

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: U.S.A.

**Transcript of Maureen Taylor and Marian Kramer
Interviewer: Jennifer Lyle**

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Maureen Taylor is a social worker and dedicated community activist who fights for food, clothing, shelter, light, heat and water for those in need. She has served as chair of the Michigan Welfare Rights organization since 1993, and was elected treasurer of the National Welfare Rights Union in 1994. Taylor defends recipients of public aid at the Michigan Family Independence Agency in case disputes, and serves as the program director for the Detroit NFI Community Self Sufficiency Center, a program that works to assist chronically unemployed persons in the Detroit Central Empowerment Zone. Graduating first in her class, Taylor received her Bachelors Degree in Social Work from Marygrove College in 1983. In 1994, she earned her Masters Degree in Social Work from Wayne State University. Taylor has received many awards for her community organizing and leadership, including the National Community Leader Award from the National Black Caucus in Washington, DC.

Marian Kramer has been in the front lines of the Welfare and Civil Rights Movement since the 1960s. She has retained her commitment to end poverty in America by empowering the poor, especially women, as leaders. She has fought government programs, such as Workfare, defended poor women against unjust persecution for welfare fraud and led campaigns to elect the victims of poverty to political office. She has organized poor people's movements, housing takeovers by people without homes, and led efforts to unionize in the South. Kramer is the recipient of numerous awards for community service, and is known as a mentor to college students fighting poverty. In 2004, she was awarded an Alston/Bannerman Fellowship, a fellowship for long-time community activists of color. Currently, she is Co-chair of the National Welfare Rights Union.

Jennifer B. Lyle is Adjunct Assistant Professor at Columbia University's School of Social Work. She recently received her Ph.D. in Social Work and Sociology from the University of Michigan. She has 18 years experience working with local and national community organizations around issues related to welfare rights, women's economic security, LGBT rights and visibility, and most recently, reproductive health and safety of women and girls of color.

Transcript of Maureen Taylor and Marian Kramer

[Song] *We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes
We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes¹*

Jennifer Lyle: Hi. My name is Jennifer Lyle, and I'm here talking to Maureen Taylor and Marian Kramer as part of the Global Feminisms Project. And we'll be talking today about your social activism and the work that you've done for many, many years. The first question that I have for you both is, what led you to the work that you do now? How did it develop? What inspired you to do what you're doing?

Marian Kramer: I'll let you go first.

Maureen Taylor: Yes, Ma'am. I was...I'm born and raised in Detroit, the lower east side of the city of Detroit in a community called the Black Bottom. And in that particular community, the concept there was we shared information and resources and support for each other, and I thought that's the way the world worked, because that's what I understood. As I grew older and went to high school and eventually went to college, I learned that the world didn't work that way, that there were some other things that were happening, and that if you wanted to have a community that was prosperous or at least safe you needed to do something. So at an early age, I became involved in...at least an interest, at first a passing interest, in politics, because I couldn't understand why there seemed to be inequities in terms of how some people lived, others struggled. So as I got older, entered into the workforce, things happened, lost jobs, things just changed and I became clearer and clearer that I needed to be involved in a movement of sorts that would deal with this question of racism. I worked on that for a very long time until I realized there came a time that I found out that it was something else happening. It wasn't just all white people were bad, all Black people were good. Was something wrong with that, because I started to meet folks that were in the gray area. And so as I became more involved, it became clear to me that there is a class component to all of these fights that are going on, and in an effort to try to adjust these inequities, I've been involved since then, and all of my activities are based in my community where I live. That's how I got to be where I am now.

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: Kind of short for Maureen, huh?

Jennifer: Yeah.

¹ These lyrics from "Ella's Song" by Sweet Honey in the Rock precede a biographical montage of each US site interviewee.

Marian: Well, my activities started in Port Allen, Louisiana, which is West Baton Rouge. And at the old age of four years old, my grandfather was slapped three times by his little young [clears throat]—excuse me—boss at the time, who was white at the time. And the young man was young enough to be his grandson. And they had always loved baseball. He said, “Three strikes, you out.” And he kept telling that young man, “You’re going to have to respect me.” The young man’s orientation was that we were nothing, you know, as...as Black, nothing but their property. He hit Dad for the last time in this tavern. It was located across the street from where we lived, on Achafalie Street. And Dad retaliated, and as a Black male—man—in Louisiana, you didn’t do that. And I remember the family coming together late one night that night to try to get my grandfather out of Louisiana, because...

Jennifer: **Um-hum.**

Marian: ...we knew what the end...I mean, *they* knew, my family knew, my father’s side as well as my mother’s side, what the end results could be.

Jennifer: **Hm.**

Marian: That Dad would be dead. So Dad was taken to Dallas, Texas, where his sister, out of fourteen, fif—fourteen children lived. But that, you know, that kind of stayed within me, you know, as a young child, seeing the family come together, my grandmother crying, you know, and folks trying to get it together and make sure that my grandfather was safe.

Jennifer: **Hm.**

Marian: But I saw a connection there. I didn’t understand the collectivity then. But I understand it more. So that was the groundwork for me to kind of stay together within my community and do something good there. But, you know, being born in Louisiana laid the groundwork for me to get involved period, because I knew for one thing there was this whole attitude you had to be light, bright, and damn-near white—that was the tone—in order to...to try to fit in...to a upper level among the Blacks there. But, you know, our family was not like that. For one thing we were all different complexions. Number two, my family was carpenters, cooks and that type of stuff, you know, or maids or what have you. So therefore we didn’t make the grade, you know, as being that light, bright, damn-near white type of attitude. You could be like that, but you had to likewise have some of the economic basis. So my mother was the inspiration for us. So we moved to Dallas, like a year and a half later...

Jennifer: **Um-hum.**

Marian: ...the family, the immediate family, like my mother and four children and my grandmother, because my mother and my father during that period of time separated. My mother got us involved in the NAACP.²

Jennifer: Hm.

Marian: I didn't understand all that. But I know we were involved. Because the whole church was involved. So, you know, from...from that foundation, you know, I got involved in the civil rights movement. From the civil rights movement in Dallas, Texas, during the hanging and lynching and, you know, all that stuff going on, into at Southern University, becoming very active. Don't try to think back what year that is because I might not tell you.

Jennifer: I was going to ask you.

Marian: Yeah, yeah. That was back in the early 60's.

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: Because I graduated from high school in 1962. I'm looking at Maureen, 1962. But, um...

Maureen: Just a spring chicken.³

Marian: A chicken, that's all I am. Yeah, you know that.

Maureen: Yes. Um-hum.

Marian: But, you know, my...one of the things my mother told me in going to Southern, because I went back to Louisiana...

Jennifer: Um-hum.

Marian: ...to stay with my father during that period of time to attend Southern University, don't get involved. She had became...you know. Although we were *involved*...

Jennifer: Right.

Marian: ...her thing was don't get involved and get kicked out of school.

Jennifer: Okay.

² The *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People* (NAACP) is an organization that works to ensure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of all persons, and to eliminate racial discrimination.

³ A *spring chicken* is young person.

Marian: Because all my cousins and all the rest of them were kicked out of Southern University for participating in the rising civil rights movement at the time.

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: Well, you know, when you say don't, what do you do? You get involved. Not only did I get involved, but I became a task force worker for the Congress of Racial Equality⁴ at the time. I worked on campus. I really wasn't interested in school.

Jennifer: Hm.

Marian: I was just interested in...and it wasn't nothing else for me to do, you know.

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: So not only did I get involved in CORE, but I became one of their active members and staff to try to help involve the community, my family more involved. As the thing intensified, two years later I was sent out on one of the task force in the summer, on summer projects and that type of stuff.

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: So, you know, it's been a continuous thing from the civil rights movement, then in...in...in Detroit to being active once I got married. And one of those Alinsky projects and that type learning, organizing, more in depth in the community and that type of stuff, and then to welfare rights.

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: In the beginning stages of welfare rights, because some of the people in the original organizing around welfare rights, a lot of us came from the civil rights movement to help get that on...on the road and what have you. And I've continued. As the objective situation changed, then so do our strategy and tactics on what we had to do. But I've maintained my membership, since the 60's, in the welfare rights organization. Because I've felt that's where I needed to be and that is, among the poorest of folks and struggling for them to be able to organize the fight back that needs to take place to free all of us out here.

Jennifer: Okay. It sounds like your organizing, your work comes from this understanding that you want to give back to a community that you came from.

Marian: Yes. But I want to...we want to get the community to fight in their interest.

⁴ *Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)* is a national civil rights organization, founded in 1942. CORE currently focuses on technology training for youth of color.

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: And the fighting in their interest, we're talking about just like Maureen has talked about earlier, about a class question, we're talking about fighting in the interest of the class, and that is, right now what we're facing in Detroit and around the country, particularly in Detroit and Highland Park and places where we live, you see all this killing taking place. Because people are fighting one another...

Jennifer: Um-hum.

Marian: ...not understanding concretely who they should be focusing their attention around. We've been involved...

Maureen: That's right.

Marian: ...in struggles around the utilities and all that type of stuff, and people are afraid to even come out and ashamed to say, "My water is off, my utilities are cut off," because they feel that people are going to look down on them for not being able to take care of their bare nece—you know, the necessities, you know.

Jennifer: Um-hum.

Marian: They...because we live under a government that make you feel that that's your fault. So, yes, we want to give back to our community, but in the main, we want our community to get...get so to the point that they're engaged...

Maureen: That's right.
[together]

Jennifer: Right.

Marian: ...to fighting back and making sure that we have a quality of life that everybody can enjoy.

Jennifer: Okay. Can you...I want to go back, because you started talking about the welfare rights...

Marian: Um-hum.

Jennifer: ...movement, and can you talk a little bit about what...what that is, what that has...what that is, what it's become, and how you...You talked a little bit about how you became involved with it, but can you talk a little bit more about that, how each of you came to it?

Marian: How did you come?

Maureen: Well, you should start, because it's because of you that I became there. You got me there. Tell her what happened in the beginning when you were in with George Wylie⁵ and them.

Marian: Thank you, Mo.

Jennifer: Um-hum.

Marian: But anyway, you know, back in Syracuse, New York in the early...back in the 60's, there was a poor people's conference in Syracuse. I just come out of the civil rights movement. I was at the West Central Organization.⁶ There was Alinsky-style organization in Detroit. And the community decided that they wanted to attend this poor people's conference.

Maureen: And don't forget to explain Alinsky, what does that mean.

Marian: I will get to Alinsky.

Maureen: Thank you very much.

Marian: Thank you. And, um...once we got to this conference, we ran into some of the people that had been in CORE with us. And that was George Wiley.

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: That was some of the people that was from Louisiana, that was on the project with me, and as well as with my ex-husband. And they pulled us together to meet Frances Piven and Richard Cloward,⁷ who had a concept that they wanted to develop at the time. And they figured that if they talked to us as civil rights workers that had just left, you know, the civil rights movement in the South at that time...

Jennifer: Um-hum.

Marian: ...that we would probably come on board and help organize around this concept. We listened, diligently. Now mind you, we had just come out of the battlefield -- I mean real battlefield -- and we listened, and we...I told them at that time, I could not become a

⁵George Wylie was the founder of the National Welfare Rights Organization. A nationally recognized chemist, he taught at Syracuse University before founding the NWRO.

⁶West Central Organization is a community-based organization in Detroit that works to protect low-income community members from suffering under city, state, and federal urban renewal projects.

⁷Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward are award-winning, New York City-based scholars who have collaborated on issues of poverty, welfare reform and economic inequalities. Their classic book is *Regulating the Poor*.

full-fledged worker for welfare rights because I was committed in Detroit to helping out at this community organization as well as my husband at the time. But we would work diligently to help set this organization up within the community.

Jennifer: Right.

Marian: And that was my commitment at that particular time, my first time being around Frances and Richard, first time meeting Beulah Sanders, who was at one time one of...the second National President of the National Welfare Rights organization. And there must have been about three to four hundred people at this conference, poor people's conference at the time. But that was like the launching, the beginning launching of welfare rights. Because all of us agreed that we would make sure that we organized people in the community to come to the first national meeting.

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: And that was held at—I'm trying to get it—in Chicag—no, in Washington DC, one of them at the time. And I got kind of committed at that time to be involved. Although I was committed to this organization, West Central Organization, that was this Alinsky side on this...Let me back up. Saul Alinsky was a person out of Chicago that at one time was an organizer around Back of the Yards. And Back of the Yards back in early--I might have forgotten my period of time—early 30s...ah, early 40s and stuff, wanted to keep Blacks from being able to move in. And Alinsky, being an organizer, if they would...they wanted to organize around, he would do it. Then he...further on, it was the question of the nuns who wanted to organize against being able to, you know, not having to wear the habits and all that...

Jennifer: Um-hum.

Marian: ...that stuff, I remember him being in some of those demonstrations to support the nuns, you know.

Jennifer: Um-hum.

Marian: And so, you know, it was that type of thing. But then too he...further expand, you know, as far as organizing with different communities. In Chicago, it was around the University of Chicago who wanted to expand and push out the community. That was...

Jennifer: Right.

Marian: ...TWO⁸ organization, The Woodlawn Organization. And, you know, on the...on, um...way I became aware was Northwest Community Organization, where we met Alinsky and likewise he came to Detroit. And that's what we had in Detroit. But it start

⁸ *The Woodlawn Organization* is a Chicago organization that works to provide quality housing in the city's Woodlawn neighborhood.

changing for him in Detroit. Because the situation start changing also in Detroit. We had a little visitor...

Jennifer: Wants to get on camera.

Marian: Ah, yeah, he wants to get on camera too. Do you blame him? And, um, so, you know, this is where I came in contact with Alinsky more so in Detroit.

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: And, ah, it was around urban renewal and trying to push the community out and that type of stuff. And eventually we parted our ways. But likewise, we made sure that welfare rights was a part of this org—organization, the West Central Organization at the time.

Jennifer: Okay. So can you just briefly describe what's the...the Alinsky model? What does it entail?

Marian: Wow. You're taking me back to something...

Jennifer: Just briefly, just...

Marian: Ah, well, Alinsky had a concept...

Jennifer: And how you used it for welfare rights. Um-hum.

Marian: Well, he had a concept that, you know, whatever the people wanted to organize around, you know. And the people that we wanted to...that we were working with were interested in maintaining their community. And the people in welfare rights that was based in Jeffrey public housing at the time. And then the West Central Organization, there was, um...Westside Mothers⁹ that was formed at that time, were basically organizing around being treated with respect and being able to get the necessary programs that...to support them to be able to go to work or to get an education. Well, in the community I was living it's around housing also, that you don't take our housing. So that was the main...and the Alinsky thing was, if that's what people want to organize around, then we organize around it. If they want to organize around a party in the street we would organize around it.

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: That was basically his thing, and that you organize the people to have a piece of the pie. But our concept was, we wanted to have them not only have a piece of that pie, but make the general decisions concerning our lives, okay? And eventually, you know,

⁹*Westside Mothers* is a Michigan welfare rights organization that advocates for low-income persons and an improved welfare system.

Alinsky was a very patriotic type of person, really supported the government and stuff, so we split on a lot of things eventually, you know. He was not...Eventually, I remember the last time I saw that man, I told him that, you know, your concept is to organize to have a piece of the pie, we want the whole pie. And you organize and retr—ah, you know, usually pull out your organizers, but I believe that the organizers should come from the community, you know. And that the community in the final analysis should be the ones that make the decision about their lives, and not some high paid organizer that comes in here. So, you know, a lot of his tactics and stuff, we...philosophies we...we split on. But we used a lot of his tactics, because it would work -- door to door, you know, organizing the—what is it?—the block clubs¹⁰ ...

Maureen: [inaudible] block clubs, [inaudible]...

Marian: ...and all that stuff into a motive force, taking them down to City Council. They had never been to City Council before. Taking a skunk to a meeting at...at Wayne State Board of Trustees meeting who we felt that that's how they felt about the community, that we stink, and they were going to urban renew us out. So he took us beyond what we could imagine at that time, at that particular time.

Jennifer: Okay. What...what time was that?

Marian: Why you keep insisting what time?

Jennifer: This is for...it's going to ___...

Marian: But that's all right. I understand. That would...and I'm proud of it. It was during the 60s and early...

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: ...early 70s.

Jennifer: Okay. So it's still around the 60's.

Marian: Um-hum.

Jennifer: And, Maureen, so I guess I would...I guess the question can be, I would like to know how you got into the welfare rights organizing. But also can you talk about how you all...how you all met each other. How...?

Maureen: Marian is considerably older than I am. So by the time I arrived, a number of these struggles were already in full bloom.

¹⁰ *Block clubs* are neighborhood groups who take on a variety of roles, such as neighborhood watch, collective yard maintenance, or a social club—all intended to improve the quality of life on their block.

Jennifer: Okay.

Maureen: I had...I was in college and...at Highland Park Community College, as a matter of fact, and was involved in a very vigorous, sometimes violent confrontation with administration at Highland Park Community College. And the issue was there were 99 percent African American students at this facility and no Black faculty. And it was an outrage, and, you know, students were...were complaining about the cultural problems and not being able to identify and all of those kinds of things. And at that time, you know, my hair was...I was best nationalist in town. I'd go outside and the wind would grab my...you know, all of that. So while I was in school and these issues were coming up and I was part of raising these issues, because it was an educational component that I was focused on -- how can we get a better, deeper education if we can't get an education because the folks that are teaching us and training and what not always have a bad attitude and they live someplace else? None of them even were local folks. I was still living in Detroit. Highland Park is a small community enclave inside of Detroit that's surrounded by...but none of the teachers lived there. There were all suburbanites. So they had a...a perspective. And, again, at that time, I was looking at this Black and white issue. I was off into this fight. Many of our students had begun to get expelled because we were picketing, and the police were called. You know, this was something that was lasting over a period of months, and this was intense organizing. Then there came a time where the faculty came forward, the administration came forward, and they said, "Well, what we're going to do is we're going to hire African Americans, and your point is right and, you know, we're going to start, and next semester you'll have some untenured¹¹ Blacks working here, some untenured women working here." So this is fine, it's a start. So six months later, the students are still failing. They still can't read. Their grades are no better. And, you know, now we're into a argument where we're saying, "Well, what is wrong here? Maybe it's not the individual teacher." Now at the time, I'm going through a metamorphosis myself. It's the 70's. And, and I'm in Chicago at a meeting. It's a Democratic National Convention¹² and I'm there. And there's fighting going on in the streets. I'm trying to hit somebody, I don't know who to hit, but, you know, I'm there with whoever's in the...in the audience and in the streets and what not. And what happened was, I'll never forget this, it was, you know, police officers at those time, at those days in Chicago, they had three-foot nightsticks that looked like they were yardsticks, and this cop was about to hit me upside my head, and a white guy who I did not know, a student just like me, jumped on me and took the blow. Well, that told me -- you know, I have never been a stupid person -- that told me clearly, wait a minute, it's something wrong with what I'm thinking because, see, this guy didn't know me, but he didn't want the police to hit me upside my head and he took a serious knock to the head, blood and everything. So by the time I got back up to Detroit and begin to...you know, I thought I need to sit down and review a lot of issues, there's something wrong here. And

¹¹ An *untenured* employee, is usually at an academic institution, but has not yet received a life-long job security guarantee.

¹² *Democratic National Convention* is held prior to each presidential election, in which delegates of the Democratic Party formally announce their candidates for president and vice-president.

I began to change some attitudes about some things because it became clear that it's not a Black and White fight. So I started getting involved in looking for changes. Found some flyers that talked about, we're having some classes, some politics classes, some classes that have to do with politics and the study of economic systems around the world. And, and, and it was a class that was set up, and I looked at it, I didn't know what it was, and, you know, made some telephone calls, and it was about then that I found Marian Kramer, and she answered one of those calls—you know, I need to find out about these classes, get some information and try to find out what they were. Well, let me fast forward. Went to some classes, some other things happened, few years went by, learned some things. I went to work at General Motors.¹³ I got called in at GM and I was a test driver for a very long time. I was cute, didn't smoke, paid you all the money in the world, I'm going there. So I went to General Motors and I worked as a test driver on the second shift and I was there for a number of years. There came a time when all of our shift got a pink slip.¹⁴ We were all laid off at the same time. And I thought, like everybody was told, this is just a temporary activity. Months went by, we're still getting our little money. Unemployment lasted a long time in those days. You had a first extension, the second extension, a triple extension. So, you know, still...still doing fairly well. Came a time some of my...my colleagues said "Let's go out to the proving grounds in Milan, Michigan." And somebody we knew who was still working there had a birthday. We went out to visit this girl and it was only her and another person. All the other shifts had been laid off. We were really surprised. I still had my badge. I went on the grounds...

Jennifer: The proving ground was where you did test driving, isn't it?

Maureen: Proving grounds is the testing gr—the testing facility at Milan, Michigan. It's a farming community about 40 miles outside, maybe about 25 miles outside of Detroit. So when I get there, there's a warehouse, where my track used to be. Now my job was to drive an experimental car 100 times around the track at 100 miles an hour. At the end of the 100th rotation, I had to crash that car into a wall and these...it was a wall that had mattresses, so you crash into it, you know, the first 50 times you do it, you know, you lose...you know, your stomach is gone.¹⁵ But after a while you learn what this job is. And I was a brake and emissions tester. So I did this job. Now when I go back out and I visit my plant where I used to work, the proving grounds, there's now a warehouse. Wasn't there before, so I went and took a look in the windows and there was a robot driving my car. So it took me about three seconds—hmm—cold outside, dark in there. Robot didn't need any heat, robot didn't need any lights, didn't have to go to the bathroom...

Marian: Just air conditioning.

¹³ Founded in 1908, *General Motors* is the world's largest autoworker and has its headquarters in Detroit, Michigan.

¹⁴ "To get the pink slip" is slang meaning a notice of dismissal from a job.

¹⁵ Maureen is using this expression to mean that this experience made her feel very sick.

Maureen: ...no time off. Didn't need anything. Air conditioning inside the car to make certain that the engines didn't overheat. About five seconds I realize, you know, we're not going back to work here. Not going back to work here. So I came out, long time went by, all my benefits were exhausted, it's time for me to go to the welfare office because my lights and my gas were about to be cut off. I go to the welfare office, they say you have to come back when your thing's already cut off. "No, that doesn't make any sense." "No, that's the rules." Remember that crazy girl I met a couple years ago. Let me call that crazy woman. Call Marian. Said, "Listen I need some help." I told her what was happening, what's going on. She says, "Okay. So Schoolcraft office." She said, "Meet me there." "That's fine. They're not going to talk to you." She said, "Meet me at the office." So I go there. I'm standing right next to her at the counter, she told the lady, "This young lady came in to get some assistance and you didn't talk right to her, you didn't help her, what's the problem?" "Rules, regulations." Marian picked up a manual and threw it and hit her. I said, "Whew, I got to join this. This...[laughter] this...I got to go here." The woman came back, everybody scattered, they came back and I got money for rent, I got money for gas and lights, food stamps -- I didn't ask for those -- I got all kinds of things. So I thought, now it can't be the fear of this little woman. She was...

Marian: Much thinner then.

Maureen: Yeah, it can't be that.

Marian: It won't say that.

Maureen: This is a big woman she threw this manual that. It can't be that. It must be something else. So I was very intrigued and began to go back to some studies and to try to understand what is the...what is the reason why so many people lose jobs. Wasn't my fault. Wasn't my colleagues' fault that we all got laid off. Then we go to this state agency who is mandated to help us, and when we get there, they have a bad attitude and act as if it's something we've done wrong. What is the basis of this? I couldn't understand it. I knew I couldn't understand, but I *knew* she knew, so I hooked up with her. And that was 25 years ago. "Teach me this, because I need to find out what's wrong here." Been there every since. Welfare rights.

Marian: And she drove me up a wall ever since then.

Jennifer: I'm sure.

Marian: Um-hum.

Jennifer: So what...what has it been to work as colleagues and friends? Or be friends as colleagues in this...in this work?

Marian: For one thing, we truthful with one another. Because we...all the work that we have to do. You know, some people some time think that Maureen and I about to fight each other physically. But it's...but we be battling out tactically how we need to move on

something. So as...as the more and more we stay in the trenches and more and more people that we bring, and the more and more love that we have for each other as well as...cut -- you got to stop, that bug is on you [laughs].

Jennifer: Is it?

Maureen: Right to...on your collar and...

Marian: I'm sorry.

Maureen: ...almost next to your face.

Marian: Yes.

Maureen: Now it's gone.

Marian: Okay. You better get him now before he comes back in.

Maureen: Um-hum. Well, let's keep going.

Jennifer: Okay. We'll just keep going and we'll cut it later.

Marian: Yeah, I don't...

Maureen: Okay. I don't know about bugs and...

Jennifer: Sure.

Marian: Yeah, I just didn't...I just didn't want it to bite you, you know.

Maureen: But...and...And we've had many victories over the years . . .

Marian: Yeah, yeah.

Maureen: . . . because we work together. The tandem team of Malone and, and the other guy, whatever his name was. And Pippin and...and Jordan. You know, it...it really works well with the concept that says, because we work together...

Marian: She don't know who they are.

Maureen:as a team. Oh, these are basketball players. I forgot.

Jennifer: Oh, okay.

Maureen: I forgot. But, you know, if you work together in a collective and work together in terms of management by consensus it really works.

Jennifer: Right.

Maureen: So we have had tremendous victories because we play good cop/bad cop.¹⁶

Jennifer: Yeah.

Maureen: And we used to do it for a long time, but now as we get older, we just bad cop all the time now. We don't want to do good cop anymore. Just go in there and just start smacking folks.

Jennifer: You mean you go in where and play good cop/bad cop?

Marian: Yeah, we go into, you know, um, into the welfare office if necessary to represent probably one or two of our members, because Welfare Rights is a membership organization. But once we arrive there, it might be the whole, ah...

Maureen: Yes.

Marian: ...ah, waiting room of people that we end up staying all day with, to make sure that they get quality services. And we represent all the people there. And not only that, we make the workers as well as the district manager work...

Maureen: [Inaudible] policy, that's right.

Marian: ...I mean, actually work, you know, because they're supposed to be giving people not only service but service with respect, and that type of stuff. So, you know, if necessary we have kept some welfare office open for three straight nights, 24...24 hours, you know. And at the end, quite naturally, they arrested us, but it was not just Maureen and I, but, you know, I...some of our past members who have passed away—Diane Bernard¹⁷ I know I have done it in Louisiana with Annie Smart¹⁸ and that type of...

Maureen: Office takeovers.

Marian: ...you know, that was...that has always been one of the battlegrounds of welfare rights. And that is at that office level. And then we have to turn around and represent some of those same workers.

Jennifer: The workers who are in the office.

¹⁶ *Good cop/bad cop* is a technique of police interrogation in which one officer (the bad cop) is mean and abusive towards the subject and the other officer (the good cop) defends the subject from the bad cop, thus winning the subject's trust and obtaining information from them.

¹⁷ *Diane Bernard* is former president of the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization.

¹⁸ *Annie Smart* is a welfare rights activist from Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Marian: Um-hum.

[together]

Maureen: Um-hum.

Maureen: See there's some...some history, that we went to, ah, at one of the offices, and it's good history because we were line workers. You know, and don't forget, we were in Inkster, and we kept that office open for 72, 78 hours—don't forget—and we...we'll...we'll barbecue and bring a hibachi in this place, whatever, take a office. So at five o'clock when everybody else is going here, you'll be here. But the point is...and it was...it was—oh, it took me a long time to learn, and I had...I know I worried Marian and...and Freddy Nixon, and May Payne,¹⁹ some of our earlier members there. You know, these are war veterans. I mean, women who had been on welfare, bad diets, they were all overweight. These were some of the fighters, the backbone of whatever democracy is, were these women here. Courage, you know, rebuke you in the name of the devil, they're very religious, and roll their sleeves up and will punch a policeman before you could blink your eye. You know, you weren't prepared to fight, and they just go. But some of them....

Marian: Some of them were on the kidney machine three days a week.

Maureen: ...courage. Hm!

Marian: Thelma Eccles²⁰, Beulah Sanders,²¹ all of them. But they were always ready. They would come off that kidney machine and be sick.

Maureen: You know, Johnnie Tillmon²².

Marian: And ready to go...yeah, ready to take over.

Maureen: Lost both of her legs, Johnnie Tillmon, and that's when I came in after Marian was giving that explanation about the Saul Alinsky, model...

Marian: Oh, yeah.

Maureen: By the time I came along, the Johnnie Tillman model, which is the victims of this fight need to be in the management, need to be in control of what happens.

Jennifer: Hm.

¹⁹ *May Payne* is a welfare rights activists in Detroit.

²⁰ *Thelma Eccles* is a welfare rights activist.

²¹ *Beulah Sanders* is a former president of the National Welfare Rights Organization.

²² *Johnnie Tillmon* founded the California Welfare Rights Organization and also served as the first Chair of the National Welfare Rights Organization. In 1972, she published the essay "Welfare is a Woman's Issue" *Ms.* magazine, challenging mainstream white feminism's conceptions of welfare.

Maureen: And, and I was recruited and trained under that model, which is the correct model. Let's move ahead with the victims of this fight who don't bargain, who don't sell out, who don't get scared. The only thing they do is die before we get to where we're going. But they never give up. So I came in under that particular brand and Johnnie Tillman who I never met, but, you know, read many of her writings, she was already in a wheelchair with both legs amputated by the time I was involved in this organization. But it was her and Fannie Lou Hamer²³ and whatnot that said, you know, "We gonna go down this street, and we gonna be in charge," and that was...

Jennifer: Hm.

Maureen: ...so very incredibly important, because the victims of this fight, unless they're in charge of this, you know, that we go into other kinds of waters.²⁴

Marian: And these are the kind of women that you generally...that's why I'm glad you're doing this project.

Jennifer: Um-hum.

Marian: Because those women are the type of women that people never really...you know, you don't read too much about them. But they are some of the women that were in the forefront of protecting human services. But at the same time, laying the groundwork that they made it better, you know. Situation has changed now. When we started out in welfare rights, ah, I remember I had to go on aid, because I ended up with a...my first child. And my husband and I sure enough was separated, and I ended up at the welfare office, and I knew organization and I was a part of welfare rights.

Jennifer: Um-hum.

Marian: You know. I sit up there for 15 minutes before I decided I was going to start something on my own, pregnant and all, you know. I wanted to make sure my child has some...some healthcare and all that type of stuff. And I walked up to the counter and said, I...I need to talk with the super—your supervisor. She said, "Who gave you the right?" I said, "I tell you who gives me the right to ask for that. I'm from Welfare Rights."

Jennifer: Um-hum.

Marian: And within a matter of 15 minutes, which shocked everybody in the other...in the office, had been sitting there all day long. I was being served.

²³ Fannie Lou Hamer was a civil rights activist and member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Fannie Lou Hamer founded the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP).

²⁴ The speaker is using this expression to mean "different kinds of places," or areas in which they were not used to organizing in.

Jennifer: Hm.

Marian: Not only be—being served, they were trying to get me out of there. You know, so organization...

Jennifer: Um-hum.

Marian: ...and, and the question of having some type of vision that this does not have to operate like this...

Maureen: That's right.

Marian: ...has kept us going, you know. So, ah, you know, I'm staying here in welfare rights until there is no need for it again. And, ah, you know, like I quote, ah, Guida West²⁵ who wrote our book...

Jennifer: Hm.

Marian: ...you know, the National Welfare Rights Organization, Guida said, "Bury me with my boots on."

Maureen: That's right.

Jennifer: Hm.

Marian: Because I'm going down fighting. And, you know, and I'm...I...and I'm proud for the fact that we have the opportunity to be among those women and be a part of that. But at the same time, you know, you get very angry at a situation that, here we are...

Jennifer: Yeah.

Marian: ...I'm 59 years old. I'll be 60 in a couple of months. My problem is, why in the hell am I still having to fight like this for our children to have a decent life for the future.

Marian: Even harder.

Marian: And much harder, because we're now facing the situation where I live in a community where, say, 50 percent of the people were without water.

Jennifer: Hm.

Marian: You know, it's getting worse. It's not getting any better. So, yes, I must stay in the struggle.

²⁵ Guida West is the author of *The National Welfare Rights Movement: The Social Protest of Poor Women*, (1981) and a long-time activist in the Welfare Rights Movement.

Jennifer: I wanted...you've answered a lot of the questions that I have, but I want to ask, I would...when you talked about Johnnie Tilman, I think about what she said. We...we go from being beholden to a man, and then it becomes "The Man".

Marian: Um-hum.

Jennifer: Or something like that. But one of the things that, ah...there's this discussion about working for race and class and gender and understanding all those things. But where I really learned it was under you all, about how you showed me that there's a fight and it's about humanity, it's about...

Maureen: That's right.

Jennifer: ...people. So can you talk a little bit more about how that became part of your vision? You talked about this man protecting you, but, you know, I've seen...you...you've worked with disability, you worked with women, you work around race, you work around water -- all of those things. And that...I think that's strengthened your work, and I'll let you tell me about it.

Marian: Well, you know, originally, when welfare rights started, we started out as organizing AFDC recipient, Aid to Families with Dependent Children.²⁶ Um, mainly people on the rolls,²⁷ you know. And that was the objective situation at the time, coming out of the civil rights movement, you know, trying to get these head of the households organized. Situation changed, you know. A lot of the women, not only that we were able to...to expand the services through the struggle, it wasn't nothing that the government gave us. You know, it took struggle for this.

Jennifer: Right.

Marian: Ah, you know, being in the trenches, going in and out of jail, you know, that type of stuff, making sure that, you know, protecting our children, making sure that they're not snatching our children and that. What happened was, the situation changed that a lot of the women ended up in the workfor—you know, getting better jobs. They were already in the workforce. You know, getting better jobs. And, ah, with them getting better jobs, and eventually technology began to expand, so, you know, an organization like Welfare rights, which is people don't tend to think of it as a part...as a part of the labor force...

Jennifer: Um-hum.

²⁶ *Aid to Families with Dependent Children* (AFDC) is a program in the Office of Family Assistance that provides federal and state funds to families in need of financial assistance.

²⁷ "On the rolls" refers to people that are receiving government assistance.

Marian: ...begin to have to change too. So back in 19...um...well, back in the 70's, you know, we just...the National Office ceased, but we maintained a lot of the local organizations. Michigan Welfare Rights was one of the strongest, and that organization continue even today. But in 1987, we formed the National Welfare Rights Union.

Jennifer: Um-hum.

Marian: And the purpose of that was based on, ah, a program that was being implemented in Washington, DC. We began to organize on a national level against slave labor, you know, forcing folks to work off their welfare grant.

Maureen: Workfare.

Marian: Using wel...welfare recipients to bring down the whole of the working class at that time. And we...

Jennifer: And you're saying that's Workfare. That was Workfare.

Marian: That was Workfare. That was...here it was called in Michigan the MOST²⁸ program.

Jennifer: Oh, okay.

Marian: You know?

Jennifer: Right.

Marian: Michigan Opportunity Skill Trade...Training program. Big farce, you know. Because people generally didn't end up with some good quality jobs. But we decided that we had to change. If we were going to form this national organization, we had been approached by some younger women. It was Annie Smart and I...

Jennifer: Um-hum.

Marian: ...and Arenia Edwards²⁹, and some more of the old welfare righters had been approached on a national level, "Could we have a national organization again?" Because of the program that was being pushed out of Washington at the time.

Maureen: Economics change.

Marian: Uh-huh.

Maureen: And you know...

²⁸ *Michigan Opportunity and Skills Training*, is the name for the state of Michigan's Workfare program.

²⁹ *Arenia Edwards* is a welfare rights activist from Houston, Texas.

Marian: Situation change.

Maureen: Things were changing.

Marian: Um-hum.

Maureen: You saw it but didn't know what it was yet.

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: So we called a meeting. Michelle came in at that time. We called a meeting.

Jennifer: Tingling Clemens?³⁰

Marian: Tingling Clemens.

Maureen: Tingling Clemens. That's right.

Marian: And we fundraised and we had the first founding convention at Georgetown University.

Maureen: Um-hum.

Marian: And we complained. We complained there too about the hills and all the stuff we had to go up and down. But we formed the National Welfare Rights Union. And we wanted it to be a union because it could not be just people on public assistance, like in the past. It had to be a unified type of thing between the employed, unemployed, organized, unorganized, folks that were facing the type of problems that poor people faced.

Maureen: Oh, yeah.

Marian: And we had to solidify. We had to make sure that we fought for unity there. And this union was that type of thing that we wanted to form. And we began to notice too that we wasn't needed for work, like we once were needed in the factories and places like that.

Maureen: Just started to catch on to that. Yeah...

Marian: Catch on to that.

Maureen: ...what's going on here?

Jennifer: And the downsizing of labor...

³⁰ *Michelle Tingling-Clemens* is a civil rights activist in Washington, DC.

Marian: Oh, it was coming.

Maureen: Yeah.

Jennifer: ...that's what you're talking...

Maureen: It was coming.

Jennifer: ...okay.

Marian: Because even under the Carter Administration,³¹ we began to notice what his welfare reform was all about. It was not about what we were talking about. It was beginning the stages of, ah, this whole Workfare type of thing. And each administration, it start implementing that type...trying to bring it in, so...

Maureen: We going help you get off of welfare by getting them trained to this job over here.

Marian: Working off your welfare check.

Maureen: And you can work next to somebody else who's got benefits and...and...and vacations and whatever else, and, you know, this is going to make you better. I can't do...We saw it before anybody else but didn't know what we were looking at. There was something changing.

Marian: And not only that, ah...

Maureen: Yeah.

Marian: We constantly was struggling for quality child care, and that people need to get paid to do that. So we began to see this stuff, and at the same time in the 70's...

Maureen: Hm.

Marian: ...a lot of people were getting laid off from the factories at the time.

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: Here in Michigan, which was our base. So we had to even help the workers...I remember, being approached at Westside Mothers by the UAW,³² because a lot of their workers had to go on and file for food stamps³³.

³¹ The administration of Jimmy Carter, the 39th President of the United States, from 1977-1981.

³² Founded in 1935, The International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America (UAW) claims to be one of the largest and most diverse unions in North America.

Maureen: Food Stamps.
[together]

Marian: And it was Westside Mothers through Selma Good and all the rest of them, [Inaudible]and Ella Brags and stuff had to go over there and help those workers to apply for food stamps.

Jennifer: Who had never had any experience with the welfare system.

Marian: Had never had Food Stamp. They might have...
[together]

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: ...but, you know, and some of them not, you know.

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: But they had...they didn't know nothing about the Food Stamp program.

Jennifer: Right.

Marian: But it was welfare rights that was out there helping them to be able to go through the necessary process and get eligible for Food Stamp. You know, and then we began to see as we began to organize the National Welfare Rights Union, that under the National Welfare Rights Organization, there was a reserve army of unemployed that people could play with in and out of the factory, and, you know, and that type of stuff. But what we began to notice is the advancement of technology, and as robots, just like Maureen had described in the beginning, begin to take over these jobs, there have become a permanent army of unemployment...

Maureen: That's not ever going back to work for you where they used to go.

Marian: Never will be able to work.

Maureen: So we didn't catch it. But knew something was going on. And I'm still fresh in the organization. I knew I was off. In two, three, four years, my whole shift was gone. The second shift was gone. The midnight shift had two people that were maintenance, and the day shift had one person that was maintenance. So there was three people that replaced about 700 individuals, and all robots. Still didn't get it. You know, never saw a condition where productivity all of a sudden began to overtake everything. And here we

³³ Food stamps refers to the federal food assistance program where low-income families use coupons (now electronic debit cards) to purchase groceries. Certain foods such as fresh fruit or dairy products are eligible under the program whereas items such as vitamins are not.

are living in Michigan and all these factory workers are off and they're calling, talking about food stamps. Hm. What's this about?

Marian: Even the...

Maureen: Don't get it.

Marian: ...sheriff deputies...

Jennifer: They were getting laid off?

Maureen: Getting laid off.

Marian: Well, they were gonna...they were facing layoff, but...

Maureen: There were picket lines.

Marian: ...they refused to be laid off, and they continued to work out of protest.

Jennifer: Right.

Marian: They were facing child support. They were facing the possibility of losing their homes and all that type of stuff.

Maureen: Called welfare rights.

Marian: They called...well, yeah, they called Legal Services and Welfare Rights.

Maureen: So...

Marian: And we had to help them to, how to impact those services and stuff. So suddenly I'm where at the point in Wayne County, Sheriff Department are saying, "Look Marian, I'll go in there with my pistols on." I say, "Hey, that's not going to get you nowhere. We been fighting this for years. But, you know, maybe I want you in there when I go in there," you know. [laughter] That type of stuff.

Maureen: So this is the time when the...the massive exploitation and removal of factory jobs. We're off into this now. So we're talking about something that started 25 years ago. And, and all of the factory workers that lived in the...in and around the Detroit area, throughout Michigan, the factories are starting to cut down. And, and we're looking at it and it's not like it used to be where factory workers get, you know, off for change over for two or three days for a week, then they come back. Wasn't that. Factories were closing down and moving to other parts of the country, and things begin to happen. And, again, you know, when you in the midst of the whirlwind, you can't, you know, you don't know...you know you're in the whirlwind, but you don't understand what's going on. And, and it came a time where, you know, again because we're talking, we're

studying, and Marian is in contact with the welfare rights members across, you know. We've got these affiliate members at states, had welfare rights in...in New Orleans, welfare rights in California, welfare rights in Arizona. Washington DC, Seattle, Washington. And she's calling folks and we're getting information. Wait a minute, there's a trend going on here. What's happening? People being laid off all over the place, *all* of our members across the country are doing food stamps for factory workers, for mill workers and people are being off work and got all these Workfare programs where they want you to work off your grant, and, you know, as it became clearer and clear, this productivity issue, where now they don't need us to work anymore, so you don't have...what do you need healthcare for? You can't produce anything for them, so let's remove that. What do you need education for? You can never serve this master anymore. Why should we care if you can read and write? Let's take that away. You don't need housing and cloth—it's all right to stand on a corner with a sign that says, "Will work for food." Twenty years ago you never saw anything like that. And now we got all...we have *families* standing on street corners. The woman and the child, veterans signed, babies standing right there—"Will work for food." Now it's becoming clearer that this is a national...this is an international move to make a change. Welfare was always an employment program, state-ordered for a period of time until you found a job, you got off, you went to that job, and you continued your life. Now things change. It was a time that you could live on welfare, you could stay on it and live on it where you could eat -- benefits, housing, get some clothes, get some things for your children, some shoes and you could work. Bit by bit, they start breaking those things down, and I...I would...you know, I didn't see it, it was Marian, it was [Inaudible]Linebarger, it was some of our members or whatnot that had much more experience in learning what these things were to tell us, look at the facts, don't take our work for it, here's what's going on. There is a dismantling of this social service system. We get to August 22nd, 1996, and Bill made...

Marian: Playboy Clinton.³⁴

Maureen: Yeah, I won't even say it. Bill Clinton...

Jennifer: President.

Maureen: Bill Clinton.

Marian: Um-hum.

Maureen: Passes this or signs into existence forever Welfare Reform Bill.³⁵ What's the name of it? Marian is the only one in the whole world that knows the whole name of this bill. What's it called?

³⁴ A sarcastic remark referencing the sexual behavior of former President Bill Clinton. The 42nd President of the United States, from 1993-2001.

³⁵ The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act was introduced in 1996 by President Clinton. It tore apart the 60 year old welfare program and completely altered its administration.

Marian: No, not if...if I can remember, Personal Responsibility and Reconciliation Act...

Jennifer: Work Opportunity...

Marian: Something like that.

Maureen: Yeah. No, she's the only one that knows that.

Marian: I don't remember that mess no more.

Maureen: And he signed this bill into effect, and because he was a Democrat, well-liked, he could play the saxophone, he put on Foster Grant glasses, and whatever else it is that was going on, people liked him. If a Republican had a tried...and many did, to...to submit such a law, the whole country would have been up in arms. But because this was a, you know, a good-looking Democrat, nobody said anything and it laid the ground work for whatever else that needed to fall apart, this crushed it. You know...

Jennifer: Let me ask you about 1999. I'm talking about when you took a dele—delegation...

Maureen: Um-hum.

Jennifer: ...of folks to the United Nations...

Maureen: Hm.

Jennifer: And specifically, the Declaration of the Poor People's Economic...

Marian: Human Rights?

Jennifer: ...Human Rights. So what is that...

Maureen: Three years into it

Jennifer: ...And what were you doing at the UN?

Marian: Okay. We got to back up. And we just didn't go to the UN.

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: See, let's back up. See 1987 was the beginning of the National Welfare Rights Union. 1987 too, we realized that what had happened in our hands, we had the National Welfare Rights Union that represented one const—you know, of different constituents of people that was in the National Welfare Rights, I mean, the National Union of the Homeless that came about too.

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: And some of us ended up on the same board, which was the National Anti-Hunger Coalition.

Maureen: It's a third group. Um-hum.

Marian: That's a third group, which dealt with providers and the people that they served, you know. And I was sitting around and I told Annie that one night, I said, "Guess what? We have at our hands all three organizations, and we can call the summit to deal with just what, um, Dottie Stevenson³⁶ and them have been dealing with, the campaign that we had adopted on a national level, Up and Out of Poverty...

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: ...Now. Because not...our sisters and brothers...our sisters in Massachusetts had designed and, and nurtured this campaign then we made it a national campaign. So we called a summit back in 1989. You remember that?

Jennifer: I remember that.

Marian: In Philadelphia. We wanted it in Philadelphia because this is supposed to be the foot of liberty, right?

Maureen: City of Brotherly Love.

Marian: Love! You know. But we knew the home...the National Union of the Homeless we wanted to bring to the forefront, how homelessness was increasing in this country. And so we called this National Survival Summit.³⁷ At the same time, Miss Schneider had called in about, prior to that, earlier that year, about the march on Washington. They came from the homeless themselves, you know, about the need to have this. And which...

Maureen: Which [Inaduable] of the Homeless [Inaduable}.

Marian: Yes. Ah...

Maureen: Um-hum.

Marian: We told them, yeah, we would participate, but, ah, we knew...I didn't even go the meeting. We said we would follow whatever the homeless said. We followed the Homeless Union. We designed and began to carry out this campaign -- We had a summit, in Philadelphia, where 500 people made it their way to that summit. We didn't...the only

³⁶ Dottie Stevenson member of the National Welfare Rights Union from Mattapan, Massachusetts.

³⁷ This *Summit*, part of the Up And Out of Poverty Movement, was held in Philadelphia in 1989.

grant we received to help us with this summit was from Reverend Yvonne Dell, who was a minister in UCC United Church of Christ.

Maureen: Um-hum.

Marian: Ah, and she gave us ten thousand dollars which we used to help poor people to get to that summit. But basically a lot of people had to fundraise themselves to get to the summit. We came out of that summit and decided certain campaigns needed to take...take...begin to be organized. We wanted everybody up and out of poverty in the United States -- in the world really.

Maureen: That was the slogan. Um-hum. Up and Out of Poverty Now.

Marian: Ah, we were going to participate in the Homeless March.

Maureen: Um-hum.

Marian: But our demand was going to be that the homeless had to speak for themselves and lead that march.

Maureen: Um-hum!

Marian: We had people from the peace movement. This is when we expanded. We had people from the homeless struggles. We had providers, we had...

Maureen: Welfare rights.

Marian: I'm getting us... welfare, all the welfare rights were there. We had people from unions they were there.

Maureen: That's right.

Marian: We had...what was so interesting, see some of these people had never attended no kind of conference before in their lives, you know. And they were at this, at this summit. And then we united...eventually we were called in by the National Organization for Women. They joined. Ah, some of the other organizations joined into the campaign. But that began to help us to see that we wasn't going to win here in the United States, the whole question of coming up and out of poverty. Here come little old Dottie again, out of Boston, say, "Look, we have to look at this whole question." Because remember, one thing I love is we...we can get in a room, we can fuss, we can party, we can do everything. We gonna come out of that room with a plan. And that plan was that we had to look at the question of poverty and looking at our human rights being violated.

Maureen: That's right. And link those too.

Marian: And link them. So in New Orleans at a National Board meeting, we decided that we were going to start organ—around, organizing around the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and that under that, that we wanted that implemented in the United States, to be the basis for to begin to eliminate poverty. Out of that, Kensington Welfare Rights, which is a part of the national, began to design...take...began to organize around it, and we began to advance this whole campaign around economic human rights. And that became the first fight around going to...to the UN, the March. And that's how we ended up at the UN. We began to take from Boston...our Boston campaign, who started this whole Universal...

Maureen: That's right.

Marian: ...Declaration of Human Rights struggle, these complaints that we began to interview members about their human rights being violated. And through that we took it to the UN and...and...and filed those complaints with the UN for them to take some action on this. Have they taken any action? We've gone to the UN three times...

[together]

Maureen: Three times.

Jennifer: Hm.

Maureen: ...with different individual complaints. Hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of pieces of paper and complaints written out from all across the nation, internationally, just hundreds and hundreds -- this is what happened, this is how it happened, this is why it happened, document everything three times. Took them all thousands of pieces of paper.

Marian: And it's still going on. Because...

Maureen: They're still investigating.

Marian: ...and, you know, this thing about Kensington, and Kensington is still spearheading that. You know, poor people's campaign and that type of stuff. And we had a inter—we had a international poor people's cam—conference, summit, in New York, where we again took, you know, was focusing on human rights violation. A lot of our people have gone to different conferences around the world, you know, to bring up the question of poverty in the United States.

Maureen: Same issue.

Marian: I know when we were invited to participate in Uganda at one time, we brought up the question at the Seventh PAC, Pan-African Conference,³⁸ one of the things we brought up was the question of homelessness in the United States. We made sure that Leona Smith who was the president of the National Union of the Homeless became our

³⁸ The *Seventh Pan-African Conference* was held from April 3 through April 8, 1994, in Kampala, Uganda.

spokesperson on...on the governing body at that. Because they could not conceive homelessness...

Maureen: Yeah, right.

Marian: ...in the United States, you know. The...all they remember was the...what's the thing, Bill Cosby's Show?³⁹

Jennifer: *The Cosby Show?*

Marian: *The Cosby Show*. They thought we all live like that, you know.

Maureen: Land of the free, home of the brave...

Marian: Ah...

Maureen: ...money, jobs, golden streets.

Marian: So it was a shock to them to see what we were facing.

Maureen: Sound like heaven...

Marian: ...you know...

Maureen: ...more than America, so...

Marian: ...yeah, facing here in the United States. So, um, you know, we...we still have a long way to go. But we have made these connections. We even went to the Continental Front for Community Organization. We are part of that effort, where you have all the...all the...all the countries, ah, and what have you...

Maureen: And islands, Caribbeans.

Marian: ...from, from the Caribbean islands and, um, you name it -- South America, North America and all this, we all come together and try to look and it's the United Community and all that st—you know, trying to work with each other, and get some strategy and tactics from each other. We became a part of it, because I think it's to bring up this question of poverty. Bring up the question of homelessness, and how we have to begin to organize and fight back on this. You know, we been instrumental continuously in the 90's. We came out of that. Not only did we talk about the whole question of...of

³⁹ *The Cosby Show* was a popular TV comedy that aired from 1984 to 1992, focusing on an upper-middle-class Black family, the Huxtables. This family was unlike other Black families previously seen on television because they were solidly upper-middle-class, the father was a respected doctor, and the mother a successful attorney.

coming up and out of poverty, but our people became some of the best people in trying...in taking over housing. You got all these public housing sitting out here...

Maureen: Empty.

Marian: ...empty that the utilities were on, and you have homelessness on the increase, but they can't go into public housing. But yet and still...

Maureen: Too many people.

Marian: ...we paying for those public housing.

Maureen: Too many people living in shelters. And it's just, it's madness. You know, shelters are full, people living on grates, boxes over the their head, and you stand up and look in the middle of the night and all the pop...all the public housing lightments...

Marian: apartments

Maureen: ...the lights are on. And they're empty and there's heat, and there's electricity and the water's running. It's absurd. So, you know, it...it was, it was more than an issue to raise all these points but at every venue, and you talk about the United Nations, everything, and you can...you know, you've been to so many of these. You know we move this fight around everywhere. And...and it's always the same fight, you know, poverty -- people not being able to go to work, you can't make fifty thousand dollars a year at a job, then you get laid off from that job, and you find another one that pays twelve thousand dollars a year, something's going to happen. Can't make it with twelve thousand if you're used to making fifty. If you have a job, and it pays forty thousand dollars a year, then you get a job later on that pays twelve dollars a month, because that's about what your income is used to...

Marian: Hm.

Maureen: ...then why is that your fault? Why should you lose your house? Why should your children be taken away. And now we have this kind of circumstance which pretty much, that's the case. Highland Park used to have sixty thousand residents in it, sixteen thousand residents live there now. They charge people in Highland Park for water based on a figure that says sixty thousand, and they don't find it wrong! We've got in Detroit between June of 2001, June of 2002, 40,752 addresses had water turned off -- forty thousand, seven hundred and fifty-two registered addresses. And of those, about 39,000 were homeowners, some...beyond that, oh, 36,000, there were two or three thousand that were businesses and some are community organizations that lost water, about 36,000. Now, it's 365 days in a year. 36,000 addresses, homes, being turned off meant that the water trucks were moving down the street, flatbed trucks -- that's the only thing we could figure -- they jumped off, turned the water off, the truck kept moving. Then you had to jump back on again. Because that's the only way you could disconnect that...that kind of water. When we challenge, through a period of information gathering, whatnot, friends

had to help us, we challenged the water department, and we...we found out who was in charge and went to these people and said, "What is the problem here?", they said, "That's right, what about it? They couldn't pay the bills. If you can't pay for water in Detroit, can't have it." That's the circumstance we living under now -- human rights violations that nobody cares about because it represents low income people. Nobody cares that women are having babies in front of the hospital. Can't get in there, because they don't have healthcare, because these are poor women. Now, you know, we started this conversation off about...Marian raised this issues about killings.

Marian: Hm.

Maureen: You've got 51...I guess it's 64...

Marian: Sixty. It's 60.

Maureen: Sixty killings over...well, in the beginning, the first figure they gave us was 51 deaths over 50 days -- 51 killings...

Jennifer: In Detroit.

Maureen: ...over 50 days in Detroit. But that only represented, like the sheriff told us, only represented those that died. There were two or three times as many people shot. But the tension in not just Detroit, all of these places where people had jobs and had incomes and had families and had hope and had po—possibilities and opportunities and visions, across the nation were falling apart. And we continue to try to hold these no good backstabbing no-good dogs, may the die and burn in hell, Democrats and Republicans responsible for fixing this mess and they all have healthcare. We pay for it.

Marian: Um-hum.

Maureen: They have utilities, we pay for it.

Marian: And their children have...

Maureen: They got, you know, children...

Marian: Quality education.

Maureen: ...they got wives, girlfriends, sweethearts, mistresses sometime that live in the same house, we pay for all of that. That's what this fight is about.

Jennifer: So we are...the generations, coming, like you're saying, are becoming accustomed to a way of looking at people that it's...it's okay to see a family on the street or...

Maureen: Absolutely all right.

Jennifer: ...or that it's...it's okay to have water turned off. So the work that you're doing, how is the work that you're doing affecting and impacting this generation to have a different vision of how people should be...

Maureen: Well, Marian talks about how the women are that raised up, were the banner carriers, the May Paines, and the Johnnie Tilmans and the Beulah Sanders, and Freddy, especially Freddy. Man, that Freddy Nixon was my hero. And Diane Bernard and, you know, tearing up now just thinking about them. We're these women now. And...and because we're these women now, we have an obligation to make certain that these folks that are coming up behind us, and we're don't go a good job at it because it...the struggle is so humongous. This thing is just all consuming. But we have a responsibility of letting folks know that we remember what service look like. We remember what humanity looks like. We remember what love and compassion and caring looks like. We remember what opportunity looks like. And it's not what they showing you out here. This is not the way we're supposed to live and we don't have to live this way. And to be able to convince people, I don't care how many times you go and watch somebody get shot on television, that actor gets up. That is not what is common. That is not what happens. If you shoot somebody for real, they're going to lay there for a while. We don't have to live this way. Electricity, gas and water are rights and should be made available to everybody here. It doesn't have to be a question of DTE⁴⁰ owns all the electricity. It happens because we blinked. That's what our fight is on a regular basis. This is not a replica of what life is, what we see out here. This is not what it is. We can live fine. We can go to the movies for a dollar. We can have popcorn for 15 cents, because these people have, and that would be us, have developed the ability to be able to manufacture everything we want. They can build a house in 15 minutes, prefabricated, they can build a car, we can all drive. What is this that we're living under? It's because of this horrible corporate greed. And that's what this fight is. And it's a difficult fight, because the enemy's very good. Enemy's got all manners of...of money and resources to try to convince people that all you see on television is what actually the reality is. The final analysis here, we fighting, demanding that people in Iraq have democ—democracy. They don't want it. We going to force it. You going to take this democracy along with Bechtel⁴¹ and Halliburton⁴² and we going to set up these oils and rigs and you going to deal with it or else. Now the folks in Haiti demanded democracy—we can't go there.

Marian: Um-um.

⁴⁰ *DTE Energy* is a large corporation that owns much of the gas and electricity services in the United States. They service both residential areas and commercial businesses.

⁴¹ *Bechtel* is one of the world's largest engineering and construction corporations. They are involved in the mining industry, the oil industry, and the telecommunications industry, including holding several U.S. government contracts.

⁴² *Halliburton* is of the world's largest corporations in the field of oil and gas. They hold numerous lucrative contracts with the U.S. government, and have been hired to implement many facets of “reconstruction” in occupied Iraq.

Maureen: Guess not. No oil. No nothing we don't want. And that is the fight. How do we clearly delineate and explain this is the wrong information. It's yellow, it quacks, it waddles—if you conclude that it's a horse, it's something wrong with you. It's not that. They got all the signs of being a duck, then it might be that duck it is. That's what the fight is.

Jennifer: So how do you do that? How do you...how are you fighting that?

Maureen: Very carefully.

Marian: Okay. Just back up. You know, when they moved to eliminate General Assistance in...in Michigan, we had to change our whole tactics of what we were doing at the time. We were trying to lobby and get the legislative not to support what Engler was doing at the time. And I got a call at one o'clock at night from, at that time, Representative Hollister's⁴³ office saying, in the wee hours of the night, they had the legislative...this legislative came together, and passed the elimination of General Assistance. We say, "uh-oh, the plan's changing now." We called a meeting the ne—I got on the phone at two...and I was good for waking people up...

Maureen: Um-hum.

Marian: ...at two and three o'clock in the morning, said, "Look...

Maureen: Um-hum!

Marian: ...we got to have a meeting in the morning. Because our plans must change. We're not going to Lansing. And we came out, with, look it's tent time.

Jennifer: Hm?

Marian: That we knew, borrowing from our sister organizations in Philadelphia, the National Union of the Homeless, they had pitched a tent for a long time out in front of city hall. We said we was going to pitch a tent, right down and across from public housing. Because if you're going to cut General Assistance...

Maureen: And what was General Assistance?

Marian: And General Assistance was individuals and, ah, childless couples that were eligible for a mere—it was really small—two hundred and some dollars a month to take care of their needs.

Maureen: Everything.

⁴³ *David Hollister* is a Michigan Democrat who served in the House of Representatives from 1974 until 1993. Hollister was Mayor of Lansing, Michigan from 1993-2003. Starting in 2003 he became Michigan's Director of Labor and Economic Growth

Marian: And I know that don't happen in a lot of other countries. But this was some of the, um, ah...this was based on...on some of the wealth that labor had created, you know. So General Assistance was started here by...in the 1930s to help workers when they were on change-overs.

Jennifer: Um-hum.

Marian: You know, in the factories and stuff like...

Maureen: Give them some income.

Marian: Changing the models and stuff. So, you know, when they looked at it, people say, "Oh, yeah, those...young, lazy young men need to be cut off." That was crap. Because, you know, when there was plenty of jobs, people worked, you know. So it was the beginning move up, along with what Clinton was doing, to eliminate some of these vitally needed programs. We not only pitched a tent, we...we organized, we had various organiza—The hunger...we always started with that first. Because welfare rights theory is all...I mean, tactics have always been the streets, the legislative and the courts. We had people coming as far as Lansing bringing tents, bringing different stuff that we were going to have for our D-Day.⁴⁴ Our D-Day for pitching this tent, beginning to take over houses, was Veterans Day, November the 11th.

Maureen: My birthday.

Marian: November the 11th. We took a busload of folks to Washington to hook up with some of our other Up-and-Out-Of-Poverty people and we took Washington with a storm. No permits. They said what we going...I had lost my voice, remember? No permits, no nothing. We...we say, we marching down Washington DC and we gonna go straight to the, ah, to the State Capital. We don't give a hook about permits. Because if they put us in jail...

Maureen: You can't do that? You can't do that, you can't march without a permit. Watch this.

Marian: Hey, that's a free place for a lot of our people. Watch this. And they kept coming to us talking about...

Maureen: In the middle of the street.

Marian: ...who...who is the spokesperson? We always said, "They in the back. They in the back." And we kept marching in the most busiest time in Washington. We stopped all the time.

⁴⁴ *D-Day* is the day on which Allied forces invaded Normandy during World War II. The term "D-Day" is often used to denote the initiation of a struggle or attack.

Maureen: Middle of the street. Stop everything.

Marian: And you know what I was so proud about? That was women in the forefront of that.

Maureen: That's right.

Marian: Not only did the women take over...

Maureen: Annie Chambers, all of them.

Marian: ...the homeless march in the early period of time where we locked our arms and took it to the front and demanded that the homeless had to speak for themselves.

Jennifer: All right.

Marian: But it was women that were in the forefront of this. And it was diversified, that made sure, okay...

Marian: Ron Casanova⁴⁵, Cubans, everybody.

Maureen: ...if they come, we had...we had...if they come to you, tell them to go to the back, and. And the police just gave up, say "I don't care." I remember the district police saying to, ah, the federal officer saying, "You got 'em now..."

Maureen: Um-hum. You do something.

Marian: ...*you* do something with them."

Maureen: People joining the march, we just.

Marian: And everything. But this was all in one week. And we were fighting back to keep people from Michigan from being arrested. Because they...we had D-day here.

Jennifer: Um-hum.

Marian: Our people got so angry when they got to the State Capitol. You know, we had one member named Annie Chambers.⁴⁶

Jennifer: Uh-huh.

⁴⁵ *Ron Casanova* is a Philadelphia organizer committed to ending poverty and homelessness. He is the founder of Artists for a Better America, vice president of the National Union of the Homeless and editor of the *Union of the Homeless National News*.

⁴⁶ *Annie Chambers* is a member of the National Welfare Rights Union from Baltimore, Maryland.

Marian: Annie's a warrior. Annie's not only a warrior, Annie's the mother of 24 children. And Annie got more energy than all of us. Annie is 55 now. I mean, 65...

Maureen: 65.

Marian: ...now. But Annie got...just got out the hospital, she was so angry because they kept telling us, "You can't be on that...on those stairs, because those are the Senators' stairs."

Maureen: That's where they walk.

Marian: That's...that's for them. Annie say, "Bull, I paid for those stairs and I'm still paying for those stairs..."

Maureen: Yeah, sit down on them steps.

Marian: ...I have a son that was killed in the Vietnam War and don't even know where he's buried" and stuff like... "I paid for those, and I'm a sit my butt down on these stairs." And I knew, I said, "Oh, Lord! Here we go." Annie sit down, when Annie sit down, Sister, one of the nuns sit down from Philadelphia...

Maureen: She going to sit down and everybody...

Marian: ...I looked around and everybody was sitting down. I said to Maureen and to Diane...

Maureen: Hm.

Marian: ... "Get the Detroit and Michigan people back, because I know what's going to happen."

Maureen: We trying to get arrested too in Washington, DC.

Marian: I say "We can't do this." So the people, you know, our people were arrested, our...you know, from Philadelphia, from Washington and stuff like that. And we got the people from Michigan back here, because . . .

Maureen: It was tight.

Marian: ... on D-Day. Not only did we pitch a tent -- I mean, this was one of those tents that they have those revival tents...

Maureen: See, you don't know how tents are.

Jennifer: Right, right.

Maureen: So you take a tent, it's a regular tent.

Marian: A big tent.

Maureen: But you get an L-shaped tent...

Marian: One of them tents was about as big as this studio.

Maureen: ...you can get two-bedroom tents, you know. No...

Marian: No, no, no. We got two of them.

Maureen: donated stuff (laughing).

Marian: And, and that...and people said, "Where you got the money from?" People were bringing money, because they were a part of the Up-And-Out-of-Poverty, Michigan Up-And-Out-Of-Poverty Coalition.⁴⁷ And they were helping out, to help. But if you couldn't be there, you at least was donating some. And I...remember, I had been fired from Michigan Legal Services, and they had to pay me back all my money. So I was helping...we were putting everything we could in it. The day...

Maureen: Yeah, homeless people in the tent.

Marian: ...of D-Day, the man pitched the tent for us, and we knew that a lot of people were off in Detroit because it was...

Maureen: Veterans Day.

Marian: ...Veterans Day.

Maureen: It was a federal holiday.

Marian: Look up, here come the Chief of Police.

Maureen: Um-hum!

Marian: "You can't do that." We say, why? "This is private property." We say, "We know it."

Maureen: Say you got to have a permit.

Marian: We say, "How do you know we don't have the permit?"

⁴⁷ *Up-And-Out-of-Poverty* was an ad hoc coalition of local organizations that work with those directly affected by the cuts in the state of Michigan's social services budget.

Maureen: It's a holiday. You can't tell if we have one or not.

Marian: You can't tell us nothing.

Maureen: Everything is closed. You don't know.

Marian: We pitched that tent, we had those tents. They were great. Everything you can imagine in those tents. They were...the homeless had got together, that these tents were locked together and everything. And there was a conference that day, remember?

Maureen: Um-hum.

Marian: A union conference, AFSCME.⁴⁸ And we had a press conference. We had our fatigues on.

Jennifer: Ah.

Marian: Because like Diane said, we were in war.

Maureen: We're in war. It looked like we were in war.

Marian: We were in war.

Maureen: Cute little hats.

Marian: Yeah, and we marched. Everybody that came to the press conference, some of the officials from Detroit, and we marched all the people over to public housing. And we took over public housing again. This was our third time doing it. We took over public housing and began to stay there all...We made the police stay up there all day long. They didn't know if it the rest of us, if it's not the rest...what to do. What do we do? Here's some nuns here and everything. What do we do with these people? Not only did we move people in, every day people were being arrested. We kept Tent City -- this is key. Like Maureen said, we stay out here. This is a protractive struggle.

Maureen: That's right.

Marian: We started on November the 11th of 1991 in that struggle, because they had eliminated General Assistance, and at our first demonstration, we took over the media, because they refused to cover what was happening at the time. But we started with Tent City that day.

⁴⁸ The *American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME)* is the nation's largest public service employees union, whose members who serve the public in all areas of government, health, education and other services, both public and private.

Maureen: November.

Marian: It took on a housing struggle in Detroit, and every night we were attacked by the police, but we began to even win them over. And then Flint, it became...

Maureen: Homeless.

Marian: A homeless, just, struggle, and...and the workers from the factory constantly kept coming. And Ann Arbor...

Jennifer: Hm.

Maureen: Students.

Marian: ...the students helped out with it.

Maureen: Put tents up.

Marian: And we had the Tent City here. And in Lansing it became a constitutional struggle...

Maureen: Right on the grounds of...

Marian: ...right on the grounds of the State Capitol.

Maureen: State Capitol

Marian: On...on December the 5th of that year...

Maureen: Engler had to pass it every day.

Marian: ...we pitched that day. Every day. And that's why we...we ended up with the Embassy for poor people. And if you want to know what poor people want, come to Tent City. And we kept those tents up until Good Friday.

Maureen: April.

Marian: We kept them in court, we...we made sure that the tent company were paid. We sued Coleman Young,⁴⁹ and got monies back for that, and we paid the tent...The tent people say, "Look, whatever."

Maureen: See, the police had already come in and destroyed the tent.

⁴⁹ Coleman Young was the Mayor of Detroit for five terms, from 1974-1994. he was the first African American Mayor for the city.

Marian: They arrested the tents.

Maureen: And...and arrested the tents. That's what they did. And one of the first charges was the tent wasn't properly ventilated. And, you know, when they were making the charges we were standing in there and the top of the tent and it was flapping, you know, the winds coming through. Not ventilated, you know. It was madness. So they tore the tents up. And...and so many of our...our colleagues made a decision, you know. If the tent is going to be arrested, I'm going to go with the tent.

Marian: I'm going with the tent.

Maureen: I mean, it was something. So we go get another tent, come back and set this up, and the next time it was next to a church with the pastor's permission. So here police come, fighting and arguing to keep this tent up. And what's the charge? Well, you have this tent on the grounds of the church with the owner's permission.

Marian: Who was arrested? Diane. And as well as the minister's wife.

Maureen: This went on. This went on. The other thing that happened, homeless were coming in to get serviced and we fill out applications and food stamps, applications and giving people information about where you can go to get a house and all this kind of thing.

Marian: Turning on their...

Maureen: And...and it was a food issue. You know, how we going to feed this? And we went back to the, you know, loaves and fishes.⁵⁰ You know somebody going to have to help, get on TV. So I tell the people, we got this tent open and the homeless are coming here for shelter. We can't feed them. Oh, Lord!

Marian: What do we do...?

Maureen: Every hospital, the homeless were getting fed Duck a l'Orange. A lobster bisque. Pancakes show up in the morning.

Marian: Pizzas. I got so sick of seeing pizzas.

Maureen: Food. I mean, food, I mean, you know, you had to make a reservation to get in the homeless tent, because the food was magnificent. It was truly great. And it was breakfast, lunch and dinner. We had a floor model TV...

Marian: Yeah!

⁵⁰ Refence to a Biblical story in which Jesus feeds the hungry with fishes and loaves of bread.

Maureen: ...somebody donated a 27-inch floor model television. Had a generator, somebody donated that. Turned the television on...

Marian: Some of the counsel persons donated they...

Maureen: ...we had TV Guides, be newspapers...

Marian: ...generators

Maureen: ...delivered to the tent. This was an event. CNN⁵¹ said during that year that that was the third most important story of the nation, that tent going up from November to April, that's what this fight is.

Marian: And we could not understand...we could not get coverage from the media...

Jennifer: Right.

Marian: ...in Detroit and in Michigan.

Maureen: Every place else.

Marian: We got covered from Ja—from Japan, Canada, it was CNN in . . .

Maureen: Australia. Oh, yeah.

Marian: Australia, all over the place, and they finally brought . . .

Maureen: But not in Detroit.

Marian: ...when we, you know...they knew that we was not going to take them not covering this more. We had some conscious reporters to begin to unite with this struggle. We had people driving all the way from upper Michigan, ending up with just fourteen dollars—I remember this couple. They just wanted to touch the tent and be a part of the tent.

Jennifer: Hm.

Marian: Because they began to see and embrace the struggle. It's their struggle. Because they knew if we didn't fight for housing and for homeless people to be able to have jobs and housing that they were next.

Jennifer: Hm.

Marian: You know. We had people donating mink coats. Now what do we need with mink coats, you know.

⁵¹ CNN is U.S.-based large corporate news service.

Marian: Some suburban mink coats.

Marian: Mink coats...

Maureen: Remember Ted Nugent,⁵²...

Marian: Yes.

Maureen: Ted Nugent the rock star...

Jennifer: Yeah.

Maureen: He went out and shot deer and whatever else he did.

Marian: Brought all that.

Maureen: ...and he showed up with venison,⁵³ and the first time I...I didn't know you could make chili out of deer.

Marian: Yes.

Maureen: And he showed up. He showed up with boxes of food and all this kind of stuff, but I mean, you know, it was...it was gratifying because you could see that the message was being heard, you know what I mean? Suburbanite women would show up – “I was so upset,” and every—“I heard about this and I was just outraged, and I have these things, it's not much.” And bringing mink coat.

Marian: So what we did...

Maureen: “What is this?”

Marian: You know, we were getting over...

Maureen: Just, ooh!

Marian: ...we was getting too much and we became the suppliers for the shelters.

Maureen: Had to go get another tent. Put the things in there, to give it away to other shelters.

Jennifer: Oh

⁵² *Ted Nugent* is a rock musician from Detroit, known for his outrageous behavior and being a gun enthusiast.

⁵³ *Venison*: Deer meat.

Marian: Say, take, don't...

Jennifer: Okay.

R1: ...don't bring it here. Take it to these shelters.

Jennifer: Okay.

Marian: We ended up with sleeping bags. Everything. It showed us the warmth.

Maureen: They gave us those jackets.

Marian: Yeah, the warmth of the work—of the people out here.

Maureen: Didn't want to see it.

Marian: They did not support homelessness.

Jennifer: Right.

Marian: And you said it right. They forced, you know, in essence, people done got used to this. And that's criminal. That's immoral for that type of stuff to happen, and we're fighting that. Because to us, not only have we experienced what life could be like, but we want life even better.

Maureen: That's right.

Marian: You know. And you...we do have that type of vision, that we can have life better. And that's what we all about, you know. And like I said, bury us with our boots on. I always tell my daughters, don't use no money to put me in no grave. I don't believe supporting funeral homes and stuff like that. Y'all use that money to live, you know.

Maureen: We're not going to give up, we just going to give out.

Marian: The best thing you can do for me as a daughter, and you know, now I'm a new mother, um [clears throat] because of Clinton's welfare reform and all these young women out here—I'm losing my voice—that ends up with their children snatched because of water, because of the fact they might need some kind of medical attention. I ended up being a new mother four years ago, my husband and I, with some babies. You know, and I needed babies like I needed a hole in the head. I was rejoicing that my last of the five was gone, you know. But I have new ba—you know, my what?, one is three.

Maureen: Three, five and...Justin's...

Marian: Nine. I've had them four years.

Maureen: ...three, five and nine.

Jennifer: So

Marian: Four years. And we're just a part of what is beginning to grow out here.

Jennifer: You've said a lot of times, many, many...you've mentioned many, many women who've been...

Marian: A whole lot of...

Jennifer: ...out of this...this movement. Um, you're talking about how women are affected overwhelmingly by this movement. And I wanted to know, do you feel that the work that you do can be understood as feminist?

Maureen: Well, probably there would be a...a perspective that folks would...might want to view and interpret the work that we do with a feminist bent to it. And that...that's only because the way history has now mandated that women are poor. It didn't have to turn out this way, but because the majority of the folks that we work with, particularly in welfare, are women who are out there, women who have these children. So, you know, eight out of ten of our customers, of our...of our clients, are...are women. And to the degree that, you know, people want to look at it in that kind of box, it could be looked at as a feminist kind of activity. But I think that our position would be that we...we...feminism is a narrow point of view. We're much bigger than that. We're internationalist. Not interested in men being poor either. Ain't trying to find out how to figure out how to just free women, we want to try to figure out how everybody who is struggling to eat, eat, housing, all these kinds of issues, that they all have a way out. So to the degree that our fight and our movement and our activities are based in a destruction of this economic system. I mean, you know, I know that this...you explained to us earlier that some...Poland and some of the other countries and what not that might be participating in this activity and we're so proud and humbled to be involved. But let us make no mistake -- we hate capitalism. Hate it. It's no good.

Marian: With a passion.

Maureen: Hate it. This concept, that free market, let it decide. The free market don't decide nothing but how to keep you poor. We're for a system that says everybody, if you live through the birthing process, you have a right to have healthcare, housing, take a trip to Bermuda if that's where you want to go to, you know, all of these kinds of things. If you lived. And that needs to be the key. So to the degree that we're women, and...and sometimes we feminine women, you know, we wear little cute stuff every now and then, but that is *not* the focus. The focus primarily is to talk about the international relief of this question of poverty. And we can't do that if we section off a part of the group.

Marian: But you know, even when you look at our organization, majority of them are women. But it's a lot of men in there. But, again, you know, like even in the Continental Front for Community Organization,⁵⁴ I have always told those men, you know, a slave that get a weapon and don't know how to use it, deserve to be a slave.

Maureen: That's right.

Marian: If you think from one minute that you gonna be free as a man and not...and that I'm going still be your slave, you got another think coming, brother. Because I'm going to be right there with you on equal terms, you know. And if you want to classify it as feminine, I don't care what you classified it. But if you began to move just like the enemy, you become my enemy, you know. A lot of people are afraid of that word, the "f" word, feminism. You know, ah, why? Because, it...you know, they don't figure that women should be a part and have the rights and...and that type of stuff that men have enjoyed, not so much Black men, you know, and they too have enjoyed at our expense.

Jennifer: Um-hum.

Marian: You know, we're fighting for our society.

Maureen: Um-hum.

Marian: And for that we do not embrace...no exploitation and oppression.

Maureen: Anywhere.

Marian: Anywhere.

Maureen: That's right.

Marian: And therefore, you know, ah, that's why we participate in all these struggles. The women that we...you know, a lot of time when we on what now, and we fighting for the free...you know, the right to choice⁵⁵ and stuff like that, we make people understand, in order for the women that we represent to even have choice, they got to have some economic freedom too, you know. You can't have a choice unless you have the basis economically...

Maureen: To make a choice. Um-hum.

⁵⁴ *Continental Front for Community Organization* is an international, grassroots organization founded in 1987 that fights to end poverty and exploitation in Latin America. Representatives from most Latin American countries meet every two years to share experiences, analyze recent trends and define platforms for struggle.

⁵⁵ *Pro-choice* is often used to refer to people who support a woman's right to make her reproductive health decisions, particularly around abortion.

Marian: ...under this country to be able to have that choice. They don't even have health care, less more than anything else. So, yes. We are feminists. But at the same time, we will turn around and kick some of those feminists' butts too, because they just as reactionary to what we are about, because they don't even touch poor people.

Maureen: Uh-uh.

Marian: Our thing is that we want a world where we can thrive and not barely survive.

Maureen: Yeah, see we don't want to take up...

Marian: That's what we're about.

Maureen: ...Oftentimes, we're...we're...we're approached about what...you know, the feminism has a connotation of...of lesbian women. Comes up all the time. I love it. Favorite, favorite discussion.

Marian: Um-hum.

Maureen: Especially now since we have marriages going on all over the...all over the country.

Marian: And I, I applaud those folks for doing that, I think its great.

Maureen: And I think it's outstanding, you know, because see...

Jennifer: The marriages that are happening in San Francisco?⁵⁶

Maureen: San Francisco, New York.

Marian: San Francisco, New York, I hope they do some here.

Maureen: That's right. You know, and...and people raise that issue, "Well, you know, what is your feeling about homosexuality?" Well, let me tell you my feeling about poverty. See, 'cause, see, that's the issue I have. What adults do in the...in the quiet and in their own homes, why is...

Marian: It ain't your business.

Marian: ...it your business unless you trying to date one of them, you know.

Jennifer: Um-hum.

⁵⁶ Same-sex marriages granted in the city of San Francisco during February and March of 2004.

Maureen: And I'm...you know, the issue here for us is only one. And people come up, well, you know, I have a problem. You know, feminism, you know, we have women do...do you have the same passion about same-sex relationships as you have about a woman who has lost her ability to live or keep her children or whatnot, because those things were taken away. If you didn't have to have that fight then, don't come to welfare rights door and try to raise this issue about feminism or gay or any of those kinds of things. Because we embrace everything that's got to do with fighting for equal rights. If there was a way for me to jump out here and to get to San Francisco, I'd been throwing rice.⁵⁷ . I support all of it...

Marian: Oh, yeah.

Maureen: ...because we are for equal rights for everybody. And who is to stand up and say, well, you know, I like...this is my girlfriend, this is my...my boyfriend, this is my significant other for 20 or 30 years or 5 years or whatever case may be, and they want to get married, well, I got a particular position against that? How dare you. How dare you! You *got* no right to make those kinds of discri—those kind of discriminatory remarks. People have the right to do what they need to do. And if you didn't have this fight about these other issues, don't bring that here. We get ugly on these kinds of issues. So usually, after we slap a two or three of them down...that's why I say, we used to do good cop/bad cop. They don't come to us anymore. Just one time they spread the message "Don't talk to them about that. They'll get mad."

Marian: We had a member, and I, you know, I hope that she will come back out. She's been really...Frances Taylor.⁵⁸ And we just love her...

Maureen: Hm.

Marian: ...that helped form the National Welfare Rights Union. She is out of Queens, New York. And Frances, I had to stay...you know, I had the opportunity to stay with her when I had to go to some activities in New York. And Frances said, "Marian, what is your position on gay and...gay people and lesbians, stuff like...?" I said, "What's the economic base? What are problems they're having with economic?" She said, "That's the organization I want to be in." I say, "But I don't give a hoot..."

Maureen: I don't care about that.

Marian: ...who's making love and all that stuff, that's not my problem." My problem is, how can we get this economic plight off of our backs. And that's what we got to be about.

⁵⁷ Guests throw rice at the bride and groom as they leave the church in traditional Christian wedding ceremonies. The rice is meant to represent prosperity.

⁵⁸ *Frances Taylor* is a welfare rights activist in New York.

Jennifer: Hm.

Marian: And so on the one hand, we really applaud...

Maureen: That's right.

Marian: ...what is happening around the country.

Maureen: Go get 'em, that's right.

Marian: As far as what Bush⁵⁹ has moved to say that he wants to make this a constitutional amendment and stuff like that, people don't have the...

Maureen: It's an outrage.

Marian: ...right to, ah, marry, that is as far as same...same sex and stuff like...same...

Maureen: It's an outrage.

Marian: It's outrage. It's a attack on all of us. And we have to remember, when they went...when Hitler went after, ah, certain people, you know, other people stood back.

Marian: Didn't say nothing.

Marian: And didn't say nothing. We have to remember our history, or we gonna die with it.

Jennifer: This has been very educational. I thought I knew you all. But I learned a lot from you. And I...I want to ask you one more quick question.

Marian: A quickie?

Jennifer: Quick.

Maureen: She's talking to you.

Marian: She's talking to you.

Jennifer: I'm talking to both of you. You mentioned Guida West, Frances Piven. You've had some links with university women and some people who have

⁵⁹ A Republican, *George W. Bush* was the Governor of Texas before he was elected U.S. President in the controversial election of 2000. The 43rd U.S. President, he is the son of 41st president George H.W. Bush. During his term, he primarily focused on the "War on Terror", including an invasion of Afghanistan and the Iraq war. He was re-elected in 2004.

proclaimed feminist...What is...what's the good and bad of your relationship with the university? Academics?

Maureen: And she said quick now. Quick.

Marian: Well, Guida, when you look at Guida West, Guida...Guida is a jewel among academic women. When you look at some of the...some...some of our experience at...have been very good and some bad, be it on a international level or local level. Sometime...and let me tell you, a lot of people in welfare rights have a lot of degrees now too, you know. But some have the notion of thinking that I've obtained this education, you listen to me, because I'm the professor, the professional person, when it comes to your particular situation.

Jennifer: Um-hum.

Marian: And they get a rude awakening, you know. And some have stayed. And some...and when I look at people like yourself, or look at Servio Dunyo, you know, thank God Servio's...

Maureen: Doctoral student.

Marian: ...there with us because a lot of days Maureen and I would not make it, you know. Because she's organized when we're not, you know. I mean, I know, we...you know, so on the one hand, I think they should take they talents and they skills that they have had the opportunity to obtain and go and work with poor people. Not trying to dictate to them -- listen and learn from them. And come out of there with what their...what their skills are and what the skills are of the poor people to make all of them some better people. But, you know, they don't come in there looking at us from the mountain top.

Jennifer: Okay. Well, we have to wrap up and I just want to...let you leave. I just want to thank you very much for being here and...

Maureen: Thank you for the invitation.

Jennifer: ...being a part of this.

Marian: Thank you.

Jennifer: It's wonderful to hear you speak.

Marian: Given us an opportunity to be with you again.

Jennifer: Thank you.

The End

