

Voices

**“NO JUSTICE, NO PEACE” AND THE RIGHT TO
SELF-DETERMINATION: AN INTERVIEW WITH GARY
GRANT AND NAEEMA MUHAMMED OF THE NORTH
CAROLINA ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE NETWORK**

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ABSTRACT

This is an interview with Gary Grant and Naeema Muhammed, leaders of the North Carolina Environmental Justice Network. Each of them talks about where they grew up, their politicization, how their paths crossed, their work together after Hurricane Floyd, and the unique challenges of organizing for social justice for black communities in the South. We learn of their fight against concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs), primarily for the hog trade, and they take us up to North Carolina’s Moral Monday protests of 2013 against legislation that threatens voting rights, public education, access to medical services, unemployment benefits, workers rights, occupational and environmental health, and women’s access to reproductive health care. We are grateful to these two friends of *New Solutions* for their contribution to the journal, and we hope that their insights regarding struggles for social and environmental justice can serve as guides for us all.

Keywords: North Carolina, Environmental Justice, concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFO)

The *New Solutions* editors hail from the Northeast of the United States, and we rely heavily on our Editorial and Advisory Board members for regularly bringing content to the journal from other parts of the United States and the world. Professor Steve Wing, an epidemiologist at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, is one of those people. Steve's work is regularly published in *New Solutions*, and he has been our advisor and friend for many years. Fortunately, over the years we have also come to know Gary Grant and Naeema Muhammed, both born and raised in North Carolina and both organizers in their communities. The interview below was conducted on two different occasions in North Carolina. These were long and wonderful interviews that help us understand the backgrounds of these organizers from a southern state, as well as the work and principles of the North Carolina Environmental Justice Network, which has benefitted from their leadership. We have edited the interviews and organized content using headings. However, we have retained Gary Grant's and Naeema Muhammed's voices in the hope that readers will feel like they, too, are sitting around the kitchen table listening to their stories. Gary and Naeema each talk about where they grew up, their politicization, how their paths crossed, their work together after Hurricane Floyd, and the unique challenges of organizing for social justice for black communities in the South. We learn of their fight against concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs), primarily for the hog trade, and they take us up to North Carolina's Moral Monday protests of 2013 against legislation that threatens voting rights, public education, access to medical services, unemployment benefits, worker rights, occupational and environmental health, and women's access to reproductive health care. We are grateful to these two friends of *New Solutions* for their contribution to the journal, and we hope that their insights regarding struggles for social and environmental justice can serve as guides for us all.

NS: Gary, would you like to start by telling us how you came to be doing this work?

GRANT: I grew up in the resettlement community of Tillery Farms, North Carolina, established in the 1930s under President FDR [Franklin Delano Roosevelt]. I then went to college and participated in the civil rights movement, having somewhere around 15 to 17 arrests during my college years. (I am now up to 19 and am trying for number 20 but no one seems to want to give it to me.¹) I returned home to Tillery where I taught school for 11 years.

Growing up in the Tillery resettlement community and being one of the children of Matthew and Florenza Moore Grant, you learned—or were taught—that you're pretty much in control of your life. *You* have to make the decisions; self-determination. The community challenged many of the inequities during that time, including taking children from the resettlement community to the white high school

¹ Editor's note: Gary's 20th arrest came at a Moral Monday protest in Raleigh, North Carolina on June 3, 2013.

to enroll them after *Brown v. Board of Education*. I guess we could say that I grew up in an activist community, never thinking that I would be an activist, much less an environmentalist. But I guess the activeness did come about from the community in which I grew up and my years of teaching, because of the injustices. I taught during segregated-school time, and I was there when the schools were supposed to have integrated and were to have ended “separate but equal” (or rather, the separate and *unequal*). We had a struggle to save our school in 1978, which we eventually lost in 1981 because of out-migration of young people. But in 1978, we formed the Concerned Citizens of Tillery² around the closing of the Tillery Chapel School.

In 1991, I believe it was, there was an article in one of the local papers that said economic development was coming to Tillery. It was about a paragraph long and said hog farms were coming to Tillery. Well, for me that was nothing alarming because I grew up in a farming community of 300 farm families and all of them had hogs. So what’s the problem? The first problem was that one of these hog farms, which was actually a CAFO was one-half mile from the last descendent of the founding family of Tillery. Charles Tillery, Jr., . . . had just finished restoring his plantation house to its original luster (with money from the state’s Historic Preservation Fund that they wouldn’t share to let us restore any of the resettlement houses) to be featured on the state and national registers of historic places. With that designation, he would have to open his home two times a year to the public. So he comes to us, the Concerned Citizens of Tillery and I’m still saying, *What’s the problem?* He says, *Get in the truck and let me take you down to the site.* We go down to the site and there’s all of this humongous earth-moving equipment and I’m asking, *What kind of hog farms are they going to build with this?!* So that was the beginning of my real learning about industrial animal growing. Together we were then able to organize our community and educate the people.

One of the things about the 1990s in Halifax County, North Carolina, is that the elected officials still were not accustomed to black and white people walking into their meetings holding hands, being on the same page. With that we were able to get the county commissioners to appoint a special ad hoc committee with the health director, farmers (of pigs, cattle, and chickens), and those whom they had determined to be activists and/or environmentalists. There were about 12 people—two people from the county commissioners—that were on this ad hoc committee. It came up with an ordinance that didn’t say hog farms couldn’t come exactly, but it did tell corporate hog farms that if you’re coming, here’s what you have to do . . . and industry does not like to be told what to do. The ordinance had two parts. You had to have a permit to build, and then you had to have a permit to operate. So it got to be quite cumbersome. There was also this group of citizens that were rallying and saying, *No, this is not the kind of development that we want.*

² See <http://www.cct78.org/>.

So CAFOs were my introduction to the environmental movement, I guess. And then as we were successful in Halifax County, we met people from Northampton County, which is an adjoining county, and they were having the same issues. And then we met people from Edgecombe County and we basically saw that it was the same kind of communities being targeted; primarily African American, poor, and some aging communities. And because the Tillery community has been an activist community since at least the 1940s and '50s, we did not think that it was fair to keep the CAFOs out of our community and then let them go to another community that looks like us. No, we didn't think that that was fair.

There was a group formed called the Hog Roundtable . . . [LAUGHTER] and we really thought that we were going to run these industrial hog operations out of North Carolina. For a couple of years we were making progress in the fight, and going to Raleigh to protest and rally. It was the first time, to my knowledge, that traditional environmental groups like the Sierra Club, Environmental Defense, and the River Keepers were joining with grassroots communities to fight for the same cause, at the Hog Roundtable. Basically we were trying to protect water, surface water and groundwater. And as one member of our community says, even in Tillery it brought the black and the white community together for the first time. . . . So eventually the NEJAC comes to North Carolina Central University and I'm invited to come and talk about hogs.

MUHAMMED: You need to say what NEJAC is—

GRANT: National Environmental Justice Action Committee. Rather, *Advisory* committee. It's *not* action. The National Environmental Justice Advisory Committee to the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency].

BIRTH OF THE NORTH CAROLINA ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE NETWORK, 1998

GRANT: So I'm at NEJAC meeting [outside of North Carolina—Ed.] talking about hogs and it was just unbelievable. All the folk who were talking were primarily black and all of the communities that they were talking about were black. Nan Freeland with the Clean Water Fund was there talking about water quality, and after the meeting was over, we're all gathering around and someone says, *We really need to do something*. . . . And we say, *Well, what do you want to do?* They say, *Well, we need to have a conference or a meeting or something*. And the one thing about the Concerned Citizens of Tillery (CCT) is (remember that I said Tillery is an activist community): it moves. CCT doesn't think that you need two years to plan. You go ahead and get it done. So we convinced Nan Freeland of our concerns, and we started organizing for an environmental justice summit to be held at the Historic Franklinton Center at Whitakers, North Carolina in Edgecombe County. The NEJAC meeting was probably in June and we were ready for the summit in October. We had about 75 to 80 people who showed up, including

Steve and some of his students. It was a good meeting. So out of the summit came the knowledge that we needed an organization, and that was the birth of the North Carolina Environmental Justice Network in 1998.

Another thing that came out of the summit was that as we sat around on Friday night talking afterwards, some of the students were saying, *We need to do more about this. We've got to let other people know.* That was Kimberly Morland, Sacoby Wilson, Rachel Avery, and several others. So Dr. Wing and his students created an environmental justice class there at the school of public health at UNC-Chapel Hill, with community assistance.³

I had met Steve and we had written a grant to the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences called Southeast Halifax Environmental Reawakening (SHER). And the question today still is: Did I get him into trouble or did he get me into trouble? But, at any rate, we got the grant and that also enabled the community, the Concerned Citizens of Tillery, to be able to be sort of, what's my word, I don't know what to say be a *leader* but that's what we were, and supporter, of the movement getting its act together. While at the same time we were doing research. Generally, community folk do not like researchers and we have certainly good grounds on which to stand regarding that opinion, but we had never met anyone like Steve Wing. He has done a lot helping to educate us and helping us change our mentality towards researchers; real people who are concerned about community having access to knowledge and data so that they can fight the battles against the government as well as industries that want to pollute in the communities. So then the network begins to operate, and we hold the summit each year. We've missed only one since we organized.

NAEEMA'S COMMUNITY ACTIVISM IN PHILADELPHIA 1966–1980

NS: Naeema, what was your history, and how did you learn to be an effective organizer?

MUHAMMED: I guess it started when I was a teenager living in Philadelphia. You know, we were talking about a re-education of black people, so we were just doing little door-to-door conversations with people in our communities, talking with them about the need to pay attention to what's going on around them, to make sure they're going out to vote and understanding who they voted for.

NS: Re-education from . . .

MUHAMMED: From the *miseducation* we've had in this country about ourselves. Part of that had to do with our cultural roots, being aware of our

³ The class has continued through 2014 as a forum for students to be exposed to communities impacted by environmental injustice; see specifics in an article by Steve Wing in *The Networker*, the newsletter of the Science & Environmental Health Network, available here: http://www.sehn.org/Volume_5-5.html.

heritage. That meant we didn't wear Americanized clothes and stuff. So everybody was walking around with African garb.

NS: Would you have called it the black power movement?

MUHAMMED: Well, no. At that time it was more thought of as a revolutionary movement which then went to the Cultural Nationalist Movement and then into Pan-Africanism. So we focused on a reeducation of ourselves in a society with all these systemic problems that create the conditions in our community. Also at the time people had caught onto Kwanzaa, because it dealt more with the culture/national side of the black movement. We called it the Black Liberation Movement.

NS: So was that around 1968 that you went to Philly?

MUHAMMED: I went there in 1966. I was born and raised in Rocky Mount, Edgecombe County, North Carolina, and I grew up in a segregated community. I went to segregated schools. Before I went to Philadelphia I never had any real interactions with white folks, and didn't want to because I was quite happy. As a matter of fact, I often think about that and say to my children that they missed those days because that's when people really took care of one another. It was more of a community environment. Growing up, if an adult said something to me, I knew better than to open my mouth and say something back. I could be all the way on the opposite side of town but [if] I did something wrong, my family would hear about it.

GRANT: And let me say this. . . . While Naeema's saying that she didn't have interaction with white people, I was having interactions with white people every summer at Franklinton Center at Bricks, where interracial work camps were being held in the 1950s to the point of even crosses being burned on the lawn. I was witnessing crosses being burned on the lawn.

NS: And that's how you knew that that's where to take the EJ . . .

GRANT: . . . to take the EJ summit, that's right. And I'm saying, not to stop Naeema's story, but there was a difference in the resettlement communities, an activism that caused us to be able to participate. And there was a Dr. King over at Franklinton Center as well. His name was Judson King who was as black as a boot and his wife was as white, well, whiter than either one of you all. . . . I mean she was black but her skin complexion was white. And he loved to tell the stories of driving through Mississippi and having to put her in the back of the car because he didn't want to get lynched.

MUHAMMED: Prior to going to Philadelphia I had not been involved in any kind of activism and had never really given it a thought. But, you know, once I got so lucky to start, it never stopped. As a matter of fact, I have three children and they always tell people they were born into the movement, that they didn't have choice. But also when my son was five years old and I was working at this insurance

company, we had a company picnic and my son was playing out on the grounds. We were at Bear Mountain in New York. So he was out there playing and the vice president of the company went up to him and said, *Hey, little boy, how you doin'?* And he told him, *Don't call me no little boy. I'm a black man.* He was five years old. So one of my co-workers heard it and she came running over saying, *You better go get your son if you want your job.* I was like, *What are you talking about?* She said, *I just said if you want your job, you better go get your son.* Then she told me what he had said, and I was like, *Well, so what? That's his feelings.* And I didn't do anything about it. They were worried that it was going to cause a problem. But when I went to work there, the company already knew my reputation because a friend of ours who was a lawyer with the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] at the time, we were all friends and worked together in activism. So they knew the way I came.

NS: When did you come back to North Carolina?

MUHAMMED: I came back to North Carolina in 1980. I left green and very naïve. And I came back totally—

GRANT: Right and ready to play! [LAUGHTER]

MUHAMMED: Yes, indeed. One of the largest campaigns we worked on in Philadelphia that had the greatest impact had to do with that crazy Frank Rizzo who had been in office for two consecutive terms which was the limit [Mayor of Philadelphia, 1972-1980]. He wanted to change the charter in order to try and run for a third term. We had to beat the streets day and night. We were out from sun up to almost sun up the next day going door-to-door talking to everybody about the importance of people coming out and voting against that charter. Rizzo was already talking about making Philadelphia a police state at the time. And we was like, *If we don't want a police state, then we better do something about it.* There was a lot of police brutality going on while he was in reign and a lot of killing of black folk and they would always say that it looked like they had a weapon or, you know, they looked like they had a knife or they looked like they had *something* that they didn't have. And that's how they were getting away with it.

After all of the organizing we began talking with the black police officers about their role in the brutality. They had an organization called the Black Guard in the Philadelphia Police Department, and they had it because the police benevolent association was basically white and racist, and the black officers could feel it. So we began talking with the Black Guard about the police brutality and finally they began reporting the brutality. As a result of reporting the brutality, the police benevolent association came out and told the Black Guard, y'all better be prepared to cover each other because if you're out on the route and need some back-up, don't call us, we're not coming. So we kept the black officers always on alert. They talked about how they had to always stay on alert to hear those calls so they could get there to give some assistance because the white officers wouldn't do it. And, you know, but this was all because of Frank Rizzo's attitude that he could

allow this to go on. We worked hard day and night for months on end trying to keep that charter from being changed, and we won!

When we won, we was on Broad Street in Philadelphia celebrating and the police came up there and we was dancing in the street. And when they came and tried to tell us to leave, we let them know, *your boy just lost, so you better get away from us*. And they did. They probably could look at the crowd and see they didn't want no confrontations. We had built strength. So that was a good thing and it really rallied the black community and dealing with all the police brutality. We were fighting to have a citizens' review board which we had been consistently requesting. And, of course, they was fighting against a citizens' review board.

NS: You finally got them to put the board in, or they never did?

MUHAMMED: No, they never did. They never did. We tried but it wasn't successful. After that we were better able to get people to come out and vote and to be looking at the candidates and hold a forum where people could question the candidates.

BLACK WORKERS FOR JUSTICE—NORTH CAROLINA

NS: So all of that is how you came back here as a seasoned and skilled organizer?

MUHAMMED: Well, I guess you could say it that way. When we got to North Carolina in 1980 there were a lot of issues going on in the communities around where we were living. One of the biggest concerns was how the workers were being treated—with North Carolina being a right-to-work state and an anti-union state. It was almost criminal the ways workers were being treated. And so we began talking with workers about organizing a union and that they had a right to do that. They just needed to know how to use the laws that was in place to defend themselves if they were terminated or dealt with poorly at the work site.

NS: Who is “we”?

MUHAMMED: Saladin, my husband. We started out just doing it as two individuals. But in 1981 three black women at the Kmart store in Rocky Mount had been terminated based on the right-to-work law. We know that's what was behind it because the way they fired them made no sense at all. They accused one of stealing 71 cents, and they prosecuted her. She went to court for that crap. And then another one, they said she had cut-out shoes and they weren't supposed to wear cut-out shoes. And then another one they accused of stealing a loaf of bread. And these women had been there like 15, 16, and 17 years. They belonged to this church in Rocky Mount where their pastor was very active in the community, Reverend Thomas Walker. They went to talk to him about it and he told them to get in touch with me and my husband. So they did, and we set up a meeting with them. They came down home and we sat and listened to everything they was telling us about the whole atmosphere in that store. We begin talking about what to do about it. We said we'll call for a boycott of the Kmart store. When we started the boycott,

it was basically the women workers and their children, and Saladin and me and our children. That’s who made up the picket lines out there every day. But we would go out there early in the morning and stay all day. And then some friends of ours from Raleigh started coming down. And to make a long story short, we did that boycott and then we realized that we needed some better organization in place and that’s when we gathered and formed Black Workers for Justice (BWFJ)⁴ in 1981.

NS: And was the boycott successful?

MUHAMMED: Yes. When we did the boycott we asked the workers, *What would be your demands?* They gave a list of demands and we informed them that they need to send it to the headquarters and then follow up on it. So they wrote a letter to Kmart headquarters. One of the things they were asking is that they be reinstated. They got their demands met. They were reinstated, but they refused to go back. We said if you don’t want to go back, don’t go, but make them reinstate you so that other workers can see and won’t be so scared. Workers in this state were just gripped with fear because they could be so easily terminated. So we had to work people through that fear. One of the things we always did in any campaign was to make sure we took it to the workplace so that the workers inside could see what was going on outside. Then, when they didn’t see nothing terrible happening to anybody that participated [in picket lines], we figured that would get them some strength, and it basically worked. Then I met Gary. I first met Gary when y’all was fighting the school thing.

GRANT: Right.

MUHAMMED: You know, me and my husband, Saladin, we would go up to Tillery and participate in the meetings there because we love running into a good fight. [LAUGHTER] We began going back and forth to the meetings and it used to tickle me because while you’re in the meeting, the cops are out in the parking lot checking license plates.

NS: The school board meetings?

MUHAMMED: Yeah. And I would tell Saladin, they probably going to run us off the highway on the way home or try to give you a ticket. They have to do something to try to intimidate you. But they didn’t know they couldn’t intimidate us, because we lived in Philadelphia where three times the police kicked our front door in. And they always came in like they was looking for somebody or they had some lame reason but it never made sense. I remember the first time they came, I had just gotten out of the hospital for having our last baby. I was getting dressed to go for my check-up and Saladin was in the bathroom and I heard all this noise at the front door and I said, *Saladin, I think somebody’s trying to break in the house.* I looked out the bedroom window and the street was full of police. I said, *Saladin, it’s the cops!* They came up the steps (we was on the second floor), they had on riot gear with assault weapons. And we was like, *What the hell is this about?* And then

⁴ See <http://blackworkersforjustice.org>.

Saladin, he ain't got no sense, 'cause he went to cursing. He cursed them from the moment they came in on the first floor. They came up to the second floor. Then they went up to the third floor. He went up with them cussing them out, calling them rednecks and everything. And I'm sitting in the room saying, they goin' to kill us 'cause of you. [LAUGHTER] It was at the height of police brutality. And I was like, "they are goin' kill us for sure." As a matter of fact, Rizzo came out with a public statement that black people are nothing but animals and told the police, "shoot to kill." And everybody knew this. So I pick up the phone and call Joe Miller, the lawyer that I was telling you about, but I couldn't get out because they had intercepted the phone line. Yeah, they had intercepted the phone line so I couldn't get the call out. . . . You know, they came in like that and they left with nothing. No explanation. But we knew it was because of the work we were doing, and so the result was that it made us work harder because then we knew we were doing the right thing or they wouldn't be so worried about it. And so each time they came, it just made us stronger and more committed to what we were doing. There were two other occasions but I won't go into details.

NS: Both of the other occasions were to intimidate you?

MUHAMMED: Yeah. As a matter of fact, on the second occasion, we were actively involved in a boycott of the public transit system in Philadelphia because they were talking about cutting lines, cutting bus routes, and every route they would cut was in the black community. And so we were saying *why ya'll cutting all the routes in the black community where people got to use these buses to get to work?* And so we decided that we would just boycott the public transit system. And so we got out of our bed every morning about 2 o'clock, get dressed, and go around to the bus depots. There was a bus depot right around the corner from us. We could walk there from where we lived and a civil disobedience squad would be there waiting for us, every time. . . . That's why the police came the second time. And then the third time we were doing a boycott in downtown Market Street because they were messing with the black vendors on the streets, which that was their way of making a living. But the Merchants' Association, the white merchants' association, had begun complaining about the vendors being out there. So we set up a picket line, a boycott line up and down Market Street, asking people not to shop there because of the way the shop owners be treating the vendors. We figured that's why the police came the third time.

THE AFRICAN AMERICAN ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE ACTION NETWORK

GRANT: I ended up doing environmental justice work because it's my community where I live, and I think that that's what pulls people in wherever they are, is trying to protect themselves and the community in which they live, whether they call themselves environmentalists or not. Being able to connect with others that are

fighting the same battles or the same kind of battles, and being able to have support with research and even through attorneys. I’m not sure whether it’s empowering or re-awakening the power. People can make a difference when they take that research and legal counsel, and then they are the ones who address the problem, not sending someone else to address it for them.

NS: Working with lawyers and scientists?

GRANT: There was a group in EPA Region IV called the African-American Environmental Justice Action Network, AAEEJAN, that was organized probably back in the mid to late ’90s. One of the pieces that came out of that network was a paper on the role of researchers and attorneys. It takes all of us working together in order to really protect the community but oftentimes these groups do not give or fully support the community in the way that they are capable of doing. Because they are fearful of reprisals themselves, I would imagine.

WING: Another thing that you might talk about is the warning, which I’ve heard both of you express repeatedly to communities, don’t expect the lawyers or the academics to save you.

MUHAMMED: Yeah, as a matter of fact, when I’m talking with communities as an organizer, I’m saying we can do the research, you can get your legal help, but ain’t none of that going to really solve the problem if there’s no community organizing the advocacy behind it. If the community is not speaking out on its own behalf, nothing’s going to happen. The community has to lead the way, whether it’s a legal struggle or a research struggle, the community has to lead the way. And we tell them that even when they call on the North Carolina Environmental Justice Network, we make it clear that we can come and assist you, we can’t save you. You have to do the work, you know, that’s required to change the condition in your community. We can assist you, but we can’t save you. You know you have to be the ones that do it.

GRANT: We are working with a black community now, and getting them organized is just dragging, I mean, really, really, really dragging. They are just not . . .

MUHAMMED: Speaking out.

GRANT: . . . as an organization. Other organized communities they speak out, and send messages to the state legislature. When emails are sent out saying, we need your support to help stop this bill, or whatever, they immediately get it out to their members. But this black community is still at the stage of being afraid to head up an organizing effort, with someone always saying, “Well, I really don’t think I ought to be the one heading this up. . . . You know that kind of thing. It is just so often that people wait for someone to come. And if you speak out, what are the ramifications? What happens to you in the process? The Moral Mondays movement is an example. A group has now put up the website where every person who has been arrested is posted, their mug shot, who they are, their physical address, where they work, and if they happen to be a state employee of any kind, the amount of money that they make.

MUHAMMED: That’s right.

NS: Who is doing this website?

MUHAMMED: Art Pope, it's being funded by this guy, Art Pope, who is—

GRANT: Who runs—

MUHAMMED: He has pretty much bought off our government. And he's pretty much running the state through Pat McCrory's new government and his cronies. He's basically a billionaire that owns Rose's, Super Dollar, all these stores that you find in black communities, where they set up in black communities.⁵ They're supposed to be fairly cheap merchandise, but the problem is that when you buy, purchasing stuff from these stores, you're supporting Art Pope's ability to push forth all these bad bills that are turning back the environmental regulations in the state, that's repealing the voting rights act. And they repealed the Racial Justice Act which required that, you know, African Americans on death row be heard again in case there's been some accidental, well really not accidental—

GRANT: Not accidental.

MUHAMMED: Intentional railroading of blacks onto death row. So he's funding the government's ability to roll back these policies and stuff. And it's just a mess. So Art Pope supported them publishing this thing on the Internet. This group is going to be looking at everybody that's been arrested at Moral Mondays. That makes people afraid. So we are just saying what they need to say, and not be afraid to say it.

When you do that, people for some reason, they treat you differently than if you were just hemming and hawing and dancing around what you really want to say. You know, it's like, OK, she's not afraid, so they just kind of act different towards you. That's been my experience, that when you say what you need to say, people respond to you—

GRANT: Respectfully.

MUHAMMED: Respectfully. Even, they might not like everything you say, but they respect it, the fact that you're willing to take a stand and say what you need to say.

GRANT: That's right. One of the major principles for the AAEJAN was that we were to go back to our communities and form local AAEJAN networks. And that way you would ensure that the community would be the one that was making the decisions, the community is the one that's running the organization. The North Carolina Environmental Justice Network was set up under those principles, that communities should be the ones in the driver's seat, should be the chairs of the network and all of that. We ran into difficulty because of funding initially. And also distance that communities are from one another. And thirdly, the extra burden that all community leaders probably feel, trying to fight at home, then becoming a part of a state organization and trying to make meetings, and help to ward off at the state level, and then be a part of a regional group that, called AAEJAN, that then

⁵ See <http://www.vwstores.com/about-us/> for a list of the stores under Pope's company.

would be working, especially with the Environmental Protection Agency in our region, and then from there into national organizations. It can just be overwhelming and overpowering. People just can't do it. Which then causes them to not only back away from the state organization, but also makes them a little bit leery of being, I think, out front even at the local level.

NS: Who started AAEJAN?

GRANT: Connie Tucker was there at the beginning—it was a spinoff of the Southern Organizing Committee. When SOC lost funding, whoever it was that was funding that group, the spinoff got to be the AAEJAN network. And we were making great headway, I thought, for a while. And then that funding somehow sort of vanished. It gets back to people having to write their own grants to have funding to be able to attend meetings at a regional level, and before you know it, you don't have any funding.

MUHAMMED: And you don't have many people at the meetings.

GRANT: Exactly. I was actually at an AAEJAN meeting the morning my mother passed. I had gotten in the night before, and was greeted with that news when I got to the office in Atlanta.

NS: What year was that?

GRANT: It was July 31, 2001. Yeah, so I was there for one of those meetings, and still trying to find a way for the organization to be able to survive. And I think that that's another piece that's never talked about enough around those of us who do organizing and this kind of work, that we actually have a life somewhere that is put on hold, and oftentimes it gets to be number 10 on the list, rather than number one, where it should be. Or number two. Number one should be that we should take care of ourselves, and that's not happening, and number two should be our families. And we have a tendency to put the community at number one, and then if we find some way to deal with the other ones, then that's what we do.

NS: Gary, it seems part of the operating principles of the organization is that you have to learn how to do this work yourselves? You can take advantage of the support you get from academics, lawyers, students but you can't—

GRANT: —they're not going to stay with you. There are some who stayed long periods, maybe five years or so and we began to depend on them, thinking that they're going to be there, but ultimately they left as well. Communities need to learn that early on.

HURRICANE FLOYD, SEPTEMBER 1999

Hurricane Floyd produced more human misery and environmental impact in North Carolina than any disaster in memory. The 15-20 inches of rain that fell across the eastern half of the state caused every river and stream to

flood. . . in North Carolina, there were 35 deaths; 7000 homes destroyed; 17,000 homes uninhabitable; 56,000 homes damaged; most roads east of I-95 flooded; Tar River crests 24 feet above flood stage; over 1500 people rescued from flooded areas; over 500,000 customers without electricity at some point; 10,000 people housed in temporary shelters; much of Duplin and Greene Counties under water; severe agricultural damage throughout eastern NC; [Editor's Note: inserted from a National Weather Service Event Summary⁶]

MUHAMMED: After Hurricane Floyd hit eastern North Carolina, we formed an organization called WRAP, Workers Relief and Aid Project, to assist flood survivors, to try to help them get through the recovery process. Myself and another BWFJ member, Joan, did the organizing. We would go out every day and just go around to all the communities talking door-to-door with people encouraging them to come to meetings as a group to talk about what was going on. . . . We recognized early on that the process had been set up to intentionally shut people out.

First of all, Hurricane Floyd broke a 500-year flood plain in Eastern North Carolina, and Princeville was under water for a week. Washed up graves and everything. So when the flood happened they put all the black folks in the shelters and they put all the white folks in hotels. And so, our thing was the water didn't discriminate, why does this process discriminate? Then we begin talking with the flood survivors. Well, first of all, everybody was called "victims" and we was like, *No, don't call yourself a victim because that renders you helpless. But if you call yourself a survivor that means you're going to fight back.* So they stopped saying victims and starting saying Hurricane Floyd Survivors. We made T-shirts with that on it.

I began going around talking with various people that had been flooded. And what I was hearing is they were all saying the same stuff, but because they weren't talking to each other, they felt isolated. So I began to say, *Well, have you talked with your neighbor? Because if you go talk with your neighbor, you're going to find out this is not just you that this is happening to; it's happening to everybody which means it's a systemic problem that needs to be addressed. And we need to figure out how to address it.*

But there was no way for them, the way the conditions were, there was no way for them to feel comfortable doing that, because FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] was riding people's back out there, and pretty much threatening them about what they could and couldn't do, you know? And patrolling the areas like people were criminals. They were treating people like they were criminals.

So we brought one of these trailers, under the auspices that we wanted to do a health clinic so that people had access to health care, since they had been dislocated, which we really did. But we also turned it into a meeting place for the

⁶ See <http://www4.ncsu.edu/~nwsfo/storage/cases/19990915/>.

community. We could call it a “meet and greet,” everybody in the same room. We had people talking and hearing each other. And you know, that began bringing them together and some cohesion formed amongst the survivors realizing that this was not an individual problem, but a systemic problem, and it needed to be addressed from that perspective. And people were able to do that once they understood that’s what it was.

Then we discovered that FEMA picked up 400 families from Princeville and moved them over to Rocky Mount to the coal ash landfill site. That site had been active up until the flood (and was right down the street from a women’s prison). So, you know, FEMA not only improperly closed it down but there was no real downtime between when they closed it and when people were put there.

And so we begin questioning, trying to find out what they had done to justify putting human beings over on this site. And not only were they lying to us about the site, they wouldn’t allow us to get the information which was supposed to be public information. So we wanted to know how to deal with this. Again we called on Steve and said, *What do we do about this? How can we find out about the site?*

One of Steve’s students was getting ready to work on his thesis and so we was like, let’s get this white boy from UNC-Chapel Hill, this prestigious university, to go over to the same places, to the county offices, to the state, to the company had been using that landfill, the company producing the coal ash. . . . Get him to go talk with everybody because they’ll tell him whatever he wants to know. First, because he white. Second, he got UNC behind his name. We knew that would work. And he agreed that would be his thesis.

So, he did research and the doors just flew wide open to him. Companies let him come over there and sit and talk with them all he wanted, and they answered every question he asked. And we were so tickled because we knew what was coming. When he got done and he summarized his research and when he did his report, what it showed was what we already knew. It had been an active landfill and had not been properly shut down. We asked them, *Had it been tested for human habitat?* They told us yeah. We knew they were lying. And that’s what the report showed. They were lying.⁷

When we started doing this research some of the FEMA workers found out what we were doing and started telling the community people that we were lying, and that we didn’t know what we were talking about. So we said to the people, OK, let’s see what happens when we call a press conference. Invite the

⁷ See Aaron Pulver, “FEMAville: Rock Mount’s Temporary Housing Facility: Are Its Residents at Risk?” (Master’s thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2000), http://www.southernstudies.org/images/sitepieces/pulver_report_coal_ash.pdf; Dumpsites in Disguise, a report of the Institute for Southern Studies, <http://www.southernstudies.org/2010/05/dumpsites-in-disguise.html>; and Farquhar S, Wing S. “Methodological and Ethical Considerations in Community-Driven Environmental Justice Research: Two Case Studies from Rural North Carolina,” in *Community Based Participatory Research for Health*, eds. M. Minkler and N. Wallerstein (Jossey-Bass, 2002).

media in to get this report. That was our way of telling the community we were telling the truth. But when we called a press conference, we saw all the big dogs coming to try to convince the community that this is not true. And that's how you know it's true, because if it wasn't true, they wouldn't be sending all the big dogs down.

GRANT: One of the most horrific scenes that haunts me even today is how the liberal, more well-to-do people sent truckloads of clothing to the site, and they were just dumped into a pile. There was no kind of a process to it; it was like people were scavengers.

MUHAMMED: Yeah, they had to dig through it.

GRANT: Yeah, they would have to dig through. It was the most humiliating thing, next to the fact that they were on a landfill that had not been closed. And that's the first time I've ever said that in an interview. But even today, periodically, you know, the image just flashes in my mind. And I mean, it was a mountain, it was like a landfill itself, a mountain of clothing that had just been dumped. It's very painful.

MUHAMMED: One of the things that came out of that as well was a coalition of organizations that already existed. BWFJ, CCT, NCEJN [North Carolina Environmental Justice Network], Steve and his students—

GRANT: CWEA was there at that time, Center for Women's Economic Alternatives.

MUHAMMED: Yeah, you know, through WRAP we became the interceptor with these deliveries to the people. We would deliver it to the workers' center, and sort it out and make it in nice neat sections and bundles and sized up and everything, so when it was delivered to the people, all they've got to do is know what size they need. Or if you need water, here's water. Not water, juice, and anything else that you can throw in that pile. You know, toothpaste and whatever. Everything was like neatly organized so that people could feel human when they came to get the stuff, and not being made to feel like they wasn't worth anything, like they had no value at all.

GRANT: And I think that that's one of the things that the EJ network does, as well, is to help people feel their own value, that they are worthy, that they are worthy to have clean air, clean water, and to be treated humanely by whomever, researchers, lawyers, government agencies, institutions of higher learning.

We also need to clarify the impact that the North Carolina Student Rural Health Coalition had in the early processes. A problem that we discovered with that Coalition is that young whites come into communities but they don't stay. The lesson learned is that it's the people who have to understand that they must have their own self-determination, not someone else coming in to define issues and problems for them. After we worked on the flood piece together, the next EJ summit was actually built around the flood survivors.

THE 51-HOUR HOG FARM VIGIL

GRANT: One of the other pieces is how we have been able to teach even some of the traditional environmental groups who we call tree-huggers, who save the fish and save the wild birds and all of that, that people have to be put into the equation. We have developed very strong allies with the River Keepers movement and the Water Keeper Alliance. And they helped us to organize a 51-hour vigil where we took a mock hog farm to the legislature.

MUHAMMED: Yeah, a mock hog farm. Two of our community partners built two little cute hog houses. We held a 51-hour vigil because the moratorium was due to expire in September of 2007. The moratorium was put in place in 1997 to try and slow down proliferation of the hog companies into North Carolina. And so in 2007 it was due to expire and so we wanted to make sure that our legislators heard from the community—

GRANT: It expired every two years. From 1997 to 2007, we had to go every two years to keep the moratorium in place. The significance of 2007 is that we took these model hog farms. We got a kids’ wading pool. We took 40 gallons of hog waste to the capitol grounds and that was the day that we found out that it was no longer “organic fertilizer” but that it was actually “toxic waste.” They told us that if we spilled one drop they would have to call Haz Mat in and it would cost us thousands of dollars to clean it up. But it’s OK to spray it on—

MUHAMMED: —because it was toxic waste! We was like, *toxic? What!* When we loaded it on the truck it was organic. So help us understand how we drove up 40 miles up the road and then it’s toxic waste.

GRANT: The River Keepers were very instrumental. One of the things that we did was show videos as people came by. And they had all of these wonderful little videos of white children standing in the waters and talking about the river and da-de-da-dum-da-de! And we then we put on *The Rest of the Story* which is a documentary about the hog CAFOs.⁸

MUHAMMED: Yeah. We put it on to be on the big screen TV that we had out there.

GRANT: We also gave a copy to every legislator, and we got the permanent ban.

NS: So that permanent ban meant it wasn’t a moratorium that would expire in two years. Now it’s—

GRANT: — permanent.

NS: No sunset?

⁸ *The Rest of the Story* is a nearly 15 minute video documentary of the hog farms in North Carolina, and residents and workers who have been affected by the farms. It was created by the North Carolina Environmental Justice Network and is available here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ReMXawj4oK8>.

GRANT: No sunset.

NS: And the ban is a ban of what?

GRANT: That they cannot build any new facilities with open cesspools and spray fields.

NS: So, back to the DVD.

MUHAMMED: We showed the DVD and one part of the DVD is an EJ Network member telling a story about what has happened to her family as a result of the hog industry taking their land and building hog CAFOSs right behind their house they were living in. One day, after constantly calling the sheriff trying to find out how these people got the land, she went to the register of deeds office to discover that the deeds had been changed. And that's how the hog farmers were able to build around their land. They had gone in there and changed the deeds and sold the land. They just took the land.

GRANT: That happens in many, many cases with family members who are illiterate. They just gradually take a piece. Who's going to check the deed? Who's going to be checking on a deed? And the daughter who came back home—

MUHAMMED: She had lived in New York. She had the original deed with her in New York. When she came back, she went and checked the deed and discovered that some of the land had been taken and they built the hog farms and were spraying animal waste. So she was going around and trying to get something done about it. Her mother lived in a house with a screened-in porch. And one day the hog grower's son walked in. He walked into their yard, had to go through the door on the porch and then the next door to get into the house, didn't knock, didn't ask to come in, and the grower's son shook her mother in the rocking chair. She was about 99 years old. Shook her around, cursing at her about what he was going do to her daughter if she didn't shut her mouth. And then about two weeks later she got a certified letter from the Sheriff's department telling her that if she didn't stop her groundless complaints, she would be made to serve time in jail or pay the hog farmer money to compensate them for money they were losing because of her groundless complaints. So these are the kinds of stories that I began hearing as I went out trying to organize and fight back against the pork industry in North Carolina. And so I'm saying to people we need to organize because we need to be fighting back. We can't just let this keep happening.

One of the things that I noticed in North Carolina, people don't talk to each other about problems. They'll lollygag all day about church and work but they don't talk about problems and issues that they need to talk about. And so as an organizer, I begin going around talking with people about things that we need to be talking about and then asking questions. Do you know what's going on in your community? And how much do you know about what's going on in your community? Are you talking to your neighbors about it? How do you feel about it? How do your neighbors feel about it? If everybody is having a problem, why y'all

not talking to each other? And why don't you form community groups to come together on a regular basis and meet and talk about the issues and make decision about what you want to do about it? And so when we did the 51-hour vigil in 2007, that's when we literally camped out on the grounds of our legislative body for 51 hours. We had tents and campers. We spent the night.

NS: You have spoken about Concerned Citizens of Tillery, and Black Workers for Justice. How closely aligned are the foundational principles of those groups, with AAEJAN and NCEJN?

MUHAMMED: Well, I know for Black Workers for Justice, we strongly support the Environmental Justice Network, and believe in the work of the Network. Black Workers for Justice, on some matters, has approached environmental concerns from the worker's perspective. We try to work together to help get some resolutions to environmental problems that affect workers.

GRANT: And Concerned Citizens of Tillery was actually born out of the principle of self-determination, the principle that community leaders would be at the forefront, are at the forefront. Concerned Citizens of Tillery, we're in the 35th year of our existence, and leadership is still coming from the local community. We have built a pretty good reputation locally, and somewhat statewide, that when we come, we're coming prepared.

CONCERNED CITIZENS OF TILLERY, 35 YEARS STRONG

NS: I'm struck by the fact that CCT is celebrating 35 years. There are of course still major issues regarding self-determination among the residents of Tillery and in communities throughout the rest of the country. Have you found that your principles or strategies have changed at all with the times?

GRANT: Well, we're not being dumped on anymore. That is a big difference. One threat that still remains is the loss of the land and the transformation of the community. I work with a researcher who has been telling me, Gary, your community is not 98 percent black, it is about 70-some percent black. And I keep telling that researcher that it is 98 percent black. Recently we were doing a presentation, and he had someone who does maps, and he asked that person, "Would you please show Gary his community . . ." and what it was, actually, is that the community's land is now being *owned* more by whites than by blacks. But, you know, the black population is still there. So we still have that struggle. As a strong community organization we have been able to ward off any kind of additional dumping that the local government or state or anyone else might have wanted to put on us.

I think that with some of the happenings in the North Carolina legislature this last session [Summer 2013—Ed.], that we may have to go back and rev up some of the rhetoric in order to get people to understand that, *Look out, we can be dumped on*. I've been at CCT for 33 of the years as the director, but I've been there the whole 35. And I have watched the organization go through several formations, I'm

not necessarily real thrilled with the formation at the present time because we still have the issue of religion, and the indoctrination of community residents. I tell the ministers, you know, all you're doing is trying to save our bodies for the grave while we give you all the gold that we can bring into the church out of our poor, meager salaries and retirement funds that people have. So, I find that as a black-mailing issue too, because the churches in the community still are not addressing issues that they need to be addressing, from our perspective. We had an 87-year-old the other day who actually spoke up about the church and the preacher, well, not the church so much, but the preachers only being interested in getting the money for themselves. And when that age group begins to raise that issue, then you know somebody has done something that shouldn't have been done.

But I think that the organization is still relatively strong. The people are still ready to wage battles to protect themselves. We actually had a group that went up to Moral Monday. They weren't ready to get arrested or anything like that, but the fact is they went and wanted to go again. . . . So I think the people are still aware that the fate of what happens to them lies in their hand, other than, they aren't ready to take on the preacher just yet. And that doesn't mean that the church should not be there, I'm just saying that sometimes you have to stand up and say, whoa, wait a minute here.

You know, in 35 years I think we [CCT] probably have members in at least two-thirds of the country (people who have been through the community) because of the fact that people really live by the principle of self-determination.

MUHAMMED: Yeah, and they are kept abreast of what's going on all around, and not just in their own community, but around the state, country, even the world. A newsletter goes out on a quarterly basis that consists of all the work that's going on in North Carolina. And then that newsletter's mailed out to all the people in the states all around. And so when they get a membership notice for dues due, they'll be happy to pay them, because they're going to keep getting that newsletter.

GRANT: And it also keeps people who are from Tillery connected to each other.

MUHAMMED: I think when Gary was talking about Moral Mondays, it made me think about the fact that, you know, I have my grandchildren visiting from Philadelphia. Well, I guess the first thing I thought about was my own children who's now bringing their children down to visit, but they grew up, during the formation of the Black Workers for Justice. They were babies when we got started. And when you ask them, are they members of BWFJ, they tell everybody, we didn't have a choice, we was born into the movement, so we didn't have a choice.

But then we got our grandbabies visiting this summer for the first time without their parents. They were left with us. And so we've been kind of taking them wherever we go. So they went to three Trayvon Martin rallies, they went to a Moral Monday, they went to lunches, three EJ sessions while they were here. And you could see that they were learning from it. Because the five-year-old, which I always say is the spunky one, at the first session we went to in Tillery, Steve was showing these video clips that he had. And one of them is of me being arrested at Moral Monday. So the little five-year-old when we was in the car said, "Grandma,



“Monday Protest”

Photo by Chris Seward, 6/3/2013, Courtesy The News & Observer

the next time the police tell you to do something, can you just do it, so you don't have to get arrested again?" I said, "Well why not?" And they say "because that is embarrassing, and could you not show that picture to anybody else? Could you not show that picture?"

But then she goes to the Trayvon Martin March, and comes back flying into the house, "Grandma, you want to know what we learned?" And then that's when she said the chant about Trayvon Martin, and we all know the reason why he was killed, because the whole system is guilty, the whole system is guilty. And then she chants "no justice, no peace," and she be pumping her little fist into the air. And so when she said that it was embarrassing about me being arrested, the eight-year-old and my 15-year-old granddaughter tell her, "No it's not, because grandma's fighting for our rights." So it's all right to get arrested for that.

GRANT: But it also opens up avenues of dialogue, and that's the important thing, that children can begin to understand that all is not well in the world.

WING: I've never asked either of you about this. Do you see the EJ network, in principle, as being an organization that responds to communities that are trying to organize around the problem, and they come to the network for advice and assistance? Or, do you see the network as an organization that goes around looking for communities that are experiencing something to go become involved in? Or does it matter?

MUHAMMED: Well, from my perspective, I think it's a little bit of both. We have communities that call on us, and you know, we will go and assist them. And if they are already organized and they have some questions about maybe is there a better way to do what they're doing, we can offer some advice, and we'll do that. Some communities want the experiences that I have as an organizer to share with other people in the community.

And then there are some communities, I mean, there are some towns where we hear about something, we hear, we recognize the danger, and then we just want to make sure whoever's living near that area is informed about what's going on. Because you know, we really, we firmly believe people don't do anything when they don't know. But if you were informed, if people know, then they can make informed decisions based on what they know. But if you don't know nothing, you don't notice you need to be doing something.

GRANT: I would agree that the organizations primarily will find us somehow or another, and I think that speaks well of the organizing that the network has done, and the number of communities that it has connected with, and the word gets out that you need to contact this group. As we are growing and technology is growing, we've not been, I would say, as progressive in using technology as some of the younger members who are coming in think that we should. And we're open to them taking that on, just don't be adding it onto my plate and we'll be all right.

But I do think that there is a struggle within the organization. We never go into a community and take the lead, it's always supporting the organization. But as to whether it's going to be an advisory, paper-pushing group, or if it's actually going to be a group that is on the ground with the community, walking with them and going with them where they need to go, and knowing that they have that support of people there with them when they need to stand up to elected officials, government at all levels, or institutions at whatever level.

ENGAGING YOUNG ADULTS IN THE MOVEMENT

GRANT: I think some struggle comes about because younger people who are coming along have actually been duped into believing that they grew up in a color-blind society. And they really think that we can do it this way, you know, we can go through the "legitimate," avenues, and problems will be taken care of. And so there is an internal, whether it's admitted to or not, but there is that internal struggle amongst the representatives at the table.

And a great deal of that has to do with the fact that we don't have actual community people—the great number of *community* people that we need at the table. The community is becoming vastly outnumbered by professionals, and we've really got to do something about that. The professionals who go home at night, back to their safe havens. Even though their hearts are in the right place, they haven't moved into the community. They can go home to their clean air and their

safe neighborhood and their gated neighborhood and all of that, while we’re still going home to all of the poop and landfills and all.

NS: Do you think that’s mostly as you described it just now, a generational thing, the younger people being color-blind?

MUHAMMED: I think it’s generational, and I also think it comes from a lack of exposure to history, and to what’s really going on in the community. And you know, that’s one of the things we see when we have the community meetings with others. We go to the meetings, the young people are not there, but live in the community. So we always ask the question, where are the youth? And why are they not in this room? Because they’re getting the same exposure, so they need to be learning the same as the adults are learning. They need to be in the room, involved in the discussions and aware, which means that they would hear some of the history that takes place in those meetings.

GRANT: And that’s one of the reasons that we have a youth summit that coincides with our regular NCEJN summit, even though there are some corrections that need to be made there, but at least we’re bringing youth in. And I think that we need to distinguish youth and young adults. It’s the young adults that we’re not getting into the movement, or even to become aware. The youth we are reaching more so, and all of that has to do with the fact that the young adults are trying to make a living, trying to keep food on the table, and you know, it’s very, very, very stressful, as the whole society and especially in areas like this have changed from an agrarian agriculture where families worked together—we were all at home before. But now your travel is so far, if you have a job, you’re traveling an hour, hour and a half to get to work, and an hour, an hour and a half to get back home. And that just leads to the whole deterioration of the community. When we expose children to the right things, they will go. And when we support the children when they want to do something, and that’s one of the things CCT has always done, we do intergenerational work, we’ve got to have your input, and so that things will move in life with what it is that you feel, or how you feel that they should be done. But the youth, the young adults, they don’t know what the struggle really is. But they’re angry. And they have a right to be angry.

MUHAMMED: No jobs, no, you know—

GRANT: No decent housing.

MUHAMMED: Education being cut. Now, you know, they’re going to have to fight for the right to vote. Unemployment is an issue in North Carolina because of what the administration has done, cutting unemployment, cutting it down from the, a maximum of \$500 to \$350, and they cut back the number of weeks that you could draw down to 20 weeks is the maximum that people can draw.

NS: \$350 is the maximum?

MUHAMMED: \$350 per week is the maximum amount that a person can draw for unemployment. And now they can only draw for 20 weeks as of July 1, 2013.

As of July the 1st in North Carolina, there was 70,000 people that got eliminated from unemployment because of that rule by this administration. 70,000 people that was collecting unemployment, that as of July the 1st, no longer have unemployment benefits, because of the way they rewrote the laws.

GRANT: Even community leaders have been so brainwashed that we must accept this institution's method, you know, no one asks, *Why are we living off of food stamps?* And then the, those who have, "arrived," are asking, *Well why are they getting so many food stamps and I can't get any?* You know, all these pieces that are still being put into place to divide us, and that there is no discussion taking place within the community to address it.

MUHAMMED: And the other day when I was at church, one of the things I was discussing with a young lady, we were sitting with the children, and we were discussing the fact that when my children were growing up, I wouldn't have to worry about child care. I mean family automatically kept your children for you if you had to go to work. You always had family or friends that would say, we'll just bring the children here, and you don't have to pay anything.

But now, the cost of childcare . . . my daughter, she was just talking, her childcare bills run up \$300 a week. You know, so how can a low-wage worker afford that kind of child-care bill? So I was saying to people, you know, they run around talking about these young girls on welfare. Well, if they can't get no decent job, what's the purpose of going to work if you're really literally paying to go to work because by the time you pay child care, by the time you buy clothes to wear, pay taxes, buy lunch, get transportation, you ain't got no money. You're paying them to go do their work for them. And so it makes no sense for a low-wage worker with children to go to work. There's nothing for them to gain from it, absolutely nothing.

GRANT: No recreation either. Recreation's on the other side of town, you can't get there, there's no public transportation. You know, the more things have changed, the more they have remained the same.

MUHAMMED: And then we think about the Trayvon Martin, if they go to the other side of town for recreation, will they make it back alive? You know, will they make it back alive?

**SELF-DETERMINATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE:
"BECAUSE IF IT GETS TO YOUR NEIGHBOR'S DOOR, YOU BETTER
BELIEVE IN A FEW SHORT MINUTES IT'S GOING
TO BE AT YOUR DOOR."**

NS: So is this economic justice part of . . .

GRANT: It has to be.

NS: . . . part of self-determination.

GRANT: It has to be a part of self-determination, it has to be a part of the environmental justice movement, it has to be a part of workers for justice, it has to be a part of everything, whether our government has become so corrupt by corporations who just want to hog everything for themselves, and poor people are so far down the line that by the time they get it . . . No matter what, it has to be the community's self-determination that changes it. Now, they can be duped, they can be fooled, and all of that, but ultimately, and hopefully in many cases, they will come back, they will come back and actually, you know, group themselves, gather themselves, and move towards changing it.

NS: How much educating do you do around how to make things change? Like working within the system, working with your legislature, your elected officials versus (or in addition to) going to rallies. When do you stand up, and where? Is that kind of education part of how you organize?

MUHAMMED: Well, one of the things, when you understand the way, and probably pretty much everywhere, you have your local governments and you have your state government and your federal government. So in North Carolina, it is critical that people pay attention to what's happening in these local governments in our communities. Like in our Rocky Mount city council, and the zoning board meeting, and the planning board meetings. And even in our educational board meetings, you have those boards, and you know, like panelists. If you've got children in school, you need to be attending those educational board meetings, because this is where they're making decisions about what's going to happen to you, and in your absence if you're not there, if you don't go to these arenas. So we encourage people to pay attention to what's going on at the local level so that you can be in front of the ball instead of always being behind it. So it's a lot easier to stop stuff than it is to change it.

So if we get there and we're in the room when the decisions are getting ready to be made, we can speak to them then. And that's what we encourage in the network. That's what we encourage people to do, to be at these meetings. And you know, when we did the 51-hour vigil, we also set up the meetings with various state representatives of the constituency that was coming to the vigil so that they could go in and talk with their representatives about why we were doing the 51-hour vigil and what the concerns were.

For many of the people that came that day to rally, they had never gone into that building and talked with their state reps. And you know, people would say, "I didn't know I could do that." They didn't know that they could go in the building, and go in those offices and talk with those representatives. So they were able to do that. And then we had this one idiot senator who had never had his constituency come, and he couldn't handle it, so he got a little feisty in the room. And Gary and I was in that room. And so when he got feisty and he go and jump up from his seat like he's going to do something to somebody, and he stepped out from behind the desk like he's going to hit somebody, Gary stepped to him. And I'm in the room,

and I was like, *You know what? If you want to throw a punch, you're on your own, because I can't referee.* But the nerve, as an elected official that's going to get so offended he's going to jump up and do something. But he had been so used to, you know, what do you call it?

NS: Intimidation.

MUHAMMED: Intimidating, intimidating his constituency in the counties, at the county level, that he thought he could do it at the state level.

GRANT: I want to say, and I think Tillery is a good example, Concerned Citizens of Tillery was founded by a group of volunteers. There was no money, and when we did get money, it almost destroyed the organization. I guess we should be thankful that there was some strong leadership that helped us to get through it. But I'm also finding that when we're having Tillery-ites return home, we're getting two kinds. Those who were successful, [who] are very conservative, and those who were still working in laborious jobs. They are the ones who are insulted when they go to government offices to do things, or they go to the bank, and they feel like they've been mistreated. You never hear that kind of complaint from those who graduated college, or who went off and actually got a job in business and that could wear, you know, a shirt and tie to work every day, or perhaps worked even in the federal government in some form or another. But they are very, very conservative. And it's because they were scared to death that they were going to lose their job. And when you've been in poverty and you have an opportunity to get a paycheck every week, you're bought off, whether we want to accept it or not, but that's basically what happens.

I also wanted to add something when Naeema was talking about people attending meetings. Halifax County, where I live, is 70 miles wide. Which means the center of the county is 35 miles from the furthest borders, both ways, which is a 70 mile trip in order to go to a government meeting. Then with the continued out-migration of the children as they go off to college and don't come back, we're now busing children almost two hours a day, each way, to get to school.

And so the children are being bused two hours, and parents are driving an hour to an hour-and-a-half to work. So that's actually three-and-a-half hours before you can get to your child if something happens to you. And no one looks at those kinds of things. And all of that plays a role.

I will end with this, how self-determination is being, what's the word? Taken away from people. Even if they wanted to feel empowered they are feeling so disempowered because of government and institutions that continue to take away from them.

MUHAMMED: And then the last thing I will add to that is, when we talk about research and communities, all of this stuff that we just talked about are the kinds of things that I think should be involved in conversations with communities that need research. They need research because they have a problem that's impacting their health. But you know, let's connect all these dots. Why was Trayvon Martin

killed? What does that have to do with environmental justice? And why did they roll back all those policies up there at the state house? What does that have to do with it? We understand how all these things are connected, whether it's the killing of Trayvon Martin or the rolling back of a bill, if you're living on this earth breathing still, you need to be concerned about these decisions that's being made. Because they're going to eventually roll over into every community in this country.

It reminds me again of Philadelphia, we was fighting police brutality. But you try to get people to understand; you don't wait for the police to come beat your head in to get up and be involved in this fight against police brutality. You get involved now so you don't have to get your head beaten in. You know? But it's like, until it comes to my front door, it don't affect me.

How do we get our people to stop thinking like that? Feeling like that, you know, you've got to be involved, whether it's at your front door or if it's at your neighbor's door. Because if it gets to your neighbor's door, you better believe in a few short minutes it's going to be at your door. So we need to do something now before it gets to that point. That's the last thing I have to say: “no justice, no peace.”

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