

CARTON 9: 28 THE BROTHERHOOD OF SLEEPING CAR PORTERS

DELLUMS, RON ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT

2002

2017/193



Ron Dellums, 6/20/02

I: OK, today is June 20th. I'm doing an interview with Ronald Dellums about his uncle, C. L. Could you just say a word, and we'll just test it?

R: I'm going to be responding to you at about this level. 1, 2, 1, 2, 3.

I: OK, let's check it. OK, that's good. Let's go ahead.

R: I remember, you know, it's fascinating that you mentioned that because I remember once C. L. told me, he said, "Never want to be the guy out front." He said, "You never want to be the politician. You want to be the power behind the scenes. You want to be the people, the person that influences the politician." And later I remember he was - he was at an event where he was being honored, I think by ACLU in San Francisco. I believe that was the night when he said that that as the one piece of advice that he was happy that I didn't take.

I: [Laughs]

R: [Laughs] And he said, he said, "I'm so happy," he said, "that's one piece of advice that I'm happy that my nephew didn't take," and he said, "because not to worry. When I'm gone, my nephew would still be here," you know? Which was such an incredible thing for him to say in front of people to me.

I: Yes.

R: And that in his sense of pride in me. But he always said that. He said you can influence from the behind the scenes. So it's



fascinating that at this point in my life, now having retired from Congress, to be able to engage in the activities the way he would have engaged in the activities, under the radar screen, etc.

I: Yes.

R: And, you know, because C. L. was, as you know - in my life C. L. was larger than life. He was immaculate, incredibly well groomed. I can just see him now. Everything about him, to his fingernails, was perfect. He taught himself. He was self-taught. Graduated from high school. He was self-taught.

I: You know, I found in the archives over at the library in Oakland, the African American Museum and Library, where some of the papers are that Barbara put there? I found a little booklet. It was an address book. But in the address book was a list of books, over a hundred books. The list had been written over a period of time because different inks were used at different times, but the same handwriting.

R: Mm hmm.

I: I think it was a list of book she was reading over a period of years, and it's a fascinating list. But that's, again, what you're talking about: self-education.

R: Yeah. Self- - self-education. Understanding the importance of how he presented himself, how he said things, how well informed he was about things, the level of passion that he could bring to an issue. All of those things. So for me, you know, just because of the dynamics of my life and the dynamics of his life, you know, I would be fascinated to read your book because I will learn things that I



didn't even know about C. L., because I'm his nephew. I'm the little kids, you know, get on my bike and ride down to Seventh Street and see my uncle, or the older kid that, you know, came out of the Marine Corps. You know, every month he would send me a certain - he would send me a check every month, for a few hundred dollars every month until I graduated from college, to make sure that I stayed in college, that I had, you know, spending money and this kind of thing. If I had a problem, if my car needed repair or if I needed a book, C. L. "Whatever you need, just stay in school. Get your education. Get that done." He was always there for me. C. L. Dellums never ever was not there for me. He was totally consistent. He was always there and always caring and always very supportive and always encouraging, always pushed me, "Stay in school. Stay in school." [inaudible] So I have a success model in my life. You know, we're living in West Oakland, but I could get on my bike three or four - from Tenth Street to Seventh Street and go up the stairs, and my uncle had an office.

I: Above the billiard parlor.

R: Yeah. Above the pool hall, that's right. And my uncle had an office. He had the receptionist. He had a desk. He had books. He had a pipe rack. He had people, important people coming in and out of his office. He was an immaculate person. You know? Drove his Cadillac. And paid cash, you know? Taught me how to stay - you know? He taught me about being in debt or out of debt. He was just a really good person. So there was this guy that, at a certain point, I began to realize that that name was magic. It could - people



- Dellums. "Is C. L. Dellums your father?" And I would say, "No, he's my uncle." But then some people just assumed that he was my father. And - 'cause I remember - I was going to McClymonds High School. And, you know, C. L. led a big effort to make sure that McClymonds was an accredited school. I mean he led a community organizational effort right there for McClymonds. Well, I get into McClymonds, and I got in the problem that a number of young African American kids get into with their counselors, and that is, well, you know, "Why don't you do this?" as opposed to go to college. And my folks didn't like that at all and immediately pulled me out of McClymonds High School. And I used C. L.'s address at 829 Brockhurst as my address, although I lived way deep in West Oakland on Woods Street, and which allowed me to go to Tech High School. So I only spent a few months at McClymonds. My folks pulled me out right away and put me into Tech High School because they said, no, I wanted to go to college, and I wanted to go to a high school where I'd be encouraged to go to college. So when I got to Tech, they did enroll me in all the college prep courses and what have you, because in junior high I kinda got off of it for a minute, you know? But that wasn't because I wasn't material. I just got interested in other things. Well, so people just assumed that that address - so I was actually C. L.'s son. So people said I was C. L.'s son, so doors opened. Like during the Christmas holidays, for example, a number of us during the Christmas holidays would go to the post office, or what - you know, work for two weeks delivering, you know, Christmas cards during the holidays, make some extra



money. Well, I went to C. L., and this was impressive to my buddies, because I went with two or three of my buddies, and I said I want to, you know, get a job working during the Christmas at the Southern Pacific, you know, big train-loads of mail, these big sacks of mail. And - so you could either deliver the mail or another job was to work down at Southern Pacific unloading and loading these big bags of mail during the Christmas holidays. C. L. hand - sat down and hand-wrote a note and told me, he said, "Take this down to this office at Southern Pacific." And I - and I went with my buddies and walked in, and I handed somebody the note, and they looked at it and went back in the office and handed the note to somebody, and this guy came out, and he said, "OK, which one of you are Ronald Dellums? Who are these folks?" "These are my friends." Said, "OK, hire all of them." [Snaps fingers] Immediately. Just with a handwritten note. And I remember C. L. used to say - he said, "The sad thing about nepotism," he said, he said, "People talk about nepotism and you can't help your family." He said, "That's very sad," he said, "because you get to the point where you can help them and then they don't want you TO help them." He said, "That doesn't make sense." So he said, "My family's my family," he said, "I'm getting my son - my nephew a job, getting my nephew a job." We laughed about that. Because he said, "Because that's what I encountered, that worry," you know, "You understand nepotism. Now that I'm in a position to help you find a job, now somebody's going to get upset because I'm helping my nephew find a job? It doesn't make sense." [inaudible]



I: What's your earliest memory of him? You talk about you as a little boy, riding your bicycle, but is that the earliest memory? What comes to mind? Was he around the house a lot? Your parents' house?

R: Yeah, he used to come by, and he would take my sister and I out for rides, would take us places.

I: Yeah.

R: And he would also take us - we would also visit his home. I loved to visit C. L.'s home.

I: So you met - you got to know Marva early on then.

R: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. She was an infant. I got to know Marva. She was an infant.

I: She's a few years younger, right?

R: Yeah. And - but this - even before Marva. Before - before Marva, you know, my sister and I, we'd go and like we'd spend a Saturday or a Sunday at his home. And, you know, the things that you remember? [inaudible] about being a little kid. He used to make sure that our hands were clean before we ate, and he used to take my sister and I, and I remember - and I was a little kid 'cause I couldn't see up, you know, over it, and he used to wash my hands. He'd wash my sister's hands. And I remember - I remember this man's - a very caring person, but to a little kid he's a big fellow, right? But here's this gentle man, this gentleness. There was something - something very gentle. He'd wash our hands. And I'll never forget that. It's like I can remember the smell of the soap, and I can remember he [gestures washing], washing my - so here's



this - here's this incredibly busy man, this very important person. Here's this guy who could move communities and move institutions and, you know, had this strong will, this courageous guy, this fighter person, and I remember as a little kid, because I wasn't - we weren't big enough, you know? Or something - he put a little box . . .

I: You couldn't quite reach the sink?

R: Yeah. I couldn't reach the sink. And sometime he'd put a little box there so we could stand up and at a certain point he'd wash our hands. And he was just that kind of person. And he really cared about us 'cause we were - we were his younger brother's two kids. And my father - see, he sent for my dad.

I: Your father's Verney.

R: Verney Dellums.

I: [Spells], right?

R: Yeah.

I: So C. L. sent for him.

R: Yeah, and actually, see, my father was supposed to come to California and enroll in the University of California at Berkeley's School of Journalism because my dad wanted to be a sports journalist. And C. L. had come out to California earlier. And C. L. sorta took on the role of father, older brother, etc. Well, my father came out to California, fell in love, got married. I started to make my way into the world. He never went to college. So in that sense my sister and I had to act out both my mother and my father's dreams of furthering their education. So C. L. sorta - C. L. sorta was like a father figure to my father. And my father - my father also was



very bright. My father had a photographic memory. And I don't recall - because I can't recall this coming up - to whether C. L. had a photographic memory or not. But I know, you know, he was well spoken and had a great facility. Probably had the same gene.

I: You know, judging by the letters he wrote, he had a tremendous memory, right?

R: Right. OK. And because my father was elected the Recorder of the class because my dad was like a, you know, he was like a computer, all his life. If my father read something, he'd retain it. He could tell you what page and where. I mean he had a mostly photographic memory. So he wanted to use that knowledge as a journalist. My memory is not as good as my father's, but mine is not, you know, just pure photographic to that extent, but I do have a memory that's well, well beyond average, and it had nothing to do with me. I know that. I inherited that from my dad. So my ability to handle a lot of information and data, it came easy because, because, because of my dad, and also I think because of C. L., and they spoke well, and C. L. spoke well, and maybe it was just part of the gene. So I've always been humble about that, and not necessarily - maybe I worked on it, fine-tuned it, but I came in the world with it.

I: Yes. Now, C. L. and your father were very close there, because, as you say, your father was like a father figure, big brother to him, brought him to California.

R: Oh, yeah. Oh, very much so.



I: And what was his relationship with your mom, with Willa?  
Was he close to her too?

R: Yeah. He was a good friend. You know, he was a good friend to my mom. And I think he was a strong figure. You know? Because some people think my dad might have been even smarter than C. L., but C. L. was more disciplined than my dad. Yeah. He was more disciplined than my father, and maybe [inaudible] more mature than my dad in that sense. But my father was incredibly bright. But C. L., just as I said, he was larger than life in that sense. So my father, you know, was overshadowed to some extent, I think, by C. L. But I never sensed a lot of envy there. But, you know, C. L. would bail my dad out, you know, financially, you know, when he needed it, you know, because my dad was on the edge, you know, 'cause he's working every - but C. L. was more disciplined, you know, saving. You know, he was much more organized.

I: What kind of work did your dad do?

R: My father ran on the road.

I: He was on the railroad.

R: He was on the railroad. My father was a Pullman porter, initially. And so he was in the union. And then C. L. got my father to integrate the waterfront.

I: Oakland waterfront?

R: Longshoreman.

I: The Longshoremen, yeah.



R: Right. The Oakland-San Francisco waterfront. When there was no Blacks, you know? There was a time when there was literally or virtually no Blacks, as . . .

I: That was a back . . .

R: . . . longshoremen and stevedores.

I: Was that [inaudible] the '34 strike or . . .

R: No, this was after that. This was later, because I was born in '35, and for a portion of my childhood my father ran on the road. So he was gone, in and out, you know, traveling. A Pullman porter would travel. But then later - and I'm trying to remember exactly when that was, whether that was in the late '40s - maybe early '50s. But my father was one of the first African Americans to integrate the waterfront. And then he got his union membership as a Longshoreman.

I: In the ILWU or . . .

R: Yeah, he was in the ILWU, and my father retired from ILWU. Yeah. He was able - he worked long enough to retire from there.

I: Yeah. OK.

R: So his union - I'm sure that my dad's, you know, union involvement and everything very much influenced by C. L., 'cause he came out here. C. L. was in the union. My father comes out, joins the - gets in the union and starts working. Then, you know, C. L., through his other efforts with NAACP and whatever, they decided to integrate the waterfront, and my father was one of the early, quote, test cases, and my father got hired on the waterfront.



I: OK. What did - did C. L. take you to any Brotherhood meetings or any of the union activities? I know you would come to his office.

R: Yeah, but I never went to his meetings.

I: He didn't take you to meetings or anything like that.

R: Right.

I: How did you come to know about the Brotherhood? What - did he talk to you about it?

R: Oh, yeah.

I: Did you get that from your father?

R: Both.

I: Both.

R: And - both of them, because sometimes they would both talk. Sometimes C. L. would tell stories, you know, as I was growing up, about, you know, some of the problems that they had in the union. You know, he would tell me the stories about the rough times, when the strike-breakers, you know, throwing people through plate glass windows and, you know, that kind of stuff. So, yeah, he told us stories about that. And sometimes my dad and C. L. would talk. So we were little kids sitting around, you know, on the floor or whatever. But that's how we learned a lot, was just by the stories that they would tell, or we're in the room and the adults were talking. So you're sitting around the floor listening, enthralled in the storytelling that was going on, because our family's very verbal, so they spent a lot of time talking with each other.



I: Did you get to meet any of the people that your dad, that your uncle worked with, like Randolph or, [inaudible] Randolph or Webster, or NAACP people, like Water Gordon or Turae Pittman?

R: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Turae Hall Pittman, all the - I did meet them. And I'm sure that I met all of them at some point along the way because I was in places where I could, where, you know, I could meet them. As, yeah. But now to meet them, to know that that's what I was doing, is a different thing. I didn't - you know, like later on, then I began to understand the significance of the people that I was meeting, but I met them as a child, but later that's who this was.

I: You were speaking about how C. L. presented himself and his manner of dress, his manner of speaking. How would you describe his manner of speaking because not many people have talked about how he spoke. How would you describe that?

R: Yeah. Like a Harvard graduate, with an affected speech pattern. You know, I remember - let me tell you. One of my friends and I, we were taking a Social Work class at San Francisco State. It was Dr. Seton Manning, who was an African American professor who was teaching community organization. And we had to pick out a community, and there was a whole series of questions and analysis that we had to do for our community organization project. So we chose Oakland, and I went to interview my uncle. And there was one question on there that dealt with class and caste stratification. And C. L. pronounced it. And so we said, "Well, what about the class and caste stratification in Oakland?" And C. L. goes - and right to this day my friend, if he walked in here now, he would tell you,



because we laugh about it [inaudible]. "Clahss and cahste strahfication." So he spoke with a long "A". Clahss instead of class. Cahste instead of caste. You know? Straht instead of strat. So he spoke with a - so many people thought C. L. was an east coast, Ivy League trained, educated person. And, as I began to hear stories, A. Phillip Randolph and others, they developed an affect. Many of them developed - they spoke very precisely. And so I think C. L. [inaudible]. Now, this is a guy from Corsicana, Texas. OK. And so he developed this speech pattern that communicated training, discipline, education.

I: Right. And so you think Randolph influenced that?

R: I think so. Probably. From what I gather, Randolph spoke, you know, sort of like that.

I: Yeah, he had a very distinctive speaking style.

R: Then maybe C. L. picked up on that in meeting with the brothers from the east coast. So here's this brother from Corsicana, Texas who comes to California, and then he gets involved in a union struggle that brings him in connection with brothers from Chicago, from New York, Los Angeles, other places, so he develops a cosmopolitan ear because he's now dealing with people who speak different patterns. And I think that those guys decided they'd train themselves to be eloquent speakers because they were the communications. They were the - they were the - they were the front line people that had to do two things--garner the respect of the potential union workers and also command the respect of management, that they'd be taking me seriously. I'm an intelligent



person. Look me eyeball to eyeball and we'll deal with each other. And that's the way C. L. came across to me, as a serious guy. But I saw the gentle side of him, the human side of him, the loving side of him. You know? I mean he was like uncle - he was Uncle Cott.

I: Uncle . . .

R: Cott. We never called him C. L.

I: Oh, as in Cottrell.

R: Right. So he - so all my life he was Uncle Cott.

I: Uncle Cott. Yeah, yeah. Did he like have any favorite foods or drink or music, or things that sort of stand out in your mind that he particularly enjoyed, some of the small pleasures of life, like food, or maybe there was something, some favorite music he liked, or stories he liked to tell?

R: You know, when you're a kid, you're in your own zone. But um - [pause]. You know [inaudible] I always knew that I could - ginger snaps.

I: [Laughs] Ginger snaps?

R: Always - at Uncle Cott's house. Ginger snaps.

I: Ginger snaps, huh?

R: Yeah.

I: Yeah.

R: And he was the only - he was the first person that I ever knew that actually had cases of soda. That was amazing to me. When you think about a kid from 1014 Wood Street, you know, you're going to the store, you know, folks send you to the store. C. L. had - he had cases of 7Up, you know, that kind of stuff. I can't -



Marva will probably - she could tell you more intimately, because she grew up with him every day. But I remember ginger snaps and 7Up.

I: Yeah.

R: Ginger snaps and 7Up.

I: Were they - would you find that there were times that there were challenges in being his nephew? There were things that were . .

R: No, it was always an asset.

I: [inaudible] about it sometimes?

R: Always an asset. I never experienced a negative in that regard. It was always very, very positive. And that's, as I said, when I realized that that was magic, because teach - people would [inaudible] - want - even if they dealt with me one way, until they made that connection, it was very clear that they dealt with me differently from that point on.

I: Yeah. Interesting, yeah . . .

R: So it wasn't - it never became a burden in that sense. I don't know. That old adage - I think children rise to the level of their expectation? And people expected - they said, "That's C. L.'s son," so they expected that I would be at this level. So, you know, you operated at that level. You know, if you tell the kid every day you're not worth anything, that's the way they respond. But being related to C. L., he's a big-time guy, they figure you're a smart guy. So you got to be a smart person. But I never saw - it never became a negative. As a matter of fact, there's one anecdote that I'll tell you.



I was in Hunter's Point - I think I might have told you this. I was in Hunter's Point working in a - on a Manpower program in Hunter's Point. And - was it - the Governor came through.

I: Governor Reagan or . . .

R: Brown. Edmund G. "Pat" Brown.

I: Mm hmm.

R: A staff guy came through. They came through to look at this project. And this was a big-time, experimental project in Hunter's Point. And so I was talking to the guy. He said, "Dellums. Related to C. L. Dellums?" You know, same thing. I said, "Yeah." So he said, "I imagine you've been asked that question a lot. Are you related to C. L. Dellums?" I said, "Yeah." I said, "One day I want somebody to . . ." I said, "One day I want somebody to walk up to C. L. and say, 'Are you related to Ron Dellums?'" And that guy said, "Now, that's a story." This was - I think it was the press secretary. But I remember he actually wrote that down in his book. And C. L., Uncle Cott, called me one day and he told me that he was walking down - you know, he was walking somewhere in the Capitol, and he ran into the Governor or something, and somebody, they walked up to him and they said, "Are you related to this guy Ron Dellums?"

I: [Laughs]

R: And he fell out laughing, and I told him I had told this story. He said, "Well, somebody actually asked me that." And it was funny 'cause I mean I wasn't a politician or anything. And I said, "But one day that's what I would like." But that never was a negative experience.



I: Speaking of stories like that, tell me the Ronald Reagan story again about - first of all, the story of C. L. and getting reappointed by Reagan, and then the story where you as this congressman meet Reagan years later.

R: Right. Right, right. Ronald Reagan became Governor.

END SIDE A, BEGIN SIDE B

I: We're onto Side 2 now.

R: Ronald Reagan became Governor and apparently there was some question about whether they were going to reappoint C. L. to the Fair Employment Practices Commission, where he was Chair, and had founded the Fair Employment Practices Committee that were, that were the basis of the campaign to get that whole thing going. One of the Republicans went to Governor Reagan and said, "You have to reappoint this guy, or I don't serve." And I can't remember his name now. But he went to him and just made it very clear. He said, "You meet this guy. He is the Fair Employment Practices Commission. You cannot get rid of C. L. Dellums." OK. "And you get rid of him, I'm gone." So Reagan reappoints C. L., to the shock and amazement of everybody. 'Cause here's C. L. He's an old labor union guy from back in the '30s. You know? And - 'cause all those guys had this sort of socialist kind of orientation. They're young fellows in the '30s, and coming along - he's a militant guy, pushed hard, and a staunch Democrat. Reagan reappoints him. Because he had no alternative. Literally. Because C. L. had made his mark, and



he couldn't get around C. L. Dellums. He's on the ground, with his colleague, Republican or Democrat. He was a force that they had to deal with. And, as I said, he became Mr. Fair Employment Practices of the State of California. You're going to have a Fair Employment Practices Commission; you're not going to have C. L. Dellums? Are you nuts? So Reagan reappoints the guy. And apparently became very impressed with C. L., as most people are. So Reagan becomes President, and I'm a member of the Congressional Black Caucus. The Black Caucus goes to a meeting with Ronald Reagan. You know, and the President's going to be briefed on who the members of the Caucus are, and what have you, so he sees the name. And he says, "Next time you see your father, tell him I said hello."

I: [Laughs]

R: And I kept the [inaudible] till the last time that I saw Ronald Reagan. As many times as I corrected him, he always said, "Tell your father I said hello. Give my regards to your father." And I kept saying, "But he's my uncle." You know, I didn't know it. Reagan had a hearing problem, [inaudible] and I didn't know that. But then I start turning to his staff, and I said, "He's my uncle, not my father." "OK, we'll tell him." But wherever he saw me - and he recognized me immediately. Whenever he - whenever he saw me, whether we were walking down the halls of Congress or whether I was in the White House, or wherever I ran into Reagan, and he saw me, we got within earshot, he would always say, "Tell your," he said, "Tell your dad I said hello. Hey, Dellums, tell your dad I said hello." To this day he probably thinks that, you know, that C. L. was my father. But



it was that kind of power. All the way to here's this guy from Corsicana, Texas, that even in the White House they had to deal with him, that he was so large a person that just my presence conjured up his image. You know? "Tell your father I said hello." Now, here was a guy who wasn't necessarily going to appoint C. L. Or was questioning whether he was going to appoint C. L. "No, you don't appoint him, I'm not serving." Said, "I can't serving on the Commission without Dellums. Dellums is the Fair Employment Practices Commission."

I: It would be interesting to get - if you remember who that was.

R: Yeah, I can't remember his name, but one of the guys went and told - because if they're still around, one of them will probably tell you. But they couldn't . . .

I: It wasn't Jack Hardin, was it? Hardin?

R: I can't remember. He may be somebody to start with. But they couldn't envision - they couldn't envision that without him.

I: How would you characterize C. L.'s political vision? What was he trying to accomplish in sort of the bigger scope of things here? I mean - you know, we talk about people as being, you know, socialist or being [inaudible] basically for democratic rights or - you know, he's - there seems many aspects to what he was doing, because he was in the labor movement, he was in the civil rights movement, he was in housing and all across the board.

R: Yeah. Education.



I: So if you would have to say - yeah, education - you know, if you had to say, try to summarize his political vision, how would you characterize that?

R: Well, you know, you gotta - I'll preface my remarks by saying if you think about the time frame that C. L. was operating in, the politics of black America began to really gain focus and momentum in the '60s, because that's when politics got very sharp and the civil rights movement moved forward. So here's a guy operating prior to that time, with pieces of the community mobilized different ways. So my sense of C. L. was that he was a guy who I - the old folks used to call them "strong race man."

Remember that term?

I: Mm hmm, right.

R: Strong race man. And I think that that's how people would view C. L., and that's probably how C. L. viewed himself, as a strong race man, whatever that - whatever that conjured up. That meant that here's a guy who felt strongly about being a black person and who had - was willing to fight anybody that attempted to oppress or be discriminatory or - here's a guy who fought for the rights. And I think if you look at his union activity, the right of black people to work, the right of black people to organize, the right of black people to have a decent wage, so the union became the vehicle for them to make that statement.

I: Right.

R: As workers we have the right to organize. We have the right - we will organize in order - in order to guarantee that we can



work in, you know, good conditions, you know, livable wage, and that we can determine certain factors in the working place, how we work. And you cannot oppress us. We're not slaves. That's over. That's done. You're not going to deal with us like that. You're going to deal with me as an equal human being. You're going to deal with me as a dignified person. I'm going to come back to another story I want to tell you on that point. Then, if you look at his housing discrimination issues - see, he was challenging discrimination. Strong race man. Proud of who he is. And would challenge anybody's desire to use race as a mechanism to discriminate, whether that's on the job or in the school or in the community or whatever. So the labor union effort, I think, gave him an opportunity to challenge discrimination in the workplace. Fair Employment Practices Commission was an extension of that. OK, challenging discrimination and the right of people to be treated fairly. The NAACP, I think, gave him the mechanism to talk about housing discrimination, to talk about - like McClymonds. You know, challenging them to make sure that McClymonds was an accredited school, so the school that served, for the most part, the black community in Oakland had an accredited high school, so that kids who wanted to go to college could go to college. So I sorta saw C. L. as fighting racial issues, as standing up for black people, trying to knock down barriers that in any way inhibited the free movement of black movement in their every-day lives, whether that's where you live, how you live, where you work, how you're educated, etc., all of that. An aside to make - shed some reflection on this. I'm a young



guy, young kid. And I needed some money for something. I mean I'm young, so it wasn't much. And I think whatever it was, my mother didn't give it to me. And I think I was kind of upset about that, and I went to see C. L. as my alternative. You know? Because I could always get me some money from C. L. So I go to C. L. with this story. You know, and I - you know, I got all kinda pride and, you know, I'm saying I need the money, and Mom should give me the money, whatever. So C. L. said - there was this old labor union guy. What's his name? He had the big eyebrows. In the union. Mine workers. What was his name?

I: Louis? [inaudible]

R: John L. <sup>Lewis</sup> ~~Louis~~. United Mine Workers. He said, "I'm gonna tell you a story about John L. Louis." Now I'm talking about some money. So he said, "I'm going to tell you the story about John L. Louis. Mine workers." He said, "When he first sat down to negotiate a deal with management, he had a [inaudible] union. The first time he sat down," he said, "he begged, he cried." He said, "All I want is just a little slice of bread for my workers, a little piece." And he goes, "He realized that he was not negotiating from strength; he was negotiating from weakness. And he couldn't demand, so he begged. On behalf of the workers." He said, "A bit later he came back, and he sat down across the table with the strongest, largest labor union in America, and he demanded. He said, 'This is what we want, or we'll shut you down.'" He said, "You understand what I'm telling you." He said, "You don't demand from weakness; you demand from strength. You're in a weak position." [Both laugh] OK? So he

John  
Lewis  
Story



understood power, and he understood strength, and he was telling - he was trying to tell - give me an early lesson. You know, you're caught up in your own false sense of pride, but you're not - you know, you're not dealing - you're not negotiating from strength on this. You're the one asking. So you gotta ask, OK? You can't demand. You demand from strength. He said, "Always remember that. Demand from strength." And I think that that was - that epitomized C. L. He demanded from strength, and I think C. L.'s a guy that always tried to understand where he was at a given moment, and what is the appropriate tactic, and am I dealing from strength? And if I am, I will demand. If I have to build, then I have to come a different way. So that story was revealing to me, in the sense of let's sort of open the door. Let me kinda understand him some, but he also taught me a serious lesson. You know, so you - you can't go in selling wolf tickets, he said, because right now you're selling wolf tickets, 'cause you have no strength. You know what I mean? 'Cause you need the money. You know, you need help. But you can't demand it. OK, you gotta ask. You gotta - he said, "You have to be humble." And he said that to me. He said, "You have to be humble." He said, "You're like this," he said, "but you have no backup. You have no strength on this." He said, "You have to be humble." And so I think that C. L. understood that. I think he brought that to the situation. But I would say that that's what he - he saw himself as a strong race man. I think C. L.'s purpose in his young adult and into his adult life was to challenge racism and to challenge discrimination. That's what he was about. And to better



the conditions of our people, how we worked, how we live, how we got educated, etc., etc. And he was a very proud person. And from strength he demanded things. From weakness he negotiated things. And I think if you look at how C. L. operated, that's exactly how he operated. You know? If he didn't have strength, then through the sheer power of persuasion, of charm, of character, of intelligence, of integrity, he put the deal together. OK, because that's what I have - that's all I have going for me, then let me maximize that. But now when I sit down across the table from you from strength, you know, you will not deal with us like this. This is the way you will deal with us, or we will shut you down. OK? And that became a way - so he learned how to operate on both levels, which allowed him to be able, as I see it now, looking at - to - that allowed C. L. to work with people easily, in a very fluid way, you know, level. When he was on top, C. L. didn't take any mess. You know what I mean? He says, "No, we'll do it like this," because he always understood where he was. And I listened to people - I listened to people when he - you know, when they had the service for him, the memorial. Then I got a chance as an adult to hear other people who worked, who had the luxury of working my uncle much more intimately than I ever had a chance to, and I got that feeling from people, that he didn't take any mess when there was no need for that. See? Right on point when he felt there was no wiggle room or no, no, no, no. He was like, "This is done like this." You know, because he said - if he saw the forces in his line, if he saw the forces lining up to, you know, that supported his position, C. L. was right there, straight ahead, right on



course. You know, it's like I remember [chuckles] somebody told me that they were at this big meeting one time, big community thing, and C. L. got up and spoke, and he was fiery, you know? And somebody said, "Man," he said, "that's the baddest white man I've ever seen." [Laughs] And they said, "Man, that's no white man. That's Ron's uncle."

I: [Laughs]

R: So it depended on the moment, but here's this classy looking guy, but, you know, fiery person. And my sense of it was, you know, they were the early socialists. You know, and they kind of evolved, you know. But I think, you know, "Workers of the World Unite" kind of thing. Yeah, I think that that was their early orientation.

I: Well, Yeah, Randolph certainly was socialist.

R: Yeah, and C. L. - and C. L. came across to me like that.

I: Yeah, although they had their differences with the communists and the Communist Party in particular.

R: Right.

I: I think they had a socialist vision.

R: Mm hmm.

I: I can really see that. Well, thank you very much.

R: OK.

I: Are there other things you would want to say? I mean undoubtedly . . .



R: No, I - now that you got me thinking about it, I would think along further, but I think a lot of intimate things - you've now made contact with Marva.

I: Marva, yeah. In fact, we did an interview about a week ago, so I'm asking her about, you know, the family stuff and - so her experience of growing up in his household, because she had that experience, so that's a different experience.

R: Yeah. 'Cause, see, she had the luxury of that one. You know?

I: Right. So I'm - so we're talking about that. You see him as a young person growing up, as a member of the family, but not directly in the household because you didn't have the experience of being very close to him as a family member, and then your career also is obviously influenced by having, by the fact that he was your uncle.

R: Yeah, 'cause it was Uncle Cott and [inaudible] Walter.

I: Yeah, [inaudible] right.

R: [inaudible] Walter was his wife, right.

I: Right.

R: So that the regular visits, because that was like going to north Oakland.

I: [Laughs]

R: You know, and C. L. had a lawn, you know, in his back yard. I mean in west Oakland we had a lawn, but [inaudible], and then he had a bird bath in his back yard. You know, that was - to my sister and I that was amazing. So that was like going - you talk about



"movin' on up"? You know, so that was like a serious jump economically to go over to C. L.'s home. You know, they had a stucco white house, you know, with grass in the back yard. You know, so in my - so he was a - he was like my well off uncle. You know?

I: Now, he had the business all along, all through here, right?

R: Mm hmm.

I: 'Cause he owned the billiard parlor.

R: Mm hmm.

I: So I take it that was fairly successful, as far as you can judge.

R: Yeah. I remember Aunt Walter said, she told me a story one time about him. She said - this was before they got married. And she said that - he said - he said to her - um [pause] - "I'm never gonna wear overalls. It may be rough for a while, but trust me. It's gonna be all right." And she said she trusted him and married him, and - you know, and he told her, he said, "I didn't come to California to wear overalls."

I: Mm.

R: "I came to California to find my way. Trust me and marry me." He said, "It'll be OK." You know, "We're gonna be all right." And she said she trusted him and she - and never looked back. And she said, "Your uncle was a self-made, self-taught man." He could have gone to college. He could have done any of that. But he was a young guy. What I love about C. L. is that he - he took time. He took time. He never denied me. If I came there to seek 25 cents to



go to the movie, I always saw C. L. I always got past the receptionist, go in and sit down and talk to my uncle, you know? Then he would sit down, "OK, what's up?" you know? "What's on your mind?" He had a way of rocking and smoking his pipe, and he talked to me. And, and I don't know how to put this - he never let me bullshit him, OK? And he always - he always dealt with me substantively. So he took the time to care about me. He heard - he listened to what I was saying. It's like he told me that story about the labor guy. 'Cause he could have just pulled out some - say, "Here, how much you need?" Or he could have written me a check for fifty dollars, whatever it was I needed. But he took the time to tell me a story. You know what I mean?

I: Yeah.

R: So for me C. L. - if there's any pain that I feel in my life, if there's any real pain that I feel in my life, it's getting elected to Congress took me out of my world, put me in another world, and C. L. was an important person in my world. And I had to leave my community and leave my family and leave important links in my life and come to Washington. And as I look back, and I guess the one thing that I will say to you in tremendous sincerity - that's one price that I paid that causes me sometimes even to cry about it, because there are a lot of years that I missed being able to just sit down and talk with C. L. as a man.

I: Yeah.

R: You know, and as a man that he respected, that he loved, and we could talk manly. I mean I'm not talking about manly in the,



you know, masculine - I'm not talking about that. I'm not talking about sexism. As mature human beings, as adults, is a better word.

I: Yes.

R: We could talk adult to adult. And I missed that. I missed out on that because I'm back here. Then when you go home, get off the plane, with a schedule. And most of the time I got off the plane going to an event, and I got back on the plane coming from an event. So being able to see my friends and my family was something that I lost. And C. L. and - well, 20-some years I lost. And now had I been home in Oakland with C. L., then I could have sat here with you for days talking because he and I would have talked like that. You know what I mean? But I missed it. And - and that - and that for me is very painful. And it's a price that I paid. It's a price that I paid; it's not a price that I was happy with, but it's a price that I paid, because C. L. was a seriously important and significant person. He was a very significant role model in my life. He was a black man that had strength and character and intelligence and charisma and cared about things. He had principles. He was successful. He was a capable person who like - C. L. could do anything, the way I saw him, so then to be able to get to a certain point where he and I could talk as peers I was gone.

I: Wow, yeah.

R: See, 'cause he and I both actually came to Washington at the same time, because in - but, you know, his was in and out from time to time. But if you look back, in 1971 two Dellumses came to



Washington. I came to Washington as a member of Congress, and he came to Washington as a national board member of AFL-CIO.

I: That's right. Right, mm hmm.

R: So two of us marched into Washington in January, 1971. Two. OK? But he'd come every now and then and go. See, I was here most of the time. So now C. L. and I are 25 hundred miles away. I don't have access to him. So that's why I said the dynamics of my life and the dynamics of his life, so we could only - we only had the opportunity to know that each other was there and to observe each other at a distance. And I think that my life would have been richer for, if I had had the opportunity to have an intimate way of communicating with C. L. over that period of time, 'cause that was a productive period in my life and a productive period in his life, and it would have been wonderful to have been able to collaborate with him. That would just have been an incredible dream. But the way Congress operates and the madness of the scheduling and what have you, so it's kinda like, well, the next time I go, and the next time I go is suddenly ten years, and then it's fifteen years, and then twenty years, and then suddenly he's dead, and oh my God. You know? But - so that's why that night that he was honored at ACLU, and they may have a tape of his speech. I think they did tape that. 'Cause ACLU honored him - I can try to find out.

I: I'd appreciate it.

R: Now, just for your information, my partner, Lee Halterman - Lee was on the board of ACLU, I believe, when C. L. was chosen to



be honored. When he gave sort of his last speech. But he was a guy from - you know, he was a guy from the other generation, you know? But - so I was kinda like his link to the next. I was his link to the next struggle, you know? And that's what he told the group. He said not to worry, my nephew's [inaudible]. He said if I die, that's kinda what he was saying, you know?

I: Yeah.

R: That there's still another Dellums out here that the world [inaudible].

I: Carry on.

R: That'll carry on the work, you know?

I: Right.

R: So he gave me - in that night he sort of - he gave me that mantle in front of all these people, the family mantle. You know? And I was home a few weeks ago, and I just drove around just to make contact with that. Here's the building with C. L.'s statue.

I: In front. Yeah, I love that statue.

R: Yeah. And I went just to stand in front of it, you know, just to look at it.

I: Commune. [Laughs]

R: Yeah, and the Ronald V. Dellums Federal Building.

I: Right. There the two of you are, in the community there, right. Ah. OK. . . .

END TAPE