

Called to Lead: One-on-One with Wilhelm Joseph

Rosita Stanley, vice chair of the NLADA Board of Directors and lifetime client leader along with Hillary Evans, NLADA staff liaison to the Client Policy Group sat down and had a dialogue with Wilhelm Joseph, executive director of the Maryland Legal Aid Bureau. Conducting this interview had been a long time coming for Stanley who led the interview and saw it as an opportunity to introduce this pivotal equal justice leader to the client community and her peers.

Planting the Seed; Joseph in his Early Years

ROSITA STANLEY: *I really want to introduce you to the client community and to my peers I've [known] you for a long time, but I [didn't] know [a lot] stuff, so I just wanted [you] to share some of that with us and to talk with us a little bit about your perspective on where we are and how we move forward.*

WILHELM JOSEPH: *What I do and what I have done was really easy for me because of my circumstances. I was born into a situation of, let's call it poverty. I was the first child of parents who divorced very early in my life and my mother went on to have five more children. There were six children she raised by herself, basically. And it was a typical poor woman's situation in a third world [country]; not very many things were available to us.*

And everyday, acquiring the basics involved some struggle. And [while] people take things like lunchtime meal[s] and dinnertime meal[s] in stride for granted, even something as basic as that in my household required vision. Vision and creativity as to where the next meal would come from. I remember leaving for school in the morning and not knowing if we were going to have a lunch that day. And my mother always told me to make the girls' lunch.

When I came to the US on a track scholarship, it was after I had received a very good high school education. I went to one of the best high schools probably in the entire Caribbean, which I had competed for and won a spot. And that was the basic foundation. I had a sense of vision and justice, which I think was inculcated in me by my grandmother who got her sense of justice from her strong religious beliefs and strong adherence to her religious beliefs. I have not met a single individual yet in my life who walked the talk like my grandmother. And she taught me that, that adherence to principle and humility can in fact make you a very strong person. She rejected wealth and many things but had strength of inner self that radiated out to people. And if you met her once in your life you felt blessed.

So, with that kind of a background when I landed in Mississippi in 1965 to pursue a higher education, it was about time to better myself. But it didn't take me but a few hours to realize that I was under some mistaken beliefs that in the US, particularly in the South, things had changed, that civil rights and laws had been passed, the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965, and that segregation was no longer the order of the day. But I saw that

de facto segregation was still the order of the day, and that I found that to be abhorrent that people strictly on the basis of the color of their skin were being held back and treated as second class citizens. And I just saw myself as one of those people and that was not something I could tolerate. And I can recall my mother saying to me, be careful about your involvement with all this stuff. And I said back to her that's like saying to me, to jump into a barrel of tar naked but avoid getting black.

So, I found myself interacting with my fellow Mississippians young people who eventually pushed me to get involved in voter registrations and picketing. We did a lot of picketing against segregation.

We found that stores in little towns in the Mississippi delta would take your money but wouldn't hire a black person. I found that terribly hard and we did a lot of, marching and picketing in Greenwood and in Louisville and I would run into people like Fannie Lou Hamer who took me under her wings and when I saw the kinds of sacrifices that she was making as an individual, I thought I was privileged to be going to a university and enjoying a scholarship that basically was made possible by sacrifices of people like Fannie Lou Hamer and others who had gone before us in that state and other states around here.

STANLEY: *How did you meet Fannie Lou Hamer?*

JOSEPH: *Fannie Lou lived about 30 miles from my university, and through my involvement and connections, she became a very strong advisor to me. I [would] say to her, Fannie Lou here's a problem, she'd say to me, "Okay, I agree, now what you going to do about it?" And so the next time I knew that when I go back to Fannie Lou I have to tell her here is what I'm going to do about it, and what do you think? She wanted action and action that had some objective that made sense. And so those are some of the fundamental lessons that had a positive impact on my life.*

In the Face of Adversity

JOSEPH: *As a student leader in Mississippi, [those in power] thought that I was some kind of threat to some kind of established order. And they did all kinds of things including my being expelled from school. I found out later that the state of Mississippi had a daily surveillance of my activities for seven straight years. Every single day somebody was surveiling and writing a report about my whereabouts; what I was doing, what I was saying.*

I could've been dead. Somebody fired a rifle shot into my room at 2 o'clock in the morning when I was studying at a desk. And not knowing if that shot was fired to scare me or was it an attempt to knock me off or whatever the case might be. And many other things happened. I knew they had a concerted effort to prevent - in their own words, this is the state of Mississippi, to prevent my enrollment at the University of Mississippi and also to secure my deportation for no particular violation of any public order or private order whatever the case might be.

In retrospect, I would say, "My goodness gracious." I always say it was maybe my grandmother's prayers that protected me. Because I don't know how I survived umm obvious attempts by the governor and the lieutenant governor would the senate president in Washington conspiring to do me in. How I survived that I don't even know.

STANLEY: *[Didn't the government] even create a law or rewrite a law so they could [deport you]?*

JOSEPH: *The governor said, when the Senate Judiciary Committee staff wrote back and said, "Well, unfortunately he is complying with the terms of his visa and there is no grounds for his deportation." The governor wrote back and said, "Well, can you all find some law or change the law to make it illegal for a foreign student to be involved with the civil rights movement." That didn't go anywhere apparently or came in stride. And when several hundred of my fellow students were arrested in 1969, I think that put me over the edge. I became a true, a true revolutionary.*

Several hundred students have been arrested, taken off campus, sent home, and the president made some statement about several of them can't come back and most of them have to reapply after three months. I said I'll tell you one thing, every muscle in my body and every bone, whatever I can do, I will make sure that every single student who wants to come back here [will] come back here without a hurdle otherwise there is no school at this university. I said it to myself. I said it to [the president] directly, and I meant I would do anything to achieve that because that was an ultimate unfair act. They had committed nothing wrong, done nothing wrong. And in the end we triumphed with the cooperation of the students who were living on campus, those who were living off campus, and the parents of the students.

And [then] the president [made] some silly statements, telling me that these students were not as smart as I was and that they were so poor--- that they were happy for the first time in their lives to be in a place where they have indoor plumbing and indoor toilets, and I said, "Guess what president, me too." It was the first time for me too. He didn't know that. You know that was the old divide and conquer. And then [the president] told them some of my fellow student leaders, "Hey you don't want to associate with Wilhelm Joseph, he's a foreigner. He doesn't understand what's going on here." And we [all] rejected that crap. And today some of my colleagues and I we are still close, and one of them is a very prominent surgeon here in Maryland ... It's about the experience of sticking together on principle and not falling for what we call the "okeydoke."

Pursuing a Legal Career

After the arrests, we had to get the help of many lawyers to process people back in the school At that point [in] time, Mississippi only had two or three homebred black lawyers in the entire state. And they were all, at that point, what I would call senior citizens. By 1968 and 1969, a couple of black law students had graduated from

University of Mississippi. Most of them had been transfer students from other law schools. And we began to see a little group of indigenous black lawyers. And they said to me, Wilhelm, you have only but one choice. You have to go to law school. And you have only one other choice in law school ...the University of Mississippi law school. We decided that was [how it was] going to be. Of course, interestingly they tried to prevent me from going there unsuccessfully.

They figured I needed scholarship money. So when they tried to take my scholarship, the whole point was that I would not be able to attend the University of Mississippi Law School. But what happened, the dean who admitted me was fired within weeks of admitting me to law school. I was not the sole reason; I spoke with the man for the first time in my life last year. And he said I was not the only reason – I was part of it. They were still very upset with him. It was the native Mississippians. They were upset with him for bringing in black students into the law school, hiring a young, what do you call it, liberal, progressive faculty, primarily from the north. So, when I received his notice on June 30, 1969 [granting my] scholarship admission to the law school . . . and exactly one month later [the law school indicated] that it was a mistake.

However, I was able to put together a package with the help of other professors at the law school and things like the [NAACP] Legal Defense Fund [and] the Warren Scholarship Fund. I was a CLEO fellow . . . and we put together a very lucrative package to go to law school. I thought I was rich. I was rich going to law school. So, I could buy my books and food [and it] wasn't a struggle and it was good.

Passing the Torch & Leading the Way

So anyway, you know I left Mississippi with the intention of practicing law in Mississippi. I was elected to something called the Law Students Civil Rights Research Council (LSCRRC) which was a national organization of law students. At that point, the primary programs were to recruit law students to fill summer clerkships at public interest places around the country. . . . And then when I got there, I was very fortunate to be given the biggest foundation grant people ever [received] from the Carnegie foundation to launch a program of recruiting people of color for law school and to set up programs to retain people of color at law schools in addition to the summer program. So, I did that for two years and went back to Mississippi.

STANLEY: *How did you find this piece of work?*

JOSEPH: *[T]hat program began as a response to the conditions that young law students saw in Mississippi in 1964 ...the freedom summer. And the students mainly at Yale, Harvard, and [New York University] began to see the civil rights law students at the Civil Rights Research Council. And at Ole Miss where I went, because I was the leader of the black students I became a delegate in 1970 to attend a LSCRRC national meeting in Chicago. And so I was on the board of LSCRRC, I got elected at that convention to the board of LSCRRC.*

So, I served from 1970 to 1972 on the board ... and I was responsible for the whole region of Mississippi, Louisiana, Tennessee [and] going around Alabama interviewing potential summer clerks. I would go to the law schools in the area. And [at] the annual meeting in March of 1972 in Albuquerque, NM they put me out of the room. I didn't know what happened. And when I came back in the room they told me I was elected to be the National Director. Nobody asked me.

STANLEY: *You [were] drafted.*

JOSEPH: *I was drafted. So, I left Ole Miss on the day of my last exam and drove straight to New York City to pick up this job. I was scared to death.*

STANLEY: *[More scared] than when you first came into this country?*

JOSEPH: *I was scared to take on all this responsibility. At that point, I had four offices. I was 28 years old and had an office in San Francisco, an office in Atlanta, an office in Chicago, [New York City] and I was the head of it. ... So, I had to raise all the money for all the interns, raise all the money to pay all the staff, maintain these four offices. I was 28 years old, just arrived from Trinidad a few years ago. I'm in NYC. I'm in the big apple interacting with the biggest law firms, the most powerful lawyers. I was scared to death. The only thing was that by that time my mother was in New York. And so I had a mother, and my two younger sisters had come with her. So, I had some family and there was a strong Caribbean community there.*

Culturally I had some support, but it was a tough assignment, which I think we did pretty well, and then went back to Mississippi to work with Francis Stevens who also was a native Mississippian, a prominent [white] lawyer in a big firm in Jackson, Mississippi who basically renounced that and dedicated his future life to working for civil rights and to uplift poor folks. And he became a senior administrative professor at Antioch Law School. And at one point he served as the director of the North Mississippi rural legal services and recruited me to come back to Mississippi.

I got a call one Saturday morning saying the board had just decided I'm the new director. Again, nobody asked me. I was drafted the acting director. So foolishly, I took the job. And then the board gave me another mandate. There were two hell raising lawyers on the staff ... that I had to fire.

STANLEY: *Who was that?*

JOSEPH: *Solomon Osborne and I forget the other one. I said, "I don't operate that way. So if you want me in this job, you put me in this job, [and] let me evaluate what I do." And it turns out that they wanted me to fire the two strongest, most gutsy, competent lawyers of the time. I thought no way in the world. No way in the world. Anyway that's history.*

STANLEY: *So, how did you get engaged [in]... the national leadership piece [and] the work that we do now, you know the NLADA board.*

JOSEPH: *Yeah, the NLADA board. [R]emember, I spent the first seventeen years of my life in this country basically in Mississippi. Mississippi is a resource poor state. You're working with poor people and civil rights. You're working with scarce resources. So luckily, those two years that I spent in New York put me in touch with a whole different arena of resources, New York foundations. It put me in touch with all kinds of progressive thinking. I made a few trips and went places around the world. So, I got a global perspective. And I realized that to be effective in Mississippi we had to basically broaden our horizons. I had to go out, I had to reach out, [and] I had to broaden my own horizons. I had to try [to] broaden the horizons of my colleagues in order to marshal resources. And we were able to do that to a limited degree. We got some foundation money to help some community groups for instance the United League of Tupelo. The United League was a very vibrant, activist community group that got us in a lot of trouble. And the local authorities accused us of um illegally representing unqualified groups or ineligible groups and all that kind of nonsense.*

[A]nd so we were able to get resources. So again, I got active in another group called the National Conference of Black Lawyers. And through those sort of national interactions, we sort of made contact with other people. A lot of people at Rutgers Law School were a great partnership for us ... Rutgers Law School black students developed a very special relationship with us in North Mississippi. They had something called the Southern Mobilization Project, which brought to Mississippi every summer law students from Rutgers to interact with legal services in the South. And those ties and those interactions by my being initially on the LSCRRRC board gave me a more national perspective. And realized that your struggle cannot be won strictly locally and you have to build larger coalitions. And that's what it was. Now I try to do the same thing.

Leadership & Diversity

STANLEY: *You know that your work on the Leadership and Diversity Committee over at LSC kind of filtered over into the work you did with the leadership and diversity over at NLADA, right? Out of that piece we had a leadership conference in Arizona where we had Speaking Truth to Power. And I think that that conference for me reengaged the clients differently in this community, and I need to thank you for supporting us and creating an environment where we could do that and some kind of difficult way but in a safe way.*

[A] couple years ago, legal services programs began to try to identify with what was happening [to] leadership in the field as program staff leadership age [out] ... [And] you know on the client side leadership has dwindled. [A]s we begin to deal with term limits that some of our friends have supported being put in place, there has not been [an] intentional effort to build a pipeline [to] ensure that eligible clients ... [are] engaged [at the] national and program levels in deciding how resources get spent in this community... [and] to ensure that we [not only have] access to attorneys but quality

representation in civil matters. I know you are interested in a piece of that on Civil Gideon, but I don't want to go there. I'm just talking about the leadership here. And so now we're engaged with LSC and with NLADA trying to talk about how we deal and model that program to ensure that we have a pool of clients [and] community advocates who are impacted by poverty to be engaged in work we do in this community. Give me your perspective on that and your guidance on how you think we can be effective with that.

JOSEPH: *Oh, that's a heavy request.*

STANLEY: *I trust you.*

JOSEPH: *Let me say this. First of all, it becomes easier because of people like you it's easier.*

STANLEY: *Thank you for that.*

JOSEPH: *You've been out there – you've been consistent. And like all of us, I think I know I have grown and gotten sharper at some of what I can do and you have too. And so that's inspirational. When I see you and your colleagues ... clients who are out there being able to articulate and not getting a lot of support, I understand from your perspective what it is like, being on the short end of power, being on the short end of influence, being on the short end of resources. I know that from personal experience. And that doesn't mean you are on the short end of integrity and dignity and self-respect. So, I know that what sustains people who come out of institutions that I came out of is dignity and self respect. So, it's that belief that I am equal to any task as anyone else given the opportunity. And to try to give everybody else the opportunity, you realize that some people have some kinds of hurdles and impediments that are very difficult to cross but yet needs to be given the opportunity.*

A lot of credit for moving NLADA to accept as a stated program priority ... the issue of clients must go to you and your colleagues. But when Chuck Wynder came to NLADA he was my point person with whom I conferred and talked about a lot of things. And I give Chuck a lot of credit. He is one of the most effective listeners I have ever met in my entire life. And he stays with a project and he did a whole lot to organize, from my perspective, those leadership meetings in Arizona and so on. And I was privileged to be a part of that process.

So again, it takes leadership, your leadership and your colleagues' leadership and the leadership of NLADA to move that forward. I think once it's moved forward. I mean one of the most powerful meetings we had, I think, was the one actually before Arizona. That one in Salt Lake City ... where several clients said, "My god I didn't realize I could be so powerful." And one gentleman, I forget where he was from– Atlanta or Georgia – a young man was there a client member of the audience... So, again I say that you, your colleagues, Chuck and the folks at NLADA not only say that this is going to be a priority

but actually implement the priority and continue to do so. I mean that is how things happen. How are we going forward?

STANLEY: *I understand what you said, but you know I tell people I get tired of preaching to the choir. And I don't know why I always feel that I have to try and legitimize to people who've been here forever why it's essential that clients be equal partners in this quest for justice. And so it's like you know as I begin to think about how I leave this community, it's just so important to me that we have some process so we can help clients understand who they is, what their role is, and how they can best use their talents and their strengths. But it's almost like it's a continuum. You know I don't have a problem trying to help people who just came into the community. But it's the old heads and some of them it's like – even those who believe they won't step farther with us. So I'm trying to build a strong coalition that has to be broader than the conscience now. You know what I'm saying? And as we begin to look at the turn out with our leadership and the program that where we are the directors. And what is going to be crucial for us is a lot of African-American leadership who've been there for us and are going to be there for us. You know what I'm saying. And so yesterday we were at [LSC] and I had to introduce Edgar Cahn. [Some] didn't even know who he was. And so it's that history that people don't know. And I don't blame them, you know I understand they don't know, but some of them don't even want to hear it. So you know we got Access to Justice Centers and we got poverty law firms you know and we don't have a movement. And I don't know if we are ever going to have a movement in this community again. But I'd just like to hear what you think, what your perspective is in this.*

JOSEPH: *That's a tough one. You see, we don't want to admit it as often as we should, but while we talk a lot about in this country about racism and a lot sexism some may think that it is a radical concept to acknowledge the role of class. And the role of class can be just as divisive and class transcends race and gender. So therefore, a person of color may identify within a class. And a person of the same gender may also identify with a class . . . I'll say this you can't have assume that because a person's color of skin or the persons' gender they are sort of in line with your thinking and your aspirations. [W]e are doing this because people who we call our clients, are at the most disadvantaged socio-economic class. Clients are at the center of our purpose. So when we use the word client-centered work, that's why we use it because that is what's going on. Part of representing poor people and helping poor people is to lift, get out of conditions of poverty. And conditions of poverty go beyond just not having enough money to buy goods and services. It means that if you have been born in that kind of situation it affects aspirations. It affects your hope. It affects your endurance. It affects your self-confidence. It affects your ambition. So therefore you have to try and get all that going, and so its almost like you have to be constantly educating people who have not had the experience themselves to understand this.*

And I think that in days when Legal Services Corporation used to have more regional trainings and interactions, and people had an opportunity to confront these things more directly in the regions, I think we had a better opportunity to teach and learn. In many meetings, we had Atlanta meetings. I mean we had some heated exchanges, but it was

[a] learning opportunity and a teaching opportunities. We didn't always see eye to eye. I recall one time I had a confrontation with another legal aid director who ended up representing the Ku Klux Klan. I mean you know come on. So we had some learning opportunities. Some folks didn't like it too much, but we were telling the truth. We were telling the truth. So I think - the opportunities to teach and learn have to be always on the table.

In Mississippi, this is what we did. We actually set up client advisory groups in 8 in 40 counties. Every county had a client advisory group and every county put a representative onto a larger group we called a client advisory group and we had regional representatives, and we had elections and debates and discussions. And then we hired staff whose job was in fact to empower those client advisory groups . . . The word I was talking about is . . . Empowerment – you have the folks you hire empower people at all points in time to have their dignity restored, to become self-confident . . . to have their dignity be respected. So those things are intangibles, but they are just as important as saying here is money for food stamps, here is your rent money for your housing... I think that if people have that self-confidence, that hope, that dignity, that self-respect, they are in a better position to pull themselves up by their boot straps. And this is what has to be taught to some people to interact with people of a different class. And it is a class issue. It is clearly a class issue.

STANLEY: *I think that we have peoples in leadership – folks that suffer from the same thing the clients suffer from. And so they can't empower us because they feel so powerless and so their role is to serve us – right? And so my deal is I don't need you to serve me, I need you to represent me so I can serve myself. And so people who really just can't get those two things to meet up. But one of the pieces that I want to talk about is. It took me a while to put my arms around Barack. A really long time. His wife did it for me though. But what I do understand is that it's a new day and new way. And so that the new leaders now they see things different than we do. They think that, their dreams are, their goals aren't any different than ours. But I'll tell you the technique for making the accomplishment is different. And so they come from the Dr. King syndrome which is you slap my cheek I'm going to give you a hug. We come from if you slap me I'm going to kill you. And so I've had to learn to do is step back, and support them. And that comes from trust that we're going to get there. And so the way we fought – it's a new day. And so the tools we used back then may not be the tools that they using now. But my problem is the history. It's that somehow these new leaders don't have enough. See I remember riding in the back of the bus. You know what I'm saying? I remember them white water fountains and the black water fountains.*

JOSEPH: *I do too. It's abhorrent.*

STANLEY: *I remember the black schools and the white schools.*

JOSEPH: *And that happened also after the so called laws had changed.*

STANLEY: *Yeah, yeah, and so back in my hometown they are going back to that because they satisfied the court order. And so now they never did integrate the schools they desegregated it. And so and they bussed us out of our community to their schools and then they closed own and tore down all our schools. And so now you got these schools in the other neighborhoods and so those people are organizing saying they're busting up our neighborhood and our children can't get into school. And so you know I just think that, and I tell folks all the time that we are slowly being lulled back into...slavery without us understanding what's going on because our eyes really ain't on the prize our eyes is on the who and the what. And so as I talk with my grandchildren, I say you don't have to be angry – you know we come out of this being angry. You don't have to be angry but you have to be mindful. So what I'm trying to do is figure out as I leave this community because I just think that in a lot of places we got people that talk a good game but they ain't walking that good talk. And it ain't just about race. I think this is a class issue. But it's easier for us to have the race discussion because everybody can identify and define that and they don't want to talk about class. But I think that we have to begin to have that discussion in our community- don't you?*

JOSEPH: *I think you know you said many, many, many, many things there. But I think one of the interesting sort of a byproducts of Barack Obama's ascendancy - he tried to run a campaign that transcends race. Folks wouldn't let him . . . But at the same point, by running a post racial kind of campaign, it highlights class. And you see people are going to racism and same races do different things. You know, I'm thinking the same as you. I raised three children. Two of them were born in Mississippi. And I ask myself and one today. They all have a conscience. One of them is a lawyer in Baltimore. The other my youngest son is trying to build his career. He is in the private sector. My oldest daughter is in the media, she's a producer with one of the media networks, ABC. Advertise ABC So, I am trying to pass onto them and others you know what it is we think they should know in order to make better decisions going forward.*

Having Vision

JOSEPH: *I think I shared with Chuck [NLADA Vice President of Program Leadership and Support Charles Wynder] and some other people recently, I have a tendency to wake up in the morning at 2 o'clock and have these little inspirations. And one of them was, "what the hell is vision?" That was my question – what is vision I asked myself because you know vision is a quality that leaders must have. So I said what is vision. Because to get vision, it just can't come jump out of the sky. So, I said you know what vision is? Vision is really how you inform yourself about where you want to go.*

But to get that, vision has three dimensions of sight – three dimensions – vision has three dimensions of sight. First one is hindsight. The second one is foresight and the other one is insight. Now what is hindsight talk about? Hindsight talks about experience and knowledge. So, if I have the experience and knowledge of what I did before. What I failed at, what were the best things to do. That body of knowledge can help inform my vision. If I think about foresight, usually I think about vision and foresight interchangeably. It's where I want to go. Now where I want to go means I haven't been

there before. So, it talks about taking risks. So if I am going to take risks I want to be informed as much as possible of where I've been and what I did and know insight – where I am. Insight is awareness of my current situation, where I am. Vision is informed by hindsight, foresight, and insight.

Now how do I transfer that knowledge? Transfer the knowledge for those behind me who haven't had the experience and the knowledge that my 64 years [has had and] know to pass it on. And you have the same challenge. One thing we have to do that we don't do very well – we don't chronicle, we don't write, we don't write our history at any point enough. And I am a big violator of that rule to write your history. I mean and what has happened to me lately in the last three to five years is just like I'm talking to you is a lot of people have come to me to express views so at least the view I have expressed are being written by somebody else. And you haven't yet. What you are doing with me – you have got to do the same thing.

That fire that you have in your belly, that perspective, that understanding, that hindsight, that experience – you gotta pass it on in a body of knowledge. That is your, Rosita's idea of things. And let other folks at least use it as a basis for their information. For their growing power and informing their vision, etc. And that is a duty that we owe ourselves, and those behind us.

STANLEY: *And they have to be written because if you speak it they don't hear it.*

JOSEPH: *Right, and even if you write it, it gets interpreted. But it still puts it out there.*

STANLEY: *Well I just didn't want to leave this community without having this dialogue.*

JOSEPH: *Well you keep saying leaving this community – what's going on with you?*

Transitioning forward

STANLEY: *You know in this community there's a movement to push people out and I had requested that I be allowed to plan how I leave ...I owe a debt to my community that I leave some models in place because that's what was done for me. And so I understand that that in order to make room for a new, somebody got to move and I always wanted to be a part of a capacity building piece. For a long time, I was the one you know. And so now there are several of us. And I mean this kind of stuff bothers me. We have about maybe at most ten active clients in NLADA, and so I got shifted last year. This year we are going to lose four of the most senior clients we got – you know what I'm saying? And ain't nobody worried about filling in the gap. Because I think one of the things Lillian Johnson said to me, [which] is always important to me, is that I [may not always] agree with you but that you are in the room because you keep our conscience in the room.*

And so we got clients that [are] coming around now that know nothing about poverty and they ain't connected to nobody or even deal with people who are less fortunate; they are in their own family. And that's the leadership that they seem to be pushing in this

community. And I remember some years ago, Lillian Johnson asked me do I trust that other folks can speak for me. And I said it all depends on who that person is. You know what I'm saying? When Chuck came to NLADA I latched on to him, and I latched onto Camille [Holmes Wood] because I felt that they was the youngest part of our community and that they bring something new and unique to this community. And the only way we are going to break these chains of institutional slavery is that we bring young folks in who are willing to take some risks and do things differently. And so I plan to leave this community, if we can't get the client mentoring project funded and rolling.

You know I'll work now and around what I need to do to stay here. I've been trying to figure out what is the issue that is going to send me home. And so that goes back to I'm tired of begging and fighting in order to stay here. I know I'm more beneficial to this community inside the organization than I would be on the outside. You know what I'm saying, but it's time for a transition and I'm not going to be able to pick who comes behind me, but I want to make sure we have a pool to choose from, so, as I make that preparation I think in terms of when you ain't hear what you want to see.

JOSEPH: Right. You know I hear you I don't know how old you are. I'm 64.

STANLEY: I'm 61!

JOSEPH: I'm 64. I'm older than you. I'm your senior. (Laughter) And so I can see for many years when you were a little kid in pampers, I was still four years old.

STANLEY: Man, you weren't but three.

JOSEPH: I could beat you up. So we all are facing that challenge. The wise people are saying that it is to our benefit to age down. Some of my colleagues at legal aid are sick of me saying, they are laughing at me because I am saying, "Turn the millennials loose. Turn the millennials loose." They have the energy they have a certain perspective. Yeah, they don't have the knowledge and experience; so, we have to kind of guide them, but don't try and scare them and turn them loose. I guess when you think you have reached a point or you feel the pressure uh to move on. You know it's not always easy. Because it involves change and change always makes you feel incompetent. I am not familiar with the other side, so I wouldn't know what to do. But you get past it.

I think what you are doing right here someone should do with you. You should be the one being interviewed to lay down in detail. Particularly, I am impressed with just hearing the questions, the thoughtful questions that you put forth. And sort of your introduction to these questions is an indication of your deep thinking about these matters. That needs to be shared and kept. So, maybe that's a project you can be involved in.

[T]o have a duty, you [have] to mobilize those thoughts and any other colleagues you have around. You can be very useful in that capacity. And you don't have to be always on the board or committee. I know that comes with certain assurances you are at the table. But the real challenge is that you got to sometimes facilitate and empower others

to the table too. If we don't do that, then the struggle can't be sustained. So, we got to look around and see whom we can empower. I'm looking around right now and saying who can I empower ...but that person hasn't showed up yet. So, now I'm thinking well maybe I should start putting my little things together, my little words, my little ideas, my little thoughts. I could maybe put together a little booklet to pass on the book. Chuck and I talk about these little things, these ideas I have you know? I am very modest about it. I don't think it's that fancy but it has sustained me you know what I mean. It kept me going. It works for me. And it's been working for quite a while now. And I answered a question last night to LSC I answered the question, "What do you think is the most important step you have taken to promote equality?" I thought that is a tough question. It could be a tiny little thing. And I thought about it, and one very important step I took is in the Legal Aid Bureau is making the hire of Hannah Lieberman as my chief advocate and chief of more equality. And I said [to] my colleagues, if we had no resources we couldn't do that because we came with an administration where resources for the clients were at the national level. ...

And I said what kind of talk about equality – we're survivors. So I said what we did was organize something called the Equal Justice Council. And I said what I did is not the idea was to change the psyche of the program from one of scarcity and "can't do" to a psyche of abundance and "can do all things". That's what I did. I said, "How do we achieve that psyche? You gotta tell people who say, "Oh we can't do this, oh we can't, oh we're scared," how are you to transform the thinking to "there is abundance here!"

So it's almost like a magical thing we can do the mind – we can do it! You have to create concrete symbolic things that look promising, that counsel, that get prominent lawyers together who say we will raise money so that gives you hope. ...

You know, and for people to come in, people have an expectation of abundance, which means you all can have what? You can have a sense of future. You can have a sense of stability. You can encourage creativity. You can take risks. That way vision can come in, that foresight – I can take risks. I'm not worried about if am I going to be here next year. Or you take risks with security. And that's what I think the thing I did to promote equality. ...

STANLEY: *And then you inspired your staff to dream. You freed them up so they could dream.*

JOSEPH: *Right. Exactly. State of mind. Let me tell you something. Let me tell you all a way to get back to Mississippi. ... I realized that here was a college president, perpetuating ignorance. I found this so abhorrent so repulsive. I realized that the peoples' minds had been affected. The minds. I thought it was not really about – he would say – "oh why don't you all keep quiet and just do your studies so you can graduate and get a ten thousand dollar job and buy you a Cadillac. Buy you a Cadillac. That's all he saw as a sign of progress. It wasn't a thinking process. That hey – you could be whatever it is you want to be. Buy you a Cadillac? You could make Cadillacs. You could be anything you want you are you have the same brain as anyone else. The*

same two legs, you put on your pants the same way. Who cares about a Cadillac? You know, it's about a thinking process. And day by day, ... and one on one I think that's why I became very dangerous. They saw people changing their thinking. And when I hooked up with Fannie Lou Hamer I think I became like a nuclear danger because you're going to people's thinking. And I knew what I had to do.

STANLEY: *Yeah, you get in folks' heads. You know you did.*

JOSEPH: *The thinking, and thinking. It's not about the things, it's about the thinking. Once you have the thinking right all the stuff will come. All the Cadillacs you want will come down the road. You hear what I'm saying? The thinking.*

STANLEY: *[I knew someone who believed that] if [he] can get [in]to your mind, the body is going to follow. [He] want[ed] to get into your head because if [he could] control your thinking, [he] could control your movement. So, when I went ...to school I couldn't assimilate. Because I couldn't forget everything I know just to take in what this [man] was trying to tell me because I knew that his world and my world wasn't the same world. You know what I'm saying? And so, as I began to deal with my kids and my grandchildren now in school, I have to make sure that they are informed from a base. And that they understand that education is a process. You know you take something to it. You don't expect, [and] I can't expect to turn my kids over to peoples who don't even know us and who don't have our value system and let them produce who they are going to be for the rest of their lives. And I was thinking when you was talking about the stuff you went through in school, do you know that most of the kids in school, now especially in Southern cities, they are getting expelled from school and they don't even know what's happening? ...*

STANLEY: *You know a couple of times when they were doing the oral history at the Equal Justice Library, I kept trying to get them to do me and they never would.*

JOSEPH: *Are you kidding me? ...You know you should feel very, very comfortable that you have given a whole lot to this – the notion of equal justice. And in your heart and conscience you should feel very, very well. And on a more practical level we talked about you know leav[ing] something down for folks. What you have inspired in people [is] really something. Whenever I meet [with] you and you say something complimentary that gives me strength. I'm telling you – to know that I am working for a particular cause and a person who is close to it respects you, that to me means more to me than money, than that salary. It gives me strength, it's an inspiration, it's a challenge to keep earning that respect. Earning respect of your peers and people you respect. It's tough. ...And so, what I'm saying to you is that earning your respect and your colleagues' to me is a very precious thing.*

Answering His Calling

HILLARY EVANS: *You talked about you being pushed into leadership, and I was just wondering if you think that where you are today [resulted] as your calling or being chosen to lead?*

JOSEPH: *You know, I have always shied away from running towards leadership, but for some reason I was always pushed to lead; I was responding to calls. The pivotal event in Mississippi that put me over the edge was when Martin Luther King was killed in 1968. I had just been in Memphis myself, and the night before I was at the house of the union leader of Sanitation Workers with a friend of mine discussing the struggle of Sanitation workers and if I hadn't looked out for myself I would be out on the street. And when he was killed that was a point where I was pushing more and more my colleagues to change their thinking in the University and become more progressive about events and circumstances around [campus].*

And that night folks came to me and there was a plan to do some stuff. And I said boy this is not this is so destructive. People were planning to destroy the town, the university, kill the sheriff, all kinds of stuff. I mean we had some angry black men who were veterans of the Vietnam War who had come back to Mississippi saying, "I don't understand, we come back to this country, we can't even enjoy what we have been fighting to defend overseas, and they killed our leader – we are going to destroy this whole place. And I said, "Oh my god, what am I going to do." And I remember going outside and going on the hood of one my colleagues cars and telling a big lie. I said, "Guys we have a plan, we have a plan, we got a plan. And I got four or five guys with me, and we are going to go back and tomorrow morning we are going to tell you all the plan. But I am positive that part of that plan is to keep cool until you hear from us."

I ain't had no plan. My plan was to transpire. ... The next morning we decided to go to the march and we had a little program at the University. And we go to the capital to the march and here comes my colleague with a little pistol, a training pistol, and he road in the front of the line and he says, "When we went down the highway, oh my God, the Mississippi National Guard, with their rifles drawn pointing at us. He got quiet. He said "shoot when you see the eyes of the whites. Shoot when you see the eyes of the whites." You know I knocked his ass out. I knocked him cold with my right hand.

STANLEY: *You had to!*

JOSEPH: *And he hit the ground and I picked him up on my shoulder and I passed him to somebody and said to take him to his home. So, I had to the next thing I go to move him to the dorm and I come back and I said oh my god, I see a poor old white man – what is he doing coming this way with a truck. They snatched the poor man out of the truck, they overturned the truck. And I said oh my god, we can't don't harm this man, don't harm this man, because you are going to bring on you can't do it.*

So, that was a pivotal point when I had active leadership, and I had to say, “man, I’m a leader now gosh I got to be doing something responsible.” I mean when you are young you do some things; I mean you’re crazy. Cuz here I was a foreigner, on a student visa on a track scholarship. I wasn’t thinking about that. I was thinking about all the stuff that was going wrong. You know and all things I had to do. I mean I did some things that I wouldn’t put on the record.

EVANS: *Come January we’re going to have a new administration. And how do you think we should proceed with the poverty agenda?*

JOSEPH: *Aggressively. I think that the agenda to attack poverty and legal services has gotten captured by some folks who can’t see beyond their nose. Man I’m telling you, they mean well, but they are just they, they are captured by something. ...I talk about hindsight, foresight, and insight. They have too much hindsight. I think they are paralyzed by hindsight. And so their foresight, their risk taking is too minimal and you have to have a balance of those things. And that’s a problem. And they are just too scared.. I have said the greatest leader the world has ever known in my book is Christopher Columbus. Gotta be. How the hell you get a whole bunch of folks to jump on the ship with you, and say I’m going around the world when they say the world is flat? And say come go, and folks go on the ship with you. I mean that is foresight and risk taking. The world is flat everybody is saying and he said no I believe the world is round, come go with me. And folks jumped on the ship with him man! And how he got people to do that I don’t know! I wouldn’t go with him. I wouldn’t go. I’d say you come back. I’ll go on the second trip with you.*

Yeah, I’d make the second trip Christopher. But I mean that’s so. I think they are trapped. I don’t want to call them names. They are nice people I know some of them. They are just trapped.

STANLEY: *Do you think we have a poverty agenda? Do you think we have an agenda for real where we are at?*

JOSEPH: *We have a real agenda, we’re too afraid. The opposition is going to be there, they have their agenda. If you let that be a constant obstacle, you’ll do nothing. You gotta push forward. So, I think [we] push forward.*