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University of California
Berkeley, California

Queen Thurston:
Oakland Army Base Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
Lisa Rubens
in 2008

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01-00:00:00

Rubens: We're with Ms. Queen Thurston in her wonderful home in West Oakland. And today is the 20th of August. Thank you so much for having us into your house today for this interview. What we're really interested in documenting is your role with the West Oakland Community Advisory Group and what your interest specifically has been vis-à-vis how the Oakland Army Base could be used. And I want to begin by just asking you how long have you lived in West Oakland.

01-00:01:19

Thurston: Since 1942.

01-00:01:23

Rubens: How is it that you came to West Oakland?

01-00:01:27

Thurston: My father was working on the railroad and he decided to move my family, my mother and family.

01-00:01:36

Rubens: How many children were in the family?

01-00:01:41

Thurston: Five, three brothers and two girls.

01-00:01:41

Rubens: Where are you in the birth order?

01-00:01:45

Thurston: The younger, yes, I'm the baby of the family.

01-00:01:46

Rubens: And did you go to school when you came to Oakland?

01-00:01:49

Thurston: Yes, when I first came to Oakland I spent my first year at Clawson Elementary School, which is no longer there, and we couldn't get it revised as a school, and now it is homes, condos and businesses.

01-00:02:08

Rubens: So you graduated high school in Oakland?

01-00:02:08

Thurston: Actually I went to Tech High School and then I graduated from Berkeley High.

01-00:02:14

Rubens: And then what did you do? Did you work in the area?

- 01-00:02:17
Thurston: Well, actually I worked as a public relations person for Welcome Wagon International. It's a business out of—I believe now—it's been so long ago—but it's from the southern country, and they go into the home when new people come into the neighborhood, and you visit with them and tell them about the different businesses and products and places in the neighborhood, in the area.
- 01-00:02:51
Rubens: What led you to get into political activity in Oakland? When is it that you settled here in the West Oakland community?
- 01-00:03:00
Thurston: Well, actually right from the beginning, because my father worked on the Western Pacific Railroad and it came right into Oakland. And I had an uncle that was married to my mother's sister. He had been a railroad man. And that's how my father got into it. And that's why we came here. Actually they lived in Berkeley though. But Oakland was our destination.
- 01-00:03:24
Rubens: You yourself, how long have you lived in this wonderful home that we're in?
- 01-00:03:29
Thurston: Since 1972.
- 01-00:03:32
Rubens: Did you marry at that time?
- 01-00:03:34
Thurston: No, I married early, in '50.
- 01-00:03:38
Rubens: But what made you come to West Oakland?
- 01-00:03:41
Thurston: Well, because I always lived here, and I loved it here, and so I just stayed here. Yes, because we only came to Berkeley to wait for the place for our family. We were waiting for an apartment, which was not very far from here, on Poplar Street and Twenty-fourth.
- 01-00:04:02
Rubens: And then you came to this home.
- 01-00:04:04
Thurston: No, then I lived with my family when they moved to the family home on Magnolia Street between 24th and Grand.
- 01-00:04:19
Rubens: So you're long-lived Oakland, with a big extended family.

01-00:04:22
Thurston: Yes, yes.

01-00:04:22
Rubens: When did you find yourself first becoming politically active in community organizations? Is it prior to WOCAG?

01-00:04:29
Thurston: Oh yes, definitely prior to WOCAG, because actually I was very active in the school system because my children were in school and I was in the PTAs and all of the different things that they had at the schools. And all of the children weren't at the same school, so I was quite busy, because some of them would still be in elementary school when others were in junior high and others in high school.

01-00:04:56
Rubens: How many children do you have?

01-00:04:59
Thurston: I have six children.

01-00:05:00
Rubens: Oh, bless your heart. And their age range?

01-00:05:03
Thurston: Oh well, the youngest is in her forties, 44, and the oldest is 58.

01-00:05:10
Rubens: You had your hands full.

01-00:05:12
Thurston: Yes. I was very blessed that very few problems were serious problems, and they were over very quickly, which was very good. I am thankful.

01-00:05:23
Rubens: You mean vis-à-vis your children.

01-00:05:25
Thurston: Yes.

01-00:05:25
Rubens: So all the way were you involved in PTA from elementary into high school?

01-00:05:32
Thurston: Oh yes, right, from Clawson Elementary to Hoover to Tech, McClymonds, Castlemont, Oakland High. They were involved in all of those schools because they wanted to go to different ones for different reasons. And so I was involved in especially McClymonds and Hoover and Clawson.

01-00:05:52
Rubens: Were there particular issues that you focused on or were a member in the sense of being a backbone of the PTA?

01-00:06:01
Thurston:

No, just more or less just a backbone of the PTA. And just helped with all of the different events and would always be there for the PTA meetings and to help, whatever things that the children needed, a support system for the school.

01-00:06:18
Rubens:

And then how about what else? Did you get involved with any local community group when ACORN came in or—the Cypress Freeway I imagine would have—

01-00:06:28
Thurston:

Well, yes, we were involved in that also, but also I had been a Campfire Girl leader when my children were little, and I was always interested in whatever was going on in the community, and tried to be a part of it or to find out what was going on.

01-00:06:49
Rubens:

So is there any one or two other organizations you want to mention that you were involved in before?

01-00:06:53
Thurston:

Well, when the Loma Prieta earthquake came, we organized a group with the city and Stephanie Floyd-Johnson was our coordinator and go-between person from the city. A small group of ladies with the help of Ms. Johnson were the founders of CWOR, Coalition for West Oakland Revitalization, and we did programs and discussed how we were going to try to rebuild West Oakland from all of the damage that had happened. And I also worked with other people to try to keep the freeway from being able to come back down through the heart of West Oakland, because that Cypress Freeway actually was dividing the community, and it was a very—how would you say—place that was really scary for children who had to come on the other side, because it was fast-moving, the traffic not only on the upper decks but down on the Cypress Freeway. It was busy traffic. CWOR published two reports, phase one report, “Visions and Strategies,” May 1994, and “Visions to Actions,” mid-term report, June 1995.

01-00:08:06
Rubens:

And then underneath it was really not attractive.

01-00:08:08
Thurston:

Yes, no, it wasn't anything there then. It was just storage and things like that when the freeway was there, and not anything attractive at all.

01-00:08:20
Rubens:

So did you feel vindicated? Did you feel that your working really did meet with success?

01-00:08:28
Thurston:

Well, the thing of it is we are very glad that it finally—yes, the freeway is around the West Oakland neighborhood, not through it now. It's on the outskirts between West Oakland and the Army base, and not right through where the homes are, because at that time there were homes on the other side and on this side. But it took a lot of places out of there that was in between. But I'm glad that the freeway no longer goes right through our neighborhood anymore. But I was really very sorry because some of us really wanted to see an African marketplace where the freeway had previously been. We thought that would be something that would give some history of the things that had been here in West Oakland before, and we thought it would be a chance for some of the blacks and African Americans who had lost their business due to the building of new projects and housing, and also who had lost their property because of the Loma Prieta, because Seventh Street was thriving at one time, and had a lot of businesses. And I was thinking that if we put an African marketplace on the Mandela Strip, which was Cypress Freeway, then we could bring back some of the glory of the people who had lived here and had businesses here that had lost them.

01-00:10:02
Rubens:

But that didn't come to be.

01-00:10:05
Thurston:

But that didn't come through. But also we were I guess lucky, because we did hear that the Transportation Commission was going to reallocate the money to someplace else that had been set aside by Caltrans for the Mandela Strip or the Cypress Freeway to be revitalized. And with Mr. Willie Keyes and myself and many others we went to San Jose to the—what do you call it - The Traffic Commission, whatever they are, the commission on the roads, and got them to stop the money to keep it for the revitalization of the Mandela Parkway.

01-00:10:46
Rubens:

The Highway Commission.

01-00:10:46
Thurston:

The Highway Commission. Got them to stop; to insure that the money would not leave Oakland and go to something else other than the freeway. So at least we managed to keep that money here as part of the revitalization for the community.

01-00:11:02
Rubens:

So by the time you become involved in WOCAG you've had quite a bit of experience going to agencies.

01-00:11:07
Thurston:

Yes, well, I had been going to the city. I was almost in City Hall every day for some kind of meeting or some kind of committee meeting or either a community group -going in meeting with our councilpeople or whatever was on our table at the time.

01-00:11:26

Rubens: By the way, what did your husband do?

01-00:11:35

Thurston: Well, that is weird, because I've been married more than once. And one husband was a person that worked at one of the places that's gone now. The Naval Supply Center, in the automotive department. And my second husband had worked as an aviation mechanic at the Oakland airport.

01-00:11:56

Rubens: I see. I was going to ask if any of your children had ever had jobs or had anything to do with the Oakland Army Base.

01-00:12:05

Thurston: No they haven't, they haven't been able to do that, they've been too busy I guess trying to raise their children and to take care of them.

01-00:12:15

Rubens: So tell me then about the formation of WOCAG. When you learned the news that the Army base was going to be demilitarized, that there was going to be a commission set up, OBRA, to help figure out the reuse, and that one of the mandates of OBRA was that there had to be a community organization, there has to be representation. I guess they named it WOCAG. But do you remember the first meeting?

01-00:12:42

Thurston: Yes, yes, I can remember the first time that Congressman Dellums came to the city. And it was at Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church. And one of the things that he was saying, by them downsizing, and that the base would be closing, that it possibly would be a good opportunity for the West Oakland community to get some benefits from that. And that was giving us hope that maybe some of the things that we needed as a community we would be able to get. And maybe some of the people who had lost businesses or that type of thing, they would be able to get in some of the buildings, if there were buildings left, or just take part in it and be able to benefit from its no longer existing as an Army base.

01-00:13:45

Rubens: Maybe some of the ideas that were left over from the Cypress Freeway? The way you were talking about an African market.

01-00:13:50

Thurston: Yes, well, the thing of it is—yes, I thought that this would give a chance for some of the benefits to be reaped here. And especially because the Army base and the Port of Oakland, they are on our west side and our southern border. So West Oakland is really impacted by what goes on, on both the Army base, Naval Supply, or say for instance the Port of Oakland, because they're on our borders on both sides.

- 01-00:14:24
Rubens: That's right. And it's such valuable land. Wide open land.
- 01-00:14:28
Thurston: Yes it is, exactly.
- 01-00:14:30
Rubens: So it's basically twelve years since that original meeting. I think it was in '96.
- 01-00:14:36
Thurston: Right, yes, yes.
- 01-00:14:37
Rubens: Would you be able to describe just a little bit? Did you vote for officers?
- 01-00:14:45
Thurston: Yes we did. Yes.
- 01-00:14:47
Rubens: Were you happy enough with the representation? I guess George Bolton and Monsa Nitoto were the—
- 01-00:14:56
Thurston: Well, actually really I think George Bolton is a levelheaded businessman type of person, and I think he did and is doing the best job he can. But something else I want to say about the Army base also is that I had a brother who served in the Army and I had one to serve in the infantry. And also another one to come later in the Air Force. And so often some of the statements you got was as if the Army is something totally different from the people. But the Army isn't totally different from the people. Because it's your family and my family and our relatives or our friend's family and children that go off to war. And one of the brothers served fighting against the Germans and the other brother was in the islands in the Philippines and around. So I really feel that you shouldn't separate it as if it's a big powerful entity and you have no right to ask them to do things for you or the people. The people in general. Because it's the people who make up the military.
- 01-00:16:17
Rubens: Are those brothers still alive?
- 01-00:16:19
Thurston: No, well, my younger brother is still alive, that was in the Air Force, but he really didn't have to go to war. But the other two, one just recently died a couple of months ago. And the other one has gone on a little while before.
- 01-00:16:33
Rubens: So are you saying that by the time in the nineties the Army wasn't in a certain sense given the respect? Maybe because of all the hostilities in Vietnam and Desert Storm it was a different era? That these distinctions were being made between the Army and the community?

01-00:16:56
Thurston:

It was just that when we as WOCAG members, the West Oakland Advisory Committee, would ask for some things, and say we felt that this should happen, and I don't feel that the things that we were asking for were unreasonable, but they would always say, "Well, that's the military and you can't fight them and that's the way that—"

01-00:17:19
Rubens:

Who was saying that? People in WOCAG or in the city?

01-00:17:22
Thurston:

From the beginning we knew the process. There was a man that was in charge of the base, he was a retired military person working as the main point person. The people who were like our advisors or the people who came to talk with us. In other words you couldn't penetrate the ideas. But if you're saying that it has to be a community component of the closure of the base, and you're putting us in place to say that we represent the city as a community, well, then why are you not respecting and looking at and analyzing the things that we were asking for?

The other thing that I had a problem with: Sometimes there would be questions that we wanted to ask about what are the laws of maritime, and like who could be on the base, and who could be on the Port of Oakland once the base closed. And we would ask for the proper people to come and talk with us. Sometimes we wouldn't get them. But yet sometimes we would be promised that these people would come and talk to us and clarify some of the things that we had on the table that we wanted to know about.

One other thing that I was really very sad about, the process is so big and it's quite, quite—it's hard to understand the maneuvering of how that you have to transfer and how that you have to process it. And we wanted to at least say keep the administration building on the base as a historical site, and that possibly that West Oakland organizations could share in that particular building. And they would maybe get offices and different organizations—I suppose you naturally would have to have some kind of qualification and some kind of say, show work ethics or whatever it is that you've done really for the West Oakland community. But the next thing we knew it was torn down.

01-00:19:47
Rubens:

Building 1 was torn down.

01-00:19:47
Thurston:

It was torn down.

01-00:19:50
Rubens:

Even before I think your plan for West Oakland was developed?

01-00:19:55
Thurston:

Yes, well, anyway it was torn down quite early in the process, even though that was one of the first things I know that we had asked for. And I do know that that was one of the things too that—you said you spoke to Mrs. Wyrick-Parkinson—that she was asking for, was to at least keep that building. Because we weren't certain also of the other buildings, because there was that contamination and that type of thing, and a lot of orders and rules and regulations that had to be followed.

01-00:20:30
Rubens:

So yes, you were having to read a lot of documents, and then you were asking for people to explain certain things to you. And did you feel that process was not quite as transparent, it was opaque instead of transparent.

01-00:20:45
Thurston:

Yes, yes, yes, and so that was a lot of what we really had problems with. We asked—especially like I said the maritime, because the Port of Oakland is there. And then all of a sudden when we were saying, “Well, can there be this type of business there or a group, not necessarily our group, but groups that were going after the things, well, can they be there?” But, well, that's considered maritime or it'd have to be something that's related to maritime to be qualified. Well, sometimes those things weren't made really that clear. And then there are things that you still see that were being said that was going to go on. And this is to me personally, that it didn't seem like it had anything to do with maritime, but yet. So it was quite a lengthy process and—

01-00:21:51
Rubens:

Disappointing in some ways?

01-00:21:53
Thurston:

Yes, quite some ways.

01-00:21:55
Rubens:

Did you serve on a particular committee? I understand that there were about 160 people who constituted WOCAG in the beginning and then there was a dividing up into land use and environmental and other committees. Was there one particular committee you worked with?

01-00:22:09
Thurston:

No, I really didn't.

01-00:22:10
Rubens:

And were you able to attend meetings?

01-00:22:16
Thurston:

Yes. For many yes I did and was there all the time.

01-00:22:18
Rubens:

Were they evening meetings?

01-00:22:20
Thurston: Yes, yes, usually in the early evening like six-thirty to eight-thirty.

01-00:22:23
Rubens: At the West Oakland--

01-00:22:24
Thurston: Senior Center. One time we were at—I think we even had some meetings early on at the library too. The West Oakland branch, located in the multi-purpose center at 1801 Adeline Street.

01-00:22:35
Rubens: I think other people have said that, that's right. And so you're saying that George Bolton did his best.

01-00:22:41
Thurston: I think so. Yes and he always went to the OBRA meetings and represented us there also with his report.

01-00:22:51
Rubens: He went to OBRA meetings probably—

01-00:22:53
Thurston: Yes, yes, OBRA I meant, yes.

01-00:22:57
Rubens: Did you have any direct dealings yourself with either—it's Paul Nahm who headed OBRA.

01-00:23:08
Thurston: At one time yes, we had—I was trying to think. Seemed like it was someplace else that—oh we also met I believe at the Army base at—what is that place? Yes at one time we had some meetings out there.

01-00:23:24
Rubens: Did anyone ever take you on a tour of the Army base?

01-00:23:31
Thurston: Yes, there were some bus tours that went through there. And we talked about the trucks and where the trucks that were there were parked and the land that was there and vacant, that type of thing. Yes, we did.

01-00:23:47
Rubens: Well, tell me, what was it that you—apparently a draft reuse report came out sometime in '98. I think the organization was formed in '96 and you held meetings and came up with a draft reuse report in '97, '98, and then it got hung up on an environmental regulation, BCDC.

01-00:24:11
Thurston: Yes, we had a lot of discussion with BCDC definitely. And that's what I'm saying, that it was so much of it, it's really hard to really go back and think of

what we did. But yes, after I thought about it, we had a lot of meetings on the Army base at the OBRA office that was out there. Yes because at one time—

01-00:24:35

Rubens: Do you know what the building was called?

01-00:24:38

Thurston: That's what I was trying to think of -it was right out there, of Maritime. It was the first building after turning off Seventh Street. You had to go down to the main gate and drive back around to get there.

01-00:24:38

Rubens: But how would you get there literally?

01-00:24:44

Thurston: I drove.

01-00:24:50

Rubens: And do you recall if there were any particular institutions or kinds of businesses or function that you wanted to see the former Oakland Army Base have on its property? I know you mentioned having Building 1 remain as some kind of community center or retreat perhaps. But in addition to that was there a certain vision that you had?

01-00:25:18

Thurston: Yes we right from the beginning supported getting the truckers on the base. Because West Oakland had been overrun by trucks illegally parking in our neighborhood. And for some reason it seems that the—I don't know whether—sometimes they said they didn't have the proper amount of enforcement officers to take care of that. But we would go through the neighborhood at night and the trailers would be dropped, because you're not supposed to leave trailers unattended in the neighborhoods and residential areas. But it used to happen a lot. And so that was one of the things that we often fought for, was that the truckers would have—and we really were looking at it being quite a place on the base, not just for them to park but have a place where they could do the cleanup and do their showers and this type of thing and have the restaurant and food and all of the things where that it would really be comfortable for them.

01-00:26:26

Rubens: You're saying a full-service full-use for the truckers.

01-00:26:29

Thurston: Full-service parking for the truckers. Because we thought that that would help.

01-00:26:33

Rubens: You want to get them out of the neighborhood.

01-00:26:37
Thurston:

That would help to get them out of the neighborhood. Because trucks in the neighborhood, it's really—I know most places, if they're residential, they're not allowed. And for them to have a trailer and just left there and it's dangerous, because you cannot see little children around them also, for a great distance, so it was a little bit—it was just disheartening to not really get the full—

01-00:27:09
Rubens:

Getting that problem taken care of. Well, no plan has been decided on yet.

01-00:27:17
Thurston:

I don't think so, yes, right.

01-00:27:17
Rubens:

So do you still see these trucks in the neighborhood?

01-00:27:21
Thurston:

No, they're not as bad as it used to be, but every once in a while you see them and you don't know why you still see them. But it's not near as bad as it used to be. And also the other thing was the farmers market. And I know there was a lot of stuff even between the grocers themselves, but we would like for the produce market to actually be on the base too, because it seems that maybe the way that they've been treated by the city—because I feel, and I think that the WOCAG feels the same way, is that to have a fresh produce market is a plus for the city where that you—because especially with all of the genetically altered foods now and all that type of thing, to have fresh fruit and vegetables that you can go and get, because you can go also and get them as a retailer, not just a wholesaler. And it was just getting so that they were not really surviving down there, because Jack London Square is trying to grow and be a beautiful thing and all of that, and so I was thinking that the city and OBRA would have embraced them if they wanted to really build it up to embrace them--or to where that they could have moved out there where you no longer have to have the trucks in the downtown area. It seems that would have been a plus for everybody.

But so that you could still have your fresh fruits and vegetables that you could also get as a community consumer, not just as a big trucker.

01-00:29:23
Rubens:

I think that's still on the agenda certainly. People want that.

01-00:29:27
Thurston:

Yes, I think so, I hope so. But that's two of the things that I know that we have fought for very adamantly, is the truckers and the vegetables, the produce market.

01-00:29:40
Rubens:

Then there was the issue of the recycling companies that were down.

01-00:29:45
Thurston:

Well, one of the recycling companies up in the northern—seems like it was for a while not really complying and helping to keep it clean on the outside of it. But the one thing that I know about the one that's near us here, the gentleman there, he tried so hard to work with the police about the vandalism, and he's made calls to them, and also about the dumping, because people were dumping—not people that he was recycling for, but they were coming at night and dumping stuff near there. And that he was trying to work with the community groups and city to help make it better. And it would be nice if they could go out there and be away from the community.

01-00:30:41
Rubens:

Over these twelve years, it started with such spirit, and of course that first report came out and then there was the hang-up. But have you been able to maintain the backbone of the WOCAG organization? Did you start to see it diminish some?

01-00:31:01
Thurston:

Well, it diminished a lot from the beginning as far as the number of people. But I do see a couple of the people that had—well, one thing is because of employment also. That some of the people who worked and weren't able to work right in the city had to go to jobs away. They just could not keep up with coming to the WOCAG meetings. But the people that are there are very strong. And we have gotten a couple of new people that have been younger residents here in West Oakland, have come and gotten involved.

01-00:31:42
Rubens:

Did you have a hand in beating the bushes and stirring—

01-00:31:46
Thurston:

Yes, I did recommend people to the WOCAG, and a couple of them did get on. And that's what we've all been trying to do.

01-00:32:01
Rubens:

You've pointed to that it was difficult to keep up to date and have full explanations about what the regulations were or what could be in maritime and Army and not. Were there other impediments that you found in the city process? How about your city councilpeople? Do you think that they were in line with you in terms of trying to have the Army base serve the community?

01-00:32:29
Thurston:

Well, actually sometimes—because I think the city councilpeople should be more visible. Especially with the organizations that are represented by the city or sitting on boards trying to represent the city and their community, that they should be more visible and have more input.

01-00:32:55
Rubens:

More of a presence?

- 01-00:32:55
Thurston: Yes, a presence, and input into what we're doing.
- 01-00:33:02
Rubens: I can't remember the name of the woman who preceded Nancy Nadel.
- 01-00:33:02
Thurston: Oh, Natalie Bayton.
- 01-00:33:05
Rubens: Did she or Nancy come to the WOCAG meetings.
- 01-00:33:12
Thurston: No, not really. I don't really remember whether Natalie Bayton—usually she came to meetings, but I can't remember about the Army base right now.
- 01-00:33:25
Rubens: And what about Nancy Nadel?
- 01-00:33:32
Thurston: I don't remember Nancy Nadel at—but I do think that her assistant has come a few times.
- 01-00:33:45
Rubens: Well, now tell me about Elois Thornton. She represented CEDA. And CEDA now is the organization that took over from OBRA and that has helped to keep WOCAG alive. First it looked like WOCAG would dissolve when OBRA dissolved. Did you find her helpful?
- 01-00:34:14
Thurston: Well, I think at the time that Elois Thornton was there, I think that she did as much as she could do, as keeping records and being there. She was at every meeting and doing the recording and the advice. And other people also were involved along with her at the time, but right now I don't remember exactly who they were. But it was a lot of people.
- But I think she tried to talk to everybody and tried to get as much as she could for us. I do believe that.
- 01-00:34:49
Rubens: How about people from Dellums's office?
- 01-00:34:52
Thurston: Well, no. In fact, we just had someone from Dellums's office to come about two to three months ago, and the statement I think was made by one of the people that it was the first time that we had—as far as I can remember—that we had someone from Dellums's office. But I don't remember that anybody had been from Dellums's office early on in it at all.
- 01-00:35:22
Rubens: You had that one meeting with Dellums that was the initial meeting.

- 01-00:35:27
Thurston: Yes.
- 01-00:35:28
Rubens: I have heard that Roberta Brooks came to a few meetings, from Dellums' office here in Oakland.
- 01-00:35:30
Thurston: Yes she did. Yes. That was a while back.
- 01-00:35:38
Rubens: And then what about Sandre Swanson?
- 01-00:35:41
Thurston: No, Sandre Swanson was the beginning, and he was the person that headed up—so when you said that, that was Dellums's office. Sandre Swanson did come. Because he was one of the administrators of the whole board when it first began, yes.
- 01-00:36:03
Rubens: He's someone I need to interview.
- 01-00:36:07
Thurston: Oh yes definitely. And I'm thankful now that he's in Sacramento that it seems as though he's really trying to initiate some bills and propositions that are important to the people.
- 01-00:36:21
Rubens: Did you have a sense that he personally but also as part of his job in Dellums's office felt committed to getting that Army base to be a place that would be vital to the community?
- 01-00:36:35
Thurston: Well, at that time I don't remember that it was that much that he had to say one way or the other. I think it was more or less on a level of what information that was brought there or to be talked about or something like that. I didn't remember him at that point as being instrumental in helping the base plan. He was in the informational and organizational stage.
- 01-00:37:04
Rubens: Moving your plans forward.
- 01-00:37:07
Thurston: Moving us along, no. But I'm thankful that now that I'm seeing and I'm reading quite a bit about the columns that he has in the different places—*Post* and *Sunday Morning* and *Black Business Listings*, he's doing quite a bit in Sacramento, so I'm glad to know that.
- 01-00:37:25
Rubens: He's got his hands full right now trying to get the budget passed.

01-00:37:30

Thurston:

Yes. He's also doing a program about exploited youth—sexually exploited youth. And I think that's very good, because a lot of people don't realize how serious with the times like they are that the youth—and also what about it that he's saying is that how sometimes youth are picked up and they are like criminalized, and it's really sad, need to be more study and looked into and supporting them.

01-00:38:12

Rubens:

You had mentioned that WOCAG lost some of its membership, maybe even some of its leadership, because people had to work.

01-00:38:17

Thurston:

Yes, and it's such a long process, you just can't hold—this is not a paid job. It's just a volunteer job. And of course it's good for people to be volunteers and continue to volunteer if something means something to them, but if you have other things and families and—twelve years? That's quite a bit of volunteering, only on one subject.

01-00:38:48

Rubens:

Over those years also did you see the community change. The Oakland Army Base didn't have that many jobs, but it did have jobs, and when it closed those jobs were gone. You had been so active in the schools in the years past. You just mentioned a particular problem that youth face that Sandre Swanson is trying to deal with. How did you see West Oakland change as a community over those twelve years?

01-00:39:18

Thurston:

Well, actually I can't say that the Army base is so much of it. It's the city I guess and the people who lost their jobs because of the closure. But it's so much crime that has happened, which West Oakland wasn't noted for that type of crime that's going on now, but that really I don't think is about the Army base at all. I think that's just the everyday today children not being taught in the schools and lack of funds to be able to live a credible life. There was hardly any crime in West Oakland.

01-00:39:58

Rubens:

It's not that the Army base served as a buffer, some kind of force that would at least have a presence in the community. You don't think that that made much—

01-00:40:08

Thurston:

No, it probably made some difference, and a lot of people did lose jobs. But a lot of people also did not live right in this community. But yet it did service a lot of people. There are people that came to the West Oakland Senior Center that retired from the naval supply center which was now a part of that area.

01-00:40:21

Rubens:

And I'm saying just the coming and going might have been a deterrent.

01-00:40:24
Thurston:

Well, I don't think the coming and going was a deterrent. But that's another thing that we are very concerned about, is the jobs now that will be on the base that some people will benefit, and also we're hoping that the AC Transit and possibly a shuttle system whereby people can get from here to the Army base. We have that lovely park down there, but the getting there is really a hassle. There should be a continuation of the walkway from the post office and Esther's Orbit Room to the Port View Park, a safe walkway, and a system that will drive you there if you don't drive.

01-00:41:13
Rubens:

Yes. That's why I asked you how did you get there. And I think that has been one of the features of the WOCAG plan, that that be included.

01-00:41:27
Thurston:

And the other thing about the WOCAG is that the fund—I just hope that some of our people that have been longtime people here, and that it will be something that will benefit a large number of people in West Oakland, that community fund. Because—

01-00:41:45
Rubens:

Where did that idea come from? Has that been there—

01-00:41:51
Thurston:

That was part from the beginning as I understand it that it's supposed to be part come from the city and part come from the port, I think, that you create this community fund, and I think it was supposed—some out of the money, tax increments or something, coming back, whatever. I just feel that we should be able to see from that fund not just a few little organizations get some money to do some programs. We should see something great that the West Oakland community could benefit from that base having been such a great impact on our community.

01-00:42:25
Rubens:

And that's still to be funded. That's dependent on developer—

01-00:42:29
Thurston:

Yes, it's still some questions around it, from the developer and all of that is involved in it. And that's what seems like everything that you work through, it seem like it's so many things that have to be resolved and solved around the issues to get them to work. Especially when it comes from the community.

01-00:42:56
Rubens:

After the recent request for qualifications, they've narrowed down from fifteen or so who had presented their qualifications, and now they're asking to have four plans submitted, but that's going to be another—

- 01-00:43:08
Thurston: That will be another long process. I don't mean for the people who are the developers for the base. I mean the community fund that's supposed to come to the community, yes.
- 01-00:43:19
Rubens: But I thought one of their rationalizations is they're not going to fund that fund that will go directly to the community till they decide on who the developer is going to be and what the nature of the development is going to be.
- 01-00:43:37
Thurston: Yes. But actually that fund, I don't feel should be weighted down with stipulations that make it hard for community to access. It seems as though our representatives never really apply a strong initiative to work on behalf of the ordinary people.
- 01-00:43:41
Rubens: Should not be dependent on that.
- 01-00:43:44
Thurston: Dependent on that, exactly, exactly, yes.
- 01-00:43:45
Rubens: So I need to get clear where's that being held up.
- 01-00:43:50
Thurston: Me too. Yes, yes. It's so hard to keep up with all the reading too because there's so many other things that are going on that you have to try to keep up with too.
- 01-00:44:03
Rubens: Do you still attend WOCAG meetings? How often are they held now?
- 01-00:44:10
Thurston: Still once a month. Also when the OBRA have their meeting, we attend those. There were committee meetings for the annual report.
- 01-00:44:21
Rubens: Now the CEDA meetings?
- 01-00:44:23
Thurston: Yes, the CEDA meetings, George Bolton and others, whoever wants, yes, we try to go there. Most of the time I can't go there.
- 01-00:44:33
Rubens: What other activities have you been involved in in the community parallel to that or subsequent to when you got involved with WOCAG.

01-00:44:44
Thurston:

Well, actually I'm involved in the Lowell Park Community Organization and we just did the National Night Out. And also I'm the chairperson for the West Oakland Senior Center Advisory Council. And we've just had a barbecue. The Rise and Fly Barbecue and Card Party, which was quite nice. It's open to the public and you just need to pay for your food. And that is quite interesting.

01-00:45:12
Rubens:

Well attended?

01-00:45:14
Thurston:

Yes, well attended. But of course they had the blues festival the same weekend, so that took away a few of the people because it's usually jam-packed. It wasn't quite jam-packed, but a lot of people did come in and pick up the dinners and leave. But we did have a dining room and a TV room with people who were enjoying playing cards and games.

01-00:45:35
Rubens:

You were the chair of that?

01-00:45:37
Thurston:

Well, no, I'm the chair of the advisory council. But the different committees have their chairperson, and that was one of the special committees that—well, no, actually that was the membership committee because we had a membership drive. And they did the barbecue, rise and fly barbecue. And they do a membership drive along at that same time and they announce it for that particular event. And I did get second place for bringing in the second highest number of membership. But you have to have at least four and be a member to qualify to be in the drive.

01-00:46:10
Rubens:

Congratulations. And what was the name of the park that you said you were involved in? I wanted to make sure. Laurel or-

01-00:46:15
Thurston:

Lowell. L-o-w-e-l-l. It's the park that's up Linden, my street, at 12th Street. We wanted to have a name that was familiar to the neighborhood. So we named the group the Lowell Park Community Organization. We wanted to keep down crime. At the time we started the organization, drug dealing was visible and at its peak. The young people were standing on corners, five, six, ten or whatever. The young folk were hanging out in front of our homes, hiding in our yards. We started working with the Neighborhood Crime Prevention Council, it's part of the Oakland Police Department. Sandra Saunders-West is our coordinator. We do call-ins and work with the beat officers. There are beat officers assigned to our area.

01-00:47:17
Rubens:

When did you start that?

- 01-00:47:19
Thurston: Oh, well, we've been doing that also about twelve years.
- 01-00:47:22
Rubens: I think it's very important to document how much you've been involved with, you and other WOCAG people, and at the same time trying to keep up with WOCAG, and all of this as a volunteer.
- 01-00:47:35
Thurston: Oh yes definitely, yes.
- 01-00:47:36
Rubens: Is there any other organization that you want to point to?
- 01-00:47:40
Thurston: Actually I belong to the Association of Africans and African Americans. And that is an organization that try to promote unity of Africans worldwide, economic unity of Africans worldwide.
- 01-00:47:57
Rubens: And how, literally, did that take place? How big an organization is that now?
- 01-00:48:04
Thurston: Well, right now, it's the same as almost all these organizations. You just start out. But we did have an AIDS conference over at Acorn Town Center in February and it was quite successful. We had young historians and people who are in African studies and University of California and—don't remember the other universities. But anyway that talked to the kids and dialogued with the young people. Which was really quite nice. And I'm very glad that the children seemed interested in information about AIDS and also information about Africa.
- 01-00:48:51
Rubens: And so how long has this been going on, this organization?
- 01-00:48:55
Thurston: Well, the association has been in existence since 1978. It was founded by Reverend Daima Clark. And she became a minister because she felt becoming a minister you would be recognized by more people. Talk to you, they feel that you have some authority because you've been to the school for divinity.
- 01-00:49:21
Rubens: Is she still active?
- 01-00:49:23
Thurston: No, because she's older than I am, she's about ninety I guess now, and so she's not active. But her son—she has a son that is active with us. In fact he's our treasurer. So it's very good to know someone in her family continues to work with us.

- 01-00:49:41
Rubens: What is his name?
- 01-00:49:41
Thurston: His name is Claude Clark.
- 01-00:49:43
Rubens: And her first name was?
- 01-00:49:48
Thurston: Daima, D-a-i-m-a. Hope I'm spelling it right. She had been a very active lady. But she's not well right now. But she's still hanging on.
- 01-00:50:05
Rubens: So was it this organization, the Association of Africans and African Americans, that you were speaking of when you wanted to see some kind of presence in the Seventh Street area or in the Cypress—on the Mandela Parkway when you were talking in the very beginning about a museum or a center or—
- 01-00:50:27
Thurston: No, that wasn't the one. It was just with the CWOR, the Coalition for West Oakland Revitalization, which was pulled together by the City of Oakland to revitalize West Oakland after the Loma Prieta earthquake in 1989.
- 01-00:50:40
Rubens: Okay, that was the dimension of that. This organization didn't necessarily associate with that.
- 01-00:50:45
Thurston: No, no.
- 01-00:50:48
Rubens: I want to make sure that I really draw out everything that you've been involved in. Tell me about your television show. Do you announce the WOCAG meetings? You just slipped in the fact that you have a TV show.
- 01-00:51:19
Thurston: Yes. The WOCAG I think is an important board. And so I tell them that there's a WOCAG that meets once a month, and it's the second Wednesday of the month—I think that's right. And that it's the community and that it's there to be able to say how the Army base is supposed to be reestablished—the development of the Army base and—
- 01-00:51:49
Rubens: This is one of your venues for recruiting new people. Tell me for one minute, just so that we have this on tape, we were talking about it when we went off. You were asked four years ago.

01-00:51:59
Thurston:

Yes, by Madge Gates, because she used to be with the Soul Beat television show, and I went there to be interviewed because the organization, the West Oakland Community Collaborative, which is twelve groups that work together to make things better in West Oakland, if we can, well, we were doing a voter drive, because we wanted to get people back interested in voting. And also one of the main things that I was concerned about is that our teachers for our senior students in high school, that they tell them to register to vote, because I think it's a great opportunity, and like I said, no matter what is done with your vote, you take the responsibility, because somebody worked very hard to get it to the process where that you would be able to vote. So go ahead and vote no matter what you think or what you believe in. And so that's what we were doing.

And also a lot of people don't realize that convicts and ex-felons can vote. A lot of people think, "Well, I've been to jail, I can't vote." But you can, as long as you're off probation and have served your time and you're doing whatever you're supposed to. And especially if it was a misdemeanor, you never lost your right to vote. But a lot of people don't realize that. And so these were the things we were doing. That's how I got into it, because I went there to be interviewed. And this lady, Madge Gates, asked me would I do a show.

I said, "Well, Madge, you don't want me to humiliate the show and myself too, because I don't know anything about it." She said, "But I've seen you out there in the community fighting long enough to know that you speak up and you talk about the things that you feel strong about." She said, "And I think you can do it." I said, "Well, let me think about it." She said, "I believe you can do it." So that's how I got into it. Four years I've done it. Channel 78, KBLC, on Wednesday mornings at 6:00 a.m. Every Wednesday morning.

01-00:54:14
Rubens:

And how do you fill that hour?

01-00:54:21
Thurston:

Because I do all the announcements for every—well, see, I get all these papers from environmental, everybody, from Berkeley, the environmentals, from maybe Pittsburgh, everywhere. But you see, the thing of it is when it comes to the environment that's another thing that I tell—okay, I'm talking about Pittsburgh, it's something that's toxic there. I said, "But you may have relatives there." So that's the kind of thing I try to tell them. So you tell them about this. They may not have this paper that I have from the Environmental Protection Agency or from some environmental group.

And just like when PG&E had a problem down here right in our back door. They were testing all the way down to Jack London. I said, "Suppose your kids—even though this is not West Oakland—but you might have been walking or your kids playing in the grass at Jack London Square, and this contamination could be—" see, they're trying to check to see how far it had

gone. I don't even know. I might be just saying this. But I don't know. But at least be aware. Call PG&E and ask them about it. What's going on? What are you talking about? And so anyway everything at the West Oakland Senior Center I tell them about it. And anything like Just Cause. I tell people about Just Cause, it's an organization that fight for minorities, especially for foreclosure and different issues that they feel that are unfair. And this is why I support them and announce their things, because I've seen the impact that they have had going in before City Council and different places to speak out against issues that are negative to the working class.

01-00:56:03

Rubens: Helping people save their homes?

01-00:56:03

Thurston: Helping people to save their homes. And other issues that are very important to people of color that they do this. And they're a multiracial group. But anyway so this is why—I said, "I can't say that everything they do is fine. I don't know that. But I just know the things that I know about that they have fought some good causes." That's why I say, "Just Cause." And so that is why I talk about them. And then I also have guests. I have guests that I feel that have really given something to the community or people that I think will be a good example or a good person for children to see as a role model.

[End Audio File 1]

Begin Audio File 2 thurston_queen_2_08-20-08.mp3

02-00:00:00

Rubens: Who are some of the guests that you've had on?

02-00:00:08

Thurston: Oh, I hope I can think of—

02-00:00:09

Rubens: I'm going to ask you about one in particular. She's with something called Environmental Indicators here. Margaret—

02-00:00:16

Thurston: Margaret Gordon. I had her on when Mayor Dellums appointed her to the Port Commission. So I did have Margaret on for that. And I have gone to her building for some of the programs that I'm interested in, and yeah, that they're holding the meetings at her site. So—

02-00:00:44

Rubens: She's particularly interested in environmental issues.

02-00:00:49

Thurston: Oh yes, she's very involved in that, yes, yes. Also I had a young man named—I can't think of his last name. His name was Brandon Chapman. And he is the head golfer at the Chabot Golf Course. And he's a young black male

and he's only thirty-three. I thought he was much younger. So I was telling him, "I'm glad that I thought you were much younger," because evidently he's healthy, his eyes are clear, his skin is nice, teeth are beautiful. I said, "So this is something I like to tell our young black men about," that he has achieved this, and they can achieve this type of thing also. And he teaches all the people that come through the Chabot Golf Course up in Oakland Hills. So that is wonderful. And there's so many people I had. I don't know if I can think of them.

I've had Arnold White. But of course Arnold at one time had his own show. And he's one of our major artists here in Oakland. I've had Dan Barnette, a retired Harlem Globetrotter that wrote the book Is My Skin My Only Sin? I recently had Michael Lange on because he and his partner, James Brooks, were opening a stage production, "Shakespeare's Lost Manuscript." The play opened at the Cultural Center on Fulton in San Francisco, and it played two nights and a Sunday matinee at Laney College here in Oakland. The show will be going on to New York, off Broadway. The author of the production is Larry A. Allen. Mr. Lange and Mr. Brooks are the founders of the Bay Area Repertory Theater, (Bay Art).

02-00:03:37

Rubens:

And did you say his mother was a reporter?

02-00:03:37

Thurston:

Yes, very very well known lady. She's a black lady. Jerri Lange.

02-00:03:43

Rubens:

With the *Oakland Tribune*?

02-00:03:45

Thurston:

I'm not sure at the moment. I'm not sure which. But she's been very active in the community and a very well known media personality. Dr. Jerri Lange is her name. Anyway Michael Lange and James Brooks founded the Bay Area Repertory Theater. And this play is going to go to off Broadway also.

I wish I could think of the name of the young man who wrote the play. His last name was Allen. His middle name is A-m-e-r-i-c. I don't remember what his first name was.

02-00:04:25

Rubens:

You're going to have an opportunity to add to that when you get this transcript back. You'll be able to—we can amend, write that in.

02-00:04:34

Thurston:

Okay. But the play was very very good. It was about greed and how some homeless person that had been a veteran, this man had found out he had this manuscript. Excuse me. And he was doing everything that he could do to get this manuscript from him. It was very interesting. I think a lot of people would have enjoyed it.

02-00:04:54

Rubens: Maybe to bring this interview full around back to WOCAG. The Homeless Collaborative was a major issue too, wasn't it?

02-00:05:16

Thurston: Right, yes. And I don't remember exactly how, but they were trying to also do something on the base for them.

02-00:05:27

Rubens: You mentioned this play and it reminded me that—was that something you were in support of?

02-00:05:32

Thurston: Oh yes. Well, see, I've always thought that we have so many buildings that are vacant in Oakland. And there were so many—what do you call—excuse me—industrial buildings along the Wood Street Corridor at one time that were vacant. And I never thought that—well, it just got out of hand really. And it never should have gotten out of hand. It would seem that it should have been a thing that a city would be more responsive to and would have tried to find a means to it from when they first started seeing that people were being out on the street. And it should have been some type of a shelter. And then I also felt that it should have been some kind of law put in place. I don't want to see people necessarily incarcerated and that type of thing. But I think it should have been some kind of law made once it seemed that it was becoming such an issue, and so that the people see as they come into your city and you are bombarded by homeless every day, that it should have been more of a response from the city to put a place for them where they could have gotten their meals. And so many people say, and use it as an excuse, and I'm sure it is true in a lot of instances, where if they go into some of these shelters they get their possessions stolen and they're not protected. And I can understand not wanting to go to a shelter. But I just think for people to be on the street it's really sad. Yeah, that you call yourself a city, that we're not a poor city, so it really shouldn't be that people on the street homeless.

02-00:07:34

Rubens: Ms. Thurston, what is it that sustains you? You have such a vitality, a big heart. You let slip at the end of the interview you were running a TV program for four years. Do you attribute your—

02-00:07:48

Thurston: I have no idea, but I'm just trying to keep it together. And I guess faith and God and my family. I always had family, and we were always supportive of each other. And around each other. And respect each other and loved each other. And one thing I always believed in also is that if we can't be nice to other people's children, we can't love other people's children, what are my children going to do or my children's children going to do when I'm no longer here or my children are no longer here, who are they going to be with. With the people who are doing everything that you thought that you shouldn't be doing or your children shouldn't be doing. If you don't try to love other

people's children and love other people, if you think of yourself that you're trying to be a right person, but don't you want your children coming up with people that are right? So if there are problems we should all be working together to try to solve them.

02-00:08:53

Rubens:

Well, bless your heart. What a wonderful statement. This interview was mainly about your activities vis-à-vis WOCAG and how the Oakland Army Base would be reused, and I think you still have faith that some aspects of what you had wanted to see might get—

02-00:09:14

Thurston:

Yes, I hope so, yes.

02-00:09:14

Rubens:

But otherwise, you've got a forum for rattling cages.

02-00:09:20

Thurston:

Yes, yes, I try. We just have to keep trying, and hoping and having faith, and trying to do the best you can do to make it happen, whatever you want to happen.

02-00:09:31

Rubens:

Who sees the TV program?

02-00:09:40

Thurston:

Now did you hear that? That was gunshots.

02-00:09:44

Rubens:

Really? I didn't know that. I thought it was a skateboard.

02-00:09:49

Thurston:

No. That is something that should have never gotten to that state. And that's the type of thing that I'm talking about. If I'm not trying to help other people's children as well as mine, is this what will happen? And that is scary.

02-00:10:13

Rubens:

Well, I want to thank you so much for this time.

02-00:10:16

Thurston:

Yes, well, thank you. And I do hope that the WOCAG and that we can see something in the construction that will benefit West Oakland, benefit a lot of people.

02-00:10:33

Rubens:

As far as you know, do you think Bolton will keep active?

02-00:10:38

Thurston:

Yes, I think so. He's stayed with it this long. I think so.

02-00:10:44

Rubens:

I know that Monsa has some health problems.

02-00:10:45

Thurston: Yes, and he's been blessed that he was able to get a kidney so quickly.

[End of Interview]