

Black Power Chronicles: Koko Barnes

Koko Barnes Ladson, a SNCC veteran and activist, discussed her early life in Newport News, Virginia, and her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. She highlighted her role in organizing the New School of Afro-American Thought and her work with SNCC and the Black Panther Party. Barnes recounted her experiences with racial injustice, including the Emmett Till case and the electrocution of Linwood Bunch. She also detailed her efforts in community organizing, voter education, and her involvement with the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice. Barnes emphasized the importance of community engagement and self-awareness in activism.

Faye Edwards Coleman: Good afternoon. I'm Faye Coleman. I'm with the DC Black Power Chronicles oral history project. I'm delighted to have Ms. Koko Barnes Ladson here for an interview.

We're going to talk about the role she played in the community as an activist, as a SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] veteran, and the work she continues to do. She has made a tremendous contribution to the Black community in the District of Columbia and elsewhere. Welcome, Koko, and thank you for agreeing to this interview.

I want to start at the beginning and ask you to tell us a little about your early years as a child growing up. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I understand that you were born and raised in Newport News, Virginia. Is that correct?

Koko Barnes: That's what I accept, but I was physically born in North Carolina. My mom and dad were from North Carolina. They married young, and I was the last of three to my mother. She was going home to have all her babies and then coming back to Newport News. So, the family was living in Newport News, but I was born in North Carolina, Maxton, where Afeni Shakur was born. After three months, she [my mother] moved me back to the family in Newport News, and I lived there the rest of the time.

Faye Edwards Coleman: Tell us a little about the community you lived in. What was it like at that time—your neighbors, your siblings, and what role your parents played in your formative years?

Koko Barnes: Well, I don't have a lot of memories. I don't know why, but I don't. As I said, I was the youngest of three—my brother, James, we called Tank McQueen, and my sister, Ella McQueen. At that time, I was little Jean McQueen. I was always small in stature.

My father was an entrepreneur. By trade, he worked at the waterfront, as they called it—the shipyard in Newport News. At that time, it was the largest shipbuilding and dry dock company in the world, and it kept that title for many years until Norfolk built up right across the water.

I grew up feeling loved and doing the things most kids did, but because I was the youngest of three, I always wanted to know and do what they [my siblings] were doing. I started driving cars at the age of seven. They weren't, but I wanted to get a leg up on them. Our school—I went to the same high school as the girls in *Hidden Figures*.¹

Faye Edwards Coleman: Really? What was that like?

Koko Barnes: That was [at] George Washington Carver [High School]. We have a historical marker on Jefferson Avenue, our main drag even now. It was erected last year because so many people of note went to that school, and the school played a pivotal part in the community.

The Goble girls [Joylete, Constance and Katherine]...there was license taken in the making of the movie, but in [19]61 when they say the movie took place, they graduated that year. They were in my sister's class. Joylette, the oldest, was in my brother's class, and I shared a class with them because I was in the orchestra. We were all in the orchestra, but we were all at the Gobles' house.

The thing that's really important for me...even bringing that up is that as important as Mrs. Goble [referring to Katherine G. Johnson] was at Langley Field [NASA's Langley Research Center in Hampton, VA] at the time, she was just as active in the community—receiving children, encouraging them.

Fortunately, my family was advanced in terms of grades, but we were still encouraged. I was encouraged to be an aeronautical engineer. In fact, my high school yearbook asked, “What are you going to be? Aeronautical engineer.”

Faye Edwards Coleman: Back in those days, was there a focus on STEM? And that interest in aeronautical engineering, where did that come from?

Koko Barnes: I'm sure that came from Mrs. Goble's influence and her work at Langley Field, which was right up the street from us. Though I grew up in Newport News, the Hampton dividing line was just a few blocks away, and Langley Field was just up the road.

¹ *Hidden Figures* is a 2016 book by Margot Lee Shetterly, later adapted into a film, that highlights the contributions of Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson, three African American women mathematicians at NASA's Langley Research Center, whose calculations were critical to the success of the U.S. space program despite facing racial and gender discrimination.

I think it came from...at that time Carver [High School]—this was before integration. Our school had an advanced class—the senior class. I think it started before senior year, but my memory isn't good there. In the senior class, I was in the advanced academic group, and we went to Hampton Institute at the time—it wasn't Hampton University yet—for advanced math and science.

Faye Edwards Coleman: This was while you were still in high school?

Koko Barnes: Yes, still in high school. At that time, Virginia had a law requiring five years of PE [physical education]. So, in our last year, we had to take PE. We took our school bus to Hampton, attended classes there during the day, then returned to our school in the evening for PE before heading home on the bus with everyone else.

Faye Edwards Coleman: Tell me a little bit about your earliest recollections of racial injustice during those years—maybe high school or even earlier. What were some of the things that seemed to stick out?

Koko Barnes: The most troubling event was Emmett Till's murder. The tragic and horrific murder of Emmett Till, a 15-year-old from Chicago [IL] going back to his roots in Mississippi that summer. At the time, it didn't come out, but since then, it's all come out that it was a lie. He never did anything that he was accused of having done.

But the accusation was that he whistled at a white woman and Virginia was strictly anti-Black at that time. He was caught, beaten to death, and hung by a group of white men. The papers had it. I can't really remember about TV at the time.

It was just horrific. My dad, being in the public as he was and working in an international setting at the shipyard—people from all over the country interacting with him—it was definitely a topic of conversation. It was terrifying to me.

Our house was always a refuge. If you had any problems, you could come to the McQueens. If you didn't have shoes, my mom would buy you shoes. We had the corner store—Joe's Corner. My dad, Joseph McQueen [ran it]. We sold, just like any corner store, canned foods and shelf food, but we always had fresh meats. You could come there and get food and pay us later on the books. So, I was in contact with the whole community at a very early age.

Faye Edwards Coleman: Was there something about incidents like the Emmett Till murder? And I think when we talked earlier, you had mentioned something about a gentleman who was electrocuted?

Koko Barnes: Yes, that was the Bunch family. Their home was directly across the street from our corner store, and we got to know them very well. They were always speaking to us in the store.

Linwood Bunch was his name. This was just a few years later, and he was alleged to have been dating a white girl. He was caught. And at that time—if you were dating, getting ready to get married or whatever your level of relationship is—if you get caught you just say rape, so that you are cleared. Because the stigma and the accusation sticks. He was electrocuted for dating a white girl.

Faye Edwards Coleman: There was no trial?

Koko Barnes: They had a trial, but he was found guilty because of the miscegenation laws at the time. That's what it said. In fact, there was an article in *The Washington Post* this week about the man in Virginia who was most noted for making sure there was no mixing of the races. I don't want to dignify him with his name. He believed that if you had one drop of Black blood in you, you were worthless and not worthy to be represented by anything that the government offered.

The biggest thing that he did was to keep Native Americans from being recognized and receiving any compensation the government was giving to tribes, and recognizing tribes. He wouldn't do that. And there was someone also in Maryland as well. But the laws were very clear.

Faye Edwards Coleman: As you started experiencing and hearing about these [events] and knowing these people—in the case of the gentleman who was a neighbor of yours who was electrocuted. How did you begin to—you obviously had engendered feelings about racial injustice and and all in this country, what was going on in this country. How did you process that, and how did you act on those feelings? Those feelings of rage as you were getting older?

Koko Barnes: I'm not sure that I acted on it as I was getting older in a conscious way because my family was a pivotal family in the community. We were always interacting with the community and helping. Also, there weren't white people in our community. It was pre-integration, so you only saw Black people. Even our police officers were Black. Everyone we came in contact with was Black.

Of course, my dad owning a store, his suppliers were not Black. So, we did come in contact with white people. But on a daily basis—getting on the bus, going to school, leaving school, coming back to the store, on the weekends, going to the movies. The beaches...there was a stream across the river and one side was black, one side was white. Same water, but there was no mixing of the races.

I had friends who grew up further south. DC was where you had to change when the trains came through. You got out and you got in the Black only car. When you were coming North [from]

South, and when you were going North from the South to change back, they got in the Black only car. So, DC was a little different. And by Virginia being a bordering state of DC, some of those things were more liberal than elsewhere.

Most of my friends talked about how when they were going to school in the morning, they had to get off the sidewalk if white kids were walking, and give them the sidewalk and then they could get back on. Or if there was ever any dispute, the white kids were always in the right. I didn't experience any of that.

We grew up knowing who we were and that we were great, proud people. We could do anything we wanted to do. I really grew up thinking that I could. I was never challenged, but I grew up thinking it wasn't a question. You just had to do your work, learn your craft, and work your craft. So, it was that kind of confidence, full confidence, with which I approached life for myself.

Faye Edwards Coleman: So, when you got to Howard [University]—you came to Howard in the early [19]60s, I believe in [19]63—you were a student in engineering. Was it in engineering?

Koko Barnes: Double math and physics.

Faye Edwards Coleman: What were your first impressions? Obviously, there was a lot going on at Howard, and [it was] different from, I would assume, from Newport News. What were your first impressions of Howard?

Koko Barnes: To be honest, the very first real impression I got was on the main campus, the student group called NAG [Nonviolent Action Group], which, in many ways, was the precursor to SNCC. But it didn't go from NAG to SNCC, but the people in them, you know, did that same kind of work. They were organizing, collecting foods and clothing to take the Mississippi for the summer of [19]64 [referring to Freedom Summer].

I was always active in the community, so I immediately got involved with NAG. Through that organization, I met Stokely [Carmichael] and a few of the SNCC leaders and saw my place in that kind of activity. From there, I joined other local organizations. Eventually... 14th Street was a long way from where I was living, because I moved off campus my second year. Eventually, I found my way to 14th Street where they were organizing this organization called The New School for Afro-American Thought.

Gaston Neal—may he rest in peace—and Don Freeman were the major organizers. My friend Vera Walston, at the time, and I decided we might as well get involved and help with the organizing effort. And we did. We helped organize The New School physically, because the interior was fitted out, as well as organizing people to come and to take part.

The whole idea of The New School was to bring consciousness into the community—to let Black people know there were things they could do. This was around [19]66, I believe.

We also brought in speakers. Everybody came through The New School. Malcolm X, LeRoi Jones—who later became Amiri Baraka—John Carlos and Tommy Smith after they did the Black Power salute at the Olympics. It was our cultural center, our center for consciousness and organizing the community

It was on 14th Street. The SNCC office wasn't on 14th Street at that time. When they moved to 14th Street, they moved diagonally across from The New School. Vera and I went over to see how we could be helpful there, or how they could be helpful to us.

Baba Zulu [Dr. El Senzengakulu Zulu] that time Lester McKinney, was heading the office. It was also, by this time, the year that Stokely issued the call for Black Power. Willie Ricks, of course, is the person that articulated the phrase Black Power at this particular rally at which Stokely was speaking, but he embraced it and continued it. Stokely got the credit, but—

Faye Edwards Coleman: It was really Willie Ricks who did the first uttering of that phrase Black Power.

Koko Barnes: Absolutely, and Stokely got the credit. But DC was bubbling with activity for Black people at that time. As I said, if you came to DC, you came through The New School.

I remember Chuck Stone—he was a writer for *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and a special assistant to Adam Clayton Powell. He really energized us. He was always helpful, always bringing information, giving us ideas, and pointing us in certain directions. A lot of work went on at The New School, and a lot of people.

Faye Edwards Coleman: So, tell me. Was The New School also called Ujamaa Shule?

Koko Barnes: No.

Faye Edwards Coleman: What was the connection, if any, between them?

Koko Barnes: There was no direct connection that I know of. My role never had anything to do with Ujamaa. I saw Ujamaa as an outgrowth of SNCC Freedom School.

When children in DC started wearing afros, I would think [it was] a direct influence from some of the things happening in that corridor—with The New School and SNCC. But they were being expelled for it. So, we held classes in the afternoon. I would organize a place and the students. There were two sisters in particular—the Coffey sisters, Mary and Marty Coffey. May they rest in peace.

One of their sons is a doctor, and the other son...they're still in the area. They helped us by providing tutoring. They were schoolteachers for students who were expelled and had to keep their lessons up. Vera, others, and I organized [it]. Alberta Crow was an early student, Vera's sister, Jolynn Brooks, in our SNCC Freedom School.

Baba Zulu—being the head of the SNCC office prior, even after Stokely came—it was the SNCC office's project, but I was the person doing it. So, they started a preschool called Ujamaa over at 9th [Street] and Florida [Avenue]. It operated there for a few years and then they moved to their current location at 15th [Street] and Q [Street], Northwest, where it has remained ever since. They are the oldest, longest-standing, independent school in DC that I'm aware of.

Faye Edwards Coleman: And those are the roots. From the DC SNCC office, as a Freedom School, an offshoot of that.

Koko Barnes: That's my recollection, yes.

Faye Edwards Coleman: How did you happen to become Stokely's executive assistant? When was that, do you recall?

Koko Barnes: Shortly after he arrived in the office, he became the chairman of SNCC. He had a lot of extra [people], I would imagine, call on him from the community, from around the country. He knew of my administrative skills. Being the child of an entrepreneur, I had a lot of skills because I organized everything for my dad. I did his taxes, I did his inventory. I did everything for his businesses, kept his business in order.

So much so, that I think about it. The largest hardware store in Hampton [VA], very nearby where we lived, was liquidating—going out of business, sort of like the Hechinger situation.² They brought in a nationwide liquidator and they had an ad in the paper for some help. I applied because I was going to be a senior next year, leaving. And I was getting more and more responsibility, but more and more freedom to move around.

And I applied to go over and work that summer before my last year. And Mr.—his name won't come to me—but the liquidator, I don't know what I was doing or what he observed, but he asked me, would I be his special assistant.

And we got that place organized, and we got that sale going on, and he was out of there. But that was my first job outside of my parents' businesses, and I realized then that I did have some

² Hechinger was a major home improvement and hardware retail chain that went out of business in 1999 due to competition from big-box retailers like Home Depot and Lowe's.

marketable skills. I guess other people saw it. Wherever I was, I was articulate, I could write, I could speak, I could research. In fact, I did some ghost writing for Stokely.

Faye Edwards Coleman: I'm in the process of cleaning out some files and all, and it's *The Pitfalls of Liberalism*. Because I thought I noticed your name. It says copyright Stokely's mother, Mabel Carmichael, written January 1969. Exclusive distribution by KoKo. I said, okay, let me bring this and show you.

Koko Barnes: Yeah, that was one of them. He traveled so much and he was gone a lot. *Ebony*, a Johnson publication [Johnson Publication Company], had a contract with him to record his speeches. I don't know what's going to come of that. With all of these people from the [19]60s, their [speeches] weren't getting taken down, but he did have a contract with Johnson Publications and they taped most of his speeches.

But he was so busy, he traveled so much. A lot of times, he would just say, "Koko, put something together—make a pamphlet for this, or answer these letters for me." So, I answered his correspondence. Some of it he never even saw—he just trusted me to do it. And much of it he saw, I would get him to sign. But that was one of them, yes.

Faye Edwards Coleman: Did you have an opportunity to travel with them? I know you also work closely with other SNCC veterans, like Chico Neblett, Cleveland Sellers and some of the others. Did you travel around, or were you basically in the DC SNCC office and then the DC area?

Koko Barnes: I was basically in the DC SNCC office in the DC area. However, I did travel with him on several occasions. For example, toward the end of the existence of the SNCC office, there was a merger with the Black Panther Party, and Stokely was the Prime Minister.

As Prime Minister and as my being his executive assistant, that gave me responsibilities because most of the stuff, I knew, he wasn't going to be doing if it was of an administrative nature. I did a lot of work organizing offices on the East Coast and training Afeni Shakur and her group in the New York Panther office. I went with him to Minnesota, the night he made his famous speech about anti-Zionism.

Faye Edwards Coleman: That was so controversial at that time, most of the things that he said.

Koko Barnes: In fact, it really began the demise of the SNCC office because so many of the supporters were Jewish people. And to his defense, it got painted as an anti-Jewish position, but

it was not anti-Jewish, because Semites have a history with African people.³ That's what they are. That's not anything that we would be against. But it was some politics.

But of course, that's how it came out. So, I was with him then, and I traveled with him to California for the Panthers for Huey's trial—Huey P. Newton, the head of the Black Panther Party. Four or five kind of trips like that, but not a lot.

Faye Edwards Coleman: What was that period of the merger between SNCC and the Panthers [like]? You were sort of a front row observer to all of that. This was the time when the Panthers were very active in the community—with their community breakfast, all of their programs and all the controversy. How was that with you? How did that impact your feelings about nationalism and Black Power at that time?

Koko Barnes: I have to admit, I wasn't making a direct connection at that time. You kind of do, you kind of perform, you kind of bring out who you are for the task at hand. For example, in organizing and establishing offices or training the sisters who were manning the phones, you would go into a professional, administrative stance. You wouldn't get into the politics of it because things happened so fast, with so much to do.

But because then J. Edgar Hoover who, at that time, was head of the FBI, began to step up his opposition to anything Black—any organization [that was] Black.⁴ Having said that he didn't want a Black Messiah to rise after the Malcolm's [Malcolm X] and the King's [Martin Luther King, Jr]. They really, really tracked me. And state agents following me all the time. And not just me, it was many of us.

Faye Edwards Coleman: When folks came to Boston and I was involved, etcetera, I'll never forget the time the FBI came to my house and I wasn't there. They talked to my father and said, "Do you know what kind of people your daughter is involved with?" It was you and Chico and a lot of Black Panther folks. So how did that era influence your beliefs?

Koko Barnes: Prior to that era, I worked—the United Planning Organization [UPO] opened in 1965. It was an anti-poverty program to address the ills in the community. I'm not saying [that], that's what they said. They hired a lot of professional organizers, and I was one of them. Next thing I knew, I looked around and there were so many SNCC organizers in it.

³ During the late 1960s, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) shifted toward a more radical Black Power stance, leading to tensions with some of its early allies, including Jewish civil rights activists. This change, particularly after SNCC's 1967 statement criticizing Israel's actions in the Six-Day War, led to accusations of antisemitism, though SNCC leaders argued their position was anti-Zionist, not anti-Jewish.

⁴ As FBI director (1924–1972), J. Edgar Hoover escalated efforts to suppress Black civil rights and radical movements, particularly through COINTELPRO (Counterintelligence Program), which targeted organizations like SNCC, the Black Panther Party, and Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), using surveillance, infiltration, and disinformation to destabilize Black activism.

There was a white guy named Al Maxirly who—I don't know if he's in jail now, but he hasn't stopped, and they haven't stopped haunting him. He formed an organization called ACCESS [Action Coordinating Committee to End Segregation in the Suburbs].

This was when the white flight was going on, when white people were leaving DC for the suburbs. They built the Beltway to give them easy access to get back and forth home. He organized a march around the Beltway to symbolize this noose. That's what he called it, around the city of Washington.

And I looked up, and many of my UPO friends were part of the organization. We marched around the Beltway, and we got bottles thrown at us and fruit thrown at us in [19]66. UPO was an interesting phenomenon because, we now can organize in our communities. I think we were supposed to be cooling people, but we were educating people.

For example, we opened the Prince George's office, called the Suburban Program. We rented offices above a famous landmark called Jack's Liquors, next door to a famous landmark called Ebony Inn. Anyone in this area would know them.

We had the second floor above Jack's—there was a loan office there, and we had the second floor. We were right in the middle of the community. We did voter registration—not from the office, but in the community—voter education.

Fairmont Heights was where it was, right across the DC line—Eastern Avenue in Northeast, near Sheriff Road. Gladys Noon Spellman, who was a councilperson in Prince George's County [MD] at the time, was doing a tour through the area and broke the heel on her shoe. She said, "We're going to pave these roads." And they got paved.

That's the kind of nothing going on to support the aspirations of Black people and the condition at the time. We helped support that, argue for it, keep the pressure on until it happened. And it happened. We registered people... whatever it was that they felt their community needed. We supported aspirations. I don't know what happened to the Suburban Program because I resigned to work full-time at SNCC as Stokely's assistant. But the [19]60s were a time of so much going on.

Faye Edwards Coleman: I know you also were instrumental in the Black United Front, which was having a major impact in the community at that time, talk a little bit about that.

Koko Barnes: It's interesting because it's just the result of organizing. Stokely, at the time, was calling for the Black leaders to come together not to just talk, but talk on a platform that asked for and supported the same things that each [leader's group] needed. Good schools—Barbara Sizemore. I even ran for the school board to support her aspirations of what she wanted to do and to keep her on the board. I lost by 10 or 100, I forget the number, but I lost by a few votes.

At that time, there was Sterling Tucker, Walter Fauntroy. The head of UDC, which at that time was called Federal City College, Holland Randolph, who was the head of it. You had Douglas Moore, Dave Eaton—leaders of the community at that time.

Stokely felt it was important that we just not have leaders who talked about their corners of the world, but that we could find some corners that all of us felt and were affected by. That we could come up with some platforms to demand or ask for from the authorities that we needed, and then to ask the community to support those platforms as well.

And it worked very well. Their first call for Black United Front, all the leaders came, but Stokely's admission to them was, "Nobody's going to hold a press conference when this meeting is over and say what happened." This is our community. This is our meeting, and there'll be no press releases. You can say it was spirited. A lot was accomplished, but no report of the meeting.

It worked for a long time. There were no reports of the meeting. But what happened was a young, Black boy got shot by a policeman whose name was white. So the white policeman, Black boy was even back in those days—you know what's happening now, white policeman, Black boys and men and women.

It kind of changed the dynamic some because the cameras and the microphones were going in front of the leaders asking their opinion. Because the people took to the streets and complained and gave voice to what happened. But it was a great experiment, and it opened up other cities to have a Black United Front.

Faye Edwards Coleman: I remember you had a major role in the Commission for Racial Justice and United Church of Christ. How did you get involved, and what sort of things were you all trying to accomplish at that in those days?

Koko Barnes: The SNCC office closed in [19]69 and Dr. Charles Cobb—rest his soul, just a giant among men—he was United Church of Christ's minister, one of the Black ministers at that time. In fact, Jeremiah Wright was not a minister at that time. He was a board member of the Commission for Racial Justice. The church established this commission and Charles Cobb was hired to do the groundwork for the commission.

Faye Edwards Coleman: Charles Cobb Sr's son who was very instrumental in SNCC.

Koko Barnes: He had to get it from his dad, because his dad was just phenomenal. In fact, he was the one that convinced the church to get involved with the Wilmington Ten cases.⁵ To get

⁵ The Wilmington Ten were a group of civil rights activists, including Benjamin Chavis, wrongfully convicted in 1971 for arson and conspiracy in Wilmington, North Carolina, amid racial tensions over school desegregation. Religious leaders, particularly from the United Church of Christ (UCC), played a crucial role in advocating for their release, with strong support from figures who convinced the church to mobilize legal and financial aid, ultimately leading to their convictions being overturned in 1980.

that exposed for what it was and then to get Ben Chavis released from jail. Of course, Reverend Ben Chavis went on to become the head of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People].

Faye Edwards Coleman: And well before that, the Commission for Racial Justice.

Koko Barnes: Yes, he came to head the local office. I was the director in his stead and when he came back, he took over the directorship, yes. I cross-pollinated with a lot of the early things in DC that mattered. For example, Blacks in Government [BIG]. I remember Nell Pendleton...the names just escape me. The early organizers.

We would meet with them, we would talk with them, we would strategize with them, support whatever their aspiration was, whatever the activity was.

Faye Edwards Coleman: Was this in the [19]60s or—

Koko Barnes: That was more in the [19]70s or before the [19]60s ended. Dr. Cobb, in [19]69 when the SNCC offices closed, they asked me to find a location to have a local office, a local presence. I said that I would, but that at that time I was pregnant. Probably that January. And I said, “You know, when I have the baby, we can move forward, move in.” I wasn't the director of the office, but I was the organizer in the office.

For an example, many things came out of that office. I started a third-party custody program at Lorton [VA], and I named it after some youth that I had become acquainted with that were in Lorton. And we call it YAG, Youth Against Narcotics. It was the first third-party custody program there where we got them. We got about 12 inmates released to me five days a week to come into the community for education and service in the community.

Faye Edwards Coleman: And so your role was, they would come to you, report to you, and you assign them yes to projects in the community?

Koko Barnes: Yes.

Faye Edwards Coleman: And did they go back?

Koko Barnes: Yes, they went back to Lorton in the evening. Dare. Dare to live, dare to believe, live your convictions and then you're not afraid. You don't think something is wrong because it's what you believe. You believe you're right. Everybody's on your side because you got to be on the side of righteousness.

I'm not going to get into the church with this, but United Church of Christ was footing the bill for this and they fully supported. As I said, Reverend Jeremiah Wright—who is the reverend now, who wasn't then—was a board member. T. Willard Fair, who has been head of the Urban League in Miami, Florida for over 50 years, was a board member.

Karen Edmonds [Spellman], her father was the chairman of the board at United Church of Christ. And Dr. Edmonds was a firebrand, then. I see where Karen gets it from. My goodness, Karen Edmonds, but she's no longer Edmonds [maiden name]. But the fruits of survival, the roots of knowing who you are, the roots of being committed, the roots of organization were all over DC at the time.

I won't forget that the United Church of Christ—at the time, I was director for programs on Africa, and director for community organizations. And I joined the Council of Churches of Greater Washington. At that time, Reverend...[can't recall name] he assigned me to the social action committee. And as a social action chairperson, I could organize churches around social issues, and each church could choose to, or not to, have an event or an activity around those issues.

In the early [19]70s—and I know I've jumped from [19]60s—freedom for South Africa, was the hottest thing on the ticket for us. We held—we meaning the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice—held the first anti-apartheid national conference.

Faye Edwards Coleman: I was going to ask about that.

Koko Barnes: Yes, we held it right here in DC and Damu Smith was my executive assistant on that. May he rest in peace. Damu was wonderful, he was talented. Just always on it. So, he was my right hand, and I was fortunate to have him, because I don't think we would have had the success that we did have had we not had him.

DC was the first city to vote to not do business with any company that did business in South Africa. I don't want to go too far into that. But I believe—and I'll go on record saying that—this whole thing of releasing Nelson [Mandela] from prison had its genesis in South Africa, needing to have sanctions lifted because they were dying.

A lot of the early activities that really got a lot of attention nationally emanated right here. Eleanor Holmes Norton and Mary Frances Berry [were] out protesting...Randall Robinson, outside the South African Embassy. My children were arrested doing that. And Dr. Sylvia Hill. In fact, we had a coalition with Dr. Sylvia Hill, SASP: South African Support Project.

We had a coalition with SASP, and as a member, I helped collect medical supplies to send to the front lines for the Southern African freedom fighters. At that time, you had Zimbabwe up in arms, Angola up in arms. You had Mozambique up in arms.

Just as an aside—I won't stay on this too long—but I went to Zimbabwe in its first year of independence. The medical supplies that came out of DC, by independent school children and others, had been sent over, and I had the pleasure of opening that box and opening supplies coming from DC.

I saw my daughter's box—she was in an independent school at the time—and that just made me feel wonderful. Because you give money, you send stuff, but you never know if it ever gets to the people to whom it was intended. You don't know if it gets used in the way it's supposed to be. I saw that because I helped her to make that box. So, we made a first aid kit, put hinges on it, little red cross and it just did my heart good. I worked in the Ministry of Health and we opened that box.

Faye Edwards Coleman: That was 1980.

Koko Barnes: I've left the 70s already. At that time I was talking about SASP, Dr. Sylvia Hill and that Southern Africa Support Project. They did enormous work, wonderful work coming out of the Sixth Pan-African Congress. She was one of the organizers for the Sixth PAC. My daughter was born that year and I didn't get a chance to go. I had to make decisions. My husband went, but I didn't go.

Faye Edwards Coleman: I want to ask you about African Liberation Day. There were so many rallies and marches here in DC, almost annually or every other year. They would gather in what used to be Meridian Park—we changed the name to Malcolm X Park. You had a major role in that. Talk about that.

Koko Barnes: I don't recall the real genesis. I can't say if it was more SNCC or more New School or what, but I was an active organizer, and Stokely picked it up, and we physically had a naming ceremony. Right across the street from it was the Ghanaian embassy, and while it was a little awkward politically, we asked them to allow us to use the embassy to make the announcement of a change of name and to garner it for the community that it now was the community's park.

It would be called Malcolm X Park from here on. I did the press conference and brother Owusu Sadaukai, [founder and president of] Malcolm X Liberation University, stood with me. The two of us did the naming ceremony.

Faye Edwards Coleman: I was there. I remember.

Koko Barnes: And it was wonderful because our position was that this is our community—we live in it. Why can't the things that happen in the community reflect the people who live here and their aspirations? They have a part in doing it.

When WPFW came to town, Lauren Cress Love was talking to me about it. She said, "Koko, you ought to come." And I said, "I will." She and I decorated the studio, put up walls—those padded walls and everything. Because we felt—and I know I strongly still do—that the community has to be part of itself, of lifting itself as well as when they are tearing it down. Which is not positive.

Faye Edwards Coleman: Talk a little about your involvement in Pan-Africanism and the concept of Pan-Africanism. You mentioned your activities related to the conference and the Free South Africa Movement. But can you remember your early awareness of the Pan-African concept and movement?

Koko Barnes: I don't know that I can remember the beginning of it because when I got to Howard, you couldn't escape Black consciousness. Even though I grew up in an all-Black community where I rarely saw white people—or just on some occasions—it was a different feeling. I guess [at the time] I was a young woman and I have to make my own decisions. And choose to go, not to go. But working hard for people less fortunate than you, doing something I have been doing all along on specific project. Collecting clothes, collecting food, packing them up and getting involved—with people talking about [how] we are an African people.

Even before Malcolm went to Mecca, we were saying this, "We are an African people." Our history is of an African people and our future will be that of an African people. And there was so many [saying], "I ain't no African. I'm from North Carolina. I don't know nothing about Africa."

I think those were the genesis. Then, when I got involved in an organization like SNCC—oh, I know what really sealed it. I got to the United Nations and the OAU, the Organization of African Unity, and they embraced me. Through the Commission for Racial Justice, they made me part of their delegation. Through that I had credentials to attend any United Nations event.

I think my first United Nations project I participated in was in Mozambique, for Zimbabwe and Mozambique—I forget the title, in Southern Africa. I met Samora Machel, and I was so impressed. His wife, of course, who is the current wife of Nelson Mandela—Graça [Machel]. She was so gracious. She had a big reception for all of us.

Of course, I wanted to single myself out and let them know about people in Washington, DC, who support them. As I said to someone recently, my girlfriend [friend] Vera... at that time, the ambassador was Andrew Young who is [a] United Church of Christ minister. I said to Vera, "We

were boogalooing in Mozambique with Andrew Young.” She said, “What?” After President Samora Machel had the party, we were over with the down group, and we were boogalooing.⁶

So, I think that that United Nations experience, is what really concretized, as Stokely would say, the theory with the reality going through those African countries. I must have visited 20, 30 African countries, and on the front line of the ones that had war in those huge planes that were carrying supplies.

I'll never forget we went out of Nigeria to the country just above it [Niger] to take medical supplies. And I was in this [C-130] transport plane that had nothing, it didn't have seats, like, “Fasten your seat belts.” It was just a military plane taking equipment. I just couldn't believe that this was the reality of the world, and I was a part of it.

Going back to the supplies being sent, that we could affect it, both with supplies, with our coming in solidarity with them. With our pledging that we know that we're an African people, and we know that the same people that colonize you, colonized us.

So, when Africans come over here and they're told, “Don't go into the inner city, don't date Black women because they carry butcher knives.” They're told these things. And many of you who know African people who work places, can ask them, they'll tell you that they were told to avoid certain areas. Don't talk to certain people. And they tell us that the same people who told you that tell us stuff about you. You know, “You stink, you fly, you swing from trees, you don't have bathrooms.”

And for people who don't know, they take that and so then the continent doesn't meet because of these barriers. I had a chance to not just knock those barriers down... I remember first year of independence in Zimbabwe, I was working in the Ministry of Health, and at lunchtime, you go to get your lunch and you go to the little sandwich shop around the corner, and there are two lines, a white line and a Black line.

And Lord, they were pulling my [hand saying] “Sister Koko.” I walk up to the front. There's two people over there, and our line is out the door around the corner, and it's two people in the white line. So I said, “Excuse me, what's, what's going on?” You know, Zimbabwe is free now.

Faye Edwards Coleman: Let me fast forward quickly, because we're running out of time—this is just so fascinating. Fast forward to the 21st century, talk about your involvement over the last 10 years or so in Prince George's County, in Seat Pleasant [MD], and beyond. How have your early experiences with Black Power, SNCC, and Pan-Africanism influenced what you do now and what you've been doing recently in the community?

⁶ The reference to “boogalooing” (a popular dance style) suggests a moment of joy and cultural exchange at a post-independence gathering, where activists and diplomats, including Young, engaged informally with local communities.

Koko Barnes: I'm glad you asked me that, because when I came back from Africa, Zimbabwe, I got married to a continental African and had a wonderful son, Lamin Roy N'Dour who is a fantastic person, intelligent. He's a Brown [University] graduate—he didn't go to Howard—in economics. But he's also a third generation entrepreneur, and he's making his mark in the area.

But when I got back, I got married, had Lamin and I worked for the Office of the People's Counsel. At that time, Brian Lederer was the head of the Office of the People's Counsel. The current head is Sandra Mattavous-Frye, who worked with me back then—a very competent person.

The first project we worked on was the breakdown of the Ma Bell into the Baby Bells.⁷ I was hired as a community liaison to go out and explain [the changes]. If there was anything before the DC Legislators Council, the Office of the People's Counsel would help the community understand the issue. The most recent one was the buyout of Pepco.

Faye Edwards Coleman: And Washington gas too.

Koko Barnes: Before any of that could happen, the people had to have an opportunity to participate—to say whether they wanted it or not. I was hired to hold community forums where people could air their grievances, explain what the issues on the table are, who was involved, what it meant for them, and what it meant overall.

At that time, it was the breakup of Ma Bell into the Baby Bells. That was a very interesting case. Judge Harold Green was the judge in that case. It was interesting going through the city, talking to people, and answering questions about it.

I had just come back from Zimbabwe and didn't know exactly what I'd be doing, but once I landed in there, I could see—this is the same everywhere. If our people aren't informed and don't get active, then decisions are made for us by people who don't always have our best interests. And not just make decisions for us, but they also influence us to stay home, not to vote, or to believe our vote doesn't matter. It's not the case.

I came back, worked for the Office of the People's Counsel, and then, as I said, got married, had a baby, and moved out of DC into the county. That was a big change for me—I was a DC girl. But I got involved in Prince George's County and landed with a startup organization that wanted to make a difference in the community. They asked me to be an advisor, and I agreed.

⁷ "Ma Bell" was the nickname for the Bell System, which was broken up into "Baby Bells" in 1984. The breakup was the result of a settlement between AT&T and the federal government after years of antitrust lawsuits.

Of course, I eventually ended up as the chairperson. But when I moved away and came back, I stayed with them. I came every quarter for meetings and continued working with them. When I came back to the area, I became director of it.

The organization dealt with housing—housing issues that were leading up to the big housing crisis we just experienced. Getting the community to understand that nothing can happen without your say-so. But enough of you have to say so, not just one or two of you. Which means we have to organize. We have to knock on doors, we have to go to churches. We have to talk to our neighbors, etcetera.

That kind of reinvigorated me, because I had been away and out of it for a long time. I even moved back to Newport News – my dad got very ill – to help him with his health, and we eventually moved him back to the area, and that's when I came back to the area as well. But knowing that everybody has a responsibility to get involved in their community. If you don't like something, that's going on, work to change it, because that's how it works.

Faye Edwards Coleman: If you don't change it, it's not going to happen.

Koko Barnes: That's right.

Faye Edwards Coleman: I want to thank Koko for this wonderful interview. If you had one piece of advice for the next generation of community activists, what would it be?

Koko Barnes: Know yourself and you can find yourself in service to your community.

Faye Edwards Coleman: Wonderful, very good advice. Thank you so much, Koko, this has been a pleasure. You've been an inspiration for so many in the community, and your legacy will live on for years to come.

Koko Barnes: You forgot to mention the influence that you gave to me when you were a student, helping me with that Canadian Tour across Canada to all the universities.

Faye Edwards Coleman: Actually, it was Stokely that called me. I was at Cornell [University] at the time, and Stokely called you and Ethel Minor. And he said, "Faye. I need you to facilitate. They need to go." Was it Halifax? You went to Halifax, Nova Scotia?

Koko Barnes: Halifax, Nova Scotia. Toronto, the whole suite. I went to five universities.

Faye Edwards Coleman: That was in [19]69, because I was at Cornell.

Koko Barnes: So, it's people like you who support us and we thank you.

Faye Edwards Coleman: It's my pleasure, since it's our role. Thank you, Koko, wonderful, wonderful and very inspirational. Thank you so much.