

## **Penn South Archive Project**

Witnesses: Norman & Velma Hill

Interviewers: Christiane Bird, Silvie Bird, Tracy Gross, John Harris

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**Christiane:** Hi, Velma and Norman. I'm Christiane Bird and I'm here with my fellow interviewers: John Harris, my daughter Silvie Bird, and Tracey Gross, who's heading up the Penn South Archives Project. And it's such a pleasure to be here, an honor. And we thank you so much for welcoming us into your home. It's really great. So can we... can you tell us your full name, please?

**Velma:** My name is Velma with a V.E.L.M.A. My sister was Thelma, but Velma Murphy Hill is my name. And this is Norman.

**Norman:** Norman Spencer Hill.

**Christiane:** And how long have you lived at Penn South?

**Norman:** We've lived at Penn South since 1967.

**Velma:** Approximately.

**Christiane:** Wow. OK. And how did you learn about it and what was it that attracted you to moving in here?

**Velma:** Well, you know, we... we were civil rights activists in the 1960s and labor trade union activists. And um... we realized that a co-op was being planned. And you... built and I think Bayard Rustin who was a civil rights leader was already in the co-op. And so he informed us that there was a possibility of our coming to... to the co-op. And I was very excited about it because we had been involved with the Jewish community and the Black-Jewish community. And I sort of wanted to get a feeling what a co-op, what cooperative living was like. And I think Norman and I went to Israel about maybe four or five times, what do you think Norm?

**Norman:** Yes.

**Velma:** About four or five times. And we looked after the co-op, the kibbutz. And we were very, very interested and supportive of Israel and the Israeli labor movement, Histadrut. And so when Bayard said there's a possibility of your coming in, and I said, are we going to integrate the co-op? And he said, Yes. [laughs] And we said, fine. And then we came in, I guess about 1967. We went to Israel in '67, right Norm? I think we went to Israel in '67. But anyway, we moved in, in about '67.

**Christiane:** And what were some of your expectations about what it would be like living in the co-op and were they... Was the reality different than what you expected?

**Velma:** Oh we... we understood that it would be self-governance. And we, we didn't know but we found out that it was OK. I mean there were problems but there were not major problems.

**Christiane:** And where had you been living before you...?

**Norman:** We lived in the Franklin Plaza Apartments?

**Velma:** Yes.

**Norman:** Uptown on the east side.

**Velma:** 107th Street. Yeah. And we also lived with his family where... I was born in Chicago, and Norman was at the University of Chicago. And so we moved back to New York in 1961, I guess and lived with his family in Summit, New Jersey. That was quite a commute, you know. But we were very happy living in the co-op. And I think you had mentioned a question about what was the community like.

**Christiane:** Yes.

**Norman:** We had friends who were already in the co-op.

**Velma:** Right.

**Norman:** Friends who were also active in the civil rights movement. And so we looked forward to being in a co-op adjacent to them or close to them and seeing them not just in the movement but also socially. And the co-op provided that opportunity.

**Christiane:** And was it an issue? I imagine there weren't a lot of African-Americans or people of color living here then. Did you encounter much racism or negative reactions?

**Velma:** Well, I think that we sort of encountered I guess, originally, a little... I guess, surprise and a little... some consternation. For instance, Ernie Green, who was one of the Little Rock Nine, lived in the co-op with his wife, with his first wife, I guess. And he said to me, he said: You know, I got into the elevator and he said, everybody got out of the elevator. And I said, well, you know, we... we all have to learn [laughs] And they were probably a little skeptical of you. And it was okay. But... uh... later on, I became a psychotherapist. And I remember you know, people would buzz...buzz to get in, and sometimes people would go and open the door for you. I know we shouldn't, but some, you know, people do. But my black

patients... never. They never opened the door for them. That, I think that's...it's much better now. But that was originally what happened. But I think that people got to know us. We got to know them. It was... it was a very nice place to live. And it's a good environment. And I like the fact that there is a board. There... there are... There is a Committee of Cooperators. And I think that that's not the norm in New York.

**Christiane:** Right.

**Velma:** And I think that that's very important. And the participation is very important. Needs to be more. But certainly, it's ah... cooperative participation in the governance.

**Christiane:** And were you involved in setting up the governance or the Mutual Board or any of the early programs?

**Velma:** I can't hear you.

**Christiane:** Were you involved in setting up the governance or the Mutual Board here or any of those early...

**Velma:** Not really. You know, I don't know whether or not, you know, the history, but Gene Glaberman was on the board he was a dear friend of mine, and I guess Walter was on the board. Walter Mankoff. And there were people on the board who we were sort of active with. So we were sort of involved. But... Norman was involved more nationally than locally. And I was involved both nationally and locally. And I remember we... we got a group together. Oh, boy. I guess in the, I don't know, eighties or nineties, which was trying to pressure the... the local government to have more affordable housing. Because, you know, when we moved in, it was much more working class. And now it is... you know, a working class person can't afford to live in Chelsea. It's just incredible. And we feel - we felt then and we feel now - that we should have more housing that is for middle and lower income residents of New York. So that we're... So I was involved in that. I think I was president of a group. Boy, it was a long time ago. You don't remember it, right? Oh, it was a long time ago. But we... that the... I guess it was the Koch administration to agree to... Oh, by the way, they didn't do it, but they agreed to have houses that were 20 - 40 and to build more low income housing. But they didn't. They never did it. But you know, the struggle goes on, you know.

**Christiane:** Right, right. How about you mentioned there were other people involved in the civil rights movement here in Penn South?

**Velma:** Oh, yes.

**Christiane:** Can you tell us a little bit more about...

**Norman:** They were Tom Kahn.

**Velma:** Yes.

**Norman:** Who became executive director of the League for Industrial Democracy and also was on the staff of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963. Rachelle Horowitz who worked with Bayard Rustin and was a cooperator she was transportation coordinator for the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Gene Glaberman... was sort of the graphic designer for the movement.

**Velma:** Yes.

**Norman:** And both the unions and civil rights organizations utilized his... art savvy and capability he was in the co-op. He and his wife Millie. Velma mentioned Ernie Green who was in the co-op.

**Velma:** Yes. Phil Fried. Phil - Philoine who was the daughter of Sidney Hillman who was active in the movement I think she died last year and... Oh boy.

**Christiane:** Wow a lot of people.

**Velma:** We can get you a list there were more than that. I think that this is probably one of the major developments that had both civil rights leaders and both civil rights activists who were cooperators. And we're proud of that.

**Christiane:** Did you have regular meetings here at the co-op?

**Velma:** Well, we had meetings during the March on Washington here in the co-op.

**Norman:** We had meetings in Bayard Rustin's apartment.

**Velma:** Yes,

**Christiane:** Wow.

**Velma:** And he was a... quite a good friend and a very joyous personality.

**Christiane:** When did you first meet him?

**Velma:** Oy vey!

**Norman:** I first met him I first met him in the summer of 1959. When I went to a youth conference and heard him speak about civil rights. I was impressed by his analytical ability, his eloquence, his charisma. And then he took some of us who were attending the conference to meet A. Philip Randolph. This nation's greatest black labor leader, who was president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters The most historically significant union for Black workers. And that was in 1959. That was the year, as I said, I first met Bayard.

**Velma:** And I... Norman has been involved in every one of Bayard's major projects from the March on Washington to the youth marches to...

**Norman:** March on the Conventions Movement.

**Velma:** Yes. Yes. He's been involved in every one and I was like minor, but I was sort of, I was involved too. So, you know, we learned a lot from him. And I think the... the movement unfortunately has ignored much of Bayard's teachings and A. Philip Randolph's teachings. And what we try to do is to continue with that legacy, that legacy of coalition building, that legacy of non-violence, that legacy of of trying to build the majoritarian democracy here.

**Christiane:** And how did you... can you tell us the story of how the two of you met? I understand it was during the civil rights act.

**Velma:** Yes.

**Norman:** In 1960 there was a picket line in front of a Woolworths store in Chicago. Protesting the fact that the Woolworths in the South did not provide integrated facilities and especially for Blacks and is... especially in its restaurants and students were sitting in and we met on a picket line that was supporting the students who were sitting in at Woolworth's in Chicago in 1960. My brother was in... happened to be in Chicago introduced me to Velma saying that I ought to meet her because I was someone who thought crazy like and so... So we met and Velma invited me out to dinner.

**Velma:** No. I invited him to my house. My mom made dinner. [laughs] I never was a good cook.

**Christiane:** Then I read something about a demonstration on the beach. The... can you talk a little bit about that?

**Velma:** Yes. In Chicago, I was the president of the NAACP Youth Council on the South Side of Chicago. And I have to tell you that when I met Norm, Norman came to talk to the NAACP Youth Council about civil rights. And... Well, I'll shorten this because the book tells about our love story. Uh... in our first chapter. But we heard...

we heard about the young people in the South and that, you know, they were our age, you know, and they were trying to change the world and they were sitting in and everything. So we wanted, in the NAACP, we wanted to get involved in the sit-ins. And then we found out about the Chicago beaches and parks which were segregated. You know, Chicago probably is one of the most segregated large cities in the country.

**Norman:** It was segregated, in fact. Not by law.

**Velma:** That's right. That's right. Defacto. So we heard about that and we decided we wanted to go and we wanted to integrate and desegregate Rainbow Beach. And I had met Norm and, and he had talked about there was this movement in the whole country... a movement for desegregation and for democracy and... So we decided... we had a meeting with NAA. We decided we'd go up, go there, and we wanted to do it in an integrated group because the NAACP was all Black and at least the young people were. And so Norman found a group of young people at the University of Chicago, and they I won't go into it, but we were very worried, I think, as Blacks sometimes are worried now, about being integrated and would... they're going to take away our culture. We're not going to be able to dance and... and talk and everything and so we were... We were a little skeptical, but Norman and I were always integrationist. And because my mother was a trade unionist, you know, and... and so we decided we'd go out there together, an integrated group. And I have to tell you, it was an experience I think that Chicago will never live down, at least on the South Side. But it was a... it was a... we were met by a white racist mob, and they started to throw rocks at us and bricks at us. And we sort of got up and sort of was marching out... out of the beach and I got hit in the head and I got... with a brick or something. I got 17 stitches in the head. And that was when I really fell in love with Norm [laughs] because he sort of carried me off the beach, you know, and actually we were married a couple of months later, few months later, and we've stayed together too. But um... it was quite an experience. There were no policemen out there at all. And... in our book, this is like the first chapter, "Wade in the Water," and... so I won't go over it. But... but it was a love story and we sort of stayed together and we were like a team of people. And I think that we were the only Black team of activists who became leaders in civil rights and in the trade union movement. Because we were mentored by Bayard Rustin and A. Philip Randolph, who understood that race and class — that is civil rights and economic rights — would go — should go hand in hand. And so we were the I think, the only Black couple who were leaders in the civil rights movement as well as in the labor movement. And we have a, a program of policy, of principles that have non-violence, coalition building, and four or five other principles that Norm and I live by. We've always lived by and we... we feel that the younger generation is beginning to understand that they have to

have coalitions, too, with everybody. Not everybody. Not the racists, but anyway, [laughs] with the young people, with Blacks, with other minorities, with gay and lesbian groups, with the religious community and with people of goodwill.

**Norman:** And the labor movement.

**Velma:** And the labor movement. The labor movement is really essential.

**Christiane:** Now, is that what the A. Philip Randolph Institute was about basically, right?

**Velma:** Yes.

**Norman:** Well, actually, just a bit more about the wade-in that Velma led on Rainbow Beach. We had heard that a black couple had been driven off the beach by the... by these the same white mob.

**Velma:** There's a policeman in his family.

**Norman:** Family, yeah. And so after the incident in which we were confronted by the white mob, we decided that we would go back to the beach and we did go back to the beach until it was integrated.

**Velma:** And we developed a coalition around the integration of the beach developed in Chicago with Chicago Labor, which Chicago Liberal community, religious community. I mean, there were hundreds of people who came out to integrate the beach after we had an incident there. And by the way, that was like August 28th, 1960 which the March on Washington was August 28th, 1963.

**Christiane:** Wow.

**Velma:** But Norm, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to....

**Norman:** No., that's alright.

**Velma:** And I got hit in the head and Norman and I were married shortly afterwards and I developed a... an embolism and lost the baby because of it. And the doctors told me not to have any children because it would, it would be dangerous for me. But we, we decided that we were going to be committed to really change the situation. And so we committed our lives to it and we have not been sorry.

**Christiane:** Wow. That's a beautiful story actually how could that... I mean, out of that horror how something... Yeah.

**Velma:** Yes. Yes.

**Christiane:** Yeah.

**Velma:** And I... I sort of became interested in education. You know, it's very interesting. I know that you're not going to be able to do this Norman came from an upper-middle-class Black family in Summit, New Jersey. Do you know, Summit, New Jersey? [laughs]

**Christiane:** I do.

**Velma:** And his dad was the only Black dentist in Summit for many, many years. And I... I grew up in the ghetto in Chicago. And my mother was like the trade unionists who worked, who had seven children and worked two factory jobs unlike what happens now, 'cause women don't have a lot of factory jobs. and we don't have a lot of factory jobs. So that we were different, but we were very similar. He cared about education and I did. He cared about social movements. And I did. He cared about integration. And I did. And he loved America and we want it to change so that we could really love America, you know?

**Christiane:** So was your mother involved in the Lady's Garment District Unit, at all?

**Velma:** No. She was in Mine, Mill, Smelter Workers Union. But I'm not sure how we got really connected to the ILG but we... uh...

**Norman:** Through the ILG leadership helped us get into the co-op.

**Velma:** Yes, that's true. But we were involved with the union beforehand, you know, and we were involved with... I'm from the Teachers' Union and I organized paraprofessionals. And...

**Christiane:** Was... did that involvement predate your moving into Penn South or were you already involved in the Teachers'-

**Velma:** No, actually, A. Philip Randolph during the Ocean Hill-Brownsville said to me, Velma, I want you to go out and check it out. So I guess this was 1968. And so I went out and checked it out and I said, The Union is right to defend its members and... and I really do want to be involved with trade unionism. And so I explored a whole bunch of unions and decided I would pick the UFT. And the UFT had minori- mostly black and Hispanic women well, it wasn't the UFT. In the school system, there were teacher aides all over the place. And I... I went to Harvard and then I graduated from the Graduate School of Education and I came and I saw all these... these Black women and Hispanic women and I said, are they teachers? And somebody said, No. I said, what are they? And they said, Teacher Aides, making \$50 a week and no benefits. And I said, that's what I want to do. I

want to organize them and people said... You know, I mentioned it to some of my Harvard friends, and they said, Velma, you don't want to do that. You know, you... you want to be an administrator. And I said, no, my calling is to help people and I can help. And so I went into the UFT, organized them, integrated the teaching force with paraprofessionals and developed a career ladder for them. And now they're doing very well. Now, the teaching force is very integrated. And I can, you know, I can have some responsibility for that.

**Norman:** The career ladder enabled paraprofessionals to get their education paid by the Board of Education. And so that they eventually became teachers in the school system. And that was an unprecedented anti-poverty program.

**Christiane:** And you were instrumental in getting that going?

**Velma:** Yes, absolutely.

**Christiane:** Wow, that's great.

**Velma:** And in the struggle against the community control people, by the way.

**Christiane:** They fought you on it?

**Velma:** Oh, yes. They fought a lot, OK? And... and Bayard and A. Philip Randolph really supported me and supported the union organizing. Those... these women - mostly women and Black Power had come into play. So that, that movement was sort of anti-union at that time. So...

**Christiane:** OK,

**Velma:** So it was... it was really a struggle.

**Christiane:** So you were... encountered hostility both from the Black Power Movement and the teachers or the...

**Velma:** No,

**Christiane:** Not the teachers.

**Velma:** No, not the teachers. By the way, we... Al Shanker and I went and talked to many teachers. And in order to help set the platform for the, the paraprofessional entrance into the UFT, and the teachers were pretty good on that. And they would... see, paraprofessionals were in the classroom anyway. So the question, I don't know whether you teach, but teachers were very skeptical about para's initially. And also the... the whole question of team teaching

didn't go very well. And the teaching with the paraprofessional who they were in charge so they... it was a little better than team teaching and many, many teachers said they wouldn't exist without the paraprofessional in the classroom with them doing small group instructions, doing, you know, menial tasks but being there.

**Christiane:** Did you have to become a paraprofessional?

**Velma:** Yes. Yes, I graduated from Harvard and then I became a paraprofessional. [laughs] and Al Shanker said to me, he said, Velma, I've tried to organize para's before and he said, I think you have to become a paraprofessional. I said, fine. I mean, you know, most of the paraprofessionals were a little older than I was. And I had said, now look, my mom said, anybody who is willing to be... in education, you've gotta, you've got to respect them, you know? And anyway, I... I think I did one of the most wonderful programs that I ever had.

**Christiane:** Yeah. That's great.

**Velma:** Norman and I are doing another program now which... which we don't want to discuss. I guess, right Norm?

**Norman:** We can.

**Velma:** Well, I don't know what you want...

**Christiane:** Well it's all so interesting.

**Velma:** Well.

**Christiane:** If you'd like to, discuss it, if not...

**Velma:** Yeah, we'll... we'll just say a little bit about it. The... the Biden administration has been really up against real authoritarianism, and it really is a problem for it. But one of the things that they did was to develop legislation which would rebuild our cities and roads and...

**Norman:** Bridges.

**Velma:** Bridges and the infrastructure. And part of that is the providing of 800,000 jobs a year for ten years.

**Norman:** In construction.

**Velma:** In construction. So Norman and I decided that we wanted to really help out and we developed a very, very good board of union people.

**Norman:** Civil rights leaders.

**Velma:** Civil rights leaders.

**Norman:** Political and community activists.

**Velma:** Yes. And we're... and... and the, the Secretary of Labor is a good guy and he's from the building trades and our people know him like Ernie Green became the Assistant Secretary of Labor and he sort of... he worked with them. So what we're going to do is we're developing a program now which is labor in the schools and labor in the churches. And we're going to recruit young Blacks for the building trades.

**Norman:** Young Black men and women.

**Velma:** Absolutely, by the way. Because, you know, the build... in the Black community, we don't know a lot about the building trades. They make a lot of money. They make sometimes more than teachers, you know, and that's a way for minorities to get into the middle class. And to get really good, stable jobs. And so what we're going to be doing, we're going to be recruiting in schools vocational schools and in predominantly Black schools and also in churches. And we're going to help

**Norman:** Black churches.

**Velma:** Black churches. That's right. And we're going to help get a piece of that 800,000 jobs.

**Christiane:** It's impressive. You're still so involved.

**Velma:** Yes, absolutely.

**Norman:** And the objective is to recruit or even place young Black men and women into apprenticeship programs in the building trade unions.

**Christiane:** Wow. That's great. Yeah.

**Velma:** So anyway, that's what we're doing now. Aside from our book, [laughs] we're doing that.

**Christiane:** I want to ask you about your book, but before we go there, I read about... you were involved in organizing some demonstrations for the World's Fair here in New York in 1964.

**Velma:** Oh, yes. Oh, wow.

**Christiane:** Can you tell us something about that? That sounded...

**Velma:** Aaye! In the office there is a, there is a New York Times article that... that they, they... they talked to me about. And Norman was very much involved in that, by the way. But, it was a C.O.R.E. project.

**Norman:** The Congress of Racial Equality.

**Velma:** Yes. Under Jim Farmer, not under that crazy guy what's his name? Roy Innis. Unfortunately, by the way, we talk in the book about that change over too. because what we... what we want to do is to give, we want to tell our love story. But we wanted to have a backdrop of the civil rights movement and the labor movement so that, that is all intertwined in the book. The World's Fair demonstration was in 1964 and we... we wanted to create a vehicle for jobs at the World's Fair and in the wider community and...

**Norman:** There was a faction that... and we wanted it actually to counter a faction of the Congress of Racial Equality who talked about organizing a stall-in,

**Velma:** Yes.

**Norman:** to block traffic as it came across the bridge into Manhattan. And we felt that this not only was a misplaced lack of focus but would unnecessarily alienate you know, working and middle-class people who were trying to get to work. And we felt it was that... that one ought to have a demonstration directly at the World's Fair. In fact, press for more jobs, a greater opportunity at... directly at the World's Fair. And so we organized such a demonstration. In fact, we had and we developed a presence at the World's Fair part of the demonstration involved blocking the entrance to the World's Fair in which a number of people, James Farmer

**Velma & Norman:** Michael Harrington

**Norman:** My... my... Bayard Rustin were arrested but we had demonstrations in the fair and various dis... displays in... in... the fair

**Velma:** For the audience, yes.

**Norman:** And with a... and with a network, in fact, to keep the keepers in touch with those who were demonstrating at the pavilions and we had a-

**Velma:** I have to tell a story.

**Norman:** Here we go.

**Velma:** Norman was... we had walkie talkies, and that was the first time we used walkie talkies, by the way. So we practiced with walkie talkies. And Norman Hill was King Cobra. That's... and I was Cobra Number One at the World's Fair. And so what we would... what we were trying to do is to make sure we were in communication with the various C.O.R.E. groups who are... people came from all around the country. And so we wanted to make sure they were stationed at various places and so the, the news media said there's a paramilitary operation, right? [laughs] Well, it wasn't quite paramilitary. because once... once somebody was arrested, people got a little nervous. You know, they... they... they would forget their little... um... You know, this is Cobra One. And well, we didn't tell... we didn't tell that, by the way. But it was not a paramilitary operation. But it was a good one. It was a good start. And we sort of laughed about it afterwards, you know, but it was a success. And the other demonstrators that wanted to block traffic, that failed. So...

**Norman:** In fact, it never materialized.

**Velma:** That's right. That's right. And what... what did materialize failed. But anyway...

**Christiane:** So you succeeded in getting the jobs that you wanted at the fair?

**Velma:** We... we did... they... They had a few more jobs that they hired people for. And we felt that it was relatively successful.

**Christiane:** I'd like to go back a little bit. Just ask you a few more questions about the co-op since...

**Velma:** OK.

**Christiane:** I'm wondering what building you moved into initially and what it was like. Can you remember what it looked like or what your furniture...

**Velma:** Let... let me say this, OK? We moved into this apartment. We've been in this apartment, but I was stationed in Washington, DC, when I worked for the Service Employees International Union. I was actually the first Civil Rights and International Affairs Director. So I went all over Africa, by the way, training Black trade unionists in Africa. So that... and Norman was here I mean, we always had an apartment here, but we didn't both live here like we were separated for... from time to time. OK, um, would you say that, Norm? So, when I went to Harvard, Norman came to have weekends there and but we always had an apartment here and when... when I moved back, I became active in the co-op and active with, for instance, police

affairs in Chelsea. And I actually brought in people from Chelsea Elliot and...

**Norman:** Fulton.

**Velma:** Fulton Houses. And we got them on the board, the Community Board, because we wanted to have representation from the poorer communities here. And I also was very much involved in the Chelsea Rec Center getting... opening the Chelsea Rec Center so that I was involved as well as here as well as nationally.

**Christiane:** What years would those be? Approximately?

**Velma:** I'd have to get them for you.

**Christiane:** No. Yeah. Are we talking 1970s, maybe?

**Velma:** I mean it's, you know, it's been a while.

**Christiane:** Sure. Sure.

**Velma:** I think the affordable housing thing was in 19... 90s, I think. And the Chelsea Rec Center... Oh boy. 19... I'd have to get the but we...we were very much involved with that [phone rings] What is that?

**Norman:** It's the phone. Well, we've been in this apartment, building 3A apartment 19B as in boy, since we moved into the co-op.

**Velma:** Yeah.

**Christiane:** And what was... what was the building like then? What was the neighborhood like? Do you have memories of...

[sirens]

**Velma:** Well, as I said, the neighborhood was certainly less middle class.

**John:** Let's let the ambulance pass.

**Velma:** Oh, that's right.

[pause]

We were very involved in the Hudson Guild and it is true, by the way, I mean, I was more involved locally than Norm. Because Norman was the president of the A. Philip Randolph Institute for how many years?

**Norman:** 24.

**Velma:** 24 years. And he was, he was going around organizing I think over 200 affiliates all over the country. So that he would, you know, he would come home, but he... his emphasis was on organizing those groups and, thank goodness, they... lots of them still exist and they want to do book parties for us. So... that was wonderful. But I got involved in the local community more and certainly with the Organization of paraprofessionals. I was traveling all over the city, meeting with them and going to lunch meetings and after-school meetings and...

**Christiane:** And at the same time, you were helping to set up the Hudson Guild and?

**Velma:** Yes.

**Christiane:** Wow. And rec center.

**Velma:** Yes.

**Christiane:** All of these programs.

**Velma:** Well, I mean, I... you know when... When I got hit in the head and lost a child, I got... I was paralyzed for like about, I guess, six months. And they told me I was in my... was it early twenties? Then they said, Velma, when you get older, you're going to have trouble with your leg, 'cause I... I had developed a paralysis on this side and now I'm having problems with walking and all that. I'm going to be going to physical therapy now and... but hey, it was worth it, OK. But after I got to be 80, it sort of started to be a little difficult, you know.

**Christiane:** Both of you are amazing. You're both in your eighties, then. You're still so active.

**Velma:** Yes. But he's... he's...he's... he's getting to be 90 next year.

**Christiane:** Oh, 90?

**Velma:** Yeah. Next year.

**Christiane:** Wow.

**Velma:** So... I... you know what? He's healthier than I do when he exercises, I say oh my God, I wish I could do that.

**Christiane:** And how about the... um... the Black Lives Matter Movement? Had this something you... the two of you have also been involved in?

**Velma:** Well, I have to tell you, that actually we had a couple of leaders from Black Lives Matters here, and we talked about the movement in the past and the movement now. And I have to tell you that a lot of them understand that they stand on the shoulders of us, but particularly the leaders of the past. You know, and I haven't been, Norman hasn't been I guess Norman developed an eye problem. He lost his eyesight in the early...

**Velma & Norman:** 2000.

**Norman:** Early 2000s.

**Velma:** But he's you know, he's incredible. And I have not been well so that I haven't been as involved as I... as I could be, you know, but I think that both Black Lives Matters and also Occupy Wall Street were very important things and they were non-violent movements. And I think that they they... they got it, you know, and there's a song: Freedom Doesn't Come Like a Bird on the Wing. Every generation's gotta win it again. And we want to help but this... another generation is here today.

**Christiane:** And how would you compare what's going on now to what was going on in the 1960s? Anything that you?

**Velma:** Well I don't think we've ever had a situation like the situation which we have now with Trump, with authoritarianism sort of creeping in with sort of polarization as... as never before. And I really do believe that there isn't quite an understanding of what's happening. And I think more and more we are understanding it and we're understanding the connection between the forces of Putin, forces in Europe, and in well, I'm not sure Asia, but certainly in Europe that are connected with the forces here and I really think this election, the midterm elections and the regular elections are going to be very important and that we have to just pull out all the stops in order to get people in, you know, not fully agree with us, but not that are we want people who are committed to democracy, our institutions and the rule of law and I don't think the I think we're going to have a hard time getting people out. You know.

**Norman:** One of the differences between the earlier civil rights movement and today is that a single demonstration you could bring about immediate change that is, you, you could... you could sit in at a restaurant and desegregate the restaurant or... and whereas today, the problems are not merely racial, but economic and social, for example, it's not just about integrated housing, but it's about decent, affordable housing. And it's not just about fair employment, but it's about full employment. That decent wages and pay. It's not

just about integrated education but... but quality education.  
Maximizing the learning potential of all students.

**Velma:** Right.

**Norman:** And these economic and social problems require... there's no single demonstration that brings about change in the... in this economic and social area,

**Velma:** institutional change

**Norman:** It requires political action to bring about institutional change. And that's... and I think Blacks should be aggressive and militant in... militant about engaging in political action but being a minority racially and numerically, they need allies and the key and crucial allies the trade union movement, which has a program to deal with and address the economic and social problems disproportionately experienced by Blacks. And so and also what's needed is a majoritarian strategy involving coalition politics. And that's the essence of the... the change today. And I think that that's why, in fact, we need and we need to elect into office that are committed to address and end the economic and social problems and focus the spending of taxpayer dollars on the needs of the have-littles... and have-nots of society, not the wealth and corporate interests, I think that the, in a sense, problem is a more complex, but equally as challenging as it was in the early days of the civil rights movement.

**Christiane:** Yeah. That's... that's a very interesting comment. Yeah. And is that... that's kind of the sort of thing you were working on in the A. Phil...

**Velma:** A. Philip...

**Christiane:** Randolph Institute. Right?

**Norman:** Yes.

**Christiane:** Trying to get that... Is that organization still quite active?

**Velma:** Absolutely. Yeah.

**Norman:** It still exists. The A. Philip Randolph Institute acts as an organization made up primarily of Black trade unionists welcome anyone sharing its commitment to racial equality and economic justice. It acts as a bridge between the trade union movement and the civil rights movement, encouraging direct participation with labor programs in the community, in the pro community matter, and bringing community concerns back to play with, forcing and encouraging the

building of the Black Labor Alliance for Racial Equality and Economic Justice. We have organized affiliates of the Randolph Institute made up again primarily of Black trade unionists, on the assumption that Black trade unionists.... First of all, being trade unionists would know from direct experience what the labor movement is all about and what unions are for and secondly, being Black are no strangers to the Black community. And are in a position, therefore, to act as a bridge between the trade union movement and civil rights movement and one of the prime ways to do this is to engage in voter participation drives voter registration, registration, get out the vote and voter protection in Black areas all over the country to maximize Black impact in key elections. For example, even former pres- President Clinton first ran for the presidency the margin he won by, was provided by eight states. Those eight states had significant Black population and active Randolph Institute affiliates in each of those states that drove voter participation drives that provided the margin of difference in those eight states that resulted in Clinton's victory.

**Velma:** People don't know that.

**Christiane:** That's interesting.

**Velma:** Yeah.

**Norman:** So that and the Randolph Institute continues to be active today. Now, politically not only engaging in voter participation drives encouraging greater Black participation in the trade union movement and there will be a positive union presence in the Black community.

**Christiane:** It's so interesting, yeah. I'm wondering, are there still civil rights activists that you are in contact with here in Penn South? Is that still an... Is something going on or... It's a different era, I know.

**Velma:** It's a different era. And, you know, for the last couple of years, we... we've had COVID, right?

**Christiane:** True.

**Velma:** And so we haven't been as active as we could be, you know, and maybe maybe it'll be better I know that there is a willingness in the co-op, but I think it just has to be more directed, you know? But we... we haven't been and I don't know when we're going to be able to focus on that because we're going to be dealing with the book and dealing with a new... a new developing organization.

**Christiane:** Sure. You have enough on your plate.

**Velma:** Yes, I mean... But the... you know, the co-op is home and you can't forget about home. So we're going to have to make some time.

**Christiane:** Do you want... do you want to tell us a little bit more about your book? Or are you...

**Velma:** Well, I...absolutely. By the way, we're very enthusiastic about the book. The book is called "Climbing the Rough Side of the Mountain." And it is the story of a marriage over 60 decades of activism and love. And the, the intro is by John Lewis, Congressman John Lewis and Vernon Jordan. They decided they would do our intros. So we're very happy about that.

**Christiane:** That's wonderful.

**Velma:** And we're very happy about the fact that we sent out copies of the book to various people. And we have had... um... blurbs from civil rights leaders, labor leaders. I mean, it's just been incredible.

**Norman:** Elected officials.

**Velma:** Elected officials. I mean, it's really... I think we have about 14 blurbs about the book and from academics I mean, it really has been important and I've been... I've been overwhelmed, by the way, with the... but it... it... it... it tracks the civil rights movement from our perspective, from C.O.R.E., the Congress of Racial Equality. I know I touched it from C.O.R.E., to the NAACP Youth Council and... and Rainbow Beach to the March on Washington and we talk about not just our experience, but an analysis of what went on in the various movements. We did that historically. We also talked about Black Lives Matters, and we made a little criticism of it. But, generally, we're... we're in support of it, and we also talked about the Occupy... What is it, Norm?

**Christiane:** Occupy Wall Street.

**Velma:** Yes. Yes. We... we talked about that. And... and we really talked a little bit about the... the Trump administration, too, because we wanted to connect the past with the current problem. Because if you don't understand the past, you will not understand the present. So we try to do that and we talked about things that are not known. For instance, there was an A. Randolph Institute chapter that really succeeded in defeating David Duke in his bid for, what is it, governor?

**Norman:** Yes.

**Velma:** In Louisiana, and we just want, we want people to have our view of what happened and our view from our leaders. You know, our leaders were Randolph and Bayard and... um... and King to some extent, too.

**Christiane:** Were you personally... did you mean Martin Luther King?

**Velma:** Oh, yes. And we also worked in... setting... in helping to set up workshops during the King era, we also tried to convince him not to go into Chicago when he went in Chicago and didn't succeed there. And... go ahead.

**Norman:** I was in Memphis helping to generate support for the striking sanitation workers, who were mostly Black, and was there when King was assassinated.

**Christiane:** Oh, wow.

**Norman:** I got to the hotel where he was killed minutes after it happened.

**Velma:** There are pictures.

**Norman:** Yes, so that...

**Christiane:** Wow.

**Norman:** I had a direct association with, with King who was, you know, who came to Memphis to support the organizing drive of the sanitation workers.

**Christiane:** Right.

**Norman:** And that was his last campaign. His last act. So we knew him well.

**Christiane:** So you were there right when... right when he was assassinated. Oh my..

**Norman:** Yes.

**Velma:** So I don't know how you're gonna put all this together.

**Christiane:** I don't know. I feel like I haven't focused on Penn South. It's been so interesting hearing about your civil rights...

**Norman:** Let me say one other thing about our memoir.

**Christiane:** OK?

**Norman:** It also projects our politics. We are lifelong Social Democrats opposed to authoritarianism on the right and totalitarianism of the left and pro-labor we... it's reflected in the fact that the initial conference where I met Bayard Rustin was the conference of the Young People's Socialist League. The students that I was able to bring to the wade-in, that Velma led, were students who were part of the Young People's Socialist League at the University of Chicago.

**Velma:** But not all, Norm.

**Norman:** Not all. But some of them were and so that... so that in effect, the memoir reflects and... and it is... and is a rejection of our politics.

**Christiane:** I'm looking forward to reading it. It sounds like it'll be fantastic.

**Velma:** Oh, it was... it was... it was a job. It really was a job. I have... I have to say, I... I have another... I have three more books in my mind, but I'm not sure I'm going to do it. But the, the agent, who is wonderful, has talked about doing some children's books and that'll be a little easier to handle, you know?

**Christiane:** Absolutely. Right.

**Velma:** But... but I mean, you know, we... you know, what is it? What is it now? It's not comic books. It's uh...

**Christiane:** Graphic novels?

**Velma:** Yes, graphic novels. They've suggested Rainbow Beach as a graphic novel, the relationship between Bayard Rustin and A. Philip Randolph, which was really a father son relationship, as a graphic novel. And you know, we'll... we'll, I mean... I also want to talk a little bit about women in the movement. Because there isn't enough talk.

**Christiane:** Yeah. That's all fascinating subjects. And, you know, I could go on and on with questions, but I'm not so sure that...

**Velma:** I'm not sure what you're gonna do with...

**Christiane:** I don't want to wear you guys out. And John, do you want to add... do you want to ask any specific questions or?

**John:** Well, I have tons of questions about the relationship between the labor movement and the civil rights movement and when they were

at odds and when they weren't. But I think we've talked about that a lot. So my question really, and I want to see if this is getting picked up on the mic here, and maybe you can repeat it afterwards.

**Christiane:** OK.

**John:** It has to do with Chelsea and Penn South. And maybe you can reflect on what your social life was in the neighborhood. Were there restaurants you went to? Was there an African-American social life in the neighborhood, or places that were yours that you went to... or how was life back then in the sixties and seventies in the neighborhood?

**Velma:** Uh, well, we had a relationship with oh boy... what is the place? I haven't been there for so long, but it's between 15th and... oh God...

**Christiane:** What kind of a place?

**Velma:** It's... it's a... it's like a shopping center like for food.

**John:** Oh, uh, Chelsea...Chelsea Market? No.

**Velma:** No, not the Chelsea Market. The other thing, well, maybe it is the Chelsea Market with the railroad. That's uh...

**John:** For the High Line?

**Velma:** No. Oh well. Forget it.

**John:** Chelsea Market is over by that... over there on 15th.

**Velma:** Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. But we used to have meetings there and you know, we... Restaurants, we... You know, the restaurants that we went to have disappeared. You know? And I haven't for a couple of years. We haven't been going out to eat a lot. You know.

**Christiane:** What was Chelsea like when you were here? Were... were... were there's lots of small stores? I mean, there are so many high rises now. What was it like when you were?

**Velma:** Actually there were more small stores, more Mama and Papa stores than there are now. I don't even know if they exist anymore, unfortunately. And... uh, well, there was a Chelsea Rec Center. There was a lot of activity around that. Getting that started and then... Is it still there?

**Christiane:** Yes, the rec center is still there. My daughter is a member actually now.

**Velma:** Oh, very good. Very good. I was one of the founding members of the Chelsea Rec Center. But it's there?

**Christiane:** And what about the... you know, we were also wondering what about the... if you knew what the neighborhood was like before you moved in and there were people that were displaced? And was that something you were given your social and civil rights awareness?

**Velma:** There was a lot of displacement. Yeah. Oh, Jesus. I'm doing a block now.

**Christiane:** OK.

**Norman:** But... uh... I just met a cooperator whose mother was displaced by the building of Penn South who is now... and she's now a cooperator. They've sort of come full circle. But what...

**Velma:** You know what? It's very... it... and you have to have a little cash in order to move into Penn South now. So we had lots of friends who were in the projects who decided once they got accepted into Penn South, they said, oh no, they've got kids. They would go buy a house in New Jersey. You know, there were several friends of ours who did that. They just said they... they wanted more space and you know, I'm going to have to...

**Christiane:** Changing times.

**Velma:** Yeah. But I'm, you see anyway, I can't remember. I'm actually trying to think of a guy who was Hudson Guild who died a few - maybe ten years ago. I don't know. The head of Hudson Guild? Do you know what I'm talking about? No? No.

**Christiane:** Sorry.

**Velma:** You don't know what I'm talking about, do you, Norm?

**Norman:** No. No, I don't...

**Velma:** I mean, it's awful because he was a dear friend of mine and he... he knew all about and he actually would educate us on how things had changed, you know? But I can't really remember that. It's, like, so long ago.

**Christiane:** Yeah.

**Velma:** I'm sorry.

**Christiane:** Let's... you... you've given us a lot of fascinating information.

**Velma:** How are you going to put this together?

**Christiane:** I don't know [laughs]

**John:** When we're done with this, I'll give you a little explanation, and I can show you some of the stuff that we have already.

**Velma:** Okay, that's good.

**Christiane:** But I think we should stop because, you know.

**Velma:** OK.