

## Dilonna Lewis Interview

The following oral history memoir is the result of 2 digitally-recorded sessions of an interview with Dilonna Lewis by Cynthia Tobar on August 5, 2011 in New York City. This interview is part of the Welfare Rights Initiative Digital Oral History Archive Project.

Dilonna Lewis has reviewed the transcript and has made minor corrections and emendations. The reader is asked to bear in mind that she or he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Cynthia Tobar: So thank you for being here. Thank you for making the time to meet with us. I wanted to ask you about your background, your early life and influences that were brought to bear on you by your family or their education. I'm very interested in what your early childhood was like. The intellectual and social world you may have inhabited and that sort of thing. Tell me a little bit about that. And you could begin anywhere you like.

Dilonna Lewis: Sure. Well, I was born and raised, my very early formative years in St. Vincent and the Grenadines which is a very small island in the Eastern Caribbean, off the coast of Barbados. I always say Barbados, 'cause everyone knows Barbados, and never heard of St. Vincent. And I was raised by my grandmother and my grandfather. And the dynamics of the family was that back then in the early '70s, my mom and my dad had recently gotten married at 17 and 18. And at that time my sister was one and a half, and I was like eight months.

So they left St. Vincent. My father, you know, was very ambitious and he knew at the time that there were not a lot of opportunities in St. Vincent. The economy in St. Vincent, at that time, was very, very limited in terms of not only availability of jobs, but not really paid well for the couple of jobs that you had. So my father was actually in the police force at that time. And that was one of the service jobs, was like the big job. If you got a police officer position, you were considered like "whoo-who" big time. But he realized that wasn't gonna make it for him. Because he was so ambitious and he always wanted to travel to America because everything in the Islands, in my specific island, whenever you heard of America, you heard about, "Oh, opportunity and, you know, you can get an education. And with that education you can grow," and, you know, on and on and on.

So he left with my mom and the idea was that my sister and I would stay with my grandparents until my parents got to the point where they would be settled and economically strong enough to be able to send for us and-- so that we can live with them in the United States. That took a while. (LAUGH) First,

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when my father came, he entered the Army. And if you're familiar with Army life, you are-- it's not stable. But through the Army he was able to get his masters in computer science. So he was able to advance with his education through the Army.

But the flipside of that meant that his family, which was basically just my mom, had to travel a lot. So they were in Germany and they were in Texas and Arizona. And it wasn't really a stable setting to bring children into-- they made the decision that it wasn't stable enough to bring us when we were younger. So we stayed with my grandparents. And I think one of the main reasons why my parents made the decision to stay is because in St. Vincent, with all of the other economic woes, we have a really strong education system. So we have all these educated folks with no jobs.

So we stayed until I was 15. And my sister was 16 going on 17. I had a very simple but very powerful life, with my grandparents, my grandmother who was the matriarch of the village. And from a tiny village, less than 500 people. So everyone knew everybody. And my grandmother was just a force from my very beginning. My grandfather did whatever my grandmother said. And she made the decisions for everything. And not only for the family, but also for the other villagers. We were very much a small community. And I just remember earlier on, my grandmother would always say to us, "No matter where you go, no matter what you do, you always have to take advantage of every educational opportunity. Go until you cannot go anymore," my grandmother would say.

Because she was a teacher, but back then it wasn't that you were-- you started off with your high school diploma, and then you can start teaching. It wasn't that you can advance to masters, et cetera, and then you know-- so my grandmother was a teacher, her mother before her was a teacher. And my mom was a teacher and my sister's a teacher. So education is big in my family. My grandmother, for my sister and I, was our model. And she was very powerful, she was extremely intelligent. And she also had like a collective sense of responsibility. If there was someone else in the village who didn't have, my grandmother would cook enough for everybody.

And my grandfather was a fisherman and a farmer. So the land was our source of income. And my grandmother would just keep pushing us to go beyond and use whatever we have to go beyond. And also with a very social justice sense. And so I always say that my strong passion for social justice, as it relates to education, stems from my grandmother. And I tell her that all the time. When I came to this country, it was interesting. Because as soon as I came, I went to the 12th grade, and then I went to college, and then I went away to college. So I never really got a sense of reconnecting with the family before. Then I had to go away to college.

So we came, and then I was away to college for four years. I would come back on break time. But my mother is very much my grandmother's daughter. So that tradition of woman empowerment was ever present-- I actually refer to myself more as a "womanist" than a feminist. And the reason why is because I just feel as if as a woman of color, sometimes I never-- at least the interest and the things that are really important to me and my community, I never really saw that as part of the mainstream feminist agenda. And to create more of a space, more of a... you know, phenomena of womanism, I felt that there needed to be something carved out. To this day, my grandmother, my mom, my aunts are

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very much powerful influences. And I come from a tradition where activism and women who speak up and speak up loud, that's the tradition.

I can't imagine myself being a part of any society that allows for any group to be discriminated against, or for resources to be taken away from, and be silent. That's not a part of who I am. And I think when I graduated from grad school and the opportunity for WRI came up, I always say that I don't think I consciously chose to come here at WRI. I feel like the issues just grabbed me. And I've been here ever since.

CT: And can you tell me a little bit about what your parents' experience was when they came while you were in St. Vincent?

DL: Well, my-- it was harder for my mom. And I think it was harder for my mom because being an army wife, you're expected to be at home, be that person who takes care of the home base. When my parents came here-- maybe four years after my parents came here, they had my brother. So there are three children, my sister and I, and then my brother, who was born here. My brother was born here. And my mom-- because she was so conscious of-- (BELL RINGS)

(OFF-MIC CONVERSATION)

DL: But because my mom was so conscious of making a solid space for us to come to this country, I think she sacrificed a lot so that my father can do really, really well. So that we could come to this country and that she can have the economic means to support us when we're here. So, you know, I've had lots of conversation with my mom. And she delayed her own education so that my father can go ahead and do his.

And then later on, after my parents separated, then my mom went out and she also got her master's degree and has been working in adult literacy for over 25 years now. And basically she teaches adults to read and write. And adults, some of whom have graduated from high school, but still can't read. So literacy is her passion as well.

CT: And your father still is in St. Vincent?

DL: My father passed away. He passed away of a heart attack six years ago now. But he had relocated to England. But the reason why he was able to do that at the time was because it was so much easier for him. My mom was concentrated on the family and the fact that she had two daughters in St. Vincent who were coming here. And at the time it was easier for my father to relocate to England and start a new life. He didn't have anything to hold him at least. So he was able to go to England. He created a whole wonderful amazing life for himself in England. While my mom stayed and pretty much restarted from scratch and rebuilt everything for us to come here.

CT: That must have been difficult that she's--

DL: It was really difficult for her. And I think one of the things that my mom always says-- has always said to me, "Even if you're married, always make sure you have your separate account." Because at the

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time, I think sometimes when couples separate and they were married for over 18 years before they separated, I think the tendency is, "I'm getting to hurt you without understanding that it's not just hurting this person, it's hurting the whole family."

So at the time my mom and my dad had a house, they had, were settled, and everything like that. But when they separated, everything was in my father's name. Or they had a joint account, but in a joint account you can still take everything. So pretty much my father took everything when he left. So my mom had to do everything from scratch, and did an amazing job. An amazing job. So I think it's a testimony to the fact of how, you know, how strong and how smart and how amazing a woman she is. And she has always told me from her experiences, "Always make sure you have separate-- you can have a joint if you choose to. But always have your own."

CT: Indeed.

DL: So her lessons have actually made me even more empowered, my sister and I so--

CT: What was political-- politics in your family background?

DL: In terms of politics, I think I am more progressive. My mom is also progressive. My dad, I'm not sure because he has-- even when we came to this country, he was always in England. So he really wasn't an immediate force in my life. I mean, he was there, and I knew he was there. And we would correspond. But in terms of lessons, or in terms of what was going on, my father-- I don't really know what his political activism, or anything like that is.

But even when I was in-- for the year that I was in high school, my mom was very much involved in the PTA. And she was very much involved in local politics. I mean, she was on the community board. She was a part of this small community that worked with the executive board that was really working on helping with Caribbean immigrants who were coming into Brooklyn at the time. Who really didn't have much of a space in terms of social clubs or, you know, the food or anything like that. So my mom was very much involved in that.

And as a result of that, I think that we connect even more. Because her passion was in education. So a lot of the things that she worked with in terms of that smaller Caribbean community within Brooklyn at the time, and at the time it was Crown Heights, we now live in Canarsie. She noticed that, especially for military wives, the fact that the women in military families, their education if you looked across the spectrum is so much lower than their husbands'. And about the sacrifices that women had to make. Especially women within my community, who-- and a lot of women at that time, and still now, not so much now, but at the time, most of my mom's friends, and most-- in her community were women who left St. Vincent with the idea of coming here to work. And what would happen is, they would end up in

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these domestic types of work, where they were being taken advantage of because of the fact that they were new immigrants. They were placed in factories working really long hours, and not really given the benefits that they were supposed to receive.

And my mom would explain to me, like even earlier on, in her own work she would organize with women from her Caribbean community who really felt like they didn't have a voice. Because my mom had more, I guess, "legitimacy" because she came and was able to obtain her papers through the army and all, et cetera. Other mothers didn't have that luxury. So she would really work with them to organize within the community so that they could actually start building resources for themselves, so that they could send for their children. That was a big part of my mom's early work was working with women who were sending for their children from their Caribbean islands to come to join them here.

And it's a process. Because number one, you have to negotiate within the government for visas. And St. Vincent didn't issue visas. So you had to go to Barbados to actually get a visa. And you had to be able to-- my grandma was very much politically active. So at the time the national Democratic party in St. Vincent called NDP, my grandmother was very much into politics, as she still is. And through her relationships with certain officials in the NDP party, was able to secure our visa, which is unheard of. I mean, a lot of women would go years before they were able to reconnect with their children. And for my mom, because of my grandma being the link in St. Vincent, and my with her own activism here, was able to speed up to the process for us to come here. So that was my first exposure.

CT: That's wonderful. That's wonderful that you were able to help. And what areas of the Caribbean did-- different regions of the Caribbean?

DL: Well, we had-- big were-- Trinidad and Tobago, St. Vincent, Granada, St. Lucia. And these are more of the smaller, eastern Caribbean Islands where they don't really have-- like in my country-- in Trinidad, they did from the very beginning. But in my country, still there's no international airport. So in order to get to St. Vincent, you have to come through one of the other islands. But more of the disconnected islands, and disconnected in terms of like not very known as a tourist spot. If you're known as-- like Jamaica, Guyana, even Barbados, from the very beginning were known as big tourist spots. So they got more resources and, you know, the government had pacts with the U.S. government that would sent money there, you know, to make sure that the tourists had their white sand beaches. Well, that's another story. (LAUGH)

Anyway, needless to say my country was not part of that. And a lot of these other countries, St. Lucia, Trinidad, they were more the poorer countries in terms of, you know, economic growth. So those were the countries that my mom worked with.

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CT: And this is great. I wanna backtrack and go back towards the time when you came to the United States the first time. And then you said you went to college. Can you talk a little bit about that? What college you went to and what your studies concentrated on?

DL: Well, it was-- let me just talk a little bit about the experience of coming to America.

CT: Exactly. Exactly.

DL: That was a culture shock. Because everything that we've heard when we were little, everything that we heard about America was, I mean, you always hear it. But it is true that it was as if the streets were paved in gold. That's what you would like to believe. And that there is a real democracy in America and you can speak up. And as long as you're willing to study hard, and as long as you're willing to, you know, do your best in school, you can make it anywhere in America. America's the dreamland. And that was infiltrated in the media. Everything we got in St. Vincent came straight out of United States. Everything.

So when I came to America, I think I had these grandiose expectations of, "Oh, I'm going." And I remember like reminiscing with my friends in school, "I'm going to America." And it was just like, it was like another version of heaven. And then when I came and I realized that-- well, my first shock was I went-- I came from a very close-knit village into where everyone knew everybody. And everyone would look out for each other. Like my grandmother would be-- if there was a kid, who for whatever reason the parent was working in the farm really late, they would come over and stay with us, no questions asked. It was just a given.

When I came to New York, it was about locking the doors. When we would sleep back home, I mean, it may sound trivial, but back home you would sleep with your doors open. And there was never a question. And then when we came to this country, it was-- my mom was working really hard, she was working two jobs at the time. My sister and I pretty much, when we came, we would just go to school, come home, lock the doors, study, go to school, come home. And then my mother was involved, so we got to go with her on the weekends, and to all the other stuff she was doing.

But initially it was this sense of, "Oh, my gosh," the buildings felt cold. And everything felt clinical to me. There was-- and, you know, and the first thing that you were taught, "Don't speak to strangers," because you never know who was--

CT: What neighborhood?

DL: It's Crown Heights. It was Crown Heights at the time. But everyone wanted an apartment. And you go into your apartment and you locked your doors. That's just the reality of how it was. And even in the school setting, 'cause I came from always being in parochial school, like Anglican and Catholic schools back home, into public schools. I went to Paul Robeson High School. And it was really a culture shock. And just in terms of little simple things as the way you spoke to your teachers. I was shocked at how American kids would communicate with teachers. And the way that I was always taught about respecting elders. That was like a big value in my community where I was raised. And especially in a

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teacher-student relationship, like respect is a big part of that. And so that was like totally different here. So that was like a big shock.

And I've always been very independent. So I-- you know, my mom worked with me in terms of college applications and all that. But I've always been the one to pretty much take the first step and follow through. In St. Vincent, our education standards were so much higher than even here. So when I came here, there were so many classes that I didn't even need to take, because it was just so easy. I already did this back in the previous grade back home. So a lot of my time, even when I was in the 12th grade, was spent building relationships with counselors and teacher, and really just preparing my college applications.

And I knew I wanted to go away to college, because I knew I was already in the mindset of, "I want to see what else is beyond the doors of Brooklyn. I want to see how-- I want to experience a different part of America." So I knew I wanted to go away to college. And I went to Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania for undergrad. And that was another culture shock. Because, you know, it's funny because I was never raised to ever question that my skin color would in any way limit me. So I went into every setting whereas my friends were looking at colleges where, "Oh, we have to make sure that there was a certain percentage of people that looked like me." For me that wasn't an issue. And I think in retrospect I would have done things a little differently.

But I was just about what kind of programs do you have, I was at that time big on psychology, and education—I majored in psychology. I wanted to work with abused and neglected children because as part of my community, when I came here, I did a lot of afterschool stuff with kids who were a little bit younger than me, who were very much disadvantaged. And I thought that I didn't have back home, and from my perspective, I thought, "Oh my god, you're an American and you don't have?" I was shocked. So I worked even when I was young with younger children who were disadvantaged and who were abused in different ways.

And my mindset was that I wanted to work with children who were abused in a clinical setting. So psychology was my focus throughout, and counseling. And as I went along, I started picking up more in terms of education and how you can really merge the two and work with a certain population, but with education as a way of helping them to lift themselves out of the situations that they are in. Versus the mental health philosophy, which is coming in and treating you as if the disease is-- whatever that mental disease is, is just something that you need to just prescribe a drug, take care of it. And then put you right into your social economic situation that's actually caused the problem.

So I never felt like psychology was big enough for me. Big enough in terms of the changes that I wanted to make. And the way that I was taught psychologists work as, you know, taking the child out of the family, instead of looking at the whole family. A lot has changed in, you know, these fields over time. But at that time, it really wasn't enough for me. But anyway, I went over to Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. And in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, one of the culture shock there was it's a small private college, approximately 3000, and in almost every class, I was the only person of color. And it was a culture shock

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because I saw how even the town of Lewisburg, I remember when I landed, when I came, my uncle and my family, everyone was looking as if they've never seen a person of color before.

CT: What area was this in?

DL: This is close to Williamsburg, Pennsylvania. And if you're familiar with Williamsburg, Pennsylvania, at least back then, it was the capital of the Klu Klux Klan. I didn't know that at the time. I was like 17.

CT: And was in the '80s or the--

DL: This is actually, no '91. No and they're actually still active. And they, you know, I've experienced some marches through the town of Lewisburg, even as a college student. So I thought that was something I just read about in the books until I actually experienced it. But needless to say, with the way that I was raised, even that didn't faze me. 'Cause I saw it as an opportunity, "Oh, my gosh, it's an opportunity to educate." Like people like me exist. So it didn't really phase me. I had a roommate once and she-- I remember this-- just a funny story, but I remember I was combing my hair and she looked at me with amazement that, "

And, you know sometimes when you haven't pressed or permed your hair, it can stand up a little bit. She's like, "Oh, my gosh. How do you get your hair to do that?" And I looked at her and I was like, "Oh my gosh," she wasn't being ignorant or she wasn't trying to be hurtful. She just didn't know. So I saw that as an opportunity, "Hey, I can educate you about this." So that has always been my approach not to respond in a negative way. But to say, "Here's an opportunity to educate you that there are many different types of people that exist in the world. And here's how we exist. And here's how we can co-exist." So, anyways--

CT: And this is how we fix our hair.

DL: Yeah, this is how we fix our hair.

CT: And how did you-- maybe you wanna talk a little bit about your transition from your bachelor's degree in Pennsylvania and then how you decided to get to...

DL: Sure. So even in Pennsylvania there was-- which I always credited Bucknell for having, and I don't know who came with the idea. There as a really radical professor in the psychology department Earnest Keen. And he came up with this idea for dividing up the dorms into different themes. So there was a dorm at the Peace College Dorm, like a "peace" focus, that's the theme of that college. Which just meant that in addition to just going there and sleeping and doing all that kind of stuff. You would have discussions with the resident's assistants about, you know, certain issues. Issues that we're taking from our class, issues that were prevalent in the media at the time, et cetera. And there was an international dorm...There was a domestic violence theme. And he was revolutionary at the time.



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But in any case, so I was fortunate enough to link up with this dorm-- I saw this, it was like a new initiative that was starting the year that I started Bucknell. So I was fortunate enough to link up with the Peace College. Because it was about social justice. It was about access to education for all. Which is everything that I believe in. It's not something that I studied and then I developed like an interest for. It was a part of me since I left as a village girl from St. Vincent. And I started as a part of the Peace College, we were reading books by Jonathan Kozol, Ruth Sidel, that as our first introduction to Ruth Seidel. *Woman And Children Last*, was the book that I read that had a major impact on me. And so we would read these books and we would come together and we would talk about it. And then we would go into Lewisburg, into areas of Lewisburg that were, you know, economically marginalized, racially marginalized.

It was like, "Oh, so here's-- no wonder you were shocked to see me. Because here's where you have tucked away anyone who looks like me." But in any case, so we got to do a lot of that work and we went out into different areas of Lewisburg. So made my psychology more community relevant, instead of just about administering drugs, which I'm not for anyway. Anyway, so when I was working with Professor Keen, and his partner at the time. And they were connecting to things that I've always believed in, and trying to incorporate that into the classroom. I had an opportunity through my relationship with certain professors to study abroad. I had the opportunity to do a research project in Barbados.

So through those types of connection, based on my interests and based on what was afforded to me, and how I used that to expand, like what else? What else can I learn-- I then connected to a professor who was at Columbia from Earnest Keen. And he was interested in this project that I had with Earnest Keen. And that was my initial connection to Columbia. I never really made a decision like I wanted to. Like this is the-- only where I'm gonna go, like I did early admissions, and I got accepted early. So then I decided, "Well, the benefit of that is that I'm closer to home." I was still over in campus, 'cause I wanted to have that experience of independence. But I was closer to home so I was back to my family, versus going to another program that I got accepted to in New Hampshire, or Amherst College in Massachusetts where it was another disconnect from my family.

So I decided to come back. And I think the main reason why I decided to come back because, to me it was like the best of both worlds. I had an opportunity to study in a field that combined psychology and education, which I really found very desirable. In addition, I was in New York. I was in New York where, you know, an urban population where I can work in different areas, and I can really get to practice everything that I so believed. And then I got to be close to home. So that was the decision that brought me back for graduate school.

CT: And how did you come to choose your graduate thesis then?

DL: It stemmed from one of the projects that I did with Earnest Keen-- working with socially, emotionally disturbed children. And seeing how if you carve out and work within education in a certain way, then you can make big improvements in their overall well being. So that was the initial foundation

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for my thesis. And when I came back to-- when I came to New York for graduate school, I expanded that by working in tier 2 shelter, Pelham Hill tier 2 shelter with the Children's Aid Society. And they-- in addition to the tier 2 shelter, the fund of that project also worked a lot with the emotional-- emotionally just the-- I think it was called at the time, if I remember correctly, Emotionally Disturbed Unit at New York Presbyterian, 168th Street in Washington Heights, which is close to where I was doing my internship in Harlem.

And I integrated both. I integrated the mental health with education. And that was my initial-- my work with the tier 2 homeless shelter was my initial real experience of individuals who are on public assistance. In school, I read about it, but it was very much from one perspective. This was my first time actually with families who were-- their only source of survival was what they were receiving in terms of their benefits. And at the time, this was coming close to the time where the welfare argument was just starting to bubble. And all of the stereotypes were exploding. And I was seeing the impact of that. I was seeing women-- the majority of women who were in the tier 2 shelter, African American, Latino women were escaping domestic violent situation. And I could remember sitting in the group, 'cause I was doing group work, and also I was doing-- connecting them to education and helping them with their application to college, et cetera.

And then I was hearing from women that in the situation that's unfolding right now and what's going on, I might as well go back to my abuser, because this is too much. I can't do this. And then I was, "Wait a minute. That doesn't seem right. How can we be developing social policies that are putting like a certain populations of women in a situation where they feel like going back to their abuser is better than what they're experiencing at the welfare center?" It's like something is wrong with that. And I remember going back to my graduate class, and I was speaking to one of the professors who was advising me on my thesis. And even he wasn't really aware of what the deal was, I felt. I felt that his perspective was from HRA. And we would have guest speakers from HRA come into class and all that kind of stuff. And I felt like, "Oh, my gosh. You know, this is an opportunity." And I remember, you know, doing my field notes and in my case supervisor, conferences with him. And it was like he was awakened by the experience. So then when I finished school, when I finished working on my thesis and we were-- at the time I was contemplating whether or not I wanted to do full-time work while I continue my Ph.D. at the tier 2 shelter, which was connected to New York Presbyterian. Which basically would mean working full time in a clinical setting.

And over time as I went through internship, and I was finished at grad school, I realized it was almost as if it was sustaining or not allowing certain population, and I say certain population, because it was often the case that everyone that I worked with, everyone who was basically being faced with the situation of, "Do I take care of my kids and my family? Or do I go back to my abuser? Or do I just give up and just give in," were people who who looked just like me. And to me that was a sign of, well, you know what? Maybe there is something here outside of the clinical setting that you can work with within education. For me, education has always been my source of enlightenment. And I always feel like no matter how ignorant a person is, no matter how they were raised, even if you were raised in a vacuum, I think if you were exposed to education, you have an opportunity to change your thought processes. You have an

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opportunity to see through a different lens. And that's what education affords. It's more than just a degree. It helps you to become a better person. It helps you to be a more fully developed human being.

And that was my pull. And I knew then and there that I wasn't destined to work in a lab. I wasn't destined to just sit across a room and help that child who was in a really bad situation because their parents were poor, or whatever, or they're the product of abuse. There is a place for that, but for me, I know from my work and my life journey, it was more in education. So when the opportunity came, when Melinda was looking for someone at the time, because she was already starting to think about, I think, this is my theory, that she was already starting to think about her next thing, her next big thing. I think she wanted someone who could do both. Who could counsel students, who could work them around issues of domestic violence, and also be able to teach. So the opportunity came, and it was just such a nice fit. And the fact that in over 15 years we're still doing this fight, has kept me--

CT: And maybe you could tell me more about how you came to meet Melinda [Lackey]. What were the circumstances? What stage were you in? This is post-Columbia.

DL: Yeah, so it was post-Columbia. And it was right at the point where I had to make a decision as to whether I'm gonna accept the job offer at New York Presbyterian. And then I had posted my resume on an online job site-- it was so very random. It seemed like the minute I posted my resume, I got a phone call from Melinda. It was just very freaky. And I believe in destiny. I do. I believe in destiny. And I believe sometimes the universe tries to let you know when something is right and when something is not right. It's up to us to whether we listen or not.

And I was fortunate enough that I was in the mind frame and in a fully present being that I was able to listen and take that call. 'Cause I could have very well not taken the call, and that would have been-- I don't know where I would be. But anyway, so I took the call, and she said, "Oh, you know, I saw your resume." And it was at the time where she was looking for someone to come in. She said, "I saw your resume and I would love to interview you." So I came in and I interviewed with Melinda and she told me about this new project that she's just starting up at Hunter. And here is her vision for the project. She wanted to be able to do a class as the core of the program. In addition, she wants to, she realized that so many women were coming in with issues that she had no idea how to take care of. She wasn't trained in psychology or counseling or any of the therapeutic techniques or anything like that.

And she said she wanted to do it, but she did not want to do it in a clinical setting. She didn't want to have a clinic. She wanted to do it in an education setting, which was Hunter. And, you know, so she was-- so at the same time that I was being interviewed for this position as coordinator of supportive services and education at WRI, she was sharing with me all of the visions that she had. And that was really exciting to me. Because I could see myself coming in and being a part of co-creating something together. So then that was my first interview. And then I said, "Okay." And she said, "All right I need to speak with Ruth, Jan and Mimi. Because they're my steering committee and I consult with them during my advisory committee, 'cause this is a brand new project. And I've just secured funding to hire someone full-time."

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At the time Mo started off in the first class, but had started even before, if my memory serves me correctly, doing like internship or work study. Not internship, work study, at the brand new Welfare Rights Initiative. So Mo was here from the very beginning. So was Beatrice, you remember Bee, and Michele, you may remember Michele. The second time when I came in for my second interview, it was a group interview. So I met with Ruth, I met with Jan, and Melinda. Mimi wasn't a part of the interview. It was Ruth, Jan and Melinda. And my first thought was, "Oh, my god. I can't believe that I'm gonna be in a room with Ruth Sidel who's-- I read all her books." When I was an undergrad I read all of her books and I couldn't imagine, and I didn't even know until I walked into a room and was like, "Oh, my goodness."

But in any case, the bottom line is I decided to come on board at WRI because I felt that this organization at the time so closely, in terms of what it stood for, in terms of its mission, in terms of what it wanted to create, not just a band-aid solution, but real change, and about the approach of engaging women who were the ones who had the firsthand experience of everything that we were discussing, the social policy, the impact of social welfare policy. Changing, and changing in a way that would cut off education. That they wanted in a way create the space for whatever to emerge to emerge.

Not that they had a set way that this organization has to inform this way. But it's about creating that space for women who believe that they have a right to speak for themselves, instead of having someone speak for them. For women who believe that their lives are not about deficit, but about "Wait a minute, I'm in a bad situation, but you know what? Through education I can change. And through education I can do something different for myself or my family. And I can connect with WRI as a way of getting the know-how and getting the strength to do that." That to me was like amazing.

And then when I met and I saw the model, and the model was that you can have academia, like Ruth Sidel and Jan, who were professors for years, working with this young, vibrant Melinda, who was a graduate student, who just has this idea. And she wants to put her idea into place. And they were all equal in that room. That's the place I wanted to be. So the model, the people were the big enticers for me, and the issue. And that's why I started.

CT: How did it affect you during the beginning stages of WRI? I mean, how long had it been, and this is just forming at this time. What year was this--

DL: This was 1995. I came on board in 1997. So I came on board after the first class was finished, and they're moving into the second year. And it was at this time where it was perfect. Because that first class was the pilot class. That's the class that Mo was in. We had a test of what was working and what-- and we wanted to explore what could work better. So it was just a ripe opportunity. And when I came in, I think everything was structured so nicely. Because when I first started WRI, we went away on a retreat, it was a staff retreat. And we went away upstate. And it was this amazing visioning center that Melinda created for us.

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And the model was, we know what the issue is. So it's not about beating down and saying that, "You're wrong and we're right." It's about recreating something that make that old model so archaic that it will crumble. So the new thing would hold up and be even stronger. So it's not about beating against someone. So that from the very beginning was exactly, you know, congruent with how I think and my personal belief and my personal values. So going away on the retreat was amazing and it was an exceptional way of integrating new staff. And we've tried to do that over time.

The class exemplifies a collective education model. Which I believe in, collaboration makes it even more powerful. But I was so impressed and so amazed that even with all of the hardship that the students that I was working with at the time were going through, that there was this big drumbeat, that we can do it because education is that big thing that's was life changing. It ensures that our children don't have to experience a crisis.

That was just like amazing to me. And I've learned a lot of lessons over time. Because sometimes you're come in to this type of work thinking that, "Well, if you only get the policy makers to sit with you, if you only educate them, then change will happen." And that's not the case. You know, that's not the case.

You need organizing. You need advocacy. It's not just about sitting in a room cranking out these amazing policy papers. And, you know, intellectualizing about poverty and the source of poverty and the factors that contribute and how we're gonna alleviate poverty. It's about doing the work of getting the change that you envision that you wrote up in your paper. And that has been my strongest lesson, even now. When you have a reality, when you see the impact of policy right before you, and you see not only the impact of policy, but how women are penalized for the fact that they're-- for example, couple years back I had a student and when she came in she was explaining that, "Well, I wanna be in school. But my benefits were cut because I'm in school. And now I don't even have enough to feed my kid. So I'm trying to get food to feed my kid." I think it was like-- I don't know who in the school system have reported that her kid had complained about being hungry. So then that triggered ACS.

So here we are in a situation where here she was as a mom trying to get an education. They cut her food stamps because she's trying to get an education. So she's not able to give her kid what she was able to before. Another branch of that same larger agency then comes in and say, "You're not being a good mother because you're not feeding your child properly. So we have to come in and see if you're fit enough to keep that child."

Well, that doesn't make sense. So did you realize policy maker that this was going to be the outcome of what you were designing? Most don't even realize what the real outcome of their proposed policies. So even in the grass root world, I have found that working in collaborations and in coalition with other groups, there is still that emphasis and that it's just about policy. We just need to have better policies. And we just need to have them sign this, and then it will all be okay. And that's not the case. We also have to make sure that the policy translates into a meaningful way in the community, so that the people can feel empowered enough to know that if it's not working out the way that it's intended to work out, even for good policy, that they can do something about it. And sadly to say, even now when I'm

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speaking to students, most don't think there's anything that they can do about the circumstances that they're faced with.

A key aspect of leadership development training is the hope that even though we focus on the issue of welfare and access to education, we are also modeling the way of approaching policy in a sense of collective negotiation, and getting the people involved. It's the hope that the model would be replicated to whatever situation you face when you finish with the program. So if your passion is, "Tenants right," or if your passion is even making sure that more women are in the legal field, I don't know, whatever your passion is--you can take the same model of leadership development and apply it there.

I think to me that's the most heartbreaking. When students say, "But there's nothing we can do. There's nothing we can do." So the hope is through the process of WRI and through the process of engaging in the leadership program, something different will evolve in terms of civic participation.

CT: And could you describe what your vision of leadership was before you became involved at WRI? Before you met Melinda? And then how it's changed at your definitions? And how that's also changed in the way that you communicate leadership to the people who participate, students and others and colleagues, collaborators in WRI?

DL: It's funny, because I was reflecting on a similar type of question way back when for something else I was doing. And I realized that it's not so different. You know what's different? It's the naming that's different. Back in St. Vincent in Buccament Bay, there was no sense of, "Oh, the collaborative leadership model. Or Ethical Leadership 101." We didn't have those terminologies. But the essence of how we worked, and what we did was about collective leadership. Women in the community were voicing their opinions and serving as leaders. I talked about my grandmother being the matriarch of the village, and she very much was. So I always felt-- I've always felt that for me leadership was about community and about self awareness that then led to community awareness. So that model has always been the case for me.

I think what has evolved over time, through my education and through my participation in WRI, it's just the naming and the categorizing of things, and about making things into categories that are teachable. So I think with education, it helps you organize things and organize people in a way that makes it a tool for empowerment. First, it's just a reality that happens.

CT: And could you give me any examples of that, and how that's developed over time? WRI now is on its-- how many years now? 13--

DL: Going on 17.

CT: 17.

DL: This is the 17th year. Even in WRI, I've seen changes. In the early years, I think the way that WRI is designed, is that it's designed so that it's dynamic. I think in the early years of WRI, it was about training students to be more involved. Not so much that students started off being involved. With the students it was a first time experience. One of the things that I realized is that when someone comes to you,

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before you say, "Here is the ticket, get on that bus and go to Albany and advocate for your rights." You have to make sure that students feel confident and prepared to self-advocate. If someone can't feed their kids, and I don't feel empowered, they won't feel eager to jump on a bus to Albany.

I realized that things happen more in phases based on the organization's stage of development.

I always tell students, "We don't give you strength. You don't come to WRI and we give you voice. You always had a voice, but it's just that now you can see different ways to make your voice more affective."

So one of the things I've always admired about WRI, from the very beginning, even though things may have happened in phases, that original mission of Beatrice, Mo, Michelle, I'm the only exception, but Beatrice, Mo, Michelle, everyone else, started off in the class, and then moved right into leadership positions at WRI. The students who came on as work study then got a position in the organization. When the media calls, the students are the ones who are answering. When there's a testimony, the students are the ones who are writing the testimony. It doesn't mean that you don't give input -- we all need that. It doesn't matter how far up the educational ladder you are—we share input from each other at WRI. For me, the specific concrete examples of WRI as an organization, living its mission is the what keeps me here as one of the Co-Executive Directors.

CT: And how would you describe the-- your own-- well, moral development in those of the people who have participated in WRI as they become involved over the years?

DL: Oh my gosh, I've gone through such a growth process in the years here. I have-- and I think I've become either a stronger advocate for the fact that women are tremendous and are so important to this movement. Mothers are so important to this movement. Because-- and I say mothers because 90 percent, and I actually think it's higher than that. Because in reality, I think it's probably 96 percent of our leaders are women with children. The population has changed over time. Now we're seeing the kids from my early years are now 16 and 17 and they're coming to college now. Today, there's a bigger population of young people who are being told that they cannot stay in college simply because their parent is receiving public assistance. So the population has changed over time.

But in terms of my own moral development, and spiritual development as a woman, I have grown leaps and bounds. I think I've become more humble by the fact that-- not that-- let me see how I can say this. How privileged I have been, not privileged in terms of money. But how privileged I have been that I was raised to believe that you can be anything that you want to be as a young woman of color. And I realized, "Oh, my goodness. That is the opposite of what young women of color are raised to believe in this country." And sometimes it's done even through internalized stereotyping. It's done through family members, kind of putting it out there. Like, "You can't go that far because you have to take care of your kids, and you have to help me to--" so it's even internalized. And sometimes I would speak to students and they would say, "Well, I'm different. You know, because I want go to school, and I'm not like the other ones." I'm like, "Do you know the other one's story? No, you don't."

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We don't know the intellectual potential of other women who were cut off before they even had a chance. So let's not judge. That's new for me. You know, that awareness, it's been really powerful. Because sometimes you think that if you're going to a community and it's a community that has never really had much in terms of economic opportunity. Or even-- you talk about political awareness and political activism, not even thinking that they have a right to be involved in the sociopolitical landscape that's around them. Not even thinking that they have a right to be involved. So when you're working with that community and you think well-- you start off thinking, "Well, it's just about opening up your awareness. It's just about communicating to them that, "Wait, a minute. There is a way." I'm showing them concretely the way. You don't realize that as a process of doing that, you have to help break down the internalized stereotypes. And those are the hardest. It's easier when it comes from the outside, I have found. It's just my experience. It's easier to dismantle the stereotype when someone has told you this. But you know that they're wrong because here's why. And here's the reality of your life that proves them wrong. But it's when you believe it, when you believe it and sometimes don't even know you believe it. You know, there's one student in the class. He went on and on about how he doesn't have a good relationship with his mother. Because how dare his mother put him in a situation where he have to defend why his family is receiving public assistance.

I said, "You know, how dare your mother try to save the family when the father left, and she had no other means by getting food stamps and Medicaid and cash assistance. How dare your mom try to keep the family together." But it's deeper than that. It's more of a psychological bruising I find. And I think my background helps me understand that a little bit better in connecting to education. But I never realized the depth of it. I never realized how that can actually help perpetuate the same stereotypes and the same bad policies that we all try and fight against.

And that's still a lesson that I-- even to this day I continue to learn. Every time, every session of the class, there's one, two, three students who have internalized the stereotype about themselves, about their families, about their communities, and it's really hard to break it. But it gets broken down over time through the process that unfolds in the class.

CT: And, I guess on the other end of the spectrum, in regards to reaching out to other organizations and people who don't have this experience with poverty, what was your attitude towards the conservative right before WRI? And how has that changed over the time that you were involved with WRI?

DL: I used to think that they were like aliens. (LAUGH) I remember thinking that they can't really believe the bigotry that they profess-- are you for real? What planet do you live on? I used to think that, "You must come from someplace else. Because how could your reality be so different from what I know? And that has changed dramatically over time. Because what I realized is, number one, everyone is a product of their upbringing. And everyone is a product of their formative learning years. If you went to a school where everyone looked like you, and everyone had opportunities that you had. And then you were placed in this position as policy makers where you're making decisions about people you have no idea about, that you have never experienced, you don't know what their lives are.



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All you know is maybe what you've read, the different poverty theories you read. How could you not have the position that you have? And I think that I've also learned to respect that even though we may have ideological differences about what makes you poor, and what the poor need, etc. it doesn't mean that we have to be aliens. It doesn't mean that we can't talk. It doesn't mean that there's not a way for us to come to consensus for the greater good-- and that's big. It's important for me to understand where you're coming from with your context, the context from which you emerge, and how it has influenced your thinking. Just like it has influenced mine.

My life experiences have influenced the way I look at the world. I look at the world through social justice lens. But it doesn't mean that because you weren't raised in that way, and that you don't look at the world that way, that we don't have a way to speak, and that we can't speak. Before WRI, I never thought I would be in a room with a conservative Republicans speaking nonsense about poor people and not throw something at them. And now I can. And now I can. And I can do it in a way where I really just want to understand your context--who are you? What influenced you? I want to listen. And I want you to hear what influenced Mary or Jose or whoever is with me. And that we can-- even though our backgrounds, our influences may be different, that we can come to a reality based on what we all know makes sense. Based on what research has said. Whatever language speaks to you, whatever proof you need, we can communicate that without being disrespectful to each other.

CT: But I guess piggybacking off of that, in terms of issues of organizing for welfare rights advocacy groups, how-- what are the tensions and the issues of WRI's collaboration with other organizations that are out trying to accomplish the same mission? What are the strains and the different types of activists- - activism models within these different organizations?

DL: I think the biggest strain right now is this. There are organizations who are well meaning, who have amazing directors et cetera. But who have over time bought into two things, welfare's a dirty word, you can't say it. And if it's in your organization, you have to change it. Proof in point, a lot of the organizations that we work with have taken welfare out of their name. And I don't think that it's out of malice or anything bad. I just think that somehow they're feeling that if they move away from welfare, it makes it easier for them to communicate with others.

And it still saddens me that if Welfare Rights Initiative is not in the room with the amazing lawyers that we work with, with the amazing organizers that we have been privileged to work with over the years, four year college never gets mentioned. And it would be the first thing off the table for something else that's more winnable. And I think if we buy into that, we would have done a discredit to Melinda's vision. And we would have done a discredit to all of the over 4,000 women and men who have graduated, and have moved their families to economic security because we never gave up on college.

CT: Can you talk to me more about what happened to you guys in 2008? What were some of the legislative wins and accomplishments?

DL: So right before Mr. Bushy (LAUGH) left office, and this didn't just happen in 2008, there was a history that led up to that. So the history that led up to that was advocacy, testimony, never giving up on the value that four colleges and advanced degrees should be approved activities. But all the studies

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show upward grids. And every graph shows that there's a relationship between earning potential and levels of education. That has never been disputed. What has been disputed is who should have access to education. So anyway, right before he left, the final TANF regulation actually in this language says that education, including four year college for the very first time was allowed.

However, New York State says, "No, we're not allowing that."

Over the last several years, one of the major policy goals has been trying to make sure that we change New York State language. And the only way you can change that is with law. So the last three years, this is the third year we've completed, we have been working to help secure the passage of S2323/A2471 to make sure that NYS conforms to federal law by allowing individuals receiving public assistance to have their 4-year college participation approved.

S2323/A2471 would allow college in a way that's consistent with federal law. It does not have any fiscal implications. It's a win/win for NYS State and it's a win/win for students.

Last year we came very close to securing its passage. We will continue to work on this important legislation this year.

CT: And how have you prepared students to deal with the politics?

DL: By giving them scenarios that we know are real. And by prepping them based on the scenarios that has happened, and giving them-- and equipping them with the tools for educating their representatives. For example, if you're in a meeting and someone keeps saying, "Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes." What do you say? Well, you follow up with them in a telephone call. If they disagree with your proposal, then you ask, "What are specific points of disagreement?" Well, you say yes but you still haven't signed on as a co-sponsor of this bill. Let's address them. Okay, that's your disagreement? Okay, I'm gonna send you some information that you can then take to whoever in your party or in your caucus that you need to take it to.

Basically, we teach students to be fully present and engaged in every meeting with their representative. It's about building and sustaining healthy civic relationships beyond the passage of any given legislation. It's not just about going and visiting and saying, "Wow, I did it. I met with my representative." It's about following up. And it's about really calling a spade a spade when you see it. And calling the elephant in the room and not pretending that if you know that someone has promised something in reference to moving the specific piece of legislation along, that you're going to say, "Okay, well I guess--" you follow up. And you can follow up in a way that's engaging. I have found in my experience that no one wants you to throw eggs at them just to get them to listen. That never works. I have never seen a time where that works at all.

It's about saying that, "Here's why I believe in this. Here's why this is meaningful to me." And that's why in the class we always stress connect from your firsthand experience. It helps to model for the Senator how he or she can also connect.

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CT: I guess transitioning towards your work regarding the economic justice clinic. A collaboration you spearheaded WRI and CUNY Law School. Could you talk about how you basically got going the initial work, and how you organized structure of the work to realize...?

DL: So from the very beginning, we had-- we still have a Know Your Rights phone line, 212-650-3592. And students would call that number and say, "Here's the situation I'm facing." So we would come and I would get messages from 50 students. No way. No way you can get back to each in a timely manner. And even if you get back to 50 students, you can't have a meaningful conversation with each of them about what's going on. So the alternative back then was legal aid. Legal aid or legal services. Guess what? Legal aid and legal services were overwhelmed. They had like a caseload twice time the resources that they had.

We piloted a joint economic justice program with CUNY Law School that paired second year law students with our undergraduate students for fair hearing representation. Stephen Loffredo (professor at CUNY School of Law) spearheaded the collaboration on the law school side, from the very beginning. law.

We modeled the collaboration as a way for law students and WRI's students to work together to further the goal of continued college matriculation. Second year law students needed the practice in actually speaking and working with real people, not just book knowledge. In your second year of law school, you have to show practice with real people. So our ongoing collaboration is a win/win.

Over time the model has been strengthened. The model is engaging someone in a process with you. The law students learn about the practice and administration of welfare law; and our students learn the power of self-advocacy

CT: There is also your work with WRI's community leadership program. Can you tell me a little bit about it?

DL: The community leadership program really is the bedrock of everything that we are doing. It was designed that way by Melinda Lackey in terms of that would be that initial point where you're trained. And I see it, the model-- you see the efficacy of the model every day.

At WRI, we train students to be leaders. I believe if you're really talking about empowering people to be a part of the process in a meaningful way, you have to equip them with the tools and the know-how so that they can participate. And that's what the leadership program does. It builds community, number one, by the way that it's taught. And it equips students with concrete understanding in laymen terms, in role plays, in practice after practice about how law and policy impacts reality. And then how reality can help forge different policies. And it's a dynamic process. It's not linear, it's not stagnant. It's very much dynamic. And you can get college credits along the way, it's genius.

I just think that the way that this was originally created is genius. The program is based on the premise that leadership is not reserved for the few who have maybe the money or who have always been told they were leaders, and just then take on those roles. But that even if you never even conceive of

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yourself as a leader, that you can go through a process with others, develop that self awareness, that community awareness that I talked about earlier, but in an academic setting. And that you can learn and that you can become equipped. And that you can then work in with your colleagues and with your fellow students really participate and help whatever the policy priority is of that semester, you can make it happen. And you can create. And that's really important. You can help create for an organization what the emphasis should be. I think that's pretty much genius. Thanks to Melinda.

CT: With Governor Patterson's signing of the work study internship law in 2010, if I have that correct, let me know. If not--

DL: So the work study and internship law was that other guy. Pataki, and he signed it in 2000.

CT: Pataki.

DL: Pataki. Patterson never signed anything. No. He did not.

CT: Which counts work study internships and externships as work activity for people receiving welfare. Can you reflect on what your interactions with the governor during that period?

DL: Let me make a correction. I said Patterson never signed anything. I was just being too harsh. He did in terms of the permanency. So the permanency of the work study internship law happened under his leadership in 2010. I mean, not his leadership, under his presence. Not that Pataki was much of a leader, but anyway. So ask me the question again? I got caught up in trying to make sure I wasn't too harsh.

CT: What were your interactions with Albany at this point.

DL: So with the work study internship law. It was huge. And the reason why it was huge is because we learned so many lessons. It took three years just to get a bill. So one of the things that we did the first time, we had connected to this assemblyman from Long Island, I think I may be mispronouncing his name. But I think his name at the time was Engelbright, when we first introduced the bill. So the bill idea actually came from students. And one particular student was Pat Williams. At the time, she was doing 20 hours of work study. She was doing 15 hours of internship. And in addition to that, she still had to carve out additional time in her schedule to do what-- she was doing a WEP assignment cleaning up a senior citizen center.

And in addition to that, she was in the education program, which meant she had to participate in field placement but none of that time would count. So she was one. There were several students just like her. But she was in our class, and that's why I think of her. But there were several other clients who were in the same thing that she was in. And then we started thinking, "Wait a minute, that's crazy. If you're doing work study that's work, an internship that's work, why doesn't that count as work? Why is it that only if you're cleaning the street, or doing some sort of a maintenance assignment is it qualified as work? That doesn't make sense."

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WRI worked with other allies such as Ricky Blum, a lawyer from Legal Aid at the time, and our beloved Stephen Loffredo from the law school. We sat around the table and started drafting the language of what that law should be. And then we started, you know, seeing who would take it on. Who would take it on to introduce it? If you have a language on paper, you know, that's just one thing. My fellow Co-Executive Director Maureen Lane spearheaded our policy work, and all efforts related to drafting the bill, and working with our students and other allies to secure its successful passage in 2000.

[End of first recording. Second recording begins]

CT: And let me ask you, what was the degree of impact or what degree of impact did you intend to see as a result of the passing of this bill and later its signing into law?

DL: I think first and foremost, the first thing to happen was that students would be able to stay in school, stay matriculated in school. I think that was the first impact because we know... At the time we had lots of students who were doing work study. It wasn't an experiment. We knew that students were doing work study, externships, and it's just that these hours were just not being counted. So the fact that those hours would be accrued would make a big difference. We knew that was a given because students were doing it and it's just a matter of having what they were doing count as approved activity versus having additional hours added onto their schedule which made it impossible for them to continue their studies. I think one of the idealism of doing this is that you think policy gets passed through the Senate, it becomes law and then Boom! Change happens. I think that's where the lessons were, especially for me because I realized that that was another process. Specifically, we needed to sustain relationships beyond the point of that the bill becomes law to ensure that its properly implemented.

CT: And what is your reflection on the post-bill, post-law period, the implementation, the enforcement and that relationship building you were alluding to in your last answer?

DL: I think one of the things that was very helpful to the process was that those students who were originally a part of this, part of the WRI Leadership Program were here and very much involved. The students from our "client" base, our legal activity base was very much involved, stayed with the process throughout. So even when it became law we actually had to invite Senator Meier back to New York City because it wasn't being implemented.

CT: And at the end of the day how would you characterize the impact of all this work on your life, in your own thinking?

DL: At first I was suspect. I really was suspect by the whole process of the disconnected politician or policy maker who's actually going to be involved with individuals who have first experience of this issue in a genuine way and not just giving lip-service to it.

CT: I think we're done. Any final thoughts or words?

DL: Um...just you know, 10 years, 12 years later, when so many individuals would have said "This will never happen. This will never, they'll never sign the bill," that it will never become permanent. And I think that the permanency story is one that's also very intriguing because it took 10 years – 10 years! – and I think sometimes with grassroots organizing, most organizations are not around 10 years because

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of funding challenges. I think that's one of the things that makes it really hard when you're talking about long term change or long term impact with any kind of policy and you're not even sure if your organization is going to be around that long. For WRI to sustain throughout that process and to see the law become permanent when everyone said it would never become permanent, and the students were involved throughout. I think that says a lot about making change from the bottom up and it's one very powerful example in our history and our historical institutional knowledge that we have that we can share with others that shows time, organizing, consistency and most importantly, having people involved in a meaningful way can really bring about change. I think that's an important lesson for us to hold onto.

CT: Thank you so much, Dee.

DL: You're welcome.