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Interview with Ericka Huggins

Ericka Huggins

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**LOUISE PETTUS ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**Interview #248
HUGGINS, Ericka**

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Former Black Panther, AIDS activist, meditation teacher

Interviewed: May 27, 1994

Interviewer: Ron Chepesiuk

Index by: Alyssa Jones

Length: 1 hour, 10 minutes, 28 seconds

Abstract: In her May 1994 interview with Ron Chepesiuk, Ericka Huggins discussed her part in the 1960s radical movements. Huggins described motivation for joining the BPP and her time as a member, her current work as an AIDS activist, and her work with prison inmates. Huggins covered several topics of the time, including Black Power, Huey Newton, separation movements, FBI involvement, the US Organization, and Charles Hamilton. She also discussed the Thomas-Hill hearings, COINTELPRO and its involvement, the NAACP, the Oakland Community Learning Center, her husband, AIDS and HIV, and her work at the Shanti Project. This interview was conducted for inclusion into the Louise Pettus Archives and Special Collections Oral History Program.

Keywords: Shanti Project, AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome), HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus), Charles Hamilton and *Black Power*, Black Power, Black Student Congress, Black Panther Party for Self Defense (BPP), Huey Newton, John Huggins, NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), “All Power to the People”, US Organization (Organization Us), UCLA 1969 Shooting, FBI involvement, COINTELPRO (COunter INTELligence PROgram), Separation movements, Oakland Community Learning Center, Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, Weather Underground

Interview Session (May 27, 1994): Digital File

Time Keywords

00:00:00 *Start of Interview*/Interviewer’s Introduction

00:03:05 *Question:* What is the Shanti Project? *Answer:* The Shanti Project was started in 1974 to work with people with life threatening illnesses. In 1982, it started seeing the first numbers of men with Kaposi’s sarcoma, a cancer specific to people with AIDS. The project then focused on people with AIDS.

00:04:17 *Question:* People think of AIDS as a gay White disease. How much of an impact has

- AIDS had on the Black community? *Answer:* EH gave an example of a section of the Bronx. One out of five women in that area was HIV positive. The women were African American and Puerto Rican. Children were the highest at-risk group.
- 00:05:11 *Question:* That's really a revelation because those figures don't appear in media counts. *Answer:* Because the media has one slant on most things. EH and a colleague wrote a proposal for a program that would help the underserved. They couldn't think of a name, so her friend called it "Crossings". Volunteers from Crossings provided emotional support and practical assistance. Crossings provided these services to children and families with AIDS, as well as individuals. EH said it was a federally funded program and by contract, their clients were poor and lived in certain districts.
- 00:08:04 *Question:* Since you are federally funded, what do you think of the federal government's response to the AIDS crisis? Is it meeting the needs of the people? *Answer:* EH said it was never adequate because the numbers were still rising.
- 00:08:30 *Question:* Did the Reagan-Bush hands-off approach exacerbate the AIDS crisis? *Answer:* EH did not blame the government. EH said that the citizens were at fault because they did not believe the AIDS crisis would ever touch them, so they did not move for change.
- 00:11:38 *Question:* You know how much prejudice there is towards AIDS patients... Are Blacks extra stigmatized because they have AIDS? *Answer:* Yes, especially Black gay men. Oppressed people don't like added oppression.
- 00:12:28 *Question:* Are you a native of San Francisco? *Answer:* No, EH was originally from Washington, DC, but had been living in California since 1971.
- 00:12:38 *Question:* Could you describe your background? Where were you born and what kind of background you came from? *Answer:* EH was born into a working-class family. Her mother worked as a secretary at the State Department and her father worked as a clerk in the Pentagon. They lived in southeast DC, which was poor to lower middle-class. EH was the oldest of three children and never wanted for food, but her parents did struggle.
- 00:13:17 *Question:* Where did you go to college? *Answer:* EH went to two colleges. The first was Cheney State Teachers College in Oxford, Pennsylvania. The second was Lincoln University. EH was at Lincoln when Charles Hamilton, who was the author of *Black Power*, was there. In her third year of school, while a member of the Black Student Congress, she read a news article about Huey Newton being shot by the Oakland police. She decided to go to California and join the Black Panther Party.

- 00:13:58 *Question:* What year was that? *Answer:* 1967.
- 00:14:08 *Question:* A year after the party started? *Answer:* Yes. When she left school, it was one month after Huey had been shot.
- 00:14:34 *Question:* How old were you then? *Answer:* 18 and a half.
- 00:14:40 *Question:* That was a daring move. *Answer:* Yes, EH said that was how she was. When she decided something, if something needed to change, then she would do it. She knew her parents' money was being wasted, but she felt a pull to do it.
- 00:15:15 *Question:* What happened when you arrived? *Answer:* She went with her friend, who she later married. The pair stayed in various places until they found an apartment. They worked in an auto parts factory while they sought out the Black Panther Party. A couple of months after meeting with the BPP, the two quit their jobs to work full time with the party until John (Huggins) was killed at UCLA in 1969. After his death, EH went to the east coast to bury him in New Haven, Connecticut, where she was asked to start a party chapter. Three months later she was arrested and charged with conspiracy to commit murder.
- 00:16:28 *Question:* How do you explain the growth of the party in the mid-60s? Was there a need for this sort of thing? *Answer:* Obviously. People wanted to stand up against what they saw as unjust. People loved the NAACP, but it was not getting the job done.
- 00:17:24 *Question:* There were a lot of misconceptions about the party, too, right? People thought it was just Black Power, but it actually did a lot of good for poor people, too? *Answer:* Yes. EH said that they did not use "Black Power" and instead always said "All Power to the People". All oppressed people were included because they had alliances with all the other racial organizations, along with other organizations. There were also White and Latino people who joined the Black Panther Party. Huey Newton even spoke of Gay Liberation. The BPP was misrepresented in the media and history.
- 00:18:53 *Question:* Is that because you were so successful? *Answer:* Yes.
- 00:19:50 *Question:* Did you really think you were going to live through the period? *Answer:* EH said she woke up every day and thanked God or whoever that she had lived another day. EH spoke of how many of the people she knew were killed, including her husband.
- 00:20:26 *Question:* That was with the US Organization? *Answer:* No, that was with the FBI. The US Organization was not responsible for the 1969 shooting. The FBI infiltrated

all of the organizations.

- 00:21:57 *Question:* Given what you lost and what you went through, it would be hard not be bitter towards the government. Do you feel that way? *Answer:* EH said she believes everyone's destiny unfolds as it is meant to. Her experience in prison taught her that she has a lot to learn. It was a great thing that brought her to the BPP. If she held onto her bitterness, then it would not change anything. The government would not care and she would not be able to continue living in a meaningful way. EH held COINTELPRO responsible, not the government.
- 00:24:59 *Question:* That was as bad as anything the KGB could have done in the Soviet Union, but there really hasn't been much reaction that this had such a negative impact. *Answer:* EH said that people cared, but people were too tired and overwhelmed by the prospect of speaking out.
- 00:25:39 *Question:* And your book is going to help, too? *Answer:* EH hoped that her book would be helpful.
- 00:25:47 *Question:* You said that the sixties lacked a spiritual dimension. Could you elaborate on that? *Answer:* EH thought that if people had had a spiritual background, not necessarily religious, but a spiritual container to hold the hard times, then it would have been a different movement. Something similar to what Martin Luther King, Jr. called for from Mahatma Gandhi.
- 00:28:11 *Question:* [in reference to EH's jail experience] You were in isolation for almost two years? *Answer:* 14 months, and then the last 6 months. She meditated to get herself through jail.
- 00:31:49 *Question:* So that (spiritual inadequacy) was the biggest problem with the movement? *Answer:* Yes, the poverty of spirit is at the core of everything.
- 00:32:01 *Question:* There is a movement of young Blacks for separation. You see this at universities with Black Student Centers. What's your opinion on this? *Answer:* EH said there had always been separation movements, even in the '50s. EH did not care one way or the other, but did not think it helped anything.
- 00:32:22 *Question:* Do you think there's been much progress since the '60s? *Answer:* No. Racism is heavily imbedded in the minds of European Americans. EH said that until the White American community decided to change, then no change would come about.
- 00:34:22 *Question:* I have read critiques that racism is imbedded in the capitalist system. Do you agree? *Answer:* Yes. EH did not believe that was a critique of the system, it

was just a fact of life. EH agreed that the capitalist system was a system of stepping on others and oppression.

00:37:21 *Question:* Do you have any hope for the future? *Answer:* EH said she always had hope. She believed that people did not want to live nasty, small-minded lives, but lived that way because they did not know an alternative. EH discussed the stereotypes that were impressed upon children that continued the animosity between various races of people.

00:41:31 *Question:* White America is really afraid of rap. *Answer:* Some of it. EH said that there were young White people who loved rap and some of them even rapped. She went on to say that White America was afraid of everything. EH asked what White America wasn't afraid of.

00:42:40 *Question:* Music expresses the mind. *Answer:* Yes, exactly. EH said that the children loved Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix, and Janis Joplin. They loved the '60s singers.

00:44:30 *Question:* Hillard wrote about the Oakland Community Learning Center, but did not describe what was involved with that. *Answer:* It was a school. They realized that one could not work with children without working with their families.

00:45:15 *Question:* What year was this? *Answer:* The school was started in 1971, but became the Oakland Community Learning Center in 1973. EH was the director until 1981.

00:45:33 *Question:* Is it still surviving? *Answer:* No, it closed in 1982.

00:45:39 *Question:* Are a lot of the programs that the BPP created in the '60s still surviving? *Answer:* No, however, many of the ideas that they started survived, like the free lunches in schools.

00:46:40 **[audio unclear]** EH and RC were speaking about how the BPP was viewed in the Black community at the 1990s.

00:53:18 **[no question]** EH was speaking about how working on other movements did not excuse racism, nor did it automatically fix racism.

00:53:45 *Question:* In what context? *Answer:* EH continued to explain why the change in view of one group of people would not automatically change people's views on race. There were White feminists who wanted to work with the BPP, but not with Black men.

00:54:19 *Question:* Why not? *Answer:* EH said it was because they were afraid of Black

- men, probably because of what their parents told them about Black men.
- 00:57:59 *Question:* You said that you thought the feminists were crazy? *Answer:* No, EH thought that the Weather Underground was crazy.
- 00:58:20 *Question:* Why did the BPP align itself with the Underground? Was there a lot of division within the party? *Answer:* No, but EH did not know everything that went on. EH did not know why the two were aligned, but the Weather Underground was a revolutionary organization and they tended to align themselves with all revolutionary organizations unless they were not in agreement with the BPP. EH thought that the Weather Underground was too spontaneous and did not have the best interest of the people in mind. EH admitted that people thought the same of the BPP.
- 00:59:28 *Question:* In 1972, there were two factions. *Answer:* COINTELPRO was behind the shift and some of the things that the Weather Underground did. EH and RC discussed the difficulties of organizations and how they often split.
- 01:00:02 *Question:* What are your views today on women's rights? *Answer:* EH said she believed that every human being deserved the best. Women deserved to be treated like human beings, not equal to something.
- 01:01:50 *Question:* Are you politically active outside of your work with the AIDS patients? *Answer:* Sometimes. If EH was asked to speak somewhere, then she agreed to it, but it depended on what it was.
- 01:03:50 *Question:* You said you're married and have two children? *Answer:* Three children.
- 01:04:03 *Question:* What does your husband do? *Answer:* EH's ex-husband was an acupuncturist.
- 01:05:09 *Question:* In that *New York Times* article, Elaine Brown said that Anita Hill was crucified. Do you feel that way? *Answer:* Yes.
- 01:05:32 *Question:* Was it painful watching her testify? *Answer:* Yes. EH said it was more painful to listen to Thomas lie.
- 01:05:54 *Question:* But his strategy was effective. *Answer:* EH said it was a boys' club and that it was awful. It left a statement that it was okay to do whatever one wants to a woman in the workplace.
- 01:06:25 *Question:* You don't think it helped women? The way she presented herself? *Answer:* EH thought that Hill was great.

- 01:07:08 *Question:* What about your future? *Answer:* EH did not think she would stay in AIDS work, and planned to go with whatever called to her. EH was teaching a class called Health and Safety for prison inmates. It was a meditation class.
- 01:07:47 *Question:* What kind of response do you get from prisoners? *Answer:* Their response was good. EH said that people liked it.
- 01:08:18 *Question:* How long have you been doing it? Teaching? *Answer:* Since 1979.
- 01:08:33 *Question:* Do you ever get nostalgic for the sixties? *Answer:* No. She missed some people, but not the sixties.
- 01:08:56 *Question:* Is there a lot of camaraderie among the people that are still living? *Answer:* Yes.
- 01:09:10 *Question:* Do you ever see the possibility of another organization like the Black Panthers forming again? *Answer:* Yes, it was possible. There would not be another Black Panther Party because it had its own place in history. EH said that there were organizations that tried to replicate the BPP, but they had not been successful.
- 01:10:28 *End of interview*