

Black Power Chronicles: Kojo Nnamdi

Kojo Nnamdi, a renowned journalist, discussed his journey from Rex Orville Montague Paul to Kojo Nnamdi, influenced by the Black Power Movement and his parents' anti-colonial activism. He detailed his involvement with the Center for Black Education, the Black Panther Party, and SNCC veterans. Nnamdi highlighted his role in producing *The Daily Drum* at Howard University Radio, which focused on Black communities globally. He also discussed his transition to television, his mentorship by women in the movement, and his evolving political views. Nnamdi emphasized the importance of justice, inclusivity, and learning from past mistakes.

Ray Baker: I'm Ray Baker. I'm here with DC Black Power Chronicles. My guest today, Kojo Nnamdi is a world renowned journalist who's made his bones right here in Washington, DC, but has a rich history and legacy that we're excited to dive into. We're going to talk and start our conversation with our guest, Kojo Nnamdi. Kojo, thank you so much for joining us.

Kojo Nnamdi: Thank you for inviting me.

Ray Baker: You're well known here in Washington, DC, but you're impactful all over the world. But people know—Kojo Nnamdi—how does Rex Orville Montague Paul become Kojo Nnamdi?

Kojo Nnamdi: Well, clearly, my parents got carried away with the Christian names. Rex Orville Montague was a lot of Christian names to have, but I carried that with me until—I guess it was 1970. I came to Washington in 1969 and became a part of an organization called the Center for Black Education, an organization that had been founded out of a program at what was then Federal City College [now the University of the District of Columbia].

That program had a focus on Black education. And the founders of that program decided that Black education at that time would perform more effectively if it was based in the community rather than on a college campus.

At the time, they were developing a Pan-Africanist orientation and ideology. It was a time during which we began to reflect on our heritage and realized that the names we had were the names that had been imposed on us by slave masters. My extensive English Christian names and English surnames were a reflection of the fact that we were in captivity and we were slaves.

It was a time during which a lot of Black activists were changing their names to more accurately reflect their heritage, and that is how Kojo Nnamdi was born. "Kojo" means "born on Monday," which I was born on, in the Ghanaian language of Ga. And "Nnamdi" I took because I was a great admirer of Nnamdi Azikiwe, who was Nigeria's first independence leader. So, I took it as a surname, even though he had it as a Christian name.

Ray Baker: You also spent some time in Montreal [Canada], and the Black Power Movement here in the United States, in particular, attracted you. What specifically—because there was some time in New York there—what specifically about the Black Power Movement was attractive to you in New York and then later here in Washington, DC?

Kojo Nnamdi: The attraction for me really started in Montreal, Canada, where I arrived in 1967, at a time when the Civil Rights Movement in this country had, for a brief period, been dominated by figures in the Black Power Movement.

When I got to Montreal, Canada, my roommates, who had been at McGill University prior to my time there, had been studying and reading a lot about the Black Power Movement. It appealed to us, in part, because of our youth and because, as young people, we tended to be more rebellious than our older contemporaries.

So, there was that natural spirit of youthful rebellion to which the Black Power Movement appealed. But then it also appealed to us on the basis of its ideological premise and that is: it called for power to Black people in communities where we existed in large numbers. It didn't simply seek equality, which was what the Civil Rights Movement was about. It sought to take it a step further by empowering Black people, especially in our own communities.

There was a book co-written by Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton called *Black Power [The Politics of Liberation]* that we devoured. It had a certain appeal for us, not only because we were young and rebellious, but because we were more interested in confronting oppression openly, and the Black Power Movement seemed to be doing just that.

It was interesting because SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] had come out of people working in the South, but the Black Power Movement tended to be more attractive as an urban phenomenon. I was born in the city of Georgetown, Guyana. I have never lived in a rural community in my life—I was a city person. We were in the city of Montreal, and so it was very attractive [to us].

After spending a little more than a year at McGill University in Montreal, I moved to New York City in the summer of 1968. While working in New York, one of the people I was working with at a firm on Wall Street happened to be a member of the Black Panther Party. He was a member of a chapter at Borough of Manhattan Community College.

At the time, the Black Panther Party was one of the most prominent exponents of Black Power, I briefly joined the Black Panther Party when I was in New York in 1968 and that was the continuing appeal that Black Power had for me.

Ray Baker: You're known for your time in journalism. You brought with you, to Washington, DC, into your career of journalism the experiences of being in the Black Panthers, the experiences of working in and around SNCC. How did that inform your work in journalism?

Kojo Nnamdi: When I came to Washington, D.C., to affiliate with the Center for Black Education, that organization had been founded by veterans of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, SNCC. Before that time, I had never interacted with SNCC veterans. I had interacted with people in the Black Panther Party, but never before with SNCC veterans.

When I came into that organization, it was set up along the lines of a college, so to speak. I began taking classes from some of those people, and in addition to what was being taught in our classes, they shared quite a few of their experiences in SNCC. Those people were my mentors when I came to Washington—people like Courtland Cox, Charlie Cobb, Jimmy Garrett, Marvin Holloway, Belvie Rooks, Jean Wiley, Judy Richardson, and Ralph Featherstone. These were all SNCC veterans who, in literal terms, schooled me when I first came here.

At the same time that I was learning from their experiences in SNCC, I was also part of an organization that had put together a bookstore. Drum and Spear Bookstore had put together a press. Drum and Spear Press was in the process of trying to refine an ideological posture of Pan-Africanism. Their experiences—and these people were just slightly older than I was—informed me a great deal about what I wanted to do.

The other thing that I brought to Washington and the Center for Black Education was a keen interest in acting. I had started acting in high school when I was in Guyana and, after high school, became part of a vibrant amateur theater here.

So, when I came to the Center [for Black Education], in addition to its classes, it had several groups, one of which was a drama group. I became the coordinator of that drama group and the director of most of its productions.

During those years, the business of commercial radio in the United States had a requirement for a certain portion of public affairs programming in order to maintain their licenses. Radio stations in those days were forced to conduct surveys of their communities to find out what people in those communities were interested in and organized public affairs programming around those issues.

WOL-AM radio, now owned by Radio One, [founded by] Cathy Hughes and Alfred Liggins, was in those days owned by the Sonderling Corporation, a nationwide company. To fulfill their

public affairs requirement, they needed community organizations willing to provide content programming—essentially for free—because these commercial radio stations were not interested in paying for public affairs programming which was invariably buried on the weekend, often at night, when they didn't expect a great many people to be listening.

Long story short, our drama group was producing children's plays written by Jennifer Lawson, another SNCC veteran, and Mimi Hayes, called *Saa Ya Watoto: The Hour of the Children*. After our drama group had been performing those plays on WOL on a weekly basis for a while, they said, "Well, is there anything else that you can do?"

We came up with the idea of doing a weekly news magazine. Since many of us were actors, we felt we could act like news people. The organization was putting out a weekly newspaper called *The Pan African*—or *The Pan Africanist*, I think it was called—every week. So we were interested and involved in gathering news. Putting together a weekly news broadcast was something we felt we could do fairly well, and we did.

We did that. It was called *Sauti: The Voice* on WOL radio, again on Sunday nights for a year or two. I was working at Drum and Spear Bookstore. Then Drum and Spear Bookstore, in the early 1970s, closed. But before it closed, a radio station named WHUR—Howard University Radio—came on the air in 1971. That was the station we played 24/7 in the bookstore, so I had a lot of experience listening to WHUR.

After Drum and Spear Bookstore closed, I found myself out of a job. I was a young parent—I had twin children—and I needed a job. WHUR advertised for a news editor. I applied for that position, got it, and that's why I sit before you today with a career in journalism.

Ray Baker: To work on a show called *The Voice*, to work for a station embedded in a Black college gave you a lot of space to stay in your Pan-Africanist tradition that you seemed to be, in your young age. Are you grateful for that, and do you think it helped direct how you practiced journalism then and even today?

Kojo Nnamdi: Yes, because when I went to WHUR, I was, as you pointed out, still in my Pan-Africanist mode. Even though many of my Pan-Africanist colleagues—many of them in the African Liberation Support Committee, which put on the first African Liberation Day in 1972—were moving left at the time, toward Marxism and scientific socialism.

There was an element of socialism and Pan-Africanism anyway, and one of its greatest progenitors, Kwame Nkrumah, was himself a Marxist. So that was the direction in which we were moving.

Howard University Radio, at the time, had a format not unlike Pacifica stations today—a combination of news, music, and information that seemed to drop out of the sky at any time. It

wasn't programmed in such a way that you got the same programming every day. So, it gave those of us who were interested in experimenting with radio the opportunity to do so—something that is very difficult to find today.

However, once we were involved in news, we had to be involved in seeking truth and seeking to have that truth accepted as credible. At some point, we had to leave our ideological orientation at the door. But we could have it reflected in how much of the world we covered.

Since we were Pan-Africanists moving toward leftist [perspectives], we made sure that *The Daily Drum*, the newscast on WHUR, covered the world of Black people. And in that world, we found every country on the planet earth.

We had a great deal of focus on Africa, a lot on the Caribbean, and on places where Black people lived, both in the United States and abroad. As we progressed, we said, "It's one thing to be doing a newscast this thorough."

In fact, *The Daily Drum*—eventually, one hour of it—was really based on the National Public Radio format of *All Things Considered* which existed in those days. We consciously fashioned it in that style, but with a greater emphasis on Black people around the world.

At some point, we said, look, we have a good product here. How do we get more people to listen to this product? Because, in the final analysis, you are only as effective as the number of people who are listening to you.

At that point, the former news director, Robert Taylor, had become the general manager of the station. We had our own little leftist cell, in which we could have credibility for what we felt was a really strong news and information presentation, by attracting more listeners to the station generally. That's when we abandoned the Pacifica-like format of the station and decided to go for more popular music. That's when we decided to pump the funk.

When we made that decision, not only did we do that in the daytime...but by then, Melvin Lindsey, the original host of *The Quiet Storm*, who had started out as a student intern at WHUR, was doing that show from 7 [p.m.] to midnight. And it was already rising to the number one position in the market.

The Daily Drum aired just before *The Quiet Storm*. So, once we were able to make sure that daytime parts of programming were attracting attention, we knew the audience would rise as it got back to 7 o'clock in the evening.

We wanted to create an environment in which a credible newscast was being heard by a large number of people. I'll never forget—there was a columnist for *The Washington Post*, an African-American [journalist] named William Raspberry, who wrote a column sometime in the

late 1970s or early 1980s stating that *The Daily Drum* had arrived as a serious newscast to be listened to in Washington. At that point, we felt we had achieved our objective.

I'll say this—because we believed, given our socialist orientation, that the only way socialist views could be accepted in a capitalist environment was if the socialists were not failures. A lot of people assume that people turn to socialism because they can't succeed in a capitalist society. But if we could run a for-profit radio station, make it number one in this market, in a for-profit environment, then our socialist beliefs would have greater credibility. That was the view we held at that time.

Ray Baker: At that point, you mentioned William Raspberry—he was powerful and impactful to so many in the area, particularly as a Black columnist at *The Washington Post*. There was a groundswell of Black journalists everywhere who wanted to find kinship, organization, and community, which ultimately led to the founding of the National Association of Black Journalists [NABJ].

Given your orientations, given your experience with SNCC, the Center for Black Education, the Black Panther Party, and your Pan-Africanist time at *Drum and Spear*—how did you view the founding of NABJ? And how did you find yourself interacting and engaging with that organization?

Kojo Nnamdi: Sometime in the 1970s, before NABJ was formally formed, there was a conference in Houston, Texas, to deliberate on its formation, and WHUR sent me to attend that conference. That conference represented the planning stages of what would later become NABJ.

For some reason or another, the next year—when NABJ was officially founded—I was not a part of it. I don't remember at the time what I was doing, but when I looked at my contemporaries who were the founding members of NABJ, these were people I was working very closely with at that time. I still can't remember why I wasn't part of that process, but once the Washington Association of Black Journalists [WABJ] was formed, I joined.

From time to time, I have gone to NABJ conferences over the years and participated in the organization. I thought then—and continue to think—that it is a critically important organization, and continue to support it.

Ray Baker: That organization led the way, as far as journalists were concerned, in beating the drum for the anti-apartheid movement and for the general liberation of a number of African nations.

As a journalist, how did you see your role in that movement? What were some of your experiences, and what are some of the things you remember from that time?

Kojo Nnamdi: I became a journalist as a Pan-Africanist, so there was always a strong focus in *The Daily Drum* and in my journalistic life, in particular on Africa. *The Daily Drum* included a daily segment called the *Africa Roundup*, in which one of our correspondents, Mohamed Samora, who was from Sierra Leone, did the *African Roundup*.

When we first started participating in Pan-Africanist venues and events, the May 23, 1972, African Liberation Day demonstration was particularly focused on the liberation of those parts of the continent still under colonial rule or apartheid. For me, covering demonstrations that had to do with the liberation of those territories was particularly important.

When an organization called the Southern Africa Support Project—one of whose leaders, Sylvia Hill, is a professor at the University of the District of Columbia—began leading demonstrations at the South African Embassy in Washington to protest the apartheid state and the continued incarceration of Nelson Mandela, I covered those protests as a journalist.

Later, when Randall Robinson and TransAfrica increased the focus on liberation movements in general, and on South Africa in particular, I had the opportunity to report on those demonstrations. Many of the people I was covering were former colleagues of mine from the movement.

Covering those demonstrations and being able to be in the media...to watch Angola get its independence, to watch what was then called Southwest Africa get its independence, to watch Rhodesia become Zimbabwe and get its independence. And then finally to watch the end of apartheid in South Africa, to watch the release of Nelson Mandela from jail and to be working at Howard University Television, hosting a show called *Evening Exchange* when Nelson Mandela visited that campus. Those [moments] were the fulfillment of my dreams as an activist and as a journalist. There was nothing that I can think of that was more important to me during that time.

Ray Baker: You mentioned Angola. How much joy did it give you as a leftist to know that Cuba, at the time, was instrumental in helping Angola get the liberation that they so desperately sought and deserved?¹

Kojo Nnamdi: It was huge. It was huge because, during the time when Cuba was providing assistance to Angola, Fidel Castro declared Cuba not just a Latin American country, but a Latin African country. For those of us who had been arguing for years that if you looked at the population in Cuba and saw how many Black people there were, that Castro should recognize the

¹ Cuba played a pivotal role in supporting Angola's independence struggle and defending its sovereignty after liberation. Following Angola's independence from Portugal in 1975, the country descended into a brutal civil war involving various factions backed by Cold War superpowers. The People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), a leftist group, faced military aggression from U.S.-backed South African forces and rival factions. In response, Fidel Castro sent thousands of Cuban troops, military advisors, and medical personnel to support the MPLA in Operation Carlota

fundamental relationship between Cuba and the African continent—and go beyond that realization to provide military support for the liberation movements.

I have to say that, at the time, in my own country, Guyana, the government also provided significant support for the liberation movements in Southern Africa, and provided money for those. Those times represented, for me, a period during which the consciousness of Black people in general—and Black activists in particular—was heightened around the world.

What our forebearers, like Kwame Nkrumah and C.L.R. James, saw long before we came along, were the links that connected us in our enslavement and in our oppression were also the links necessary for our ultimate freedom. Seeing that come to fruition was very important to me as a journalist at that time—in many ways, it was the realization of a dream come true.

Ray Baker: It's one thing to see it abroad; it's another to see it in your own city. You were a journalist—a prominent one—at WHUR and WHUT as one Marion Barry became mayor of Washington, DC. And the city as a whole grew more autonomous with more Black people, thus more Black Power. Tell the viewers what it was like to experience that and your memories with the late Marion Barry.

Kojo Nnamdi: My memories of Marion Barry go back to the first time I stepped onto a college campus as a student after leaving McGill University in Montreal. That was when I was at the Center for Black Education, which was founded by many of Marion Barry's colleagues from SNCC.

At the time, Marion Barry was running a program in Washington, DC, along with his then-wife, Mary Treadwell, called Pride Incorporated. Pride Incorporated, which served impoverished youth in Washington DC, had developed a program with American University called the Pride-AU program, in which one could get to take classes at American University through Pride Incorporated. I took a class for 10 credits in photography through the Pride-AU program.

How did I get into that program? Courtland Cox at the Center for Black Education placed a call to his friend Marion Barry at Pride Incorporated and said, "This young guy needs to get into this program." That's how I got in.

Shortly thereafter, when I was working at Drum and Spear Bookstore, Marion Barry made his first run for office—for the school board in the District of Columbia—and became president of the school board. Drum and Spear Bookstore decided that school board meetings would be a good place for us to set up book displays and sell books.

I was the one who had to go to these meetings, set up our displays, and while members of the community were fighting with school board members inside the auditorium, I'd be at the entrance trying to sell books.

Courtland Cox would tell me to remind the president of the school board, Marion Barry, to announce to the audience that Drum and Spear Bookstore was outside selling books. Marion would not remember until near the end of the proceedings, so I would run up to the stage and tug on his slacks or the nearest part of his shoe to get his attention. Then he'd say, "Oh yeah, by the way, Drum and Spear is selling books outside."

That was the beginning of his political career, which ultimately led to him being known as the "Mayor for Life" of the District of Columbia. But what was most important about his career was what another SNCC colleague, Frank Smith, called the Marion Barry Revolution.

Before Marion Barry became mayor of Washington, all of the top positions in the city government and the major city-funded contracts went to white people. Black contractors were shut out, and Blacks were shut out of a lot of the higher-level positions in the DC government.

One must say, however, that Walter Washington, who preceded Marion Barry as mayor, tended to change that somewhat. But not at the level—to put it bluntly—where the money was. And the money, frankly, was in who could do business with the District of Columbia, who could get contracts with the District of Columbia, and who could get upper-level positions. Not just in the mayor's cabinet, but across the board in the District of Columbia. That was what the Marion Barry Revolution changed.

It brought Black people into all levels of district government and into all levels of district contracting. It created, in many ways, the expansion of the Black middle class in this region. There are those who argue—with some degree of credibility—that Marion Barry created Prince George's County into the most affluent predominantly African-American county in the United States.

That was the impact Marion Barry had on this city. He obviously had problems, obviously he had his flaws, but that impact is what he will be remembered for. That was the Marion Barry Revolution

Ray Baker: Compare your joy or your pride—or whatever feeling that may have been seeing the Marion Barry Black revolution in Washington, DC—with observing the liberation of the African nations. Compare and contrast those feelings.

Kojo Nnamdi: I've never been asked that before, but it's fascinating to compare because, as Marion Barry was rising in Washington, DC, great revolutionary leaders in Africa were rising at the same time. Interestingly enough, some of those revolutionary leaders—like Marion Barry—would ultimately disappoint in some respects. But we're talking about the days when they were rising.

We're talking about 1980, when Zimbabwe gained its independence. We're talking about what used to be known as Southwest Africa—now Namibia—gaining its independence under Sam Nujoma. We're talking about watching Angola under its leadership, watching Mozambique under its leadership. Watching, for the first time, Black people coming to power in those places.

And one has to remember—it wasn't until the 1960s that governments in the Caribbean gained their independence. So, you're also watching those governments come to power. And you're beginning to see expressions of Black Power around the world that represent what people had been fighting for for generations, and you have the ability to report on those things.

When Charlie Cobb became a reporter at WHUR, we sent him to Angola to witness this. He went to South Africa. We were able to put reporters in those places to report on these things firsthand. When we saw a revolution in the English-speaking Caribbean for the first time, in Grenada, we had reporters report on what was going on there. There was a certain—albeit different kind — empowering the people taking place in those places. Those were very heady days to be a reporter.

Ray Baker: We mentioned briefly that you spent some time at WHUT, the television station. Depending on how old you are and what medium you chose in Washington, DC, folks may know you best either from *The Daily Drum* or from *Evening Exchange*. Television is a different medium. How did you come to that medium and how did you seek to do the same work you had done at WHUR through this different beast of a medium?

Kojo Nnamdi: At WHUR in 1984, I created an interview program that still airs on WHUR to this day, just before 7 p.m., called *Insight*. *The Daily Drum* was one hour long, and I created *Insight* to occupy the last 20 minutes of *The Daily Drum*. For that program, as host, I would interview various notable figures—either those who happened to be in Washington at the time or those who lived here.

Prior to that, most of my journalistic work had been straight reporting. Doing *Insight* introduced me to the art—or skill, if you will—of listening more. For me, interviewing has a lot to do with listening.

When I was a straight reporter covering a press conference, I had it all on tape because we invariably recorded it for radio. If I happened not to be paying attention during the press conference, I could go back and listen to it. But doing a live interview on the air every day, there was no tape to listen to. You had to listen to what you were being told.

At the same time, *Evening Exchange*, which had been created at Howard University Television—then WHMM-TV—was being hosted by Bernie McCain, a legendary broadcast interviewer in Washington. However, at the time, Bernie was juggling two jobs.

On a nightly basis he was hosting *Evening Exchange* from 7:30 to 8:30 p.m. at Howard, and on a daily basis, he was also hosting a radio talk show in Philadelphia from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Every single day, Bernie would drive from Philadelphia to Washington to host *Evening Exchange*.

He would often arrive a little late. And on television, when you're late, the show can't be done—they had to put up a tape. Sometimes he would arrive tired from working and sometimes he would not show up at all if he was unavoidably thrown off by a traffic jam or something on the way there.

But he was a great interviewer, so WHMM did everything it could to keep Bernie McCain as host. After a while, though, it became clear that he couldn't do this. It seemed like he was doing a third job someplace at the time, and he couldn't do it. So, they tried out a couple of people from WHUR, but they didn't work out. Finally, the producer Colleen Bianchi, of *Evening Exchange*, came to me and said, "Would you mind trying this on for a while?"

That was in April of 1985. I was hosting *Insight* from 6:40 to 7:00 p.m. and then dashing over to do *Evening Exchange* from 7:30 to 8:30 p.m. After hosting *Evening Exchange* during April and May, the show shut down for the summer and didn't resume until September. At that point, Colleen Bianchi and the then-manager of WHMM, Arnold Wallace, offered me the job on a full-time basis.

I told them, "Well, that's going to be difficult on a full-time basis to do both of these jobs, so I'm probably going to have to quit the job WHUR." So, that's what I did, and they moved *Evening Exchange* from 7:30 to 7:00 p.m. That's what I did from September of 1985 until November of 2011. I did it for 26 years.

Ray Baker: We talked about the art of listening. Education, in many senses, is a function and practice of listening. Did any of your time and experience at the Center for Black Education help provide the skill set you would need to be a good listener, thus to be a good host?

Kojo Nnamdi: I did nothing but listen with the exception of the role I played in the drama group. I was not a leader; I was a listener. The Center for Black Education had classes—and they were for a few years that it existed, so adamant about rebelling against the system—that we had classes on Christmas Day. I remember my sister visiting me from the Caribbean for Christmas that year—I believe it was 1970. On Christmas morning, I got up and said, "I have to go to class," so she came with me.

Suffice it to say, the class was not very well attended. A lot of people couldn't tell their parents they weren't coming home for Christmas. But the experiences of the people who were teaching those classes, the depth of knowledge...classes on Africa, political science, math, even bricklaying. You attended those classes, you listened, and you got a really rounded understanding of where you fit into the world.

The Center [for Black Education] was based on the premise that you couldn't just teach social sciences to Black students—you had to teach math and science and give them a rounded view of the world. We even started a children's educational center where we were teaching children.

But what I was doing in those days was listening. And yes, listening is a skill. We were in an environment—an environment in which it's much worse today—where we are inundated with so many signals coming at us from different places, that taking the time to truly listen [is rare].

The other reason I developed listening skills was because, growing up in Guyana, South America, there was no television. Radio was our only broadcast source of information and entertainment. I grew up in an environment where, when we came home from school for lunch and said, "Mom, here's what happened in school this morning," she would say, "I am listening to my stories on the radio—you'll have to speak to me later." And so, she listened to the radio. It was never background [noise] for what you were doing. It was something that you actively listened to.

Ray Baker: The Center taught you so much about the world around you. We sometimes only converse about the role that women and sisters play when there's a woman who's the subject. But I'm curious—from your purview as a man—what role did women play?

How did gender manifest itself, if at all, in your Pan-Africanist experiences, in your experiences with NABJ, in your experiences in journalism, and in your experiences with the Center for Black Education?

Kojo Nnamdi: When I got to the Center, I was surprised to discover that, in the Civil Rights Movement writ large—and in SNCC in particular—women had to struggle for recognition. At the Center for Black Education, from the moment I arrived, women were in leadership groups at the Center and women in the leadership of conducting classes.

I mention names like Jean Wiley, Belvie Rooks, Judy Richardson, and Daphne Muse—these were all mentors of mine. I did not realize that they had emerged from an environment where they had to struggle for that kind of recognition—an environment in which they were routinely considered as secretaries, or people washing dishes, or people who prepared the meals for the guys who were going to be leading the organization.

The Center adopted that principle without ever having mentioned it. I walked into that environment, found that environment comfortable for me. The people writing our children's plays were Jennifer Lawson and Mimi Hayes—we had to go to them for instruction on how to perform in those plays. It was never a problem.

This was a time, in the 1970s, when the Women's Liberation Movement and feminism were gaining prominence. We felt at the time women were entirely our equals and that responsibilities

had to be shared. By the time we got married, went into our marriages, all responsibilities for cooking, cleaning, and everything else had to be shared.

It did create some havoc in some of the organizations at the time because a lot of the guys weren't willing to accept that. But it was something, luckily for me, I encountered the moment I entered the activist movement.

Ray Baker: It's one thing to be in and of the activist movement within Black spaces—WHUR, WHUT, anything that starts with "WHU." It's another thing to be of that ilk, of that training, and be somewhere that starts with WAM.

Your career has taken you beyond the walls and campus of Howard University, but also to American University, and in fact, for many, you are well regarded there—perhaps even best known for your time at WAMU [American University Radio].

How did you bring with you your experiences, your training, and your leanings in Pan-Africanism, leftist socialism, and everything we've discussed thus into spaces that aren't always as welcoming to that?

Kojo Nnamdi: As my career at Howard University Television lengthened—and I had learned a long time before to leave my ideological orientation at the door when it came to covering news and issues. My commitment to socialism and Pan-Africanism, frankly, took a back seat to what I felt was most important. And that is, if ideas having to do with Pan-Africanism and socialism are important, then if they are allowed to compete fairly in the arena in the battle of ideas, then their truth and their validity will emerge.

It is no longer necessary for me to expound or espouse those beliefs, but just to make sure that there are spaces where people hold those beliefs—public spaces where they can participate in the engagement and battle of ideas. Also, it was just as important to me that white people be included in those spaces. Because by that time, I knew white people—both on the left and the right—whose ideas I felt were important.

On a regular basis on *Evening Exchange*, you would see Askia Muhammad, who was affiliated with the Nation of Islam and *Muhammad Speaks* newspaper. You would see Mark Plotkin, who was Jewish and liberal. You would see Tony Snow, a conservative who was working for *The Washington Times* at the time...all sitting on the same panel, having a conversation.

To the extent that Black people were excluded from conversations, it was important to me to ensure that all people and women—Bonnie Erbé was a regular guest—to make sure that everybody was included on Howard University Television in those conversations.

In 1998, I was approached by American University to host what used to be known as *The Derek McGinty Show*, which had become a show called *Public Interest*.

When I was approached to do the show, I didn't think much of it because I thought that I'd be doing much of the same thing that I was already doing on *Evening Exchange*. What was, however, most important about it was that I was doing a show called *Evening Exchange* in a predominantly Black section of the city for a historically Black university.

I was invited to do a show west of Rock Creek Park, in a predominantly white section of the city, at a station owned by a predominantly white university. I saw this as an opportunity to bridge these two communities in a Washington that has historically been divided along racial and class lines.

My presence at these two institutions—and any role I could play in having them collaborate—would be able to help people in this town understand what our differences were, but what we also shared in common.

I thought, at the time, that it was a very ambitious enterprise in which to engage, but I really wanted to engage in it. That was my thinking about it. The reality of it—I guess I can best tell you in terms of what happened when I would walk down the street.

Mark Plotkin and I, when I first started at WAMU, would be walking down the street, and all the Black people we passed would say, “Hey, Kojo, what's up?” None of the white people on the street would recognize me even though Howard University Television did have a significant white audience.

Mark would ask, “Why is it that everywhere we go, all these Black people recognize you?” I told him, “Because there's only one television station in Washington that thinking Black people watch—and that's Howard University Television.”

In those days BET [Black Entertainment Television] was still just doing [music] videos at the time. A lot of Black people who were interested in ideas weren't watching BET, but they were watching WHUT, when a whole lot of white people in the city didn't even know we [WHUT] existed.

After I had been at WAMU for a while, I'd walk into places, and white people would look at me and not recognize me. But the minute I opened up my mouth, they would turn around and say, “Oh, you're Kojo Nnamdi! I know that voice.”

So now, I live in an existence where Black people recognize me by sight, and white people recognize me by voice. If that's bringing people together, then maybe I've served some purpose in that regard.

Ray Baker: When we think about the Black Power Movement, we think about young people. We think about agitation. You started the interview earlier talking about the in-your-face rebellion to white supremacy. We don't often think about how those folks age and how their politics and their ideas—which is a word you've come back to a number of times—age. Describe your ideas aging. Describe your politics aging, describe how you have aged.

Kojo Nnamdi: When I look at Black Lives Matter activists, I see myself when I was younger. That was the level of my engagement—I wanted to be out there, confronting racism wherever I saw it, and I wanted to do it in the streets. I wanted to be seen doing it. I wanted to be seen standing up to it. I wanted to be militant because I felt that militancy would be more effective than a demeanor in which I was seeking respectability.

As I've grown older, I think I have refined my points of view. To some extent, I have mellowed—as people do when they get older. I still feel very strongly about justice and fighting injustice, but I no longer consider myself a Marxist-Leninist.

I think the fall of socialism in Eastern Europe in the 1980s taught me a great deal about how the ideas of scientific socialism and democratic centralism could be easily manipulated in an authoritarian manner, to create what, in fact, became dictatorships. That led me to pull away from those ideas, to recognize the fault of them and even begin to recognize the faults in the movement in which I myself participated in—the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement.

I began to recognize the tendencies of males in these organizations, to want to occupy positions of leadership, to essentially not acknowledge the contributions that women were making. I had to examine the extent to which I may have been a part of that at some point. As I've gotten older, for me, truth has become more important to me than ever.

What we in journalism call objectivity—something I frankly don't believe in—but making sure that facts do matter has become of crucial importance to me. Making sure that I am not following blindly, any ideas or any leaders. That my eyes are always open to the flaws in the ideas of the people with whom I'm associated. And most importantly, to the possible flaws in my own ideas.

I always like to tell people, you shouldn't take yourself too seriously because you should realize that you can be wrong. If you think that because you have fastened on to an idea, that you have an obligation to cling to that idea—even when others are pointing out flaws in that idea—then you need to check yourself out. Because you should always be open to change and always be open to new ideas.

We live in a society in which technology is changing society very rapidly. I have friends who refuse to use email. But you have to try to understand what is going on around you—either acknowledge it if there is no injustice involved or fight against it if there is injustice involved.

But not to fight against it simply because it's something you're not used to. We have to learn how to accommodate new ideas. When I look at Black Lives Matter activists, as I said earlier, I see myself. I see all the things I did right, but I also see some of the mistakes I made at the time. And I say, "Okay, you have to learn from your mistakes." But here I am—if you want to know the mistakes we made, I can tell you about them.

Ray Baker: I was just going to ask that. What is the role of the elders who have gone through this, in the space of advising or in their relationship with the younger people who are in the streets confronting brutality and injustice these days?

Kojo Nnamdi: To try to have them avoid some of the mistakes we make, even as we allow them to chart their own courses in life. We in the Black Panther Party thought it was cool to refer to the cops as "pigs"—and then we suffered the retaliation of the police, because they were who was really armed. We may have had a few pistols, etcetera, and we actually felt at one time we could carry out urban guerrilla warfare and that we could take over cities, and run them.

We discovered that was not true. We discovered that taunting people who were more heavily armed than we were could result in us bearing the brunt of their revenge. When we started calling the cops "pigs" and they began to retaliate, you saw what they did to the members of the Black Panther Party. The way in which members of the Black Panther Party were killed.

After a while, we learned to be more judicious in how we responded to these individuals because when you are young, you have the feeling that you are invincible. You feel empowered and then you get cut down. And if you are cut down in a vicious and violent manner, it can break your spirit.

What's very important to me with young people in the Black Lives Matter movement is to not have their spirits broken by pushing themselves too hard, too soon. But at the same time, allowing them to lead themselves. We cannot lead them. We can advise them. We can never write our own obituaries.

Ray Baker: The tale of Kojo Nnamdi will be left to someone, many years we pray, down the road to write. But if you had a little hand in saying what should go in that obituary, how should the legacy of Rex Orville Montague Paul—later Kojo Nnamdi—be remembered?

Kojo Nnamdi: I'm glad you brought up the name Rex Orville Montague Paul because I see legacies as part of a continuum. And it started with my parents. I never knew my grandparents, but for me, it started with my parents. I grew up in a home where my father, mother and their friends were intimately involved in debating what was going on all over the world.

I remember my parents and their friends talking about the overthrow of a leader named [Mohammad] Mosaddegh in Iran. I remember sitting in the living room hearing that

conversation, that the United States and the CIA had overthrown somebody named Mosaddegh and put somebody named the Shah of Iran [Mohammad Reza Pahlavi] in power.² It was only in later years that I realized that happened in 1954. At the time, I was 9 years old and listening to my parents and their friends discussing what was going on all over the world.

I remember in 1957, waking up in the morning, looking out my front window and seeing lots of Black people in African garb going past my house and asking my parents, I was 12 years old, “Why are those people dressed like that? Where are they going?”

They said, “Today is the day that Ghana gets its independence, and we here in the Western world, in the Caribbean, are celebrating Ghana’s independence.” I didn’t quite understand what they meant, but that was Rex Orville Montague Paul in that environment, coming into consciousness.

I remember when I was 15 years old in high school, having read a great deal of history, in an elite high school, about Europe and Great Britain. The first history teacher who taught me about Toussaint Louverture in Haiti...for the first time in history, I saw myself reflected in someone who had a role in changing the world and in ending slavery. That was Rex Orville Montague Paul.

When I came to Canada and the United States, I came as somebody who had been produced by an anti-colonial movement of which my parents and their friends were apart. There was already a strong degree of consciousness instilled in me against oppression by witnessing the fight against colonialism. Guyana got its independence the year before I came abroad and was a part of that.

So, in many ways, I was ready for the Black Power Movement and everything that happened since then. As I evolved into a journalist and I evolved into a talk show host, and into whatever I am today, I still carry those sentiments.

I carry a tattoo on my arm that has the District of Columbia flag—if you can see that—because I want justice for the District of Columbia, which has allowed no vote in the Congress of the United States. In at least one respect, I do not maintain a certain neutrality on that issue. That is who I am today.

I would like to believe that, over the span of my life, my primary interest has been in providing—or assisting to provide—justice for people who are oppressed and discriminated

² Mohammad Mosaddegh was the democratically elected Prime Minister of Iran, known for his nationalist policies, particularly the nationalization of Iran’s oil industry in 1951, which had been controlled by the British-owned Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) (later BP). In 1953, the CIA (Operation Ajax) and British intelligence (MI6) orchestrated a coup to overthrow Mosaddegh, fearing that his policies would reduce Western control over Iranian oil and increase Soviet influence. The coup restored Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to absolute power, making him a pro-Western authoritarian ruler.

against, wherever those people happen to be. If I have performed one small service in life, I would like that to be my legacy.

Ray Baker: His name is Kojo Nnamdi. He has been our guest here on the DC Black Power Chronicles, thank you for joining us. I'm Ray Baker, until next time.