

Food Sovereignty in Black Washington, DC: 1950 - 2017

Senghor Baye

Oral history conducted by Dominique Hazzard
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Interviewee: Senghor Baye (Alvin G. Ricks)

Interviewer: Dominique Hazzard

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Summary:

Community activist and cooperative economics champion Senghor Baye discusses the formation and operation of collective food buying clubs in the District in the 1970s, the importance of self-determination, education and community trust, and the ways black nationalism shaped his worldview.

1:01 Introductory statement

2:32 Description of the Shepherd Street Collective Buying Club (SSCBC)

06:12 Expansion of the SSCBC

09:11 Description of Market Days, including one at Matthews Memorial Baptist Church. Thoughts on the importance of trust for cooperative enterprises.

10:57 Challenges of coordinating food buying clubs in the 1970s and 80s

13:48 Thoughts on the benefits of food buying clubs

16:11 Reflections of the importance of organization and education when coordinating the buying clubs

17:38 Thoughts on trust, community unity, self-reliance and the motives of grocery store corporations

21:21 The role of collective buying in establishing community control in a gentrifying city

22:49 The evolution of the SSCBC (now the Sure Savings Community Buying Club) and transition to Community Based Buying Clubs, Inc. (CBBC)

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44:39 Reflections on the food landscape, growing food, and attitudes toward growing food in 1970s Washington

46:54 Discussion of current day lives and locations of SAFETY Inc. founders and collaborators

50:36 Members of CBBC, Market Days at Shiloh Family Life Center and Matthews Memorial Baptist Church, dissolution of Roots Activity Learning Center based buying club

53:36 Current day conversations with co-operative food entrepreneurs in D.C.; challenges of running food buying clubs in the past

55:57 Memories of his children helping with food packing and distribution

58:56 Discussion of his children as adults and passing down family values of healthy eating and consolidation. The Racial evolution of the Community Warehouse.

1:00:24 Operation and importance of the Community Warehouse to collective buying clubs and food cooperatives in the region. The importance of preserving black owned food businesses.

Senghor Baye

DH: I am Dominique Hazzard, I am here at Sankofa Cafe on at Georgia Avenue. And it is November 9th, 2017. And would you introduce yourself?

SB: My name is Senghor Baye. I've been going by that name now for 39 years. I was born as Alvin G. Ricks. I'm still Alvin G. Ricks, I've just moved up to a spiritual level. I was born and raised here in Washington, D.C. I been an activist since I came out of high school, Bell Vocational High School. Very involved in the movement on many levels, I'm here to talk about collective buying power and cooperatives.

DH: When were you born?

SB: I was born October the 28th, 1951.

DH: Awesome. Go ahead.

SB: So as I was saying, most people when they say self-reliance or self-determination, they still expect someone to give them something. And what you have to do is really recognize, if you got an issue with food stores, the best way to attack that is to get small groups together, teach them how to operate collective buying clubs.

What I mean by that is, in the 70s what we did was establish Shepherd Street Collective Buying Club. SSCBC. [00:01:18]

Some of the neighbors and some friends consolidated their resources and put together a plan of organized operation whereby money was paid 'bout three or four days prior to the purchase of food collectively. A core group of no more than three or four, sometimes just two, would take the funds go to a warehouse that sells produce, and buy it.

We popularized "Save 40% on your grocery bill. Feeding a family of four with four bags of groceries for \$25." So everybody would put their \$25 up. We never went over amount of 18 to 20 units, 24 sometimes. Because that's the way things come wholesale. When you get those resources together, the only money that's needed is the money to-- primarily to buy bags, plastic bags, brown bags, and basically have some gas money and know where to go get the food. And the rest went into purchase. [00:02:32]

When I say fruits and vegetables, I'm talking 'bout four bags of groceries, that you would get every two weeks. That's how we did it, that's how we set the system up. The system was so nice, and people loved it so much, that it started spreading. So before we would take the group and make the group large-- because the larger the group, the harder it is to manage, because you got people coming to pay money. You got people coming to pick up their groceries. We didn't have to rent anywhere. We used our homes on Shepherd St. -- 1233 and 1233 Shepherd Street-- as breakdown spots.

We had a core group of people that we trained how we did breakdown. We didn't have to use scales or any of that. Because you got almost half a bag of collard greens, and a half a bag of kale, the way we did it. So, we just eyesight it. We did it by count-- so if it was apples, everybody got eight apples, or you know seven-- whatever the count broke down to. Some items are already bagged when you buy wholesale. So people were very happy. [00:03:42]

We started getting very popular. We were getting ready to get to the point where we were bringing in more members and we were 'bout to outgrow our basements. The breakdown only took four hours at the most-- going to get the food, coming to bring it in, breaking it down, having a core group of people to break it down, put it in all the bags with people's name on it, and then they would come pick it up. But you gotta train people. Because people forget to come pick up their food, people would pay other people to bring their food to 'em. It's just a lot of issues, you gotta train people on the concept-- cause it's different than going to the Safeway.

The other thing is-- we said, we want to go into a location. What locations are best to do this at, so that we can try to outgrow being at our homes? We used schools, independent schools, and I've got the list: The Nation House Positive Action Center at 770 Park Road, which is no longer there, that was one of the spots-- Roots Activity Learning Center, was one. And we set up another buying club at Shiloh Family Life Center. So Shiloh Family Life Center had a buying club. [00:04:49]

So we got Shepherd Street, and that one-- we said ok we got other buying clubs we can set up. Some other people left us and set up their own. We said, now we need something to bring all those buying clubs together, because everybody's individually doing their own thing. But we want to have more buying power. So we set up the CBBC-- Community Based Buying Clubs Incorporated. Which was designed to be a shelter for the-- even though we were going to incorporate that-- the smaller buying clubs didn't have to do any incorporation or anything like that. And all we were going to ask for was a percentage to keep CBBC established. From the buying clubs.

We ended up, the last location we had was Roots Activity Learning Center. We also had a plan to get dry goods. We did that on a monthly basis, where people would get an order form and they would say what they wanted, and when we got a sufficient amount of people we would go to wholesalers that sell grain and buy bulk. Same process. So not only were we getting fresh produce-- and if a family was not a family of four, it was a smaller family-- they would split. So one family would put up \$12.50 and the other \$12.50 and then they would break down that order. [00:06:12]

Ok so the trust factor is important. And organization is extremely important. And I just want to pull up my notes, just so I can not get too ahead of myself. We had market days--

(noise interruption)

--to get the word out. We established what was called "Market Days" where people could come and buy the produce. Now we did get scales, and all that and we would go out and buy a lot of food and prove to people that they could come purchase food at a very cheaper price. That was a way to get people into the buying clubs. And we did those market days in two locations-- Shiloh Family Life Center we did several. The Washington Post covered it-- I couldn't find those pictures but I've got pictures where the Washington Post covered us. That's how Shiloh Family Life Center's buying clubs got established, we did Market Days there. [00:07:19]

To show the community you could come get fresh produce at a very cheap price, and save. But we said you could even save more if you're in a buying club. So that was called market days that we would do on Saturdays.

Then we also were at Matthews Memorial Baptist Church in Southeast, we did a Market Day there too. So we were very successful at spreading the word. And we were very successful, people were very happy. Our last location was Roots Activity Learning Center, which is on North Capitol, up off of Blair Rd... which is owned by Bonita Thompson. And the principal there was Brother Kamara Robinson. We did most of our breakdowns on early Saturday mornings so it didn't affect school.

And then, rather than us go buy the produce, we started hooking up with people who delivered produce. So it was a little more easy for us to just get up in the morning and just be there when the truck comes. But we have gone so far as to go down to Jessup, Maryland and shop around and buy the type of food we want. But down here in Washington, D.C. they have a market, they got a lot of stores there now that sell wholesale. We used to go primarily to Saul Solomon's. All of the buying clubs were told to make sure they let Saul Solomon's, which was a Jewish enterprise, know that they were connected to us so they didn't get charged a different price.

That's why I said trust is very important. And the knowledge of how you go out and buy your produce. You either gotta have a vehicle to go purchase it, or you gotta have it delivered. You have it delivered, that means you gotta wait for the truck to get there. You have a certain amount of time for people to come pick up their goods. We actually had a policy where if people don't come pick up their food, we would donate it. Because we didn't have nowhere to refrigerate food or nothing like that. So it's a-- (snaps)-- it's quick thing. [00:09:11]

However, we were very successful. I would love to see that model used again for what is going on in Southeast! Because the situation in Southeast is very critical in terms of getting *good* produce, good quality produce, and not only getting good quality produce but being able to feed your family wholesome food. So stores may come, fine. But they're not gonna' be cooperative stores that come in there, ok? That's the reality. Unless you have enough people with enough money to set up and get cooperatives and all the licensing and all that. So they quickest thing to do is to set up multiple buying clubs of no more than twelve to twenty-four people, or families that collectively buy together. But they have to be trained, they have to trust each other, and they have to have a spot like a church or a community center whereby they can pay their money by Thursday, pick up their food by Saturday morning. That simple.

The hard part is training people, 'cause people are like "Well, I wanna make sure I'm getting the same amount as this"-- I mean you gotta do some orientation and training to people. And you also have to have the trust factor in there-- pay in advance. I doubt if you can get four bags of groceries *today* at \$25. However, you still would always save 40-50% on your normal bill.

Everybody doesn't eat the same thing, we had that issue. So you gotta really educate people on certain loss leaders, of what they should and should not eat, so you have a basis of items. Sometimes you go to the wholesaler, they don't have one item so you have to have alternatives. So there is some organized work that has to be done. [00:10:57]

Once you've established enough buying clubs, you're almost at a point where you can set up a cooperative. And everybody that's in the co-op pays a certain fee, and then you set up a store for everybody else. I worked at Stone Soup, I used to pick up food for Stone Soup on 18th Street, and also Fields of Plenty. They were cooperative stores.

DH: Are those stores still open?

SB: No, neither one of them is open now. But they were like health food cooperative stores. But what I'm saying is you don't need that until-- to really help people right way-- if you're dealing with the food problem that exists in Southeast, you have to educate people to self-reliance. Self-reliance is the key because that means if you consolidate you have buying power, you can go out and buy your own stuff and bring it back. Same thing with going straight to the farm. Once you have a significant amount of people and you know what you want? Rather than these little market days that you see around town-- farmers' will be growing *for you*. Once you set your buying base. Because it's all about trust and it's all about organization and delivery. You want to keep everybody happy. The only overhead you have for what I'm talking about is basically bags, transportation, and a venue. That's it! [00:12:22]

You don't have to have a stainless steel sink, you don't have to have all that. When you set up a storefront, and a cooperative, you got to follow all the licensing procedures in the District of Columbia. So the best way for the people in Southeast to address the issue is to go around all of that red tape. Can't nobody stop you from buying collectively. Can't nobody stop you from growing your own food if you're collectively sound. But you gotta have people who are educated-- 'cause if you're growing your own food you gotta have people that know how to grow their food. So you can't run, until you walk. The best thing is collective buying. And I'm an advocate of that because like I said, most people don't understand that all of these big department stores and things you see around-- all of them started out basically as either vendors or cooperatives.

But their thing was capitalism. They want to capitalize on the people that come by. If you're a collective buying club, your thing is you want to be able to build your relationship with community. So not only collective buying clubs help provide food for you, they provide more of a

community setting. Because now you're breaking down food or picking up food, and you're coming in contact with each other with something positive. So it is a method to self-reliance. On all levels. But first level is, you are what you eat. Food is the best way to start. [00:13:48]

This book here that I have, "The Collective Courage: The History of African-American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice" will give you the history of Nannie Helen Burroughs and a whole lot of people in D.C., all the way back before the time you're dealing with, they did it cooperative. Or collectively. So why should we be running out here thinking we can get Safeway, Wal-Mart, all these people that come and gon bring you garbage anyway-- looks good, but it ain't good for you-- and they gon capitalize on you? If you have a low income community you can put together what I just said with food stamps!

DH: Sure could.

SB: You just have to-- we didn't deal with that, but you just have to be organized. There are enough wholesalers around, it's very easy to do. And once you-- you have to build the trust factor with them too, because if you have a truck bringing food that's been already ordered, but not paid for, they gon be leery about coming to certain places. So what you want to do is have someone go to these places, watch what's happening when the truck gets loaded-- purchase or pay-- see you got to be organized, especially today. 'Cause very few truck drivers are going to load up produce and come to certain areas in Southeast in the AM-- 7 AM, 'cause that's when we mostly wanted them to come. 7 and 6 AM in the morning. Plus he's gon' be getting paid, you're gonna pay him-- so if you don't have a relationship you can't deal with checks-- so you got that cash thing.

So you got to be organized around those. I'm prepared-- I don't know where you are with the folks. But I'm prepared to teach people, help people go there. I've talked to Damien [Bascomb], I've talked to several people in Southeast and I let them know-- if you want to really knock this thing in the bag, and you gain the trust of the people, and the people start seeing they can do it on their own, you don't need a grocery store! What you need is a collective buying power. You go to the wholesaler. And when you're tired of the wholesaler, you go to the farm. You're saving *more* money once you go from the Safeway and Piggly Wiggly-- whatever the store is-- to the warehouse, and then to the farmer. So you're educating people. [00:16:11]

And then at the same token you can educate people on what they should be eating, how to prepare their food, recipes. You can add all of that in.

Water. I'm doing a product right now that alkalines water. You take spring water and you drop this thing in it and it alkalines water with seventy nutrients. So once again that's another issue that you could tie into collective buying. Offer opportunity for people that are conscious of eating, and opportunity for self-employment! By marketing products to people that will help aid and assist them. 'Cause we're more acidic than alkaline. So it's all kinds of things that can be incorporated in there once you have cells together.

See the key is the trust factor and building community. This community, that community, this community, all these communities can unify around what we need. Don't matter your differences, don't matter your ideology. We all eat. And I guarantee you that the big stores, when they see that going on, they'll come in and set up. Because that's how you gotta put pressure on the powers that be. Otherwise they don't care nothing about the health of our brothers and sisters in Southeast. When I say 'they' I mean the big stores. They don't care nothin about that. Wal-Mart, Safeway, Giant, they don't have our best interest-- even Whole Foods, they don't have our best interest at heart. [00:17:38]

So, self reliance. Then you have nutritionists come in. Talking to the people about not eating too much starch. They're more susceptible once they're getting-- saving money from buying food. So I'm open now for question. I just wanted you to know-- see, we talk a good game. And we aspire to do stuff. But when it come down to practical action, it doesn't manifest the same way. And the politics of the city's always gon be in the way... you can't count on-- I mean, don't get me wrong, I like the ward Councilmen out there, I like what they doing, I love that. But politics is politricks. So you have to take it under your own initiative to do.

That's how Marion Barry got popular. I worked with Safety, Inc. right around from the corner from Pride, that's the way we did things back then. We just did it. The community need to be clean? We did it. Now everybody's caught in this whole thing of expecting the system to do something for you? Oh, they ain't gon' do nothing but try to figure out ways to get rid of you, 'cause now it's the whole depopulation thing going on. That's why it's so critical-- particularly Southeast! And I grew up in D.C. when Southeast was like country. Chickens was in the lands, and things like that. So I got a real serious passion- even though I live in Northwest, I've lived in Southeast, I got a serious concern about what's going on. And everybody knows about the gentrification and all like that. That's gon' continue to happen in any city. I saw plans thirty years ago, when they were planning on returning when they exited. [00:19:18]

Cooperative housing. Same thing. We need to be-- once you can get yourselves together buying food, the next thing is what? Where you live! You want to control your community, you got to come together collectively and collaborate. Buy buildings together. I'm just saying. And we got some examples of co-ops, but nowhere do we have the leadership of those co-ops really moving at a level where they all are working *together*.

I got a friend that manages a co-op in Southeast, a building. And the problems that he runs into is incredible. But they maintain. So there's everything you can do-- because cooperative is key. Because everything that happens, technically speaking, communism and capitalism-- and I don't know whether you want to put this in there but I'll tell you-- came from us. Not in the same formats-- we [black people] had the marketplace *and* we had socialism. We had all of that. When we were all cool. So I don't know-- this book with Jessica Gordon Nembhard is critical, 'cause you will be able to add it to the work you're doing, and take it-- she's done a tremendous

job. I couldn't help but bring that. Let me make sure I covered-- I know you wanna go on but I wanna make sure I covered a couple things that I think are very important.

Ok like I said we went to churches and schools. We were at a church at 4th & P St NW, I forget the name, it's an A.M.E. church because I grew up at a church right around the corner at 3rd & Q, then I went and became a member when I was a teenager, of Springfield. But we couldn't get those two churches so we went to this A.M.E. church. And that was an outlet where we broke down food too, for a long time. But that was still Shepherd Street Collective Buying Club.
[00:21:21]

We said ok Shepherd Street, we wanna kind of get off of the 'street' thing when we go different places-- we called it Sure Savings Collective Buying Club. So Sure Savings Collective Buying Club evolved into Community Based Buying Clubs Inc. Unfortunately the brother who came up with the concept with me is now an ancestor, Brother Dennis Watkins, he worked for United Way for many years. He also worked with the United Black Fund with Calvin Rolark for many years, and then he worked for United Way.

Well, we came up with that concept to try to help others emulate what we were doing, to build the power base in D.C. of buying power. Like I said the key thing that people need to really recognize is trust-- that's really critical because we trust each other more back in those days, the 70s and 80s than we do today. Now it's a big distrust thing. So you gotta build that, or you gotta get organized. Gotta have a core group of at least four to five people that are willing to do the work required to put the structure together and to go out and train the families. And the families should never be over-- this is just my recommendation, people can do whatever they want, 'cause we've gone up to thirty-six and it's really harder to deal with-- but twelve to twenty-four families, or units per buying club.[00:22:49]

So if you multiply 24 times 25, you see what kind of money you're dealing with. We usually had 18 items or more, fruits and vegetables. Yeah! Four bags of groceries would be loaded up for \$25!

DH: Eighteen different types of stuff?

SB: Eighteen different types of items, right from potatoes to sweet potatoes to collard greens to spinach, to apples, oranges, lemons, bananas, peaches sometimes, strawberries depending on what was out. Oh yeah! See-- always the more you have, the more you can get at a cheaper price. It's that simple.

When you're going to the Giant as an individual, you're getting priced as an individual. Giant pays what, for what they're getting, you see? They're buying bulk, and you coming in as an individual. So they're making loot with all these different individuals coming in the door. But you can go past that! By going to buy from some of the same sources they gettin their produce from! Maybe not the farms and stuff like that, but at least you can go to the wholesalers-- a case of

collard greens, broken down, can feed *easily* a family of twelve. A case of collard greens. You see? So you get two cases, if you got 24. So you got to know-- most people, "I'm gettin *ten lemons*?" 'Cause most people used to buying three lemons. We'd say "Yeah! Certain amount of lemons come in a case." Same thing with oranges. "I'm gettin this many?" I said, "Yeah! If it's too many for you, you half up with somebody, and then you break it down!" If you don't like one item, and another person like it--

DH: Trade--

SB: Same thing, it's trust! It comes back to communications and trust. Now on the bulk situation, most people you gotta educate people, 'cause a lot of people don't even know how important buying bulk is. Most of the people they know oatmeal-- certain things-- they know flour, honey, you know things like that. But they have no idea about the amount of foods that come dry. Of course you got nuts, raisins, things like that, people love those. They're very expensive, so once you consolidate-- and based on how many people we would have-- I know I'm kinda loud-- would be based on how much they would get. Or how much they would pay too. [00:25:22]

We even set up a gas cooperative. Yes! I had a truck come in, we rent a spot that has pump, and our members would get gas at a-- you can do anything like that!

DH: Wow.

SB: It's-- there's nothing that cannot be dealt with... that you can touch-- collectively. But food is the key thing because you are what you eat! And if you can't deal with your food you ain't gon' be able to deal with nothin' else. Clothing or nothin' else. Not at all. And that's why this situation Southeast, as far as I'm concerned, is a wake up call for self-reliance.

DH: And by situation you mean the lack of options for people?

SB: The lack of food that's over there! I mean they've had some stores over there was selling *super* garbage to people, for years. The lack of places to buy produce. And see another thing is our people are so caught on meat. And I mean I'm not-- we didn't advocate that you shouldn't-- but I don't eat meat. But what I'm saying is, you can buy that that way too! You can buy a cow and have it cut up with a butcher if you really want to do that, and save money. Plus you're getting better quality. But I don't advocate that at all, 'cause you really got to have a kitchen, you got to have a network then, you got to go to a butcher--

DH: It's a lot.

SB: Well they used to have what they called DGSs in the neighborhood, years ago, where you could go have them cut up your stuff up for you. Mama used to always send me to DGS before the Safeway. Because you could see them cuttin up your stuff. Same thing with fish. Same thing! [00:27:09]

See... we been hoodwinked. They talk about a food desert over in Southeast-- they givin out garbage at Whole Foods nowadays. Forreal, if you do your research. Whole Foods ain't-- Yes! [Organic Markets] is probably the best around right now. Got some questions about that too. But Yes! started out as one store in Georgetown, and now they all over the place. And they always are busy.

DH: They are. I like Yes!

SB: Of course-- they the best thing really happening. So why can't we with our buying power get to the point where we make the corner store ours? And everybody that comes in and is an owner pays a certain price, and those that are not owners they pay a little higher price. That's building your community. So while we complaining about gentrification, we also accepting it, and knowing we not doing anything to change it... and this is not just here in D.C., this is going on everywhere. [00:28:21]

I mean we got brothers and sisters-- that's a whole 'nother story-- but I'm working with brothers and sisters on the [African] continent too. Because right there you can grow your own food, down South you got places where you can grow your own stuff and people just not doing it. Because they don't realize how important that is. If you could grow what you're eating-- I mean we got UDC and Howard University, got huge land out in Maryland. Only a little bit of it is being used. But I do know they're making their own compost-- UDC is. They're doing different things. I know the brother that runs the program. It's hard to get people to understand. He was selling organic food at one time-- you know who the most serious buyer of organic food is? Restaurants! Restaurants! But guess what, they're taking that food, organic food that they buy for you, fixing a meal, and you're coming and paying. Ah! (laughter)

(chatting)

So it's very very important for us to give what we have. It's not about us as individuals. The more you know the more you're supposed to be showing. And that's why I said I'm open. I told 'em. I told 'em at Union Temple. Union Temple Men's Day, I told 'em look y'all want to deal with these things, this is the way to do it! Once you start doing that, then you can attack the crime! Because now people are communicating with each other. Now people know who's living in this house. Whose carrying the-- I mean you understand? You gotta start there though. 'Cause right now we don't even know who's in-- you don't know what's up! You don't know who's living next to you.

DH: I don't.

SB: It was a time when you could leave your door unlocked, you understand? So we gotta understand, and if we not gonna do it in the city, we gotta plan to get out of the city. And of course I'm an advocate of not living your life in the city.

DH: You wanna get out of the city?

SB: Yeah, I been here all my life. But we got 100 acres down in North Carolina called Noah's Arc. And that brother was with us with Community Based Buying Clubs, now he runs that. So I got three acres there. I would prefer not to be here. But I have a passion for my people. I got grandchildren, you know. [00:30:57]

DH: So Brother Baye, tell me more about yourself, where you grew up in D.C., your family, your childhood, anything you want to tell me.

SB: Well I grew up in Washington, D.C. I went to Truesdell Elementary School. Paul Junior High School. It was kinda rough, kinda youngest in my generation on both sides, so I kinda went through the rough life. I had open heart surgery when I was 14. And that opened my eyes to life a little bit. Even though I was the youngest in my generation-- my older brother's nine years older than me-- I still was a knucklehead, hardhead, spoiled, and ran the streets.

But when I read Malcolm X in high school I was like "Hey! If Malcolm can do this, I can do it. So I started tryin to change my life around. I grew up in a nationalist household, a family who's nationalist. 'Cause a lot of people don't know the history about D.C. There's a lot of people that grew up here in D.C. that was very very staunch nationalists. But they also were very protective. So I grew up in a protective family setting.

DH: And what does it mean to grow up nationalist?

SB: Well, that you, for me-- that you understand self-reliance, and you understand that you got to survive, and you understand taking care of your family, and you study. Like my mother met Paul Robeson. My mother worked-- when she went to Howard University as an intern for three months-- as an intern for Carter G. Woodson. So what I'm saying-- that's to me, being ingrained, nationalism. Doesn't necessarily mean your ideology-- even though I'm a Garveyite, and I grew further with understanding African nationalism, and understanding the importance of-- our people have power but they don't utilize it.

But anyway back to me. I went to Bell Vocational High School. Bell Vocational High School is now a multicultural school. It used to be just for males. 'Cause I probably wouldn't have got out of high school had I not done that, 'cause I was all into the girls. Anyway, from there I end up working in the public school system for a long time as a guidance counselor. I learned a lot there, at Rabaut Junior High School. [00:33:13]

I became a black militant, I'll say that. I was all about the Black Panthers. We created an organization called Stop America from Eating the Young. SAFETY Inc. Same time Pride was working in the early 70s. And our job was to stop the abuse of our youth. The Funkadelics put an album out called America Eats Its Young. And we really understood America eats its young

and pacifies aged ones. So that's how we got real involved into the community. I met independent schools. My oldest daughter-- I have three daughters, one is in their 40s, one is in their late 30s and one is in the mid 30s. I got four grandchildren.

I grew up basically in Northwest D.C. But after my heart surgery my mother had to leave town 'cause she was pressed to pay for the bill. So I ended up living with my sister in Southeast, that's how I got into Southeast. I lived in several locations in Southeast while I was in high school. I currently-- I was married when I was right out of high school, I was married for 25 years. I've separated. Me and that mate are best friends today, and we all deal with our children. I've now hooked up and been together now with my current wife for 18 years. And all of us are friends. I mean her ex-husband-- she was married for 25 years-- is in Senegal. So I've learned how to get over this whole thing of you're no longer a mate and you still share with each other. And I've been blessed in that regard 'cause most of the sisters that I've been hooked up with-- it's couple I wouldn't put in that category, but most them, even-- not just the two I'm married to-- are blessings. They're just great sisters, and I still communicate with most of them. [00:34:58]

So I've had a great opportunity, despite having open heart surgery at age 14 and seeing abuse, of becoming a child advocate. In my late twenties I found out about Marcus Garvey through reading Malcolm. I found out about the UNIA, I got into the UNIA. I got a book coming out--

DH: And what's the UNIA?

SB: The Universal Negro Improvement Association. The Afro communities league founded by Marcus Garvey in 1914. I incubated in that, started in that, studied with people who studied under Garvey, and was trained by them. I helped build the divisions of the UNIA back in the D.C. area starting in the 80s. I got appointed as the co-Chairman of the Centennial Committee-- and this buying club is still going on by the way, what we were doing locally. But I started getting more involved and learning from our brothers and sisters around the world. Studying from people like Dr. Ben, Dr. Clarke.

And I had rose to power in the UNIA. So I served as the District Commissioner of Maryland, Virginia, and D.C. I also was the co-Chairman of the Centennial Committee of 1987, Garvey's 100th centennial, I was the co-Chairman of that. So I served on the parent body with a lot of the brothers and sisters that worked with Garvey and trained [with] them. I took the course-- [00:36:13]

Anyway, I evolved to becoming the Third Assistant President General, I was elected in 1996. I served three terms as Third Assistant President General of this movement-- it's a global movement. I helped bring divisions into the UNIA and helped build in the Washington, D.C. area. I evolved, shortly after that when the President General Raymond Battle passed, I was moved from Third Assistant to First Assistant, and then a year after that the Second Assistant was moved up and I decided I was called to run for President General.

I ran for President General in 2008, became President General. So I'm the 9th successor to Garvey and the 10th President General of the UNIA for 8 years-- I served two terms. I was re-elected in 2012. In 2016 I was not elected, and someone else was elected, a person that I appointed as the High Chancellor. So I'm still doing that kind of work, still involved. [00:37:11]

I also, fourteen years ago a friend of mine and I we founded Harambe Radio and TV. It's an internet network. HarambeRadio.com. So I have a show, I have an internet radio show I've been doing since that time called Black Star Line Nine Time. So I see myself as an activist. I work with the National Council of Elders, which is being formed. I work with the Pan-African federalist organization which is a grassroots movement being formed all over the world. So I'm still working, but I'm also a director of a camp we have for girls that-- my significant other emulates Nannie Helen Burroughs. She channels Nannie Helen Burroughs. She does Nannie Helen Burroughs. Well for six years we've had a camp for girls aged 5 through 13 that we do at the Davis Dance Center.

So I still am a child advocate, even though I'm 66. And I really believe that it's important for us that are older to share in the understanding that there's no lost generation. If it was any lost generation, it was the Baby Boomers. And I'm in the Baby Boomers generation. The reason I say lost is because we got millionaires, we got the greatest historians, we got people from all over the world that have traveled. We got all kinds of resources. But what are we doing to pass on to the next generation? Hello? So we got children-- I'm an advocate of all of that. But I also have a philosophy, it's not about me or she, it's about we. Gotta get away from that individuality, that's Eurocentric. [00:38:45]

To get back to Africanity-- and even in Africa, Africans're the same way. They're courting a Eurocentric paradigm. We gotta get back to the African paradigm. Whereas if I eat, you eat. If you eat, I eat, he eats, everybody gotta eat. Everybody eats! It's not like I sit at the table and eat, and he can't eat! Everybody gotta eat! So that means we gotta figure out a way to get our food together. That's African. So that's what I'm working on.

(Chatting)

I see myself as a homegrown-- my grandmother was born here in 1900. My mother and father were born here. So I see myself as original Banneker City person. 'Cause a lot of people don't know how black D.C. has been. And of course it ain't no longer Chocolate City.

So I don't know what else you want? I love my children, my grandchildren are off the chain. I got four grandchildren-- three grandsons and one granddaughter. And they awesome! It's in the bloodline you know. And like I said, I'm the youngest in my generation on both sides, so I got a lot to carry over. I just feel blessed, I feel blessed to be able to sit and talk with people. I'm an advocate for study circles. I say people gotta get in study circles. You can't just study [by] yourself. You gotta get in study circles,'cause everything is gonna come from that. So that's short.

DH: Beautiful. Take me back to the moment where the Shepherd Street Buying Club started.

SB: Shepherd Street *Collective* Buying Club.

DH: Shepherd Street Collective Buying Club! How did the idea come about, who was involved in starting this, and why do you think you decided to start at that moment? [00:40:46]

SB: It was two of our families, that family that lives at 1233 and the family that lived at 1223, and we brainstormed. And as I say, Dennis Watkins who's an ancestor now, worked with United Way. And he saw a lot of things. He saw us as black people not taking advantage of the opportunities that were out there. And we brainstormed. And I was coming into Garveyism. So we decided, his wife--

DH: And what year is this?

SB: This is 1978. Him and I decided that we needed to do something in the neighborhood. Because I was doing the youth program. We already had a beautification, sanitation program. So we had some community involvement. Food was an issue! Dennis and I sat down and talked. I said Dennis why don't we just set up a collective buying club, later for tryna do a cooperative? So that's how we did it!

And we did the research to see that nobody could stop up from doing what we were doing. We didn't need no license. We didn't need to go through all those hoops. Because there are some hoops to go through. Whenever we start trying to do something there are many more hoops than others have. So we went that route. And once we got into it and people started tastin how it was rolling? They loved it. And we were getting people to come to us from all over the place, that's why we said we need to stretch out. And we were trying to get people to do your own thing. Don't count on us to do it for you. That's why we set up CBBC. [00:42:19]

DH: And what was the food landscape like in that neighborhood?

SB: Well it had Safeway. Safeway was there, and it had corner stores. In fact that corner store at that time was run by a black guy! But you know we saw the need to educate people on how to save money, and how to-- we wanted to take people to the farm. We wanted to get people more into growing their own food. Which was a tough task back then. You talk about growing back then and people was like-- "What?!"

I mean even today. You got a lot of people trying it now and doing it but-- like I got collard greens growing in my yard now. I had a cabinet the same guy that runs UDC, he built a solar cabinet in my yard for me in 1982. Where I was growing my own food.

DH: Tell me some more about that.

SB: What?

DH: What was it like growing your own food-- this is pretty early for solar technology.

SB: I'm not [a] green thumb person. But I learned. I had brought other people in who knew what they were doing. Collard greens are easy, because you plant them during the cold time and they come up-- so basically I had other people. I'm not an expert in that regard. But I'm an organizer. You see? As time progressed, I started getting more into trying to work with other people that are dealing with food things.

For example I have a partner named... I call him my spiritual son. And he has his own product line out now of olive leaf extract, which is helping a lot of people. And he also has moringa and a couple other products. I'm building with people like that. And like I told you 'bout the water. Imma give you that brochure. For a long time we were working with people that were doing their own alkaline water. And this is something that alkalines your water and puts seventy nutrients in it, so you can keep that. And all my information is there, you can check out my website. [00:44:39]

We were inspired by watching the different people that went to United Way and get funding. We couldn't get funding from United Way-- SAFETY Inc, the group I told you about. We were non-for-profit. So we went to Calvin Rolark, Denis Rolark's father-- in fact early on Denise Rolark was doing some stuff with us too back then-- and got a grant from him. And we had a house on 16th Street called The Pyramid. It has twelve fireplaces, eight that were open. It was unattached. And it was at 1825 16th Street. Now it's attached, it's two attachments. So we rented that house, that's where SAFETY was at. And you know Pride was up the street. Special Approaches to Juvenile Assistance was around the corner. Rapid Inc. All of those non-profits we kind of interfaced with each other. We'd do fish and chicken dinners, parties. And that's how we survived, that's how we rolled.

And that was a non-profit organization, and I told you about the 135 acre estate that we have? Yeah in South Carolina... well we turned that over to the last president of SAFETY, who is the owner of that land. So SAFETY is now called Medi-sage. Which stand for "healing wisdom." And it's a 135 acre estate in Mount Croghan, SC. So SAFETY is defunct, but still tied. So I was the registered agent and Executive Director. We let that roll into what is called Noah's Ark / Medi-sage.

A lot of those people-- my brother who was with us, play brother actually, James Monroe, he's in Atlanta. He has a group called Safety First. And now he's dealing with medical malpractice. A lot of people die from medical malpractice. More than car accidents. A lot of people don't know that. So he went that way. Yasmin, Sister Yasmin whose living with cancer, she's a singer, she was one of the board members.

DH: Of SAFETY?

SB: Yeah. SAFETY is spread out but some of us still-- the ones of us that haven't transitioned, we still stay in touch with each other. A lot of us branched out in different directions. [00:46:54]

DH: Once we got to the CBBC--

SB: Right.

DH: --how many people total were participating in this across the city?

SB: Oh it was only a board of directors with the Community Based Buying Clubs Incorporated. We had several groups that set up buying clubs, but we only had two that was consistent and successful. In fact Shiloh-- I don't know whether it's still functioning, but they were functioning a couple years ago. Shiloh Family Life Center. So we had two strong buying clubs, and that was Sure Savings Collective Buying Club functioning out of Roots Activity Learning Center, and Shiloh Family Life Center. Rev. Alston is no longer there is neither is Rev. Gregory, they were the ones that helped bring it in there.

DH: And the Shiloh Family Life Center, can you tell me again where that was located?

SB: Shiloh. You know where Shiloh Church is at? 9th & P St, right off the corner of P. They have a Family Life Center and they have a big church. That's very historical church. We used to do-- they used to break down their food right there.

DH: And the Sure Savings one, where was that located?

SB: The last location was Roots Activity Learning Center.

DH: And what neighborhood is that?

SB: That's uptown Northwest. And Shiloh is downtown Northwest.

DH: What happened to Matthews Memorial?

SB: Well we did one Market Day there. And what we do basically was brought the produce, brought it in. And set up scales. And we would weigh food. And people would come buy it at a savings. Shiloh-- we had several at Shiloh Family Life Center. We call 'em Market Days as a way to pull the community towards it so they can come see the produce and then run the concept with them about the buying club.

DH: So you didn't ever really help establish a buying club in Southeast--

SB: No

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DH: --but you had the Market Day?

SB: Right. No, never got a buying club going in Southeast.

DH: Ok. For the ones that were really strong and active, can you tell me more about who was in them? What type of families, what time of folks ended up participating? [00:49:02]

SB: Most people-- we had cab drivers. We had people who were professional-- like Dennis was in the economics, he worked with Dorothy Heights' group, after he left the United Way he worked for [the] economic aspect of Dorothy Heights' group. And then he told me, he said "Senghor we should have never let this go, 'cause now all these big corporations are talkin 'bout it, we need to show them what's up." This was before he transitioned.

People were either self-employed, or they were what I called activists. Cab drivers and all kinds of other employment sources. But basically you would say most of the people that were with my group would be put in the middle class category.

DH: And mostly black people?

SB: Oh no question! We had some people that came through that weren't. They heard about it and got food. We weren't anti anybody, but it was primarily black families.

DH: You said the Shiloh Family one might still be running, and the one that was at Roots, what ended up happening with that buying club?

SB: We got burned out, trying to manage and keep people consistent, and we moved on, doing other different things. We just decided that-- first of all the principal transitioned. But that wasn't the reason why we stopped there at Roots. Roots was sort of a pick back up from years back. So we went all into the '90s with Roots. [00:50:36]

So the concept is still alive. In fact I have documentation, I have different things. It's about commitment, people need to people committed. I got my hands in a whole lot of different things. I had went through my divorce, and we revamped the buying club after that! So that went into the latter 90s.

DH: And I was wondering if you could tell me more about-- you said a lot that the key element of being able to be successful with these buying clubs is building trust--

SB: Yes, that's important.

DH: --so how did you do that? What did that look like in practice?

SB: Well it wasn't hard for *us* in Sure Savings to build trust. Because a lot of the people knew each other. But when you're dealing with a community-- nowadays most people in the

community don't know each other. Or don't have any kind of working relationship. It's hi, bye, that's it. They don't know who's living next door. So you gotta build that. It's best to have people in the same area. They don't all have to be in the same area! But your central spot is a spot all of them can come to. That's why we advocate certain areas.

For example-- Union Temple.... has a farm now, where they got area where they're growing food. It's not a big thing. But you would set up multiple buying clubs *in* Union Temple. Not just *one* for Union Temple. And there are other key spots in Southeast that I have resources with, or know people where we can come in and talk to people about it and implement. Brother Damien-- do you know Damien?

DH: Mhmm.

SB: I been telling Damien for the longest time, "Brother, when you're ready, let me know." 'Cause we'll come sit down with anybody. And when I say "we" I'm mainly talkin 'bout me, but there are some others that were around that know how we did it.

DH: I think he's feeling burned out too. (laughter)

SB: I wanted to counsel... some of the counseling I did with them-- that's what happens with a lot of our young enthusiastic people. They get off focus because they get so caught up in-- because it's so much going on!

DH: What did you all do as folks who were tryna coordinate all the people, to stay focused and prevent the burnout?

SB: It's not so much just burn out. People start doing other different things. One of the problems is, when you have somebody that pays you \$25 and then don't come pick up their food? That's kind of-- it's really discouraging. And then you have to stay there at the center, waiting. So if the center is giving you the space and you don't have to pay them anything-- you gotta wait. So we had to come up with a way, of what we do with food when people don't come get it. And we did, we would go out and donate it. [00:53:36]

During the summer, people would want you to not only break their food down, they want you to deliver it to 'em. So you would have some people who would say "Ok, I'll take such-and-such their food." You go to their house, and they don't answer the door! You got this food in the car-- so those are the kind of things, when I say you got to have training and trust, that's important. 'Cause if a person can't remember they gave you \$25 on Thursday to pick up their food Saturday morning? I mean-- you know what I mean?

And you'd be surprised with the people that happened with! We'd call 'em up and couldn't get 'em. "Oh!" the next day, "I forgot all about it!" We'd say "We gave your food away." And they'd say "No problem, I'm sorry." So that-- that's training that has to happen.

SB: What is one of your favorite memories from this time when you were involved with these buying clubs?

DH: My children, and how they loved it. When they saw you break down, that's the favorite. In fact if you get that Washington Post article, if I find it, I have a picture of one of my youngest in my arms and we're standing by a scale when they took that picture. My favorite thing is watching how the *children* love what you're doing. When they see you breaking down food like that, running lemons and dropping in all these bags, oranges in all them bags, they're like "Oh! This is happenin!" And so it's instilled in them. That was my favorite, my chil-- and then, when it's no buying club they like "Well what's up Daddy? What's up? What's happenin?" 'Cause they grew up on it.

His children and my children. Dennis had five girls. I only had two at that time. But that's the biggest thing that get me, the children. 'Cause remember... I was with the child advocacy group, SAFETY. And if we had that mechanism, whew. 'Cause children can operate the operation... they can do it! All you gotta do is assist them.

DH: The breaking down and the stocking?

SB: Yeah! They would love to put lemons in this bag and that bag, and the oranges in that bag. And they will never forget that. And it will be instilled in them. That's my favorite, watching how my children-- and my grandchildren don't even have a clue about that. [00:55:57]
They don't have a clue because they haven't seen it, but... they've learned certain principles from their parents around consolidation. Because the family still consolidates... I've still got that energy happenin. But it's not the same as it was back then, where you're buying food together. Diets change. My oldest daughter went to Georgetown. She's vegetarian until she went into Georgetown playing basketball. And I can't tell her at 19 years old "don't eat chicken"! Do you understand what I'm saying?

DH: (laughter) Right.

SB: So it's like if you gon' eat chicken, you gon pay for it! You should see her now, she's up at Wilson now, she's the basketball coach. I'm just sayin. 'Cause she chose to eat chicken-- look at me I'm 66 I ain't got to stomach or nothin'. I'm good to go. But that's part of raising your children. You gotta give them the principles and it's up to them to apply them

Now my youngest daughter's a... vegetarian. The baby's a vegetarian. Ain't never ate no meat. Never in her life! She's back and forth though. The older one-- soon as she got out the house she was figurin out how she can eat chicken. (laughter) But hey! She did well at Georgetown. She's doing a lot of great work and is youth advocate. She's off the chain. And she's helping youth out up at Wilson. So I can't complain.

DH: She's got your same values.

SB: But now she's drinking this water, she's tryin now to come back, 'cause she sees the difference.

DH: The impact on your life.

SB: Her mama's still the same size she was. 'Cause she don't eat no meat.

DH: No meat. My last question is-- thinkin about today. A lot of people talk about the 60s and 70s in D.C. as a renaissance time for co-ops, and it was just so many different types of co-ops going on. And today there's fewer. Why do you think that is?

SB: A lack of consciousness. But I didn't even talk about the Community Warehouse.

DH: Ok, tell me about that.

SB: Glut in Southeast it was a community-- and it wasn't us-- and they set up Community Warehouse. Well a friend of mine Kwesi Uluajamon, who's the lawyer of SAFETY Inc who lives in South Carolina today and in Atlanta-- he has land. He asked Brother Yazid... some people who were studying under Ra... he recommended that they go over to the warehouse and volunteer. So that's what they did. Turns out we end up taking over the Community Warehouse. When I say taking it over-- running it. And it used to become a spot. Dr. Sebi actually came here and *lived* there for a while. The Community Warehouse became a *black* outlet of dry goodS and it became a cultural community. It was over on Kendall Street Northeast. That's where we bought our dry good from. [00:58:56]

DH: This was in the 70s?

SB: Yeah! And Glut is still in existence, out in Mount Rainier. But Glut, Stone Soup-- I told you 'bout-- Field of Plenty. All them used to buy their stuff, their dry goods from the warehouse. So you had the warehouse as a cooperative. And you had these storefronts that used to count on that warehouse. So the warehouse used to buy whole-- and the reason the warehouse folded was because of tax reasons. They got jammed on taxes. And a lot of the brothers and sisters that ran that are now ancestors too, some of 'em. That's really what happened. But the Community Warehouse was key here in the D.C. area.

DH: It was like an important thing for all the other co-ops-- needed this co-op.

SB: Oh for everybody. Us and the community. Because otherwise you had to go out in Maryland, and we had to go to Seventh Day Adventist spots and places like that to get your wholesale. Because see-- most of the wholesale outlets now are Chinese. Or Korean. When you go down to the wholesale, that's what they are. Because *they* stick-- they are basically-- but we buy from them, and they supply their folks. Where's ours?!

But we had the Community Warehouse at one time, which was really taken over. Not in a negative way! What I mean taken over was-- you would go in there and you would see a lot of young liberal whites. And then soon it was all black people in there. And the little whites had went other places, and the black people was running things. [01:00:24]

And it stayed for a long time. And they had an upstairs where they did-- bands would come and play. So it was a great spot! Right up on Kendall Street NE. Community Warehouse. That was very important. Like I said, Dr. Sebi-- you know who Dr. Sebi is, you ever heard of Dr. Sebi?

DH: No.

SB: Well Dr. Sebi, he's now an ancestor, but he came here and stayed there for a long time.

DH: Anything else I didn't ask that you wanna share?

DH: What are they gon' do? I mean what-- not just you, I'm not asking you-- with this information? 'Cause that's what I-- I've already let them know. I'm ready to help you, whatever. But I can't do the same type of organizing that I did back then 'cause I have my hands in a whole lot of other stuff. And that's another thing. We don't realize how powerful we are as a people. We squander that. We give that back to the same oppressor that's oppressing us. We gotta do somethin, we gotta shift that... we gotta multitask-- we multitask as individuals, but where's our collective multitask? This place right here, Sankofa. Perfect spot. We gotta make sure it stays! Duku, up the street, Blue Nile-- gotta make sure it stays. Because they're key.

DH: Well thank you.

SB: Sure, thank you.

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