Black Power Chronicles: Nkenge Touré

Nkenge Touré discusses her early activism, starting at age 14, including refusing to pledge allegiance and organizing against gender-based dress codes in school. She recounts her involvement with the Black Panther Party, her role in the The Black Voice, and her arrest for protesting racial injustice. Touré details her work with the Black Panther Party's survival programs, such as the Free Breakfast Program and the People's Free Health Service. She also highlights her transition to women's issues, founding the DC Rape Crisis Center, and her involvement in the National Black Women's Health Project. Touré emphasizes the importance of self-care, continuous learning, and intersectionality in activism.

Nkechi Taifa: Greetings. I am Nkechi Taifa and I am really thrilled to be here as part of the SNCC Legacy Project, DC Black Power Chronicles. I'm very thrilled to have the opportunity to interview my mentor, someone who has been my inspiration, Nkenge Touré.

Nkenge, I just want to welcome you here and say that I have always felt an affinity toward you. Our birth names were the same—Anita—and even our adopted African names were very, very similar. So, I just want to welcome you here this afternoon.

Nkenge Touré: I'm thrilled too. I'm thrilled to be here because I think this project is really exciting. We often talk about young people and why they don't have the information. Part of it is because we're not sharing it. We're not teaching it on a broad enough scale for people to benefit from it.

I think this is really important, not just for doing research, but for making sure that the legacy is not lost. I commend SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee], Karen Spellman, and everyone involved in this project. I commend them for taking this on, and I'm really excited.

Nkechi Taifa: Nkenge, you mentioned young people. Let's start right there. When you were a young person—I'm talking about a really young person—your growing-up years in Baltimore [MD], some of the things you were doing way back in high school. Share a little bit of that with us.

Nkenge Touré: I think that I got on my path, as it were—the path that the Creator, the universe, set out for me—a very long time ago. I have actually been organizing and doing things since I was about 14 years old, starting in junior high school and on into high school.

In junior high school, the first thing I did that, I guess you could say, was a personal action—a statement—was that I refused to pledge allegiance to the flag. Every morning in home period, you had to stand up and say the Pledge of Allegiance, and I refused to do it. They insisted that I stand, and I insisted that I wasn't going to.

So, they called my mother, and she came up to the school. She was none too pleased to have to take time off from work to come up there. They told her, "Your daughter is not pledging the flag. She's sitting in her seat, not standing up, not acknowledging it."

And my mother said, "Well, did you ask her why?" And so they asked me, "Why?" Because freedom for all, justice for all, I don't believe that. I don't feel like that's happening for Black people and I don't feel like I can say pledge of allegiance to a flag that is not supporting me and supporting my people.

Nkechi Taifa: What year are we talking about? What time frame was this?

Nkenge Touré: This was probably around [19]63, [19]64. The agreement was that I would stand outside the classroom while they did the Pledge of Allegiance, like I was infecting people or something. But that was fine.

Nkechi Taifa: So, you would be listening back then.

Nkenge Touré: Yeah. I paid attention to Martin Luther King [Jr]. My mother and my aunts, we came to the March on Washington when I was 12 years old. I remember that so clearly. It was such a hot, hot day, and I had never seen so many people in my entire life.

I used to have motion sickness, so my head was basically hanging out the window all the way to DC and all the way back because I was nauseous and sick to my stomach.

Nkechi Taifa: So, your parents brought you to the March on Washington. Were they conscious people?

Nkenge Touré: They were conscious. They weren't conscious in the sense of being in organizations or heading up actions in the community, but they were those basic, working-class people who paid attention to what was going on and had their feelings and thoughts about it.

My mother worked at London Fog coats, she was a shop steward. So, a certain amount of consciousness came that way, through her. They also went a few times to hear Malcolm X speak. So they were conscious—quietly conscious, I guess you would say—making sure that their children understood that we were Black and that we were certainly as good as anybody else.

Nkechi Taifa: So, you mentioned working class people and I presume the neighborhood and the like [where] you were going to school. Tell me a little bit about the socioeconomic conditions you were growing up in and how that impacted you as a child.

Nkenge Touré: I grew up in Lafayette Projects in Baltimore. I think Lafayette Projects was the second set of projects that had what we called the high-rise buildings. It's 11 stories with about 10 apartments on each floor. Five on each side of the elevators.

There were six or seven buildings, surrounded by what we called the "low-rises," which were the two-floor apartments. Basically, everyone who lived there had different circumstances—some people were on public assistance, others worked, and some hustled. There were a lot of single mothers raising their children.

Our elementary school was right across the street from our building, so it only took about 10 minutes to get home. My mother would be looking out the window, expecting us to come straight home—wondering, "What's taking so long?"

When we were younger, she didn't work; she was on public assistance because she had made the decision to be home during our early years. But when we got older—around third, fourth, or fifth grade—she went to work, and we became latchkey kids. But there were so many latchkey kids in the projects. Parents had to work, and their kids had—

Nkechi Taifa: Can you explain what a latchkey kid that is for this younger generation of millennials who hopefully are listening?

Nkenge Touré: A latchkey kid was a child who was on their own for part of the day because their parents were at work. You had a key, and you either wore it on a chain or a string around your neck, or you kept it tied and secured inside your pocket, purse, or book bag—but mainly around your neck. You could not lose those keys because they cost money, and you didn't want to have to keep replacing them.

My brothers and I were latchkey kids. I had two brothers—Nyata Touré, who passed away two years ago this November, and my brother Steve, who was the youngest. He passed away in 1994 at the age of 40. So, we were step kids [in age]—10 years old, 11 years old, 12 years old.

Nkechi Taifa: And you were the oldest? What did that mean being the oldest girl in a house full of boys?

Nkenge Touré: It meant trying to rein them in. My mother got home from work at five o'clock every day, and we all had our chores that we were supposed to do before she got home. They would wait until 4:30 [p.m.] to start doing their work, and it made me so mad. They were just infuriating me.

We were always having arguments. They'd be like, "You're not the boss of me! Mama didn't tell you…" And I'd say,"Yes, she did!" So it kind of went like that.

We had arguments, and sometimes we had fights. One year, at Easter time, my two brothers and I got into a fight in the house. They locked themselves in the bathroom, and when my mother came home, no work had been done. There was yelling all over the place.

She took our Easter baskets and gave them to a neighbor who had quite a few kids. Gave our Easter baskets away and said, "That's what you all get."

Nkechi Taifa: So, that left an impression upon you.

Nkenge Touré: Yes, it did.

Nkechi Taifa: Let me go back to the Pledge of Allegiance—that was an individual act of resistance. As time went on in your schooling, were you engaged in group protest activities?

Nkenge Touré: Yeah. One of the early things I remember was that we weren't allowed to wear pants to school—females couldn't wear pants. I felt like that was unfair when it was cold outside in the winter, why we couldn't wear pants to school. It wasn't ladylike and it wasn't in the rules and all that.

So, some of us got together, walked out of class, and walked out of school because we wanted to wear pants. Our parents had to come in, and the compromise was that during the winter, you could wear pants if we had permission from your mom. They had to send a note saying, "Yes, she can wear pants to school." That was in junior high school.

In high school, in the 10th grade, there were a lot of fraternities and sororities among high school students in Baltimore—not like the college ones, the Deltas and the AKAs, but student-formed fraternities and sororities.

The city council wanted to put a curfew on youth, to be home by nine o'clock or something really ridiculous that people had problems with. They held hearings at City Hall, and a lot of teenagers were there. Quite a few parents were there too, but it was mostly young people—all these fraternity and sorority members—who came to testify.

I testified on behalf of Beta Omega Phi Sigma, and ultimately, the curfew did not go through; it was not approved. That was certainly because of all those youth who came out and protested at City Hall—many for the first time. But we were directly affected and impacted, so it was necessary for people to show up.

Different fraternities and sororities were reaching out to others, talking to their schoolmates, saying, "Come on, we've got to go down to city hall when this hearing comes up." At that time, [Thomas] D'Alesandro [Jr.] was the mayor—Nancy Pelosi's father.

Nkechi Taifa: Okay, I had no idea. Interesting. So, this was during the time when Black Studies was coming into the schools. I know in Washington, DC, there was a lot going on with respect to that. Did you have any involvement with that as a student?

Nkenge Touré: Yeah, I went to Eastern High School, which was an all-girls school. This was either the first year—if not, the second year—that Black girls were coming to that school.

All the teachers were white. There was one Black art teacher, and the vice principal, Rose T. Kenny, was Black. But she was one of those Black people who, in the [19]40s, could have passed—you would have never known. She was very light-skinned, had curly, crinkly hair, and all of that.

Quite a number of the teachers at Eastern had also gone to Eastern, graduated, went to college, and came back to teach there. So they were very invested in maintaining a particular culture. And here come all these Black girls coming from different backgrounds, from middle-class families to working-class families to families on public assistance.

They didn't have any Black books in the library or anything like that. There was a book on George Washington Carver, but there were no Black books. So we were very frustrated.

After we did the action to be able to wear pants, we had to do the same thing at Eastern because you couldn't wear pants there either. So I organized a repeat of what we had done at Lombard Junior High School so that we girls—since it was an all-girls school—could wear pants when it was cold.

We were right across from City High School, which was the all-boys school. They were on that side, we were on this side, just separated by an avenue. We were also right across the street from the Baltimore Stadium on 33rd Street.

This was the time of the beginnings of the Black Panther Party in Baltimore. There was also the Soul School [Institute], which was teaching cultural nationalism, Black consciousness, and all of that. And on the other side of town was the Black Panther Party, teaching revolutionary thought, intercommunalism, and those kinds of ideologies.

In a way, they were sort of in competition to get the high school students. Were they going to be with the Soul School, or were they going to be with the Black Panther Party?

Some of us were going to political education classes at the Black Panther Party headquarters down on Gay Street. And then we were also going uptown to West Baltimore for the classes that the Soul School was offering, getting into their ideology.

At school, we decided we just couldn't tolerate all of the blatant racism—and everything that was going on at the school. We needed to organize, and we needed to do something.

We got a teacher—Joan something—she was a history teacher. If you wanted to have a club at school, you had to be sponsored by a teacher. She sponsored us as a history group, but in reality, we were [called] The Black Voice.

Nkechi Taifa: The Black Voice. That was the name of the organization, underground.

Nkenge Touré: Underground, we were The Black Voice. So, we were meeting with the principal, the vice principal, and some of the department heads about the situation with the books and the fact that every week they had mandatory assemblies, but they never seemed to have anything interesting for the Black students. They always had things that were more of interest to the white students.

So, we were having these meetings, and they asked us, "Do we know anything about The Black Voice?" We said, "Who's The Black Voice? Huh? There's a Black Voice? What you talking about?" They said, "There's a disgruntled section [of students]."

We had put out flyers all around school, for students to stand up for their rights, demand Black books in the library, push for more Black teachers, and all of that. They went through all of the student lockers, searching for flyers, paper, anything that indicated who The Black Voice was. There wasn't nothing there. There was nothing there that could link anybody to anything.

So, the big thing that got us all arrested—like I said, we had these mandatory assemblies, and they were boring as the devil. We were talking about what we needed to do about those assemblies. We were tired of meeting with them. They were just stringing us along—they meaning the administration—was just stringing us along. We were going to have to do something.

So, we decided that we were going to come to school on the day of the assembly. We were all going to wear black, and we were going to take all the seats across the first two rows of the auditorium. You were seated in sections and stuff, which meant that we were pushing people out. But we got all the seats, so when it came time to stand up and pledge the flag, we all stood up and did the Black Power fist.

Nkechi Taifa: Alright, 1968. Tommie Smith and John Carlos.[1] Was that around that time?

Nkenge Touré: Yes. We got up and we did that, and they were appalled. They were so embarrassed in front of the guests who had come. But the other students in the school were like, "Wow, what is this?" They were excited.

Nkechi Taifa: Didn't you get arrested?

Nkenge Touré: Yes we got arrested. We didn't get arrested that day. What happened was, a few days later, there was this really racist teacher named Miss Shepler. She was one of the ones who had graduated from Eastern, came back to teach at Eastern, never got married, had four cats—you know, dedicated her life [to the school].

There was a young woman named LaTonya Hooker. There was some trash on the floor in the classroom, and Miss Shepler told her to pick it up and she wouldn't pick it up. She said, "My mother didn't send me to school to be a maid." Shepler got really mad. The students in the room were getting kind of antsy.

We all came down because we heard about it. Some of the advocates for The Black Voice came downstairs. She panicked. She locked both doors to the classroom, got on the intercom, called upstairs, and told them that the Black Panther Party was taking over the school. They sent the ones that wear the masks and have the nightsticks.

Nkechi Taifa: The SWAT Team.

Nkenge Touré: The SWAT Team. Yes, they sent a SWAT team to an all-girls school. Okay? To an all-girls school.

So, before they arrived—because we didn't know she had called them—we went upstairs, took over the office, and took over the intercom system. We told everybody to leave class and come down to the auditorium because we were having a meeting.

Nkechi Taifa: It's on now.

Nkenge Touré: And it was on. So, we got arrested. Eight of us got arrested, and we were called The Eastern Eight. By the time we got down to the police station—because they put us in the paddy wagon—they took the women and sent them to Pine Street.

By the time we got down to Pine Street, the street was so packed with youth supporters that they could barely get the paddy wagon through to take us into custody, to take us on into jail. Word

[1] The reference to 1968 corresponds to the Mexico City Olympics, where U.S. athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their fists in a Black Power salute during the medal ceremony, protesting racial injustice and human rights violations.

had gotten around to other schools, and City College felt like Eastern was their sister school. So, it was quite a big thing.

That was the beginning of the schools uniting—having representation from several high schools, and coming up with our list of 28 demands. We demonstrated every day. One day we would be in front of the school board. The next day, we would be in front of city hall. And the next day, we would be in front of police headquarters.

Nkechi Taifa: Let me just bring this down into a nutshell because we've only covered just a teeny portion of your life so far. We need to jump ahead, but I think this was really pivotal. I think you really demonstrated Frederick Douglass' quote: "Power concedes nothing without a demand." And that's exactly what you all were doing.

So, with respect to these demands, just talk about the impact that had. Talk about you going around and starting to do work with the Black Panther Party in Baltimore. We're still talking about high school and then getting to DC. So let's bring it on down—

Nkenge Touré: Let me go a little faster. I was doing it that way because you were asking me all these—

Nkechi Taifa: We're trying to get a good flavor.

Nkenge Touré: This was the pivotal moment that organized a lot of students in Baltimore. Students were leaving school to go to the demonstrations in front of those various offices. We held out for a really long time. We met with them a few times, trying to get—we did get books. We got books in the library.

I think we got a couple of teachers, but we didn't get all of the things we wanted and we were young, so we didn't really know how to hold a coalition of all these students together from different schools. You had the little dynamics of, who's in charge, who thinks they're in charge—all of that.

And then there were parents demanding that their kids go back to school because they were graduating. It was like, "You're not going to not graduate because of this stuff." So that's kind of how that went. I didn't go back to school because I was barred from attending any high school in Baltimore City—because of that. The school board did that. My mother got a lawyer to defend me, and it was Judge Murphy.

Nkechi Taifa: Oh, Billy [William] Murphy. Wow.

Nkenge Touré: He was my lawyer. When I went to jail, I think I stayed in jail for about two months. It was a learning experience. They had me in a cell with a stripper named Teresa, who was in jail because she had killed her boyfriend. That was my cell mate.

Nkechi Taifa: How old were you—Nkenge Touré—at this time? Excuse me, Anita was your name.

Nkenge Touré: Yeah, I was still Anita, but I had taken my African name from the Soul School which was Ifetayo, which meant "love excels all." But I didn't really use it a lot.

Nkechi Taifa: So, your age at this time, when you're spending two months in jail…how old are you?

Nkenge Touré: I was between, I think, 17 and 18. So, the day I was supposed to have my big hearing at the school board—for Billy Murphy to defend me and present my case, was the same day the Black Panther Party office for the breakfast program got raided.[2]

The office got raided, and the breakfast program got raided. By then, I was a community worker with the Black Panther Party. I was going down there, spending a lot of time there, and everything.

Nkechi Taifa: Was [Marshall] Eddie Conway part of all that at this time? [William] Paul Coates?

Nkenge Touré: Yes, they were, but they weren't…they were Black Panther Party, and some of them were the teachers for the political education classes, but they were not directly involved in the school stuff, right? That was our thing.

Nkechi Taifa: When you said the Panthers…when they raided the Free Breakfast Program…

Nkenge Touré: When they did that, that was the time when Eddie was there, and Larry [Pinkney]. Yes, those people that you're referring to, they were all a part of the Party at that time**.** So, the headquarters on Gay Street, the police had basically surrounded it, so I was not able that day to go to court.

They took that opportunity not to grant me another opportunity. What they did was, just to save face and not be totally shame-faced, their compromise was that if I went to summer school and took any two classes that I wanted—they would give me my diploma. And I refused to do it.

Because I felt like I didn't do anything. I'm not set to go to summer school and I'm not going to summer school. I would have to admit I was wrong and y'all were right. So no, I'm not doing it.

[2] On April 17, 1970, the Baltimore Black Panther Party office, which operated a free breakfast program for children, was raided, reflecting the broader government repression faced by the BPP's community initiatives.

So, the police stayed out there for seven days—a whole week—up and down Gay Street, blocking everything.

Nkechi Taifa: So, you were living at the Black Panther house at this time?

Nkenge Touré: Yeah, I was staying there. The thing that saved us was the community. The community surrounded the police. They were bringing us food. They were watching all the time so that the police couldn't—what we called vamp.[3] They couldn't attack. They couldn't vamp on us. And that lasted about seven days.

Also, the white liberal groups—socialist groups, student organizations, and so on—they were coming down supporting. This was their opportunity to be in solidarity. So, that's how that went. I spent almost four years in the Black Panther Party.

Nkechi Taifa: Okay, so you moved to DC?

Nkenge Touré: I was sent to DC.

Nkechi Taifa: Sent to DC. Tell us about that. What was your role within the Black Panther Party? Or give us a little feel for the Party—its structure and things along those lines.

Nkenge Touré: In our chapter, we had a lot of young people. Different chapters had various makeups. Some chapters had more older people, more of what we call—

Nkechi Taifa: When you say younger people, give us a feel.

Nkenge Touré: Younger people were 15 to 19 and older people were probably 25, 26 up to 40. You had people from all kinds of backgrounds. So, you really did have what we called the lumpen proletariat, right?[4] And the illegitimate capitalists.[5]

Nkechi Taifa: How did the Panthers define the lumpen proletariat?

Nkenge Touré: The lumpen proletariat were like the lower working class. The lower working class that were not polished or refined, but they were just the working class people on the grind. So they were proletariats—that was the workers—but they were *lumpen* because they weren't finessed up and stuff.

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[3] In this context, "vamp" refers to a sudden, aggressive police raid or attack, a term used by activists to describe law enforcement's efforts to disrupt Black Panther Party programs and activities.

[4] Lumpen proletariat refers to a socio-economic class comprising marginalized and unemployed individuals, often seen as disconnected from traditional working-class movements but sometimes mobilized in revolutionary struggles.

[5] Illegitimate capitalists refers to individuals who accumulate wealth through extralegal or underground economies, such as hustling or illicit trade, operating outside conventional capitalist structures but still engaging in profit-driven activities.

And the illegitimate capitalists, those were the drug pushers, the pimps, and the prostitutes. And a lot of those people came into the Black Panther Party. They came into the Party which was amazing that they subjugated themselves to the structure of the Black Panther Party.

Nkechi Taifa: What was the structure? Give us a flavor.

Nkenge Touré: You had a Defense Captain, and then you had Lieutenants—like education, like the Minister for Education, which would be like a Lieutenant. The Defense Captain was the ultimate person responsible for the chapter.

You had the OD, which was the officer of the day—that's where people got their basic marching orders from. Everything came through the ODs.

Education classes—PE classes, as we called them, political education—[were held] two to three times a week. You had the Finance Officer, you had the Communication Secretary, which was like what Kathleen Cleaver was at the national level.

So, you had a Communication Secretary, and you had a schedule, basically. People got up in the morning, ate breakfast, got dressed, and went out to sell papers.[6]

Nkechi Taifa: Before you go [on], this is like communal living?

Nkenge Touré: Yes, this was communal living. And then you had some community workers who didn't live there, but they came every day and got into the mix of what was going on.

Nkechi Taifa: What about division of labor or gender roles? I mean, there was cooking, I presume, and cleaning up—and cleaning up weapons. I mean, who did what?

Nkenge Touré: Everybody was responsible for cleaning their weapons, for keeping their weapons clean. You were supposed to reach the point where you could break down your piece in the dark and put it back together.

Different things like cleaning up in your room, you were responsible for keeping your room clean. Common areas were kind of rotated.

Cooking was, who could cook. You know, let's be practical—who could cook? So, that's how that went. Yes, there was a lot of sexism. There was a lot of sexism. But at the same time, there was also equality in that a sister could catch a bullet just like a brother could catch a bullet.

[6] The *Black Panther Black Community News Service* was the official newspaper of the Black Panther Party, serving as a key tool for political education, fundraising, and mobilization, with members following a structured routine to distribute it widely.

This speech that Artie Seale—who used to be married to Bobby Seale—made, where she said, "There are no Pantherettes." You had a few women who were Defense Captains—Audrey Smith [Jones] in Boston [MA], Ericka [Huggins] up in New Haven [CT]. Some places had female Defense Captains. And how the chapters ran had a lot to do with the Defense Captain, with his vision or her vision and interpretation of things.

We had East Coast, West Coast, and South meetings every Sunday, where the chapters came together to talk about issues—what was going on, what was needed, how much police harassment was happening, stuff like that.

Nkechi Taifa: I know, in particular—because when I was a teenager I would go by the Party in Washington and you all were conducting PE classes. And in addition to selling papers, you were also very much involved with the medical part of the Party. Tell us a little bit about the medical—

Nkenge Touré: The Black Panther Party was very much into—Huey [P. Newton] named them survival programs which were the People's Free Health Service. Chicago [IL] already had a clinic—a fully running, community-supported clinic.

There were breakfast programs, which was one of the things the Party was most known for—the Free Breakfast for Children Program. Every chapter across the country had to have a breakfast program.

You had the Bussing to Prisons Program because a lot of the inmates were far from their families. In California, the prisons were way out, far from where people lived—because California is a big state.

New York—same thing. Families had to go way upstate. A lot of times, people were held in places like The Tombs [Manhattan Detention Complex]—you hear about that on *Law & Order*—but that was just holding. That wasn't where they were going to be. They were going to be sent to places like Attica [Correctional Facility]. So, you had the Bussing to Prisons Program.

DC had a program. We had a Bussing to Prisons Program where, twice a month, we took people down to [Federal Prison Camp] Alderson for women and Lorton [Reformatory] for men. We would meet at a church, have a meal, and then get on the bus and go.

Everybody had to make sure they didn't have anything on them. Don't bring no joints. Don't bring no knives—things that could get people into trouble, particularly since they were not pleased and enthused about the Black Panther Party's Bussing to Prisons Program.

You had the Free Clothing Program, and we got different stores—if you remember McBride's—which was sort of on the level of [indistinct]—to donate clothes. And you had churches. You had a lot of places that donated clothes.

So, we had a Free Clothing Program where people would come in, and it was set up—organized, clean, neat, hanging on hangers. People could come in sort of like going shopping—going through, picking out the stuff that you needed.

One of our main programs was The People's Free Health Service which ran for a number of years. In which the Save the People [a community organization] took over when the Party went out to California, when Bobby ran for mayor and Elaine Brown ran for city council.[7]

They called in a lot of the chapters because they needed foot soldiers. They needed people to be out there doing the work. But the papers were the main thing. Papers were printed in New York, but at one time, the papers were printed in DC, right up on 18th Street.

We had an office, and in the basement were the presses that were used for a lot of the literature that was done. We had decided that the presses should go up to New York. Sam Napier—who was assassinated—he was the…I forget what Sam's title was, but he was in charge of circulation, and he got the papers everywhere.

So, the presses were supposed to go up there, but the presses couldn't get out of the building because they were too big. And they weren't going to take them apart and put them back together, because they weren't even sure they would go back together properly. The walls were demolished and the presses went out into the basement.

Nkechi Taifa: Did the Panthers own the building?

Nkenge Touré: The People's Free Health Service was a very big and very important program. We did outreach. We would go out on Saturdays and line up people to be screened on Sunday. Then, we would go back on Sunday and screen them. The following week, we would come back and bring their results.

They screened for general stuff, but specifically for sickle cell, diabetes, hypertension. We had a collaboration with Community Medicine at Howard University, with Dr. Jean Linzau. He was really something. He was like our medical director. We had to have someone who was truly a doctor—someone supervising and who you could be under [for] the malpractice insurance.

We would go back the next week, on Saturday, and give the results to the people we had screened the week before on Sunday. And we just repeated that over and over again until we

[7] *Save the People* (STP) was established in Washington, D.C., by Nkenge Touré and her husband, Patrice Touré, after many members of the D.C. Black Panther Party chapter relocated to California in 1973 to support Bobby Seale's and Elaine Brown's political campaigns.

covered all of Valley Green, or just huge neighborhoods. We would cover the whole neighborhood and then move on to another one.

The students who did the screenings and the work were from Howard University Medical Student Medical Association. We partnered with them. They were very excited, and they supplied volunteer students who did the work—who went out, did the testing, and the screening.

Then, we would go up to Howard and do whatever we needed to do to get the results for people. To spin down the blood for sickle cell, you needed a centrifuge, which was up there. And that was a hugely expensive piece of equipment. So, we would do them up there.

Nkechi Taifa: How long did this service last and what caused it to stop?

Nkenge Touré: The service lasted about four years. It lasted a really long time and everybody wore their white lab coats and stuff. We were not going to have people out there just—everybody was going to be uniform, everybody was going to be clean, everybody was going to look like they were providing a service that our people deserved to have.

We opened a clinic. We opened a clinic in Southeast [DC]. What finally happened with the clinic was they kept raising the malpractice insurance to the point that the doctors couldn't afford it. They could not afford it. And that's how the clinic came to be closed.

People were referred to the clinic when we were doing testing and screening. If we ran across people with other issues, they would be referred to the clinic. Plus, people could just come to the clinic.

Nkechi Taifa: Nkenge, can you very briefly tell about any relationship you had at this time, or any children that might have come along?

Nkenge Touré: I do have two daughters who are, today, 41 and 45. So, it's been a few minutes. My first daughter, Trina. Her name is Trina Frelimo Njeri. And she hated Frelimo.

Nkechi Taifa: Oh no.

Nkenge Touré: I explained all that to her, but at school, it was like, "Don't nobody want to be called Frelimo." You know, kids making fun of her and all of that. So she really didn't like it. That's why we just ended up calling her Trina. Okay, you can be Trina. Because she came to the Saturday African School that you taught.

She was born in [19]72, and I was in the Party when she was born. Her father had been in Vietnam. He had come home, and, you know, he was so Black. That was when the brothers came

out from the 'Nam [Vietnam]—they had to do the dap, the whole thing. You know, you gotta do it all. He was out of that period.

When he came home from the service, after he went to his home—to see his relatives and stuff—the first place he came was to the Black Panther Party office. That's how we met and he came into the Party and Trina was born. Kianga, who was born in [19]76…she was born when we had Save the People.

Nkechi Taifa: And Save The People was the organization that you and your husband founded after most of the Panthers went out to California.

Nkenge Touré: It was decided that some people had to stay because of the papers. The papers in DC were a very important connection, and we had to have that. And we didn't want to shut down the breakfast program.

Myself and Patrice [Touré] stayed, as well as a brother named Akram. There were a couple of people who didn't go. I was content not to go, because there was a whole bunch of stuff happening out there. So, we founded Save The People [STP].

Nkechi Taifa: And where was that located?

Nkenge Touré: That was located on 9th and H Street, Northeast. And we opened the Education for Liberation Bookstore. So, people could meet there, have little programs there, do things there, and also buy books and get educated.

And we had free summer school. We found a couple of people who were teachers to work with us in the summer with the kids. That is how Save The People came about—so that the Black Panther Party presence could remain in the metro area.

Nkechi Taifa: Before I ask how you came from the Black Panther Party to the DC Rape Crisis Center and all the issues dealing with women and all like that, was there any impact that you could see with respect to COINTELPRO—the FBI's secret, illegal program to destroy and disrupt the Black movement and one of their primary targets was the Black Panther Party. Did you see any machinations of COINTELPRO during the time that you were with the Party?

Nkenge Touré: In DC, the office was attacked a couple of times. When Malik Edwards—

Nkechi Taifa: The artist.

Nkenge Touré: Yeah, the artist…was tutoring under Emory Douglas. Of course he was there, but he wasn't tutoring under Emory because he was doing his own thing. There were things

going on like getting stopped all the time. When you're driving, going someplace, getting stopped all the time.

We found this one guy who had come from the service, so he said…he was trusted. He used to do some of the duty driving, taking people to different places. But that also meant he knew where people were going. And as it turned out—he was a pig. He was an undercover [cop]. That was a hurtful thing to find out. But that miscommunication just—

[INTERRUPTION]

Nkechi Taifa: We've talked about the Black Panther Party. We've talked about you early growing up. Want to hear a little bit about you moving into women's issues and feminism and your work with the [DC] Rape Crisis Center. How did that happen? Share with us.

Nkenge Touré: We had the Education for Liberation Bookstore, and I found a couple of books on rape. That wasn't really my area, but, you know—I'm a woman. It's rape, that's violation.

There were a couple of assaults and things happening in the neighborhood around where the bookstore was, so we had a couple of community meetings—women [coming together] to talk about the issue. That's how I got interested.

And I went on WHUR Radio. Niani Kilkenny had invited me to come up and talk about what was happening around that neighborhood, around that area. Some of the members at the Rape Crisis Center happened to be listening. This was in [19]74.

They heard the broadcast, and they contacted me about what we were doing over there in Northeast [DC] and could they come and talk to us. That's how we first met. I wanted to learn more about rape and sexual assault, child sex abuse, incest—all of that. I did a very short stint as a volunteer at the Rape Crisis Center—mainly learning, because I was pregnant with Kianga.

I came in October of [19]75 and she was born in March of [19]76. And after she was born, we still had the store, but we were really struggling. We had a couple of people from RAP [Regional Addiction Prevention] , Incorporated—Fred Lynette and his brother, Larry—and they became a part of STP, Save The People.

So we were all working, but eventually, they kept raising the rent. We wanted to buy the building, but they refused. They refused to let us lease or buy the building. So anyway, I went to work at the Rape Crisis Center as a salaried person.

Nkechi Taifa: And you really rose and actually became the Director?

Nkenge Touré: Yeah, I did. I was the Director until was it [19]80 or something like that? I had to step down for a year, during which time Loretta Ross came in. Then I came back as Director for

Community Education which was the role that I held for the remainder of the time that I was at the Rape Crisis Center. And I was at the Rape Crisis Center for 13 years.

Nkechi Taifa: I think during this 13-year period—correct me if I'm mistaken—you also helped to found the National Black Women's Health Project. And then you were working on anti-apartheid issues, tenant rights issues, the murder of Yolanda Ward, and all this organizing.[8] I just remember Take Back the Night.[9] I remember all of these things. Give us a little flavor for your time there and some of the issues that you really were the mover and shaker of.

Nkenge Touré: I was one of the people who founded the DC chapter of the National Black Women's Health Project. The National Black Women's Health Project was founded by Byllye Avery and Lillie Allen. And that came out of a conference they had down at Spelman around health issues. They expected 700 women to attend, and 1,400 women showed up.

They were having workshops under the trees and everywhere because it was twice the number of people and people went home and set up chapters when there wasn't even a formal organization yet. So, it seemed like one thing led to another.

Joan Little and Dessie Woods were Black women who were in jail after being raped and as a result of being raped, had killed their rapist. And they [their rapists] were white. So, Dessie was in Georgia, and I went there to interview her. That's when I met the African People's Socialist Party.

I met Faye Williams and Linda Leaks and Ajowa [Ifateyo]—who were very involved in that organization, and invited them to come up with a Take Back the Night march to speak about Dessie's situation.

Nkechi Taifa: What was Take Back the Night?

Nkenge Touré: The Take Back the Night march was a march that white feminists had been organizing for a number of years, focusing on making the streets safe. Take Back the Night—the idea was that you should be able to be out at night and be safe, not worried about being attacked or harassed or anything.

So hence, the Take Back the Night march. A lot of the organizing for that was done by Feminists Against Pornography. And we—being the DC Rape Crisis Center—we did Anti-Rape Week, which was a week of workshops, seminars, all kinds of things on issues of sexual assault, self-defense, how to defend yourself.

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[8] Yolanda Ward was a Washington, D.C.-based housing activist and organizer who fought for tenant rights and against gentrification; she was mysteriously murdered in 1980, with suspicions that her death was linked to her activism.

[9] *Take Back the Night* is a global movement and series of events advocating for women's safety and an end to sexual violence, often featuring marches, vigils, and speak-outs to reclaim public spaces and challenge gender-based violence.

Those were the main ones—the self-defense classes and the various other classes. And we had guests come in from other women's organizations to speak and present during Anti-Rape Week. We joined forces with the Take Back the Night march so that the week would kick off Take Back the Night.

And we—the Rape Crisis Center—we did the first national Third World Women's Conference on Violence Against Women. That's when we got to find out about five or so other Women of Color groups that were doing sexual assault awareness and prevention work.

Because our center—the DC Rape Crisis Center—was the first rape crisis center in the United States. We met the women from New York—we already knew about them, but they came down for the conference.

But we met women who came from Boston and women who came from New Haven, and a couple of other places that we didn't know about. Pennsylvania—they had a rape awareness program that was under the Mental Health [Department] for the state of Philadelphia. So, a lot was happening through that.

And then we did a lot to support My Sister's Place, which was the first shelter in DC for battered women and their children. It had a secret location and all of that, and it was organized and sponsored by the Women's Legal Defense Fund. They were getting tired of dealing with all these battered women and felt they needed to take some action, so they started the shelter.

From there, while we were doing this women's work, we were still involved in Black community issues. So, we were still dealing with issues like police brutality, slum lords, all kinds of issues like that—issues that impacted our people.

So we were drawn to the National Black United Front [INTERRUPTION].

…Bladensburg Road in Northeast and they did a lot of things. So, we were involved with that. They wanted to found a chapter of the National Black United Front—the NBUF chapter in DC. And that is also when we met Bobby Karega Dukes.

We went to the founding conference for NBUF, and we became involved. NBUF was divided into sections. They had a youth section, a housing section, and a prison section. But we noticed that they didn't have a women's section. And we thought they should have a women's section. And there was a lot of struggle about having this women's section. So, Sophia Bendelli—

Nkechi Taifa: In New York?

Nkenge Touré: Yes. Conrad Worrill's wife, because he was the co-chair with Reverend Herbert Daughtry, had the religious in and Loretta, myself, and a few other sisters—we just kept on, whenever there was a meeting or a convention dealing with this issue.

And so finally they said "Y'all want to have a women's section? Have a women's section." So we founded the women's section. I believe that Sophia was the first chairperson—chair of the women's section. And so, the big thing that the women's section took on was the United Nations Conference—the Decade for Women Conference in Kenya in 1985.

Interviewer: So you're leading up to that?

Nkenge Touré: Yes. And that was the work that was coming through. A lot of the work that the women's section was involved in and focused on was going to this conference. The National Black United Front was really not in support of this conference or of going to it. They didn't see the need for this—women just coming together to talk about what?

Nkechi Taifa: Since there were Black nationalist organizations and there were tensions between that and the women's section. And you were kind of in the middle of both, right?

Nkenge Touré: Yeah, yeah.

Nkechi Taifa: So how did you navigate all that?

Nkenge Touré: What happened was—may the ancestors always bless Queen Mother Moore.

Nkechi Taifa: Yes, I remember she was there.

Nkenge Touré: The Hares—Nathan and Julia Hare—who were parapsychologists out there, they spoke at the convention. They spoke against the conference, saying it was just going to be a gathering of white women, and so forth and so on. And we were speaking for—

Oh—Jamala Rogers, let me not forget the Organization for Black Struggle.

Nkechi Taifa: Wow, she was around back then.

Nkenge Touré: Jamala was very much involved with the women's section.

Nkechi Taifa: So Jamala is, right now, one of the central figures in Ferguson [MO].[10]

Nkenge Touré: Yes, she is. So, after Nathan and Julia spoke, I believe that our presentation was next. Loretta and I presented about going to the conference, the importance of it—which turned out to be, at the time, the largest gathering of women ever in the world at that 1985 conference.

Nkechi Taifa: Was that a large contingent from DC?

[10] This refers to the activism following the 2014 killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager, by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, which sparked nationwide protests against police brutality and racial injustice.

Nkenge Touré: Oh yeah, there was a large contingent from the United States, and a pretty large contingent from DC. But what happened was that after we spoke, Queen Mother Moore—who is revered by all…she is the grandmother of the movement, embraced by all the revolutionaries, the nationalists, and all of that. Queen Mother Moore said she wanted to speak. She wasn't on the agenda to speak.

Nkechi Taifa: Oh it didn't matter. She said she wanted to speak.

Nkenge Touré: Exactly. She said she wanted to speak. She got up there and said that the Decade for Women Conference was a very important gathering of women, and that she intended to be there. [She said], "Yes, I'm going." She said a few other things…

[It was] the opportunity for women internationally to come together and share, exchange, and dialogue. After that, a lot of people who were undecided—decided. They decided to support. And some people who were against it came over. All because Queen Mother Moore said so. She said, 'I'm going.' Queen Mother Moore going? Must be [important].

So, we spent the next couple of years—we put together the International Council of African Women [ICAW]. And our newspaper—our newsletter—ICAW: African Women Rising was the newsletter for the International Council of African Women.

Nkechi Taifa: Now, which one of those things had that phenomenal logo? They had women from different nationalities.

Nkenge Touré: That was the Rape Crisis Center. You talking about the red one? Malik drew that and gave it to us. You had the Native American, the Latino, the Asian, the Black represented. The white women got very upset because they wanted to know where were they? [It was] a picture of dolls right? And they wanted to know where their doll was…[it was] all over the world.

Nkechi Taifa: As we're bringing this part to a close, what concrete came out of the International Women's Conference that was in Kenya?

Nkenge Touré: A lot of things came out of it. A lot of collaborations between women in different countries to share information about different things. There was a lot of collaboration among women in Africa around health issues, childcare issues, and things of that nature.

And they had planned to have a midpoint conference to see where they were and how far they had come. That was held in 1988 in Nigeria.

Nkechi Taifa: I want to kind of just bring this home now. Most folks know you today as a stalwart of WPFW's "In Our Voices," that has been going on for maybe 20 years now. Tell us a little bit about that…how you got to "In Our Voices" and some of the voices that you brought to this house?

Nkenge Touré: When we came back, there were lots of requests for us to speak at different places about our experience at the conference. All the various things that had happened. The stuff that happened between the Palestinian and the Israeli women. We were speaking about a lot of things when we came back.

We tried to get a bill passed against street harassment. We almost got it. That was initiated by Linda Leaks. She had started a campaign and a newspaper called *Up Front*, and she was dealing with all these violence against women issues. And her big thing was street harassment.

I kind of came into it and asked Linda if we could work together around some of this and push it. So, the Rape Crisis Center became involved in that, and there were a number of other groups that were involved—Women of Color as well as white women—to try to get this bill passed.

The South Africa apartheid was going on—where everybody was getting arrested at the South African Embassy. So, I organized a Women's Day for all of the women of color and feminist organizations to come together. About 25 groups came together to get arrested.

What was happening in South Africa was an overall form of violence against women—because it was oppressing them and violating their human rights. And then under that, you had the specific issues of violence against women that were happening. There were just a number of initiatives. Cheryl Tatum—I don't know if you remember her—

Nkechi Taifa: Oh yeah, the cornrows. Marriott Hotel.[11]

Nkenge Touré: This was a really big thing. The Marriott Hotel had told this Black woman, Cheryl Tatum, that she could not wear cornrows to work. That it was unprofessional. And there was another sister at another hotel—I can't remember her name—but the most prominent one was Cheryl Tatum.

Nkechi Taifa: I knew her lawyer.

[11] In 1987, Cheryl Tatum, a cashier at a Hyatt hotel in Crystal City, Virginia, was dismissed for wearing her hair in cornrows, which her employer deemed an "extreme and unusual hairstyle."

Nkenge Touré: I said that was psychological violence against women. I went to the board at the Rape Crisis Center, and I said, "I want us to do a campaign in support of Cheryl Tatum and this whole issue around cornrows."

At first, I was told that it was a stretch to go from what we did to psychological violence against women. I disagreed. And ultimately, they backed it. The Rape Crisis Center backed it. So, I organized a demonstration to be in front of the Marriott Hotel—when it was there on 14th Street, around from The Shops and around the corner from the National Theater.

We organized a demonstration. When we got down there, there were like 750 people or something out there in the street. It was like, "Oh, we got the right one." You know, we were thinking 100 people, maybe 150—but the union from the hotel came out to support.

A lot of people…people felt it was really wrong to say that she couldn't wear cornrows to work because it wasn't professional. They were just the straight-back ones—braided straight back or maybe a part in the middle and braided down. No exotic stuff, none of the twists, the bells, the bows.

Nkechi Taifa: So, you were instrumental in making that happen. I know she won that case and set her precedent.

Nkenge Touré: Yes she did and a lot of people got their consciousness raised as a result of that. That was just some of the important stuff. But anyway, after 13 years, I was pretty tired. In fact, I was nuked. I wasn't burnt out—I was nuked. And so I said, I'm gonna have to go. I'm gonna have to resign.

Nkechi Taifa: From the Rape Crisis Center?

Nkenge Touré: Yes, I had to go. I had already been doing some things at WPFW with Sophie's Parlor and this DJ Robin—I can't remember her last name—who worked for Ron Dellums, the congressman from California. When I left, I got a call from the program director at WPFW, which happened to be Imani Drake, Bobby Hill's wife.

And she said, "I know you can't not do nothing, so why don't you come down here? We need more women present—do a show." I was like, "Oh, I don't—I don't think so." I got a new job, went to a new school, moved away, different things. And I turned around and it was just me standing there. That was 30 years ago. Because "In Our Voices" is in its 30th year.

Nkechi Taifa: That is monumental.

Nkenge Touré: I started as soon as I came back from Cuba. I went to Cuba first—for the intercontinental women's…it was a gathering of women from the Americas, meeting down there

to look at different issues, discuss different issues. So, I went there first, and when I came back the following week, I started "In Our Voices" with the collective. I started the first couple by myself, but then it was the collective and it was the collective for a year.

Nkechi Taifa: And then you took it over, and it's been going strong ever since. Let me just ask this as my final question, if I can—kind of bringing it all together. Based on your whole life's history of struggle, of activism, in the like…what advice, what lessons would you give to young people who might be listening to this broadcast? Based on your [experience] what do they need to be doing? What should they be concerned about? What is your message to the next generation?

Nkenge Touré: My first message is that you need to pace yourself. And you need to take care of yourself—because we spend so much time taking care of everybody else that we weren't taking care of ourselves. And so now, it's back on us that we didn't.

Know that the struggle is going to go on for a really, really, really, really, really, really, really long time. And so you can pace yourself so that you can stay healthy. If you need to go to the doctor, make the doctor's appointment. And go to the doctor.

If you need to go to the dentist, go to the dentist. It's okay to get a massage. It's okay to have a little time for yourself—a little me time—to get that massage, or go to the spa, or something like that. I think you need to pace yourself in that way.

I think that you need to always be studying, always learning new things. Don't get stuck in one area and not be able to move beyond that. If you have, like, violence against women—that's an area I'm very strong in, very passionate about, so I'm in that. But at the same time, I have interests and involve myself in other things. The Citywide Housing Coalition is where we got rent control. The District of Columbia has rent control.

The health issue. We did the Women's Self-Help. We learned how to do self-exams and all of that. So, I would say that you want to continue to grow and involve yourself in other things. And see the connections, the interconnections—what do they call it now? Intersectionality—between things. And realize that there's more strength there. There's more strength in doing it that way.

The last thing I would say is save your work. Save those flyers, save those papers, and things like that because they tell a story. And put the year on them because we would say, May 17. Oh, and then—when they don't have a year—it's like, I guess you think, "Well, this is [19]88, so if it's May 17, it must be May 17, 1988."

But in 10 years, in 15 years—do you know if it was 1988 or not? So, put the full date on your work. I guess that's it. The young need to respect the elders. And the elders need to respect the young. And both need to know that they can learn from each other.

Nkechi Taifa: Nkenge, all I can say is, it's been an absolute pleasure. Your life has been absolutely extraordinary and quite an inspiration. I just want to say, on behalf of the SNCC Legacy Project and the DC Black Power Chronicles, thank you.

Nkenge Touré: Thank you. If we ever get a chance—because we didn't talk about the Provisional Government of the Republic of New Africa. Remember, the Education for Liberation Bookstore was the voting site for people to vote in the National Black Elections.

We had some involvement in that and Patrice had a lot of involvement in that. He became a judge in the RNA [Republic of New Africa] People's Court.

Nkechi Taifa: I voted for him.

Nkenge Touré: I voted for him too.

Nkechi Taifa: Patrice was the husband in those days. Patrice Lumumba Touré.

Nkenge Touré: I voted for him also. So, there are a lot of things, and I just regret that we don't have time to go over and cover more things. But that's a sense of it. And I feel, as I said in the beginning, I feel honored that I would be asked to share my information and share some of the things that I've done and been involved in.

Nkechi Taifa: We thank you for sharing your wisdom, and I know that it will touch many people's hearts and hopefully inspire them to pick up the baton and continue to struggle.

Nkenge Touré: Thank you, sister.

Nkechi Taifa: Thank you, my sister.