

The following is a selection from a March 25th, 2015 interview with Debi Duke, a core member of the Washtenaw County Coalition Against Apartheid, conducted over email by Emily Bodden:

What was your background prior to arriving at the University of Michigan? How and when did you become involved in activism? In the Washtenaw County Coalition Against Apartheid? What were your primary motivations and interests in becoming an activist?

I graduated from high school in 1973. Although I grew up in a rural area of Michigan, I was touched by the times and so opposed the Vietnam War, was concerned about racism and inequality, embraced feminism and environmentalism, was somewhat aware of struggles against colonialism in other parts of the world, etc., etc. I spent time at Antioch College and Wayne State University before coming to Ann Arbor in the late 1970s.

By the time I came to U of M as a slightly older transfer student, I had spent several years working as a boycott organizer with the United Farm Workers (UFW)--mostly in Michigan (Kalamazoo, Grand Rapids, and metro Detroit) and a little in California. I also had worked in quite a variety of blue- and pink-collar jobs.

Throughout the 1970s I was involved in various labor and progressive issues and was accustomed to working with non-students including clergy and religious though I was not religious. In addition, though I never became a member of any organization or party, I was exposed to a variety of Marxist, Leninist, and Maoist thought. I don't know when I joined WCCAA, but I imagine it would have been shortly after I arrived in Ann Arbor or close to the time it was founded.

My motivation for being involved with WCCAA, the UFW, the environmental movement, and other progressive causes was pretty straightforward. I wanted to contribute to making a more just and equitable world. It sounds a bit naïve, I know, but I still believe in the work I did.

What were the main activities of the WCCAA and its members? What was your role within the organization and the larger anti-Apartheid movement?

Through WCCAA we aimed to educate ourselves and others about apartheid and colonialism and to act on our understanding. In particular, we felt some responsibility for the role our country played in the developing world. Our primary goal was to get the University to divest itself of companies doing business in South Africa. In those days before the Internet that meant organizing forums, writing letters and articles, leafleting, demonstrating, and the like as, well as raising funds to support those efforts and to support liberation movements abroad.

I do not remember holding an office or position within WCCAA, but I think I could fairly characterize myself as a core member. I recall attending a national student conference on the anti-apartheid movement at Northwestern University and may have participated in

similar gatherings elsewhere. I also spoke in favor of divestment at a General Motors' stockholders meeting in Detroit; I do not remember if I was representing WCCAA or if I spoke in another capacity though I believe I attended the meeting as a proxy for a religious order that held stock.

During your time with WCCAA, what were your interactions with students and the campus like?

I learned a lot that I carry with me still. WCCAA was one of the most racially and generationally mixed organizations I have ever been part of; in that context, I learned to think about the significance of who speaks and doesn't, who leads and doesn't, whether and why some people's views have more weight than those of others, and similar issues.

Because I viewed myself as an experienced community organizer, I was sometimes impatient with students who I felt did not understand how to present arguments in ways "regular people" could understand and embrace. This sometimes resulted in my being aligned with the less militant members of WCCAA and allied groups even though I felt I was simply proposing smart tactics.

At the same time, I was not always the most careful spokesperson, and I learned some lessons about talking to the media in particular. The best example is probably the time I referred to the regents as "assholes" when talking to a student reporter. I somehow assumed my language would be cleaned up and was chagrined to find that it was not. Lesson learned!

I believe WCCAA split, and certainly campus liberals and progressives were divided, once the Sullivan Principles were put on the table. I was part of the group that believed strongly in the need to oppose and expose the Sullivan Principles. We felt that the regents and others in power used the Principles simply as an excuse not to divest and that individual members were either thoroughly on the wrong side (even evil) or weak and unprincipled. I was somewhat disillusioned by this--I expected it from corporate leaders, but thought the leaders of great universities would somehow be "better."

It was also disappointing when the University appeared to punish some professors for being involved in WCCAA and other campus activism. Most affected was Joel Samoff, a political science professor and Africa specialists, denied tenure despite substantial support from students.