Black Power Chronicles: Dr. Sylvia Hill

Dr. Sylvia Hill, a Professor of Criminal Justice at the University of the District of Columbia, discusses her journey from Jacksonville, Florida, to Howard University, highlighting her early experiences with racism and segregation. She detailed her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, including the sit-in movement at Florida A&M and her work with the United Planning Organization. Hill emphasizes the importance of international solidarity, particularly in organizing the Sixth Pan-African Congress and the Southern Africa Support Project. She stresses the need for activists to engage in electoral politics and maintain organizational accountability, drawing parallels between historical movements and contemporary struggles for racial justice.

Joshua Myers: My name is Josh Myers, and we're here today with Dr. Sylvia Hill for the DC Black Power Chronicles. Dr. Hill is a native of Jacksonville, Florida, and a graduate of Howard University and the University of Oregon, where she received her PhD. She later went to Macalester College in [St. Paul] Minnesota before coming to Washington, DC. She currently works at the University of the District of Columbia, where we are today, and is a Professor of Criminal Justice.

Dr. Hill was a founding member of organizations like the Southern Africa Support Project and the Free South Africa Movement.[1] She was also a principal organizer of the Sixth Pan-African Congress in Tanzania. Dr. Hill, thank you for joining us today.

Dr. Sylvia Hill: I'm pleased to be here with you.

Joshua Myers: Great. So, I want to start with a journey through your background, coming from Jacksonville, Florida, and ending up at Howard University. What we've been trying to gather from the early years of our interview subjects is: what was your sense of Black community, and what was your sense of the context that drove Black progress, even as young people?

What were you able to witness in your communities that would have prepared you to accept the notion of Black Power later on in life? What was it like growing up in Jacksonville, Florida?

[1] The Southern Africa Support Project (SASP) was a grassroots organization that mobilized U.S. communities to support liberation movements in Southern Africa, particularly through anti-apartheid activism and economic pressure campaigns. The Free South Africa Movement (FSAM) emerged in the 1980s as a coalition advocating for U.S. sanctions against South Africa's apartheid regime, using protests and direct action to push for policy changes that ultimately contributed to the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986.

Dr. Sylvia Hill: Well, Jacksonville was the segregated South, and I grew up in a family that tried to protect me from the experiences of racism, discrimination, and brutality. However, living in a segregated community, you did experience those things at times.

I had incidents of going to a store and the clerk not permitting me to try on a hat, or my father being stopped by a policeman and my mother saying under her breath, "Paul, please, please just calm down."

I remember very well a playmate in the neighborhood whose father worked in Georgia. He tried to vote in Georgia, and he was lynched. That happened when I was about five. I remember the effort the adults made to keep us from knowing, but we found a *Florida Star* newspaper.

The picture of him being lynched is etched in my mind at five. I still have deep emotional feelings when I talk about it.

One of the things I would say is that it's so interesting to me that even with those experiences, I don't think I have a concretized political view yet. And I really try to point this out, because I want young people to understand that it's an evolutionary process, and you may go off in many different ways, but there's always the place for you politically, to harness your capacity and to try to make change.

There were people in my neighborhood that I didn't particularly see that way, but I now know they were expressing a kind of self-actualization that was important in the context of the 1940s and 1950s. My mother had a garden club, which was very important in organizing women around the beautification of their yards. Another woman who was kind of the grandma of the neighborhood. She was just a fierce fighter and everybody's grandma and insisted that everyone stand tall and be strong.

I was around a lot of women who actualized their lives in their personal circumstances. There was a lot of organizing happening in Jacksonville, particularly with the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]. I was not part of it and didn't really know about it until after I left. It wasn't until I got to Florida A&M that I had the collective experience of marching, being tear-gassed, and beaten back by police.

Joshua Myers: This was part of the sit-in movement?

Dr. Sylvia Hill: Yes it was a part of the sit-in movement.

Joshua Myers: You went to Florida A&M first?

Dr. Sylvia Hill: I went to Florida A&M first and then transferred to Howard.

Joshua Myers: When you got to Howard, were you aware of students who were activists fighting for social change? You got there around—?

Dr. Sylvia Hill: I got there in [19]60.

Joshua Myers: So, the Nonviolent Action Group [NAG] would have been active during that period.

Dr. Sylvia Hill: They were active, and I knew of them through Ed Brown, who was a friend. However, I lived off campus, which made it harder to be politically engaged. I would come to class and then go home—or play cards in the library.

Joshua Myers: That's a new one, playing cards.

Dr. Sylvia Hill: But I cite those things because I want young people looking at activists to know that activists have a full spectrum of life. Sometimes [they don't make] the best decisions in the world, but there's always an opportunity to refocus your energies.

At Howard, there was a lively spirit of speakers. For the first time, I saw students question professors. That was the great thing about Stokely [Carmichael]. At that time, we took a philosophy of science class together. I will never forget how he would raise all these questions.

I was the silent student, hoping the professor wouldn't call on me because I didn't want to talk in front of people. That spirit of intellectual interest, focus, dynamism, and independence was very important at Howard. It was not given just to males, not just for males. This was female life too and that was very important as a nurturing point. And there were professors who nurtured their students.

Joshua Myers: That leads you to question things, not just in the classroom, but in the larger society.

Dr. Sylvia Hill: Absolutely.

Joshua Myers: So what happens when you leave Howard?

Dr. Sylvia Hill: When I graduated from Howard in [19]63, I worked—this was the rise of the War on Poverty program. I took a position with the United Planning Organization [UPO] in their research division. What fascinated me about research and the War on Poverty was whether you could change society using the skill sets of scientific inquiry.

I began to feel that it wasn't haphazard. It didn't just happen. You could act upon it if you just had the discipline to do so. We spent a lot of time—Karen Spellman was there—we spent a lot of

time on the dynamics of whether an intervention program could produce the kind of outcomes we desired. In [19]65, [19]66, I left DC and moved to Oregon.

A lot of the local transformation in the Black Power context I know of because I was returning back and forth to the Center for Black Education.[2] That connection was a reconnection with Courtland Cox and others, but also because Jimmy Garrett and some of the San Francisco people moved to Washington, DC to teach at the University of the District of Columbia, which was then Federal City College. That's a whole Black Power history as well. I wasn't a part of shaping it, but I know a great deal about it because of Jimmy and Faye Garrett and others.

Joshua Myers: Even before you get to your time of residency here in the District, you were aware of the Center for Black Education and Federal City College. An interesting thing that is also part of this and connected to the scholarly activism [is] the African Heritage Studies Association, which has a lot of members based in DC.

I think about what you said about philosophy of science and taking that course with Stokely, and the interesting connection you made about whether or not science can be used for social change. It makes me think about [W.E.B.] Du Bois's *The Philadelphia Negro* and *The Study of Negro Problems*, where he's basically saying that this is question of truth. If you had the facts then perhaps things could change.

Dr. Sylvia Hill: This was what was so critical about C.L.R James and his role. C.L.R really encouraged us to read the books as a social scientist and political scholar. One reason Marxism was important to my analytical development was that it gave a paradigm for how you could look at society, and the cause and effect, and recognizing dialectical changes that can take place—whether by you intervening and doing something or just the natural progression of historical forces. That was key.

Joshua Myers: Would you say that radical Marxist lens was present when you were an undergraduate? Or was that something that you got once you encountered people like CLR James after you graduated?

Dr. Sylvia Hill: That was more in my graduate days. In my undergraduate days, if you used the word "capitalism," people thought you were a communist. There was a great deal of fear of using radical terms like that. People called capitalism "democracy" at that time.

Joshua Myers: Liberal democracy.

Dr. Sylivia Hill: But [Frantz]Fanon—those readings all occurred on the West Coast for me in a serious way.

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[2] The Center for Black Education (CBE), founded in Washington, D.C., in 1969 by former SNCC activists, served as a hub for Black Power organizing, Pan-Africanist thought, and community-based education. It provided a space for intellectual exchange, political strategy, and grassroots activism, influencing local and national movements for Black self-determination.

Joshua Myers: It was simultaneously happening with the Center for Black Education. So talk about Oregon. You encountered SNCC there right?

Dr. Sylivia Hill: Well, I had encountered SNCC before, right?

Joshua Myers: But there was a SNCC chapter in Oregon as well.

Dr. Sylivia Hill: There might have been. My husband was in the Friends of SNCC, as it was called in Portland, but that was before I got there. He had gone to Mississippi—we were not married and did not even know each other.

Later, at the University of Oregon, the guiding frameworks for that period were more influenced by the Black Panther Party and the oppositional force, that was the US. That was in LA.

There was also a great effort among Black Student Unions to establish an agenda: forming a Black Student Union, making sure that you increase Black students, making sure that you were an advocate for Black professors and a Black Studies department, and coalescing with other groups to seize the student activity fees, which were dominated by white fraternities. That was our agenda throughout the Pacific Northwest and the West Coast.

Joshua Myers: What do you think was unique about the Pacific Northwest relative to these Black revolutions happening on campuses? Was it generally the same in the Pacific Northwest or were there some things that were just unique to that part of the country?

Dr. Sylivia Hill: It was unique to that part of the country because we were so few—not just few at the school, but few in the state and in the cities where the universities were. You could go for days without seeing another Black person, depending on where you were.

Joshua Myers: When I think about Oregon's political history, Black people were literally excluded.

Dr. Sylivia Hill: Oh yes. And it had—and still has—a history of the white right.[3] There are also very anti-government pockets there. On the other hand, it is quite liberal in many ways. I think of Senator [Wayne] Morse, who was from Oregon at the time and led the fight for a federal city college, arguing that there needed to be an urban land-grant university.

One of my first political campaigns was for his campaign, as well as for my doctoral advisor, Arthur Pearl, who ran for governor. That experience in electoral politics gave me another set of skills—speaking on the stump, going to Native American reservations, and visiting logging communities, speaking to poor whites, and so forth.

[3] The "white right" refers to far-right political movements and ideologies rooted in white supremacy, nationalism, and reactionary conservatism. In Oregon, these groups have historically included white supremacist organizations, militia movements, and anti-government extremists, which have influenced the state's racial and political landscape.

Joshua Myers: Did your doctoral studies get influenced by the movement in any way?

Dr. Sylivia Hill: Certainly, in the sense that my work focused on reform and systemic change in schools. I did a lot of speaking to teachers about change and working with students on the kinds of changes they needed to demand. These were mostly high school students, but I also worked with some elementary school teachers. So my focus remained on change, but within the confines of education.

Joshua Myers: And then you moved on to Macalester. Talk about that transition.

Dr. Sylivia Hill: At the University of Oregon, we had taken over the president's office and demanded that they liberalize the admissions process so that Black students could have a greater presence in the undergraduate program. The president agreed and secured funding—I think from the Ford Foundation—which brought in 75 Black students.

That was quite a challenge. You're trying to complete your dissertation and research and you're trying to make sure that [these students], they're not picked up by hostile police. You're trying to make sure that the different groups, such as Latina and Native American [students] who were part of our Upward Bound program, also did not have conflicts.[4]

In the end, the president left the university and went to Macalester College. One of the primary people he took with him was John Warfield, who was quite an activist himself and quite a scholar. John insisted that if he were going to be there to do this Black Cultural Center, that he needed to have me, my husband, and some others to join him. That's how we ended up at Macalester. Initially, I was not working there—I was just trying to recover and adapt to the snow.

A young activist herself and a mother of nine children, JoAnn Favors came to me and asked if I would join her in establishing the Institute for African Education. It was an after-school and Saturday program for young people, involving various political groups aimed at raising consciousness throughout the year.

Joshua Myers: Why African education, as opposed to African-American or Black education?

Dr. Sylvia Hill: Because our political consciousness recognized us as people of African descent. We felt young people needed that sense of identity and needed to learn from other cultures and geographies where people were in struggle—learning lessons applicable to their own circumstances. We never saw a difference between what was happening in Africa and what was happening in the African-American community.

[4] Upward Bound is a federally funded program designed to support low-income and first-generation high school students in preparing for college. It provides academic enrichment, mentoring, and cultural experiences to help students from underrepresented backgrounds, including Latina and Native American students, successfully navigate higher education pathways.

As Courtland Cox would say, "The specifics may be a little different, but the general principle is the same." That's why we focused on the Institute for African Education. It was after school and on Saturdays and we had a curriculum program. Both African-American public school teachers were part of the group, as well as Black students on campus.

We had, first of all, an infrastructure. Because we had an actual space in the basement of a hotel and we paid rent there. Students and university students would come. It also provided a large space for guest speakers. People like C.L.R. James, the great Goler Butcher who was in foreign policy…Kalamu Salaam, Frances Cress Welsing.

There were many different people, but part of them coming was that they gave their donations—their honorariums—they gave them as donations. So, we were able to really build a funding apparatus for the Sixth Pan-African Congress [6PAC].

Joshua Myers: Talk about how you go from working at Macalester and doing the Institute for African Education and then being an organizer for the Sixth Pan-African Congress which we know has its roots going back to the Black Power Conference in Bermuda and the planning that goes into that.

Roosevelt Brown, C.L.R. James, James Turner, and many different names [come up], but your name is there [though] the role that you play is not always clear. What was your role in organizing and how did you, from your perch in Minnesota, play such an effective part in it?

Sylvia Hill: I have to say that the person who raised my name to the steering committee that existed here in DC—that consisted of Courtland Cox, Charlie Cobb, Geri Stark Augusto, Ed Brown, and others—was Jim Garrett. Edie Wilson was a part of that group.

Jim Garrett had come out to speak and visit and he was a good friend. He had come out to visit, and he raised with me in [19]70— he had come back from the Black Power Conference in [19]69 in Bermuda—and he said, you know, they were talking about how to get this done. Would I be interested in working on that? So I said yes. And so that's how I got involved, just literally from that.

They also needed a person who had to have the capacity to submerge their ego and their own sense of wanting to be on stage, so that it made room for a lot of different people. One of my talents in life was being that type of person. I say that quite honestly because it is true. Some people think I take the background too much, but I found it very useful for getting political goals accomplished. That's the way we got started.

We started meeting regularly. When C.L.R. James got involved, it took on a reality that was significant. But there were many of us doing different aspects of the work in different geographies. I always remind people—we didn't have the internet, we didn't even have fax

machines. We relied on telegrams and phones and sometimes the phone was a party line. We didn't have cell phones.

Communication and distribution of experiences at that time were limited by the minimization of access to that kind of technology. Nevertheless, we forged ahead, developing a good group of people who were willing to really work on making the 6PAC happen. It had to happen at the international and domestic levels.

The domestic level had a variety of tensions. The dominant leadership at the time—Owusu Sadaukai, Ed Vaughn, and [Haki] Madhubuti out of Chicago.

Joshua Myers: Would you say [Amiri] Baraka?

Dr. Sylvia Hill: And Baraka. They felt that the United States should be represented by political leadership. So then the debate becomes: are you a leader because you say you're a leader, or because you have people, you have an organization [behind you]? But not only that, [did] the people vote for you? Did you just assume that role?

Joshua Myers: Just as a footnote before you go on, it's interesting that from the early [19]70s to this moment, Black elected officials aren't at the table anymore, at this particular…

Dr. Sylvia Hill: Right. So that's another discussion. But it was the belief of our group. And you know, that's Courtland, Jimmy Garrett, Charlie Cobb, Geri, and the others—you see it representing the call. We felt that the delegation had to represent as many people as we could afford to get there, with a large enough plane and being able to pay a reasonable amount.

Can you believe it? The fare was about $667 [$4,187 in 2025] and some odd cents. But tensions existed, and there were all kinds of mechanisms. One reason it ended up as a three-person leadership is that the opposition political forces felt I primarily represented the interests of Cox et cetera.

If I were the sole leader of the secretariat, then it would be everything they wanted. In order to minimize that, they argued that James Turner and Julian Ellison had to also be a part of the secretariat. James Turner was in Ithaca, New York, while Julian Ellison—I can't quite remember where he was. He was in New Jersey or New York City. As the world would have it, I did most of the work because I had the infrastructure to do the work.

Joshua Myers: And this is at the time when Courtland was in Africa?

Dr. Sylvia Hill: Initially, they were here. Then he, Geri and Katherine Flewellen…they set up an office in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, because a certain level of organizing had to take place internationally.

Joshua Myers: What's your perspective on the way C.L.R James took that compromise and how he ends up, in some ways, not supporting [the] Pan-African Congress?

Dr. Sylvia Hill: I had long conversations with him about it. First of all, I felt torn between loyalty to him and carrying [on] with the conference. But I will never forget when he told me, "You have your political group, and you must carry forth with your political agenda. I have mine, and I have to carry forth with my political agenda."

At that point, I have to make a statement on behalf of progressive activists who were not being allowed to attend because of reactionary presidents in the Caribbean.

But here's the lesson I learned in talking with him—and I learned from President [Julius] Nyerere—you can't always have a singular cause-and-effect analysis. So you can't say, "Well, I'm not going to have the Sixth Pan-African Congress because this set of activists is not being allowed to attend."

You have to analyze what other potential possibilities could come out of this and weigh them. It's not going to be 100%, but you have to do enough analysis to see that you've got enough possibilities of good happening than the one bad thing that happened. So that's the position we took, and I still stand by it.

It was an important international meeting. I think the most important thing about it was that the liberation movements had an opportunity to press for the primacy of the liberation struggle being on everybody's agenda.

The difference between nation-state interests and the political interests of activists—let alone national liberation movements—was clear, and it was important to have that surface to the consciousness of those of us who were activists, as well as to the liberation movement.

It was important for participants—even those who were just delegates or observers, whatever their status—to see an African country that was really struggling to fashion itself by being more people-centered than corporate-centered.

And it was important for them to see that international solidarity is an aspect of Pan-Africanism. It means that when you return to your own locale, you have to work to end your country's support of colonialism and settler apartheid.

Joshua Myers: So that leads directly to what you do when you come back to the States.

Dr. Sylvia Hill: Absolutely.

Joshua Myers: Before we get there, I want to give you the opportunity to tell the story of the meeting with Nyerere and how you were initially excluded from it.

Dr. Sylvia Hill: I'll tell this story because it's a lesson for women to learn too, and I want to be very honest about that. While we were at the conference, the President asked to meet with the primary organizers of the conference—a delegation. The ambassador said they only wanted five people. This is what James Turner told us at a public meeting of our delegation, which had about 199 to 200 people—199 on the plane, and then some others who got there on their own.

So he names the people, and they're all men. I'm sitting there, and I say this because I want young women to know that you really have to speak up for yourself. Of course, I came through an era when I learned that over time because we were really taught to be silent, to be nice, and good would come to you eventually—somewhere down the road, right?

So there's that feature of at least that part of my personality. But I will always respect and admire Mary Jane Patterson, who was an older woman who had worked internationally. She was in the administrative structure of the Presbyterian Church and had quite a leading role. She raised the issue and said, "How can you have a delegation, and Sylvia is not included after all the work she has done to even get us here?"

They said, "Well, it's only five males."

So I go to my room—we were staying in dormitory rooms, by the way—and the ambassador comes in. The ambassador says, "We hear that the men are excluding you, and the President would like to meet with you first so that when the men get there, you will already be there."

And that was the tale of that. But a subtext of that meeting was the opportunity to talk with the President, particularly about the issue of race and class, which had been framed as an either-or issue in the activist debate.[5]

Joshua Myers: Which was pretty dogmatic during the [19]70s.

Dr. Sylvia Hill: Oh, very dogmatic, very dogmatic. I mean, it was impossible to really have a discussion about it because, when you think about it, it makes no sense in some sense. I mean, of course, race and class exist. It's a problem, right?

But they wanted the Sixth PAC to take the position that race was the primary contradiction we had to deal with and that we didn't have to deal with class. Well, if you take that position, then you're not dealing with the economic order. And of course, the economic order has a lot to do with manifestations of various forms of racism.

It was a very good discussion with President Nyerere on that, and particularly, the national liberation movements were also very concerned about this use of the primacy of race because

[5] The intersection of race and class has been a central debate in social movements, with some activists emphasizing racial justice as the primary struggle, while others argue that economic inequality is the fundamental issue.

they saw it as buying into a kind of cultural nationalism and not really paying attention to the economic forces—

Joshua Myers: Which gave rise to neocolonialism.

Dr. Sylvia Hill: Right.

Joshua Myers: We can get to Angola later. This is a major side of this contestation.

Dr. Sylvia Hill: Absolutely, it was. So that was the debate, and it was very important that we had that debate in an international arena. I think the liberation movements used the opportunity to meet with different delegations of participants and to explain their agenda.

The important point that the national liberation movements articulated was that the phase of armed struggle had, as a component, a social liberation component—such that if you wanted to know what a society was going to look like, you had to have liberated zones where young people, girls and boys, went to school. Where women had a chance to go to school. Where women also participated in military action, and where there was a commitment to elder care. And where there was a minimization of this kind of glorification of worshipping individuals as opposed to working for the collective good.

FRELIMO of Mozambique was very important in characterizing that, and so was the MPLA [People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola], as well as the African National Congress, which actually had a camp there where people met with some of the young people in that camp.[6]

Joshua Myers: How influential was [Amílcar] Cabral in this conversation?

Dr. Sylvia Hill: Cabral had just been assassinated, so he was very influential. His theoretical framework—that the national liberation struggle was an opportunity to reclaim your history and your historical forces in order to go forward—was very inspirational.

And we had very good concrete examples as well. But because he'd been assassinated, in many ways, the primacy of the PAIGC [African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde] was not as great as FRELIMO or MPLA. Although they spoke for all of them, actually.

Joshua Myers: So you build connections in Tanzania and you bring those connections back to the States. What led you to move to DC around that time?

Dr. Sylvia Hill: Because we felt that in order to influence policy, you needed to be in the belly of the beast where policy is being made.

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[6] FRELIMO (Front for the Liberation of Mozambique), MPLA (People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola), and the African National Congress (ANC) were key liberation movements in Southern Africa that fought against colonial rule and apartheid. These groups not only led armed and political struggles for independence and racial justice but also established training camps and solidarity networks that connected activists across Africa and beyond.

Joshua Myers: It's interesting. One of the reasons I asked about Cabral—and this is also connected to FRELIMO—is that when he came to the States, people asked, "Well, what can we do?" And that was his answer—you needed to come to Africa and fight with us right there.

Dr. Sylvia Hill: And actually, that had taken place in New York, but only a few people were there and got an opportunity to meet with him. Fortunately, it was documented in the book *The Groundings With My Brothers*, and it was significant.

The movement was very split on that because he made a very important point. He said that whenever you become involved in activism, you have to ferret out for yourself: Why are you in it? Is it for your glorification? Is it for you to be on stage? Is it for you to wrap yourself in garb and look beautiful? Whatever it is, you have to sort out what is going on here. Why are you there? And so you search for how you can be in solidarity with the struggle.

Particularly Samora Machel really emphasized that: "You're not doing charity work for us. This is about your liberation, too."

Joshua Myers: Exactly, exactly. Which I think is a point we should begin to raise much more now. Particularly in how a lot of African-Americans tend to view African activism—it comes through that kind of philanthropic or charity lens much too often. I think re-energizing the kind of political struggle that was being waged in the 1970s would be critical.

So let's talk about the Southern Africa Support Project and its relationship to not only the larger Black Power and Pan-African movement but also what made it so unique and specific to activities that were not happening at the time, particularly here in DC.

Dr. Sylvia Hill: Let me just say that we had trial and error before we got to the Southern Africa Support Project. But I think one of its strengths was that it had a group of people—women initially—who met every week to try to analyze and figure out the way forward. That group enlarged, and Howard University was actually a space where we met because most of us lived on that side of town.

So, we met in the engineering building at first, then in the African Studies program, which had an outreach component led by Adowa Dunn Mouton. And then we led the African Studies program around kitchen tables throughout the city.

One of the things we committed ourselves to was first presenting the issue as a struggle both there and here. People had to see why it was important from the perspective of our own circumstances in the United States as well as [in Africa].

I remember initially we had a long debate because, you know, even the word racism, when we started out in [19]70, was not used that much. If you said the word racism—like capitalism—you were thought to be a communist or something.

We had a great debate about what we were going to call apartheid, what we were going to call colonialism. How would we get people to picture it and associate it with the Jim Crow experience, the slave experience in the United States, and the current discrimination experience?

We got really good advice from a lot of good people. One was Niani Kilkenny, who insisted that we have a cultural focus. So did other people. I don't know why the name is slipping me. Sweet Honey in the Rock's leader…Bernice Johnson. She said, "You've got to include culture. You've got to include culture."

So we tried hard to—we had a number of very popular kinds of things. During that time, as is now, gospel concerts were very popular. Once we got advice, they said, "Look, you've got to have the right master or mistress of ceremony. That's why people come. And you've got to have the right people singing."

So we got into that, but in the midst of all of it, we would always show a slideshow. Now, PowerPoint wasn't even around then—I want to remind people. We would show a slideshow and try to point out the issues, whether we were in Zimbabwe that week. So we always had a week [focusing on a country] like Zimbabwe week, Namibia week, South Africa week, Mozambique.

Joshua Myers: It was principally about raising awareness.

Dr. Sylvia Hill: It was raising awareness, but it was also raising solidarity around refugees. But people were refugees not because of natural disasters, but because of political action. That was another part of the lesson we wanted to teach. The liberation movements were struggling for themselves, struggling against corporations and the U.S. government, and they needed allies. That was another part.

Joshua Myers: It was also about resources.

Dr. Sylvia Hill: People-to-people ties. Yes, we stressed people-to-people ties. And we did raise medicines, we raised educational supplies in solidarity as well. Howard University's radio station was very important for that because we had what was called the radio-thon. We would have speakers during the program, and Melvin Lindsey and Robyn [Holden] would allow us to come on. They had very popular radio shows.

Joshua Myers: It was Kathy Flewellen who worked at the radio station?

Dr. Sylvia Hill: She worked there too. She worked there as well at one time. The format was to have speakers briefly talk about the issue at hand, and Sandra Rattley would create these wonderful commercial spots featuring a progressive singer but with a political theme. We did that basically for 10 years.

Joshua Myers: And you brought some pretty major speakers to DC?

Dr. Sylvia Hill: Yes.

Joshua Myers: Can you talk about some of those?

Dr. Sylvia Hill: Yes…trying to think of one.

Joshua Myers: Oliver Tambo.[7]

Dr. Sylvia Hill: Oliver Tambo. How could I forget? We met at the Howard University Hotel. Initially, the African National Congress perspective was very eurocentric because they felt there wasn't much that could be done in the United States. But Johnny Makatini, the late Johnny Makatini, who was the UN Representative for the ANC [African National Congress], spent a lot of time going around speaking and trying to cultivate collaborations at universities, churches, and so forth. That was an important part of their strategy, as well as ours.

And once again, liberations occur because you create spaces. Universities, churches, and community organizations are important spaces to nurture consciousness, support activism, plan, support it, and carry it out. There was a flourishing of that kind of activity in this city. Many people from various liberation movements came through as speakers.

Joshua Myers: Did you all take sides when there were competing liberation movements? And if you did, what was the deciding factor on which side you took?

Dr. Sylvia Hill: I think the biggest and best example was the difference between the MPLA and UNITA [National Union for the Total Independence of Angola]. UNITA was led by [Jonas] Savimbi.

Their organization penetrated the Black community at one point because people didn't quite know about them. They particularly attached themselves to people during the Sixth Pan-African Congress.

Now, the difference between the MPLA and UNITA had a lot to do with whether you focused on the economic organization of a society or whether you thought that simply replacing the president with a Black face and filling parliament with Black people was going to make change.

Joshua Myers: What they would call identity politics.

Dr. Sylvia Hill: That was what the struggle was about. It manifested itself in all kinds of ways—too many for me to even go into here because I'd have to give too much background. But we took a position. We wrote a paper analyzing why we supported the MPLA over UNITA and tried to show some of the damage we thought would come out of that.

[7] Oliver Tambo was a South African anti-apartheid activist and key leader of the African National Congress (ANC).

True to form, Savimbi allied himself with the South African apartheid government and caused a lot of death and destruction with landmines in fields where people were planting. You know, you intend to kill civilians, not military people, when you use landmines.

Joshua Myers: What about South Africa? The ANC, PAC, and Black consciousness?

Dr. Sylvia Hill: We didn't really get into that battle—at least my group didn't. Our group favored the ANC in large part because of its structure, its historical commitment to certain ideals of democracy, and its recognition that it could not declare itself all-Black in a situation that clearly was not going to be that.

So we supported them in solidarity, as opposed to the PAC. But we never said anything against the PAC or did anything against them. In fact, we helped them too if there was a need.

Joshua Myers: Then 1980 rolls around. In 1981, Ronald Reagan is elected President of the United States. [Chester] Crocker becomes [Assistant] Secretary of State [for African Affairs], and that energizes a new wave, leading directly to [19]84.

Dr. Sylvia Hill: Yes, it was energized internally by the people of South Africa. Young people, in particular, really took on the struggle. They maintained that from [19]76 on, and the regime became more and more brutal.

The critical point is that when we did the campaign of civil disobedience at the embassy, there weren't pictures of what was going on inside South Africa. But that daily campaign at the embassy and the focus on it showed that—it led journalists, including [Peter] Jennings, who was a noted journalist, to take the whole of, I think it was ABC—

Joshua Myers: Was it *Frontline*?

Dr. Sylvia Hill: No. *Nightline*. They went there and showed what was going on. And of course, you remember that the South African government forbade journalists from even writing about what was happening. So that was a turning point because they were losing their dominance over the control over the narrative inside South Africa. And of course, the student movement here, the sanctions movement—it was just a constant escalation, not only internally in South Africa and the United States but internationally as well.

Joshua Myers: If you look at the record of the many organizations that participated in embassy protests, there's an argument that everybody wanted to get arrested, not only as an act of solidarity but also to bring attention to their organizations. But in terms of the planning of those protests, what sticks out about organizing them, the kinds of people involved, and how this, as you said, influenced change?

Dr. Sylvia Hill: We wanted it to last a week. I tell you, you know, with a lot of people. Then we said, we think we can make it to two weeks and still maintain its force. I remember Randall Robinson saying—having discussed it with no one—he said, "We won't leave here until Mandela's freed, all labor leaders are free."

Joshua Myers: That made more work for you.

Dr. Sylvia Hill: Oh, okay, then we all got to get into this. But what happened was, as these noted people began to get arrested, TransAfrica began to get calls. And one interesting thing about those calls—they were from individuals, but also from organizations. So yeah, the Black Social Workers, the Black Psychologists, the various Black Law groups, the unions—it went on and on.

It was multiracial. There were many people brought in from the Midwest who had never been in a demonstration in their lives. And you had to show them what to do, how to protest. So it included young and old. We tried to do themes as well, in order to keep the momentum going and to capture that ability to sustain.

I do remember when Ronald Reagan canceled the inauguration because it was so cold. We were there demonstrating—it was the coldest day. You just felt like, we're going to freeze to death out here. And there was a little piece in *The Washington Post* that said, well, the demonstrators weren't concerned about the cold, they were marching against it.

When you're going up against the state, one of the lessons is that you have to surprise, which is what we were able to do. You have to show that you can sustain the action. You have to have the capacity to shape the debate.

The debate had been framed around the necessity for the United States to ally itself with South Africa to prevent communism from spreading in that region. By having prominent African-American leaders get arrested, that shifted the debate to race. This is about racism, and these Black people are against racism, and that shifted the debate.

In addition, one advantage we had was that the anti-apartheid movement had been going on for some time. It wasn't necessarily guided by the Southern Africa Support Project or TransAfrica, although TransAfrica had about 15 chapters at the time. There had been groups taking on this [issue]. I think about this group in Pittsburgh [PA] that had demonstrated every year against the consulate in Pittsburgh. There were groups like that.

And of course, with the national press coverage, they stepped up their campaigns. So you had demonstrations on the West Coast—in L.A., San Francisco, and Oakland—against the consulates. And that was true in Chicago, Detroit, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and so forth. That capacity to spread was very important.

There had always been an international anti-apartheid movement, particularly in Scandinavian countries and the UK. They also emerged in this period.

Joshua Myers: What's your sense of the connection between the South African movement and the eventual sanctioning of apartheid South Africa by 1986? Was that part of the strategizing, or was it a byproduct?

Dr. Sylvia Hill: As we got closer, it began to get real. We were still marching every day, saying, "South Africa will be free. Mandela will be free. [Sam] Nujoma will be free," not knowing whether that would happen.

But the other thing I will say is that when you are an activist and committed to shaping reality, you shouldn't take anything off the table, because two or three change efforts can have a snowball effect.

It turns out the important historical lesson was that internally, South Africa had a major struggle, and externally, there were allies in an important solidarity struggle. That made change possible.

So, yes, when people say to me, "Well, you didn't get everything you wanted. They didn't get everything they wanted." I say, "No, because that's not the way social change takes place." You have to deal with what's there, not necessarily what would be the most desirable.

What was there was that the leadership forces inside South Africa had to make strategic decisions—not every Black group was on their side. You remember [the] Inkatha [Freedom Party]? They weren't only carrying out violence against the movement, they were clearly allied with the regime.

It's not a tea party. You have to decide that you can, in fact, make the kinds of decisions and concessions that will maximize change for the largest number of people. There was much I didn't agree with in terms of the changes they made, but that was something they had to live with. I was sitting here in D.C.

Joshua Myers: For the final question, I want you to give some advice to activists today. I want to frame this by thinking about the Movement for Black Lives and its connection with international solidarity—not only around Southern Africa, but thinking about the decolonization movement among young students in Southern Africa, the fight around nationalism and immigration there, the working-class struggles, the Marikana massacre a few years ago.[8]

But also, the Movement for Black Lives has been connected to what's happening in Palestine and Israel. You've done a great job explaining why we need international solidarity. But now, for

[8] The Marikana Massacre occurred on August 16, 2012, when South African police opened fire on striking mine workers at the Lonmin platinum mine in Marikana, killing 34 and injuring dozens more.

young activists in the Movement for Black Lives, the question is: how do you continue to forge it?

How do you make those connections so that people understand that Black Lives Matter has much to do with what's happening in the decolonization movement? It's not just a—as you talked about Courtland Cox earlier—a connection that's made because we are interested in it, it's a connection that's made because it actually affects us too.

Dr. Sylvia Hill: I think the first piece of advice I have is to not get yourself locked into either-or thinking. I really mean that. Marx has really good lessons about that kind of either-or thinking and how it just boxes you into making poor decisions in terms of social change and activism. So that's one thing.

The second thing, I think, is that electoral politics is important. When it's all said and done, even in support of the national liberation movements and armed struggle, we had to work on the Hill, both in the House and the Senate. It was the strength of having young Black people and progressive white people who worked on staff committees and in the Black Caucus. Some of them worked for non-Black officials as well. That was very important for us in terms of developing a strategy to influence the possibility of sanctions happening.

I know people get disenchanted with electoral politics, but their disenchantment should not allow them to drift into thinking that it's not going to work. Because the people in opposition want you to be disenchanted. They want you to feel like a vote doesn't matter. They want you to feel like that. So I would say, don't fall into that trick bag.

The other part of that is that we have had elected officials who failed our dreams and hopes for what they were going to do. We accept that too.

Joshua Myers: Here and on the continent.

Dr. Sylvia Hill: Here and on the continent. Thank you. Both places, right? But you still can't give up. What you have to do is figure out, how am I going to hold them accountable? We say that, but being organized enough to actually hold people accountable is the important phase of our struggle right now.

It really is. Aside from mobilizing young people to engage in the political process and helping them not get discouraged, to have that sense that no matter how bleak things might seem, our people have seen bleak. We have experienced it, and we've come this far. We can go that extra length. And these young people, I think, have the capacity to take us there.

Of course, professors like yourself are very important, and the kind of climate we create on university campuses is very important for nurturing that.

I will also say that when we were doing our community organizing work, we went to Lorton Prison every month to include inmates in consciousness-raising activities about what was happening, both here and abroad. We worked with high school students and went to Sunday schools.

I always tell people, if you don't want to organize one group of people, trust me, there are several others. You can always find somewhere to start…

Joshua Myers: Start with your family.

Dr. Sylvia Hill: …to make a contribution.

Joshua Myers: Dr. Hill, thank you for joining us today. This was most enlightening.

Dr. Sylvia Hill: Thank you. I enjoyed talking. Dredged up a lot of memories.