

Andrea Williams ([00:00:01](#)):

I am recording and I will give the date. So today's date is August 29th, 2022. My name is Obden Mondésir and I am with

Andrea Williams ([00:00:15](#)):

Andrea Williams

Andrea Williams ([00:00:17](#)):

And we are collecting this oral history as a part of the CWP collection in an effort to engage with the first three donors of this collection and have them talk about their experiences as well as the records that they gave in regards to their personal collections. And the first question I wanted to ask you, Andrea, is could you tell me the year you were born and where?

Andrea Williams ([00:00:48](#)):

I was born November 10th, 1964 in Iowa city, Iowa.

Andrea Williams ([00:00:52](#)):

Yeah. And could you tell me about your parents?

Andrea Williams ([00:00:57](#)):

So my parents were high school sweethearts from Hackensack, New Jersey, and my dad played football, which is how we ended up in Iowa, at the university of Iowa. Their names are Christine and Chester and my dad played football and studied at the university. My mom also studied at the university. She went to the nursing school out there and had my sister and I. they lived in married student housing and all that kind of stuff. So that's where we were born, my sister and I,

Andrea Williams ([00:01:41](#)):

And then could you tell me about the first neighborhood that you considered home?

Andrea Williams ([00:01:47](#)):

I think the first neighborhood that I, the neighborhood I consider home is Hackensack, New Jersey. I was born in Iowa. We were there, my parents were going to school and then my dad got a job in Cambridge, New Jersey. He sustained an injury, so he couldn't continue football. So after school he got a job in Cambridge, Massachusetts near the Harvard university campus. So we lived in Cambridge for a few years. I went to nursery school and kindergarten there, my sister went to nursery school there, and then we moved to Hackensack. We're from Hackensack. So Hackensack is what I consider home. Hackensack, New Jersey.

Obden Mondésir ([00:02:30](#)):

And then, you attended, Central nursery school in the late 1960s.

Andrea Williams ([00:02:38](#)):

Mm-hmm <affirmative>.

Obden Mondésir ([00:02:39](#)):

And in the pre-interview conversation, you mentioned that the institution had an impact you. Could you describe who or what provided an impact and what that experience was like and what effect it had on your life?

Andrea Williams ([00:02:58](#)):

Well, it was at the time, I guess I'll use the term, kind of an experiment. The nursery school was headed by a Harvard graduate student. I think she was in education, a woman named Lisa Pershouse, who was piloting a nursery school that had different races and ethnicities and different students from different socioeconomic backgrounds. And it also engaged the parents. And so one of the stories that my mother, so I have pictures and I've heard stories, and I vaguely remember myself experiences of all of us as kids being together and all the parents being together helping at the nursery school. We would go and do activities and trips together. And my mother used to always tell a story about how the parents helped with a grant to Polaroid to help, you know, get some funding for the school. So at one point there's a newspaper article of me with the Lisa Pershouse in the paper.

Andrea Williams ([00:04:09](#)):

And, you know, it just had a lot of, I think the reason why looking back I find it significant is, fast forward some of the work that I'm doing in advocacy, where you engage the community with the advocacy that you're doing on behalf of something that's important for the community. And that's what that nursing school experience represented for me. And I think my mom used to always talk about how I always had a sense that it—I mean, it was the sixties and people were active in the politics of the time and my mom was as well, and she continued to stay active when we were in Hackensack, she would go to city council meetings. She and a friend of hers were part of, they would go to help with the League of Women Voters activities and things. So she did local things. So I think as a parent and just as a person who it seemed like she was influenced by the sixties and her involvement and stayed involved as a community person in what was going on in the community. And that is something that I believe just not only from her, from a number of my family members, we are a family of service, you do something and get involved and make sure that what you're doing is in service to your community.

Obden Mondésir ([00:05:46](#)):

Thanks. And then you also mentioned like that, I mean, you were five at the time, or could, would've been five around that time that the Students for a Democratic Society took over Harvard. And what were the firsthand accounts do you remember from this event?

Andrea Williams ([00:06:08](#)):

I don't have firsthand accounts. Like one of the things that my mom talked about was that she was on staff at Mount Auburn. When there was a student takeover of Harvard, I think it was the SDS, and that one of the main organizers whose name is gonna escape me. But if I named it, there was somebody who was known, he got brought in, I think, because he was injured and that she was on staff at the time that that happened. And we lived very close to the university. We lived on Sherman street, so it was just up the street from the university. So it's just one of the things that she talked about, like happening, just given the turbulence of the time. I myself don't have a firsthand account. These are stories that I heard from her.

Andrea Williams ([00:06:58](#)):

Yeah. So I was asking of the, the first-hand accounts that you did heard, but you shared what your mom described.

Andrea Williams ([00:07:04](#)):  
would talk about. Yeah.

Obden Mondésir ([00:07:06](#)):

And then, you know, you stayed in Hackensack, so could you tell me what, um, what it was like attending public school, like middle school and high school while you were in Hackensack?

Andrea Williams ([00:07:19](#)):

Yeah, so my family has very deep roots in Hackensack. They migrated from the south on my mother's side from Virginia to Hackensack and, so this would be my great-grandfather on my mother's side, on both her maternal and paternal side, right. I have family members who they owned some businesses and houses and things like that. So they were very involved in the community. I feel like I grew up in a very strong black community. We used to call it south up north because all of the, all of us lived in one section of Hackensack and owned houses and businesses. And the way that I would imagine segregation works, the church that I attended is one of the second oldest African American churches, and my great grandfather, so specifically my grandmother's father and my grandfather, so his uncle, were charter members of the church, and another uncle, charter members of the church and helped build the church. And that was the church I was raised in.

Andrea Williams ([00:08:57](#)):

So, you know, my growing up, my grandfather was the chairman of the deacon board and superintendent of Sunday school. My grandmother was a deaconess. So we were heavily involved in church and church was very much a part of community activity. And I found it, it, to me, it was very grounding. I felt a strong, strong sense of community, a strong work ethic, a strong sense of service, a strong sense of politics. You know, the minister that was the minister when all of the ministers of the church I think were political in a sense or social activists. And certainly Reverend Moses A. Knott, who was the minister when I was growing up, was definitely active.

Andrea Williams ([00:09:47](#)):

He was active, for example, in getting an extension to one of the playgrounds that we had that were right across the street from the church, there was an industrial building there wasn't really being used and he pushed for the city to clear that out and get an extension of what's called second street park built there. And there were other things too, he'd bring city council members to talk. He, he pushed education for everybody in the church, not just children, but anybody. So he was, it was really an extension of what happens in the African American community in terms of uplift, education, really trying to build and be strong. So that was my sense of it. I went to the public schools. My mother and my grandmother went to the public schools in Hackensack, right. And so, I had, I got a good solid, strong education in the public schools.

Andrea Williams ([00:10:54](#)):

At that time in schools, you could have beyond a general track, what they called a business track, where you learned a trade, or you can be on the college track. And I was on the college track. However, we also in school learned things like we had a driving program, we learned how to drive. We had a pool where

you learned how to swim. We had, um, shop and what they called at the time, home economics. So eventually like the, the girls got, you know, corralled into home economics and the boys went to shop, but somewhere along, 'cause I was there in the seventies, they started opening up them to both. But I was able to take home economics and learned those, just reinforce kind of life skills that I was learning at home. So I feel like I got a good all around education.

Andrea Williams ([00:11:48](#)):

The teachers were good. And so that was my, my public schooling. And I had a sense that, I mean, my mother would always tell me, you're analytical. So I decided when I was in high school, I was toying with—I used to watch the news a lot, a lot of ABC news, and I liked the investigative journalists. So I actually thought for a while that I might go into journalism. And I went, I remember going to actually, it was a journalism conference for high school students at Columbia. And, you know, this happens, I think with young people some times. Looking back on it, I, I can see that the, it was just kind of big, kind of fun, organized chaos, right. Where you just have like a lot of sessions for students to go and learn and hear speakers.

Andrea Williams ([00:12:52](#)):

But there was something about it that I found a little bit inaccessible, right. Like I just couldn't kind of get what it was offering. And then I thought, well, because I couldn't get what it was offering that maybe journalism wasn't for me, which is not a deduction I think that I should have made, but I did. So I decided then, well, I started, maybe I should go into the foreign service or law. And I, when I went to Boston university, I spent my first semester as an international relations major, but I didn't like it. So, and I remember going into college, I have a cousin who was a photojournalist, a photographer actually, Phillda Ragland Njau, one of the first African American photographers. She did some work for life. She did some, a lot of work for the national Presbyterian church.

Andrea Williams ([00:13:49](#)):

She's in a book called Viewfinders that was put together by Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, Arthur Ashe's wife. And she had a friend who was in the foreign service and I happened to meet him. And he said, "well, you know, one of the downsides of the foreign services is you have to toe the government line. So if you don't like the government line, you're kind of there." And so I said, "oh, I don't like that." <laugh> so, all of that to say, once I got to college, I did my brief exploration, but I landed on studying political science and deciding to go to law school. And I remember that I wanted to go to law school because I thought, well, you know, lawyers help the community solve problems. And that's, I was interested in that. And so that's what I did. And I didn't go to law school right away.

Andrea Williams ([00:14:41](#)):

Um, I decided.

Obden Mondésir ([00:14:43](#)):

mm-hmm <affirmative> could we pause right there? I do have this step away for one second.

Andrea Williams ([00:14:46](#)):

Yes. Okay.

Obden Mondésir ([00:14:46](#)):

I'll be right back.

Andrea Williams ([00:14:47](#)):

Yeah, I had been taking, I had been taking some courses. I had a sociology professor, Professor Cheryl Gilkes, and then I had taken an Afro-American studies seminar and in particular, I was influenced by professor Gilkes. She in her sociology class, I think that she had maybe gone to a historically black college and something I had in my mind, like I wanted an experience at the historically black college. And so I decided to do a master's degree in African studies. And I ended up going to Atlanta university. I applied to three schools. I applied to Howard, to Jackson State, and to Atlanta University. And, you know, just think young people looking back <laugh>, I think professor Gilkes may have had some connection with Jackson state.

Andrea Williams ([00:15:49](#)):

So I kind of had it in my mind, like I'm gonna go to Jackson State too, 'cause she just, I just loved her and loved her mind and the way it worked. But I decided to go to Atlanta university. I actually got waitlisted. I had one course outstanding. And so I got wait listed at those two schools, but then Atlanta university accepted me outright. So I just went there and then I was able to finish my one course and then also start my graduate studies. And, you know, as it turns out, it was a great experience. My advisor was the woman named Dr. Margaret Rowley, who was, I believe the first black woman PhD in history. She graduated from Columbia.

Andrea Williams ([00:16:34](#)):

She was also, down the line I learned, a member of Delta Sigma Theta. I am too. And her line sister was Dorothy Height <laugh>, so it was just a great place to be, Atlanta university and Atlanta University Center. So many people in the African American community who are influential have gone to the historically black colleges. So when I was there, it was just something I needed. You know, I think also too, I decided not to go straight to law school 'cause I was a little burnt out being at a predominantly white school and one that was so large. Boston university is very large. If I had to do it over again, I don't think I'd go to a school that was so large. But I met my best friends there and they're friends of mine to this day.

Andrea Williams ([00:17:29](#)):

And I had a good experience despite, I think, the challenges of it being so large and predominantly white, but I feel like I needed the nurturing that an HBCU could provide. And it did. I was there, I studied African American studies under Dr. Rowley. I got to meet, I had many good experiences. One really powerful experience that sticks with me is that at that time, what is the black women's health? I think, I can't remember this original name. It's now called the black women's health imperative, but Billy Avery founded it and whatever its old name was, I think it was a Black Women's Health Initiative, that was started in Atlanta, in a house in Atlanta.

Obden Mondésir ([00:18:25](#)):

mm-hmm <affirmative>.

Andrea Williams ([00:18:26](#)):

And some of the graduate students and PhD in Africana studies were also around and they were part of that circle of women who would go when they would do workshops and things.

Andrea Williams (00:18:42):

Dr. Rowley's daughter, Diane Rowley, who was a doctor, and I think she, at the time worked at the CDC with Helene Gale. They were involved in it. So I got invited to Billy Avery's 40th birthday party. <laugh> right. 'Cause as a student, Diane Rowley, we would go to her house and her husband would make us waffles and stuff. And so when they had this party for Billy Avery, it was like, "oh, if you wanna come, come." So as students, we could come and we were there with all these academics who were having fun, and I got to meet at Angela Davis and some other scholars. So that was just a nice memory. And that's how being on the Atlanta University campus was you would see Jesse Jackson, you would see Jose, I'm gonna figure his name, a lot of the civil rights leaders who were still alive.

Andrea Williams (00:19:38):

They were older, but still alive and would come through. They would do talks and would just be there. They were teaching. And so it just, the homecoming shows, the homecoming events were a big event and it's a big thing at the historically black colleges, and some of my friends from Boston university would come down and come through so that they could see it. And one year Spike Lee was, was filming School Days on the campus, filming that film. And that film actually features the dormitory that I was living in. And so it was fun to see him on campus filming the movie and he as a Morehouse graduate, he did a student viewing when he finished the film. So students got to go for free. We got to do a private screening and I got a poster, a signed poster. And I have his autograph. I have since given the poster to a woman named Janet Dickerson, who was Ernest Dickerson's daughter. Ernest Dickerson was a filmmaker that did a lot of work with Spike Lee. So I just, there was a good, good experience for me. I needed it. I think the nurturing kind of bolstered me up. Then when I was finished with my degree, I applied to Rutgers Law school in Newark. So I came back home. I lived at home to go to law school.

Andrea Williams (00:21:22):

Great. Thank you. And then when you decided to go to law school, I guess first, what became your main focus while you were there?

Andrea Williams (00:21:33):

So I knew I wanted to be a public interest lawyer, so I wanted to go to a public interest law school and that's what Rutgers is. And again, another really just fortunate, it was a really great experience and place to be. You had many folks who were, you know, they came out of the civil rights era. That's the one thing my mom used to say. She said we were born in a powerful era, the sixties. And so a lot of the professors there, Arthur Kinoy, Nadine Taub, Al Slocum, you know, all of these folks were kind of in the vanguard using the law to fight for people's rights. Our school had an affirmative action program. I was admitted under that program called the minority student program. And it's one of the programs that survives because it truly focused on providing opportunities to disadvantage people, including disadvantaged white students.

Andrea Williams (00:22:40):

The Dean of that program at the time was a woman named Janice Robinson, who I think is also a graduate of Teachers College, Columbia's Teachers College, in addition to being a lawyer. And Arthur Kinoy was teaching constitutional law. Like it was good, I think for me as somebody who was going to school in the eighties, there were still people around like one of the things I can mention just back at BU is I took the one class that Howard Zinn was teaching at BU. He taught a big kind of survey course that a

lot of students took. So it was just an opportunity to be exposed to a lot of these greats that were still around and that were still teaching. And I, you know, law school is law school. law school is challenging.

Andrea Williams ([00:23:39](#)):

But yet at the same time, I was very involved in the Association of Black Law Students. A lot of the, you know, there's a lot of activism and obviously an activist history in Newark itself. So we tried to be involved in that too, looking at police brutality and those kinds of things. I remember one year we did a series, like a community series of, some kind of talks or sessions where we would talk about focus on police brutality so that the students could focus on that issue. Some of my colleagues have gone on to stay working at public interest law schools, and as lawyers in the public interest. So I had a, a good experience. It was, I mean, I just think that law school is, it's a lot of work no matter where you go. But I just remember it being—one of the good things about it, I feel like the training in law school really helps you to think <laugh>. I feel like my thinking was changed. I remember in our first year there was a group of us sitting in the lounge. We were like, "I feel my brain changing." Like it just really, it really does train your brain to think critically in a very concrete way. So I had a good experience.

Obden Mondésir ([00:25:17](#)):

Yeah. I, I don't have any real experience with law school. I've known people who are lawyers and have talked about the experience. And when you say that it makes you think critically, one of the things I feel like lawyers do an interesting job with is like working with evidence, right.

Andrea Williams ([00:25:35](#)):

Mm-hmm <affirmative>.

Obden Mondésir ([00:25:35](#)):

like working at, with evidence. What is it? And like, kind of like using that to corroborate your story.

Andrea Williams ([00:25:41](#)):

Yeah.

Obden Mondésir ([00:25:42](#)):

is that kind of what you're alluding to in regards to thinking?

Andrea Williams ([00:25:44](#)):

Well, not just evidence, I mean, I think even thinking critically about a problem, and really defining a problem well, seeing the problem well, not just accepting something that is put in front of you, right.

Obden Mondésir ([00:26:07](#)):

Mm-hmm, <affirmative>.

Andrea Williams ([00:26:07](#)):

knowing, understanding how to challenge, see, see a situation critically and to your point, what's the evidence that point to what the situation actually is, and you know, the different ways that you can see it and how do you get at what the facts of it are for real, right. <laugh> that kind of thing. So it's just the kind of work and training I feel that, how to investigate, right. How to find out what you need if you

don't have the information that you need. So, I mean, I guess that might be what you mean when you're talking about evidence, right?

Obden Mondésir ([00:26:56](#)):

Yeah.

Andrea Williams ([00:26:57](#)):

So it's just a great, great skill to have in life. And I think it's, I don't have any regrets about going to law school or becoming a lawyer. I feel like I've been able to build a career and stay focused on issues that are important to me, and that make a difference in the world.

Obden Mondésir ([00:27:26](#)):

mm-hmm <affirmative>.

Andrea Williams ([00:27:27](#)):

and, you know, that's good because sometimes people will fall into a profession and it's okay, but it's not quite what they want, but I feel like I've worked with a lot of very good organizations with some very great people doing some work that matters. So that feels very satisfying.

Obden Mondésir ([00:27:49](#)):

Mm. And then, after you finished law school, one of the first positions you took was the, you worked at, uh, the Bergen counsel, legal legal services.

Andrea Williams ([00:27:59](#)):

Mm-hmm <affirmative>, that was my local local legal services office.

Obden Mondésir ([00:28:06](#)):

And do you wanna describe what that experience was like?

Andrea Williams ([00:28:09](#)):

Well, you know, it's in New Jersey, we have Legal Services of New Jersey just like in New York, you have Legal Services, right? The big umbrella organization that has, you know, offices all over the city, right. And in New Jersey, we have county offices. And so Hackensack is in the county of Bergen and Bergen County Legal Services was the local Legal Services office. And so I worked there for seven years and, you know, it's pretty bread and butter legal services for the low income, right. Housing cases, I worked on unemployment hearings, did family law cases, child custody, we did uncontested divorces as well, but it's mostly child custody, domestic violence, orders of protection. And the work in family court on domestic violence issues is what kind of brought me to NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund, because I would happen to be in the office and they had a job posting that they were looking for— they had a staff attorney position open, and they were particularly interested in someone who had experience with domestic violence, because they were doing work on the Violence against Women act on the federal level.

Andrea Williams ([00:29:29](#)):



So that's how I came to work there. I applied and they were very much interested in somebody who had experience representing survivors of violence, right. I guess, to inform, you know, the work on the federal legislation that they were doing. So that's how I ended up going over there. My professor at the time, Michelle Jacobs, who's a very dear friend of mine now, she was saying, "you know, this would be a good move for you, you know, to work, expand your, you know, professional skills and, and opportunity." And she was right. That work at NOW LDEF working for a national office was very different. So the learning curve was a little steep, but I learned a lot because it was working on federal legislation.

Andrea Williams ([00:30:15](#)):

NOW LDEF at the time had an office in DC, so learning how that work and the advocacy that, how it goes in the beltway and beltway politics, working on kind of national advocacy campaigns, right. And task force, just how the work happens in a macro sense, right. They would get calls in from all over the country from women, 'cause you know, they looked at sexual harassment cases. They were working on looking at domestic violence and violence against women. Those are two areas that I remember at the time among other things that they, that affected women and women's rights. Um, and so it was just, I was able to learn how you kind of look at an issue from that bigger level and across the country and how you create strategies for trying to have a bigger impact, yet at the time, the national offices, whether it was NOW LDEF or a ACLU or whatever, there can be a disconnect between them and what's going on on the ground.

Andrea Williams ([00:31:31](#)):

And so the other thing I started to get exposed to was, how can you be working in a national office, but really forge meaningful relationships with smaller organizations on the ground that are not extractive? I'm not saying that NOW LDEF did that well, 'cause I'm not, I don't think they did <laugh> right. But it, it was my initial exposure to those kinds of dynamics, right. And the need to really be able to form meaningful relationships that were not extractive where you're working more collaboratively.

Obden Mondésir ([00:32:09](#)):

mm-hmm <affirmative>.

Andrea Williams ([00:32:09](#)):

So I worked at NOW LDEF for about two and a half years and then went on to work at the HIV Law Project, which was a New York City-based law advocacy office that was founded by Terry McGovern to really support people who were living with AIDS and had legal issues. They had lawyers that did direct representation.

Andrea Williams ([00:32:35](#)):

They had social workers that helped with healthcare proxy and childcare arrangements for people who were sick and just had to prepare for who's gonna care for their child if they died or they were no longer able to. And they had an advocacy training program for women called Law TAP, like Legal Technical Assistance Program. But the purpose of the program was to make sure that women knew their rights and could be a voice in the face on the issues. Because at that time in the early part of the AIDS epidemic was very dominated by the experience and what was happening with gay men and not wrongly, but however, in addition, other communities were being affected by AIDS, like women were

getting HIV and AIDS. If you can think about the parallel with the COVID pandemic, it's kind of like you're advocating while you're learning about what's happening to you with this virus.

Obden Mondésir ([00:33:42](#)):

mm-hmm <affirmative>.

Andrea Williams ([00:33:42](#)):

And for women, some of the medical conditions that women would get that were indicators that they had AIDS were not included in the definition of AIDS, right.

Andrea Williams ([00:34:03](#)):

And so one of the impacts that this had is that women couldn't then be involved in clinical trials, in AIDS clinical trials, right. Because you had to have AIDS in order to be involved in the clinical trials to then get access to the experimental drugs that they were using in order to keep people from dying, women were excluded from that cuz of these definitions. So a lot of the advocacy was really to get women out there, voiced in the face, like focus on the fact that this was affecting women too. And it was affecting women of color and low income women and women in the prisons. And so there was this training course and that is where I really got exposure to coordinating and doing curriculum development on and getting, working with women in the community who wanted to be advocates out there. They're directly affected by the issues and they wanted to be a voice in the face. How do you make sure that people know their rights and that they also have the skills to advocate with electeds and be effective with the media, while also taking care of themselves?

Andrea Williams ([00:35:18](#)):

So it was a great organization to work for at the time I worked there, the executive director was a woman named Elsa Rios, Puerto Rican woman, a woman lawyer and advocate, activist. And I was the policy coordinator and that included running the Law TAP program and the advocacy that we did. A lot of it was city and state, some federal like we would go down on federal, but a lot of it was city and state. And one major thing that we were working on is trying to get money earmarked for communities of color in New York and services, HIV and AIDS services, because what tended to happen is that there'd be a pot of money to address AIDS services and it would kind of get funneled to the big organizations and people felt like it wasn't reaching the smaller organizations that really worked directly with communities of color. And it also wasn't reaching the outer boroughs in New York, right?

Andrea Williams ([00:36:22](#)):

So a lot of our advocacy was pushing to that at the time a woman named Margarita Lopez was in the city council and she really wanted to get some money earmarked for communities of color. So I remember when I was at the HIV law project, that was a major campaign that we were working on. And it's when I met also, I met someone who's a dear friend now that I'm working with, Tracy Gardner. She was at the Legal Action Center, I think then, but she's a long time HIV and AIDS activist, but she, a woman named Saraya Elcock who was with Harlem United.

Andrea Williams ([00:36:59](#)):

I met another woman named Talatha Reeves, who I forget where Talatha was then. She might have been at GMHC. I think she was at GMHC, Gay Men's Health Crisis. I started to meet a lot of activists of color who were working in leadership positions and policy positions at the HIV and AIDS service

organizations who were leading the advocacy. And so that was a great network to start to be connected to. They came in as trainers for the Law TAP program. And one of the things that I feel like I did to make my mark on that program is that we started to expand the program beyond just that first, it was like 24 sessions of kind of know your rights and get involved in advocacy. We wanted to help people kind of strengthen their skills and we tried things like doing an incubator project and all that kind of stuff.

Andrea Williams ([00:37:59](#)):

But at one point, one of the iterations of the training I did was starting to bring in community co-trainers, and the community co-trainers were folks that were advocates in the field that people were gonna be working with anyway. So start to get to know them and network with them. And it was a piece that I pulled forward, when I went to work at the Correctional Association. So from the HIV law project, I moved on, I did some traveling. I left, I did some traveling and when I came back, when I was looking for a job, a person that I worked with at the HIV law project was at the New York AIDS Coalition. And they needed some help and had some consulting work organizing people to get on the steps of city hall.

Andrea Williams ([00:38:41](#)):

So I went to do that and was able to continue to work with some of the folks that I had met at the HIV law project. I started meeting some new people and, you know, it was consulting work. So I was looking for a job in consulting, doing that balance was a little tricky. And so then one day I saw that the Correctional Association had a part-time position open looking for somebody to develop a training program, an advocacy training program for women. So I applied for that. And one of the great things about that is that it was a part-time position with health benefits, which is rare.

Obden Mondésir ([00:39:25](#)):

<laugh> yes, it's rare.

Andrea Williams ([00:39:27](#)):

Yes. And so I applied and I got the position to work with the women in prison project at the correctional association. And that's where I met— so Tamar Kraft-Stolar was the director. And at the time Stacey Thompson was the coordinator of the coalition for women prisoners. And about the same time that I was hired, Jaya Vasandani was hired to also work with the Women in Prison Project. And so like we were that four person team.

Andrea Williams ([00:40:09](#)):

There had been only one pilot session for Reconnect and so they were interested, they weren't even sure whether it could continue, so that's what they were trying to do, they were interested in somebody who could come and see, can we continue this burgeoning advocacy training program that we wanna develop for women and have it coordinated with the pieces of the Women in Prison Project? So the Women in Prison Project was mostly doing advocacy by coordinating the coalition, but it also was, not initially, but eventually we took on monitoring conditions in the women's prisons.

Andrea Williams ([00:41:03](#)):

So in the early years of the Women in Prison Project work, it was really about moving the issues through the coalition. The coalition at the time had four committees, and the women's advocacy training program because it was working with women home from incarceration who wanted to be a voice in the face, it was very connected with the Reentry Committee. And there was also another committee called

the Conditions on the Inside Committee, which focused on things like the programs that were available to women inside and trying to improve that, for example, and the conditions that women were facing and the kind of needs inside. There was a committee called the Incarcerated Mothers Committee, which focused on the issues concerning incarcerated mothers. And so Reentry, the Mothers committee. Oh, and there was a Violence against Women Committee, right, that looked at issues concerning survivors of violence who were incarcerated.

Andrea Williams ([00:42:14](#)):

And, so it was really about moving those policy issues out of those committees and organizing people to go up to Albany. We used to bring big contingents, like six bus loads of people up to Albany for advocacy days to educate the electives about the issues that the committees were working on, right.

Obden Mondésir ([00:42:37](#)):

Mm-hmm <affirmative>.

Andrea Williams ([00:42:37](#)):

And so I worked to, you know, build up a curriculum for Reconnect. Denisse Andrade had piloted the first, and what I did in taking over from her was to expand the base of organizations that we would kind of recruit women from, right. We have always had a very strong relationship with Greenhope Services for Women, which is a drug treatment alternative to incarceration program for women. And we went beyond that to do outreach and recruitment from Providence House, Women's Prison Association, wherever women were coming home and getting those transitional services, we, Stacey, sometimes I would go with her, we would do presentations about the coalition and about Reconnect and then get people an application and apply.

Andrea Williams ([00:43:40](#)):

And so, we started to get a good cross section of women from across the city who were interested in advocacy, strengthening their advocacy skills, learning about their rights, getting involved in the coalition and that kind of way. We had, let's see, maybe the cycle was about 10 to 12 weeks. It started out 10 with Denisse. And I think I expanded it to 12. One year maybe it was 14, but 12 was the magic number. And we would have, we really focused on making sure that people knew their rights on the main issues that they were facing as people transitioning home. So housing was always an issue, looking for a job and employment was always an issue. At the time the College and Community Fellowship was growing and they focused on educational access, right. So educational access for women, family reunification. So parental rights because women would be home and they, a number of the women were in danger of losing their parental rights because when they were in prison, their children were taken by child welfare. And if they didn't find help to stay connected with their children, court cases were proceeding and they were losing their parental rights without even knowing. And so in the coalition, through the parent, that's how, that was one big issue that we worked on because the lawyers who were involved in the Incarcerated Mothers Committee were coming in and telling us exactly that, that women were losing their parental rights and they didn't know.

Andrea Williams ([00:45:34](#)):

And one of the things that was happening is that, you know, Rikers island is a place where one of the things that would happen is if a woman was in a state prison, but needed to come to court in New York city, she would, you know, come down and then be housed at Rikers so that she could go to court and

then go back, like, let's say up to Albion and that women were being produced. People, women were coming out of the state prison down to Rikers for a court date, but then Rikers wasn't producing them at court. So because they didn't make their court date, court proceedings were going on without them. And they were losing their parental rights. So the lawyers were coming in and saying, "listen, we need to do something about this," which is how the coalition really got to focus on addressing a law that's called the New York Adoption and Safe Families Act, which is this law that was a New York state version of a federal law that said, if your children were in foster care for the past 15 of 22 months, the state could start to move to "free your children for adoption," right. So that's what a lot of incarcerated mothers were getting caught up in under that law.

Andrea Williams ([00:46:56](#)):

So we did a lot of advocacy there. We also did a lot of advocacy on trying to get rights for survivors of violence who are serving long sentences because you serving a long sentence inside, okay, after a while, you're gonna do all the programs, right. But you don't really have, that's why they call it sometimes "life without mercy," because you can do all the programs, educational programs and things, but you, you weren't eligible to work and go out on work release and things like that. So one of the things that we were working on was trying to see—one is to bring attention to the fact that a lot of the women who were serving these long sentences because they had killed an abuser or harmed an abuser, that was their first offense. They really were survivors of violence, but because they had killed somebody, they really had the book thrown at 'em.

Andrea Williams ([00:47:57](#)):

And so we're trying to raise awareness about that issue and see if we could get some lesser sentence for the women. And one of the ways that we were going in is trying to see if they could be eligible for merit time, which is time off your sentence for doing good things in prison. And we did that for a long time and that didn't really get us anywhere. And so eventually we started working on what is now the Domestic Violence Survivors Justice law, which is a law that allows judges the discretion upon application and meeting a test, a three point test, to offer an alternate, lower sentence for a woman who could show that the crime that she committed was connected to a domestic violence situation. So that we worked on that for a decade.

Andrea Williams ([00:48:59](#)):

So all of that to say that my work with the women in prisons—Oh, so one other thing is, so initially a lot of it was this advocacy, this coalition work, but eventually Tamar moved and had the head of the Correctional Association say like the Women in Prison Project be the one to go in and do the monitoring in the women's prison. So because the correctional Association's mission, we had legislative authority to monitor the prison conditions in New York state. We could go in, we could look at all aspects of the prison tour, do surveys, talk to people from staff to people who were incarcerated, people who were housed there. And so we started doing that work and then really synergizing that with the advocacy that we were doing with the coalition and then the leadership training that we were doing.

Andrea Williams ([00:50:00](#)):

So it kind of all worked together as a piece. And at the time that we were doing that work, there were five all women's prisons and two co-ed prisons, the co-ed prisons were drug treatment prisons, right? Willard and Lakeview Shock. And the prisons that are now closed were Beacon and Bayview, which were minimum security prisons. And then there was Albion, Bedford Hills is a maximum security prison in

Westchester county and then Albion upstate and Taconic, so Bedford, the maximum, and Taconic, the medium, are across the road from each other in Bedford Hills, New York. And then Albion is up close to the Canadian border. That's a medium security prison, but a lot of women from New York city disproportionately are there. So...

Obden Mondésir ([00:50:52](#)):

Is there a particular reasoning to that?

Andrea Williams ([00:50:55](#)):

Well, it's where the medium security prison is, right. It's in Albion, it's large, it's the largest prison and conditions, there are very difficult. And because the benefit that people who are housed at Bedford and Taconic have is that it's closer to the city. And so more programming can happen there from folks from the city to get there. And Albion, you're reliant on the area in Monroe, New York, where it is, and it just makes so that it can't have the same, it didn't have the same kind of programming and people who could get in there and get access civilians visiting. It was difficult because it was so far. So the conditions, there were always very, much more, I don't wanna say—they're severe in all of the prisons, but there was a particular thing at Albion that is very, very difficult because of the distance. So, but we did, we did that monitoring and had all that work, worked together,

Andrea Williams ([00:52:21](#)):

I think under, so I think, I guess a typical kind of, I guess, year not day in the life, there's no day in the life of the work, is we were doing the monitoring. We would, we would answer calls and letters from women in the prisons because we had privileged mail status, privileged communication status. We could send surveys in to find out also about the conditions and that would help us prepare for the monitoring visits that we would do. And the monitoring visits, the protocols that we could bring in a team of visitors to help go around and look at the conditions in the prison and talk to everybody in the prison. We would talk to the superintendent and the superintendent staff. We would go to all programming areas and talk to the folks who have been programming. If the unions were willing to talk to us as a civilians union and as a correctional officers union, we would talk to them.

Andrea Williams ([00:53:32](#)):

The correctional office union usually did not wanna talk to us. On rare occasion, the civilian union would talk to us, and that's usually when conditions inside adversely affected them. We could, we would talk to what's called the ILC, the Inmate Liaison Committee. So those were the kind of leaders in the prison that would look at issues and help kind of advocate for issues affecting incarcerated women in the prisons. We would talk to them, see what the priority issues were and collect all that information, and then report back to the public what was happening. We usually did that through reports. We could also, we'd certainly talk with our coalition members about what we found.

Andrea Williams ([00:54:16](#)):

So there was that work, and then we coordinated the coalition and what that meant was making sure the committees were going. There was usually, there was a CA staff person on each of the committees. The administrative aspects of the running of the coalition, we did that. So, and then we had Reconnect, which would do the advocacy training. We did formal recruitment application, interview and acceptance working with a group of usually 12 women a cycle. I would run two cycles a year and then, usually had a graduation rate of nine to 10, some years, all 12 or would finish. But usually there was some drop off

just because that's kind of the, the reentry road can be kind of tough, but we usually get nine or 10 through. And they would be involved in the coalition. Everybody who came through reconnect was automatically a member of the coalition, and we always encouraged them to get involved right away. Join a committee, go up to Albany, start talking to the elected officials about our platform of policy issues that we were trying to push for the coalition.

Andrea Williams ([00:55:29](#)):

And that going to Albany to talk to these electeds was the golden ticket. It was the thing that everybody, including women who were home loved to do. They would come to meetings, people would come to meetings regularly. And we had general meetings and we had committee meetings. But whenever we had an advocacy day. That's when we would get really just people from the community, and women at Reconnect, people who were in the programs, the transitional services programs would come, because it's—I would hear people say things like, "the closest that I came to the state capital was on the bus on the way to Albion." I think it's just one of those experiences where it was such an eye opener for people who were disconnected for whatever reason, by incarceration, by drug addiction, by whatever the issue, challenges that they had, and never had a chance and opportunity to talk to their elected representative in a way that people were really listening and cared about what they had to say. And then they could see the influence that they were having, right.

Andrea Williams ([00:56:59](#)):

We had great allies in Assemblymen Jeff Aubrey, Senator Velmanette Montgomery, Senator Ruth Hassell Thompson. And then we would meet Senator Tom Duane when he was in. Like, there were folks who got it. And then folks who started to get it the more that they met people in the coalition, and we were able to press our platform. And it just was such a powerful, empowering experience for people. Even you can see it even just being with people like that, the advocacy days just got to be a thing for everybody because they were so powerful. People would sometimes bring their family members with them, their children, with them to talk to elected officials. We'd have meetings all day and we'd have, like you start out with a pep rally and in the beginning, and then you close out the day with everybody debriefing together.

Andrea Williams ([00:57:54](#)):

It was just such a tremendous experience that we would have doing that. And people really got to bring their lived experience to talk about why we need changes in the ASFA, why we needed people to understand the road of survivors of violence and have judges have some discretion, you know, just, why we needed better programming for women inside. Men were getting programming and being able to move into a job. They were getting hard skills that they could move into a job and women, with the exception of cosmetology, they didn't have the same level of programming, the same level of offerings. And so then they were coming home trying to re-find their family and find a job. They didn't have a concrete skill that they could, an industry that they could automatically move into, trying to press about why we needed access to education inside and not to have so many, such long wait lists for people who needed to complete their high school education because they got off track with that. So we're talking about finishing high school so that people could go on and go to college if they want to, or get a trade if they wanted to.

Andrea Williams ([00:59:14](#)):



So there were many, many issues that people were up being able to talk to elected officials about, and they could see them. These are real folks, intelligent, articulate, have solutions to bring to these issues. And so I just think it was always a tremendous experience to have our big advocacy days like that. So that was, that was the work that we were doing for many, many years. And we got some great wins out of that work.

Andrea Williams ([00:59:53](#)):

Yeah. And I guess I wanted to pause right there, 'cause I do have this step way again, but I guess one of the things I'm finding, let me pause here.

Andrea Williams ([01:00:01](#)):

Is it's not, I would couch this, not so much as voting, but civic engagement, because voting is one aspect of it, right. So this is where I think we can make, I can, in hindsight, make a connection with what my mother's experience was, right. Because it's all about getting involved in the issues that you care about and influencing the issues that you care about, right. And the way that our society works in a democracy, we at the lowest level, local, you come together and you vote for representatives of your interests from your community to be a voice in the local avenues of decision making about what happens in a municipality or in a state to make sure that they understand what the people's priority needs are and how they want them addressed. And that entails meeting and talking with them. So you can go to a city council meeting, you can go to a town hall, you know, collect information, anybody any day of the week can go into the elected official's office and say, "I'm a constituent. I'm gonna have a meeting with you, this is what I'm concerned about." And there's a lot of folks who they don't understand that they can do that, right. Like nobody has said, "this is how you do this."

Andrea Williams ([01:01:52](#)):

My mom would tell a story. She got back to Hackensack. It was somebody from the church. It's a regular person. She must have been interested in city council meetings, or maybe this person was going to the city council meetings. And he said to her, "anybody can go to the city council meetings. This is what you do. They have a schedule. This is when they meet you, find out what the schedule is. You go, you go here to this location in this door and you sit down and this is what happens there. They talk about these issues and you can give your opinion on those issues as well." Something as basic that not everybody knows, right. And so to connect it with the coalition and the advocacy days, it was opening that door for people, right. To help them understand how our civic government works and that they had an absolute right, like everybody else, to do what I just described. You participate in the process to pick the people that elect you. You make sure that they understand who you are and the issues that are important to you and your community.

Andrea Williams ([01:03:19](#)):

And that the way that that happens is you go to meetings that are established and you can ask for meetings with them if you want. You can go in, you can call them and talk to them. You can go to a town hall, you can ask for a special meeting, you can bring groups of people, all of that, and how that's done, right, every day by people and for people who are affected by incarceration, because the system is so intentionally set up to keep them second class, make them and keep them second class citizens, right. This was a process really for bringing people into the process. To make sure that they understood that they are entitled to be a part of that process and then do it, right. So it just was a powerful, from what I



observed and heard from people, it was just a powerful process. For some people it was the first time they not only did it, but they kind of understood it in a particular kind of way.

Andrea Williams ([01:04:35](#)):

That being said, I don't wanna say that's true for everybody, because there's some folks, like I have a very good colleague and friend who came from activism, right. So some people the road, what got them incarcerated, the issues behind that pulled them out of that process. But it's not that they weren't aware of it. And so for those folks, they're very powerful advocates because they exactly got it. You know, this person had parents who were a civil rights activists. And so, you know, you definitely had people who kind of understood it. But it was very meaningful for me to see how deeply touched someone who was really marginalized was impacted by this process.

Andrea Williams ([01:05:28](#)):

Some people never, they didn't know how to access education. They never finished anything, right. You know, one of the marks of kind of being able to be successful in society is being able to kind of do something and stick with it. It's the thing that allows you to really get into a job and stick, accomplish some things and get promoted, you get to school and you accomplish some things and you do it. Some people don't have that experience. They didn't have anybody in their life. Life was such that because of trauma, because of poverty, they didn't, they didn't have that consistently or if at all. And so to be a part of a body that created space and opportunity for people to have that experience, and then now have a reference point for doing, continue to do it, do more, do it with us, or do it with another group or somebody else, right.

Andrea Williams ([01:06:26](#)):

It really, to me, it's deep, and it opened up a pathway, I think, for a lot of people to be with a collective that understood the road and that wanted to help open up pathways and opportunities for engagement so that people could say "we are here." "We're affected by incarceration. We're here. We're part of the community. Our families are part of the community. You need to see us. You need to hear us and you need to work with us. We have something to say about what we need the solutions out here to these issues that we're facing on anything, whether it's incarceration to something else, or we need a street light, or how to affect gun violence, or how to do more youth programs or whatever it is." Yeah, so I think it's that that made in particular, the advocacy day, so powerful for everybody who was involved including the electeds.

Andrea Williams ([01:07:37](#)):

And then we got some stuff done. I mentioned focusing on, you know, some changes in the Adoption and Safe Families Act so that people understood there was discretion. The social workers didn't have to, the workers didn't have to automatically move for adoption of these children, that, you know, there were stop gaps that they needed to do. We also focused, you know, health is a major issue inside and for people who are home and the department of health doesn't oversee healthcare in the prisons, right; that's over corrections, it's its own thing. So the bigger issue that we wanted to get was Department of Health oversight of healthcare in the prisons. But it was thought at the time that that was too big and that maybe try with a smaller bite, getting the department health to oversee HIV and hepatitis C care inside. And so we were successful in doing that.

Andrea Williams ([01:08:42](#)):

What else? So there's the Domestic Violence Survivors Justice Act. I talked about that. There's ASFA, there's, oh, anti shackling. So, we found out, so this was very much a collaborative effort. There was a group at the time called WORTH, Women on the Rise Telling Her Story, and then other groups around the country, also looking at birthing behind bars and unfortunately women who are pregnant and incarcerated, they get shackled when they have to go for medical visits, shackled when they're on a gurney, shackled one leg when they're giving birth, like it's just such a human rights violation. And so we decided to take a look at New York and find out, we found out that this was happening in New York.

Andrea Williams ([01:09:48](#)):

And so through our monitoring, we started taking a look at some of these reproductive justice issues, and then through the coalition worked on trying to prohibit the shackling of pregnant women in the jails and the prisons, the New York state jails and prisons.

Andrea Williams ([01:10:10](#)):

And so we were able to pass a law, get a law, passed to prohibit it. And then we had to go back and do some more work 'cause we found out that the law wasn't being followed, but that is some of the success that we had, um, as a coalition in terms of legislative advocacy. We also did other things, like we created tools and resources to help support women home. We created a women's reentry book with women's experiences and suggestions from other people who had walked the road about how to navigate that return home, a book called My Sister's Keeper. We created a housing book along the same vein to help people understand how hard just the road of trying to find your own housing, the barriers that would come up and then also offer resources and suggestions.

Andrea Williams ([01:11:07](#)):

At the meetings, we would have people come in from time to time to give a presentation like on immigration, on transgender rights, you know, the meeting space was a space where people could come in and share information and it could happen even informally. I remember one year there was somebody who was working on trying to, it was like counseling training. So this person was a counselor and said, you know, counseling is one of those skills, like you don't necessarily have to have a degree to do counseling. So she worked up a program where people could learn what counseling was about and how to do counseling. You know, it just was a rich space because people could come in, whether you might have an advocacy issue that you were doing, you might have, let's say maybe you were organizing people to give testimony, like one year related to conditions at Rikers. There was, there were groups out there and they were partnering up to really bring attention to the conditions on Rikers Island. And someone had come and was asking if, you know, people could do interviews, if people could do surveys, and they were collecting that information and funneling and that into the information about the conditions on Rikers and just shining a spotlight on that.

Andrea Williams ([01:12:38](#)):

So it was kind of one of those spaces. We did films, sometimes it would be film projects or people were looking for folks who were interested, all to amplify and shine a spotlight on the various issues affecting women and their families and communities and the impact that incarceration was having on that. So there was a lot going on over those years formally and informally, and it was just a great, it was great to be able to have a space when somebody was coming home to say, "come to a general meeting," because it was a real community and people could see that, right.

Andrea Williams ([01:13:21](#)):

They could see that. They could start to meet people. They would meet people there who they had known from inside, right. That happened a lot and reconnect where let's say I picked the class and then people will come in the first day at class, people was like, "Hey!" They would see people they would know. And then we could all be working together. And then they would come to a coalition meeting and they was like, "Hey!" And they start to see that New York city, just by nature of New York, that it had a richness in terms of resources, in terms of people and programming and advocacy organizations and stuff, that you had a lot to work with here that you don't have in other cities and other states. You have to build it in a way in other cities and states that there's already a foundation here. So people could really take that and meet personal and professional goals that they had because they would, could tap into a network, right. They could tap into a community, they could tap into a network.

Obden Mondésir ([01:14:38](#)):

Yeah.

Andrea Williams ([01:14:38](#)):

And you could, if you needed a mentor, you needed somebody to help guide you. There was always somebody of your choosing that you could, could connect with.

Obden Mondésir ([01:14:45](#)):

Yeah. And that is something I appreciate hearing about the work that was being done at CWP where one of the ills of the system is, like, the atomizing effects it has on people. And what it looks like the coalition was able to do, especially those that were most atomized where you're like completely affected where you are, you feel incredibly marginalized, is like, bringing people together and realizing the power of working collectively and being within organizing work.

Andrea Williams ([01:15:21](#)):

Exactly. Because I think unfortunately incarceration, but even more so the issues that lead to incarceration, like drug addiction or mental health issues that a person may have, they could be very isolating, right. And so it's important to bring people into community and to build community. And I think that that's what people, that's, what we were able to do is, and so, you know, it's not like people's road from incarceration to home and in re-entry is easy. People caught cases, you know, people got violated and went back and stuff, but I think it's much easier to bounce back when you're part of a community that you have supports and that you can shape those supports for what you need, too, right. Supports on many levels and in many ways. And so it was just good to be able to be a part of maintaining that space building and having that space.

Obden Mondésir ([01:16:29](#)):

Yeah. And then, I don't know, there are two ways I want to go there. There is, I want to discuss the sunset of CWP, but then the other thing I'm thinking about is a little more abstract, but it was like, you know, some of these laws, like the anti shackling law and like the Domestic Violence Survivor Justice Act makes me think about the patriarchy and protectionism over the concept of the family and like how it seems like, especially with the DF-, with, with domestic violence, right? Like that you would think that a society in a system that—Western society tries to protect the family, but at the same time, it's kind of like one of the most dangerous spaces for people and for people who identify as women. So like, I don't know. I feel like we can save that towards the end.

Andrea Williams ([01:17:28](#)):

Well, let me say something about that here, because what you're gonna, one of the things that's important with the coalition, because the coalition existed over a long arc, is to understand like, it had limitations in the sense that its not grassroots in a traditional sense. So it's connected to an organization, the Correctional Association, that did a lot of legislative advocacy with the traditional power brokers, right. And with traditional organizations that provide services, right. So in that sense, I guess politically it's more Centrist. And the way the that the advocacy was being done is through changing law and policy. And yes, in that work, <pause> there's a lot of good work that can be done with, with political policy reform it's policy reform work. But the limitation is that like you bump up against the box of, right ... reforms, reforms only get you, but so far, so reforms are important.

Andrea Williams ([01:18:54](#)):

But we can see now I think in 2022, the limitations of policy reform, 'cause look at where some of these issues are. So if you talk to folks who worked on the Domestic Violence Survivors Justice Act today, you have an organization like Survived and Punished that's saying to DAs, "you shouldn't be even charging survivors," if you look at that work. But at the time that the Domestic Violence Survivors Justice Act and that work in the movement for survivors, that that was not, people weren't thinking like that. People didn't think that you could even ask for something like that. If you had people who thought that they could ask for something like that, they were the true radicals and kind of outliers, right. So it takes advocacy and critical thinking and push the envelope to get to that.

Andrea Williams ([01:19:52](#)):

For some people, some folks are already there. Like the system is not gonna save us, the reforms are not gonna save us. But the way I think the advocacy works is that you keep pushing and pushing and pushing the envelope and doing the critical thinking and seeing if something doesn't work assessing structurally why it doesn't work. And when you see that it doesn't work and understand that you need—you're not gonna get it within a particular system; you need something new. That's what pushes you, right, pushes us to do that. And I think that you can see that in a coalition because it's also like, some of the issues around language. You know, back in the day, you would use, people commonly used "offender," "inmate," "prisoner," right. And when I joined the coalition, there were voices like Tina Reynolds, who was the head of Women on the Rise Telling her Story, Eddie Ellis, who was an activist and a teacher saying, you shouldn't be using these words.

Andrea Williams ([01:21:05](#)):

These words treat people as less-than and insisted, they would have lists and insisted, like don't use dehumanizing language to talk about people affected by incarceration. So there was that advocacy. So I think what you will see over time in looking at the coalition is that the coalition was also trying to respond to advocacy led by the people most directly affected by incarceration, right, centering themselves and say, listen, "this is how, if you're gonna talk about it, like we wanna lead in a particular way. We're insisting on being referred to in a particular way." Like that kind of stuff. "We don't want just like small rights. We want the bigger rights," and the moves and the work that they were doing that goes even beyond what, like traditional advocates who kind of work at policy organizations or service organizations were saying or trying to do.

Andrea Williams ([01:22:10](#)):

Right, like, so there's that dynamic to it as well. And I think that's what you're kind of getting at, right. Because you're seeing it right now, looking at a macro view of the structural issues around the big things like patriarchy and capitalism and democratic systems and right. And it took advocacy to insist that. It took advocacy and also the failure of reforms, right. The inability of reforms to reach those things, to insist, we need to start building something new, cuz we know that trying to fix a broken system, trying to fix broken systems, doesn't work. And that's all part of the work, right.

Andrea Williams ([01:23:07](#)):

There are many things, but one in particular like, Michelle Alexander's book about mass incarceration kind of opened up a lot of eyes in mainstream society about how about looking at these issues and looking at mass incarceration as a thing, mass criminalization as a thing. And even that was a major shift to get people to kind of look at these issues differently, to stop pathologizing people and say it was a moral failing and look at the history, right, of how the prison industrial complex is connected to slavery. Like those kind of things.

Andrea Williams ([01:24:00](#)):

So we look at it much differently these days. And, yeah, I think the interesting thing about the coalition in talking to people who were involved in a coalition at different points in time is that, you can see depending on who you talk to, like when you talk to Rhea Mallet, you're gonna get a different view about what people thought was possible than if you talk to somebody even five or ten years from where she was to talking to somebody who was newer with the coalition, right. Maybe in its last two years where you had the city council vote to close Rikers island. Mass incarceration, mass criminalization, very much the, the lens, the way that people see these issues. And the leadership of previously incarcerated people, returning citizens that, you know, running their own organizations, being on the transition team for the mayor, for the district attorney, like all of that kind of stuff and having that level of influence on things. And then also folks who like, that's not the realm in which they wanna work. They, they really want to go outside of these structures and to build anew and are just trying something new too, cuz that's what we need in order to kind of break down these systems. So that is what I think is kind of, you know, like you're working with there.

Obden Mondésir ([01:25:43](#)):

Yeah. Yeah.

Andrea Williams ([01:25:43](#)):

And that's a lot and I think that's, that's the conversation that I think looking at an entity like the coalition allows for yeah.

Obden Mondésir ([01:25:53](#)):

Yeah. And thank you for, for responding to that and like, clarifying it with you.

Andrea Williams ([01:25:59](#)):

Yeah. So I just wanna say I do have a time check. I do need to wrap up by 12:30. So if we could just take up until 12:30 and then...

Obden Mondésir ([01:26:10](#)):

Yeah, that works. So I guess continuing within the timeline, one thing I mentioned was like describing moment where the CWP began to like...

Andrea Williams ([01:26:25](#)):

The sunset?

Obden Mondésir ([01:26:26](#)):

Yeah.

Andrea Williams ([01:26:27](#)):

So that's, like anything, it's not one moment, it's a process. And so, at the Correctional Association, the Correctional Association was going through some organizational changes that of course affected the coalition because the Women in Prison Project had always coordinated the coalition, right. And the Correctional Association wanted to focus on prison monitoring and not have the projects anymore. And so, you know, leading into that, they were also just, there had been some changes in leadership at the Correctional Association, leadership in the Women in Prison Project, that kind of affected the dynamic with the coalition.

Andrea Williams ([01:27:38](#)):

And so at one point in time, we started to do some essentially strategic planning work to see if we could build enough leadership so that maybe the coalition could be independent, like exploring can the coalition kind of be an independent entity that stands on its own that's not so dependent on the Correctional Association's, Women in Prison Project to coordinate it, right? Is there enough to have it step into that role? So we did some work. We got some money from the Groundswell to do that exploration a bit. And you know, it's always good to have those conversations and explore. I think in my view, we didn't land on—we landed on more ideas, but it there wasn't anybody who was kind of stepping in and kind of saying, okay, yes, let's try to be independent. It's one thing to say it theoretically, but then there's very practical things that need to happen, right. People need to step into those leaderly roles. And so there was that. And then at one point the Women in Prison Project's work, the women's advocacy work actually got transferred to another organization.

Andrea Williams ([01:29:18](#)):

So that organizational change that was happening at the CA, the streamlining, the focusing on monitoring, it became a very real concrete thing. And there were three of us that went on a what they call a program asset transfer. We got moved to Rising Grounds STEPS to End Family Violence program. And there, we continued to, it was there that we were able to get the win on the Domestic Violence Survivors Justice Act. We continued to do this kind of strategic look at the coalition. One of our colleagues had suggested, well, we should start to do an impact kind of assesment of the coalition and its work. And so we did that with some resources that we had. We hired a consultant to help us take a look.

Andrea Williams ([01:30:14](#)):

And I think at one point it just became clear because at this new organization, we were on a two year grant, right. And then that money was gonna run out. And so it just kind of, to me, it forced the question, like, are we gonna be able to kind of continue to coordinate the coalition or not? We didn't see the engagement and the leadership. And so we just decided to shape this assessment work in a way

where we put that question squarely on the table to make a decision. And we were encouraged by the consultant and told and reminded that it takes courage to do this. And she worked with us to show like, this is a good thing to do because so many organizations will reach a point where things are not as effective. You've had the wins, the work is complete, but there's not intentional steps taken to look at that, embrace that and make a decision. It just kind of goes away or it falls apart and stuff.

Andrea Williams ([01:31:20](#)):

So she really helped to encourage us, ask the questions, bring the people together, look at the possibilities and then make a decision. And so we did that, all of that work we did, and we decided to sunset. And so that was the event that Martha had participated in. It was a series of kind of things that we were doing that culminated in a celebratory event. And I'm glad that we were able to do it. And I'm glad that we were able—Tina Reynolds, who was the head of WORTH mentioned that their archives were at Smith college. And so we initially reached out to Smith, but then we reached out to Barnard because we had already— so many, a number of our members were familiar. I was familiar with the Center for Research on Women. Other people were familiar with the Center for Justice. So we were familiar with Columbia and your connection on working on criminal legal system reform issues and advocacy.

Andrea Williams ([01:32:35](#)):

So I'm glad that we were able to have a place to not only have a repository for items, but an opportunity with your connection with the Center on Research to have like a living archive, to really help explore issues, 'cause all the folks are still around and out there. That's why I'm pushing for an advisory committee, 'cause you know, it helps to shape like some of the questions that you're asking, like we have previously incarcerated people who are running their own organizations and in those power seats and/or doing grassroots in all kind of aspects, whether they're entrepreneurs or they're working for the government, working for the mayor's office, running their own advocacy, trying to get a jail, a new, women's jail, that's a quote, "better jail," like, just, that's a healing center, to people who are doing the grassroots, legislative advocacy and grassroots activism.

Andrea Williams ([01:33:40](#)):

It's their leadership and their analysis that I would just love to see help shape any conversations that are coming out of this. It's so terrific. So it's a great opportunity and I'm glad that we were able to get it to this point, because I think, I see this as creating a new opportunity, like new possibilities that allow what the coalition has been able to accomplish and the impact that it has. It can then catalyze other conversations. And perhaps incubate other things in the way that it has done for so many people who were able to, to use the space in a great way for their personal and professional and activism kind of vision and goals. Yeah.

Obden Mondésir ([01:34:36](#)):

Yeah. Thank you. I hear all of that. Like there is all the work that, and all the people that, well, all the work that the coalition was able to accomplish and all the people that were leaders there, or that became leaders through that experience and then having their records or having their experience, what they said and have done, to be like continued to use or be a particular usable past is like, yeah. An amazing way to continue the work.

Andrea Williams ([01:35:17](#)):

Yeah. Cause I mean, it's what being in community is. At one point you have a coalition, I mean, a coalition is not supposed to exist forever, right. You have a vision and goal. And then at some point you've met the goal of the thing and you have to decide, okay, is it gonna be a formal organization that continues to provide services? Or is it finished, right? And you're just not gonna have it anymore, and you're gonna celebrate what you were able to do. And so I think that's what we're doing. I think though, we are also creating a great new opportunity, you know, you've described it well, to have a living, working archive where people who are involved in it are able to then take that wonderful rich soil and grow some new things out of it.

Obden Mondésir ([01:36:22](#)):

Great. Thank you. And I'm going to on recording, could you name the church that you were part of growing up in, in New Jersey?

Andrea Williams ([01:36:35](#)):

Yes. It's New Hope Baptist church in Hackensack, New Jersey. And when I was growing up, it was under the pastorate of Reverend Moses A. Knott Jr.

Andrea Williams ([01:36:46](#)):

Cool.