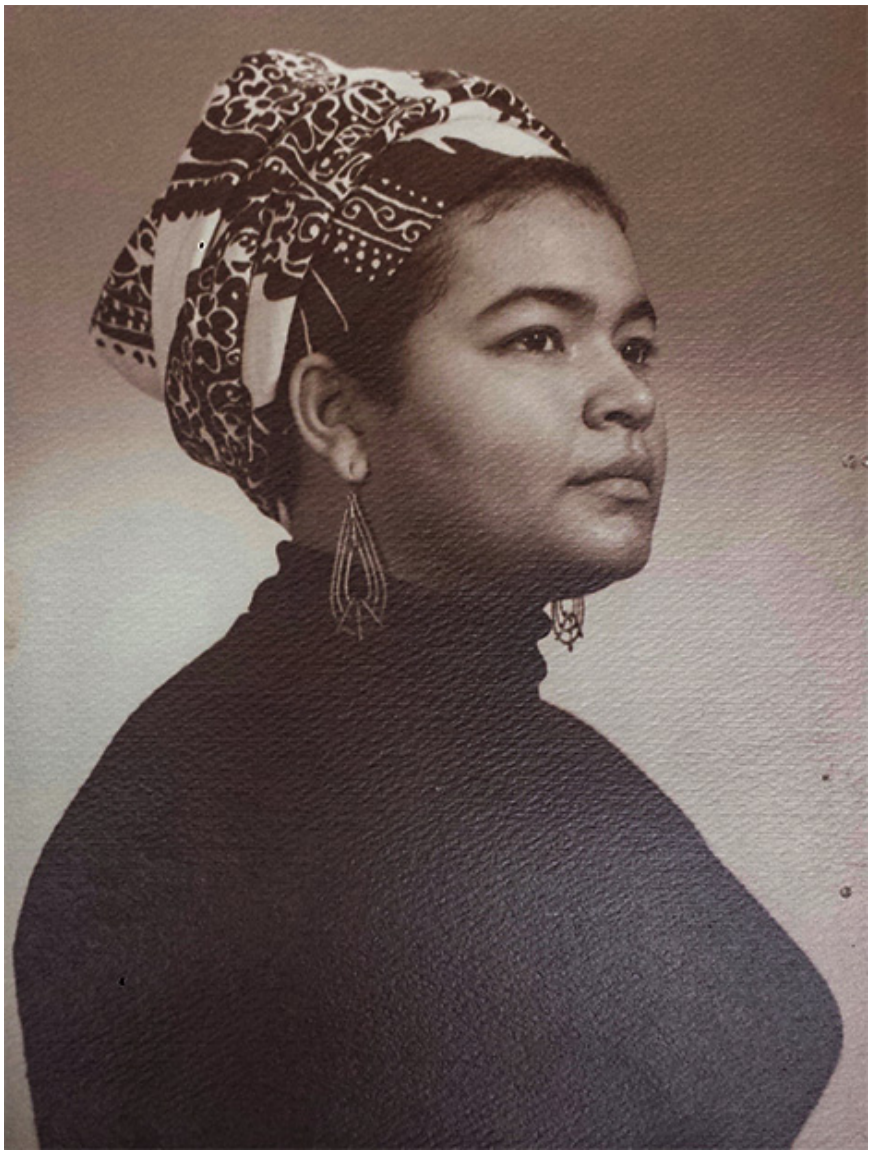
Fatima Cortez Todd at her seventieth birthday party. Photograph by Richard Yniguez, 2005.

Fatima Cortez Todd (bottom right) and her mother,
Marie Mitchell Cortez Witherspoon, c. 1950s.



Fatima Cortez Todd, c. 1960s.

Abstract

Fatima Cortez Todd is an activist who was involved in several social movements, including: civil rights, women of color liberation, and reproductive rights. Cortez Todd was born in New York City, New York, in 1945. She graduated from the University of Connecticut (UConn) in 1977. Cortez Todd joined the Freedom Summer in Louisiana in 1964 as a member of Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). She is also a member of the Bay Area Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement. As a Gestalt therapist, Cortez Todd connects mental health and social justice, including through her work at the YWCA Sexual Assault Crisis Service in Hartford, Connecticut; New York Women Against Rape; and Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York. In this interview, Cortez Todd discusses growing up in New York City; family background and values; her mother's activism and early connections to CORE; early education; attending the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963; political identities; experiences at Hunter College; working with CORE in Louisiana during Freedom Summer in 1964, including: training, the potential for violence, local activists, and voter registration work; continued work in Louisiana after Freedom Summer, including: work in a Freedom School, creating the *Freedom News* newsletter, and the role of women in CORE; marriages and motherhood; education at UConn, including: the African American Center, Puerto Rican Center, Women's Center, the Theater Department, and training in Gestalt therapy; work history, including: YWCA Sexual Assault Crisis Service, New York Women Against Rape, Mount Sinai Medical Center, the American Film Institute, and Women in Film; move to Los Angeles, California in 1987; connections to the women's liberation movement, including: work with the National Network of Women's Funds, planning the Women of Color Against Violence Against Women of Color Conference, involvement with the Rhode Island Feminist Theatre, and challenges with white women and diversity in the movement; continued activism; reflections on the legacy of various social movements, and social justice as both a global and community effort; importance of building a community of activists; spiritual journey; honors and awards; and thoughts on her personal legacy.

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Interview 1: May 8, 2024

01-00:00:05
Tewes: This is a first interview with Fatima Cortez Todd for the Women's Movements in the United States Oral History Project, in association with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. The interview is being conducted by Amanda Tewes on May 8, 2024. Ms. Cortez Todd joins me from this remote interview from Los Angeles, California, and I'm in Walnut Creek, California. So thank you so much, Fatima, for joining me. I'm really looking forward to our conversations.

01-00:00:33
Cortez Todd: Me, too.

01-00:00:35
Tewes: Well, let's start with some of the easy, early things. Can you tell me when and where you were born?

01-00:00:42
Cortez Todd: Columbia Presbyterian Hospital at 7:52 AM on October the sixth, 1945, and that's in Washington Heights.

01-00:00:54
Tewes: So specific, I love it. And did you grow up in Washington Heights? Where did you grow up?

01-00:01:02
Cortez Todd: I started out in Washington Heights and on Riverside Dr., and then the next thing I remember was being at Brooklyn, where I was boarded with a nanny. But my Mom got an apartment in Sugar Hill—in Harlem, but in Sugar Hill—and I'd come back and forth to her at that place when she finally got it, and that's the beginning.

01-00:01:37
Tewes: Do you know why you were boarding with a nanny for those early years?

01-00:01:41
Cortez Todd: Because my Mom had to work, and she couldn't afford a babysitter, and there was no family really to take care of me. So a friend of hers knew this woman who was willing to let me live with her, and she would take care of me, and then I'd go home to my Mom on the weekend or whenever, and that's how that came about. I was two years old when she took me there.

01-00:02:08
Tewes: Wow.

01-00:02:09
Cortez Todd: She lived in a beautiful brownstone building that she owned, and the family lived on the top floor and then on the other floor, and it was a place full of antiques. It was very, very grand, and she was very aristocratic, but I felt safe.

And I only cried when my Mother left me there one time, and we still don't know why, it just came up, I just was crying, and it was like—oh crap.

01-00:02:56
Tewes: Oh, you're good.

01-00:02:58
Cortez Todd: No, there was a call coming in, and it comes—

01-00:03:03
Tewes: Oh, no problem.

01-00:03:06
Cortez Todd: —on to my iPad, as well.

01-00:03:10
Tewes: That's fine.

01-00:03:13
Cortez Todd: And so that was it. My Mom was sixteen when she had me, so she left school and she went to work. She had a number of jobs. She was a waitress, and then she went to business school while she was being a waitress, because she had to afford paying for the nanny, as well as for herself. And that's really about it in a nutshell.

01-00:03:49
Tewes: I want to speak more about your family in just a moment, but it strikes me that you were navigating several different neighborhoods and boroughs in New York area. What memories do you have of these communities and what they looked like and who lived there?

01-00:04:05
Cortez Todd: Well, the block that I lived on in Sugar Hill had a number of really historical apartment buildings. But then there was a private home that was like a mansion just down the street, and it had a marker in the front yard that said it was one mile from New York City. Well, I never understood how it could be one mile from New York City if I'm in New York City, but I guess it was before New York really branched out or spread out. Manhattan did start really being inhabited down in the Wall St. area in the beginning and around Central Park, so this would have been a mile from those markers.

01-00:04:58
And when I was born, my Mom was still living at home, and so I was living on Edgecomb Ave.—that's in Washington Heights—and One Hundred Sixty-Fifth St. in a really grand apartment building that overlooked the park that was the divider between the high part of the city and the low part. It was from One Hundred Fifty-Fifth St. up to Highbridge, which was One Hundred Seventy-Fifth St. There was a forest, kind of, but it had rocks and trees, and it was the dividing line between one area of this area from the other, because down below was the original polo grounds where the Giants played. They had a lot

of cliffs, and it was a great park, and it even had a children's play area, and it was a big, wide street. That neighborhood produced a lot of artists, singers. Frankie Lymon and The Teenagers came from that neighborhood, and so they were my neighbors, my friends, and I grew up with them.

01-00:06:23

Cortez Todd: In Brooklyn, like I said, was a beautiful brownstone, and I had two houses that I could go to. I didn't go anywhere really until I was about five, because I was kept in the house, and then when my Mother would come and get me and take me to where she was living. I was never outside with anybody else. My fourth birthday was a grand event, and I had kids—I didn't even know who they were, but they were kids from different friends of my Mother or the nanny. There was one family down the street, they were the [Addisons], and they were from Jamaica. And then the next-door neighbor, I forget what their name was, but I could associate with those children and the children of the Addisons down the street, and that was it. I was pretty insulated, because I got—and the school, my elementary school was right down in the next block. So the nanny would walk me to school and she'd pick me up, so there was no such thing as me going to school on my own or going anywhere on my own, yes. From my standpoint, they were all beautiful neighborhoods, and they still are, actually.

01-00:07:57

Tewes: You mentioned one family was from Jamaica. What was the racial demographics of the areas where you were living?

01-00:08:08

Cortez Todd: Well, in Washington Heights, it was white, Puerto Rican, African American. Yeah, and some of the white people were actually Jewish. In Brooklyn, it was, from what I could tell, what I can remember from what I could see, it was all African American or Caribbean Americans that was there. And One Hundred Fifty-Second St. was built between Amsterdam and Convent, and that part of One Hundred Fifty-Second St. was all African American. Once you crossed going west across Amsterdam Ave. to One Hundred Fifty-Second St. between Amsterdam and Broadway, that became a little more mix of African American and Puerto Rican. And then when you got to Broadway, from Broadway to Riverside Dr., it was like a lot of white people and then a mixture of Chinese and Puerto Rican.

01-00:09:27

Tewes: Quite a diverse area. Do you have a sense of how well everyone mixed or not?

01-00:09:35

Cortez Todd: Well, when I did come and live with my Mom on One Hundred Fifty-Second St., I wasn't allowed to go across to Amsterdam Ave., because that one block was supposed to be rough. And I can't figure out—it was just poorer, is what it was, because the apartments were more like tenements, as opposed to the apartment buildings in my block. I don't really remember there being any conflict with people. People knew where they were supposed to be, that was

my observation. I never knew where I was supposed to be, so I wound up sneaking across Amsterdam Ave. and going over to Broadway and going down to Riverside Dr., because when I was old enough to go out on my own, I just explored. And then my grandmother was up on One Hundred Sixty-Fifth St. She had moved from the first building across the street to the other one, and I used to go over to that park. I've walked all of those trails and climbed the rocks, and I even found a cave. I was all by myself, and I realized the kids today could never have that experience, because I was maybe about ten or eleven years old wandering like that. I was never afraid, yeah, I felt safe every place that I lived.

01-00:11:25

Tewes: That's great. You mentioned that your Mother was young when she had you. Can you tell me more about her?

01-00:11:36

Cortez Todd: My Mom was the tallest. She was the middle sister. She has two sisters: my Aunt Rosemary, who's since transitioned, and my Aunt Judy, who was the baby. So my Mother was the middle child, and she was the darkest of the three. And it's not like she was dark, she was my color. But in the Black community, there was the whole issue of colorism, so if somebody was darker, the darker of the three girls—they didn't necessarily have to be dark brown or even chocolate, they were just more tan—and they were considered—I don't know what they were considered, but it was a difference. It was a difference in the hierarchy of the more white you looked, the better you were supposed to be, or the more accepted you were supposed to be. So she had just enough of a tint in her to stand out with her two sisters.

01-00:12:55

She was very adventurous, she liked going to clubs and dancing. And because she was tall and she looked older, she didn't look like a fourteen- or a fifteen-year-old teenager, and she would get into these clubs, because she loved to dance and she was a salsa dancer from way back. My father was the manager at the Audubon Ballroom, which was a club, and it had dancing on a regular basis and performers, music. She would sneak in and then that's how she met him and then how they got together. They met there.

01-00:13:44

When I was growing up, she always worked, but I never had a sense of not having money. We would go to this restaurant on Broadway near One Hundred Forty-Fifth St., and it was called La Petite Maison, and we would go there on some Sundays. I'd have my white gloves and my little patent leather shoes, and we'd walk over to the restaurant, and it was very fancy. She'd always take me to Radio City Music Hall every time the show changed, and I'd go to the museums. I did not know that we didn't have money, because I was very privileged in what I experienced. We'd go to Bloomingdale's, and then I discovered Ohrbach's, which was right across the street from where she worked at the Empire State Building, because she got a job working with the

Schenley Distillers, which is a liquor company. I'd wander across the street and discovered Ohrbach's, which had all these wonderful things and low prices. And so I would like to go shopping there, because you could get more than you'd get at Bloomingdale's for the same amount of money, and I became a bargain hunter. And my Aunt Rosemary, who was the oldest, who was my Auntie Mame in my heart—she was definitely my heart—she turned me on to St. Vincent de Paul Thrift Store, which was down on Park Ave. South. And she says, "Oh, you get the best things here," because she knew the labels. And because of where it was located, it got a lot of very good donations. That's the dynamic of where I was in relation to being very well taken care of.

01-00:16:01
Cortez Todd: And of course, living in this brownstone in Brooklyn, which was as fancy as it was, I would never have thought that we didn't have money. My Mother took really good care of me and she just shielded me from a lot of things. But she also made me aware of a lot of things, because she fought for everything that she got and she worked hard for everything she got and she broke some barriers. Like when she went to work at Schenley—she dropped out of high school to have me, and so she didn't have a high school diploma. And she had gone to the Braithwaite Business School, which was a little neighborhood, fly-by—it wasn't a fly-by-night, it was a little neighborhood [school], not really accredited, just they taught folks how to type and do a little bit of clerical work and stuff. It wasn't really fanciful. But she managed to get a job as a statistical typist, which means she could do numbers, and not everybody could do numbers and do the columns and all that kind of stuff for the reports. So that's what she did, and she just engendered herself to the company and advanced. And by the time she left, which was in the sixties, she was secretary to the vice president, who was the first Black vice president. Oh God, Chuck Williams was his name. She had really worked her way all the way up in Schenley, but she wouldn't take no for an answer. Like she said, "I can do that, I can do that," even though she didn't know how to do it. She'd find out and go back, "See, I told you I know how to do that." So she's quite a lady.

01-00:18:18
Tewes: I was going to say she sounds like quite a woman.

01-00:18:21
Cortez Todd: Yeah, she still is.

01-00:18:24
Tewes: And that's amazing, too.

01-00:18:26
Cortez Todd: She just turned ninety-five.

01-00:18:28
Tewes: Oh my goodness, still with us. You mentioned the issue of colorism within the African American community. How did your Mother identify racially?

01-00:18:43

Cortez Todd: African American or, at that time, she was Negro. Her mother, my grandmother, was Dutch, African American, and Native American. I realized that people who were considered Negroes at the time were usually a lot more than just Negro. There was always some Native American or there is always some English or Irish or Latin from somewhere, but all of those people, like myself and my Mother, were identified by color as Negro, and that's where you were locked in. So it wasn't a matter of saying, "Oh, I'm a person of color." No, you're in the classification of Negro. A funny thing about that, when I was born, the card that was on my, I guess, bassinet in the hospital, whatever it was, the cribs, and it was "Baby Cortez, white female." Yeah, because I was very, very fair, and I had all this straight hair, and I guess they saw my father before they saw my Mother when they wrote that. If you're one drop of Negro blood, you're Negro, and to the exclusion of everything else.

01-00:20:33

Tewes: And so I know this is part of a journey for you, but how did you understand your father's racial identity when you were growing up?

01-00:20:42

Cortez Todd: I never knew my father, I never saw him. I only spoke to him once when I was ten years old when he promised to come to my grandmother's house to see me that Sunday, and he never showed up. So that was my first and last contact with him. But he had insisted to my family, to my Mother, my grandmother, my grandfather, that he was a white Castilian Spaniard, and that was it. And he did not want me to learn how to speak Spanish, because he didn't want me to be identified with the Puerto Ricans in the neighborhood. It's like, how much can you hate yourself when—because when I found out that he was really Puerto Rican, it's like he was living a lie, but it also was how he survived. If he had been identified as Puerto Rican, he would never have been the manager at the Audubon Ballroom, but he could be accepted as a white Spaniard. Yeah.

01-00:21:50

It was only after I discovered that I really was Puerto Rican that I was really angry with him for denying my heritage, which means I never got to learn how to speak Spanish. I can fuddle around, but I can't really have a conversation. I would deny, because people would say, "Oh, you're Puerto Rican?" And I went, "No, my father's pure Castilian Spaniard," for my entire life. In work situations, folks are, "Oh, you're Puerto Rican?" And I'm like, "No, my father is—" and they look at me and go, "Yeah, right." It was like everybody knew except me, and I didn't know that that was the case until twenty, twenty-five years ago.

01-00:23:00

He was the Romeo of the neighborhood, and I understand that there were many women in the neighborhood who cried when they found out that he had married my Mother. So I was like, Oh wow, okay. And then I guess they lived

together with me after I was born for maybe a month or two, and then he was gone with some other woman, so he just left.

01-00:23:40

Tewes: What impact did that have on you, not growing up knowing your father?

01-00:23:44

Cortez Todd: Well, I didn't really think about it, except when folks would talk about that. My Mother remarried when I was ten, and so my stepfather, who was in the Navy, he wasn't around a whole lot. And when I was in high school, there was a father-daughter dance, and I asked him. I wanted him to take me, because he was the only father I had ever known, and I wanted to be able to show up at my school, my high school with my dad, even if he was just my stepdad. So that was the only time that I really even ventured on having a father-daughter experience, which did not happen, because he got stationed and shipped out, so it wasn't possible to do that. But I missed out. A lot of my friends had their dads in their home, and even if they didn't have the dad in the home, the dad was in their life. I had uncles, and that was okay, but I didn't really think about it until I was in high school. When I was growing up, it's like it wasn't something I even dwelled on. I had my Mom, my grandfather, my uncles, and that was good enough for me. You don't know that you're missing something until somebody points it out.

01-00:25:25

Tewes: What a great observation. Is there anything more you want to say about your extended family—grandparents and aunts and uncles?

01-00:25:35

Cortez Todd: My grandfather, he was a gangster and in the numbers business, and he had a store in Harlem on One Hundred Forty-Fifth St. It was a lady and children's wear, and the back of the store connected with the jewelry store on the right and another store on the left. It seems as though they were all part of the numbers thing, and he could go into the store, and they wouldn't think that he was doing anything but going in his store, and it's just really funny. I understand that he even had a run-in with Dutch Schultz, but he was from Mississippi.

01-00:26:28

My grandmother, who could pass for white—like I said, she was Dutch, African American, and Native American, but she was very, very fair with red hair. The family had sent her north to Chicago to marry into a very wealthy African American family, the Vander-something-or-others, or Vander. It's a very popular name, and of course I can't think about it, because I need to think about it. [Vanderpool, may actually have been the white family after all, since she was an Utley, of Dutch origin.] But anyhow, they sent her to marry, to be the wife, to marry this young man there, because it was a whole family-arranged thing. And my grandmother met my grandfather on the train—he was a porter—and then they knew that she didn't get off in Chicago. The next

thing they knew, she was in New York with my grandfather. And then she got pregnant with my Aunt Rosemary and with my Mother, and then he finally married her, and then she had the baby girl, my Aunt Judy.

01-00:27:49

Cortez Todd: He was a very stern man, but he would take me to—oh, and in the store, he worked in the store with his girlfriend, who lived in a studio apartment right next to him. They had two studio apartments, and she was, for all intents and purposes, his wife, and she took care of me when I would go down to the store to visit him. He would actually take me to Coney Island. The two of them would take me to Coney Island on Sundays, and I would ride the little ponies there, and I could do whatever I wanted. I'd be all dressed up looking nice for Grandpa, and that was fun. I went to Nathan's, I'd have a hotdog, and I rode the ponies, and I rode the baby roller coaster. So that was him.

01-00:28:46

My other uncles, I think they were more extended, I don't think they were blood related. But they had a marina at the base of One Hundred Fifty-Fifth St. in Manhattan, which is still Harlem, on the Harlem River. It was really great, because we'd get to go on the boats and ride up the Hudson. Because you'd come up the Harlem River to what they call Spuyten Duyvil, which is the break between Manhattan and the Bronx, and so the boat would go through there, and we just head up the Hudson. I remember one time, we started to dock somewhere, and it wasn't that we were going into the beach with the boat, because the boat couldn't go but so far, but they didn't want us to drop anchor and swim. And it was definitely a bunch of white people who made us turn the boat around and go back down, rather than have a big—and there were a lot of people on the boat, because it slept eight, so it was a good-sized yacht. People could have gone to jail if they had gotten off and swam to the shore, but that didn't happen, so we just went.

01-00:30:13

And my Mother, she was a great swimmer, and when we were coming back to the dock at 150 feet, my Mother jumped off the boat in the Harlem River and swam to shore. It's a very strong current there, so folks are like, "She's a really strong swimmer." But they said, "Don't do that again, that's just not a good idea." But she loved to swim. She was an adventurous woman, from sneaking into the clubs so she could dance to jumping off the boat. [laughs] And then she would go down to—there was a club called the Palladium Downtown in the Forties—in the Forties, the streets, not the forties, the years. She was [a teenager in the] late forties. But she would go to the Palladium and she would dance, and she got the name the Barefoot Contessa, because she came in with her platform shoes and her wonderful dress, and then halfway through her time there, she'd get rid of the shoes and be dancing barefoot. And then when she left, she would be holding her shoes in her hand and get in a cab or a car to come home. So she's quite the lady, [laughs] yeah, yeah.

01-00:31:53

Tewes: Quite an act to follow. I'm curious about values you learned from your family. What do you think was important to them to share with you?

01-00:32:05

Cortez Todd: The truth. You don't lie. Well, there were enough lies going on in the family to cover up stuff that they didn't want the public to know or want the other parts of the family to know, but that was a separate thing. You could keep secrets from the family, you don't have to tell the family everything that you're doing or everything that you think, but when it came to other things like: you don't steal—I raided my Mom and my stepdad's piggy bank, because I was home sick, and I shook money out, because I wanted to get a half a pint of ice cream. It was thirty-seven cents at that time. And so I would put my clothes on—I wasn't supposed to leave the house—and I'd go down to the corner drugstore, and I'd get a half a pint of ice cream. I think I did that more than I should have, because when they went to look in the piggy bank, they said, "We had more money in here than this." And we were in the kitchen, and they said, "Come here. You been in the piggy bank?" "Um, yeah." "Well, you're not going to get an allowance for the next five weeks." "Okay. I only took thirty-seven cents." "Yeah, but how many times did you take thirty-seven cents here? And you were supposed to be at home being sick, and you're going down to the corner." I said, "But it only took me a few minutes to go down to the corner and get some ice cream, and I brought it back and I felt better." So yeah, you don't lie. You don't have to go to church, but you do have to believe in God, that there is a God. You never look down on people that didn't have everything that you had, and that you needed to be generous, you couldn't be stingy if—yeah, you couldn't be stingy, and you needed to be kind and fair. I mean, really good values that I didn't know so much as—because they weren't as identifiable as they were part of the fabric of your being. And it was nothing out of the ordinary.

01-00:35:05

And even though there were all the class and the colorism issues, I was always with every mixture of people on the block or wherever I was. Once I came back to New York to live and when we were in Brooklyn, and she sold the brownstone and moved to New Jersey, so I went with her. And in New Jersey, I lived in a Black and white community, but my friends were primarily African American. They were from school, and we all lived around each other, but they were all different colors, and I was right in the middle of every color that you could imagine. But when I got back to New York, it was a little more—I would go down to La Marqueta. My grandmother would go to La Marqueta to do some grocery shopping, and she'd get chicken there, because she'd get a live chicken and they would kill it and—I need a moment.

01-00:36:22

Tewes: Sure, let's—

01-00:36:22
Cortez Todd: Can you—

01-00:36:22
Tewes: —pause. [break in recording] All right, we are back from a break, and, Fatima, you were just speaking about your grandmother.

01-00:36:30
Cortez Todd: Yeah, my grandmother would go down to La Marqueta, which was in Spanish Harlem, and I would just go right along with her. When I was in Spanish Harlem, I was always so happy. There was always music around, I was always dancing around with my grandmother. She would be getting a chicken, and they would be killing it and cleaning it, and she likes fresh food, and that's where you went for fresh food. My spirit just always took me to Spanish Harlem. I would find my way down there, because I could walk. It's a long walk from where I was, but twenty-five blocks in New York City is not really a bad walk, because it's like, Oh okay, I'm just going to walk over there. It's like going down the road to see the somebody else on the other farm, yeah, that kind of distance. But I love the music and I love all the vendors, all the street vendors in La Marqueta on One Hundred Sixteenth St., and it was just very, very vibrant. It pulled me, and I didn't understand what was pulling me, but it was really my Puerto Rican culture that was saying, "Hey, this is this is where you're supposed to be, also. You can be there, but you need to be here, also."

01-00:38:03
There was a pool. It was on One Hundred Thirty-Seventh St. between Broadway and Riverside Dr., which was a big hill. When you left Broadway, going west down to Riverside Dr., it was all going downhill to the Hudson River, so it was all on an angle. There was a place called The Lido, and it was a club and a restaurant. And they had a pool, and they had a tetherball pole and a jukebox in the daytime and live music at night. But I would go there with my Mother and my godmother, and they'd be at the bar and I'd be out by the pool, and I was free to swim or I played tetherball all by myself. I'd knock it one way and it would come around, and I'd knock it, because I didn't know that it was a game that you played with other people. I thought, Oh, you just knock it around and then knock it around.

01-00:39:11
A lot of my growing up was in isolation, because I'd be around the adults, but there wouldn't necessarily be other children. And I am the oldest in my generation. I'm ten years older than my first cousin, who, when he was born—I'm four years older than him, and when he was born, he was the boy, so my grandfather could stop taking me to Coney Island and take him. I didn't know that there was anything wrong with that, I just knew, Oh, I'm not going to Coney Island, oh okay.

01-00:39:11
Cortez Todd: But I was going with my Mother to The Lido and I'm playing tetherball all by myself. It was a Puerto Rican club, so all the music was there, and I was just dancing around the pool, because they had a sand area around the pool. It was just this Puerto Rican fairyland, tropical island in the middle of Manhattan. So there were all these little things that, as I got older, I remembered feeling special, feeling like I belong, feeling like I was comfortable, and it was always someplace that had Latin music going, so yeah. My grandmother introduced me to that culture by taking me to La Marqueta, so she could buy fresh chicken.

01-00:41:04
Tewes: Amazing how this works out.

01-00:41:07
Cortez Todd: Yeah.

01-00:41:10
Tewes: In continuing to think about values that were important to your family, did—how did you discuss politics as a family, if at all?

01-00:41:23
Cortez Todd: My Aunt Rosemary, she was very much informed about Black culture, history and culture. Before knowing Martin Luther King, she had books on Africa and African studies. And she would share this stuff with me and tell me what the original continent of Africa—and that Elizabeth Taylor looked nothing like Cleopatra, and what Cleopatra really looked like, and just all the things that were beautiful and important about African culture and history. She would talk about how folks in Egypt and North Africa were bathing in fabulous oils while the Europeans were still living in caves and had a bath once a year. So that was her politics of African or African American or Black supremacy, if you want to put it that way. We were not a people meant to be enslaved, but just imagine how strong we must be and how smart we must be to have survived and to have excelled. And she would always tell me about people like W.E.B. Du Bois, and she didn't really care about [Booker T. Washington] too much, because she felt that he was very much in enslaved mentality and grateful to "massa." And then she'd tell me about Ida B. Wells. She introduced me to jazz music and the musicians, and Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald all over, and Count Basie and Cab Calloway. Oh God, there were two brothers, and they were dancers, and it begins with a "s." I don't know, stepbrothers? I can't remember. I have a problem now sometimes trying to be—I can see who I'm talking about, and I can't come up with their name—[the Nicholas Brothers].

01-00:44:04
Tewes: That's okay. We can add that later if it comes to us.

01-00:44:09
Cortez Todd: Huh?

01-00:44:09
Tewes: We can add that later if it comes to us, no worries.

01-00:44:14
Cortez Todd: Yeah, yeah, they were famous, they were famous dancers. They were in a movie where they're jumping downstairs and coming out into a split, and then they jump and turn over and they come out. And then Cab Calloway was in the movie. Oh God, it's going to bother me for all day. Next time we take a break, I'm going to get the name.

01-00:44:45
And the politics was that you didn't want to go down South and you didn't want to live there. You may travel there to see relatives from time to time, but it was a whole other world, and you wanted no part of that. She was not necessarily a follower of Marcus Garvey, but she thought he had some good points. And then there was Father Divine, who had his own—almost like Elijah Muhammad had—his own entourage of people that he took in care of and had certain values and beliefs and followed them. But the one thing was that it was about Black pride and the history. You must know your history and know where you came from and all the parts of the world where you came from.

01-00:45:50
My grandmother's father was of Dutch heritage in Arkansas. She was born in Arkansas, and the idea that the Little Dutch Boy on the paint can, that that was part of my heritage, also. And I was like, "Are you serious?" The politics were very pro-Black and actually pro-people of color, even though it was not defined that way at that time. Because there was a thing with the Jamaicans and people from the Caribbean, people from Trinidad, and these were all people that we had something in common with, even if we had different ways of being and different cultures. And maybe you don't want to go over there, because there they eat funny or—[laughs] it's like, Oh God.

01-00:47:00
It was very Democratic. My grandfather was a Republican, and he was a Republican until he voted for John F. Kennedy. But all those other years, he'd been a Republican. The family would look at him and go, "I don't know why you're a Republican. Why, just why?" And then he would say, "Well, because of the Dixiecrats." "Oh yeah, but the Democrats outnumbered the Dixiecrats, and the bigger population of Democrats are more than the Dixiecrats, and so we need to side with them, because we'll—" so that was really the politics: know your history; read/know about other cultures, people of color and anybody that came through the African origins, so Egyptians, Moroccans, Ethiopians. And the fact that Ethiopia was Jewish, and that Haile Selassie was considered the Jesus of our generation or something. The Rastafarians believed that he was God, but we were very proud of him, because of who he was, the head of this country. And the same thing happened with Gaddafi and with Sadat, all of these powerful, political people who were not what the news

said they were. So I had always been a fan of Gaddafi and definitely a fan of Sadat, and then they got vilified or Gaddafi got vilified, and folks still don't know all the incredibly wonderful things that he did under his regime, because they had to make him out to be a monster, so they could kill him. That's how it was put to me, and that's how I believe it, because I trust the people who talk to me about what happened to Gaddafi. So yeah, we're radical politics, I guess, on some levels.

01-00:49:54

Tewes: Well, how did that play out? In particular, your Mother was an activist. What did that look like in her life?

01-00:50:03

Cortez Todd: All right, in the building that my Mom moved into when I was around four was a building that had a number of really culturally active, human rights active. Dorothy Height, who was one of the founders of the National Council of Negro Women and was their president for almost 10 million years, she lived upstairs from me. So when I was a little girl, I would see this lady who was always well-dressed, and we knew that she went all around the country and outside the country to speak, to give speeches about human rights and women's rights. I was hearing that from the time I was around four. Above her was my Mother's godmother, whose family were in theater and music and dance. So people like Harry Belafonte would come to visit them, and I'd get to meet them and Earth Kitt. And Eartha Kitt was definitely a powerful human rights, woman's rights woman, she was just—you know. So I was a kid around all of these people talking about rights, and then having my Aunt Rose have her influence. She had moved to Chicago by that time, though, but I would still hear from her, and I'd spend some time with her in Chicago. I was just surrounded with a lot of people who were cultural activists, women's rights activists, voting rights activists, going to a church to hear somebody speak about a political issue.

01-00:51:59

And Adam Clayton Powell also got very close with my family—not when I was growing up, not when I was old enough to know who he was, but before. They were trying to hook up my Aunt Rose with Adam Clayton Powell. I mean, that's how they arranged all these associations and marriages to create family stuff. When I think about my Aunt Rose, she says, "I wasn't interested in him. I was interested in his father, [laughs] because he was much more impressive to me than him." She said, "So they would send me over there to have dinner with them or have tea. I'd wind up talking to his dad more than talking to him." [Those were] just ordinary occurrences. But just being in that environment was—you know. Whenever you needed to take a collection of clothes or money or whatever, [it was] not for the poor starving children in India, but the poor starving children in Harlem or down south.

01-00:53:25

Cortez Todd: I realized later when I started expanding my view from just civil rights or just women's rights to human rights that that's where all that started, when I was a little girl and being in that environment where these people were just doing all of this stuff. And I was watching them, because I was a kid and listening to them, yeah.

01-00:53:51

Tewes: Speaking of which, your Mother was involved with CORE quite heavily, Congress of Racial Equality. Oh, I guess I should ask: what are your earliest memories of your personal association with CORE?

01-00:54:13

Cortez Todd: Nineteen sixty-two, just before the March on Washington [for Jobs and Freedom]. But my Mother had been involved with the New York City Commission on Human Rights, because she was part of the group that were testing—in the fifties—testing housing where you'd have a white couple and a Black couple go and apply or look for the same apartment. They would usually deny the colored folks and say to the white folks, "Come on in." And then my Mother would be part of the court case that said, "This is what they tried to do, and that's against the law." One of the people on the commission with her was Stan Burns, who was a New York City disc jockey, and he was very active politically. We went to a number of events, and I was a teenager by then, and I went and I heard people speak. I was just beginning to hear about Women Strike for Peace, and so this all preceded CORE. I started following my Mom around—or actually, she wouldn't leave me home by myself, so if she was going somewhere, she was taking me. Because she was like, "I'm not going to have a babysitter for you, you're coming with me, period." And that was about 1962, yeah.

01-00:56:07

So that's when we were meeting, and stuff was going on in the South and we were hearing about things and people. This was of course after the *Brown v. the Board of Education* and this was after the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and things were still festering and still being worked on. And then when the March on Washington came up, and that took almost a year to put together—actually, not a year, maybe in January of '63, yeah. And from then on, it was all full speed ahead.

01-00:56:59

Tewes: Obviously you had this connection through your family, but what was it about CORE that spoke to you?

01-00:57:08

Cortez Todd: James Farmer. And I had had some association with Quakers and with hearing about the Fellowship of Reconciliation, which is what James Farmer and Bayard Rustin and Conrad Lynn, any number of folks came out of that. There was a peacefulness about their temperament, and they were not rabble rousers, and it was about gentility almost. It was an atmosphere of acceptance and an

atmosphere of everybody's acceptance with everybody else. I think that's why my Mother got involved, and when she exposed me to them, it seemed just natural to me. They were less intellectually correct like the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]; they were a little stiff. And then the Urban League was very male oriented, from what I felt.

01-00:58:32

Cortez Todd: And a lot of my stuff growing up is stuff that I felt, and I couldn't put a name on it and I couldn't explain it. But I knew I felt at times this was the thing I was supposed to be doing and this is the way I was supposed to behave with other people, and it just felt right. And so CORE, when my Mother got involved and I would go, it felt right. By that time, we had moved to Riverdale, because my Mother had gone to court to get the apartment that we lived in, because they said, "Oh no, all the apartments are rented." And then somebody else from Commission on Human Rights came to try and, "Oh yes, we have an apartment over here." And then he says, "Oh really? Well, you told this woman that they didn't have an apartment, so you're going to rent her that apartment." And then she went to court and got the apartment, and that's where we lived.

01-00:59:37

That was the Riverdale community. Above Two Hundred Forty-Sixth St., it was called Golden Ghetto. So between Spuyten Duyvil, which was the tip of the—Riverdale was in the Bronx, but it was Riverdale, and it was a whole other world. But where I lived, which was below Two Hundred Forty-Sixth St., was the Silver Ghetto. And again, this is one of those times where I had no idea that we weren't wealthy, because we were living in Riverdale. I went to a Catholic elementary school around the corner from where I lived on One Hundred Fifty-Second St. in Harlem, and I wanted to go to public high school. They said, "No, you're going to a Catholic high school." And I said to myself, "Well, I'm going to pick the most expensive Catholic high school I can," and I did. And I got in there, and that was the Notre Dame School on Seventy-Ninth St. in Manhattan, and I had to take the subway to get there. It was a school of kids from very wealthy families, for the most part, and I didn't know I wasn't one of them. I was the only identifiable African American. Okay, wait a minute, I'm getting out of order of myself.

01-01:01:31

Tewes: That's fine, yeah.

01-01:01:35

Cortez Todd: Well, just the idea that CORE gave me a sense of really belonging and having a sense place and having something to contribute. At a very young age, that just made me feel very powerful. And while I was at school, while I was at the Notre Dame School, in my class, thirty-two of us went in as freshmen and thirty-two of us graduated as seniors. And we were divided into two classes: seventeen in one and fifteen and the other. It was a very privileged school. There were twins in my class that were from the Dominican Republic, and

they were Trujillo's goddaughters. And when I later learned, well, if they're from the Dominican Republic, these are colored girls. But you would not have known that when they were in high school, because they were very, very fair. And it was like, "Honey, you don't come from the Dominican Republic without having some African in you, because—you know, excuse me." And then there was a young woman, she was Korean, and she was about my color, maybe a little bit darker than me, but she was considered white, because she was Korean. So she could be on the other side of the Black/white situation. There was a Hawaiian girl who also had a tinge of color to her, but she was accepted as white. And there was a Filipino girl. And all these folks around my color or just the same or a little tinge difference, but they were considered in the white family, because they were either foreign or from outside the United States, and they were looked at very differently.

01-01:04:04

Cortez Todd: I graduated in 1963, so the summer of '63 was when I went to the March on Washington. But in 1962, I was active in CORE, and I started seeing some things very differently in my high school. I sat at the same table with the same girls for four years, but when the high school trip to Washington, DC, occurred, nobody wanted me for a hotel roommate. And they went to the principal and said—well, because the hotel was segregated and you could have the Korean, because she's Korean, and the Filipino, because she's Filipino, and the Hawaiian, because she's Hawaiian, but I'm just a United States-born colored girl. They told the principal, and I don't know which ones went to the principal, and I never bothered asking. But the principal called me in the office and said this, "And they said that you act like you're better than all of them." And I'm like, "Really? Oh." "And that you"—I forget what, yeah—"that you think you're better than all of them." I wanted to say, "I am," [laughs] but I didn't. And it was a very hurtful moment, but it was one that I just said, "That's not my baggage." And I didn't know that I was saying, "That's not my baggage," but I just wouldn't allow it to interfere. We still continued to have lunch every day together, and it was never brought up. And even the picture in the high school yearbook of the trip to Washington, DC, they were all there and I wasn't, and I was like, I don't care. You people are not that important to me, because I had a whole other world outside of the school, and I was almost finished.

01-01:06:41

I remember in my junior year, I started not doing so well in my grades, and one of the things that occurred to me or occurred to my Mother was that that was the same time I was starting to ask questions that they did not want to answer. But my grades got better, because my Mother talked to the principal. It's like, "Excuse me, you didn't want her to ask that question?" I don't even know what the question was. I remember what it was, but I know I always asked the question, because they also had a priest that used to come once a week to talk with us about religion and about being good girls and what would be acceptable behavior and all that and crap, because I was past going to

Sunday Mass after the eighth grade. There were things that I did not know at the time that I was rebelling against the status quo just by my very essence. I was not doing that, I wasn't accepting that, I'm not believing this, I'm going to question this, and I just became a thorn in their side. [laughs] Those nuns, they had a hard time with me, yeah. But my Mother always supported me.

01-01:08:23

Tewes: That's really fortunate to have that support.

01-01:08:26

Cortez Todd: Yeah, yeah, no matter what I did. She was my hero, she was always there for me, I mean, always there for me. Even when I was wrong or I had done something wrong, she was still there. She never spanked me. She did slap me once when I was fourteen, because I had—one of my classmates was spending the weekend with me, one of the few white girls in my class that really was close with me. But we went to a party and then we left the party and went someplace else that we had no business going and then we got back home. She tattled on us, and the next day when they took her home, they came back, and the first thing my Mother did was walk in and go, [makes slapping motion] "You had the nerve to do, da, da, da, da, da." And I was like, "Yeah, we did, we did." And she said, "Go to your room, just go. And I don't ever want to hear anything like that again." "Okay." Yeah. But then we had dinner that night, and we were fine. Yeah, she was my hero—is my hero.

01-01:09:52

Tewes: Yes, I think I want to continue our conversation about CORE in our next session. But to finish up today, I'm curious about your early interest in the arts and what that looked like for you. What were you interested in?

01-01:10:16

Cortez Todd: Flamenco dancing, because my Mother took me to all these artistic events. When José Greco and his company would come to New York, that's where we went, and I'd come home, and of course I was flamenco dancing, and I had castanets and I was learning how to—[pretends to play castanets]. I never learned how to—my hands just wouldn't get the sound right. But it didn't stop me from trying. And then I would [pretends to play castanets] all around the house. When my Mom would be asleep on the weekends on Saturday mornings and I had come back home for the weekend, she had 78 record collection, and so I would play all the records while she slept in the morning, and that fascinated me.

01-01:11:16

And then my Aunt Rosemary introduced me to finger painting and water painting. So I'd be listening to the music and I'd be water painting, watercolors. Then I got charcoal. All these things were given to me to express my artistic interest. I went to the theater. I saw *Fanny* on Broadway. I had no business seeing *Fanny* at that age, but I did. And then we would go to Atlantic City for the summer, a couple of weeks in the summertime, and they had a

club across the way that had entertainment, and I'd always go with them. I had to have a Shirley Temple, but I would see all these performers. And I loved dancing and so I got to dance, I got to practice flamenco. My godmother's niece was a dancer, and she performed in the play *House of Flowers* that was on Broadway, and she would talk to me.

01-01:12:42

Cortez Todd: That's the other thing. When I was in elementary school, a friend of mine, her mother got season tickets to the ballet, the New York City Center Ballet. And she had two tickets, so one was for her daughter and one was for me, and she gave them to me. And every Sunday that the New York City Ballet was in New York, we were at the ballet. I mean, you can see *Swan Lake* but just for so many times, but I was starting to follow—oh God, there was one piece called *Afternoon of a Faun* with a man and a woman, and Edward Villella was—I just loved his work, and Arthur Mitchell, who later founded the—oh, God. Arthur Mitchell founded a ballet company in Harlem, I can't remember the name of it at this moment, but it was his. [The Dance Theatre of Harlem.] Actually, at this point, they built next door to the house that we lived in on One Hundred Fifty-Second St. There was a garage, and then the next building was a rooming house and somewhat of an illicit activity house, and now that is all his theater company building. They redid everything and made it an arts environment. No, it's not the National Black Theatre, but I did get introduced to the National Black Theatre, because Barbara Ann Teer was also in the family, so there was Black theater.

01-01:14:44

All of my artistic interests came, because I was taken to everything, exposed to everything. I would go to The Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art] or the history museum [American Museum of Natural History] on Central Park West and Seventy-Ninth St. I could walk there from my school, and the subway station was also right there that I could go straight home. But I would wander around in the history museum. I would wander around in the library, which was like eight blocks away from me, and just wherever there was music or anything going on. And like I said, we went to every change of the Radio City Music Hall program, and they changed with every season, so it's four times a year I saw four new presentations. I was always drawing or doing some clay. I mean, my Mom gave me every tool that she could to allow my creativity to come out.

01-01:16:07

Tewes: And what has that meant for you in your life, having this creative foundation?

01-01:16:17

Cortez Todd: That means I'm a jack-of-all-trades and a master of none. I do a little painting, I did a lot of acting, I tried to learn the guitar and I was not good at it. [laughs] When I went South, one of the guys had a guitar and he was playing. I said, "I know that. E minor, A, E minor, A, E minor, A, E minor, B7." That was a particular song, and I knew the chords, but I couldn't really play them.

[laughs] So I would dabble in a lot of stuff. Dress designing. My other cousin became a designer of really men's stuff, but I would create stuff. Again, Saturday mornings, I would get all these scarves of my Mother's and I'd make stuff—a bra with one scarf and another one—and I'd be dancing around like I had seen on Broadway or I had seen at a dance thing. And then of course, there's always my flamenco. And then my aunt, my Aunt Rosemary, she was really my Auntie Mame, she took me to my first opera when I was four, and it was Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffman*. And when we came back home, we performed the opera in the archway between the living room and the dining room, and I got to dance one of the—there was a doll, there was a ballerina in the opera, and so I got to act out her role. It just filled my life with a lot of interesting dabbling, yeah, just a lot of creative energy to do just a bunch of stuff, you know?

01-01:18:51
Tewes: Yeah.

01-01:18:52
Cortez Todd: And that's also what contributed later to my creating an art and therapy program, but that's another story.

01-01:19:03
Tewes: Yeah, that's why I'm asking. It feels like a throughline in your own life.

01-01:19:06
Cortez Todd: Yeah, I've always taken everything I've learned and passed it on in something that I did. So creating the art and music therapy for so-called bad boys. They weren't bad, they were just full of energy and full of creativity, and nobody was giving them the opportunity to do that. But once a week in the afternoon, they were mine, and I took them Downtown and I took them on Madison Ave. to the antique stores. And one of them stopped and he said, "Is that a real woman at that desk or is that a mannequin?" Because they had just seen a bunch of mannequins that were posed, and this woman was so still at her desk in this antique store. He's like, "Is she real?" And I said, "Yes, why don't you go in and say hello to her?" "We can go in there?" "Yeah, you can go in there. Just don't touch anything, but you can go in there." And they would go in and be just fascinated by the stuff that was in there. The young man, he went over to her, and he says, "You have a beautiful store, this is a beautiful store." I know she was holding her breath, because I had six little boys [laughs] that were around ten years old all come into the store, and she was like [gasps]. Yeah, and just also doing work with other teenagers and creating theater programs and jobs.

01-01:20:51

The one thing I will say is I had to go before the board of the Summer Youth Employment Program in Hartford, Connecticut, with my proposal, and I had to defend the proposal. They said, "Well, what has theater got to do with work and education?" And I was like, Now I know you didn't tell me that or ask me

that. I said, "Well, if you want to be an actor, you have to learn how to read, so you can read a script. If you want to write a story, you have to learn how to read and write. If you want to have a production, you have to build the set, so there's carpentry, literacy, and just stick-to-itiveness in having a project." I said, "Those are all good work habits." And one person said, "I never thought about it that way." I wanted to say, "Yeah, and now you're going to give me the money?" [laughs] And they did, they did. There were about twelve or thirteen kids that got a paycheck for six weeks in the summer to do theater.

01-01:22:06
Tewes: Amazing, what a great connection.

01-01:22:09
Cortez Todd: Yeah.

01-01:22:09
Tewes: I think that might be a good place for us to end today. Is there anything you want to add before we close out?

01-01:22:20
Cortez Todd: Not that I can think of. I'm going to find out the name of the dancers, [the Nicholas Brothers].

01-01:22:29
Tewes: Oh sure, we will [add their names]. [laughs]

01-01:22:31
Cortez Todd: And the name begins with an "s", and I'm going to find it, I will make a note for the next time.

01-01:22:38
Tewes: Okay, not a problem, not a problem. Thank you, Fatima—

01-01:22:41
Cortez Todd: Okay.

01-01:22:42
Tewes: —I appreciate it.

01-01:22:43
Cortez Todd: Thank you.

Interview 2: May 15, 2024

02-00:00:04

Tewes: This is a second interview with Fatima Cortez Todd for the Women's Movements in the United States Oral History Project, in association with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. The interview is being conducted by Amanda Tewes on May 15, 2024. Ms. Cortez Todd joins me in this remote interview from Los Angeles, California, and I am in Walnut Creek, California. Thank you, Fatima, for joining me again today. Looking forward to it.

02-00:00:29

Cortez Todd: Oh, thanks for having me.

02-00:00:32

Tewes: I think a good place for us to pick up today would be to talk about your involvement with the March on Washington, which [was the] March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in August of 1963. We discussed your longtime connections with the Congress of Racial Equality [CORE] by this point, but how did you become involved with this particular march? What was your work here?

02-00:00:56

Cortez Todd: Well, Andrea Simon, I think I might have mentioned, hosted Sunday soirees basically that were a gathering of people who were involved in various movements and aspects of the movement, like Women Strike for Peace and the Congress of Racial Equality. And we would have a gathering where they would exchange news and information about different things going on in the South and in the North and stuff with the Commission on Human Rights in New York City and the housing program for testing apartments and testing in the real estate market where people are being discriminated against. That was very important, because that's also how we got the apartment that we were living in, in Riverdale. My Mother went to court, because when they went through the testing of that particular building and they said that there was no vacancies and there was a vacancy, and that's how we got to live there.

02-00:02:03

I was in high school, and I was just fascinated by the people around, and I didn't really have a voice in any of the meetings or any of the information being shared. I was really there as an observer and somebody that could fetch water or serve little hors d'oeuvres, whatever came down the pike. Sometimes it was just a bologna sandwich and folks—just snacks, I mean, it wasn't serious. I just remember feeling a sense of awe in all of these people, and my Mother, of course, was very much at the center of that. They would have Andrea's children who were older than me—well, not that much older—but two of the daughters, Lucy and Carly, would sing a couple of folk songs, and that would be really about it for the entertainment. It made it for a very relaxed environment where folks could talk about very serious issues that were going on, and I was just a great observer.

02-00:03:26
Cortez Todd: Now when they started talking about the March on Washington coming up, I wasn't sure what was going to be my part or—because I was excited. I wanted to go to Washington, DC, with everybody else, and then I came up with the idea—because someone had once told me, "If you want to be part of something, you have to make yourself indispensable. So find something that you can do that nobody else is offering to do or can do, and then you'll be sure to have a spot." Okay. So I said, "I want to make the banners for the buses," because they were going to have two buses, "and I want to make the banners for the buses." They were like, "Oh, fine." I had no idea how to do it, but I had an idea how to do it. And I had a lot of support from my Mom and a friend of hers who got the sail cloth, because it was a heavy canvas, and it had grommets on the ends. And then taught me to cut holes, cut a slice so that the wind could blow through it, as opposed to making it bubble out. I was learning a whole new skill. And that became my project, and that was it. So I got to make them and took over in my Mother's living room and brought them on the day of the march to the buses, and they put them on.

02-00:05:11
Tewes: What did they say?

02-00:05:13
Cortez Todd: "Riverdale CORE March on Washington," I think. I know "Riverdale CORE" was there, I don't know. I don't know if it had "March on Washington," but I know it had "Riverdale CORE," and it may have had "March on Washington," but the bus banner in the front had "March on Washington," so maybe I didn't have that, yeah. I can't remember right now.

02-00:05:45
Tewes: That's okay.

02-00:05:46
Cortez Todd: I know I cut a lot of letters and I pasted a lot of letters on this canvas, but I know it's "Riverdale CORE."

02-00:05:55
Tewes: And were the letters themselves also canvas or another material?

02-00:06:00
Cortez Todd: That's flannel.

02-00:06:01
Tewes: Flannel?

02-00:06:02
Cortez Todd: Yeah, they were. It's something that you get in elementary school when you're in kindergarten and you cut out things and it's kind of a—

02-00:06:15
Tewes: Oh, felt?

02-00:06:15
Cortez Todd: Is that what it is?

02-00:06:19
Tewes: It's what comes to my mind.

02-00:06:21
Cortez Todd: Okay. Well, whatever it was, it was like the thickness and the weight of cardboard, but it was material. It might have been felt, yeah, because flannel would have been another thing, felt would have some body to it, yeah.

02-00:06:41
Tewes: So you made yourself indispensable by doing this work?

02-00:06:45
Cortez Todd: Yup.

02-00:06:47
Tewes: What was the day of like? Did you drive in the bus the day of the march or the night before?

02-00:06:55
Cortez Todd: Oh, the day of, we had to get up at the crack of dawn and be gathered. I forget where we were leaving from. We might've been leaving from Andrea Simon's house, because there were two buses, and everybody just gathered and got on the buses, and we were half asleep, but we were we were heading to DC. And I think it's like, from New York to DC, maybe about five hours, about that. We stopped along the New Jersey Turnpike, and folks got coffee or something else, but we were singing songs on the bus, you know, [sings] "Oh, freedom, oh, freedom," or [sings] "Ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'round, turn me 'round." We were just gung-ho, we knew we were on a mission.

02-00:07:59
Tewes: And what was it like when you stepped off the bus?

02-00:08:08
Cortez Todd: I think I was really awestruck. Everybody had scattered to different areas and stuff. My Mom went with some of her friends, and I found this great tree that was up—we were up close to the front, and there were a lot of people. There were just a lot of people already there when we got there, so they must have left the night before and got themselves there. I noticed this tree, and I knew it was going to be sunny, and I wasn't going to be out in the sun, so I parked myself at this tree and just had a great view of everything and everybody. My Mother went off with some of the other people on the bus. And I was there, and people would come by and check on me, and I was good. I knew where I was, and I knew where the bus going home was. I need to stop for a minute.

02-00:09:16
Tewes: Sure, let's pause. [break in recording] All right, we are back from a break. Fatima, you were going to tell us more about the day of the March of Washington.

02-00:09:25
Cortez Todd: Yes, so like I said, I found my spot, which was a tree just on one side of the Reflection Pond, and near the front stage and under this great, shady tree. Actually, I saw people that I didn't know were going to be there, people that I was a summer camp counselor, and the son and his wife—of the owner—showed up. It was like, "Hey, how you doing? Oh, good to see you here." And I think they gave me some fruit, because people were sharing food and whatever. But I was all set, I had everything I needed, and it was just nice to see people that I wouldn't have expected or didn't know that they had any idea about doing anything around civil rights, and here they were in the same place that I was. And I just saw all the gathering up on the steps at the podium, and you just—okay. While I saw all of that, what I felt—and I think this is what you were looking for—I felt safe. I felt like we were all there in a kumbaya movement, and nobody was arguing with anybody, and everybody was really being like one big family, because nobody was a stranger. I was seventeen years old, and I felt safe and I felt special, because I was part of all of this.

02-00:11:38
Tewes: Thank you.

02-00:11:38
Cortez Todd: And I heard all the speeches as they came one by one. The only thing that made me really annoyed was that Dorothy Height, who at that time—well, she almost forever was the president of the National Council on Negro Women, and I know she was one of the founders. She was up on the stage out there in the sun, and of course, she had a big hat on to keep her face from [getting] too much sun, and she never got to speak. And it was like, Wow. Well, why is she up there if she's not going to speak? I waited all day for her to speak, and she didn't, because no women were allowed to speak. [laughs] Here we are marching for peace and freedom, and jobs and freedom, and the women get to be there, but don't get to really say anything, just to be there to support everything else that was going on. And I remember noticing that and going, Wow, I wonder what happened? Did they run out of time, what happened? Oh, gee whiz. And it wasn't about running out of time, it was that they just were not included.

02-00:13:07
Tewes: And you noticed that even then?

02-00:13:08
Cortez Todd: Yeah.

02-00:13:11
Tewes: Well—

02-00:13:12
Cortez Todd: It wasn't because she was a woman, it was because she was an important woman that I was very taken aback that she wasn't speaking. This is not just Jane Doe from the side of the street. This is a woman of substance, I guess, a celebrity in her own right.

02-00:13:42
Tewes: And a leader in her own right.

02-00:13:44
Cortez Todd: Exactly. And I didn't get tired, nobody fell asleep. Because you're out there in almost a picnic kind of mode, and when you're at a picnic, somebody's always going to go with a blanket and lay down and nod out. Nobody nodded out or I didn't see anybody nod out and I didn't see—yeah, it was just a very warm environment, people warm, emotionally warm. And the speeches were incredible and the music performances were incredible. I mean, Bob Dylan with "Blowin' in the Wind," just important songs. And I think Peter, Paul and Mary did "If I had a Hammer." Odetta sang, I can't remember what, she might have sung, "Oh, Freedom," I don't remember, but I just remember enjoying the music.

02-00:15:03
Tewes: And what do you remember about the speeches, what stuck out for you from that day?

02-00:15:09
Cortez Todd: Well, one of the things that stuck out for me was the fact that I knew that James Baldwin was coming from Paris, and he had written a speech, and he didn't get to give it. Burt Lancaster read his speech, and I knew that, because I knew Baldwin was supposed to be giving the speech, and I think Burt Lancaster acknowledged that he was doing Baldwin's speech. I'm not sure, but I know that he did. And I said, "Wow, he's doing a really good job, but why isn't Baldwin speaking?" I liked the fact that Burt Lancaster was there, and I liked the fact that he was giving a speech. But I was annoyed by the fact that Baldwin couldn't give his own speech. And then I heard later when they said that they wouldn't let Baldwin get up to the microphone, because they couldn't guarantee that he would stay on point, that he wouldn't say stuff that they didn't want to have heard. And I know that Jim—James Lewis? No.

02-00:16:35
Tewes: John Lewis?

02-00:16:36
Cortez Todd: Huh?

02-00:16:37
Tewes: John Lewis?

02-00:16:38

Cortez Todd: Yeah, John Lewis. I was like, James? And I went, No, it's not his name. I know that John Lewis, he gave a great speech, and I felt his emotion. And then I was upset, because there was—oh, I think it was a white minister or some clergy person who said that he had to take out the line that, "We're going to do this and march through Atlanta, like Sherman did Georgia," or whatever the exact words were. I didn't know that at the time, but I found out later, because somebody says, "You know, that's really a damn shame that he wasn't going to give the benediction for the opening of the day of speeches and acknowledging that everybody was there, unless John Lewis took out that line." And I'm like, "What? That's just wrong, that's just wrong." But you understood the politics of that time were very oppressive. And even in the middle of a freedom march, somebody is going to be making rules that they have no business making to almost try to water down the validity of the march, and like I said, that was just wrong. I didn't know all of that when it was happening, but I knew that Baldwin was supposed to be there, and I knew that he was there and that he didn't get to give his speech.

02-00:18:27

Of course, Dr. King's speech was wonderful, but the other part that really stuck with me: I knew Bayard Rustin, and I knew that he was one of the main architects of the march, he and A. Philip Randolph. I think he might have had the greater part in writing the ten pledges. There were ten items of pledge that he wrote, and A. Philip Randolph read off the main entrance to those ten pledges at the end of the march that was going to happen. And it was like, Wait a minute, I know that Bayard wrote all of that, so how come he doesn't get to—it became a day of, Wait a minute, somebody else wrote that and they're not the ones that get to say it. He did get to do the ten pledges, but A. Philip Randolph did the introduction on why that was important and what it was that we were being asked to do. They said, "Do you pledge to go home and talk to your families, your neighborhoods? Do you commit to the fight for the civil rights and voting rights and all of that?" And that's all I can remember. I don't remember them offhand, but I know where to go find them if I needed to say them, but they're available on Google. And everybody, all of the people said, "I will," or, "I do so pledge." And if everybody who was at the March on Washington had kept their word when they went home to their communities, we would not be where we are now. But folks didn't. I would say maybe 10 percent of the folks kept their word. I know I was one of the 10 percent.

02-00:20:49

Tewes: That leads me to ask: what was the impact of this event for you personally and, do you think, on the movement?

02-00:21:00

Cortez Todd: I think it was very inspirational, and it was a great, feel-good moment, but nobody—not nobody—most of the folks did not know. It was like going to a grand and glorious party, and then going home and then being comfortable

with just talking about how wonderful that party was, but not really knowing or not really committing to doing anything about what was suggested at the party. That's very frustrating to think about now, because we're in deep dumpy.

02-00:21:52
Tewes: Yeah. Well, thank you for sharing that. But of course, your involvement in the civil rights movement did not end with this march. Before we get to discuss that more, I just want to ask, thinking about your personal politics at that time: when did you start identifying as an activist?

02-00:22:17
Cortez Todd: I didn't know I was an activist; I just was. I didn't identify as being anything other than a member of CORE. And the only time I had a title was when I was a CORE task force worker in Louisiana, and that happened the year after I was in Washington. I had been involved with CORE with my Mother since I was like fourteen. I didn't identify myself as an activist; I just knew what I was doing was something important.

02-00:23:08
Tewes: And at this point, you're seventeen years old, and are way under the twenty-one-year-old threshold to vote, but did you have a sense of electoral politics at that time? Were you following a certain party or policies?

02-00:23:23
Cortez Todd: Well, I knew that we were, or that my family was, Democrats, except for my grandfather, who was a Republican. But he changed from being a Republican to vote for John F. Kennedy, and he remained a Democrat after that. He was also at the March on Washington, but he came—I didn't see him, didn't know he was coming, didn't know anything about it until after the fact, but he came with his church. They came on a school bus, which was probably the most uncomfortable ride that they could take from New York, because school buses were not known for being comfortable or being air-conditioned or anything, and the bus broke down on a Jersey Turnpike, so they had to get it fixed. It wasn't a major thing, so they were able to get it taken care of and kept on, and they made it to DC.

02-00:24:29
Tewes: So, as we say, the March on Washington was August of 1963. That fall, is that when you went to Hunter College, that year?

02-00:24:40
Cortez Todd: Yeah, yeah.

02-00:24:41
Tewes: So that's 1963 to '64. Can you tell me about your decision to attend?

02-00:24:48
Cortez Todd: Well, in my family, I didn't have a choice but to commit to go to college, and I didn't want to go away to some Catholic college, so I registered for Hunter

College. Hunter had started out as a women's college, and so that's where I was going to go. I wanted to study classical languages, Greek and Latin, because that's what I had enjoyed, Latin in high school. And the stories were so wonderful that you wanted to read more and you wanted to be able to read more, and then connection with the history of when things were written was very fascinating to me. And so classical languages, Greek and Latin are considered classical languages. I registered for Greek, Latin, modern history, French, and English. And I found the most prejudiced professors in the Greek and Latin classes, as if I didn't belong there. I basically said, "Eff it, I'm not going, I am not going to go in that class and watch the professors favor helping and dealing with everybody except my questions." The Greek class, the woman—it was a woman professor, and she actually—there were Greek students in the class, so they were way ahead of writing and speaking and all of that stuff, and she was of no help to me whatsoever, so I stopped going to Greek and Latin.

02-00:26:47

Cortez Todd: My English teacher, I adored, and it was Kate Millett. I learned later what she became, and she's this fantastic writer and person, and she was just wonderful. She was very much a feminist before they were talking about feminists, and she gave me a lot of encouragement with what I was writing. I wrote a particular short story that had a lot of flower in it, and she said, "Just curb that a little bit and just write what happened. You don't have to dress it up, just write the story as it happens in your mind." "Okay." So I go to her class. And then I had a French class with Alex Sergei, who later became the head of the Romantic Language Department, who was just an incredible person, and we remained friends even after I left school. I did well in his class, because he was there, he was there for all of his students, and that made a big difference.

02-00:28:03

And as for the history class, I had not gone to all the classes, and I had my midterm exam, and I got a B in the midterm exam. So I said, "Oh well, this is all stuff I had in my senior year in high school, so why am I going to bother going to class, because I don't [need to]?" Well, as it so happened, because I didn't go back to Greek and Latin class, that was a failure. And then I did fail my history final exam, so that was goodbye. And also because I had missed classes, they just weren't going to give me any credit for that class. So the English class and the French class were the only ones that I got good grades in, but that's also when I flunked out of my freshman year. [laughs] I felt quite righteous in my rebellion that this was supposed to be, but—

02-00:29:16

Tewes: Mm-hmm, and—

02-00:29:18

Cortez Todd: —I remained friends with my French professor. Even when I went South, I wrote him letters, and he would write back. And when I got back to New

York, it was like, "Oh, you got to come and have dinner." He was just very present in my life for a while.

02-00:29:37

Tewes: Wow. At that point, did you think you were done with college forever or just for the moment?

02-00:29:45

Cortez Todd: Just for the moment. I planned on going in the spring semester, but then I was getting involved in local projects and stuff like literacy programs. But the literacy program that I got involved with was Harlem UP or something like that, and it was all men in positions of authority, making assignments and so forth. And I think that I was feeling like, Wait a minute, I got something to say here, and there was not really any room for me to say stuff, or they didn't pay me any attention. I think I was the youngest person, also, there, so it was like, Who is this kid coming here and—this little girl, this little girl. And they called me "little girl" just one time too many, and I'm like, Okay, fine. Well, this little girl's going to take her behind home, because it takes me a while to—I got to take a bus and a subway to get here, and you're going to treat me like this? No.

02-00:31:06

And so my Mother said, "Look, you got to make up your mind. You going back to school for the spring semester or are you going to get a job?" "I'm going to get a job." "Okay, and you're going to pay rent every week." "Okay." She said, "Yeah, because I'm not taking care of you. You're not going to go to school, then I'm not going to provide all your money." "Okay." So I got a job. My first job was at the AT&T, the phone company, in the accounts receivable [department], when the monthly bill for a basic phone was $6.39. My pay, my take-home money was $59 a week, but you would've thought it was a lot more, because I would give my Mother $20, and I had a whole $39. [laughs] And I decided, I'm going to move, I'm going to move out and get my own place. And I looked at a number of places that I could afford, and it was a weekly rent, but it was like, Wait a minute, I don't have any furniture, I don't have a TV, I can't afford a phone. And so I stayed home and minded my business and just kept my job.

02-00:32:35

Tewes: Yeah, [laughs] but at what point were you starting to look towards the summer and thinking about CORE's Louisiana Voter Education Project in the summer of 1964, also known as Freedom Summer?

02-00:32:51

Cortez Todd: Well, it was it was in the spring, and they were having meetings talking about what was happening the coming summer, and that's when I said, "I want to go." By this time, I'm now eighteen, because I turned eighteen in the October of '63, and so I could go as a young adult, although you weren't really considered an adult until you were twenty-one. But I felt like I was old

enough to go. And the folks in the Riverdale CORE totally supported the idea for me. Because my Mother said, "I don't want you going down, it is too dangerous, and you're just not old enough to go and understand all of this." I'm like, "Yes, I am old enough to understand all of this, and I'm old enough to take care of myself." I went down to the CORE office, National CORE office on 38 Park Row in New York City. I was interviewed and I filled out this application, and then finally they said, "Yes, you're acceptable to go." Okay. So my parents actually bought my suitcase, and it was one of the first suitcases that had the combination on it, so I could lock it wherever I was without worrying about keeping track of a key and—

02-00:34:32
Tewes: So they came around?

02-00:34:34
Cortez Todd: Huh?

02-00:34:35
Tewes: So they came around to the idea?

02-00:34:36
Cortez Todd: Yeah, they came around and supported me. And actually, Schenley Distillers, where my Mom was working, and she was working for the vice president, who was a Black man and—oh my goodness, I can't remember his name right now.

02-00:34:57
Tewes: I think you said Chuck Williams last time.

02-00:34:58
Cortez Todd: Yeah, that's it, Chuck Williams. And Schenley paid for my ticket, first class. So I flew to New Orleans, and then flew from New Orleans to Baton Rouge on their donation and contribution to CORE, basically, so I was very honored by that. And when I left, I had just gone to the beauty parlor, and my Mother had sewn some dresses for me, and so I had this beautiful green and beige paisley linen dress that she made. I had my white gloves and my purse and my patent leather shoes. And that's how I flew, and that's where I got off, in Baton Rouge, only to be met by CORE workers in coveralls [laughs] and T-shirts. And like, Oh, I could have dressed a little differently. But I had all dresses. I didn't own any pants, so I had all dresses in my suitcase. They weren't all fancy linen, but they were little foo-foo, because that was my style. I didn't realize it was so impractical doing what I was about to be doing, and they giggled when I got off the plane.

02-00:36:45

But the first thing we did when I got off the plane is we went into the cafeteria there at the airport to see if we would be served. And we were served with no argument, but they folks just looked at us like, What are they doing here, who are those people in here, why are they here? But that was my introduction to

Louisiana. And then we drove from Baton Rouge to Plaquemine, where we were going to be for two weeks, and we were housed in different families around the office of CORE.

02-00:37:23
Tewes: And was this your training?

02-00:37:24
Cortez Todd: Yes.

02-00:37:26
Tewes: So what did the training for your work that summer entail?

02-00:37:32
Cortez Todd: Well, it was two weeks during which we had training in how to respond in a nonviolent way, how to fall to the ground and get into a fetal position and cover our heads if we were attacked so we would waylay some of the damage if we were going to have any. We were shown and we went through testing about how there were some torture things that could happen, like somebody would try to put a cigarette to your face or whatever. I discovered at that time that I really had a temper that I had to work on really controlling, because the first time somebody came at me with a cigarette, I was like [acts surprised]. And they're like, "No, just don't do anything. Just keep your mouth shut and don't respond at all. And don't show fear, just don't ever show fear. Because when somebody is attacking you, they are more likely to not attack you if you look at them with just a solid face or a solid person, like, I don't think you want to bother with me, and they go off." We learned about the different locations in the state where people are going to be sent. We learned the whole process of how to register to vote and the history of some of the activists in those different locations where people were being sent. So it's not like we were going blind into an area where nothing had gone before us. Something had been prepared to expect us at some point in history, and here we were in '64, and this was the time.

02-00:39:40
Tewes: That's a great point about building upon the activism of previous generations.

02-00:39:46
Cortez Todd: There were some local people who had done some pretty brave things before we got there. It's not like we were the first to bring any kind of sense of awareness, because where we're—I'll get to that later on. But just dealing with the training time, there was a club across the street from the CORE offices, and the CORE offices had a building. On the first floor there were offices, and upstairs there was a wide, open thing almost like a ballroom size. And that's where the training activities would come and the classes in how to vote and what the protocol was if we got arrested. I mean, just all the information we needed to have for survival and giving a little bit of information on where we were going the teams that we would be with. So I knew who I was going to be going and be with on my assignment. It was Sharon Burger and Peggy Ewing.

Sharon was from Mishawaka, Indiana, and Peggy was from Ames, Iowa, and they were two white girls. So them and me.

02-00:41:22

Cortez Todd: My point I wanted to make was that we would have our meals, our breakfast and dinner, actually across the street at this club, which during the daytime was just for us. And they had a little kitchen, and they'd serve young people who would come in for a sandwich or something like that, so they operated that in the daytime. In the morning when breakfast was ready, they would play King Curtis's "Soul Serenade" almost as a call to have breakfast. So we'd hear that, because we were all close enough that when they played it and it was broadcast out all over the neighborhood, we're like, Okay, we're heading for breakfast. I love that song, Aretha [Franklin] did a version of it, but I just loved hearing it every day that we'd go there.

02-00:42:27

And of course, at night the club would turn into a club, and they had a couple of nickel slot machines. And so I was like, Oh yeah, I'm going to try that, and of course, you never won anything anyway, and they just ate up all your nickels.

02-00:42:45

For the first two weeks, almost for the entire time of our training, I came to training with my hair in curlers, because it was so humid that my hair would get all frizzy, and that was just not how you were supposed to be, and I was like, Oh. And they said, "When you go out into the community, you are not going to be able to wear your rollers." I'm like, "Oh, what am I going to do? I can't walk around with fuzzy hair." We went up to St. Francisville, which is one of the locations, and there was one woman who was in the group, a Black woman from Boston who had an Afro. She had a very close-cut Afro, and I said to her, "You've got to cut my hair, because I can't wear the rollers and I can't walk around with my hair all fuzzy and out of control." And so she said, "Are you sure?" I'm like, "Yeah, I'm sure." So she cut all my hair, and I had a fro, a close cut, just kind of like this, which it was fine, but she was like, "Are you sure?" I went [nods]. "This is my commitment to not getting in the way of the work and not being all foo-foo." And I don't think I ever wore those patent leather shoes again, because I had some sandals, and I wore sandals and sneakers every day. Those little patent leather pumps had no business. [laughs]

02-00:44:46

Tewes: Doing the work, no.

02-00:44:47

Cortez Todd: Yeah, no. So that was the environment for our training time, and what the training was and how we did. We gelled as a group, we got very close and very tight very quickly, and people really looked out for each other. And we knew how to laugh and we knew how to party and we knew how to dance and

just hang out. There were a couple of romances that got started, and I was involved in a couple of them. One of the things I realized is this was my very first time away from home on my own. I think I might have been the youngest that came in from out of state, because there were a couple of other folks that were there from the community who were also younger than me, but I was the youngest task force worker. It was just like I was cut loose, and I loved that freedom and I loved the attention that I would get. I felt very special and important, because I knew what I was going to be doing was important.

02-00:46:23

Tewes: Right. On the flip side of this, the substance of your training made me think about the fact that there was real danger involved in the work that you were doing. Not long before, the murder of the three workers in Mississippi, I believe, occurred.

02-00:46:44

Cortez Todd: Yeah.

02-00:46:45

Tewes: And then I know you experienced, over the course of your summer, encounters with violence. How prepared were you to deal with that, or how were you thinking about that as you moved forward?

02-00:47:00

Cortez Todd: I was very naïve, and I had very little fear going into it. I very quickly developed a sense of fear in reality, because when the three—Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner—were missing, I called my Mom and I said, "I'm not one of the missing civil rights movement people." And she said, "Oh, I know that." I'm like, "Oh good. Okay." She said, "I'm not worried, I'm not worried, and I know that that's not going to be you." "Okay." And of course, that was over in Mississippi, not in Louisiana anyway. It happened within the first two weeks that we were doing our training, so it was really quick, but because it was so far away, I didn't really feel that fear.

02-00:48:08

It took me a little while—not long—it took me about a week to [feel that fear]. I was being walked back to the residence where I was staying by a young, white man who was from Nyack, New York, so we had a New York situation, community sense. We were talking a lot, so he said, "I'll walk you back, because you shouldn't walk by yourself." And then when we were walking, he says, "Oh, get behind the bushes," and he saw a truck coming that he knew was with white people in it. He then joined me behind the bush, and he says, "Yeah, we've got to stay here and just stay here and make sure they go past," because they would ride through the neighborhood to intimidate people, and saying things out the window, "I don't know where you-all are, but go back home, you—" and any number of obscenities that they could come up with to try and frighten us, "Yeah, we're going to hang your ass," just ridiculous stuff.

02-00:49:38

Cortez Todd: And I discovered at the moment and in that time, that when I am afraid, I have no control over my urine, and so I just stood there and wet myself. I was very embarrassed by that, but the person that I was with—his name was Charlie Fenton, who is a friend of mine to this day—he says, "Come on, let's take you back to where the guys—" because we were housed, men and women, separately. And he says, "Come on, go back, and we'll get changed, and then I'll get you back to the house to where you're staying." I'm like, "Okay." So he gave me a pair of his pants and another shirt, and then walked me back to where I was. And then he just walked back to where he was staying by himself, so I [said], "Aren't you worried about them seeing you walking in this neighborhood?" He says, "They wouldn't say anything if they saw [just] me walking in the neighborhood, but they would say something if they saw us walking in the neighborhood." "Oh okay." "They might suspect I'm a worker, a civil rights worker, but they wouldn't necessarily bother me." "Okay, all right." And that was when I discovered fear.

02-00:51:24

Tewes: And how would that manifest for you over the course of the summer?

02-00:51:29

Cortez Todd: Always looking over my shoulder, not really wanting to go out at night, just having a cold chill go through me when I thought that there was a truck with white people in it going past me. I didn't go anywhere by myself, and that night let me know you don't go anywhere by yourself. And you watch, you be careful who you are with when you are out, because you could become one of the missing civil rights workers. So it had hit me very, very fast, and like I said, I was very naïve when I got there. The way I was dressed [laughs] proved how stupid and naive I was. But I got into the rhythm, and you get into the rhythm of self-preservation really quickly, and also watching out for the people that you're with. We all looked over our shoulders all the time, but not all of us were looking over our shoulders at the same time, because there's always one person in the group who's watching out and/or somebody else will watch out. So we took turns watching out so that we didn't all have to be doing the same thing at the same time.

02-00:53:27

Tewes: Well, thank you for sharing that. I want to look more closely at the work you were doing in the summer of '64. So from Plaquemine, did you head to Lettsworth at that point?

02-00:53:43

Cortez Todd: Yes, I went to Lettsworth, Pointe Coupee Parish. And so the family's house that we were staying at were the Caulfield family. They had a big farm and they were landowners, which cemented their presence in the community with a very strong presence. And I found out later that Sergeant Caulfield—that was his first name, not that he was in the Army or anything; he may have been, but I don't think that's where it came from. It was his birth name,

Sergeant. And he actually had had a voter registration campaign. He had been part of the Communist Party, and his activism came from that. But he did some things, like he actually created a voter registration project himself, and he gathered some people around who were also other farmers that were landowners, Black farmers that were landowners. They were able to register 3,500 residents and have an election where they had some influence. They didn't have it for long, but they did accomplish that. He also established seven different schools, five were elementary schools and two were junior high schools, I believe. And he established the importance and the need for school buses that would take Black children to school. Otherwise, they had to get there on their own before they established the school bus system, which only served, really, white people. So he was definitely an activist, and the people that were around him, who we then met, were also a part of that activism that he had been part of and he supported.

02-00:55:59

Cortez Todd: Now, Thelma Caulfield was the daughter, and she and her mother lived in the house by themselves. Except for one weekend or maybe two weekends a month where the father and the two sons would come home from either New Orleans or Baton Rouge where they were working in the construction field, and they would come home. It was just her mother and her in the house. Peggy and I shared a bed and a room in the front of the house. There was, I guess, maybe six rooms in the house, including a living room and a kitchen. No indoor plumbing, but we had a chamber pot that was in our room every night.

02-00:57:06

And certain things you don't even think about until much later, is that Mrs. Caulfield, Mama Caulfield, got up every morning and fixed breakfast. She baked biscuits from scratch. Everything that we ate came from their land. If we were going to have fried chicken in the evening for dinner, she had gone out there that morning and killed the chicken, feathered it, and cut it up and fried it. There was a wood-burning stove in the kitchen, which also was the source of heat in the whole house, and there was electricity, but not a whole lot of appliances, no TV, no radio. So it was very, very simple and laid-back, but it was a warm, supportive environment. I didn't even miss TV and I didn't really miss the radio or having my records or any of that stuff, because this is just what it was. And you accepted where you were and you were grateful for the hospitality and you just appreciated it, and you went out to the outhouse out back.

02-00:58:47

But the idea that their mother would come into our room after we leave. We'd leave at about eight o'clock in the morning to go canvass all the area that we could. That she had actually gone in and changed, dumped, cleaned the chamber pots. And it's not like we did anything, it was only—there wasn't anything serious in the chamber pots, but the idea that this woman was emptying all the chamber pots and cleaning them and then putting them back

in the room that we slept in for the next night—I mean, all the things, the ways that she took care of us were incredible.

02-00:59:40

Cortez Todd: There was another house down the road that had a bathroom, an indoor bathroom, and would let us come and take baths every day. So when we finished walking all those dusty roads and talking to people and encouraging them to come to a meeting at the church or find out more about registering to vote, we would go to this house down the road to take a bath. And we shared the same bathwater, because you didn't want to use up all their hot water. You didn't want to use all their water, because it was coming from a well; it's not like they had city plumbing or anything. And the idea that that's what we did, it just felt as normal as anything could've been. There was no muster for us.

02-01:00:39

They also had a telephone, so when we needed to have contact with somebody, they would call that number. And would drive down the road, get us, drive us back to take the phone call, because we had to find out if something was going on or whatever. So just the very simple way and sharing way—and we shared everything. Peggy and Sharon and I as outsiders, we didn't know each other, but we became like three sisters. I realized Thelma and I were the same age, and she was just this Amazon warrior. She knew everybody and everybody knew her, and she could make introductions for us into the community.

02-01:01:36

Another family down the other end of the road were the Russells, and the Russells had horses and they had their farm, but they also had horses. I was a horseback rider from way back in summer camp and everything, and I said, "Oh wow, I love riding." And they said, "Well, you can ride." They would saddle up a horse for me every now and then and say, "Oh, we've got a horse you're going to have—you want to ride tonight?" "Oh okay." And I could ride out in the fields, in the cornfields, ride up and down. People were so generous, and they took care of us and made us feel important and special. So those are the two families in that community. I don't remember the name. I was really bad about remembering people's names, and I scold myself later on that I didn't remember the people that gave us the baths every day, and that was pretty important, but I was an airhead. One of the things that got pointed out was that I was a spoiled, little, privileged child from up North, and I didn't know anything about anything. And I was like, "Yeah, I guess you're right." [laughs]

02-01:03:21

One of the places that we would have lunch sometimes was a place called the Dew Drop Inn, which was basically a restaurant/bar, and it had a jukebox, and I would play the jukebox all the time and dance all by myself. Then we had a lot of flirtations with local guys, and there was one guy, Freddie Tolliver, who wound up working with us. We would pick him up in the morning, and he

would go and walk the same roads that we were walking. He knew a lot of people, also, just like Thelma did, and made the introduction, so made us valid. So that if we went to somebody's porch, he would say, "Oh, this is So-and-So, and So-and-So, they got something to tell you," and make the introduction, and then we would give our spiel. I didn't have to do a lot of thinking about anything except watch my back, and yeah, that was really pretty much it.

02-01:04:47

Cortez Todd: We went into this restaurant that some—it was owned by a Black family, and I wanted a hamburger. They were like, "We'll put some grease in the pan." And I said, "You deep-fry the hamburger?" "We deep-fry everything." "Oh, can I cook my own hamburger?" They were like, "Okay, yeah, go back on in the kitchen, do what you want to do." So I went in, and I didn't use any grease, I was not deep-frying my hamburger. I had access to the whole kitchen, and I cut my tomatoes and lettuce and—you know. They gave me so much freedom to do what I wanted to do. I realize now I took it for granted when I was in the middle of it. I thought like, Oh well, they're just being real polite, I appreciate this, but I never really said anything.

02-01:06:01

And one of the things when I did the documentary *We'll Meet Again* was one of the things I wanted to accomplish in meeting, being reunited with Thelma, Thelma Caulfield, was to thank her and thank her family for all that they did for us, including protecting us. Because one night, the Klan came past the house, and we were on the main road—that's where the house was and then the farmland was in the back. They came through and they shot at the porch, and they shot actually underneath the porch, but it was just to intimidate us. The next thing I knew is that Thelma was standing at the front door with her shotgun in her bare feet and her nightgown. She said, "Oh, you-all go back to bed, we're fine." "But—" "Just go, just go back to bed," and she was at the door by herself. And that was when it dawned on me that every day that we went out canvassing, meeting people, trying to get folks to come to the meeting, her mother was in that house by herself, and anything could have happened.

02-01:07:49

But we also found out much, much later that Mr. Caulfield had gone to the high sheriff and said, "I'm going to have these people staying at my house, and nothing better happen to anybody, because you're going to have to deal with me." He had that kind of presence and that kind of command, but he wasn't there when Thelma was standing at the door in the middle of the night with her nightgown, bare feet, and a rifle. And it was the following weekend that they came home, because, of course, they got the message of what had happened. And they came home and the brothers said, "Okay, we know that you're committed to nonviolence, but my mother and my sister are here by themselves, and you are going to have to learn how to shoot," and I learned. I had a .22 rifle, and I learned how to shoot, and I discovered that I liked

shooting, because I had a pretty good aim. I would hit what I was looking at, and he taught me well. You realize that there are things you do have to learn. You don't want to do them and you're not going to be the aggressor, but you do need to know how to defend yourself. And that's something else I learned: I learned that people will take care of you and love you if they think you're there to do something good for them and be very generous. I recently wrote that what I learned was the courage of spirit that these people had and their generosity and their courage.

02-01:10:19
Tewes: That's a—

02-01:10:19
Cortez Todd: So that—

02-01:10:21
Tewes: —great lesson to learn. In the time we have left, I would love to hear more about the work you were doing for voter registration, what kind of organizing, what kind of conversations, and you spoke about meetings and such. How did this work, work in practice?

02-01:10:45
Cortez Todd: Like I said, we went out every day, eight o 'clock in the morning. We'd go out to the farthest part of the parish and hit the farmers. Some of the farmers were landowners, but most of them were sharecroppers. The sharecroppers were more afraid of being put off the land, because the owner could come back and say, "No, you're not going to be part of that. What do you want to register to vote for?" Some of the people did say, "No, we can't do that, because the owner of this property will put us off. We won't be able to live here and sharecrop anymore if we get involved." And then we would go back and try to encourage them and say, "You have children. You want to have a right to see what laws are—who's in office and who's looking out for your children for the education, for the medical services you need in this area, and you need to be able to have a voice." And so we convinced a number of people.

02-01:11:56

There was a church, and I can't remember the name of the church or the pastor. And sometimes I don't feel very good about some of my behavior, because I didn't really take time or energy to have a conversation with the pastor who put his church in jeopardy by having us present there. Like I said, I'm not good with names, the names of people that I should know that I never bothered to ask, and I'm embarrassed by that, because that just was not polite, and I was raised to be—if anything, I was raised to be polite. I didn't make a lot of demands in the church or anything like that, but I should have had a little bit more attention paid. So much of this stuff, I just floated through. I got my instructions, and I just floated through and just did what I was supposed to do, and anything else was not important, except remembering the Dew Drop Inn and the jukebox. [laughs]

02-01:13:22
Tewes: I think you can give yourself some grace, You're eighteen years old in this situation.

02-01:13:27
Cortez Todd: I got loose for the first time from my home. [laughs]

02-01:13:31
Tewes: No, I know. I suppose some follow-ups I would ask: you mentioned the fear of eviction that sharecroppers felt if they participated in voter registration. You had also mentioned to me literacy and healthcare. Why were those challenges to registering voters?

02-01:13:58
Cortez Todd: Well, a lot of folks were not able to read and write, and there wasn't a great healthcare system in Point Coupee Parish, except down in New Roads, which was the parish seat. Oh, not everybody had a car, so a lot of times to take people, we had to pick people up, take them to the church, so they could learn how to register to vote. We would also have to take them to the courthouse to actually register to vote. And you could only vote, or you could only register to vote one day a week for Black people, where white people could register five days a week. So when that one day came up, you had to really gather everybody that you possibly could and get other folks to drive some of the people. We only had one car for us to get around, but we could pile folks into that car, and then other folks would pile folks into their cars or their trucks in the back.

02-01:15:12
And it was important to try and inspire folks to learn how to read with accomplishing learning how to register to vote. The registration form: your first name, your middle name, your last name; your date of birth; how old you were on the day that you were registering, which means you had to put down so many years, so many months, and how many days; and then you had to write part of the Preamble to the Constitution. So when folks learned how to do that, it inspired them to want to learn more about reading and writing. And yeah, it was the more they could learn how to read and write, the more they could read a voting ballot and know what they were doing when they finally got into the voting booth. So it was all connected, literacy and healthcare, because folks didn't have a lot of healthcare, and if they had any illnesses, they went to a neighbor or somebody who was considered somewhat of a healer in the community. Because going to the hospital or the clinic, there was no hospital or clinic to go to. But if they could vote, they could vote to have some tax money put into schools, literacy programs, and medical facilities. So trying to get them to see that this is why you want to register, because this is why you want to vote.

02-01:17:16
Tewes: And how long were you in Lettsworth?

02-01:17:20
Cortez Todd: Two months, yeah.

02-01:17:23
Tewes: And {inaudible} from there.

02-01:17:24
Cortez Todd: July and August was the actual body of Freedom Summer. We got introduced in June and then our training in June, but it was maybe the last week in June that we actually traveled to where we were going to be.

02-01:17:47
Tewes: And so where did you head to after Lettsworth?

02-01:17:53
Cortez Todd: Well, I went to Jonesboro after the Summer Project was over. I went to Jonesboro, which is up in North Louisiana—Lettsworth is in South Louisiana—and there we had our Freedom House of our own to live in. Well, we lived in one-half of a house that this family had, but it was independent of the house, so it's almost like having our own apartment, and three of us lived there. Cathy Patterson, Danny—I forget what Danny's last name is. What was it? [Danny Mitchell.] Anyhow, it was Cathy, Danny, and myself there. I had a little closet with a bed in it, and I slept there, and then they slept out in another area, part of the office. An office in the daytime and bedroom at night kind of thing. We had very little money, and I knew how to make creamed tuna over rice, so I did that a couple of times. Well, people would give us meals sometimes, greens and cornbread and beans and a piece of chicken, if you were lucky.

02-01:19:36
We would sneak away. We had to come down to Plaquemine for a meeting or something, we would always manage to get a car and drive to New Orleans and eat and party somewhere at somebody's house, at somebody's family's place, and then get back to Plaquemine for our meeting or whatever we had to do, and then drive back up to Jonesboro or wherever people were. Yeah, Jonesboro was a really good experience, because one of the people in Jonesboro actually let us live in a house, and it had an indoor bathroom. But having a shower was like, Whoo-hoo! It was a four-room house, so one room could be the office. I actually had my own bedroom, but it was also a meeting room. So in the morning, I'd have to roll the bed up and put it in the corner so we could have a meeting there.

02-01:20:58
And we were right on, again, in the main road, and the Klan would ride back and forth on that road at night trying to intimidate us. And that was where the Deacons for Defense and Justice actually started, because they decided that, We're not going to have this. We were in the office a lot and we didn't do a lot of canvassing in Jonesboro, but people will come by the office and talk, and we tried to have meetings at the office. It was a central meeting place, which

made it a little bit easier on us not having to walk. And we pointed out things to the community that they needed to fight for, like they had ditches. There were open sewage ditches in front of their houses, and they had a plank, little thing to walk across to get into their house. But when it rained, boy, those ditches would get filled. It was just not a pleasant thing, so it was like really trying to fight for good sewage system in Jonesboro.

02-01:22:21

Cortez Todd: And there was a family there, the Masons, who had a daughter. It's interesting that the daughters of these families were the most active and the most brave people in the family, and the guys were like, Nah, I'm not interested in that. Although they would fix cars so that we could drive the cars or they would do things for us and watch out for us or take us where we need to go, but they weren't interested in—you know. And the other thing is that they were already registered to vote, so they were like, "Yeah I'm already registered." "Yeah, but you got to help somebody else." "No, they got to do it on their own. I did it on my own, they got to do it on their own." "Oh okay, okay," their way of justifying not being involved.

02-01:23:23

But the daughter, Annie Pernell Mason Johnson, because she'd been married to a Johnson, but we just called her Annie P. And she was maybe nineteen or twenty years old and just she knew everybody, and everybody knew her. Her mother, Pernella, was considered, when she was growing up, to be the Rosa Parks of Jonesboro. She stayed active and outspoken her whole life, but when she was very young, the teacher contradicted something that her mother had taught her, and she said to the teacher, "No, that's not right, because my mother said that this is what happened." The teacher sent home a note, and her mother then went down to the school with her the next day and said, "No, don't be teaching my child the wrong information. I know what happened, and this is what happened, and you know that this is what happened, and this is the way it went down. So don't scold my daughter when she comes and says my mother said something." And the teacher never did that again, and she stayed in that kind of mindset all the way through school and in the community forever. They're property owners, they own the property where they live in town, and then there was the family farm out of town, which was ninety-seven acres.

02-01:25:13

Tewes: Oh.

02-01:25:13

Cortez Todd: But in town, they had a compound where everybody in the family had their own little house, and there were about five houses on this piece of property that was theirs. So you could come, and they would have people come to the house and talk outside on the lawn or something. They were just an incredible family, and they still are. Ma Dear has passed on, but Annie's still active. She's very active with the NAACP [National Association for the

Advancement of Colored People], since CORE is not in Louisiana anymore, the NAACP. They're very outspoken and even more so than they ever were, but they're more active than they ever were in the middle of the civil rights movement. They were more getting folks out of jail and more theoretical stuff. They were not really feet-on-the-ground kind of group.

02-01:26:21

Tewes: But that's a wonderful throughline from both of those families that you know well. Fatima, this might be a good place for us to end for today. Is there anything you'd like to add before we close out?

02-01:26:37

Cortez Todd: Nothing that I won't remember five minutes from the time we get off the phone.

02-01:26:43

Tewes: [laughs] That's how life works. Well, thank you for a great session today, I appreciate it.

02-01:26:51

Cortez Todd: So—

02-01:26:53

Tewes: [break in recording] I'm sorry I cut you off. We are back from a short break. Go ahead and share—

02-01:26:59

Cortez Todd: When I talk about Jonesboro, most of the women were teachers and most of the men worked for Continental Can [Company], and they would park their big trucks in front of the house. A lot of the houses were beautiful, brick houses. Again, the men would finance what the women needed, but the women were the ones who were active, feet on the ground. One guy who would later become one of the founders—and I'll talk about this at another point, because it's a longer story—who have become one of the founders of the Deacons for Defense and Justice, would go to work and get off at midnight and come to the Freedom House, and just about sit in the doorway with a shotgun all night. And then when daybreak came, he'd go home and go to sleep so that he could go back to work at four o'clock in the afternoon and get off at midnight and come back to the Freedom House. And he sat there while I slept, and he was sitting in the doorway in the room that I was sleeping in, and his name was Skip, Skipper. Lee Gilbert was his proper name. But he was a very special, very special person in my heart and in my experience there. He was a really important guy, a really good guy.

02-01:28:49

Tewes: Well, thank you for sharing about him. All right, I'm going to close us out now.

Interview 3: May 21, 2024

03-00:00:04
Cortez Todd: Okay.

03-00:00:06
Tewes: This is a third interview with Fatima Cortez Todd for the Women's Movements in the United States Oral History Project, in association with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. The interview is being conducted by Amanda Tewes on May 21, 2024. Ms. Cortez Todd joins me in this remote interview from Los Angeles, California, and I am a Walnut Creek, California. So thank you, Fatima, for joining me for yet another interview.

03-00:00:31
Cortez Todd: Okay, the highlight of my week.

03-00:00:33
Tewes: [laughs] I'm glad to hear that. Where we left off, you had just discussed your time in the summer of 1964 in Louisiana, Freedom Summer. And you'd also explained that you'd chosen to stay on with CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] and continue to do organizing work in Louisiana, and that led you first to Jonesboro, Louisiana. Can you tell me about the work that you were doing in Jonesboro?

03-00:01:02
Cortez Todd: In Jonesboro, it was more a matter of presence for the community and talking with neighbors, talking with people just about what the plans are for their community and what they'd like to see happen. Folks talked about the high school and the fact that the Black high school was being closed down, because of the integration, and now that Black kids will be bused. And they're like, "Wait a minute, we'd like to stay in this building. Bus some white kids over here," that they should not lose their school.

03-00:01:48
The Mason family had a compound in town that was a gathering place for everyone. And we spent a lot of time—or I spent a lot of time with them just talking about different things. There was this one businessman who had a grocery store, it was right in the center of the Black community, and people really depended on it. And what he wanted to do was to build a motel across the street, so to try and build up businesses and also provide work for people. Because Annie Purnell Mason Johnson, who was—she's still a live wire—she worked at the grocery store and was able to talk to people, and they really respected her and her family. So it was a lot of just community outreach. Like I said, being a presence in Jonesboro in the Freedom House where people could come and talk about issues that they had with the sheriff or, How do we do this, and the voting. It was very casual, very, like I said, accessible. And the fact that we had a presence in town drove white people crazy. They could deal with the folks that they thought were going to just be subservient to them forever, but we were the outside agitators, and we would not move. The

Freedom House was not going anywhere, and it was never going to be empty, and so having that presence.

03-00:03:52

Cortez Todd: And they used to drive back and forth on the road, the redneck rabble rousers, in their trucks honking their horns, spouting insults, or whatever. Until one night, a group of Black men stood across the road with their rifles in their arms and said, "No more, just no more. You turn around, and you go back, and you don't come back here again like that ever again." And that was the founding and the beginning of the Deacons for Defense and Justice. They were the local Black men who came from a variety of backgrounds, and some of them worked at the mill; others were in business for themselves, like the grocery store person who wanted to build the motel—he wound up building the motel, and it was operable for quite some time, and then it fizzled out—and ministers. It was a very diverse group.

03-00:05:21

They had been very much part of protecting us. Like I mentioned, Lee Gilbert used to come after he left work at the mill and stand guard all night. He was one. And then Elmo Jacobs, who owned the Freedom House and let us have it, he was part of the Deacons. And [Frederick Douglas] Fitzpatrick, I forget what his first name was, but he was actually a deputy sheriff, and he had also been a coach at Grambling [State] University. Then he became a folksinger, and he was traveling all around doing freedom songs. He was one of the members. And, oh, there was, I forget, Mr. Johnson, who was the elder in the group, and I think he was a deacon at the church. He was a little man, but he was a very powerful presence. They were all there with some others who I can't remember their names and exactly who they were. And then of course, there was Earnest Thomas, who was called "Chilly Willy." He began to travel and do [speeches] to talk about what was going on in Jonesboro and to talk about what was going on in the movement. And he actually got to go out of the country and do some international speaking and then was able to come back and say, "This is what's going on in China," for example.

03-00:07:11

I didn't stay long after that happened, but I know that there was a lot of stuff going on in that town. My dear friend, Charlie Fenton, who's a white boy and from Nyack, New York—and I think I mentioned that. He had come to Louisiana, actually, from San Francisco, because he had moved. He'd gone to San Francisco and then came South to be in the movement, and he got arrested and put in the white jail, and they brutalized him for being an N-lover. Well, he got out of jail, and the community took him in and nursed him and took care of him. One of the women in the community had space in her house, and everybody came there to take care of him, because he was special and he was loved and he was cared about. So he healed, and he was there. When they had the march at the high school, he managed to be there and be part of that. I forget exactly what happened, because I wasn't there, and I don't

really remember exactly what happened. I think they closed down the high school and then I think they reopened it after a battle. So that was—

03-00:08:53

Tewes: There was a lot of community support and—

03-00:08:56

Cortez Todd: A lot of community support, and it was great. Jonesboro was one of my favorite places to be, because people were very, very vocal and very involved, and they did some stuff. They built some houses and just worked on improving the community as much as they could and—go ahead.

03-00:09:23

Tewes: Well, one thing you did was work in the Freedom School.

03-00:09:28

Cortez Todd: Well, that [was] when I went to Monroe and then—

03-00:09:30

Tewes: Oh, oh, I'm sorry, I thought that was Jonesboro.

03-00:09:33

Cortez Todd: When I left Jonesboro and I went to Monroe, that's when I was given the assignment to establish a Freedom School. And here I was, I was nineteen by then, and I'm like, Okay, I can do that. And it's like, I don't know what I'm doing. [laughs] See, literacy was an important part of learning how to register to vote. And so what I did was I had—it was a group of people that would come—oh, about eight to ten people that attended the Freedom School, such as it was, a couple of volunteers for the staff and a couple of folks from the community. What I said, "What we're going to do is we're going to talk about freedom and what your idea of freedom is and how you think you can build your community around the issues of freedom." And so part of it was about some literacy, so, "I want you to write down the things that you think are important."

03-00:10:57

And then what came out of that was sharing the news of what was happening around the state. And so I said, "Okay, well, bring me stories of what's going on, what you heard happening." What I did was I typed it on a stencil and ran it off on a mimeograph machine. I had developed the whole masthead for it, and it was the front and back page of an eight-and-a-half-by-fourteen, the legal-size paper. We were able to pass that around, not to many people, because we didn't have a lot of money to run the ink through the mimeograph machine. But across the way from the CORE office, there was Pierce's Drugstore and the movie house next to that. And even though the movie house was segregated, it became desegregated with us being there and plopping down. The Pierce's Pharmacy had a little café, got a little lunch counter kind of thing, and we could leave it there, and people would read it and take it and just talk about it with other people. And then other folks around the state

heard about it, and we just passed on some news. So that was, essentially, my version of Freedom School.

03-00:12:33
Tewes: So am I understanding this correctly: Freedom School begat the *Freedom News* newsletter?

03-00:12:41
Cortez Todd: Yes.

03-00:12:42
Tewes: Okay, and what were the ages of the folks who were attending Freedom School?

03-00:12:49
Cortez Todd: Maybe sixteen to fifty or forty.

03-00:12:58
Tewes: You had quite the range.

03-00:13:00
Cortez Todd: Yeah.

03-00:13:02
Tewes: Do you remember what freedom did mean to people in Monroe?

03-00:13:09
Cortez Todd: To not be afraid, to not be always looking over their backs to see if there's some Klan or some redneck rifle holder, just people who harassed them on a regular basis. To be able to go into a store with some kind of respect, that they are a customer, they're there to spend their money, and they should be respected. There was a Black steakhouse, a really good restaurant, and people would spend money to go there. But at the same time, there was another restaurant in town, it was on the outskirts of Monroe. But there were other places in town that folks would like to have had access to. I mean, there was Hill's Barbecue, which was in town, and everybody went there. There were no color lines ever there. There was different treatment, because white folks would go on one side and Black folks would go on the other side, but everybody still went. And then there was the outside with the tables and benches, and everybody sat out there. And so it was really funny: if you go inside and you get your meal and you bring it outside to a table, and the next table maybe some Black folks, and then the next table maybe some white folks. And so that was a totally integrated outdoor café.

03-00:14:52

Just the idea of being respected and having the right to be wherever they needed to be along with everybody else. Like being able to have what everybody had considered a normal life. And to get some elected officials that represented their interests more; it didn't matter what color they were as long as they represented their interests. And there were two hospitals, one was in

town and then there was the charity hospital that was on the outskirts of town. So to have bus service going to the one outside of town, because most Black people went to the charity hospital. I actually went to the charity hospital and had surgery. It scared me to death, because I was at the behest of the white staff, although when I had my surgery, it went fine. But I was in the segregated ward where you didn't have nurse care after six o'clock in the evening, so if I had an emergency in the middle of the night, I was SOL. Well, the woman that became my sister-in-law actually slept on the floor underneath my bed. She made a little pallet for herself so that if I had to go to the bathroom or something, she would help me and take care of me. It was just a very different kind of experience. Bottom line is folks wanted more regular bus service to go to the charity hospital, because that's also where they went to see the doctor sometime. So that became better, and the bus service to the Black community became better, as well. It's like being able to ask for public services and have them happen for your benefit was really important.

03-00:17:41
Tewes: Yeah, I—

03-00:17:43
Cortez Todd: So that's what freedom meant to them.

03-00:17:46
Tewes: Well, I'm curious if going through those exercises, plus your experience working with CORE, changed what freedom meant to you at all during your time in Louisiana.

03-00:18:01
Cortez Todd: It made me realize how privileged I was and how much access I had to everything I needed growing up for my entire life, without realizing that I was experiencing some of the fallout of segregation and attitudes even in in my high school. I realized how privileged I was.

03-00:18:35
Tewes: Sure, it brought perspective.

03-00:18:37
Cortez Todd: And wanted for everybody else to have the same privilege and access that I did.

03-00:18:48
Tewes: Thank you for that. I wanted to quickly ask about something that was occurring while you were doing this work in Louisiana, and that was the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City in late August of 1964. I'm curious what you heard about what was happening in the convention while you were doing this work on the ground. What do you recall of that?

03-00:19:19
Cortez Todd: What I recall was that Fannie Lou Hamer was a fireball. And she was one of the delegates to the Freedom Democratic Party that was ultimately going to be

not allowed to be participating in the Democratic Convention, and that fight over that and that fight about being represented. And that's as much as I remember.

03-00:19:56

Tewes: Did you have a sense that the work you were doing had any connection to electoral politics?

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Cortez Todd: Oh, it supported it entirely, and it was something that you could say to people that you're trying to get them to come and learn how to register to vote. "See what they're doing there and look at all around the country, different places that people are being active on their rights." So it was a great example in the news for folks to see and go, "Yeah, okay. Well, if they can do it, then we can too." It was an inspiration.

03-00:20:43

Tewes: Thank you. I also wanted to follow up on a conversation we had in our last session about some challenges that occurred in the project. We talked about potential economic exploitation, literacy, and healthcare, and all that being challenged through voter registration—or a reason to register for vote, as well. But you had also mentioned to me previously about cultural differences between the CORE workers and the locals in Louisiana. Can you explain to me more how those showed up and what impact those had on relationships?

03-00:21:32

Cortez Todd: When I was in Lettsworth during the summer, there were two white girls and myself, and Thelma Caulfield, who was a young, Black woman whose house we were at. What I saw was a total acceptance of all of us when we were in the community, and mainly because we were all polite. We were respectful and polite, and we didn't change who we were to accommodate where we were. And I say that, because one white male, young man, decided that he was going to identify with the folks in the community by wearing coveralls, and he wore coveralls all the time, including Sunday at church. And he offended a whole lot of people, because folks wore the coveralls during the week, because they were at work, and on Sunday at church they had on their Sunday best. They felt like, in some ways, he was mocking them or saying that that was the level that they were always at, and they were never going to be any more elevated. And when they got on their suit and tie, and the women with their white gloves and their little pumps and the nice hats, that was disrespectful. And the community, while they didn't say anything about it really to him, they said it to other people in the group.

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The other thing was that there were some men in the community who made passes at the white girls, and then would get really hostile if they were rejected or if they were not allowed to. "We can be coworkers, we can be friends, but I'm not looking to go to bed with you," just straight up. A young,

white woman wrote a manifesto, so to speak, about how white women did not have to feel guilty about saying no to Black men, which on some levels, made people upset. Like, well, that's just following with the same stereotype that white people think that all Black men want white women, and that's not the case. And that's how Black men got accused of rape, and like, "No, I'm working with this person, I'm not trying to screw her." The cultural presumptions were there, and sometimes they were reinforced by people who had no business reinforcing that mythology.

03-00:24:54

Cortez Todd: The other thing, I guess, is economics. We got stipends, basically. We earned $25 a week, and every two weeks, we got a check for 44.89. When I was in Monroe, I was paying $5 a week to share a bed in a room of a house that this Black woman rented out all of her rooms. Lavinia LePoul was her name, and she had a house that was off the alleyway behind the main street in the Black community. I think there were about six of us in that house, so she was getting about $30 a week for housing us. I know that in the Black community, houses would rent for $25 a month, unfurnished and no indoor plumbing, and folks really struggled to pay that and to try to have a car and get to work, because the buses were not that regular. The economics of their lives, depending upon the buses or depending upon everybody using a car and everybody contributing to the gas. The houses were basically a two-room house, a shotgun house with a big room up front, a big room in the middle, and then a kitchen.

03-00:27:00

And I remember one household that I visited had two full-size beds in the front room and two full-size beds in the second room, and then having a kitchen. In those rooms where they had the beds, there was also a couch sometimes or an easy chair, but not really. These folks didn't even have a TV, they had a radio. And they had a toilet on the back porch, so you went out the back door, opened up the door to go to the toilet. They had running water in the house, but it was cold, it's just cold running water, and then you had that bathroom on the back porch. So in the summertime, it was okay, but in the wintertime to go out there, it's like, I'd rather go to the gas station or wait until I could get to the CORE office. But Lavinia LePoul, she had an indoor bathroom, and she had a beautiful house, but it was kind of rundown, but she still housed six of us.

03-00:28:25

Tewes: Wow. Thinking again about some of these differences—you just mentioned economic—I want to ask about the role of women on Freedom Summer specifically, but in CORE as a whole. What did you see as the role of women in this work?

03-00:28:49

Cortez Todd: Women were, almost by default, the majority of the CORE workers. Mimi Feingold [Real] pretty much ran stuff in St. Francisville—let's see, I forget the

name of the parish, but in Clinton, [East Feliciana Parish]. And there were a couple of guys that were there, but then there were a lot of community volunteers. Oretha [Castle Haley] came from New Orleans to Monroe to supervise what was going on there. And in the office, there was me and Oretha and Marian Bernard and Claudia Edwards. And then the guys were Dave, who was a white boy; Sherman Henry, who was a local Black guy; Al Culpepper, who was also a local Black guy; and that was really it. The women outnumbered the men on the workforce, but a lot of the power that came from the office in New Orleans was directed by men.

03-00:30:30

Cortez Todd: And Ronnie Moore was the state director of all activities and stuff, especially during Freedom Summer, that was his title. Okay, at the training in Plaquemine, Mike Lesser, a white boy from the North—or I think he was from San Francisco, maybe; he lived in San Francisco when—he's since passed, but he was a New Yorker at the time—and Richard Haley, [regional states director], was based in in New Orleans. A lot of the leadership and the permission came from the guys to do whatever. But women really, we were feet on the ground. We had no power, but we had a lot of power where we were, because they weren't looking over our shoulders, but if we wanted to do something different, we had to get cooperation. And like I said, Oretha was a force to be dealt with, and she was brilliant, and she was out of New Orleans. As a matter of fact, in Dave Dennis's book, the father and son book, *[The Movement Made Us]*, Dave Dennis, Sr., talks about [Doris] Jean Castle, who is Oretha's sister. He talks about Oretha as really being in charge of a lot of stuff and just very knowledgeable and a force of nature, and that's just what she was.

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But I got to introduce her to Bob Dylan. Yeah, because one of my times when I got my paycheck, I went over to the Kmart and bought Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind" album for $3.57. I brought it back to the house, and I played it. They had a record player there, and I played it, and she listened, and she says, "He can't sing," and then she said, "but he has a lot to say." That was where she accepted the fact that maybe he didn't know how to sing, but he knew how to write and make the records that were important.

03-00:33:18

Tewes: That's too funny. And this is Oretha Castle Haley, for the record.

03-00:33:22

Cortez Todd: Yeah, yeah, because she ultimately married Richard Haley.

03-00:33:28

Tewes: Mm-hmm, small world.

03-00:33:31

Cortez Todd: Yes.

03-00:33:32

Tewes: Well, that's a great transition. I was curious about mentors you had in this moment who meant something to you, and you had mentioned Oretha. How did she serve as a mentor to you?

03-00:33:47

Cortez Todd: Because she encouraged me, she encouraged me with the Freedom School, with the *Freedom News*, with just being a presence. A lot of what we did in the South was to be a presence. And people would say, "You gave up your life up there to come down here for us?" They didn't quite understand why we would be so stupid, [laughs] but they appreciated it and they felt special. We made them feel special, because we came to them to help them with their community issues. And to me, one of the community issues is voting. So Oretha and Judy Rollins, who came out of Boston. That's the one that cut my hair, I asked her to cut my hair. She was the first person I knew that had an Afro. She was very smart, and she came up with the idea of a domestics' union [for domestic workers]. And I was there with her to try and help organize that, because she came up to Jonesboro at one point, and that's what she wanted to do, she wanted to organize a domestics union. We had a couple of meetings, but people were afraid, and a lot of—because it was so rural, there was one family that lived out in the middle of the woods. They left, some of them moved out of town and went North, because they had been so threatened by the Klan, "What do you mean organizing a domestics union?" And basically, the outcome was that some people actually managed to get their employers to pay into their Social Security, and that was a major victory. Judy sparked the fire for that.

03-00:36:14

And Mimi, Mimi Feingold, she was a little lady—she still is a little lady—but she's still another force to be reckoned with. These women were all forces to be reckoned with. She was fearless, and you felt that, and it helped you to be fearless. When you see somebody else being fearless, you're like, Okay. She's like, "Be aware of your surroundings and don't be silly, but don't be walking around timid all the time either." And again, Claudia Edwards, yeah, she was in Monroe, and she was a no-nonsense woman. She ultimately went to Shreveport to work there. But she was very organized, and she made notes and kept records of what was going on and what needed to be done. She was good with making those organizational ideas, platforms, and stuff. These were people who I looked up to, because they inspired me to be more organized with myself and my thoughts and how I wanted to do things. And then of course, a lot of the local women, whose names I didn't know then and still don't know now, just showed me how—they were working as domestics and coming home and taking care of the kids and taking care of the house. A lot of single mothers. And it was just watching them take care—and coming from a single-mother household, I appreciated my Mother more for what she had done earlier in my upbringing and saw it in these women, as well.

03-00:38:55
Tewes: Before we speak about your marriage and the work that you're doing around that time, I want to take a step back and look at the civil rights movement as a whole and your memories of this. I'm curious: what was the personal impact for you of doing this work, being in the South, but also working with CORE for the several years that you did?

03-00:39:28
Cortez Todd: It made me know that, in one way or another, this was my life's work, that this was something that I would never not be doing. I'd always be speaking out and that I really could make a difference, even if it was a very small difference in a very small location. But that was it. I took seriously the pledge that we made at the March on Washington and felt like those things were the things that I needed to dedicate my life to. And when you see so much injustice and so much poverty and so much miseducation and non-education and non-healthcare, there was just so much that was then, and it still is now the same issues. We still need more housing, we need more healthcare, we need more employment, fair practices and a livable wage, and public transportation. That sealed what I wanted to do. I didn't know quite how I was going to manage that, but that was in my heart.

03-00:40:58
Tewes: Thank you, I definitely see those throughlines, and we'll be discussing more of those as we continue our conversations. In that you just mentioned there is still work to be done, I'm curious what you think the legacy of the civil rights movement is.

03-00:41:17
Cortez Todd: Bringing all these issues to the forefront, just putting it out there. Like are we a democratic society or not, and what does that mean? Are we living up to the Constitution or the Declaration of Independence, "all men are created equal," even though we have to add in women—"all men and women." So it's all human beings, they have the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." That's the legacy that we haven't stopped trying to get there.

03-00:42:07
Tewes: Still working for it.

03-00:42:10
Cortez Todd: Still working for it. I mean—

03-00:42:16
Tewes: I—

03-00:42:17
Cortez Todd: —Bob Marley did a song that was actually based on a speech that Haile Selassie did about war. And the point is until—I can't remember the lyrics, but the lyrics are available—[laughs] and it's basically, until the—oh God, I'm not having a blank. The color of a man's skin is no more important than the color

of his eyes. And until the attitude of one group [is] more superior than the other [changes], we'll always have war. So until those things are eradicated, we're going to have war. So until all of the -isms—going away from the song, but what the song is talking about are all the -isms, all the classism and the ageism, the sexism, the heterosexism, all the racism. And until those things are destroyed, we're going to always have war. So what do we do? We keep fighting, because we have no choice, and we have to speak up, because we also have no choice.

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Tewes: The work continues.

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Cortez Todd: Always. And I think that's a strong legacy that all this stuff happened and we're still [going]. We had a reunion of CORE workers and folks that were there for Freedom Summer in 2014. And folks talking about what had happened and then what they were doing now, and it was a throughline that it's still engaged in the same thing. So it's freedom summer, freedom winter, freedom spring, freedom summer. Every year, it's freedom year.

03-00:44:31
Tewes: I love hearing that. Another big moment in your life around this time was you met and married your first husband in January of 1965. Can you tell me how you met, and anything else you'd like to say about that moment in your life?

03-00:44:56
Cortez Todd: CORE hired some guys to work with us for protection. So that while there were some less powerful-looking guys, there were several that were—I won't say that they were former gang members, but they had a bit of a history with, I don't know, being very macho, is the best way I could say that. Like I said, they might as well have been gang members, but they weren't. And one of them was named Al, and that's who I was dating. I think I was impressed by feeling safe around him or feeling safe with him being in the office, because he was a big guy. He was very opinionated and very much about the rights and stuff of everybody, but he's also a real male chauvinist, and I didn't understand that at the time. And I knew that he was just very taken with me.

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One incident that should have warned me before I got involved with him was that when I was in Jonesboro, Lee Gilbert drove me over to Monroe to have dinner at that steakhouse. And we were at the steakhouse having our dinner, and Al and another guy from the Monroe office came over to our table. Al pulled up a chair and sat there and ignored Lee and was talking to me, and I didn't know what to do. I realize now I needed to have said, "Excuse me, but we're here to have dinner and talk with each other." But you didn't do that, or I didn't do that, and I didn't know how to do that. So when I came over to Monroe, he was like, "Oh, you left that guy over in Jonesboro. Well now, we can go out and have dinner." And I was like, "Well, I am over here now,

okay." Because being taken out for a steak dinner when you are making 44.89 every two weeks, that means something. And he gave me all the flattery, and he just pursued and wooed me, and I just gave in.

03-00:47:56

Cortez Todd: And I don't know whether it was because I was afraid not to or what, but then he came home with me to New York over the Christmas break, and that's when we got married. My family did not want me to marry him in the first place, so of course, if they didn't want me to, that was exactly what I was going to do. You can't run my life. I was really silly and naïve, silly, a lot silly. We ultimately came to New York. He came home with me for Christmas. I was also sick, so I had to be taken care of. And then we got married, and then we went back to Louisiana. I didn't know that my grandfather had given him money and said, "Well, when you get tired of her, send her home." I didn't know that for a long time, he gave money to [him], "Yeah, when you get tired of her, here's her carfare home."

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So when we got back to Louisiana, we had a big meeting in New Orleans to plan out what was happening for the rest of the year or for the year. He was assigned to Shreveport with Claudia; and I was assigned to be the campus traveler, to go to the different Black schools around Louisiana, like Grambling and Dillard [University], and try to organize students. And he said in the meeting, "She's not going to do that, because I'm not going to have her riding around the state, and I'm stuck in Shreveport. She can't do that by herself." I wasn't going to be by myself, but he didn't like the idea of me being with anybody else to do that. And they would, of course, have been a male that would be traveling with me, because that's how we did things, in pairs. And I didn't fight, I just accepted that, because that was my husband and he was speaking, and therefore he spoke for the two of us.

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So he parked me at his grandparents' house while he went to Shreveport, and he'd come back every now and then. But there I was in Monroe, in this room in the back house of the grandparents' lovely house. Really I didn't have any money, I didn't have a salary anymore. Even though I was in Monroe, I could have still worked at the CORE office, but they didn't need me to work in the CORE office. Basically, I lost my job, and I lost the ability to go do this campus traveling and do student recruitment, which I would have loved to have done, but my husband said no. And at that time, it was also about supporting the Black man. Black women needed to support Black men in what they were doing, and that was the noble thing to do. I think about it now and go, Bullshit. And folks looked at me like they didn't expect me to capitulate like that. Oretha was like, "Girl, do you know what you're doing?" And I'm like, "Well, I am married now, and he is my husband." She's like, "Yeah, but we hate to lose you." So yeah, that was—

03-00:52:18
Tewes: Did—

03-00:52:19
Cortez Todd: —my marriage to him. We came to New York, we stayed with some relatives, because I went to work at the CORE national office as soon as I got up there. He was still in Louisiana and then he came up later, and we were at my aunt and uncle's house. And then we had to figure out how to get our own place, and he had to find a job. I found a job, and we got this fifth-floor, walk-up apartment that had a bed, a radio, and a table. It had two bedrooms, living room, kitchen, and bathroom, and all we had was bed and a table and a radio. My Mother's godmother used to feed us on the weekends. We'd go over to her house, and she'd fix spaghetti, and we'd stay overnight, so we could watch TV and have some company and enjoy her, and then go home and then go to work.

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I worked as a dental assistant out in East Elmhurst. We were living in the Bronx, the apartment that we got was in the Bronx, and I had to take two subways and walk eight blocks to get to the subway from the house, and then walk another six blocks when I got off the train to go to the dental office. When I think about some of this stuff, [laughs] I feel really, really stupid. The dentist that I went to work for actually had been Malcolm X's dentist, so he was an activist himself and still kept me in the environment of feeling like, Yeah, this is cool.

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And then we found out through CORE people that they were having a program run by the National Institute of Mental Health at Lincoln Hospital. It was a project of Yeshiva University in the Albert Einstein College of Medicine for Lincoln Hospital's Mental Health Services in the South Bronx. I interviewed first, and I got the job as a community mental health worker, and then he interviewed, and he got a job in another. There were three centers in the Bronx. I was at one, he was at the other one, and there was another one in between at the hospital. And again, it was like who had the priority of importance. There was a strike, and that was when 1199 union got organized at Lincoln Hospital Mental Health Services. But one of the things, I left as a community mental health worker, because I went to work for the city, the Department of Welfare, for the Medicaid Program. I worked in a hospital where I made more money than as a community mental health worker, even though I really wanted to stay there. He encouraged me, he says, "You can get this job with the city, and you can make more money and have better benefits and all that kind of stuff, and you really need to think about that." And I did. I took the test, and I got the job, and I was making more money than him. I just got tired of not doing what I loved doing, and so I think a lot of the fight just went out of me at that point.

03-00:56:49

Cortez Todd: And I did a lot of good work at the community mental health program, and I was very proud of that work. I created art and music therapy—or it was more art than music—for so-called bad boys in the elementary school. They were ages eight to ten. And the local elementary school would let me come in and take six boys from school around the corner and across the street to the community mental health center. And then I would walk all of them home at the end of the day. The thing I'm most proud of with that is I had all of them do self-portraits at the beginning of the program. And then during the time that I was working with them, I would take them Downtown, get them on the subway, take them down, let them see antique stores on Madison Ave., just seeing. Because they'd never been out of the Bronx, and they'd really never been out of their neighborhood. So I would take them out of the neighborhood so they could see different stuff, the Central Park Zoo so they could see the seals, just having adventures and then talking about them and saying, "Now, what do you think about all of this?" And have them start to talk and express how they were feeling about stuff, and they felt special.

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By the end of that school year, I said, "I want you to now do another self-portrait, and we're going to have an art exhibit over in front of the school." And every last one of them, the first pictures that they did, they were ugly, they were gray, they were just kind of deformed. At the end of the school year, they were colorful, they had bright colors on, they had a hat on, they had a smile. And they weren't great artists, but they were better looking on canvas than they had been in the first one, and I felt like I've accomplished something. Their parents all said, the teachers all said, "They have improved their behavior in class." It was a success. And then I had to leave, because my husband said so.

03-00:59:31

I had resigned myself and then I left the city. I just couldn't handle being with the city, and it was so overwhelming of bureaucracy, and I just couldn't be part of that anymore. I took temporary jobs where I could. I went to work for a temporary employment agency, and I placed people in different jobs. I then placed myself in a job that I kept for quite some time. It was with a food company, meat purveyors, and they supplied all the different things around the city, and then to the airlines and the caterers and whatnot. It was an okay job, it was not far from the house, it was easy to get to, and I just settled in.

03-01:00:39

We had tried for me to get pregnant, and I found out that I had a damaged uterus, so it was highly unlikely that I was going to get pregnant. And we had friends who had adopted a baby, and he said, "Well, let's adopt." And I'm like, "Okay." And so I went to all the interviews and all the pre-adoption parent meetings, groups. He didn't go, because he was at night school. The union had made an agreement that the employees would get free tuition at NYU [New York University], healthcare, just really good benefits. And so he got to go to

NYU, and I got to keep a job, and I got to be a potential adoptive mother. I was interviewed by this social worker who came to the house. We had a private interview, and then she interviewed him privately, and then we actually—excuse me—got a three-month-old little girl, and I became a mom. I was working, and I got a babysitter, I dropped her off. I loved her and did the best I could. I was very, very organized with how she was fed and all that, but I wanted more out of my life.

03-01:02:44

Cortez Todd: I met someone, and I had an affair. But I realized in having the affair, I really had to get out of the marriage. And the affair was really more of a deep friendship that I had with this person who inspired me to, "Well, leave. Go back to school, take your daughter with you." And so I did. That's when I went to Connecticut, where my Mom was, and I went back to school at the University of Connecticut.

03-01:03:23

But that marriage was—and I'm going to admit this, because I think women need to know. Women need more sex education, not just about having babies or not having babies, but what healthy sexual activity is and how you're supposed to feel and what you're supposed to feel. I never had an orgasm when I was married to this person, ever. I did get some information in some dirty books on how I could take care of myself. And that just compounded why I'm not staying with this man, because he obviously doesn't care, he made me a receptacle. I really put him off; I just really didn't want to be touched by him anymore.

03-01:04:42

Tewes: Yeah, thank you for sharing all that, Fatima, I appreciate it. There were a few things I wanted to follow up on, because you shared a lot of information about this moment in your life. So you moved back to New York in 1965. What was the reason for the move? I think he was from Louisiana.

03-01:05:07

Cortez Todd: He couldn't get a job, I couldn't get a job. And in some ways, I think I have said that I felt he used me like a foreign person would use getting married to get a green card. I was his way out of the South, I was his way to a better life. And when I think about that, I get very, very angry at my naïveté, my not standing up for myself. While I'm out there telling everybody else how to fight for their rights and their civil rights, I am not having my own human rights, and I'm not making sure that I have my human rights met. It's a—I don't know what you would call it—an oxymoron, I guess, to the life I was living.

03-01:06:29

Tewes: Well, and I think that connects nicely to conversations we will be having about the attraction to the women's movement and the conversations that that provoked for a lot of women.

03-01:06:45
Cortez Todd: Yeah.

03-01:06:47
Tewes: Yeah. In the time we have left, maybe we could talk a little bit about your time at University of Connecticut. When did you decide that going back to the school was going to be important for you? Why was that the next step for you when getting out of this marriage?

03-01:07:03
Cortez Todd: Well, it was kind of an enticement, or I guess an agreement that my Mother made that she would house me if I'd go back to college. That, yeah, I could come to Connecticut, but I had to go to school and I had to get my degree, and that's the only way she was going to support what I was doing. So I did go to Connecticut, and I actually got on AFDC [Aid to Families with Dependent Children], and I had student aid, work-study. And my daughter had free daycare on campus, because I was on AFDC and I was a student, so she had free daycare. And I would drop her off before I went to class, then I'd pick her up after. That was just the agreement, and I had a great place to live, and I had my car, which later got repossessed, but that's okay. I had it for a while and then I got another one.

03-01:08:24
Tewes: You moved on. So you were in school, I think from 1973 to 1977. Does that sound [right]?

03-01:08:31
Cortez Todd: Yes, yeah.

03-01:08:32
Tewes: And what were you studying at UConn?

03-01:08:35
Cortez Todd: I was studying English and anthropology, and I wound up doing some theater studies, as well, yeah, cultural anthropology. My advisor was Bernard Magubane, who was from South Africa, who had gotten out of South Africa, because he had been underground. The political underground got him out of South Africa and ultimately to the United States. He was my advisor, and he was a professor of cultural anthropology. And he taught me a lot about racism and the neocolonialism in the United States and talked about the four elements of neocolonialism, which I have talked about. I will articulate at another time when we get to other stuff, but that was what I was studying at that point.

03-01:09:42
And that's how I how I met my present husband. A friend was getting his master's project and needed a female to play a role in his master's thesis performance, and so I was cast and my husband was cast and two other people, or three other people. And that's how we met, and then we were together forever after that. He was in school; he was a student. He left and didn't go back, but we still did theater projects on campus. We did stuff in the

Theater Department, and we did some stuff independently around the State of Connecticut. Yeah, we were on campus until I graduated.

03-01:10:43

Cortez Todd: And I had my daughter with me. Yeah, for that time, she was with me. And then ultimately, I had joint custody with her dad, and then she went to live with him. I had custody of her when she'd come back for summertime visits with me, so that was the way we shared custody. Even though, again, he brought the legal papers and said, "I want you to do this, and I want to do this," da, da, da, da. "Okay, fine." Because I never wanted to talk bad about him to her, and I never wanted her to see how we fought for her custody, even though I wanted her to know that I fought for her custody, or I fought for all the time I had with her. Again, I was good for fighting for other people and not so great for myself.

03-01:11:51

But that whole experience at the University of Connecticut brought out more of that in me, because of what I did and where I was working and the people I came in contact with. I developed cancer and found out that my original sexual assault had damaged me, and then add to it, the abortion had damaged my uterus, and so I developed cancer of the cervix. I had surgery and I've been cancer free since 1974. But there was a group at the University of Connecticut that I came in contact with. Of course, it was all white women, but that was okay, because the issue was having a hysterectomy and how we needed to mourn losing that part of our body. And we needed to identify the fact that the uterus did not make us women and that having a baby through that uterus did not make us a valid woman. So that women who had hysterectomies were still women with the same abilities, feelings, and all of it. And how to mourn that loss and move on so that we don't carry that kind of baggage that we're less than, because we've had hysterectomies. I had cancer, for crying out loud, what was I supposed to do?

03-01:13:44

But it just reminded me that also one of the contributing factors was birth control pills by Ortho-Novum. And Ortho-Novum had been using women in Puerto Rico as a test ground for the pill, and a lot of them wound up having hysterectomies, because they were sterilized, just like Native American women were sterilized. A lot of folks didn't know exactly what was going on and why they had to be sterilized. But it was about the colonial mind saying that, "We can sterilize all these colored women, keep our nation pure." And that made me think a lot about being a woman and how women are not respected.

03-01:14:44

I was fortunate enough to have a doctor who did the surgery. He said, "I know you have a daughter, but if you want to have another child before we do the surgery, we can help you do that if you want." He gave me just the choices of stuff, and I chose not to get pregnant or have them help me get pregnant,

because I wasn't married to Tony [Todd] at the time—his name is Anthony, I always call him Tony, still call him Tony—and just that kind of information about how to navigate your health system and how to question doctors and get information that makes you feel comfortable. And no matter what, that you are a whole being, even if you are a woman without a uterus. Because nobody at the workforce is asking if you have a uterus, and they're still going to treat you like crap. [laughs] Having a uterus or not does not end your discrimination as a woman.

03-01:16:06
Tewes: Well, I was going to follow up: with this group you connected to at UConn of white women, were they capable of understanding the experience you were bringing as a woman of color in this situation?

03-01:16:22
Cortez Todd: We didn't separate it out as a woman of color or white women; it was just women who had a hysterectomy. And that was one of the best places, which also why I guess I got involved with white women's feminist movement, because I had such a good experience with these women, and there was no boundary. Now, our lives outside of that meeting were very, very different, but in that meeting and in that time that we spent, it was totally supportive of our womanhood, and I liked that a lot.

03-01:17:17
Tewes: I think that might be a good place for us to leave today, because there's plenty more to discuss on that particular subject, Fatima. But is there anything you want to fill in from what we have discussed today?

03-01:17:35
Cortez Todd: I can't really think of anything at the moment. I will in five minutes after we're off.

03-01:17:41
Tewes: Of course, yes.

03-01:17:42
Cortez Todd: Yeah—

03-01:17:44
Tewes: Well, we covered—

03-01:17:44
Cortez Todd: —because I've got—

03-01:17:44
Tewes: —a lot. We covered a lot. Thank you so much, I appreciate your insights here.

03-01:17:51
Cortez Todd: Thank you.

Interview 4: May 29, 2023

04-00:00:03
Cortez Todd: Okay.

04-00:00:05
Tewes: This is a fourth interview with Fatima Cortez Todd for the Women's Movements in the United States Oral History Project, in association with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. The interview is being conducted by Amanda Tewes on May 29, 2024. Ms. Cortez Todd joins me in this remote interview from Los Angeles, California, and I am in Walnut Creek, California. Thank you, Fatima, for yet another conversation today.

04-00:00:32
Cortez Todd: My pleasure.

04-00:00:34
Tewes: We left off last time speaking about your years at the University of Connecticut from about 1973 to 1977, but we didn't speak about all the work you're doing at this time, all of the activities with which you were engaging. And to start off, I thought maybe I would ask you about the African American Cultural Center at UConn. How did you get involved with that and what work were you doing?

04-00:01:03
Cortez Todd: My Mom worked at the University of Connecticut, so when I left New York and left my ex-husband, I went to live with her with my daughter, who was like three at the time. And there was a number of African American folks who would meet at the Commons for lunch, and the Commons was the big cafeteria. And so we had a couple of tables of African American folks just sitting and talking and from different—like from the library and some professors and folks from the Afro-American Cultural Center. And so I was talking about the *Freedom News* that I had done in Louisiana, and they needed an editor for the newspaper for the Afro-American Cultural Center, *[CONTACT]*, and that became me.

04-00:02:14
And I learned what being an editor was. [laughs] I had to type the stories up and then give them to this woman, who would paginate everything. But then I had to do the layout on the paper, on the format thing that it would get printed from. I didn't even know the names of the things that I was using. But I had to do the lines and make sure I rolled over stories to another page, just because I wanted to have a lot of busy stuff on the front page and continued on the third page, but the second page had to have some different stories. It was just trying to create this newspaper that is interesting. It was about six to twelve pages that I did the actual layout. And yeah, what you would do is I would pick it, do the measurements, and then I would draw a line on the format board. And then they would stick the columns on that format board, and then print it.

04-00:03:43

Cortez Todd: And I had a work-study position that I worked in. From the beginning, I worked with the Upward Bound Program during my work-study, and that was helping to organize the outreach programs, the outreach presentations in the various communities around Connecticut with the staff that they would drive out and go to those different schools to recruit students for the next semester or the next year. They ran out of money, and that's when I moved over to the African American Cultural Center to do my work-study and do the paper.

04-00:04:31

So doing that, there was equipment in the office that wasn't working right, but we had a budget for all the stuff that would go into the Xerox machine to maintain it, but the machine was like dead. And I had come in contact with some women at the Women's Center, and what they had was machines and no money to maintain them, and no money for supplies like ink and all that kind of stuff. I said, "Okay, why don't we share the resources?" So I took all the ink and supplies from the African American Cultural Center, put them in the Women's Center, but both of us got to use the Women's Center Xerox machine and just do what we needed to do. Then I was talking with someone at the Puerto Rican Center, who said, "We got all this paper, we got no Xerox machine, we got nothing." And I was like, "Okay, let's pool the resources," so that the Puerto Rican Center gave the Women's Center all the paper, the Afro-American Cultural Center gave them all the supplies to support the function of the machine, and they had the machine. And it became a really nice coalition, because those three groups, under normal circumstances, wouldn't necessarily talk with each other. But I was like, "Wait a minute, this is stupid, we need to be pooling our energies. We're all struggling for the same kind of goals, and we need to manifest that in this New England university." There are some meetings or things you'd go to at the Women's Center and some things you'd go to at the Puerto Rican Center, and stuff you'd go to at the African American Center—they had a house. And so we encouraged everybody to just overlap and be a good, strong coalition, and then it lasted for a while. I don't know what happened after I left school, because I graduated in '77, but I don't know what they did after without me nudging them.

04-00:07:17

Tewes: Why do you think you were able to connect these three groups?

04-00:07:26

Cortez Todd: Because I was all three: I was a valid Latina and I was a valid woman and I was a valid African American, so all of those three things. I didn't realize that I was Puerto Rican, but I knew I was Latin. Now, everybody else at the Puerto Rican Center knew I was Puerto Rican, because they would tease me, "Oh, you just don't want to—yeah, why are you so ashamed of being Puerto Rican? You know, girl, you look just like us. You know you're Puerto Rican." So I'm like, "No, I'm not." And then, yeah, thanks to my absent father giving me wrong information and denying me of my culture.

04-00:08:12
Tewes: Mm-hmm, that's why I was curious, because you didn't necessarily know you had connections to all three groups, but you saw an affinity and a network that needed to happen here.

04-00:08:23
Cortez Todd: Yeah, and I think that that was really my thing, just networking. Even when I was in the South during Freedom Summer, you had to figure out how to network with people in different communities who were all African American but didn't necessarily—they had maybe class issues, or who was the Episcopalians or who was the Baptist and who was the Methodist, and making those lines disappear. Because you can't survive in a community and build a movement without crossing lines and making those lines very blurred or get rid of them at all together. So UConn became just a place where I could—I was very free and I was well known, and I felt like this was a good thing.

04-00:09:27
Tewes: I'm glad you found a university that worked for you finally.

04-00:09:31
Cortez Todd: Oh yeah, yeah, because Hunter College just was a disaster.

04-00:09:37
Tewes: Right. I know something else that was really important to you at this time was your theater work. You'd mentioned being in a mutual friend's play is how you met your second husband. Is there anything else you want to say about your theater work in these college years?

04-00:09:57
Cortez Todd: Well, Tony [Todd], he was my lover in the play, and we became lovers in rehearsal outside the play. There was something about him that was so dynamic and just so grounded in his art, and I really admired that. He was in school, but then he left, and we started living together. There were people in the Theater Department and around that wanted to do some performances, wanted to do some plays, and he was great at choosing some stuff. We even did a play in the living room of the African American Cultural Center; it was the house that they had. And folks that he knew who were not in the Theater Department, he convinced them, "Yeah, you can do this." And so just a hodgepodge of people with all different kinds of majors and stuff, but they would follow him. He was like the pied piper in some ways, he could get us to do the work. And so we were able to use the theater in the Theater Department or the living room in the Afro-American Cultural Center.

04-00:11:39
And we actually formed a group that we performed outside of the campus. We went to a couple of other places to perform, and all on a shoestring, but we had a budget from the Afro-American Cultural Center that we could use. It was almost like being in Greenwich Village in the artist community that was doing stuff and being very active. I flourished, emotionally I flourished, and I

felt freer than I had ever felt in my life to be whatever it is I wanted to be and to do. I came across really interesting people that came to campus, and I got to interview them. So I moved in all these circles that just were very enriching.

04-00:12:40

Cortez Todd: And Tony was a great part of that, because he encouraged me. We didn't always agree on stuff, but the bottom line was that he did support whatever it was that I was doing. That was a great feeling, to have somebody in your corner like that, and I guess we were in each other's corners. There were moments we were a little at war with each other, but we got through that and did the work to not be a domestic violence couple. And that took some work [after we left UConn]. When we came together, we came from traumatic backgrounds. And the interesting part was that we worked out some of our trauma and got through it.

04-00:13:43

Tewes: Thank you for sharing that. I think perhaps related to working through trauma was, while at UConn, you had an internship as a Gestalt therapist. Can you tell me more about this center you were working with and your interest in the Gestalt approach?

04-00:14:03

Cortez Todd: Well, one of the things about the Commons, where everybody ate breakfast, lunch, or dinner or whatever, is that one person would know somebody else in another discipline or in another program. And so I was introduced to a woman named Ruth Buczynski, who was the director of the Yggdrasil Center for Gestalt Therapy, and that was on campus. That was a program on campus and much in campus. They had some workshops going on, and so I decided to go check out the workshops. And I was fascinated, because even though I had done community mental health, I did not know that some of the things I was doing already had another discipline where that existed. And so it made the things that I did very valid and made me feel very valid in having the thought and, well, direction that I went with the boys from the elementary school.

04-00:15:18

And Gestalt therapy is about here and now, and a lot of people think in therapy, you have to go back, "Well, when I was five years old this happened or this." Well, that may have happened, but we don't need to talk about that. What we need to talk about is where you are now. These are the things that have influenced you, but what do you choose now and how is it manifesting or how is it lingering now? It was very liberating to go, that it was a very different kind of therapy. For me, it was very gender neutral, as opposed to the Freudian stuff where you go to the husband, and he tells the wife what she has to do and what she has to say, and it's all because she's not listening and not obeying her husband that she has emotional problems, which is baloney. It was very gender neutral, and it was self-power affirmations to be free and to be able to express yourself. To learn how to have an argument or a disagreement where you go, "Well, you always did—" no, nobody ever

always does anything. More importantly, it's not what they're doing, but how you feel about what they're doing. And being able to express, "You know, when you do that, it makes me feel this." And as opposed to blaming anybody for anything, you begin to have ownership of who you are with your flaws and your good parts.

04-00:17:29

Cortez Todd: My internship to complete the program was in creating a peer counseling training program for the students who would be peer counselors for the students coming in, in the Office of Minority Affairs. It wasn't Upward Bound, it had a different name, but it was a program where I had six weeks to train these folks on how to be peer counselors and how to be able to encourage folks. First of all, to be able to not come across as a ruler, but a facilitator of what they needed to learn and do when they came in as students. So these folks had to figure out how to facilitate themselves into being that facilitator. I was a facilitator, training facilitators for what was ultimately a peer counseling training, so they could use peer counseling and respect the fact that they were a student just like this other person, they were just in a different class. They were maybe a sophomore or a junior, and these were freshmen. So the freshmen coming in could learn from their experiences in their first years in college in how they choose their courses and what made them feel good and what was going to—you know. It was all about self-definition. And that just works for me. I've carried it in all of my work as a therapist, and I'll get into that later.

04-00:19:29

When I did leave the University of Connecticut and I went into Hartford and I went to work for the YWCA Sexual Assault Crisis Service, there—when I left Connecticut and I went to New York or back to New York, I studied more at the Institute for Social Therapy and Justice, which is a very avant-garde way of looking at stuff. That people are not crazy, that what they are doing is having a human reaction to the shit going on around them, but do not call them "crazy." There are some folks who are a little bit over the physical, the biological, the mental. It's a whole other group of folks who are very much mentally ill, and they're schizophrenics and other folks. And those are diseases, but that's not the emotional, normal state of things. So when someone is belligerent, say, at a welfare office, that person is not crazy, but in a welfare office, they're going to be treated a certain kind of way, which definitely will rub everybody's nerves the wrong way. So when you get pissed, because you're not getting your needs met or you're not getting heard or you're not getting paid attention to or you have to wait in line forever to get something done and it still doesn't get done right, you might blow up. And then you get labeled as "crazy" or "hostile." So the social therapy is a way of understanding that.

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So I combine that with the Gestalt, and it's the here and now. So in the here and now, right now, I'm pissed, and the reason I'm pissed is this. And I have a

valid reason for being pissed, and I've earned the right to say, "I don't like this, this is not how I want to live." And people need to be given permission, they need to give themselves permission to try and navigate the waters that, based on sex and race and class, get all confused and labeled in a way that they are not meant to be labeled.

04-00:22:21

Tewes: Fatima, hearing you explain this, I'm wondering what connections you see between therapy and social justice.

04-00:22:29

Cortez Todd: It's so interconnected, because there are issues of internalized oppression where people believe—women believe that they're less important than men, and they behave in that way. People of color believe that white people are superior, are better than them, and they behave that, and they carry that feeling of shame of being who they are. It's all interconnected. Our emotional and mental stability and health are so linked to how we have to navigate every day, that we go out of our house and who we're going to come in contact with. And the issues around race and gender and class and heterosexism just play into how people are made to feel about themselves, and they take on that stuff as internalized oppression. They do more harm to themselves than the people who are trying to oppress them could ever do, because they swallow the Kool-Aid, so to speak. So it's learning how not to swallow the Kool-Aid and not feel like you are less than and not treating other people.

04-00:24:01

Women are often sexist towards other women and say, "Well, she got that job, and, oh, what's she doing going after that job? Oh well, she only got that, because she's cute and dresses cute." No, darling, maybe she had the brains to do it, but you're not going to give her credit for that? You're going to start criticizing how she looks, how she dresses, anything to tear her down. And with people of color, the gradation and the issue of colorism comes into play. Well, there's a whole thing, "If you're white, you're all right; if you're brown, stick around; but if you're Black, get back." And people buy into that and buy into that with each other in a community of color. With colorism, the lighter-skinned folks seem to be more important than the dark-skinned folks.

04-00:25:12

Mental health and social justice are—if we didn't have to always fight for our healthcare, for our jobs, for making a decent wage, for living in a decent house, for having enough money to pay your rent, to feed your kids—because you are socially hindered by who you are, and then you start believing all of that, that you are less than, and so you have a house full of frustrated folks, and that's not a pleasant surrounding.

04-00:25:57

Tewes: Thank you, that was a great explanation.

04-00:26:01
Cortez Todd: Thank you.

04-00:26:03
Tewes: Is there anything more you want to add about your time at UConn?

04-00:26:09
Cortez Todd: Well, there are a couple of things, and I think I touched on it: the white women's group who had had hysterectomies. Because I had cancer of the cervix, and I found out that it was brought on by the use of Ortho-Novum birth control pills—excuse me—which ironically had been tested in Puerto Rico, and a lot of women were sterilized. A lot of sterilization abuse in Puerto Rico and on the reservations within the US, and you realize it was all these drug trials on birth control medications that contributed, and women of color were the guinea pigs. So between having been sexually assaulted at twelve and having an abortion at twelve, I already started out with a damaged uterus. And then add into it the birth control medication, which was not really a good one, I wound up with cervical cancer. I was young, and I always wanted to have children, but I couldn't avoid having the hysterectomy, and I didn't know quite what to do with that. I felt like less than a woman, because I no longer could birth, I couldn't carry, I couldn't be pregnant, and I couldn't give birth.

04-00:27:47
And there was a group at UConn, and they were all white women who had hysterectomies. I forget the woman's name who started it, but she talked about learning how to mourn the loss of our uterus. And that it was not our fault, so we didn't need to carry any guilt, because there was nothing that we did to make the cancer come, and that it didn't make us any less of a woman. It gave me a place to put that emotional illness, because I didn't know what to do. It didn't necessarily make me a stable being, because I was just all over the place emotionally and feeling like I had been robbed of my one thing that made me a woman. And I realized that wasn't the only thing that makes you a woman, but we're so taught that that's the one thing that makes us women is that we can bear children. So for all the women who still had their uterus but still could not bear children, they felt as much of a loss of their uterus and loss of what defined them as women. It was a really good group, and it was small, maybe about six or eight. And the fact that they were all white women just went out the window, and we were all the same thought, and that was a very important thing for me.

04-00:29:44
Tewes: Were these women students or employees on campus?

04-00:29:49
Cortez Todd: Grad students, a couple of employees, it was mixed. A couple of undergrads, a couple of grads, and a couple of employees. I think the woman who started it was a professor of something—well, she was a professor, yes, she had to be a professor of something. I guess that was part of my introduction into the white feminist movement, because I talked about that group over at the Women's

Center with other women. It was very fulfilling where I was at that time, but once I left there and started doing more work in the community, I'm realizing, Wait a minute, there's another level of stuff that we need to be dealing with as women of color. And the white women would have us believing this stuff, but that's not necessarily our issue.

04-00:31:08

Cortez Todd: It occurred to me, all this time I had my daughter with me, and I would take her to the daycare center they had on campus and go do and go do whatever I was doing and then I'd pick her up. One of the things that I did was I was an artist's model, and I would pick my daughter up, and then I'd go to the studio or the classroom and get undressed and pose. My daughter would sit there and play with her toys that she had brought, because I could earn money doing that, and that was a great job. And it also made me feel good about my body, because I was an artist's model and that just—I'm special. That was another part of my UConn days.

04-00:32:16

And then when I left and Tony and I moved where we were in Hartford at this time in the house where he was raised, where his aunt had raised him, and we took the apartment. It was a four-unit house, and it was her house, and so we lived on the top floor. He had an idea to have a theater group of teenagers, and so we thought, Yeah, okay, we can do that. So I wrote the grants, and I got the neighborhood incentive grant. And I got use of the recreation center, which had a phone and had heat and a bathroom and running water, and it was just this big, open room. We got these kids, they were—a lot of them were street kids, and some were kids in the house, and they would come every day—well, four days a week, they would come after school. And then I had a '72 Ford Maverick, a two door, and we would pile some of the kids in, and we'd take a trip and drop some of them off, because it was dark and not late, but that just it was dark, and drop them off. And I'd come back to the rec house and grab the other ones and take them to the other side of town. We became a family, and it was a great thing.

04-00:33:59

And I actually wrote a grant for the Summer Youth Employment Program. Tony gave us the name The Free-Me Truth Troupe, yeah. He was an excellent teacher. I was good at writing the grant, and I had to go and defend the grant in doing—that these were summer jobs for kids, and they said, "Well, what is it that they're learning about working?" And, "This theater, this is just acting." And I said, "Well, to be an actor, you have to know how to read, because you have to read a script. You have to know how to follow direction. You have to learn how to be in a community, because the play will have more than one person, so you have to deal with somebody else in this play. How do you learn to have empathy for the characters and what their lives are like?" So I said, "So these are the things, these are the values and the experiences kids need to have, but literacy is what actually—" they said, "Oh yeah, you got to learn

how to read." And I said, "Yeah." We got it. And for six weeks, those kids got paychecks, and I took them on adventures, and it was just a great time.

04-00:35:40

Cortez Todd: Tony wound up getting a scholarship to the National Theater Institute, because he was a—he is—an artistic genius. And he's done a lot of work and a lot of August Wilson stuff, and he was actually in *Platoon,* that was his very first movie. So I was in New Orleans at the time, and I was at this family's house, who had been involved in the movement, and he had tracked me down, because he thought I was one place, and Oretha, Oretha Castle Haley, said, "No, she's over at Dr. and Mrs. Mitchell's house." He called me over there, and that was when he booked *Platoon*, and he proposed marriage. So that was an important phone call and time, and that was a culmination of a lot of struggle that we had. When we went back to New York, I was a member of The Family Repertory Theater Company, and he went to Modern Times Theater Company. So we were both performing in two different companies on two different sides of the city. And actually, the Modern Times Company that he was part of toured the United States with a play, and we only toured the prisons in Upstate and Jersey. Grand and glorious days.

04-00:37:22

Tewes: I'm just marveling at the turn that your life took at this moment.

04-00:37:29

Cortez Todd: I mean, some of the work that I did in New York stemmed from the work I did at the YWCA Sexual Assault Crisis Service.

04-00:37:42

Tewes: Yeah, I want to talk about that. Tell me more about that position.

04-00:37:46

Cortez Todd: Okay, that was a project from the National Institute of Mental Health. And just like the program in the South Bronx with community mental health, this was community awareness on sexual assault and abuse, and providing services for survivors, teenagers, adult women. It did not include men at the time, but when I went to New York, I was working with folks, and it expanded to men. But that was also something very close, because it was the YWCA, and it was an all-woman environment, which is great, but that's not an issue just for women. Men are sexually abused and assaulted from being young kids to even when they grow up.

04-00:38:45

And what we did was we went out into the community and talked to different community organizations to, at least, get them to acknowledge that this was an issue that needed to be addressed. Nobody was really offering any programs, but even just the awareness so that we could have more educational information or pamphlets or whatever accessible to people. This was just the beginnings of this saturation of the community with this kind of information.

And during that time, I did some oral histories with the community leaders to get their input and their support for this work to continue and expand.

04-00:39:45

Cortez Todd: I left the YWCA Cultural Services. One of the things that I personally came in contact with was my own sexual assault and all the stuff around believing that I was a bad girl. Because I had gotten assaulted and got pregnant and had an abortion, so I was less than. The women in the organization or in the Sexual Assault Crisis Service—there were two, three, four—there were five of us. And so we would have our meetings, but we'd always have a group awareness where we were emotionally in doing the work and what were our own secrets. We were all encouraged to talk about our secrets and say, "Look, if you're going to work to educate somebody else, then you need to own up to who you are and what your experience is. And it's a way for you also to get rid of the shame; you don't have to carry that shame anymore." And so that was a very freeing experience for me with the women I was working with.

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So there were three white women and one Puerto Rican woman and myself. We had some issues with the white women, because, in some ways, we almost felt like we had to teach them about racism and then teach them about maternalism, because they were trying to rule. The same way men tried to rule and be paternalistic towards women, women were being sexist to each other by being maternalistic. You become aware of these things in the middle of the work that you're doing, so you're ever evolving, you're always evolving, you're always expanding something. And then we had to write these reports on what we were doing and send it to the National Institute of Mental Health to keep getting funded. It was a good thing.

04-00:42:21

It was interesting, I did an interview with one woman in the community who talked about the welfare workers and how the welfare workers that would come into the community and they had their books with them, their little binders, and that they really couldn't stand them. They really hated them, because they felt like they were just controlling their lives. When I put that in the oral history, a white woman who was on the advisory board, had been a social worker in the community, had been a welfare worker, she says, "They loved us." And I was like, "No, they didn't, they resented you. And you can't see that, why you were resented and why people performed nicely to you and for you, because they wanted to get their benefits, but they didn't like you." "Oh yes, they did. Somebody always made a pie, and I get a piece of pie and maybe some coffee or tea." I was like, "Yeah, that don't mean shit. That's a way of getting what they want, not because they care about you. And you are not the great, white savior." A lot of welfare workers had that attitude of being, Ah, if it wasn't for me, they wouldn't survive. Well, back up, just back up a little bit, get over yourself.

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Cortez Todd: So when I came to New York and I was working with the theater company, I also was introduced to New York Women Against Rape. That was a community group, and they actually had enough funding to hire me to do training and to be a crisis counselor. And then I heard about the job at Mount Sinai Medical Center, which was a new rape crisis center that was starting there. So I actually was working for both, because New York Women Against Rape was Downtown in the Village, and Mount Sinai Medical Center was Uptown, borderline Harlem and Spanish Harlem and white folks. I actually got to practice as a therapist at Mount Sinai Medical Center, and I was attached the OB-GYN Department, because that's the department under which the rape crisis center functioned. And I did a lot of training with medical students, because one of the things that folks didn't even realize and don't realize now is that a lot of medical schools have discontinued teaching doctors how to perform abortions. And I was like, "No, you can't do that. The school has got to prepare doctors for everything, so why would you cut that?" Because women are not as important, so they don't need to waste their time learning how to do that.

04-00:45:46

Oh yeah, Uptown, I was going to presentations at the New York City Housing Authority, which were really tall, I guess, twenty-story buildings. It housed all these people, and there were a lot of attacks and assaults in the buildings or in the families. It was just a raw environment. And so training the New York City Housing Authority police officers on how to take care and consider what someone was going through if they got attacked in any kind of way, to teach [them to] work with their empathy skills. Actually, they had a neighborhood rapist who was attacking young girls, like seventh- and eighth-grade girls. The brothers of a lot of the girls were then responsible. Mom by herself most of the time, or mom and dad were making the brothers take care of them, and the brothers resented that a lot. But I did a presentation at a junior high school, and I just talked about—one of the kids, he was trying to look like a thug, and he was falling asleep, and I was like, "Excuse me, am I keeping you awake?" And I made it very personal to this whole auditorium of kids. I got a great letter, because they said that I mesmerized the kids and the teachers, and everybody came out of there feeling so much stronger. As a community, they were able to be stronger within the community, and people were actually reporting people that they suspected of doing something wrong. The numbers of reports became greater, and the number of incidents became less. So that's one of my exciting moments in—

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Tewes: That's fantastic.

04-00:48:28

Cortez Todd: So—

04-00:48:29
Tewes: Fatima, is this the eighties that we're talking about all this work?

04-00:48:31
Cortez Todd: Yeah, yes, and—

04-00:48:32
Tewes: Okay, and that's when you moved back to New York?

04-00:48:35
Cortez Todd: Yeah, like '81 to '86. I was going back and forth between Mount Sinai Medical Center and NYWAR Downtown. At NYWAR Downtown, I used to do a lot of the talks to the police department when they had their—they're called in the morning and they had their gathering and get their assignments. I would have like fifteen minutes of—I forget what they called it—shape-up or something time, whatever. On *Hill Street Blues*, the TV series, they always had that gathering of the policemen, and the guy saying, "Well, look, this is happening and this is happening." Well, I had a portion of that time to talk about how to address women who were sexually assaulted or anybody who was sexually assaulted.

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And one of the things that I talked about, I said, "There's a bias that says that sex trafficked workers cannot be raped, because that's their business." And I would point out that a shopkeeper is open to sell merchandise, but you cannot just go in there and shoplift. Same thing with a sex worker; you cannot shoplift what they're selling. And when you get that understanding, you have a whole different kind of response to people that are coming to you. And then the gay and lesbian community was really picked on, and the police had their own biases against gay and lesbian people and would almost try to dismiss it, but it's like, no, no, no, no, no, let's back up some. People have got to be given their dignity and their respect, no matter what experience they had gone through and no matter what their lifestyle is. They still deserve dignity and respect and empathy and comfort when they have a traumatic experience.

04-00:50:58
And that's when my work started spreading to men. Even at Mount Sinai, I had one male client who had heard me speak and asked if he could come to me for therapy. He was a heterosexual male, but he was discovering some memories that he had from being a child and his babysitter, who was a man or a teenage boy, assaulting him or touching him inappropriately. And he had a girlfriend that he didn't know how to tell her what had happened to him, and so we then had a couple's session, and he was able to tell her what was going on. And she understood more about why he was certain ways or has had certain reactions to stuff. And they actually got married, because they worked out their stuff in therapy.

04-00:52:13
Tewes: Wow.

04-00:52:14

Cortez Todd: Yeah, that felt good. But at NYWAR is also where I started dealing more with women of color feminism, because there were more women of color at NYWAR, New York Women Against Rape. That topic began to get talked about a lot more, and it came up in the funding circles. I was on the board of an organization called Women's Funding Coalition, and we, along with another [group]—The Women's Foundation in Philadelphia and a couple of other places—we decided to put on a conference to unite all of these women-funded, philanthropic entities. It was like generational wealth, there were people like there's The Hunt Foundation—and that's Hunt Oil—and then there were other ones where women were—so there were women of inherited wealth who had foundations, and then there were other folks that had foundations that they raised money for a cause, and the cause was one thing or another related to women's issues.

04-00:53:41

I helped design the first conference to unite. We made it the National Network of Women's Funds. And part of the issue there was in our motto, we talked about all the different kinds of women that should be funded. It was a very long motto, it was a very long purpose statement, because it's rural and urban, reservation, non-reservation, Caribbean, I mean, just all the different geographical things that all of these women need to be able to make decisions for themselves and their communities. These foundations were making decisions on what they thought should be the priority, and it was mostly white women with the foundations having that maternalistic control over how that money was allocated and how it was used. So all women of color, we rebelled and said, "So you're going to have to deal with this, this is an issue that you really have to deal with."

04-00:55:01

And one of the things is there were fifty-seven women's foundations and funding groups, and the amount of money came to $97 million that was available for these programs nationwide. And we're like, "Yeah, you don't just give a community group $500 and say, 'You can do this.' You've got to think about real money to make real change. You need to be able to give somebody a salary to do the organizing that you're talking about. People don't have free time; their time needs to be paid for, and just respecting that." That was a whole change in how foundations and funding sources were looked at and the kinds of things that were demanded when writing a grant proposal, for example. The grant proposal is: I'm telling you what I need, not what you think I need. And so more women of color just started speaking up and say, "Wait a minute, this is what we would like to do, this is how we feel we're being treated."

04-00:56:22

And then that led to the Women of Color Against Violence Against Women of Color [Conference]. I mean, these titles, boy, [laughs] they can go on and on ad infinitum, but we're trying to be specific. And we did have a conference,

and it included Middle Eastern and Caribbean, any different Latin group to come together, and I got to go. I spent some of my teenage years on the Shinnecock Reservation, which is actually in the Hamptons. And that would tickle me to no end that the reservation [is in the Hamptons], "Yeah. Oh, I'm going out to the Hamptons, yes, to the reservation." [laughs] And so I went out there, and I included women from there, and they then brought another nation, the Poospatuck, and then coming further into Great Neck, the Matinecocks, and so you find out all of these groups, all these nations on Long Island. The Daughters of the American Revolution actually had the nerve to erect a tombstone in Great Neck saying, "Here lies the last of the Matinecocks." And the Matinecocks were like, "Wait a minute, you're discounting us." There was a woman who was the head of the longhouse, and she says, "Yeah, I'm not dead. That chief died, but we have other people and we have descendants and we have families who are Matinecocks, and how can you dismiss us as that being the last of our nation?" It really resonated with me, and it just felt like that was where I was supposed to be, working with my own community and not necessarily following the wishes or the dictates of white feminists who had their own agenda, and it wasn't mine.

04-00:58:45

Tewes: Let's talk about that. What were you seeing were the major issues for white feminists at the time?

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Cortez Todd: I guess it was a matter of priorities and how families were constructed or not constructed, or how education was played out in the classroom. And the different ways that children of color gravitate towards learning a certain kind of way, as opposed to the very English way of education. The idea of bright colors, "You can't go to school looking like that." Why not? This is my family, this is my color, this is what I'm used to. And that's where the maternalism just cut across the board on all kinds of levels with trying to almost whiten women of color into their culture, as opposed to having their culture and letting women of color have their culture. And that we can work together for a bigger picture for all women and global human rights, because women's rights are human rights and civil rights are also human rights. Just value and respect everyone's color and not as an amusing oddity. Oh, that, "How those people do that is just so cute." It's like, No, that doesn't feel real comfortable, and that doesn't feel like you have any respect. You want me to be like you, I don't want to be like you. I want to be like me, I want to be like my heritage, my culture. You got yours, and I'm not trying to tell you to be anything other than who you are. But we all have a common goal if we recognize what the common goal is, and it's human rights. And human rights means everybody gets to choose for themselves, for their culture, for their community, for their children.

04-01:01:19

There's a Native American saying, "You must consider now your effects on the next seven generations." So what you do today, your personal is political,

because everything you do either maintains the status quo or is moving to change the status quo. You have to think about how that impacts the next seven generations. And in some ways, white women in the movement or in the feminist movement, at that time, had a very myopic view of what was feminism, what was women's rights. So yeah, it was just very different. And I didn't want to be a brown-skinned white woman. That's how the feminist movement really encouraged folks without even realizing that that's what they were doing.

04-01:02:32

Tewes: And so just to dig in a little bit more here, what do you think that was missing that was really important, besides culture, for women of color in the movement? What were the issues that were most important to women of color?

04-01:02:49

Cortez Todd: Well, that our children's education, our own education, our access to healthy employment, our access to good housing, to neighborhoods that were not all slums. That even the areas that were considered bad, they were just poor, and helping to improve the quality of somebody's life where they are. Harlem is a wonderful, vibrant community. And it is proven out now, because you have so many white families moving to Harlem, because it is a great, vibrant community. But back in those days, people were like, "It's such a shame she has to live in Harlem." No, there's no shame, this is my community, my culture, all of that. Until you-all came in with Starbucks and wiped out the Korean vegetable and fish markets—and like, come on. Like I said, I don't want to be a brown-skinned white woman. I want my kids to value who they are and that they're not less than.

04-01:04:23

And I don't want to hear about "underprivileged kids," just kids that we're trying to give more privilege to. There are the international twelve rights of children that in 1989 came out from the UN [United Nations]. And when you read that, children have the right to be born into a household where there's love or have the right to be born into a household that has a roof, that has an indoor toilet. I mean, just all the very simple things that children are entitled to have the right to have and making a commitment to that happening. White women in Appalachia really need the same things that folks in the slums in any big city of color. They have the same needs, but they are just different cultures. I want as much education and housing and cleanliness and healthcare for somebody in Appalachia with children as I want for somebody in the South Bronx or parts of Jersey. And it's not trying to whiten up anybody.

04-01:05:57

Tewes: Again, you're seeing the global connections here, the larger human rights work.

04-01:06:05
Cortez Todd: I don't refer to myself as a minority.

04-01:06:09
Tewes: Okay.

04-01:06:11
Cortez Todd: The reason I don't is because people of color are people of the First Nation globally. We are not the minority globally, so we may be Third World in technology or something else, but we are of the First World, and that's not a minority. Some white women got very upset when I would say stuff like that.

04-01:06:42
Tewes: Oh really?

04-01:06:43
Cortez Todd: Like I was putting them down. No, but I'm not lifting you up either.

04-01:06:54
Tewes: Fatima, as we're talking about this, I'm also thinking about how this movement fits in with your previous movement work. Specifically, what connections do you see between the civil rights movement and the women's liberation movement?

04-01:07:16
Cortez Todd: The women of color liberation movement?

04-01:07:20
Tewes: I'd say so, yes.

04-01:07:21
Cortez Todd: Yeah, okay. I'll give you Jonesboro, Louisiana, as an example. The women that worked at their jobs were primarily jobs as domestics or they were schoolteachers, so you had those two ends. The schoolteachers lived in brick houses; the domestic workers lived in wooden houses. The teachers had houses with indoor plumbing; the domestic workers may be in a house that doesn't have indoor plumbing and has an open trench, an open sewage trench running through their neighborhood. Their kids don't necessarily have good dental care or healthcare. And you get those kinds of things when you're able to vote in people or elect people who are going to do the work of representing that community. Getting federal funding for the things that people just have a right to have and need to have, and it never changed. There was no difference in my work there and my work in the South Bronx or my work in New York Women Against Rape. How you respect people where they are and help them to define what they want to be better. And the right that they have to do that and to live in a world and place where they have those things that they really need in order to function as full beings. They need that kind of support and someone encouraging them to fight for it.

04-01:09:36

Tewes: Thank you. You've also been very open about your personal experience with sexual assault and abortion. And I know this is something you've written about in recent years, particularly as abortion rights are deteriorating in the United States. I'm curious to hear your take on not only how you felt about this issue in the seventies and eighties, but how you've seen the long arm of abortion impact women today.

04-01:10:12

Cortez Todd: Well, you'd look at who's making the rules and who's making the laws, and white men were in control against civil rights back in those days. A civil right, a human right, is the right over one's own body as a woman. And a man does not have the right to make the decision for me or to make legislation that keeps me from exercising my human right. There is a picture of a bunch of dogs sitting around a table and their topic is, "Okay, let's deal with the cat issue." So you have all these men sitting around a table saying, "Okay, well, let's deal with these women," and it becomes an issue of control. And as I say, *J'accuse!: Power, Control [and Sexual Abuse],* because the way the Supreme Court—which is not the Supreme Court anymore, it's the un-Supreme Court—makes laws and choices that are nonhuman rights, it's such an egalitarian attitude. And yet they have colonialism over my body. That's about as much as I can say about that, because it's—

04-01:12:13

So I accuse the Supreme Court of being rapists or, in effect, committing acts of sexual assault and sexual abuse against women for having the nerve to come and say—just like they want to kill the Voting Rights Act. They want to kill any access to women's healthcare and women's control over their own bodies. And not everybody wants an abortion, but you have to be able to make that choice freely on your own between you and your doctor. So it's the same thing: don't tell me where I can sit on the bus any more than where I can live or go to school or the job I can have. Stop dictating that kind of stuff to me.

04-01:13:20

Tewes: Thank you for sharing that. I do want to also take a moment and ask you about mentorship in the women's movement, but also in your life and how you approach this. Did anyone serve as a mentor to you outside of the civil rights movement, encouraging you to continue your path or follow whatever you needed to follow?

04-01:13:52

Cortez Todd: My Aunt Rosemary, my Mother's oldest sister, was my life mentor. My Mother was an extremely good example for me, because she went after stuff and she spoke her mind and she fought for issues and she fought—she went to court to have the apartment that we were living in in Riverdale, so watching her do that kind of stuff. But my Aunt Rose was always giving me information about what was going on in Africa and how I needed to know about that and how I need to read, "You need to read more and pay attention.

If you're going to watch TV, pay attention to what they're saying on TV and the kind of world they're saying you're supposed to be living in, which is not the real world." Oh, she was my heart and my mentor supreme.

04-01:15:01

Cortez Todd: There are other women—I'm trying to think. There was Cherríe Moraga, who is a poet and a Chicana activist. She is one of the first people to say to me, "Your personal is political." I'm like, "Huh, what are you talking about?" And that's when she said, "Either you're living your life maintaining the status quo or you're doing something to change it, and that's why your personal is political." And then it expanded to other folks that I would come in contact with, because I did a lot of training. So I'd have people that would come do the training to be rape crisis counselors and stuff, who also had their own information and their own views of the world. And one person actually introduced me to this book, *[The Better World Shopping Guide: Every Dollar Makes a Difference]*. And shopping for a better world means you buy products and services [from sources] that are beneficial to human rights, to preserving the earth, to recycling, climate control, all of that stuff, and that's where you spend your money. So if the company is not doing that or the company has different biases about who they hire and the kind of company they run—that was a very eye-opening thing. I don't eat Domino's Pizza, and I definitely don't eat Chick-fil-A. I've never had Chick-fil-A, and I don't ever intend to have it, because these are two companies that engage in some practices that are not following human rights, and there's enough of them out there. I mean, there are some folks you can't avoid doing business with, but when you can, you need to. My dime is going where I know it's doing the most good.

04-01:17:30

Tewes: And how do you approach mentorship and teaching younger generations?

04-01:17:41

Cortez Todd: Well, when I was with NYWAR, we had a theater group. And again, the theater group that Tony and I had in Connecticut, we had boys, and sometimes the girls would want to fight with each other. "Wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute, we're not going there." Just getting them to understand how to work together as a community and not talk about people, not fight with folks, so we were both mentors to these twelve kids. And then in New York, when I came back and I was working with NYWAR, there was the Acting Up—no—

04-01:18:25

Tewes: ACT UP?

04-01:18:25

Cortez Todd: No, because I worked with ACT UP, which was the clinic defense and AIDS awareness group, but it was Acting Out Teen Theater. And again, I had a bunch of kids that came out of the Lower East Side of Manhattan and had never been above Fourteenth St. I actually got them up to Two Hundred

Twenty-Fifth St. to a television studio where they got to perform this rap song that I cowrote called "5 out of 5." Yeah, they were like, "Wow, we're going all the way to Two Hundred Twenty-Fifth St." And, "Yeah, you can get on that same train you take—" well, they actually walked to Fourteenth St., but I said, "You can get on the train and go all the way up to the end of the line, and there's the Bronx Zoo up there, there's the Central Park Zoo." "Yeah?" Folks just getting them to expand their world and not fight.

04-01:19:50

Cortez Todd: Because there was one young lady, her name was Pinky, and Pinky was about two feet tall and maybe twenty pounds, [laughs] but she would take on the biggest kid in the neighborhood to fight. And one time, I just walked right in the middle of her and these other people, and the other kids were all standing around egging them on. And I'm like, "Wait a minute." And they're like, "You can't go—" "Yes, I'm going in there to get Pinky out of there, I don't want her in there with a fight, I don't want her in there. She could get stabbed, she can get hurt, all that." And so I let them see that I was going to stand up for them. They didn't have to change who they were inside, but I was going to stand up for them to be safe. I guess it's like I did with the boys in the South Bronx, too, when I took them all Downtown and all on the subway and stuff, just showing them the other part of the world, and I guess that's been something I do.

04-01:21:09

Tewes: I feel like this connects for me, because you really see these connections, these networks, this coalition building that can be done. And part of that is exposure to different worlds.

04-01:21:23

Cortez Todd: Yeah, because the more you know about somebody, the more you can like them or not like them. But you might be more likely to like them than not when you stop being afraid or afraid that they are going to hurt you or afraid that they think they're better than you. And you find out that everybody is insecure; everybody's walking around with the same insecurities. And it's like, Yeah, you're scared of mice, I'm not scared of mice. I'm scared of rats, and there's a difference for me. Mice are cute, little things, even though I don't want to have any mice in my house, but they are cute, little things. But rats are—ew, give me the willies.

04-01:22:19

Tewes: I don't blame you for that. [laughs] Fatima, is there anything else you want to make sure to discuss today?

04-01:22:36

Cortez Todd: Yeah, you had mentioned, at some point, you wanted to talk about sexuality, and one of the things that are really—children and as a child, we are sexual beings. And when we learn that we have different feelings when we touch different parts of our body, and we've been taught that you shouldn't have

those feelings, and you certainly shouldn't explore yourself or touch yourself. And then when somebody comes along—and it was my girlfriend's uncle who said, "Oh, let's play the kissing game." "Okay." And I liked kissing, it made me feel good, I liked it, but I was not prepared for anything beyond that. And that's when you see the predators will take advantage of my sexual curiosity or children's sexual curiosity and just abuse it. So it's not like we want to deny our children their sexuality or their exploration, but we don't want them to get taken advantage of. That's a real important thing for me to think about. Because I thought I was a bad girl. I just liked kissing. And I wasn't a bad girl, I was a curious kid who liked kissing, and like I said, but I didn't want anything more. And children need to be encouraged to freely express themselves sexually and know that they're safe, that they're safe around the adults who may notice that.

04-01:25:10
Tewes: Thank you for sharing that. Is there anything else you want to add before we close out today, Fatima?

04-01:25:18
Cortez Todd: I think I'm done for the day.

04-01:25:21
Tewes: I think that's a good place for us to end, thank you very much.

04-01:25:25
Cortez Todd: Thank you.

Interview 5: May 30, 2024

05-00:00:03
Cortez Todd: Okay.

05-00:00:05
Tewes: This is a fifth interview with Fatima Cortez Todd for the Women's Movements in the United States Oral History Project, in association with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. The interview is being conducted by Amanda Tewes on May 30, 2024. Ms. Cortez Todd joins me in this remote interview from Los Angeles, California, and I am in Walnut Creek, California. Welcome, Fatima, for a fifth session.

05-00:00:31
Cortez Todd: I'm going to miss these when it's done. [laughs]

05-00:00:36
Tewes: We're getting real, real close here. So when we spoke yesterday, we spoke a lot about your work history, and especially in the field of therapy and social work, as well as your interactions with the women's movement in the United States. And I think something that might combine some of that interest is starting off today speaking about the Rhode Island Feminist Theatre company, which, I believe, you were involved with from around September 1980 to July 1981. Can you tell me what this theater company was and how you got involved?

05-00:01:18
Cortez Todd: Well, Tony [Todd] was going to—he was enrolled at Trinity Repertory Theatre Conservatory, and I would go up on the weekends, and I'd join him in some of his classes. He heard about the Rhode Island Feminist Theatre and said, "You might be interested in this." And I'm like, "Oh yeah, okay." So I investigated and then I put my résumé underneath the door, because when I went to their office, they were closed. And then I got contacted by them, and they were going to have auditions to add [a performer], because one person from the theater company had left, and they needed to replace that person in one of the plays that they were doing in repertory. So I auditioned and I got it.

05-00:02:09
The play was called *Paper Weight*, and it was roughly based—or I'm not sure which came first: *Paper Weight* or *9 to 5*. But it was the issue of women in the workforce and bosses and just the dynamics and the politics of being a woman in the workforce. And one of the characters, my character, was Melissa Mae Gordon DeMichael, and she was based on Dolly Parton, so that was fun. And what it was, was an example of what was happening. My character had a son that had a speech impediment, so I had to take off from work for a couple of hours a couple of times a week. It was my issue getting the company to approve that and not get in the way of my doing that, and so that was my struggle. Then there was another woman who had a different struggle, and another one who had been in a relationship and her girlfriend that didn't work

out. And she was an artist and—no, that's a different play, I'm sorry. This other one was older, the supervisor was older, and she had been really functioning on control or getting this particular office working. And then they had the introduction of another character, who was Ms. Showalter, who was the efficiency expert who then came in to get us all in line. My conflict was with her, for the most part, and other people supported me. The supervisor said, "I would rather have her"—meaning my character—"part-time than a lot of people that I have full-time. I don't want to lose her, so don't make me fire her, because she needs to have this time to take care of her son."

05-00:04:27

Cortez Todd: The company was made up of three lesbian women of varying ages and myself, and then they hired—and then the director was also Jewish, but she was a heterosexual, because she just got married to a man. And the dynamics that played out, they were all avid feminists, that was the whole thing, they were the Rhode Island Feminist Theatre. When we were in rehearsal, I had an Afro, and I had to come into the office of Ms. Showalter to have her go over my work and whether or not I should be fired or how can we work this out. There was one line that I had that said, "This company has an obligation to me. If I have an obligation to the company, the company has an obligation to me, too." The director stopped us and said, "Fatima, could you do something with your hair? Because when you have that Afro, it's just so powerful, and then when you say that line, you just sound so angry." And it's like, "Can you just tone down your Blackness?" I had people in the group that said, "Well, she is angry, she got a right to be angry. And well, her Afro is who she is." So that was an example of white feminism really having conflict with who women of color are and how they act.

05-00:06:19

We mentioned the Multicultural Alliance for Reproductive Freedom. I created a conference that was for everyone, and our poster and our T-shirt had "Reproductive rights and the right to choose" in English; Spanish; French; Swahili; Tagalog; Makah, which is the Native American language. I think that was it; it was a very full thing. And when we finished with the conference, we had a meeting with a consultant on organizational development and growth because, Okay, we had the conference, now where do we go? I created a series of workshops that were divided up with Asian women speaking to Asian women, Latina women speaking to Latina women, men speaking to each other, just all of that.

05-00:07:25

And so after all of that, this white, female feminist, totally liberal, in her house off of Mulholland Dr.—so we have class issues, we have race issues, and we have her politics of feminism—she is facilitating this great, big meeting, and it came to me. Well, I forget what we're talking about, but I said, "Well, [moves both hands] da-da-bi-da." I use my hands when I'm talking. And she said, "Fatima, could you not move your hand so much? Because you have on that

red nail polish, and it's very distracting." White liberalism, white, feminist liberalism.

05-00:08:17

Cortez Todd: When we were doing the National Network of Women's Funds and we had a meeting, there was a Native American woman who was part—I forget what the name of the foundation was, it was a Native American foundation, and we were having this meeting. We were in New York in the living room of the Fifth Ave. apartment of one of the founding members of the group, who will go nameless right now. And so she said, "Oh, Fatima, can you do two braids for me? French braids, they start up here and—" because she had very long, beautiful hair. So I said, "Oh yeah, well, sit on the floor right in front of me." I figured we're going to go on with the meeting, and I'll just be braiding her hair. And one of the white women said, "Could you not do that and save that for later? Because it's very distracting."

05-00:09:18

So the language is consistent: we are very distracting. Because I think about all the things that women of color do in the kitchen. Someone is cooking, someone is doing this, someone is doing that, and at the same time they're having a meeting about something else, and it's just part of the culture. So my Afro was unacceptable; my expression of anger was unacceptable; my red nail polish was unacceptable; my trying to braid someone's hair was unacceptable, because women braided their kids' hairs while they're talking about this other stuff. So this is a continual pattern in all the meetings with white feminists, is that somehow you have to tone down who you are. And that becomes just an emotional assault on who you are, especially when you have the nerve to be sitting there talking about human rights. Those are the three most outstanding instances that just caught me totally off guard, pissed me off entirely, but then I had to tone it down, I had to be nice. So that's why women of color, we got to braid each other's hair in the meeting, do each other's nails, just do whatever. "Oh yeah, well, the bylaws need to be changed. Yeah, hold on a second. Yeah, the bylaws need to be changed about that, yeah," and just continuing on, dressed in our colorful stuff, and nobody was intimidated by any of it. But you put a white feminist in the middle of that group, and all of a sudden you got to take care of her, because she is delicate, and this is just "uncomfortable." That word is still around with critical race theory teaching. It's a continuum, okay.

05-00:11:41

Tewes: Yeah, interesting. I'm curious: what impact did those experiences have on how you wanted to be involved in the movement or whether or not you wanted to be in mixed groups?

05-00:11:58

Cortez Todd: Less and less, it made me want to be less and less. When I did the Los Angeles Women in Film Festival, I was the head of the judgment selection committee. I really admired the women that I was working with, who were

primarily white, talking about this film or that film and what message it gave or what message it didn't give. Maybe it was because they were artists, it was a different flavor to things that were going on.

05-00:12:42

Cortez Todd: Okay, let me back up. I was at the American Film Institute first when I got to Los Angeles. And I was very blessed to have a friend from New York who had been with the Women's Funding Coalition that I had been part of, that she was now out here and working at the American Film Institute and told me about it. I could be a temporary worker until something opened up, and something opened up immediately, so I got to work there. It was a really good environment, but at the same time, there was a white woman in my office who was feminist, liberal. And I forget what it was that was being said, but again, she made a comment about somebody just being so loud at lunch. We sat on the grass outside and got food off the food truck, and a person of color, happened to have been Latin, was just speaking loud Spanish and enjoying her meal. And people were laughing and she's like, "Oh, that's just so disturbing." So it's like, yeah, yeah.

05-00:14:07

And then when I went to San Francisco for the other Women in Film Festival, there were a series of short films done by a Palestinian woman. Her themes were getting out the violence in oneself, and so she had some pretty violent images. And I got trashed in the paper for allowing her to have six of her little, short vignettes included in part of this film festival, that it just was not appropriate. And I'm like, Wait a minute, everybody's film gets to be in—if you're a woman filmmaker, and people vote on you to have your film in it, I'm going to support it. I may not love everything, but I'm going to support your right and your right to be seen and to have your work and your position expressed. So that, again, white, feminist liberals. They are a group I'm not very fond of, and a lot of folks who are that don't even recognize that that's who they are and what they are and what they do and how they impact women of color. But they're there for healing the community and working on human rights globally. Bullshit, no, you're there to stroke your own ego. That's where I went, it's not a nice place, but that's where I went. I'm not there anymore, I just don't deal with folks. It's like, No, that's you. I do not need to go into that meeting.

05-00:16:14

Tewes: Right. Well, I think one of the reasons why this project is important is to bring forth the experiences that you have had and help put them in context of this larger movement, and show where the movement has been lacking and perhaps still has some blind spots. So I appreciate you sharing that.

05-00:16:36

Cortez Todd: There is a white woman in the group that I deal with, the Civil Rights Veterans. She is as white as they come, and she said, "You know, I just had some problems with the feminist movement." Oh, she identified it as the white

feminist movement, so she owned what she was participating in, but she is so far advanced from where they ever will be. And I admire her a lot, but she speaks—in the group, there are also Jewish men who are pro-Palestine, you know what I mean. So this is a really wonderful group, because it sees the political stuff as being what's corrupt; not people, but the politics.

05-00:17:31
Tewes: Thank you for sharing that. Yeah, I want to talk about the Bay Area Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement later.

05-00:17:39
Cortez Todd: Okay.

05-00:17:40
Tewes: We spoke about a few of your post-Los Angeles job opportunities and interests, but I want to back up just a minute before we move on. Is there anything else you want to say about the Rhode Island Feminist Theatre company, in terms of your reach or who the audiences were?

05-00:18:04
Cortez Todd: Well, the audiences were intended to be working women, and because we had *9 to 5*, which was about working women. And then we had another one about friendship, women's friendships, and it's one is gold and one is silver. It's a Girl Scout thing, you make the new, you—

05-00:18:33
Tewes: Make new friends—

05-00:18:34
Cortez Todd: —keep the old.

05-00:18:34
Tewes: —one is silver and the other is gold.

05-00:18:38
Cortez Todd: Yes, yeah, you make new friends, keep the old, one is silver and one is gold. I think the play was *One is Silver*, I'm not sure, but it was about women's friendships. And in that, I had an artist friend who was lesbian, and her girlfriend had just broken her heart, and she was all in the dumps. She's doing a portrait of me, which I actually have on my wall over there, because I got to keep it. I'm trying to help her, and I'm a doctor, and I forget what my discipline is, but I'm trying to give her some therapy to get her out of her morose, and she really isn't having it. And then there's another woman who is dealing with issues of domestic violence.

05-00:19:38

Anyhow, we went on tour with this. Well, we performed in Rhode Island, and we performed twice in Rhode Island *Paper Weight*, which is the *9 to 5* one. We went to Tennessee, we were in Memphis, and we performed. And again, it was a really good audience. I think we did both plays during our stay there. It

was called the spring tour, which had to be cut short, because it was spring blizzard in Minneapolis. [laughs] And we were supposed to go to Green Bay, Wisconsin, but when we came from—we were in Chicago and then we went up to Green Bay, and we ran into an awful snowstorm, and someone says, "Well, do we want to—" no, no, Chicago. It was from Tennessee. We went to Ames, Iowa, on our way to Green Bay, Wisconsin, and we ran into a terrible storm. I was the coordinator of all the props and things, and I was the driver primarily of the van that had all of our stuff in it. And they were like, "Well, we need to try to make it to Green Bay." And then the snowstorm got worse, and we pulled over. We're in this diner trying to make up our minds if we were just going to drive straight to Chicago or go to Green Bay, and I said, "I'm not driving. Anybody else wants to drive, fine, but I am not going to fight this snow." And of course, there were folks who said, "Well, we're all going to earn money in Green Bay." "I'm not driving." So I was definitely the belligerent, colored girl who was not going to hold up her end of the bargain. And folks were kind of hostile towards me for a while. "I'm not, I'm just not. I don't think it's safe, and I'm not going to put myself out there." [laughs] So I had fixed a thing in the back of the van, I said, "I'm going to go lay down, you-all figure that out." And that's just what I did.

05-00:22:18

Cortez Todd: We didn't go to Green Bay and went into Chicago, so I forget, we hit—and then we also performed somewhere in Massachusetts, and this is vague in my memory. We had about five performances on tour. One of the places we went was, oh yeah, Amherst, Massachusetts, and someone said, "Oh yeah, these are the young lesbians who are putting this together. And okay, we know that they're going to feed us lentil soup and some other kind of hay and green leaves." And sure enough, we got there, and there was lentil soup and homemade bread. These young lesbians were just—they were so avant-garde, but they were so young, and we were a lot older than them. There was a lesbian couple in the company, and they were talking with each other in front of us and went, "Oh yeah, you know this and you know that?" "Oh yeah. Well, every lesbian in college right now is eating lentil soup and homemade bread." "Okay, can we stop by McDonald's?" [laughs] But that was [just some of the] banter that would go on. Oh dear. [moves camera]

05-00:23:52

Tewes: You're fine; I can see you and hear you.

05-00:23:54

Cortez Todd: Okay, I got a thing of low power.

05-00:23:57

Tewes: Oh, let's pause. [break in recording] Here we go. Okay, we are back from a break. Fatima, you were telling us about what the tour was like with the [Rhode Island] Feminist [Theatre].

05-00:24:07
Cortez Todd: Yeah, and the whole idea of the young lesbians with their lentil soup and homemade bread, but the stuff was good.

05-00:24:17
I was out of order with my memory of what places we hit. But when we were in Minneapolis, we got to perform at a theater called At the Foot of the Mountain, which was a feminist theater group. It was so fortifying and spiritually uplifting to be with a group of older women. I think they were all white, I don't remember any people of color, but there was a different sense about themself, a different sense and sensibility, so to speak. And everywhere we went, we had at least three-quarter full audiences, and people seemed to enjoy it. My family got to see me perform in Chicago, and we were performing at Second City, we used their theater. Yeah, yeah, wow! It felt good, because we got to stretch our legs, stretch our wings. We got good feedback from every audience we had, and people were just very, very generous with their gratitude, and we had a lot of good receptions. People liked to feed us, even if it is lentil soup and great homemade bread, yeah. It's certainly better for us than a bunch of other stuff we could have had.

05-00:25:54
Tewes: I'm sure. Well, thank you for sharing that. That gives me a good sense of the reach of this work and the networks that you're making across the country with other theater groups and even other feminists.

05-00:26:07
Cortez Todd: One thing that did make me sad, though, was when we got back to Providence we had to make a decision to close down the company, because funding was just not there. And I had caused them personally to lose money in a performance, because I wouldn't drive to get the van, but we had to shut down, so I don't know. It was right after that that I came back to New York, so I don't know where they are or what's going on now. And I actually saw one of the women on a train—I was going from Hartford to New York or from New York to Hartford, I forget—and she's now a lawyer. She went to law school.

05-00:27:02
Tewes: Yeah, that would be interesting to catch up with them.

05-00:27:05
Cortez Todd: Yeah.

05-00:27:07
Tewes: I want to mention something else you've done in your career, and that is the Mariposa Center for Spiritual Healing and Education, which I believe you started in 1982, and continues in some form today. Can you tell me about that work and what it entails?

05-00:27:29

Cortez Todd: That had grown in me directly after the Institute for Social Therapy and Justice. I made the connection for women's therapy and how women have been convinced of one thing or another in therapy that was really not self-defining. Tony's aunt, who raised him, she died, and I got a condolence card, and it was a statement by, I think, Sarah Poulos, P-o-u-l-o-u-s or o- or u-s or something. But it said, "[How do I become a butterfly?] I want to be a butterfly. Well, you have to give up being a caterpillar." And that became my mantra. If you want to be something, you have to give up something else. Being a caterpillar and being in a cocoon is just like women being bound and not being able to be free to fly. So I built a series of workshops called Learning to Fly—no, it wasn't *Learning to Fly*, that was a book. It's really embarrassing when you forget what you created yourself. It was about learning to fly, but that was not the motto of it, but it was encouraging women to find their wings.

05-00:29:28

And a lot of the work that I did with those folks was based on the Gestalt workshops, which was about being in the here and now, not judging anybody. Not making comments like, "Everybody does that." No, everybody does not do that. And, "You always do that, you always treat me that way." No, nobody ever always does anything. So how do you learn how to speak up for yourself? "Well, when you do that, it makes me feel this." So ownership of one's feelings is also a way of learning to fly and getting out of one's old pattern and one's old habits and just staying in your present. That what happened yesterday is not a prediction of what's happening today or tomorrow, just the here and now. That's what the Mariposa Center was about. And issues of or concepts of metaphysical Christianity, which is more—well, it really is about not judging, always being truthful with your emotions, not making nice, because it's polite. And if you can't be polite, because you feel that, then you just be quiet. Don't participate in something you don't think you can participate in, because you don't feel it's a safe environment for your feelings. And being able to identify all those places that are not safe for your feelings and looking to change them, relationships, love.

05-00:31:30

Single mothers and their relationships with their children. They're so preoccupied with working and putting food on the table and keeping a roof over their head that sometimes, those special times with their children. I'm guilty of it myself, because I was in college and I was also working a part-time job and getting my daughter from daycare, how do you pick dinner, got no money, all of this. And it's like, wait a minute, you got to find a time where you are just here and now with your child. Even if it's just fifteen minutes of bath time, let's have a bubble bath, just little things that will ultimately put you in a rhythm to grow to bigger things, but just little things. And not beating up on yourself, because you don't have more than fifteen minutes to give. Because women, we take on stuff and beat ourselves up and feel like we're less than and that we don't deserve all the things that everybody else has,

because we're women or we're women of color, in particular. "Well, this is what it is." No, this isn't what it is, you make what it is. And I'm still learning how. So it's a process, and that's what the Mariposa—because, yeah, you got to give up being a caterpillar. You want to be a butterfly, you got to give up those old ways and those cocoons.

05-00:33:19

Cortez Todd: And I've had some workshops over the years, and women—and I do a closed-eye imagery, and I walk them through an imagery thing. One of the imagery things is you close your eyes and think of yourself as a plant, any kind of plant, whether it's a tree or a grass or a flower, you decide what kind of plant you are. And then while people have their eyes closed, I ask them questions, "So what kind of soil are you in, does someone water you every day," all the things that come with taking care of a plant. "Are you getting this kind of care, and are you doing this for yourself?" Because you need to water your own self and you need to make sure you're standing in healthy soil. "Is where you are a healthy place for you to stand, stay in?" And then they would come out of it and talk about what they felt and who they were. One person actually had never had a plant in their house, went out and got a plant, so they could take care of it the same way they wanted to be taken care of. So that's my major success story that, yeah, they went out and got a plant so that they could keep exercising with themself by manifesting how they care for something outside of themselves. I'd like to do more workshops with that, we'll see.

05-00:35:06

Tewes: So that's been an ongoing—

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Cortez Todd: Yeah, and I've done individual therapy, as well, like a lot of couples therapy. There's a couple, a lesbian couple who are Indian, and so they had their whole culture on top of them. And then they had other stuff, because they were both brilliant in what they did and their jobs were very, very demanding. Their time therefore got competed for outside of their relationship and would pull them to other things. And so we had to work out: how do they manage their time, how do they manage their work, and how do they manage their feelings that had nothing to do with their partner but have to do with the work environment. And don't bring that shit home and drop it on anybody's head, but just working through a process, too. Finally, they got married and I got to go to their wedding. One of the women got inseminated, and she had twins, and the twins came in with a handicap. They got all the love and medical care and so forth, and the families really rallied around them and supported them. The little girls, they used to have to wear helmets, because their heads, their scalps had not formed with any strength, the bones were very soft. They had to wear helmets for a while when they were little, and now they don't. So they've grown as a family and come through a major, major trial, and they're still together and doing well.

05-00:37:06
Tewes: Oh, what a wonderful success story.

05-00:37:08
Cortez Todd: Yeah, they took me to an Indian restaurant, oh, a while back, some time ago, yeah.

05-00:37:15
Tewes: Hmm, that's a nice way to celebrate, I'll accept that.

05-00:37:19
Cortez Todd: Yeah. Me, too.

05-00:37:23
Tewes: I think that wraps up your time in New York, which was in the early to late eighties that you were back in New York. As we move forward into your time in Los Angeles, I actually thought I would take a moment and just ask you about being a mother. And this connects to some of the themes we were discussing already about what the women's movement does or does not do for women, and how this may or may not impact it. I'm just curious: how have you thought about your approach to family life and to motherhood?

05-00:38:04
Cortez Todd: Well, I've learned some very hard lessons about being a mom. One of the things when I was growing up, I was dressed very foo-foo and I had to always be proper and stay clean and, "Oh no, don't do that and don't do that and don't get dirty." And I decided that I wanted my daughter to get in the mud, that she could wear coveralls and construction shoes, and she can get dirty as she wants. Yeah, and she could wear a dress, she'd wear dresses sometimes, but I wanted her to be totally free to be a tomboy. It was an unfortunate decision on my part that I did not realize until much later when a friend of mine had a child who she let dress any way she wanted to, get dirty or stay clean, but her daughter liked fluff. Even if she was sitting in the mud, she liked her fluffy skirt, so she was totally—and my friend says, "You know, I used to see kids that look like that, and I'd go, Oh my God, how could they let them out of the house looking like that?" And she said, "But you know what, I now have a daughter like that who wants to be just like that."

05-00:39:39
And I did not give my daughter enough authority over herself, and I did not consult with her enough on stuff that she liked or wanted to do, because I just laid it all out for her. There was no discussion, there was no give and take. We can't do that to our daughters, we can't do it to our children, period. And my daughter is adopted, and she has some issues about that. She's also darker skinned, and she has some issues about that, because most of the folks in my family are fair. She felt like they didn't accept her or they were always looking at her in a disgusted way or looked at her with disdain. And I did not know all of that until she was older, and I realized I made a lot of mistakes.

05-00:40:53

Cortez Todd: I took her everywhere with me. When I moved into Hartford from the University of Connecticut and I was working at the YWCA, sometimes I'd take her with me to work, because they had some children stuff going on in the building. She enjoyed that, but then she didn't really enjoy waiting for me to finish work. And I might have made a bad choice on having her go there if only one part of her time she was going to enjoy and the other part was maybe not so great. So just learning how to pay attention to your children and giving them some autonomy, because if you don't give them autonomy, they will always be following somebody else, and I watched her do that. She's very accomplished now, and I'm very proud of everything that she does, but I have a thirteen-year-old grandson that I've never met, and she lives in Texas. Like I said, I'm very proud of her and I will always love her, but she chooses not to be in my life or have me in her life. And at one point, I learned some of this stuff later on how I could have been a better mom. I thought I was being a great mom, but I wasn't, I wasn't. I do know that she did enjoy being backstage while I was doing theater. And one Saturday morning, she was in her bedroom acting out one of the plays, and she was jumping from the bed to the [floor], "Oh, be born, be born!" That was Malcolm X, "Be born!" And, oh God. So she had moments of great joy, it wasn't all dismal, but I could have done better. That's my only regret.

05-00:43:18

Tewes: I appreciate you sharing that vulnerability. And thinking about another major decision in your life, the decision to move to Los Angeles in April of 1987. Can you tell me about why this big move for you and Tony—or for you, anyway, I should ask?

05-00:43:47

Cortez Todd: Well, he had been coming out to California for work on a fairly regular basis, and it didn't make sense for him to try to get an apartment and live out here and I stay back in New York, working at Mt. Sinai and NYWAR [New York Women Against Rape]. And even though that could take up my whole life, that was not being in a marriage, as far as I'm concerned. He did *Platoon*, he got *Platoon* when we were in New York. And then when he got back, he had to go to Los Angeles to do a TV show. And so stuff was coming up for him, and there were agents and people who were interested in him for his career. He said, "How would you feel about moving to LA?" "Okay, I can do whatever I do wherever I am." And so I moved out here, and that's what I did.

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I got a job at American Film Institute, and it was from somebody who I had worked with on stuff with New York. I had, and have, a very broad network of folks to do things, and they're all these women who I just adore, and we keep each other going, we keep each other working. Somebody will hear about something, "Oh, listen, did you know about this, did you know about that?" It was a relatively easy move for me, and I got a job almost instantly. So then we found an apartment, and then we found another apartment. And

then he got called back to Washington, DC, to do a play. So I got to come back to New York and visit my cousins and my family and then be with him in DC, and then I came back.

05-00:45:50

Cortez Todd: It was so funny, there was a newspaper article and it had me listed as a producer at the American Film Institute. They're like, "No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no." And I got harassed and teased about that a lot. But I loved my work. I was a film librarian, and I did a lot of distribution of the second-year students' films, and I would sell them to arts and entertainment [Arts and Entertainment A&E TV], and they'd have a chance at being broadcast. I would sell them to Canal 4 over in Europe. I had a great office all to myself that had—the office was divided into three areas. In one corner, there was an editing table, I mean, an old-fashioned editing table where folks could come in there with their films and slice and dice and put their films together. And then another table that was a worktable for doing mailings to try and get different films, give them attention, and then my desk. I had a window right by my desk, and I was on the ground floor, so it was just great.

05-00:47:09

And then because of what I was doing there, somebody knew the work that I was doing and got a reference from Jean Firstenberg, who was the director of the American Film Institute for a really long time. I got an interview with Women in Film, and then there was somebody else that they were interviewing. It was the first time Jean Firstenberg had ever called me or talked to me one-on-one and said, "You-all are interviewing somebody for this position for the events person or whatever for the festival?" I was like, "Yeah." And we had already decided to hire that woman, but I didn't tell her that. She says, "Well yeah, there are a lot of people who think that she should get that job." It was just watching the Hollywood network just take its stride. I said, "She's my favorite candidate, but I'll mention that to everyone else." And of course, we hired her, because she was the best candidate, but she also has good credentials in terms of her network. When you're working with the film festival like that, you want to have people that have networks and access to folks who can participate and support the festival. We weren't stupid cookies, and we hired her.

05-00:48:41

I wish I had realized that once I took the job at Women in Film, I couldn't come back to the American Film Institute. And that was only a four-month job, but I was so excited to do it that it was like, I didn't care. While I was there, at the end of my stay at Women in Film, we're wrapping stuff up, I was asked to speak. There was the Hollywood Women's Political [Committee in 1989]. They were all these industry women and directors and producers and actors, and they formed a march for women's rights. And Jesse Jackson was the main speaker and other people, and they asked me to speak, and I was like, "Okay." That's how I got into the reproductive rights stuff, because marching for women's rights was about reproductive rights.

05-00:49:49
Cortez Todd: So there were people there who asked me to get involved. They wanted to form a multicultural organization, and *Ms*. magazine or the MS Foundation had given them $50,000. [It was MS Foundation.] They gave it to this particular church where Rev. Ignacio Castuera was. It was at Hollywood Presbyterian. It was his task to form this group, and they would have the $50,000 to work off of, so I actually had a salary. Well, we volunteered to form the organization, and then in January, I officially became the executive director. And so I now had a budget and a salary to work with, to create the conference, and to curate this organization. But it came out of working at the American Film Institute and Women in Film, because these were all people that were reinforcing the work and backing us in our community activities. I got asked to speak at any number of situations, even for GLAAD, which is the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, so and I also did a lot of work. I've always had multiple jobs or responsibilities, because I was also doing demonstration work, clinic protection work with ACT UP. And ACT UP has the T-shirts that has the big splotch of blood on the shoulder; I still have my shirt up in the closet in a box. And so on Saturday mornings, I would go to clinic defense rallying and protest, and then I would get some of my friends to go. I even had my cousin, a guy, a gay male, who he said, "Well, I can't have a baby, but I can go support everybody else's right to do that or to not do that."

05-00:52:05
Tewes: Were these abortion clinics?

05-00:52:07
Cortez Todd: Yes, yeah. And the radicals against it—we grew up nonviolent, but we made very strong barriers to protect the women who were trying to come into the clinic, and we would tell them, "Go home." I had boomboxes that had all kinds of Bob Marley stuff and Bob Dylan and Joan Baez just blasting all over the place and some very early rap, just being a presence there. So yeah, that was just something else that was going on.

05-00:52:52
Tewes: That is really interesting, Fatima, that there's this connection that you've made. As you mentioned, the networks overlap in many ways for the Multicultural Alliance for Reproductive Freedom. Is there anything else you want to say about that particular work, that reproductive work, and why that became more important to you in later years?

05-00:53:18
Cortez Todd: Well, I got to be part of some documentaries talking about—there's one called *Choice*, and I was traveling to—I forget where I was traveling to. Well, my Mother was in Virginia, anyhow—oh, I was traveling to Atlanta to be part of the—it used to be called the Black Women's Health [Project] Caucus, and now it's called something else [the Black Women's Health Imperative], and I forget the name, but they were having a conference in Atlanta. I had been at my Mother's in Virginia, and I was driving, and I drove south to North

Carolina and hooked up with this film crew that was doing a documentary, and they interviewed me for the film *Choice*. And then I left there and I went to Atlanta and then came back to LA and brought all the information, because this was all about—the whole trip was about reproductive rights and meeting with different people and getting information. Loretta Ross was the head of the Black Women's Health [Project] Caucus, I think it became, and she was actually one of the women along with Nkenge Touré, who were the heads of the DC Rape Crisis Center. That when I got the job in Hartford with the Sexual Assault Crisis Center at the YWCA, they sent me to Washington, DC, to meet with those two to get a sense of what they were doing in communities of color in Washington, DC. And then we stayed in contact, and then when Loretta went to Atlanta to do the Health [Project] Caucus, we were still in contact. I didn't lose and I have not lost my network connections, because they became like friends and family, so to speak.

05-00:55:34

Cortez Todd: Let me just go back to Hartford for a second. One of the things that I did while I was working at Sexual Assault Crisis Center was I volunteered at the Amistad House, which was a home for girls that had been in trouble with the law. And at that house was a woman named Valencia Taft, and she and I worked together. I did a lot of Gestalt group activities with them, and I had them on the floor being—choose to be an animal, choose to be a plant. Not at the same time; we would do plants one time and a lot of imagery and do animals another time and do domestic animals and do wild animals. And just to get them to come out of their antagonistic shell and talk with them about stuff. She was also a counselor with them. So that went back to the late seventies, and we are still in contact. We were out of contact for a while, but we're back in contact, and it's really—because we used to do road running to different events and activities, like the march for women's rights that was in DC. I don't do marches anymore, they take too much out of me, and I can't march and walk and stand that long. And that was layers and layers and layers and layers all at the same time.

05-00:57:20

From NYWAR, we organized a group to go to the march for women's rights in Washington, DC, [March for Peace, Freedom, and Equality in 1983, which was the anniversary of the March on Washington]. I was the driver of this one woman's car, and we were staying at this house, and I drove all the way. Nobody else drove, and there were four of us in the car. When we got to the house where we were staying, the owner of the car, a white, Jewish, liberal feminist took the bedroom. I had the couch, as if there was no question of her right to have the bedroom. And the other two women were going, "Well, wait a minute, how does she get to go in there? We need to make a choice on who's going to share the bed in there or what." She had the bedroom to herself, and I'm like, "Yeah, well, you better drive back to New York yourself, too." But I was the best driver, so it's like—yeah.

05-00:58:42
Cortez Todd: But anyhow, the whole idea of networking and meeting people of like minds, and even if you don't always agree on everything, there's still that thread of commitment to human rights. So you do one thing, you have your job, your straight job, you have your outside activity. You do anything you can in order to—or at least *I* do everything I can to impact a community of color in whatever I do, whether it's with imagery or the distribution of materials or just the networking. And I guess that's something I was just born with, it kind of comes.

05-00:59:28
So yeah, now we're out in California and doing all the reproductive work. And then that's when I ultimately had to leave there, because they were doing the Northern California Women in Film Festival. So I moved up to San Francisco, and I was there for about a year. I actually did two festivals and I was—yeah, I was just showing stuff that irritated everybody and stuff that people loved. I actually premiered a film called *Grand Isle* by a woman director who did *Pet Sematary,* I forget what her name is. [Mary Lambert.] But *Grand Isle* was a totally different—it was a romance in Grand Isle, which is just off the coast of Louisiana, so it was very much removed from *Pet Sematary*. But again, it was a woman's view of this particular kind of life, and it's like, okay, that worked. Why can't I remember her name? Oh, I'm so embarrassed.

05-01:00:47
Tewes: Not a problem, we'll figure it out later—

05-01:00:49
Cortez Todd: Okay—

05-01:00:51
Tewes: —it's easy—

05-01:00:51
Cortez Todd: —I'll have to go look it up. Ew, I'll just have to go look it up.

05-01:00:55
Tewes: But the point is you were seeing and participating in some big, new works coming out—

05-01:01:04
Cortez Todd: Yes. Okay, after that, well, Tony and I had had some separation issues, and we separated for a while, and then we got back together and then we separated again. And at this point, we're good friends, but we live separately. But right now, he's very ill, and I'm at his place a lot working to try to help him get through his thing. But moving on along, when I came back, I—

05-01:01:52
Tewes: Well, you went to New York in '94 for the Gay Games.

05-01:01:55

Cortez Todd: Yes, but before the Gay Games, um—oh God. While I was in San Francisco, I met Peter Bratt and Benjamin Bratt, and they were doing this film *Follow Me Home*. Peter had written it and was directing it, and it was going to be shot down in South California out on the reservation, the Morongo Reservation. So I was the production coordinator, [one of two], for that, but I had met them in San Francisco and maintained that contact, and then it manifested itself while I was in LA. And that was a great time, and it was a really good movie. It was about these four artists who were graffiti artists, actually, who were on their way to Washington, DC, to paint the White House black, [laughs] and their journey. They didn't get to DC, but the journey was the story. I saw it in San Francisco, and it's a film that needed to have its own life. But Peter maintained his work as a writer and a director, and he did my family—oh God, yeah, *Mi Familia*. And I was back and forth, because I was doing some stuff in San Francisco with the Mission [Cultural] Center, which my friend, Barbara Bustillos, was the [executive director] in the Mission District, and that's how all of that meshed. And that's when I met Eddie Olmos when he did *American Me*, and it premiered in San Francisco, and so we're all there and at that film.

05-01:04:14

Cortez Todd: Actually, when I did the speech for Hollywood Women's Political [Committee] for marching for women's lives, Edward James Olmos was there, also, so I got to see him and talk to him. And so we'd run into each other every now and then.

05-01:04:35

I did the film, and then I came back and I went to the Gay Games in '94. And again, it was a friend of mine, [Chezia Carraway], who I had done work with, with NYWAR, and we used to do speaking engagements and teaches this training in sexual assault, survivor information, and coming out of trauma, and all of that. We did it up at Jacobi Hospital in the Bronx, and we alternated doing the classes for like ten weeks. We looked a lot alike, and we confused the class, because they weren't sure sometimes who was there. "Oh, you're not Chezia, you're Fatima, okay." And then when she was there, they go, "Fatima, no, no, no, you're Chezia."

05-01:05:29

She had a contact with this woman on the board of the Gay Games. They were looking for somebody to do the public relations. I didn't have to audition or interview or anything. I had a conversation with the director and explained what I had done, and got the job. And they flew me [to] New York, and I actually lived on her couch for the entire time I was in New York, and it was a great time. There were 11,000 gay and lesbian—and some straight—athletes participating in the games all around the city. It was my responsibility to do the eighteen receptions and create a theme for eighteen receptions for over a period of eleven days, because that was the length of the games. And so I did theater stuff, we had art galleries, and I had amassed a group of volunteers and

just had a grand time. And I got a pullout put in the *Village Voice*, which had the entire list of activities, receptions, and competitions. And so the *Village Voice*, I was at the meeting and they agreed to host that pullout that we wanted to have there. And then we did a thing in the *New York Times*, but it got pushed to the back, because of O.J. Simpson issues. He took up all the press that we had. Oh my God, this is our opening, and he's on the highway. And that was very enriching.

05-01:07:28

Cortez Todd: And then I came back to LA and got involved with—am I getting out of context—doing *No Loans Today*, which was a documentary that I was a co-producer on. That was in the same time that I had just finished the Gay Games. And that was a film about peripheral banking in what they call non-banking neighborhoods. That people don't have enough money to have a savings account, so why would the bank be there, and they didn't want to be a check-cashing thing. So it was a pawnshop that they served as a bank. Folks would come in, they would cash their checks for them for a small fee, but they would still cash their checks. They didn't have to go all the way Downtown or across town to go to a bank. That the bank was going to give them a hard time if they didn't have the right identification and they don't have an account. And if you don't have an account, you can't cash a check here. To go to a regular check-cashing place is just turning over your check to them. And he would also lend money to folks who come in, and he wouldn't lend more than $25, he said, "Because I don't want to lend more than they're ever going to be able to pay to buy their stuff back. I'm here to help you get over a moment and be able to exist in your next moments." And people in the community really respected him.

05-01:09:21

There were a lot of lines in the community on gang issues, and some of the folks that we interviewed, one woman had lost her son to a gang. And we got taught what the gang graffiti was on the walls or some buildings and what it meant, and you avoided going there. And then there were a number of people I was missing. I was not able to do an interview that I wanted to do with this one person in this restaurant, and so I saw people across the street in the park, I just walked across the street. I said, "We're doing a film about this," da, da, da. There was one woman there, and they were drinking their wine, and they were talking, and they said, "Yeah, sure, come on, we'll talk to you." And [the pawnbroker] said, "Why did you go over there? That's a different gang, I can't protect you over there." It's like, "No, because we're fine, we're fine." The woman, she had been on meth, and she got off and she was an alcoholic, and she lost her kids, and she was really, really struggling to come back to a normal life, and so she let us really tell her story. We got to tell a number of people's stories in the documentary.

05-01:10:42

Tewes: Fatima, how did you get involved in producing films, what led you to this turn?

05-01:10:49

Cortez Todd: Well, I produced the rap rock music video "5 Out of 5" for NYWAR, the kids' video on sexual assault. I produced the plays that we did in Connecticut for the Afro-American Cultural Center, so I had been producing. And this woman, [Lisanne Skylar], she was part of Northern California Women's Film and Television, and we became friends, and I produced those film festivals. Producing is producing, so I was her co-producer, and we actually got accepted and shown at Sundance [Film Festival]. So I got to go to Sundance, where all the movie stars and producers and everybody is, and I met great, great people. And again, there were some networks. Actually, one of the directors that was there, his name is Stephen Williams, and I didn't realize it at the time, but after that, he had a film at Sundance and his brother, Robert Williams, was the star of the film. It was a good film, a Canadian film called *Soul Survivor*. And he actually was the producer and the director for *Lost*, and I didn't know that. I wasn't a great fan of watching the show, because I got tired of them being lost. [laughs] I only found out much later, Oh, Stephen did that, oh, I didn't know that. And then he's done that, he's done a bunch of other stuff and been very, very successful, so I'm like, Wow. But these are the people that I met at Sundance, including the woman who was the lead actor—[Rena Owens]—in *Once Were Warriors*, the film out of New Zealand. She's Māori, and Māori's are in New Zealand. And we hung out, we all trudged through the snow, because it was a lot of snow in Park City.

05-01:13:12

And then I came back to LA, and I had to get a straight job. I was floating for a while trying to get some things off the ground that just didn't quite do it. I had been involved from 1992 with an organization called Giving Back Corporation, and they had done toast/roasts of older African American performers, directors, or whoever was in the arts who had never quite gotten their props. And one of the people was Virginia Capers, who was—can we do a pause? [break in recording]

05-01:14:12

Tewes: We are back from a break, and you were going to continue telling a story about your work here.

05-01:14:17

Cortez Todd: Okay. Now again, I'm going to backtrack for a second. When I was at the American Film Institute, one of the cinematography students, his mother was Virginia Capers. So he introduced me to her, and she and I remained friends until she passed. Well, during one of the first Giving Back toasts/roasts, she was chosen to be the honoree. We had little to no money to do this event, and it was scholarship raising. We were raising money for scholarships, book scholarships for students going [to their] first year in college. And I did all the artwork and everything else for the souvenir program book, and it was all done by hand and xeroxed everything, and then we gave it to the printer who then just made all the copies. That became one of my skills. Well, when I was in San Francisco, I created the poster for the festival and the souvenir program

book for that festival, so I learned back in San Francisco that was one of my likes and a skill. She stayed in contact with Giving Back Corporation. She stayed in contact with Giving Back Corporation.

05-01:15:51

Cortez Todd: And then every year, every spring, we did somebody new, and we raised money. At this point, we have done about a thousand scholarships or over a thousand scholarships since—and it's still going on. Because I did some of the recruitment for who's going to get the scholarships, and one of my students who was homeless and he was living on and off with the woman who was the director of the Boys and Girls Club out in Compton, I became his mentor. She took him South, and he went to Morehouse [College] to see about going to school there. But Pomona College gave him a full four-year scholarship, because while he was homeless, he was maintaining a 4.0 grade average. His brother had been killed in a gang war, and so he was hiding out from the gang. He didn't want to be in a gang, so he had a lot of people around him to hide him, take care of him, house him, and help him get through school. And so he went and he was studying. He was a math and science guy at Pomona [College], which I didn't know was one of the leading colleges for math and science. And he's now a PhD, and I'm just so proud of him, because he really made his way and earned every bit of everything that he got. He got his PhD from Howard University, so he just did us proud.

05-01:17:50

So there have been people—Ed Cambridge; Ruby Dee; Della Reese; Woodie King, who did the Black theater company in New York. Woodie King, phew. Every year, we honored people and raised money for scholarships. And we put the kids on the board, so I said, "This is your organization, and you have to learn how to make this work." They've done a really good job. We have a principal of a high school, and another student wound up being a captain in the Navy. They have excelled. And at the same time, Nichelle Nichols, we honored. It's been just a really good experience, because the kids got to meet—we'd have the breakfast for the honoree with the kids, so they got to see and be in the presence and have conversations with this person that was part of their African American history.

05-01:19:16

So I did that for a while, and then I took a totally straight job for ten years, and then retired. I got sick, I had issues, but I have continued to be an activist—[laughs]

05-01:19:39

Tewes: Well—

05-01:19:39

Cortez Todd: —whatever I'm doing. I'm part of a diabetes group, I'm part of the Civil Rights Veterans group. I've gone back and forth to Louisiana to be with the family that adopted me and are still doing work, and they're working with the

NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]. You just don't lose your passion.

05-01:20:07

Tewes: I love hearing you say that. And one of the questions I was going to ask you, is if you see a throughline in the work that you have chosen to do over the years.

05-01:20:18

Cortez Todd: Well, yes. When I was at UConn, my cultural anthropology teacher and my advisor was Bernard Magubane, and I think I mentioned him. They got him out of South Africa, and he was able to bring his wife and his kids to this country. And of course, some of them went back to do the work, and he actually ultimately went back and did more work. It was after [Nelson] Mandela was released he was able to go back, and he actually died there on his homeland, and his wife was there, as well. She was a surgeon nurse, a surgical room nurse. She was really just good people.

05-01:21:12

Well, what I learned from him was that there are four elements in the United States that prove that this is a neocolonial [country], that people of color neighborhoods are neocolonial environments, because there are four elements. One, they're educated by people who don't look like them and don't live in the community. The businesses have people from outside the community coming in, making money, and taking that money outside to their communities. The police are primarily white and treat folks like they're in a jail, in some ways, and are not part of the community. And even though they are African American police officers, that they have some of the same attitudes—[also] the police and fire department—on how people in that community or those communities need to be treated. And the other issue is that communities of color are administered to in health issues by outsiders. So if you look at all of those elements, you're looking at neocolonialism within the boundaries of the United States, because that's how Britain treated the other countries that they colonized. And when you look at that, what you want to do is to have some impact on changing those four elements. So the communities can be self-sufficient and be able to have a sense of pride in their community that the money, everything is not being taken out. The community is not being bled dry, either mentally, emotionally, educationally, health wise, finances, all of that. And for me, that is putting us in a global context with all the countries around the world who have been colonized and are still being treated as colonies, even though they may have their independence. They don't really have their independence, because all of those elements are coming up from outside.

05-01:23:43

Tewes: So the throughline you're seeing is thinking about social justice as a global effort, and the work that you're doing at small community levels having a larger impact, being part of a larger fight?

05-01:23:55
Cortez Todd: Exactly, very well said.

05-01:24:00
Tewes: [laughs] Just clarifying. Yeah, I have been struck by reading through your résumé—and frankly, the overlapping work, as you mentioned, is amazing—by just how much of this does seem to fit to your passion for social justice work. We only have a few things left on that list. Do we want to finish those off today or stop here? How are you feeling?

05-01:24:29
Cortez Todd: I'm tired.

05-01:24:31
Tewes: Okay, then this feels like a good place for us to end. Do you have any final thoughts, Fatima, for today?

05-01:24:39
Cortez Todd: No, right now, I'm—I get these waves of sadness about my Mother's passing. And I've completed most of the stuff that I need to do, and I'm headed to Virginia to finish up her business and have the services. It's very exhausting, and I've had to deal with some issues within the family and also some issues of power dynamics and real estate management.

05-01:25:22
Tewes: Sure, that never ends. Okay, well, let's allow you space to work on that and process. But thank you for your time today, I really appreciate it.

Interview 6: July 3, 2024

06-00:00:05
Tewes: This is a sixth interview with Fatima Cortez Todd for the Women's Movements in the United States Oral History Project, in association with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. The interview is being conducted by Amanda Tewes on July 3, 2024. Ms. Cortez Todd joins me in this remote interview from Los Angeles, California, and I am in Walnut Creek, California. Thank you, Fatima, for joining me yet again for another conversation.

06-00:00:33
Cortez Todd: Oh, you know I enjoy these.

06-00:00:35
Tewes: I'm glad to hear that, because we're learning so much about you and your life and perspectives here. I want to pick up the conversation that we had last time about your work history, particularly after you moved to Los Angeles. And one thing we noted was your work at Los Angeles Harbor College, a program called "Kids Go to College," I think around 2001 to 2004. Can you tell me more about what that work entailed?

06-00:01:08
Cortez Todd: I had students from first and second grade, third and fourth and fifth. I had basically four different groups of kids going all the way from first grade to high school to the twelfth grade, and it was a great, great time. I got to choose what I did in the classroom under banners of public speaking, learning about business, study of literature, and current events. In those, my favorite was how to teach business ethics to these kids, and I encouraged them, I said, "Okay, we're going to do this. You're going to have a budget, and you're going to separate out what you need and figure out how much you have to spend on everything. And included in that is the issue of philanthropy. You have to figure out from a young age how to give back and support organizations and things that are important to you and to your community. And how you participate in the community, which includes voting, all of the things that make you a whole human being." One of the kids picked Cisco as their stock to follow, and of course, that kid made a lot of money over the summertime. And I'm like, "What did you know that I don't know?" And he said it was just the sound of the company was interesting to him, and I'm like, "Okay, well, whatever works."

06-00:03:25
And then my other favorite one was public speaking. I worked with "Jabberwocky," the poem by Lewis Carroll. One of the kids who introduced himself in the very beginning said, "My name is So-and-So, and I have ADHD—" no, "I've been diagnosed with ADHD, and so sometimes I'm difficult." And I'm like, "Okay, we'll see." He memorized the entire poem "Jabberwocky," and he said, "I memorized it, I'd like to share it." And I'm like, "Fine." So he got up in the front of the classroom and went through the

whole thing, and everybody gave him applause, and he sat down, and I never had any issue with him. Now, I wanted to say, "You better go back to those doctors that say you have ADHD. They're just not interesting you enough to keep you occupied." Kids in some classrooms are just warehoused. They're warehoused, they take a certain number of exams, and then they go to the next. They're pushed on to the next grade, and they don't really have any growth. That kid had some growth. One other kid who was—when I gave them their evaluations, he said, "Wow, nobody has ever thought that I was smart." And I'm like, "I don't know why." He said, "Well, they think that I'm just loud and boisterous." I'm like, "Yeah, okay, it doesn't mean you're not smart."

06-00:05:19

Cortez Todd: And the other part of that was teaching debate as a way for conflict resolution, so teaching somebody how you can have a discussion on an issue without getting into a fight. It was the girls against the guys, and they chose it to be that way. And the topics were gangs, whether you join a gang or not, how you feel about how boys behave, how you feel about how girls behave. And then I had them learn how to score the debate, and those kids were really hard on the folks that were up there debating. The point was they could not answer back; they had to take the criticism and the suggestion. So just it became an environment in which to express oneself and be able to express oneself and not get angry, because somebody else has a different opinion, that everybody's opinion has some value. Whether you agree with it or not is not the issue, it's the right that you have these opinions. And the first and second graders were really good; they were just excellent for their age. The other folks were good, because they were good, but the little ones, for them to key in and pick up what to do, it just made my day.

06-00:07:01

Tewes: Yeah. Was the point of this program to offer kids an opportunity to see themselves in college, or was this just supplementary summer education?

06-00:07:15

Cortez Todd: I think it was the fact that they were at LA Harbor College, and they were there every morning from eight o'clock until three o'clock. They felt very grown up, because they had to go from my room to another room, take breaks, bathroom breaks, lunch break, all that kind of stuff. They just had a certain carriage about themselves that was very grown up. And we also published an anthology; I can't get away from newspaper kind of stuff. We published an anthology for two of the years. And one of the kids, we had read the Preamble to the Constitution, and he wrote his own version of the Preamble to the Constitution, which was basically, "I have a right to do this, this, and this. And when that is not happening, then as a community, we have a right to change things, and we have to change things, and so we have to encourage each other to vote." I was so proud of him.

06-00:08:40

Cortez Todd: There was another one that talked about—oh, talked about having a brother and not always appreciating his brother. But when he started thinking about his opinions and his brother's opinions, then they became more able to talk with each other and disagree and agree, and they like that. There was a certain amount of going to college. And then they weren't going to so-and-so elementary school or so-and-so high school, they were going to so-and-so college, and that gave them a little oomph, I think.

06-00:09:31

Tewes: I like that. Another venture that you took up was working with the Village Theater at Lucy Florence as the artistic director in 2007 to 2009, and you were producing plays as part of that. Can you tell me more about that work and why that was important to get back into theater?

06-00:09:55

Cortez Todd: Well, I used to go to the Lucy Florence Theatre to see different productions. That was a fifty-two-seat house that was also attached to a cultural center with art exhibits, and then another part that was a store with different clothing and jewelry—Afrocentric clothing and jewelry. And it was just a really cool place to be. So it was in Leimert Park, which is a middle-class, African [American] community in Los Angeles and a pretty solid community. A lot of homeowners, a lot of single-family homes, and some apartment buildings, but a lot of single-family homes, so it was a real community. It's gone through some changes now, and there's a lot of gentrification going on, but it's still pretty fairly solid.

06-00:10:53

And I was in one production, and I really liked being there and performing. And then I had the opportunity to produce a piece by a woman who I had known for a number of years, and we reconnected, because she was now out here in LA. And so her name is Rose Weaver and her production was *Menopause Mama*, and that was a one-woman show about women in menopause. So I got to produce that, which means I created the poster for it, the cards, the mail-out cards, the cards we put up there to just distribute to let people know when it was happening, and making sure that she had everything she needed. And doing some directing, like just saying, "I think you might want to change doing it that way to doing it this way." We had a really good working relationship, and a lot of good rehearsals, and then excellent performances. I forget how many performances we had, but we had a pretty good crowd for all of them.

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Oh, my husband really—I said, "I want you to do a play there." And so he and this other guy, they agreed to do *The Island*, which is Athol Fugard. Again, I was producing, and I wasn't directing, because they had a guy that they wanted to direct it. And it's like, Okay, well, I'm going to produce, but I can still let the director know what my vision is, as well. And so I got all the set

stuff to create, and I created it. Oh God, I forget. I had a slideshow that was on before the show started and then I had a couple of slides that came on in the middle of the production. And then I did all the sound effects and the music that was the preshow music. So I had a pretty big hand in that, and again, I made the poster, and it's big. I forget how big, but it was big, 24x30, I think it was. I did it on Microsoft Publisher, and I printed out all the panels and then put it on a [foamcore] board and, oh, I was very proud of it. And then I did another poster for—there was a two play—two one-acts, and I was in one of the one acts, and then there was another act. The person who wrote the one act I was in, he directed; and I directed the second piece that we did, which he also wrote. So they were two plays by the same person, Albert Cowart. He's a playwright. He was a professor, but he's now retired, but he's still a playwright.

06-00:14:25

Cortez Todd: And these are two very interesting pieces and so I did the poster for that. I got permission to use a painting that one of the artists, who had contributed art to Lucy Florence, and it was hanging in there. And I'm like, "I want to use this. Can I have permission to use that?" And they gave me permission, and I used that. I was really free to do so much stuff that I wanted. Some of the performances, when they were on Sunday afternoons, we'd actually have a meal. There'd be a buffet after and then we had a wine tasting event after one of the other plays. Well, after *The Island*, actually, we had a wine tasting situation. So I got to just create all kinds of stuff and, like I said, I had a great time doing it.

06-00:15:31

Tewes: Speaks to your artistic energy, as well. I like that you had that opportunity again.

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Cortez Todd: And the many levels on which I think at the same time. [laughs]

06-00:15:42

Tewes: Three-dimensional chess here, Fatima. [laughs]

06-00:15:44

Cortez Todd: Yes, absolutely.

06-00:15:49

Tewes: I think the last professional connection we wanted to mention for you was briefly The Don Cornelius Foundation. You were executive director from January 2013 to May 2017. What was this foundation surrounding, what was the issue at heart?

06-00:16:08

Cortez Todd: Suicide prevention and suicide awareness. Don Cornelius committed suicide on February 2, 2012. As it so happened, Tony Cornelius, his son, and I had been friends since he was at the American Film Institute in 1989. So we had

been friends, and every now and then I would call him. And ironically, I would call him when something traumatic was going on in his life. I called him one time and said, "Hey, you want to go to church, go to Della Reese's church tomorrow?" And he said, "Yes." And then I later found out that that was the same weekend that he and his wife had separated, and she had moved out. On February third—I think it was February third, because I think it was a day after he had found his father at his house—and I called him, and I said, "How are you doing?" He said, "My father just committed suicide." And I was like, "Oh my." He says, "Hey, I got to call you back." And I'm like, "Okay."

06-00:17:27

Cortez Todd: And when he called me back, he wanted me to help him write a response that could be publicly released on his father's suicide and on the issue of suicide prevention. Stevie Wonder had actually told him he needed to start a foundation, so he says, "I want to write something about creating this foundation." And so he also gathered a number of people, and we became the founders of the foundation. And because I'd had a lot of experience in 501(c)(3) and foundation and the board and all that, people trusted what I had to say. And then he went ahead and he got a lawyer, and I said, "You got to do this, we got to do this. And then if we want to have this 501(c)(3) fast, we got to fast track it, but this is what you're going to have to do. And you're going to have to spend some money to do all of this," because he's kind of tight, and I said, "This is what you have to do."

06-00:18:40

We had a lot of support from Danny Bakewell, who was the owner and publisher of the *Chronicle* in Leimert Park, in the African American community. And I knew him from other previous foundation works with the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy and some of the work that we did with the National Network of Women's Funds, because we all were interconnected with what we were doing and things that we thought about and could share with everybody else. And so we got incorporated, we got the 501(c)(3), and at the same time, we were asked to do different workshops. We did a workshop with the air traffic controllers and the federal officers at the airports, because of the great number of suicides in both of those groups, in the air traffic controllers and with some of the federal marshals involved in the air traffic stuff, as well as regular federal air marshal business. And just because it's mostly men talking about how—like Don Cornelius had a very manly presence, and clearly he didn't feel like he had somebody to talk to or could go to talk to anybody. Or therapy was not something he saw as part of his life, which might have saved his life, but you know how men tend to keep things bottled up. I would talk with them about not having shame in having feelings, and that they could share. If you see one of your coworkers looking down, maybe you put your hand on their shoulder and say, "You okay?" and being able to talk about it, creating an opportunity for dialogue.

06-00:21:04
Cortez Todd: And we started building a network with other groups, like there was the National Alliance on Mental Illness, there was one in Leimert Park. And then we had a contact with the head of the Los Angeles National Association for Mental Illness that has the Out of the Darkness Day, which is a march once a year to highlight—we had speakers and a march to highlight the issue of suicide prevention. And we happened to be able to be part of the Soul Train Cruise, which was initiated in 2012 so that we were going on the cruise, and we will present information there about suicide prevention. I designed a bracelet, it was one of those big-band rubber band kind of thing for suicide. It says, "I am the face of suicide prevention," which means all of us own responsibility for encouraging people in our communities to talk about issues, that you don't have to die kind of thing. And so I was able to go on five cruises and having a platform to talk about suicide prevention.

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And then we just came to a disagreement about some stuff, and I said, "I can't do this anymore, so this is in your hands." And I haven't spoken to Tony Cornelius since May of 2017, because it became a very serious issue of respect for me. And I had introduced him to the national organization, of which he ultimately became a board [member]. They invited him to become a board member. And when I saw that, I wanted to say a lot of things and I didn't, and I'll leave it at that.

06-00:23:34
Tewes: Got it. But it sounds like you were able to do some really interesting work at the time you were there.

06-00:23:39
Cortez Todd: Yes, yes. I don't back off from the solid stuff that I created that carries on without my presence.

06-00:23:54
Tewes: I think that's part of the legacy that we're going to continue to talk about the rest of our session here. Because in the time we have left, I want to think about reflections on various areas of your life. And one such area we've talked about in bits and pieces, but I want to give you more space to discuss spirituality and its importance in your life. We mentioned your upbringing with Catholicism and in school. I think you'd mentioned that you'd studied or been interested in Sunni Islam, and then of course, you attended the Understanding Principles for Better Living Church with Rev. Della Reese for a while, [1997 to 2002, at least]. Can you, I suppose, just tell me about your spirituality journey and what has remained important for you over the years?

06-00:24:47
Cortez Todd: Oh God, okay. I have to think for just a second here how I want to go about this. Catholicism was not my choice, and when I graduated from high school, I was no longer in a Catholic education environment, so I was done. When I went South, I went to primarily Baptist churches, and I really loved the feeling

that I had in those churches. But I wasn't necessarily in total agreement with some of the beliefs, especially the role of women and the issues of reproductive freedom. So when my first husband and I came back to New York, we were clearly followers of Malcolm X, and because he was a Sunni Muslim, we converted to Islam. And he changed his name, and I changed my first name, but I wasn't changing my last name, Cortez, I was never going to leave that. But I took really what was given to me as an Islamic version of Catherine, which was my birth name, and it had the same meaning as Fatima. And so that's who I have been since 1967, is Fatima.

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Cortez Todd: But then I got really tired of the women in the mosque being in the back and the men being up front when we went to services. And while there were things that I believed in, in terms of the brotherhood of men—*men*—brotherhood of humanity, and so I left that. I wasn't anything for a long time until I was with my husband and we were living in Hartford. This was after college, and we're living in Hartford. And I hadn't really had any kind of manifested spiritual behavior or belief, but I've always had a very Indigenous spiritual path that I've walked. My grandmother, who's Native American and Dutch and an African American in there somewhere, because I know where she was raised. She was raised among African Americans, so she could not have been all-white or all-Native American, and even though she could pass for white, that was the irony of the thing. And it was about respect for the Earth, respect for other people, other people's feelings, other people's space, how you carry yourself with a certain amount of respect. But I always believed there was a supreme being, so that was it. And having those kinds of beliefs of the rights of everybody, from a little girl; my grandmother always encouraged that.

06-00:28:31

And I have a very diverse family, and wherever we were, it was about not judging people on how they looked or whether they had some illness or anything that was quote, unquote "out of order." And to just honor and to honor my elders, and to honor the world, to honor everyone around the world. And of course, they would tell you, "If you're not going to eat that, think of all the starving children in China or all the starving children in India." So I grew up going, "I'll eat everything I'm supposed to eat, but don't fill my plate up. Just give me enough that I eat so that I don't have to waste anything."

06-00:29:18

I think when I was sexually assaulted and had to have an abortion, and the priest was involved in whether or not I would go to a home for unwed mothers, and then I had to go back and lie to him and say I was no longer pregnant, and then he asked, "Did you have any kind of a procedure to end the pregnancy?" "Oh no, no, my period just started. And so it was a false reading, it was a false pregnancy report." So I wasn't really hanging out in church after that. Even though I was in a Catholic school for elementary and then for high school, I just was not there, because I felt guilty that I had lied to the priest and had to lie to the priest. So it was very confusing.

06-00:30:14

Cortez Todd: So after the whole Islamic side and then being in Hartford, and Tony was away at the [National Theater Institute] down in Waterford, my daughter's babysitter had all of her grandkids and some of the neighborhood kids, and they would all go to church with her, and they would sing in the choir. She'd take them to choir practice, because the adults had choir practice and then part of that was the children's choir practice. So it gave her an outlet to do something, my daughter, an outlet to do something else. And then of course, every time the children sang, I went to services. And I found myself crying in the services when they would sing, because the music just hit my spirit. It just hit me, so I was like, Okay, if I'm going to hear some music in a church, I'm going to cry, and I'm not going to be embarrassed by it. That's how that started, just that feeling in my gut or in my spirit that I knew I was being touched. And because I was being touched, I was like, Let me just check out some more of the stuff. And Tony's aunt, she was not a going-to-church religious woman, but she was a religious woman. She followed the Bible and she followed, again, the same precepts that my grandmother had about respecting other people and following the Ten Commandments, so to speak. That was really it.

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And then it wasn't until I came out here and had been out here for quite some time I went to Della's church. I had heard about it, and I finally found it in 1997. And for like five years, I was at church every Sunday, every Wednesday evening for prayer, and classes that Della would teach, I was there. What I understood was that she came out of Unity, and that's metaphysical Christianity. And I can't really explain metaphysical Christianity other than to say it was about, in the Gestalt way, being in the here and now and not carrying anybody else's baggage but your own. And knowing the expression, "God willing and the creek don't rise." And Della's position was, God is always willing. And if God is willing, it doesn't matter if the creek rises. And how to live with understanding the principles of God, of a supreme being and how do you use your language. If we consider that all God is, is us, and that we are the embodiment of God's spirit.

06-00:33:57

So you listen to that God voice inside of yourself. It's like when you're going somewhere and you're about to do something, maybe you shouldn't be doing, and you start to go, Hmm, I don't think so. You need to follow that, because that's your God voice keeping you out of trouble. Getting words like "I need"—no, you *desire* something, but you don't *need* something, because ultimately, all you really need is God. Because God will give you everything that you ask for, you just be getting very clear about what it is you ask for. So for example, you don't just say, "Oh God, I want some money." Della would say, "Yeah, thirty-seven cents is money, but that's not what you need. And you desire to have more money to do more with your life, afford a better housing and whatever you need to purchase." And the clarification on using words like you don't "hate" anybody, you don't hate. You don't even use the word "hate"

in your language, because to hate something is to become a hateful person. So you have to be clear, "I do not like that," and that's as far as you need to go on hate, because you don't need to use that word. So being careful with how you speak, because it comes from inside your spirit, and you want to help your spirit be as enriched as possible. She was an incredible teacher. That was just a God-conscious way of living and being and thinking.

06-00:35:50

Cortez Todd: I died on April 22—oh no, September 22, 2005. I had the flesh-eating bacteria, I was in the hospital, and I went into a coma, a very deep coma. And I had no idea that I was dying. And then I had a vision—and this is something I remember—I was in my hospital bed, and I was in line behind three black-leather-dressed guys on motorcycles, and we were in line at the Circle K gas station out in the desert, and we were at the Slurpee machine. What I was there for was a lime Slurpee; that's all I wanted. And at one point, I'm waiting in line and I'm in the hospital bed, so I'm not really able to move myself. And I looked around, and I'm like, Oh my God, I know the ambulance brought me here, but how am I going to get back to the hospital? And the last person, the last male in line turned around, and he had the face of a cherub, and he said, "Don't worry, we'll take you back," and that's when I woke up. Behind the Slurpee machine, in between the hills and the mountains in the desert, were these mountains, and there was this great, white light. So when they talk about that white light, it is there. And that's when I came back.

06-00:37:42

So one of the things that Della had always talked about: if you wake up every morning and start thanking God for your blessings, by the time you get to bedtime, you don't have any room to complain about anything. So what you do is you thank God for bringing you through a great illness, you thank God for letting you wake up the next morning and know your name and having vision and having hearing and having speech. And these are things you just incorporate in yourself, for yourself, and then you want to have it for other people, as well. So that's how you address other people with that mindset. Is that enough? [laughs]

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Tewes: I appreciate that.

06-00:38:39

Cortez Todd: Go ahead, any questions?

06-00:38:40

Tewes: I was going to say I appreciate hearing about your journey through spirituality and particularly how it has intersected with your life. And that's a wild story, I can't believe that, but it seems like you had the right tools in place to help you make sense of it.

06-00:39:00

Cortez Todd: Della facilitated all the tools that I needed to have a healthy spiritual life. And for example, I mentioned that my Mother recently—May—passed, and folks [say], "Oh, I'm so sorry." And I say, "I'm not sorry or unhappy, because my Mother was ninety-five years old, and she had an incredible life. She had her demons, she overcame her demons, she was not perfect in every aspect, and she drove me crazy sometimes, but she lived her life, and I have to celebrate that." Yeah, it just reminded me that we talked almost every other day. I took care of her bills, I did her grocery shopping for her, even though she was in Virginia and I was in Los Angeles. I would order it from Instacart from her favorite grocery store. And she lived her life, she was very generous with people, she held no judgment, she never held a grudge. So those are all the kinds of things you also want to make sure you do. You don't hold grudges, and you don't say you're angry with somebody. You have to let go of that anger, because the only person—if you're angry with somebody, they don't feel it at all, but you carry it in yourself, and you can't carry anybody else's baggage. So my Mother didn't carry anybody else's baggage, and she just made choices for herself that were really, really good.

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She achieved so much. I wrote in her obituary that she was married and a mom at age sixteen, and not long after that, maybe three, four months, she became a single mom, because my father disappeared on her. She put herself through business school, she got a job at this company, and she worked her way up to the vice president's executive secretary. She graduated from high school, got her GED. She had a real estate firm in Connecticut, she moved to Connecticut, had a real estate firm. We had a great apartment in Riverdale, because she went to court to get that and doing all of her activity with CORE [Congress of Racial Equality]. And I'm following right behind her and being inspired by her and her moves and her fearlessness. When I think about her passing, I just miss her, I just miss her terribly. Even though she got her GED, then she finished college at Connecticut, Southern Connecticut State College. And then she got her master's [in social work], her MSW in 1986 from the University of Connecticut, and she became a social worker. After she retired from the university, she became a social worker in Virginia, and then when she came out here to take care of me. Because when I got sick, she packed up and moved out here to take care of me, and then she got a job as a social worker here, and then she went back to Virginia after I got better. So she just was an inspiration at every point of my life.

06-00:43:05

Tewes: And lived a full life herself.

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Cortez Todd: Exactly.

06-00:43:11
Tewes: Thank you for sharing more about her. I'm glad we could speak more about her legacy in these interviews. I want to switch gears and think about you again and your reflections on your lifelong activism. One thing you'd said to me was your interest in taking a global perspective to social justice. And I'm curious: what does that look like for you these days or throughout your activist life?

06-00:43:50
Cortez Todd: Well, back when I was working with the Multicultural Alliance for Reproductive Freedom, and we were talking about somebody who says, "Well, 'minority' this and 'minority' that." And one woman says, "We can't call ourselves 'minorities,' because we are not minorities in the global sense. People of color are the majority of people on the planet, and white people, Caucasians, are the minority." And it's how we accept the word "minority" as if we own that, then we think of ourselves as less than and as second-class citizens. And if we look at the effects of colonialism around the world, it is no different than the neocolonialism in the United States. So the first thing we do, stop talking about Third World people; we are First World people. Now, we maybe Third World in those countries or a lot of countries in technology, but not in presence, not in abilities, not in smarts, not in our artistic [expression], our culture. And all of that is First World culture, First World beings. And if we start thinking of ourselves as First World beings, then we demand a certain kind of respect of each other. We support each other even if we have a difference of opinion or a difference of cultural beliefs or spiritual or religious beliefs, and that that is a place to operate from, as opposed to minority. So do away with all the minority scholarships. No, they are scholarships for people of color from all over the world. Because those people, my people, earned every last one of those scholarships, because there's no place in the world that has been built with Caucasians doing the labor. It's always been a majority, people of color work group. That's where I am. So I've carried that since 1990, actually, very specifically.

06-00:46:37
Tewes: Yeah, yeah, so very specific. [both laugh] But I see how that informs a lot of the work you were doing, just thinking through your work history and the important work there, how that informs that work, as well as your activism.

06-00:46:51
Cortez Todd: The idea of activism is that you think about stuff that should be, and you at least speak on it. If you can't change it, you at least speak on it. And if enough people have a conversation about it, then it grows into a movement.

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Tewes: And let's reflect on some of those movements with which you were most closely associated. One was civil rights movement, of course. How do you think about your work in that movement these many years past? We've reached some major anniversaries of—the March on Washington's behind

you, that poster. The Freedom Summer is having a big anniversary this summer. How do you think and reflect on your involvement in that work?

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Cortez Todd: Well, in my teenage years and then also when I went South, I did not really know and understand that, in some ways, we were not demanding enough. And we were so grateful, in some ways, for being able to drink at any water fountain we wanted to or shop anywhere we wanted to and try on clothing in any store or have a job in any company that we chose to. It was not enough, because we did not codify our rights. If we had codified and demanded to codify the Voting Rights Act, the Civil Rights Act, then some of the stuff that is happening today and the changes—marriage equality has been codified. Reproductive rights laws have not been codified; otherwise, they could not have been dismissed by the Supreme—messed with by the Supreme Court. And the same fact that the Voting Rights Act had been messed around with by the Supreme Court, so it almost takes it back. So we needed to be smarter and more demanding, and less grateful and polite. And I think that that is something that carries over in all the movements that I've ever been in, whether it's the civil rights movement or the feminist movement or the women of color movement or the antiviolence, anti-sexual assault movement, or the anti-suicide [movement].

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Now, you see all kinds of notices after certain episodes on television of, "If you know somebody that might be doing this, there's a suicide hotline." That was never there except in the past few years. The fact that there are more Indigenous women that had been kidnapped and trafficked or missing or dead than any other group in this country. If we had stronger respect from the Bureau of Indian Affairs—and the Bureau of Indian Affairs is really a white—it's like the United Nations created Israel, the United States created the Bureau of Indian Affairs. And the Bureau of Indian Affairs decided and has made a decision that there are certain legitimate Native American tribes and others are not legitimate. So they don't get to have the benefits that legitimate Native Americans do. It's like, Wait a minute, how does an Indigenous person not be a legitimate Indigenous person entitled to the same stuff? Because it is very much a hierarchy that embodies race and class and caste. And I think that that's what we're needing to move more to understanding what caste movements are, what castes are. Because it embodies the racism, the classism, the ageism, the sexism, the heterosexism, all the -isms that you can come up with. And we have all not learned to be demanding enough and not afraid of demanding as if we demanded. If you don't have a nickel and you ask for a quarter, you don't need a dime; you need a quarter, so you need to ask for that. You don't need to say, "Oh, I have medicine enough for a morning dose." But you need a morning and an evening dose, you don't need to be told, "You can manage with the morning dose." "No, I can't." I can't manage with laws that are for my benefit that anybody can come along and change. I think that that's—stop being so polite and say, "Look, blankety-blank, this is what I

need, and I'm not going home without it. If I'm not going home, I'm going to sit here in your face forever."

06-00:53:06
Tewes: So it sounds like you're pointing to the ongoing necessity of the work?

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Cortez Todd: Oh God, yes. I mean, we have an increased necessity of the work this year in particular, and we've got to change. We've got to change the politicians, the people in office who are just there for themselves. The evidence that they are there just for themselves over and over and over again. And we have no way to counterbalance that except with our vote and voting people out that have that position. I have no respect in 2024 for the Supreme Court, because six of the members of the Supreme Court have been bought and paid for, and it's evident in everything that they say and do. They are the un-Supreme Court, and I don't need to mention any names, even though there's somebody I really, really do not respect and think he should be put in the doghouse in the outbacks of Appalachia. That's as kind as I can be. Because the earth keeps spinning and we keep going from day to night, day to night. And if nothing is changing in our daily life, clearly, we haven't finished our job. We may have one thing, but we don't have the other, and we need to be able to have it all. And when I say all, I mean all the rights that a human being should have who is alive on the planet.

06-00:55:35
Tewes: Thank you for sharing that, Fatima. I did also promise, related to this, I would ask about the Bay Area Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement. How did you become involved with that organization?

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Cortez Todd: I don't remember exactly how I first heard about them. But I know that in 2003, I signed up to be part of their speakers' bureau, which means I would get called to go to different high schools and organizations to talk about the civil rights movement. A lot of schools and a lot of February requests, and then I've done some documentaries. One high school out in the Inland Empire did a documentary, and I'm part of that, and then just other ones like *The March* and then *We'll Meet Again.* I got to do all these things, because they found me on the speakers' bureau of the Civil Rights Movement Veterans.

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And then a couple of years ago—and again, I'm not quite sure how this came about—but I was invited to be part of—it must have started just before COVID, because it was a Zoom roundtable discussion. And so I got to be part of that roundtable discussion, which is still going on. The kinds of things that we talk about is the fact that civil rights veterans should have the same benefits that our Army, Navy, and Air Force, and whoever other serviceperson, because we fought the war at home. We definitely very much fought a war right here in the United States, and we're still fighting it. And so

many of our veterans that are homeless or without medical insurance or have just all kinds of debilitating illnesses speaks for many of the civil rights movement veterans who are aging. I'm aging, and I'm very fortunate to have medical insurance, I'm very fortunate to have a place to live, to have food to eat, but not all the civil rights movement veterans have all of that. And it's like needing to be recognized for the work in the war on American soil. We talk about that.

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Cortez Todd: We also talk about the fact that we also have PTSD based on the work that we did in the locations where we were, and that is manifested in some of our habits. Like we don't sit with our backs to the door in a restaurant, we're careful about driving at night, we're always looking over our shoulder. Even though the Klan is not marching where we are right now, there's some other villain over our shoulder. And we need each other to talk about this stuff. We have a check-in before we get to a topic that we may be discussing. And there are many times that we will come across the same things going on in our families, the same things going on in our community. I know I have come to tears any number of times, and especially when I get really frustrated with something that's going on, there's something in the news.

06-01:00:17

And Bruce Hartford, who is like our webmaster for the website, and I'll call him our fearless leader—he's not our fearless leader, but I'll just call him it—he has a way of bringing us back to reality and saying, "Look, we've been here before. This has happened before, and we've come through it. And this law has happened before, and we've come through it, so we can't despair. We can be angry, annoyed, and maybe we can't be as active as we once were." Although one of the guys is really active, and he's really a strong presence for being out there, marching and everything else, and he's in his eighties. It's like, Yeah, okay, okay, Gene, you just keep on going.

06-01:01:23

And then a new member to the ongoing group, she was in a group—I was one of the facilitators for one of the anniversaries of SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee], and she was really one of the most interesting people that I had come across. And then she was part of the speakers' bureau, and we got to speak, because when we do speeches, we primarily go with two of us. And so she and I have gone to a number of engagements. She just joined the group, and she says, "I've really needed this group for a long time, and I really wanted to be part of it for a long time, and I'm so glad to be in the group." And there are just six of us, but it's a good place to be, and it's a place where I can speak extremely openly about things that I can't speak about in most crowds. I like talking about Israel and Palestine and what my feelings were about that and just being able to do it. And get support from other people in the group on why that is—"You're not wrong in what you're thinking. I may think this a little bit differently, but your points are valid." So you get support

and validation. This is a really important group to have in existence, and I'm just really honored and grateful to be part of it. That's how I got to you.

06-01:03:21
Tewes: Yes, and small world and networks and all that.

06-01:03:25
Cortez Todd: Yeah, because Chude [Allen], Chude will give your name out in a minute. Talk about my name, the name of somebody else in the group, she will give out the name and say, "Oh, you need to talk to her," and she's wonderful in that way. She's been having her own health challenges, and her husband had health challenges. And we get fairly involved and intimate with each other in talking about what's really going on and where we are. I got a lot of support, again, for my thoughts on Israel and Palestine and for my Mother's passing. And every time I've had to go in the hospital for something, they're right there with a text or an email or a reminder, "Oh, we're having a meeting. Will you be at the meeting?" One woman says, "I'm just calling, because you weren't with us. How are you doing now?" It's a community—or it's really a family. And we share a lot, and we support each other a lot and would like for other areas to be able to have the same kind of thing, because civil rights movement veterans are our unsung heroes, yeah.

06-01:05:00
Tewes: I love your—

06-01:05:00
Cortez Todd: I—

06-01:05:01
Tewes: Go ahead.

06-01:05:03
Cortez Todd: I was saying I don't necessarily think of myself so much as a hero, as opposed to just being unsung.

06-01:05:11
Tewes: You're a hero to someone, Fatima.

06-01:05:13
Cortez Todd: Yeah, I know that.

06-01:05:19
Tewes: I also want to acknowledge the various women's movements—you were making a distinction between a white women's movement and a women of color movement. Another thing we've talked about was white women perhaps not connecting well or being good leaders and partners in these movements, and we'd even thrown out the idea of a white savior syndrome here. Is there anything more you wanted to say on your interactions with white women in these spaces?

06-01:05:56

Cortez Todd: Okay, I think that white women are so used to having white-skin privilege that when they go out of their house on any given day, they carry that with them and don't know that sometimes it is very offensive. They have very offensive behavior when they encounter women of color. There are some old language stuff like an "Oriental rug"? No, it's not an "Oriental rug," it's a "Persian rug," or it's an "antique, woven rug." It's not "Oriental," as opposed—if it's made in China, it's Oriental. Or that people are "Oriental." No, that may be a rug. And just the difference in how people—how women of color conduct ourselves in our kitchens. And we are able to do four or five different things at the same time and still have a conversation that is on track for a purpose. So white women don't seem to be able to adjust to that so that we have to behave in a certain kind of way in a white, feminist meeting.

06-01:07:38

And we talk about the patriarchy, but we don't talk of the matriarchy, and the white matriarchy is always looking to be taken care of and will say things like, "Oh, I don't see color." Well, if you don't see color, honey, you don't see me, because with my color comes my culture, comes my heritage. I know your heritage, because I get taught that in school every single day, but you don't get taught my culture or my heritage. But you want me to teach you as if you can't go to the library and learn something on your own or go somewhere and find out things for yourself or ask questions about other people. And assume that we're all supposed to know what white women want and how the world is mistreating white women, and excuse me, you are mistreating this woman of color with your arrogance. I don't think it's an intentional arrogance, but I think it's such a comfort of having white-skin privilege that you walk through the world with a certain kind of elegance and power, and you know that, you don't question that. I have to work hard to get my comfort and power. I have to demand it in a store or in a service or in a work situation.

06-01:09:24

I mean, just like the play when I had my fro and they wanted me to do something to tame my fro, and not be so angry with my scene when that character had every right to be angry, but I have to behave all the time. White women can be outrageous. And that I think is one of the flaws that white women don't see or are blindsiding themselves. And it doesn't make me want to do necessarily any work with that community. It's how women are sexist to other women and racist and classist and all the -isms.

06-01:10:23

Tewes: All the -isms, I was going to say.

06-01:10:25

Cortez Todd: Yeah, all the -isms. They come out in different ways in different communities. And then when you try and blend, you've got to really know what you're saying and have a history and a culture behind what you're saying. So you're not just saying something like this, you know, your white, suburban culture is

natural and to be dreamed for, "You-all, you must aspire to live in the suburbs, in a house." "No, not necessarily. I want to live in a concierge apartment building. I like valet parking." Yeah, so that's where I am.

06-01:11:27
Tewes: Thank you. Despite these—

06-01:11:30
Cortez Todd: The key for me is that it is unintentional on most parts. And that's where we have to really start knocking down your ability to be unintentionally hurtful.

06-01:12:02
Tewes: Thank you for sharing that. I know that's been a challenge that you've had to contend with your whole life, but particularly in that movement. But despite that challenge, I'm wondering: how do you see your involvement, these many years later, in the women's liberation movement—both sides? Where do you see that work now?

06-01:12:32
Cortez Todd: I guess for me, I have an extremely diverse group of women friends of all backgrounds, all classes, all cultures, and each of them has their own group of diverse friendships. That's the best we can do right now is have our friends and encourage our friends to be the best that they could be. I worked with a woman who was a tall, beautiful, blonde, [laughs] and she would joke about, "Oh yeah, I've got to go play the dumb blonde right now," because she knew what she could do, she knew how she could accomplish certain things. We went shopping at one point at an upscale store, and I was buying her a wedding gift for her—a [piece of] jewelry for her wedding day. The saleswoman came over to her first, and we're standing right next to each other, and she looked at her, and she says, "How can I help you?" And what she did was, "Oh, you want to talk to her. She's doing the buying." It's like, Yeah! [laughs] And the girl just fumbled all over herself. I mean, she was a young girl, a young, white girl, and she didn't really realize what she was doing; she just did it as a matter of habit. And it's those habits that need to be addressed and highlighted and say, "No, that's not the right behavior." So it's like, "No, you don't want to talk to me, you go talk to her." So that's the kind of friends that I have that can speak up when I don't have to. Because if I have to, then I'm not going to be polite, and I don't want to do that all the time. And it's a burden you don't want to have to carry by yourself all the time, so I'm grateful for my circle of very diverse friends.

06-01:15:13
Tewes: And I'm hearing also a continuity of the importance of community, various communities in your life.

06-01:15:21
Cortez Todd: Yeah, yeah, yeah, and you have to create your communities wherever you are. In the apartment building I'm in—and I've been in this building on and off—well, I only missed two years that I wasn't here—since 2003. So that's twenty-

one years, and there are people who have been here that long, as well, who we know each other. When my Mother passed, my caregiver spoke to one person. And then when I came in that day, there was a note under my door, and it was a condolence card, and it was written out. It was very, very sweet, and I was like, Oh, that's nice. We look out for each other, and we compliment each other when we see each other in the elevator, "Oh, you're dressed up really fancy. You going someplace special?" "Yeah." "Okay, enjoy."

06-01:16:23

Tewes: I love that.

06-01:16:24

Cortez Todd: Me, too.

06-01:16:28

Tewes: Fatima, as we look toward the end of our conversation, I want to acknowledge that you've had many honors and awards over the years, which are really special and something to behold. I'm not going to read all of them, because they are many, but just for example: you've been recognized by Congresswoman Maxine Waters; former Speaker of the California Assembly Willie Brown; you've received the Key to the City of Jonesboro, Louisiana, in 2011. But one we mentioned was also in 1991. You were honored by *LA Weekly* for Community Heroes for work with the Multicultural Alliance. Is there anything you'd like to say about that award in particular?

06-01:17:15

Cortez Todd: Well, the thing about that is when I was reading the page, there was another person on that page, Jewel Thais-Williams, who was the creator and proprietor of a club called Catch One. And that was a club for primarily the gay and lesbian community, and she also did a lot of work on AIDS health education, setting up a clinic. She also had an acupuncture clinic that did a lot of free services for folks. She had a whole building, and the club upstairs had alcohol, and the club downstairs was the nonalcohol club. So for people that were in recovery or AA or just not participating in alcohol, they could go there and have the same kind of blast that folks upstairs were having. And we were on the same page, getting honors as local heroes, and I was like, Wow, I'm with Jewel. So it made me feel very, very appreciative and very special.

06-01:18:44

The one thing that I, in 1984—no, in '86. No. Yeah, it was '86, I was in New Orleans for a conference. It was the "Voices of the Civil Rights Movement" that was the conference that came out of Smithsonian. And Bernice [Johnson] Reagon was really the organizer and facilitator of it all across the country. And at that conference, I was honored as Living History for my work in the civil rights movement. So the idea that I am part of the Smithsonian Institute just makes me smile.

06-01:19:32
Tewes: As it should. I'm also wondering: what do all these awards and recognition mean to you?

06-01:19:46
Cortez Todd: Thank you. Thank you for putting my life on the line to do something important for somebody else in another community other than the community I lived in. They said, "The very fact that you came down here made us feel important." And that made me feel really important, because they thought I made them important.

06-01:20:24
Tewes: Yeah, it's a wonderful circle there.

06-01:20:26
Cortez Todd: Yeah, it is.

06-01:20:37
Tewes: And, Fatima, we spent many hours together speaking about challenges in your life and accomplishments and things you've witnessed. How would you like to be remembered?

06-01:20:52
Cortez Todd: Oh, I think I would like to be remembered the same way I remember my Mother: as a fearless, courageous woman who learned to love unconditionally at a very early age, even though I did not know that that's what I was doing at the time, and who had a love for life and dancing. I know how to have fun, even though I have to have my rollator to walk most places or my cane. I'm just praying that one day I will not need those supports, because I would like to dance again if I had to go out somewhere and dance. And someone who fought her entire life for her rights and the rights of others to be respected and treated with all the dignity that a human being should have. That translates over to my respect for Mother Nature and the planet and that is all living creatures. There's a thing about all living creatures big and small and four paws and two paws, because if I could have an animal shelter, I'd just be overrun with cats and dogs. And all the dogs that people don't want like pit bulls, which are so misrepresented. And I watch the show *Pit Bulls & Parolees*, and that's a really important program for me, because it's about recovery and rejuvenation.

06-01:23:38
Tewes: And what's next for you?

06-01:23:42
Cortez Todd: Oh, taking this set of interviews and the transcripts and mixing it with what I had started out as a book on my life and actually getting it published.

06-01:24:00
Tewes: I look forward to seeing the end result.

06-01:24:03
Cortez Todd: Oh God, me, too.

06-01:24:07
Tewes: Fatima, is there anything else you'd like to add that I haven't yet asked you?

06-01:24:16
Cortez Todd: I can't think of anything. I will five minutes after we're off the phone call, but I can't think of anything at this point. I think you've been very thorough. And I know that there are two topics that I haven't talked as much about as I might have, but for very good reason. And one is my relationship with my adopted daughter, and the fact that I have a thirteen-year-old grandson or fourteen-year-old grandson now that I've never seen and never met. And that's a whole other kettle of fish, but I know she's doing well. My friends have told me, "Oh yeah, a lot of the stuff that she's doing is stuff she got from you." So if they can see it, good enough, I did have an impression on her.

06-01:25:12
Tewes: Yeah, sure. Well, thank you so much for sharing your time with me. I've really appreciated hearing about your life and your work, and thank you for being so generous.

06-01:25:27
Cortez Todd: Thank you, thank you for including me.

06-01:25:31
Tewes: Of course.

[End of Interview]