

Interview with Prexy Nesbitt

"The work we did in the anti-apartheid movement represented one of the finest hours of multiracial social movement work in this country. Not to say that it was without its tensions and its contradictions ... I'm very interested in trying to pass on to this next generation how you can ... not let these kinds of tensions—racial, ethnic, religious—divide people from fundamental ... goals that can only be reached by people banding together and overcoming the social barriers and the polarization. That's the only possible future that we have ... to bring in real change in the United States." —Prexy Nesbitt[1]

Introduction

Prexy Nesbitt is an activist and educator who has worked over the past four decades to connect freedom-loving peoples in Africa and North America to each other in order to strengthen progressive political and social movements on both continents. Beginning as an undergraduate at Antioch College, Nesbitt has combined organizing and learning, activism and education. He founded the Antioch Committee for a Free South Africa, which succeeded after a 10-year campaign in bringing about the divestment of Antioch College's holdings from companies involved with apartheid. The college's study abroad program sent him to Dar es Salaam in 1965-66. There Nesbitt began his lifelong engagement with Africa, meeting Southern African refugees who would come to play important roles in their countries' struggles for independence and development.

Born in Chicago and deeply rooted there, Nesbitt describes his family as "a remarkable and very 'un-American' African American family." During his childhood he was surrounded by educators and activists engaged in civil rights and union organizing; his family lived in a racially mixed neighborhood and attended Warren Avenue Congregational Church. While Nesbitt has traveled extensively in Africa, Europe, and North America, Chicago remains his home and the primary locus of his work as an educator. He has taught at the high school and college levels as well as serving as a school administrator. He has also been a mentor, within and outside of formal educational structures, to scores of young people around the country, who, inspired by his example, have themselves become activists.

One of the most important untold stories from the 1950s through the 1980s is how local organizing in the United States—in churches black and white, on campuses, with labor unions and civil rights organizations—prepared the way for two stellar achievements: the national campaign that was finally successful in winning economic sanctions against South Africa, and the provision of material support to the liberation movements fighting colonialism and apartheid in Southern Africa. Prexy Nesbitt's work in Geneva and Chicago illustrates the dynamic relationships that were built during this period, featuring campaigns built on constant interaction

between an activated local base and national and international organizations providing education and stimulus.

Nesbitt joined the staff of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Geneva, Switzerland in 1979. He became part of its highly controversial Programme to Combat Racism which, among other things, provided material aid to liberation movements fighting racial oppression. He brought to the position a network of contacts with the Southern African movements. He also had credibility within many member churches of the WCC because of the numerous church audiences he had addressed, preparing them to step up to the plate and support the program's material aid initiatives.

Nesbitt made the same linkages at the local level when he worked during 1986-87 as a special aide to Harold Washington, the first African American mayor of Chicago. While the Reagan White House embraced a policy of "constructive engagement" with South Africa's white minority government, progressive political leaders like Washington were joining forces in a campaign of disengagement. Nesbitt brought his considerable expertise and contacts, both within and outside the United States, to the mayor's office. It was during this time, in 1986, that Chicago's city council gave the key to the city to Alfred Nzo, secretary-general of South Africa's African National Congress (ANC).

Nesbitt's work includes affiliations with a number of other organizations and institutions. In 1970 he became the first field staff for the American Committee on Africa (ACOA), organizing anti-apartheid groups in the Midwest. In 1972 Robert Van Lierop and Nesbitt founded the Africa Information Service and edited *Return to the Source*, a collection of Amilcar Cabral's talks and speeches.[2] Nesbitt worked for ACOA a second time, coordinating the national Committee to Oppose Bank Loans to South Africa, from 1976 to 1979. He has also worked for the Institute for Policy Studies, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the American Friends Service Committee, and Africa Action.

Nesbitt has organized conferences and given speeches at countless locations across the United States. He has written many articles and a short book, *Apartheid in Our Living Rooms: US Foreign Policy and South Africa* (Chicago: Midwest Research, 1986). With Harold Rogers and Otis Cunningham, he edited the Chicago-based newsletter *African Agenda*. Later, with Jenny Dahlstein, Karin Candelaria, and Heeten Kalan, he co-edited *Baobab Notes: News and Reviews from Southern Africa*.

Nesbitt has created an archive of documents and artifacts related to the Southern African liberation movement, housed at the Wisconsin State Historical Society in Madison. He has also delivered extensive materials to Northwestern University's Africana Library and to the Carter G. Woodson Library on Chicago's South Side. (These materials are now available for restricted public access.) A recent recipient of an Alston/Bannerman Fellowship sabbatical award, he will

be working on writing his story as it relates to the Southern African liberation struggles and the extraordinary people he has met and worked with over the decades, from Amilcar Cabral to Eduardo Mondlane to Graça Machel to Nelson Mandela.

The following interview with Prexy Nesbitt was conducted by William Minter in Chicago on October 31, 1998. The interview focuses on Nesbitt's engagement with Mozambicans and Mozambique, beginning with the origins of that engagement. It demonstrates the importance of Nesbitt's family and community in the development of his commitment to African liberation struggles. It also articulates Nesbitt's understanding of the interconnectedness of local, national, and international political work. For him this has an intensely personal dimension, as his mother died in 1969 right at the time that Eduardo Mondlane was assassinated and his sister Roanne was murdered in 1973 shortly after Amilcar Cabral was assassinated.

Gail Hovey
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Transcript

Interviewee: Prexy Nesbitt

Interviewer: William Minter
Location: Chicago, Illinois, USA
Date: October 31, 1998

Q: Prexy, when was the first sustained time that you actually worked, if not in Mozambique, with Mozambicans?

NESBITT: The first sustained period would have been the period from essentially August of 1968 through to about 1970. That was in Dar es Salaam, most of that period. Part of the period was also spent in London and in Kenya. I left the country in August of '68 with the intention of going directly to work for Frelimo at the Mozambique Institute.[3] At that time, as I left the country, I was employed by the Church World Service, as arranged by Eduardo Mondlane[4] contacting Church World Service and working with a man named Jan van Hoogstraten. And van Hoogstraten got me a combination of Church World Service money and World Council of Churches money to go and be a teacher.[5] The difficulty was that just as I left the country, the internal struggle inside of Frelimo intensified. And also that's the period in which the Tanzanian government—certain functionaries also became very involved in that situation within Frelimo and around the Mozambique Institute. That was a period when the Tanzanian Ministry of Immigration basically said to Frelimo people, " We're not going to let anybody come." I left the country nonetheless, because I was also 1-A draft status, with the summons for a physical already having been delivered to a former address. I should say one other thing, that prior to this

I had had extensive meetings with Shafrudin Khan,[6] in New York City mostly, with an intention of actually joining Frelimo.

Q: Prior to '68?

NESBITT: Prior to '68, throughout the year that I was in New York City at Columbia University. I kept very good contact with Shafrudin with the intention of actually joining Frelimo as a militant. And Shafrudin and Eduardo talked me into becoming part of the Mozambique Institute instead, giving me the very sound argument that there was no place for non-Mozambicans in the armed struggle.

Q: When did you actually get to Dar?

NESBITT: I got to Dar actually in I think November of '68. It may have been October, because I spent a month in Kenya. I worked August and September in London with Polly Gaster[7] and the Committee for Freedom of Mozambique, Angola, and Guinea-Bissau, and I also worked at the Anti-Apartheid [Movement] office. I split my day up between the two of them.

Q: So it was late '68 you arrived in Dar. And you were there until early '70?

NESBITT: I was there until late '69, early '70, going back with my mother's death, and then coming back again, and then going back again. That's the way it went. But it was in that period. It essentially ended up being about a year.

Q: Let's jump back chronologically. Where were you born? What did your parents do?

NESBITT: I was born February 23, 1944 in Chicago. My father at the time was a schoolteacher at Phillips High School. My mother was a teacher, a playground instructor, in fact, at the Drake Elementary School. Two years later, she would become a teacher too. We lived on the South Side then: 2801 South Parkway Boulevard. We've always lived cooperatively with other families, and we lived at that time with a couple by the name of DeForest and Eleanor Ward and their daughter Twinkle. And some of my father's brothers who were not yet married lived with us too. In that period, we moved to the west side, before I was four years of age. And all five brothers together bought one apartment building in Lawndale on the west side of Chicago, very much aided by a group of sort of progressive Jewish folks, including people close to Studs Terkel ... sort of left Jewish activist types. Bill Tabb's[8] stepmother, Tommy Danish, was one of them, for instance.

Q: What kind of a neighborhood was it?

NESBITT: It was a changing neighborhood. The west side was then—we first moved there in '48—predominately, overwhelmingly Jewish, working class to lower middle class. In the course of about a 10-year period, it became largely Afro-American. On that same west side, about 10 blocks away from us, was a church called the Warren Avenue Congregational Church. At the time when we moved there it was pastored by a man named Julian Keiser. He and his family moved, and the next pastor was a man named Edward Hawley.[9] And this would put us in about '55 or '56.

Q: Was there a particular reason for moving to that neighborhood?

NESBITT: The particular reason was that first, my father and his brothers got a great buy on an apartment building where they could live cooperatively, and it was also a neighborhood that was very beautiful. It sat right on a park, and at that time it was a stable neighborhood. And they got a great buy on this building. I don't think they foresaw, though one of my uncles certainly would have foreseen that coming was a tremendous change, because today that's one of the most difficult neighborhoods in the city.

Q: And that's where you went to primary school?

NESBITT: That's where I went to primary school all the way to fifth grade. But in fifth grade, my father came in one day. My mother already—she was a teacher too—had found this Francis Parker School, as an alternative, in her view, to the public school. My father was not convinced that we should go to a private school, however progressive it may have been. But he came up to the public school one day when I was in fifth grade and found me teaching the class ... teaching the reading class. And that ended it. He said that night to my mother " take them up to that place." Literally, the teacher went regularly and had lunch and coffee and let me teach the reading class.

Q: I'm sure you did a good job.

NESBITT: Sure did a good job of getting me out of there, too.

Q: So you went to the Francis Parker School. Is that in the same neighborhood?

NESBITT: No, on the north side. It involved a commute from the west side all the way up to the north side, about an hour and 10 minutes, several bus rides. At first my sister and I went to the school. And then my mother, who was the best organizer, then got my two other cousins in the building with us, another set of two cousins in the building with us, some " yard cousins" we called them from the South Side who also joined us, and then four or five other families. So it wasn't too long before there was a Nesbitt clan at the school.

Q: And that school went all the way up through high school?

NESBITT: All the way through high school. And so I went to that school from '54 to '62 and can say that even at this school I began to have an interest in Africa. I can remember, but would never show anybody in the world, a sixth-grade paper that I wrote about South Africa, where I used the word kaffir throughout the paper.[10]

Q: These were just the sources you were reading.

NESBITT: These were just the sources I was reading. In fact, I think one of the things I was reading at that time—I have to check this out—may have been the first edition of *Cry the Beloved Country*. It's about that time period.

Q: Well, *Cry the Beloved Country* came out in '48.

NESBITT: Did it come out in '48? So it may have been *Cry the Beloved Country*, because this is 1955. I started there in '54.

Q: How would you characterize your family's attitude toward Africa and political issues?

NESBITT: My family's attitude was very supportive toward Africa. It starts out with a great uncle, my father's uncle, who was a Garveyite. That was Robert Barker. And he talked to my father and his brothers who had been raised up in Champaign, Illinois, and came up here. He was an engineer for the furnaces in police stations all over the South Side, a real gun man, heavy into guns. And my father and his four brothers were nephews on my grandmother's side, and he would take care of the boys when they came up to the city, and they would catch the train. They would literally hop the freights to come up and visit. And he used to talk to them all the time about Garvey and the great ideas of Garvey.[11] Then I had another uncle, George, my father's brother, a lawyer who was in the Communist Party I think, probably, although I never knew him at a point that he was still able to talk rationally. He came down with Alzheimer's. He was certainly listed that way down in Champaign County. He became an attorney. He was a contemporary of Richard Wright, St. Clair Drake, and that was the whole group of people he ran with. My mother ran with a group of artists and intellectuals who were also very involved in things—Robert Hayden, for example, the poet. And there was a great influence of Africa from all of these people. I remember when Nkrumah got [Ghana's] independence in '57. Even before independence in '57, I can remember vaguely being taken to rallies and meetings where Nkrumah was speaking, by my father and uncles. Then additionally, there was in the building a Jewish woman by the name of Tamara Danish, who was very involved in various organizations, but one of the specific ones she was very involved in was with Paul Robeson. I remember very well being taken to Paul Robeson rallies, hearing Alphaeus Hunton and Du Bois. Those were

people that Tommy and my father and mother all would have made sure that I heard even at a very young age.[12]

Q: Did Ed Hawley already have an Africa connection at that point?

NESBITT: I don't remember Ed having that ... certainly he did through Eduardo [Mondlane].

Q: Yeah, but when did Eduardo get here to Chicago? To Northwestern?

NESBITT: I'm not sure of those dates, but it seems to me I heard '56, that he married Janet in '56. And I think when he married Janet it was the year before he started his PhD program at Northwestern. Part of the scandal of Janet and Eduardo at the time was that he was so much older than Janet. And I was minimizing the impact. Her family was really blown away, and for years her parents wouldn't have any contact with her, and so the church played a very important role, I think. But she never talks about it.

Q: So you met Eduardo here when you were still in high school?

NESBITT: I would have still been in eighth grade—eighth or ninth grade. I can barely remember him. I remember the two of them, because there was such discussion about them. There were other mixed couples around but none that were like, mixed African and white. Although there would be another similar couple: a man named Pierre Maloka, who would live in our house even. But I remember what disappointment, when we got to know this guy he was nothing like Eduardo.

Q: So you didn't know Eduardo that well at that time.

NESBITT: He was a person that would've been like a model. It's interesting, Bill, because I talked to Eduardo in the period of this sort of recruitment process, '68, '69. I talked to him two or three times on the phone. I never saw him though. And I didn't see Eduardo until I actually went to dinner with him that night. And the minute I saw him, I realized that I knew him. It hadn't been in my mind how well I knew him. And then he immediately set the context by telling me. And one of my uncles today swears by Eduardo. Interestingly enough, one of the other letters that I didn't read, from my mother—I've unearthed all these letters—was a letter talking about how saddened all of them were about the news of his assassination, that came to me from them in that February '69 period.

Q: So from here you went to Antioch?

NESBITT: I went to Antioch in '62, fall of '62, having spent the summer as a baggage porter, Dearborn Street station, loading baggage onto trains. I think another thing that was important for

me was that in '61 I was part of the Experiment in International Living[13] in Sweden. And in Sweden I kept running into people my age who were very interested in Africa. So this further excited me around Africa stuff.

Q: Where in Sweden were you?

NESBITT: Stockholm, living with a Swedish family. My Swedish brother would ultimately marry Maria Leisner. Maria Leisner was the youngest parliamentarian, and was part of the International Relations Committee. I'm just saying that to say how much it furthered my own interest in Africa, to be in Sweden and keep hearing so much about Africa.

Q: So this is at high school.

NESBITT: This is at high school. I'm the only junior amongst all these other seniors. So then I go back for my senior year in high school. I think one of the other reasons I went to Antioch was the opportunity to have the year overseas. I took the year overseas in Dar es Salaam. In '65, '66 I was in Dar es Salaam and immediately was immersed in the refugee community in Dar es Salaam.

Q: The Antioch program that took you to Dar es Salaam, was that a program where you could go anywhere and make your own arrangements or did they have an arrangement with Dar?

NESBITT: No, the school made the arrangements. It was called the Antioch Education Abroad. I was meant to go to the University College, Salisbury, Rhodesia, and everything was all set for me to go there. How I actually chose Rhodesia I cannot remember. I think part of the reason was that there were a lot of Quakers—somehow I remember—there in Rhodesia at the time. But then at the last minute, I suddenly got a letter—I've been looking all over for that letter—that refused me entry to Rhodesia. And then the head of the Antioch Education Abroad program overnight literally made arrangements for me to go to the University College, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. And the interesting other piece of this is Barbara Masekela[14]—somehow or other, Barbara Masekela was somehow involved in making this switch. And I don't know exactly how, but she showed up in Antioch just about in that same period of time.

Q: From?

NESBITT: From somewhere in the United States, and spent about a week around the campus. [Ed and Gretchen Hawley were] already in Dar es Salaam and drove up to Nairobi, Kenya to meet me. Ed was working already then as the pastor to refugees in '65 in Tanzania. And he had left our family's church. And Ed was a great friend to our family, and we were a great friend to Ed. So Ed and Gretchen drive up to Nairobi and meet me, and we drive back from Nairobi to Dar in some old Peugeot. And immediately, the community that I become a part of is some of the

ANC refugees, who, a couple of them, are attending school at the University of Dar es Salaam. Through them I then meet the Harvard Tanganyika group. And through the Harvard Tanganyika group, and particularly through seeing a woman named Mary Yarwood, I would get introduced to the Mozambique Institute, to the AAI school in Kurasini,[15] and really get exposure to that whole community of Southern Africans living in Tanzania. So I can remember, for example, going to speak to the African American Institute refugees about Malcolm X. In fact, there was a young guy who was at the Mozambique Institute when you were there, very active, very articulate.

Q: Job Chambal.

NESBITT: Job Chambal, that's who it is. He had been a student at Kurasini. And there were a number of others. So I knew some of them, or they knew me. They knew me through the fact that I had spoken about Malcolm X, in two or three sessions, to people at the Kurasini school. And Malcolm had just died that year. So I would say that that earlier period of '65, '66 also gave me fairly regular contact with the issues and some people in the Southern Africa struggles.

Q: What were you actually studying at Dar?

NESBITT: I was studying history. They didn't know what to do with me. I was the first foreign student to actually be enrolled there. And I studied a lot with Terry Ranger, John Iliffe, and John Lonsdale, and with Irene Brown, who was the wife of Attorney General Roland Brown. She was very involved with support for liberation movement people, so I remember we read some of Eduardo's writings then. We read Cabral. She was wonderful. And it was a good year. David Kimble was teaching there. Horrible. What a colonialist. I was involved with a bunch of Zimbabweans, and UDI [16] was declared that fall. And we went and attacked the British Embassy and burned the Rolls Royce and the British flag. And [President Julius] Nyerere came up to the university and told us we should all apologize. And I'll never forget that after this long scolding, as he went out the door, he winked at all of us.

Q: So you were there for an academic year?

NESBITT: I was there as an academic and also participated in an archeological expedition down to the south to Iringa and Dodoma. We went all over, and we went up to Olduvai Gorge, and this was done with a guy named John Sutton. And there was one other very important thing I did. I was the only student representative allowed at a conference organized by Terrence Ranger. There was the first international congress of African history at Dar es Salaam. And it was just extraordinary. I'm trying to think of some of the other people that were there. Basil Davidson was there. George Shepperson was there. I mean, it was an emerging field at that very time, and I felt that I was very much living a kind of living history at that time.

Q: So by the time you came back for your final year at Antioch, you already had a fairly good sense of connection not only with Southern Africa but with Mozambique in particular.

NESBITT: Even further than that, Bill, because my final year at Antioch I led the—I can't even remember what they called it—the Antioch Committee on Southern Africa [editor's note: Antioch Committee for a Free Southern Africa], along with George Houser's daughter, Martie Houser. And the issue we were raising in '67 was Antioch's connections to companies involved with South Africa, divestment. But it was '67. It went so far that we sat in on a trustees' meeting. I remember feeling very betrayed by Martie Houser, because she never went along with us all the way through. We brought a lot of people in to speak that year. One of them was Dennis Brutus, for example.[17] Around Antioch, there was a very sophisticated political environment. My senior year at Antioch, for my senior thesis, what we did was teach a course on the Third World, five of us who were seniors: an Ethiopian guy named Dessaigne Rahmato, myself, Frank Adler, Judy Kolodny, Toni Atlas. And we used an expansive definition of the Third World. I concentrated on Tanzania and Southern Africa and the relationship between Tanzania and liberation movements. And that was pretty advanced stuff, doing it in 1967, but it afforded a great opportunity to do this collaboratively. By June of '67—this would have started '66—by June, when we were to graduate, the group kind of fell apart. The Six-Day War happened, and it had tremendous impact on our group, which included a Saudi Arabian and a Jewish guy who stopped speaking to each other around the Six-Day War and other issues. But by then it was pretty clear for me that I was going to move in some directions that had a lot to do with Africa. I got a fellowship to go to Columbia University, and at Columbia University I had courses with Marcia Wright, courses with Thomas Karis, courses with a guy named Arnold Rivlin at Brooklyn College. And spring of that year was when the Columbia thing broke out, and I lost my fellowship, and I also within a week lost out inasmuch as I got drafted.

Q: Lost the fellowship as a result of the protest.

NESBITT: The protest. I was one of the two, or three maybe, graduate students who got arrested. Our lawyer in this, incidentally, was Bob van Lierop,[18] a connection that I had already made. And I brought Bob in to be the lawyer for the whole group of us that got busted.

Q: Bob hadn't done his film yet.

NESBITT: He hadn't done his film.

Q: But he'd made the contact with Mozambique.

NESBITT: He'd made the contact.

Q: And Shafrudin [Khan] got there in what year?

NESBITT: Shafrudin got there in '66 or '67. Shafrudin was there about then. And the other thing that was of great significance to me was I was sitting in a course, Karis' course, and there was an Ethiopian Students Organization called ESUNA, the Ethiopian Students Union of North America, that I was very close to. And we were sitting in this course together with Karis, and he brings in two guys to talk to us about the Wankie invasion.[19] He introduces them to us as game wardens who happen to be in the area at the time. And these guys proceed to give us this detailed breakdown of how the Rhodesian security picked up these ANC and Zapu guys coming in, and they were so detailed. The Ethiopians and I took one look at each other. And people were already suspicious of Karis, but that confirmed it entirely for us. Shortly after that, I think in a matter of months—that must have been the first semester, the next semester we never finished, which would've been taking us to the spring of '68. And by that time, I was already talking to Shafrudin seriously and also had some exposure to a guy named Roger Hilsman[20] who was teaching at Columbia. I was in the course, I'll never forget this. A guy named Davis Mugabe, a Zimbabwean, [and I] were in that course together. And Hilsman basically said to both of us: "I can create this great future for you guys doing work." He was trying to recruit us. This bastard was trying to recruit us. And there were a bunch of SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] people in that same graduate seminar with me. Linda Borus is one of them. I say that as these are all people who still are very active politically. And I think that just deepened my own commitment by that time to take some other options politically than anything that would be what Columbia could offer.

Q: With a look back during that whole period, one of the questions is to what extent you were involved in or conscious of domestic political struggles.

NESBITT: Oh, I have to say that I was very involved in those. As an illustration: I first of all had been active in the Baggage Porters Union, because my father and uncle had helped to form that union when I was a baggage redcap before I even entered Antioch. I was one of the people arrested in Yellow Springs, Ohio for taking on the symbol of racism in Yellow Springs, which was a barber shop. And I was one who went into the barber's chair and tried to desegregate the chair.

Q: That's how you lost some of your hair?

NESBITT: [laughter] That's how I lost some of—actually, in those years I had a leaping Afro, Bill. But I was also on the way to Mississippi in the summer of '64, Freedom Summer, and then didn't get to go, because my mother's fears were so deep and so irrational. She basically told me that if I went I could find some other family to try to put myself through college. And then I got sick too, that summer, so I didn't get to go. But I went as far as going to Miami, even, to Oxford, to some of the orientation sessions.[21] Then at the Columbia thing in '67, by that time I was already the editor of a citywide black student newspaper, and I was also one of the people, as I

mentioned, busted. But I was one of the people pushing for the black students to link up with the white students as they took over buildings, because many of these students were graduate colleagues of mine. And I was also pushing for us to have a demand that would be not just around protesting Columbia's expansion into Harlem with this gym but also to protest the war-related research that was being done at Columbia. I argued those positions pretty much by myself within the group that was occupying Hamilton Hall.[22] And I have to say to you immediately that I could do politics feeling very affirmed by my family. My father came coincidentally to visit me in New York during that period and found that I was occupying this building. And I remember visiting with my father, yelling down to him from the third floor of Hamilton Hall. And he used to tell the story of some white guy who was standing next to him, and the guy said "They oughta put 'em all in jail." And my father turned to him and took off his jacket and said "Well, you better start right here 'cause that's my son." So I mean, this kind of thing gave me a very affirming sense of always feeling very affirmed by my family in my politics. My other uncle here, the doctor, the one, Lendor, who knew Eduardo and admired him so much, became a physician for the Panther Free Medical Clinic on the west side. I mean this was the kind of politics that they did. And my uncle the lawyer wrote up his whole experience during World War II in the segregated army, protesting against the Jim Crow army, and he finally got sent into isolation in Australia. And there's a guy doing a book now, using my uncle's letters to the NAACP about the physical violence, the race riots that went along within the military, busting the whole illusion that the military was this paradise of desegregation and integration.

Q: Let's jump then to your second time in Dar. Because of what had happened before you came, you weren't able to teach the way that you would have hoped to. What was most of your work during that period?

NESBITT: The most substantive work and the work that I will never ever regret was the work that I did with Jorge Rebelo, which was work on Mozambique Revolution and helping to edit—helping Jorge do Mozambique Revolution. That, and some of the work that you and Ruth [Brandon] left me to do around the library of the [Mozambique] Institute.[23] And some tutoring of the Mozambican students who were still around. I did some volunteering also with Mozambicans who were pitching up in Ed Hawley's office. And I remember doing, with my not very good Portuguese—at least I had some—I remember doing some interviewing even, of Mozambicans who had been taken into detention by the Ministry of Home Affairs of Tanzania. And then I remember also at one point they brought in to Tanzania a group of captured Portuguese soldiers, and somehow some of them also ended up at one point being ministered to by the Council of Refugees. And I got involved with Ed in doing some of that, too. So my time was split between doing stuff for Jorge, doing stuff for Ed Hawley, and then some tutoring. And then John Saul [24] got me very involved also in teaching English at the Vietnamese Embassy, which also met a very strong need, since I had written publicly a letter that said—actually, while I was in Dar, I wrote a letter tearing up the Selective Service deferment that I had received by this time. My physical had been canceled. I had been granted an exemption for religious reasons,

and I decided I wouldn't accept that. And I tore it up, burned it up, wrote a letter saying I didn't agree with a religious deferment, was not a pacifist and was willing to fight and saw the Vietnamese as a group that I'd be willing to fight with [on the side of]. And I published this, publicly.

Q: Where?

NESBITT: It came out in the Dar es Salaam paper, in the Nationalist, or one of them. And that statement did not get me in well with the American community in Dar es Salaam. In fact, I remember some guys getting out of the swimming pool at the University, leaving, when I came into the swimming pool. But it helped to make me very clear about where I was taking my stance and my position on these things.

Q: So let's do a quick run-through, since we don't have that much time of your trajectory since. When you came back from Tanzania, you came back to Chicago?

NESBITT: When I came back from Tanzania in '69—'70, early '70 ... I'd come back previously because of my mother's death, and then I came back to stay because my family was in real crisis. I was in real hot water with the draft stuff. And then it deepened because I started working in a Catholic women's school on the west side and got involved with the Young Workers Liberation League, a youth wing of the Communist party, organized a meeting at the school. And there was a Red Squad agent on the staff of the school who turned over to the Chicago Tribune this meeting that I had organized so that the Chicago Tribune metro section ran a story about a "red" holding a meeting at this Catholic girls' school. That led to a demand from some of the faculty that I resign.

Q: What school was that?

NESBITT: St. Mary's Center for Learning at Damen and Roosevelt Road in Chicago. This would be '70, '71. To make a long story short, the students were protesting against the faculty. The principal said if I was forced to resign she would resign as well, although she did chastise me for not telling her that it was a Young Workers Liberation League [meeting]. I was hired to do kind of black studies, but I turned it into Third World studies, offering it to the Italians and Mexican students there, too. I then went to work for IFCO, Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization, in New York.[25] I moved back to New York, because things were also heating up around my legal situation. So I worked for Lucius Walker at IFCO, '72 into '73. And we all got fired, 19 of us. It was known as Black Monday at [the Interchurch Center on] Riverside Drive [where IFCO was located.] They fired the entire staff of Third World people. There were several sets of issues, and we demanded a meeting with Lucius. He fired everybody. There's a whole set of things to talk about around political work, and I can't remember when it fits in there, but it's in

that period that you and a group of other people give some money to Houser to hire an organizer to work in the Midwest. And Houser doesn't keep it up for more than a year. You all gave enough money for a year, he never matched it, and so forth and so on. But in that same period, I got involved with the Africa Research Group, with the Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement, and Bob and I also founded the Africa Information Service.[26] This has profound political impact, I am seeing more and more, because it's in that period that Cabral comes to visit. We did the book *Return to the Source*. It was really Bob and I editing that book. There's the takeover of the Africa Research Group archives. They made a decision to give all the stuff to Bob and I working out of Bob Browne's office down in Harlem. I'm doing much of this from Chicago, basically.

Q: Because you got back to Chicago after IFCO?

NESBITT: That's right. My roots come back to Chicago again. '73, Cabral is killed. And I think by that time or shortly thereafter we all lost the jobs at IFCO. I went back to graduate school at University of Chicago—Columbia wouldn't take me back. I only last there a year, being put in the hands of Ralph Austen.[27] I mean, Marcia Wright predicted it, and it was completely true. I was nothing but total intimidation to him. So that was a relationship never meant to be. [In that period] I also worked with an outfit that was designing alternative schools called Center for New Schools, and taught part-time. I've always been able to go and get a teaching gig just by virtue of having been in all these PhD programs, and I never even picked up an MA degree until Northwestern, later. But I could always say I was a PhD candidate, and they would let you teach—

Q: On probation.

NESBITT: Precisely. Or one low course ... the exploitation wages stuff. So '74, '75: in that period, politically speaking, there are several things that I'm involved in. It seems to me that one of them I recall very vividly—but that's later—is the Angola Support Conference, the one that starts out in Havana and then comes here to Chicago. But that's '75, '76. In '74, '75, though, I think I'm still at Northwestern then, because I remember distinctly being in Southern Africa when the Mozambicans and Malawians were killed on the Winela aircraft crash in Botswana.[28] Because I did my preliminary research for my dissertation, which by that time was going to be on migratory labor, and spent a lot of time with Ruth First.[29] But I was also back in touch with Frelimo people and was already involved with Bob Van Lierop, and we were battling out already things like who was going to be doing the Southern Africa work, whether we worked with LSM [Liberation Support Movement][30] or not, all those kinds of issues. You remember that whole period when LSM was coming here and doing a lot of showings of *A Luta Continua*? I can't remember what other things I'm doing to make a living. But by '75, I'm back at the St. Mary's school again, and they bring me back as the dean of students. And I remember then we set up this committee to work on Angola. [Earlier we had] formed—basically, Eileen

Hanson and I and Mimi [Edmunds]—the Chicago Committee for the Liberation of Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau (CCLAMG).[31]

Q: That was some time when I was at Wisconsin, between '69 and '73.

NESBITT: When was the Committee of Returned Volunteers[32] founded?

Q: It must have been '67 or '68, because the Committee of Returned Volunteers was involved in the Chicago convention antiwar demonstration.

NESBITT: Well, the Committee of Returned Volunteers had then subsequently a big conference here in Chicago on imperialism, and I remember very well because that was when Trudi Pax and I really got close to each other. Cabral was assassinated in '73, so that by '72 CCLAMG must have been around already, but I was one of the founders of CCLAMG at any rate. And I remember distinctly the difficulty of the role that I played, because I was also the founder of what was called the African American Solidarity Committee.[33] It was basically a CP [Community Party] vehicle with Harold Rogers and Otis Cunningham and myself, and we put out a newsletter. I can't remember the name of it, but it coexisted with CCLAMG. And here you had the black formation on the one hand, and the white folks with me on the other hand. And it was very difficult because I was working with both. I'll tell you when that was. When was the coup in Portugal?

Q: '74.

NESBITT: '74, okay. So that was '74. Certainly CCLAMG was up and running by then, because we brought Ruth First here. She spoke at Northwestern and was speaking the night the news came. I passed her a note that the coup had just taken place in Portugal, and that was April of '74. [In] '75, I'm working with this committee on Angola. What did we call it? Bill, I can't remember.

Q: Anyway, we can track some of this stuff.

NESBITT: It's certainly all in the archives. I've put a lot of stuff up there in the Wisconsin Historical Society. But it's out of that formation that we work very closely with a similar Angola committee in New York. And I remember being very envious of the wonderful march that people held that I was at in New York, in defense of Angola and protesting U.S. policy towards Angola. It was then out of that that the MPLA made the connection, and we met them—a whole bunch of us. Were you a part of that group that went to Havana?

Q: No, I was in Ribáuè, in Mozambique.[34]

NESBITT: So a whole group of us went to Havana—Michael Simmons and Jim Bristol of the AFSC [American Friends Service Committee], the Black Scholar people. The follow-up to that was that we had the Angola Support Conference in '76—June I think—which was all about trying to get the United States to recognize the Angola government. And that was held here in Chicago, and I was the administrator of it. Then in '77 I start working for ACOA again, moved back to New York. That was right after the events in South Africa. Yeah, it was the fall of '77. And I started working with George at the ACOA. [In] '79 I continue to work with George, but he's driving me crazy by now. We had these intense debates with George over the years on issue after issue. Particularly one was the issue of no longer giving support to FNLA and UNITA. Although we were also pressing for no longer giving support to PAC. And we didn't touch ZANU, because that was made difficult by that time by Frelimo's posture toward ZANU. Bob [Van Lierop] was still on the board then, Charlie Hightower was at the Washington office of ACOA. And then in '79 I go with the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) and work with Betsy [Schmidt] and Bob [Lawrence] and Kevin [Danaher]. We have this great team, and we're being undermined the whole time by Bob Borosage and Saul Landau. And of course there's this whole history of IPS and the black community. And we then have this huge issue with the rest of IPS over Andy Young. They wanted to give Andy Young the Letelier-Moffet award, and we were protesting it because of Andy Young's speech that he had given here, where he said that the best option for Africa ever would be neocolonialism. His behavior recently is all foreshadowed by his past.[35] In '79 I get this call out of the blue from Baldwin Sjollema. He says "Are you interested in working for the Programme to Combat Racism for the World Council of Churches, in Geneva Switzerland?" I said, What? Couldn't believe it. Now I had met Baldwin, because he had brought myself and Bob Van Lierop and Mai Palmberg—she's Finnish but has lived in Sweden. Mai and Bob and I and all of us had waged this tremendous battle at the Kunene Dam Conference that the WCC sponsored, I think in '72, where the battle was over the question of MPLA, UNITA and so forth. And so Sjollema had been involved in that, and I knew him from that. José Chipenda also I had met earlier. Philip Potter was still the head of the World Council of Churches. [36] And so I go and I work '79 to '83 at the World Council of Churches and in that period become tremendously involved in most of the NGO structures and certainly with all the church people in all the Southern Africa countries. I become the link between [Allen] Boesak and the ANC, specifically Joe Gqabi. Joe and I work out a way, where he had this whole coded thing that I would send messages back and forth to Boesak from him. He'd shoot things to me in Geneva, and I'd shoot them to Boesak from Geneva. [37]

Q: What year was he killed?

NESBITT: Gqabi was assassinated in '81. Yeah, I'll never forget that. In '83 I go inside South Africa, largely through the effort of John Stewart's parents, and Anne Hope and Sally Timmel.[38] And John's parents take me from Lesotho into Umtata. And then from Umtata into the Leumko mission. I'll never forget it. It was an extraordinary experience. And we have to leave there very early in the morning because we get word that the Transkei security forces are

about to raid the whole thing on behalf of the Special Branch. And that must've been in '83. And then '83 I come back to Chicago. I think I go back to teaching. Maybe St. Xavier College or Illinois Institute of Technology. I mean there are about 17 schools in this area that I've taught in. And then '85 I start union organizing [along with part-time teaching], and I work for—one right after the other—the Service Employees International Union and then District 65 of the UAW and I do that for three years in a row. And right out of that, I go into working for Harold Washington, and that's until his death. That's for about two years. He dies in '87. And then '87 is when I'm asked to start and work for Mozambique and work for Mozambique from '87 until it must have been '91 or '92.[39] And there was a year's period of nothing but odds and ends, and then I work from '93 until about '95 for MacArthur [Foundation] and since that time have been at Francis Parker [School] and DePaul [University]. In my life there are two important dates. My mother died in '69, just as Eduardo died. My sister calls me in '73 when I'm working for IFCO to tell me about Cabral's assassination, and then [my sister] dies four months later. And particularly those connections, because both of these women in my life had personal connections to the two people killed. There was some point that Cabral was visiting—maybe '71 or '72, New York—I'm out here in Chicago, couldn't get to New York. My sister Roanne was modeling in New York. My sister was extraordinarily beautiful, just striking. Cabral had an incredible eye for women, and I ask her to go to a meeting at someone's house, and she is sitting in the front row. And they strike up this extraordinary friendship. And he invites her to come to Guinea Bissau. And it was one of the things that she was really into doing.

[1] Interview with Prexy Nesbitt, Alston/Bannerman Fellowship Program, 2003.

[2] Africa Information Service, ed., *Return to the Source: Selected Speeches by Amilcar Cabral* (New York: Africa Information Service, 1973). Cabral (1924-1973) was the leader of the Africa Party for the Independence of Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde, and one of the most influential African political thinkers of the period. He was assassinated by Portuguese agents in 1973. See also the interview with Robert Van Lierop in this archive.

[3] The Mozambique Institute in Dar es Salaam, founded in 1963, was a channel for support to the educational and social programs of Frelimo. Its buildings also housed the Frelimo secondary school until 1968 and the Frelimo Department of Information.

[4] Eduardo Mondlane was the first president of Frelimo. He held the position from 1962 until his death in Dar es Salaam in 1969 from a letter bomb sent by the Portuguese secret police.

[5] Founded in 1946, Church World Service is the relief, development, and refugee assistance ministry of 36 Protestant, Orthodox, and Anglican denominations in the United States. The World Council of Churches was founded in 1948 and is headquartered in Geneva.

[6] Shafrudin Khan served as Frelimo representative at the United Nations from 1968 until the independence of Mozambique in 1975. He was an active representative of the movement who won friends and supporters both in New York and around the United States. After independence, he served in the Mozambican Foreign Ministry until his death in 1992.

[7] Polly Gaster, one of the leaders of a British support organization called the Committee for Freedom in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau, moved to Mozambique after independence. She founded and directed the Bureau for Public Information in the Ministry of Information.

[8] William Tabb is professor of economics at Queens College of the City University of New York and author of numerous books on economics and social issues.

[9] In the 1960s Ed Hawley worked with the Tanzanian Christian Council as pastor to refugees, where he maintained close ties with Eduardo Mondlane. From 1974 to 1993, Hawley served as editor of Africa Today, a journal based at the University of Denver.

[10] Derogatory term for Africans in South Africa.

[11] Marcus Garvey (1887-1940), founder of the black nationalist Universal Negro Improvement Association, lived in the United States from 1916-1927, before he was deported by the U.S. government to Jamaica, his country of birth.

[12] Paul Robeson, W. E. B. Du Bois, and the less-known Alphaeus Hunton were all active in the Council on African Affairs in the 1940 and 1950s. See the interview with Charlene Mitchell in this archive, and additional sources cited there.

[13] Founded in 1932, the Experiment in International Living is an international exchange program in which secondary school students live with host families. The program brings international students to the United States and sends U.S. students to other countries.

[14] Barbara Masekela, who was appointed South African ambassador to the United States in 2003, graduated from the University of Ohio in 1971. She taught at Staten Island Community College in New York and at Rutgers University in New Jersey before heading the African National Congress office of arts and culture in Zambia.

[15] The African American Institute (AAI) secondary school for refugees from Southern Africa was located in the Kurasini neighborhood of Dar es Salaam, not far from the Mozambique Institute.

[16] Unilateral Declaration of Independence by the white minority regime in Rhodesia, November 11, 1965.

[17] Dennis Brutus is a South African poet and activist. He was particularly prominent in the international sports boycott against South Africa, after fleeing into exile in 1966.

[18] See interview with Robert Van Lierop in this archive.

[19] The Wankie invasion, in July-September 1967, was the first major armed campaign by the armed wing of the African National Congress (Umkhonto we Sizwe). It was carried out in conjunction with the Zimbabwean African Peoples Union (ZAPU).

[20] Roger Hilsman was director of the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research under President Kennedy and assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern affairs under President Johnson. After retiring from the government, he was professor of government at Columbia University.

[21] On Freedom Summer volunteers and their experiences in Mississippi, see Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). There are numerous other published descriptions in the literature on the civil rights movement.

[22] For a personal reflection on the Columbia strike of 1968 and additional references, see the account by Frank da Cruz at <http://www.columbia.edu/acis/history/1968.html>.

[23] Jorge Rebelo at that time directed the Frelimo department of information and edited *Mozambique Revolution*. William Minter and Ruth Brandon (then Ruth Brandon Minter) were teachers at the Frelimo secondary school during this period, from 1966 to 1968.

[24] John Saul, a Toronto-based Canadian solidarity activist and scholar, is author of numerous books and articles on Southern Africa and professor of political science at York University.

[25] The Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization (IFCO) was founded in 1967 by progressive church leaders and activists.

[26] The Africa Research Group, founded in Boston in 1968, was one of the key groups involved in radical research and popular education on African liberation in the late 1960s and 1970s. Its publications include *Race to Power: Struggle for Southern Africa*, published as a pamphlet by the organization in 1971 and as a book in 1974 (New York: Anchor Press). See Danny Schechter, *News Dissector* (New York: Akashic Books, 2001), 169-76. For the Africa Information Service, in New York, see the interview with Robert Van Lierop in this collection. The Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement (PRWM), in Cambridge, Massachusetts, was

founded by workers at Polaroid in 1970 who discovered that Polaroid film was being used for the pass system in South Africa. The two key activists were Ken Williams and Caroline Hunter, and their protest gained national prominence.

[27] Ralph Austen was professor of African history at the University of Chicago.

[28] A plane carrying migrant mine workers near Francistown, Botswana, crashed in April 1974, killing 84 people.

[29] Ruth First (1925-1982) was a South African scholar and a leader in the African National Congress. She was killed by a South African letter bomb in Maputo in 1982.

[30] The Liberation Support Movement was a support organization for African liberation based on the west coast of the United States and Canada.

[31] This committee worked closely with the New World Resource Center, which distributed progressive literature on African liberation struggles and other issues.

[32] The Committee of Returned Volunteers, an organization of returned Peace Corps volunteers as well as some former participants in other overseas programs, was formed in 1966 and disbanded in 1971. It was strongly engaged against the Vietnam War and in support of liberation struggles, and advocated the abolition of the Peace Corps because of its history of being used as a tool by U.S. imperialism.

[33] The African American Solidarity Committee published African Agenda between 1972 and 1977.

[34] At the secondary school of Frelimo, which had been moved into Mozambique from Bagamoyo, Tanzania in May 1975.

[35] For background on the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS), founded in 1963, see <http://www.ips-dc.org/about/history>. Andrew Young, who was a top aide to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during the civil rights movement, served as ambassador to the United Nations under President Jimmy Carter in 1977-79. At the time he opposed economic sanctions against South Africa. He has subsequently been prominent in promoting U.S. business ties with Africa.

[36] The Programme to Combat Racism (PCR) of the World Council of Churches (WCC) was founded in 1969. Its activities included grants to support nonmilitary activities of liberation movements in Southern Africa. See Elisabeth Adler, *A Small Beginning: An Assessment of the First Five Years of the Programme to Combat Racism* (Geneva: WCC, 1974), and Baldwin

Sjollema, *Isolating Apartheid: Western Collaboration with South Africa: Policy Decisions by the World Council of Churches and Church Responses* (Geneva: WCC, 1982).

[37] ANC leader Joe Nzongo Gqabi (1919-1981) escaped from South Africa in 1978 after serving a prison term on Robben Island and being charged in another trial later. See <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/people/jngqabi.html>. Reverend Allen Boesak, born in 1945, was president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and a founder of the United Democratic Front (UDF), a leading anti-apartheid organization in South Africa in the 1980s.

[38] John Stewart's parents, Jimmy and Joan Stewart, who died in an automobile accident in 1984, were South African exiles who founded the Transformation Resource Center in Lesotho in 1978. John Stewart, also a social justice activist, grew up in Lesotho, Kenya, Malawi, and England; and worked in Congo before moving to Zimbabwe in the 1980s. Anne Hope, from South Africa, and Sally Timmel, from the United States, have worked in Kenya, South Africa, and other countries as community educators, applying perspectives developed from the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. They are authors of the multivolume handbook *Training for Transformation* (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1984).

[39] In the 1980s, the Mozambican government pursued a multifaceted diplomatic strategy to win support in Western countries and to defeat efforts by the extreme right wing to build support for the Mozambican National Resistance (Renamo) and South African attacks on Mozambique. Nesbitt worked to build support among progressive groups and civil society in the United States, in close coordination with the Mozambican Embassy in Washington.