

Interview Date: July 20, 2011

Interview Location: Cape Town, South Africa

Interviewers: Civic Voices Students

Civic Voices Students: The subject of this interview is Mr. Hendricks. And today's date is July 20, 2011. This interview is being conducted at Cape Town Conference Center during the EI World Congress as part of Civic Voices International Democracy Memory Bank Project. Mr. Hendricks, would you please affirm that you have signed the Deed of Gift authorizing the Memory Bank Project to make this interview available to future researchers?

Henry Hendricks: I have signed it.

CVS: Thank you, sir. Please say and spell your name, and state what country you're from.

HH: Henry Hendricks, H-e-n-r-y H-e-n-d-r-i-c-k-s, and I'm from South Africa.

CVS: Thank you, sir. What was your childhood like, sir?

HH: I grew up in a very poor household, in a very poor neighborhood in Durban, South Africa. The second eldest of nine children, so it was a tough time, a tough life with a very hard-working father, but nevertheless, we were very poor.

CVS: Thank you, sir. What were you like as a student? Were you active in school? Were there any teachers or pupils in your childhood who have [inaudible] important or [inaudible] for you?

HH: Strangely, I was very introverted and a quiet child at school. And it was only after I left high school and became a student at training college that I got involved in any kind of activity. So I was a very quiet student. So there wasn't anybody particular at that time among my teachers who influenced the way that I felt.

CVS: Thank you, sir. How did your early years influence your later years of civic activism?

HH: I think one of the main things that influenced my activism was when I saw people like my dad and other people in the community, and the way in which they were treated by the people that they worked for. They were abused. When I looked at how we were denied access into many places like restaurants. We couldn't even go onto the beach. There were just so many things in our lives, as young people; you just could not be blind to those things. And so that definitely affected my actions in later life.

CVS: Thank you, sir. Can you tell us when and how you became politically aware? Is there a moment that sticks out for you?

The purpose of the Civic Voices Project is to collect personal narratives that preserve the legacy of democratic struggles. Interviews are being recorded and transcribed by students from around the world, and content has not been checked for accuracy. Teachers are encouraged to read this transcript carefully before using it as a resource. The opinions expressed are solely those of the individuals being interviewed, and the project does not necessarily endorse those positions or the actions taken to forward them. The contents of this site were developed under a grant (Q304A090003-09A) from the U.S. Department of Education. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the U.S. Federal Government.

HH: Maybe not a particular moment. I think it is more a process than a moment. When I was at training college, and when I left and became a teacher – that was in the late 1960s – we were very aware of what was going on within the politics of the country. And I think maybe if there was a moment, it was the fact that I taught history to matric learners. And among the things that we had to do was to teach the history of our country, the history of the politics of our country as seen by the apartheid regime. And so I had to teach about parliament and about one man, one vote and the whole parliamentary system. I had to teach students that while I knew that we had no rights at all in the country. That is one of the things that really got me involved in fighting against the regime.

CVS: Thank you, sir. Who or what inspired you to take action? Did you have any civic role model?

HH: I don't think there's any of us who weren't affected by many of the black leaders in our own country, as well as black leaders up in Africa as well. So there were a number of our black leaders, as well as in the community in which I lived, where there were civic leaders who were agitating against the government at that time. So many of us followed the lead of some of those civic leaders within our own community at that time. So there wasn't a particular person that I can point to that affected me at that time. And that obviously was before the days of the arrest of Nelson Mandela and so on. It was early in the fight against apartheid. So there were a number of civic leaders that affected us.

CVS: How would you describe the movement in which you are civically engaged?

HH: Let me rather put it this way. Maybe from about 1977, I have been involved in the trade union movement. And that more than anything else has affected my actions in the country. But also, there were other civic organizations that we were involved in agitating at a local level. So it was a combination of the two that I was involved in. I don't know, did you ask what sort of actions were we involved in? Well, a number of them. If I can just take it from the – I'll go back to teaching. One of the things that we did, we knew that the special branch police, for example, were bugging our classrooms, especially the classrooms of history teachers. And so I had to say to my students, and especially in the '70s and '80s – and students were very highly politically aware at that time, and they would question me as to why they had to learn the history that, you know, that I presented to them. And I indicated that if they wanted to pass the examination at the end of the year, that was what was required of them. But we made a deal that because we suspected that some of our classrooms were bugged, that we would – one day a week – we would have a history lesson under the trees outside where we would talk about the real history of our country. And so I would engage with the students outside under the trees, and we would talk about the real history, the heroes and the struggles of our country under the trees. That is one of the things that we did. But marches, we were involved in marches, in petitions. I can't even count how many marches over the years we were engaged in. One that stands out was a march on the beach in Durban. It sounds ridiculous, but it's one of the things that we did was march onto the beach, and try and liberate the beach in Durban. The authorities had dogs and razor wire and police with [inaudible] to chase us away from the beach. But those were some of the things – the resistance kind of things that we did. And we marched in support of many of the issues that we believed in at that time as well.

CVS: Thank you, sir. With whom did you work on these issues? Who are your colleagues and what brought you together?

HH: Well, as I said, a lot of it was because I was a teacher. Because I was in the teacher union movement. But also because of being involved within a community. And again, I need to say in townships, which is where I grew up, that kind of civic movement was far stronger than in other areas. You had far stronger civic movements within the townships than in suburbia, for example. And so there's a lot of my colleagues, many of whom are in parliament and so on today who were involved at that time as well.

CVS: Thank you, sir. Was there a culminating moment to your activities? If so, could you please describe it?

HH: I'm not sure what you mean a culminating moment.

CVS: Sir, a moment where you first – you've achieved?

HH: I don't think there's ever a time when you feel that you have achieved what you've strived to do. As General Secretary of my union now, we are always fighting for the rights, not just of teachers, but for gender equality, for economic empowerment; fighting against any form of discrimination. So I don't think there's ever a time when one can say that you have arrived at a point where you can now sit back and relax. So no, there'll always be something that we need to fight about or fight against.

CVS: Thank you, sir. What were some of the obstacles that you encountered in trying to make change? How did you overcome these obstacles?

HH: I think sometimes family. Sometimes some of your family feel that you're too radical in some of your outlook. Sometimes your religious beliefs can sometimes also be the problem. I'm not sure that there were many other obstacles. The police and so on, those were things that we all knew were there. I mean, we were tear-gassed and everything else, and none of those things were [inaudible]; none of those things really made any difference. But I think – I would imagine those were the issues that really – if they could be called obstacles – I think those would be the only obstacles that stood in our way.

CVS: Thank you, sir. What did you accomplish through your activism?

HH: Well, I think I'm the one that benefited the most from the activism in that I am a better person for having been involved in the things that have helped liberate our country. Whether I contributed in some little way, even to one person, that for me would, in itself, be a great benefit. But I really believe that I am one of the recipients of the good from all of the things that I – in a very small way compared to many other people, my contribution has been fairly small.

CVS: Thank you, sir. To what extent were you influenced by other social movements such as the anti-apartheid struggle?

HH: Oh to a very, very major extent. I don't think there's any of us who could look and see what people in other countries were fighting against. When you looked at the other countries in Africa giving refuge to our people who were in exile; when you looked at people in the Scandinavian countries or in America or in the UK, as well as our own people within our own country, primarily those within our own country, you could not help but be influenced by the fight that they were putting up.

CVS: Thank you, sir. How do you measure or define success in your civic engagement?

HH: I would imagine that success in civic engagement is if what you are doing can positively affect even one life. If it can make a difference to one life; if it can change one policy; if it can bring about even that minute change in the quality of the life of a child, of an adult, for me that is the reward. It is not in any other way – the most tangible is when I see people enjoying a better quality of life, not just from what I do, but from what others do. And so I think that is how you can judge. If you can get the authorities to move from a position that they have held to, and take into consideration some of the things that you are fighting for, then I think that you've achieved a lot.

CVS: Thank you, sir. How has your choice to become active changed your life?

HH: Only for the better. Only for the better. When I look at my own children, and I see their interests in civic issues then I would hope that they have seen that their father has been involved, and so that they would want to be involved as well. But I just believe that even within my own organization that I can talk to other people, and say look, it is really what is expected of us. That we make a difference in the country, in the community where we live. So it has definitely positively affected my life. I've got no regrets. Sometimes I wish I had done more, but I think we do wish that.

CVS: Thank you, sir. Looking back on your activism, what principles would you say you were fighting for?

HH: Justice. I think justice would be one of the main issues, and freedom from oppression. The very different types of oppression, whether it's economic or political oppression. For me these would be some of the major issues that I believe we were fighting for all along.

CVS: Thank you, sir. What advice would you give to young people that got into civic engagement?

HH: I think there are so many more opportunities for young people today to get involved in the civic struggle on many levels. The hard-fought freedom, for example, is ours today that young people enjoy. I think that they must cherish that. And a way in which they would cherish that is not only just to think and talk about their heroes, but to get involved. Because the minute you relax – no matter what democracy you have – the minute you relax, then things begin to slip. And there's so many examples around the world of – and you just need to look across the border at Zimbabwe, for example. And if you're not vigilant, and if the young people are not constantly fighting – and when I say fighting, I'm not talking, necessarily, about fighting in any physical way – but if you're not involved in activism, civic activism, then the politicians begin to run the country while we the people then lose control of what we're supposed to be doing because democracy means that. It means that “we the people who will rule the country.” So my encouragement to young people is stay involved in whatever way, whether it's environmental activism, whether it's political activism, or economic activism, whichever form, but remain engaged in it.

CVS: Thank you, sir. You get sometimes de-motivated with some politicians from the government. But when you come to government [inaudible], you get inspired. You get revived and feel like you're getting there and doing that job, knowing that you're touching the lives of the youth, the young people, and beginning to help [inaudible] that at least even if how small action. But if you collect up our [inaudible] at the end, we will [inaudible] get there and improve the quality of life.

HH: There's so many things, for example. The specifics – the teacher movement that I was involved in. Is it still on? Oh, I didn't know that.

CVS: Sometimes this is where you get the best.

HH: I was privileged to be involved with people like Franklin Sun who became Ambassador to the United States for South Africa, and Austin Green Thompson and a couple of other people, and– I mean, Franklin Sun was involved in early meetings in Dakar. Some of us were involved in Harare in some of the early discussions and so on. And especially here in the Western Cape – what I was saying – but our teacher movement was nationwide, but the headquarters was here in Cape Town when Franklin was the president. There were many times during the '70s and early '80s when we would be in meetings which would be broken up by the special branch, and we'd get tear-gassed and so on. And yeah, I think it was just many things happening during those early years in our country that I think not just young people but ourselves today have got so much to be grateful for, for many people who have given their lives for this kind of struggle. We had to fight against things like a tri-cameral parliament. Some of us were sucked into that because that was our employer at the time. You looked at that, and you saw that the majority, the African people, were excluded from that tri-cameral parliament, and so that was something that had to be fought against because that was really one of the foundations of Bantu Education as well. So there were just so many things that we had to fight against at that time. So yeah, it's interesting.

CVS: You were saying that there were so many things that you wanted to say. Now that it's a little more informal that you might probably want to reflect on something?

HH: Yeah, when you look at – one of the early questions was: What influenced your early activism? And I remember my late dad, he was a very dark man, very dark skin. None of us are as dark as what he was. He really was a dark person. And when I looked at how the white people that he worked for treated him, it used to make me really angry. I really used to get very angry. He was a proud man

who was – he had a big family and so on, and he was treated like dirt by some of them. That is one of the early memories that I have. I can say that it was anger toward white people because that is what it engendered in a person. In [inaudible] life in the '70s, I worked – I left teaching and I worked for an engineering firm. And the foreman of the company that I worked for said to me, more than once, he said, “Listen, my boy,” – I said to him, “Who is your boy? I don’t understand how I become a boy. I am – and this my age; this is my qualifications. I have these children and so on, what makes me a boy?” And part of what used to happen – and sometimes I still hear it now – is where adults refer to sometimes domestic workers –

CVS: As the garden boy.

HH: As the garden boy or the girl. And these are adults. These were things that we went through during those days. And those are things that engendered an anger in you, and a desire to see those kind of things changed. I suppose there’s a whole lot of things that a person could refer to. The whole issue of job reservation used to really get us – when you left matric, you had a couple of options: one was to become a teacher; one was to become a doctor if you were clever enough or wealthy enough, or otherwise you worked in a factory and so on. But beyond that, you had very little scope. Being excluded from going to places. I remember a time in Durban on the beachfront, well, you could only walk in a certain area. You could walk on the promenade, but you couldn’t walk on the sand because that was a white’s-only beach. My little boy who was maybe two or three at that time would say, “Dad, there’s one of those rides; let’s go and ride on it.” But you see, I couldn’t tell him that that was reserved for whites. And so I’d say, “Let’s rather go – let’s take a ball and go and play in the park” because there’s a park nearby that you’re allowed to go into, because you weren’t allowed to go into all of the parks either. So all of those things. 1971 I got married, and we came to Cape Town on a honeymoon, and you couldn’t just go to any hotel. We looked at a hotel way out in Lansdowne, which was reserved for coloreds at that time, but you couldn’t come into any of these other hotels. Even the whole issue of the busses. There were just so many things. Sometimes when we talk to our children about this, they say, “but that couldn’t have been real. It couldn’t have been that people were treated in that way.” And so there were so many things that we, as young people at that time – and even in later life now as teachers or teacher organizations – that we had to fight about. Our education system maybe was one of the major issues that we had to fight about because it was segregated into 17 different education departments. At the bottom of this whole pile were our African learners who are obviously the major group in our country. The abuse that was meted out in terms of provision of facilities, of the curriculum, and so on was really scary stuff. So okay –

CVS: How many forms of, as a – you’ve been teaching for over six decades, I guess, five decades – what would your advice be to teachers and students in terms of the pace in which activism has been carried out [inaudible]? How are we stronger? And if we are, you can acknowledge that, but if we aren’t than what would your advice be to young – not only young people, to old people, especially teachers, the younger teachers and the students?

HH: One of the things that I think concerns, I suppose a lot of us, is very often materialism takes over, and people become comfortable in where they are. If you look at society now, you see that a lot of people are far more comfortable than they were under apartheid, and so they are prepared to step back and do nothing for society, as a whole. I think that there’s been an unfortunate downturn in involvement in civic issues. When you hear people like Kumi [Naidoo] and others, you realize that there is hope because there are still the cores of activism around. But I think, generally, people have become a little bit too placid. They’ve become far too relaxed and not involved to the extent that they should be. I think our responsibility as teachers is to encourage our young people. And we have got the means. And for me, the issue is you can do that to encourage them into forms of activism without it being party-politically inspired. Because the kind of injustices that we need to fight against, the kind of issues that we need to have changed, are not party-politically related. They are issues that we need within society to be changing. For example, discrimination in terms of employment, whether it’s females, child labor issues because we see so much of that in an area like

Cape Town where young people are used by farmers and that sort of stuff. We could just talk about so many different examples. And we need to inspire our children at school. We've got the space within the curriculum to talk about civic issues, and we need to make use of that. Far too often, I think teachers use that time to catch up on maths and other issues, and they should be in actual fact educating the youth of [inaudible]. So I'm saying that they need to be picking up the pace and getting young people more engaged. One of the things that I like about the project is where clubs are being formed: clubs to deal with civic issues. And I think that is an excellent idea as an extramural activity to have civic clubs on various issues.

CVS: So now that you know about the program, Civic Voices, and from a history teacher, and part of this project covers a civil rights protest in America and the [inaudible] uprising. Now, but do you think that there will be any stage where the government can infuse into the curriculum civic education, civic engagement?

HH: I would hope so. I would hope that it would become part of the curriculum, well; a more integrated part of the curriculum because none of those things happened without the involvement of society. And none of our heroes became heroes in isolation. They were part of a community. And so one would hope that that would happen. One of the things – and I meant to say it just now that as a history teacher – and I taught history for many years to grade twelve – is that in our history, there were only white heroes, and only male white heroes. And every black man from Shaka to [inaudible], all of them were villains. Our people need to learn about the fact that there are many, many black heroes. Many heroes of color over – from when – well even from before the white man stepped onto our shores. There were many real great leaders and heroes. I think we need to get our young people to realize that. And as our curriculum begins to reflect those heroes, so they need to also be inspired to be involved as well.

CVS: Thank you very much. [00:31:51]