"Genuine Struggle and Care": An Interview With Cleo Silvers

Philadelphia native Cleo Silvers moved to New York City to take up a VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) post in the mid-1960s. In the course of her VISTA service, she was awakened to the extreme deprivation faced by many Blacks and Latinos in Manhattan and the Bronx, New York. This experience also occasioned a political awakening in Silvers, who sought to systematically understand the social and economic inequality she witnessed and how to upend it. Following her VISTA service, she worked as a community mental health worker at Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx. She also joined the Black Panther Party in Harlem, New York. As a Panther, her work included conducting neighborhood health surveys and door-to-door testing for sickle cell anemia and lead poisoning and being a patient advocate in its clinic. Silvers later became a member of the Young Lords Party and played a role in its takeover of Lincoln Hospital in the South Bronx. In more recent years, Silvers served as executive director of For a Better Bronx, a community-based social and environmental justice organization. She recently retired from a position as a community outreach director at a leading New York City medical center.

Silvers speaks here with Alondra Nelson, PhD, a sociologist and historian who has documented the Black Panther Party's health activism, about the formative experiences that led her into five decades of health advocacy—an activism notable for its insistence on the inextricable links between health and socioeconomic well-being.

This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.

ALONDRA NELSON: What were some of your early influences? And which of these shaped your later work as a health activist?

CLEO SILVERS: The biggest influence was my family. My family was involved in March of Dimes activities. My parents made sure that people in our neighborhood in Philadelphia had nutritious food to eat. We had a large garden and we shared our food with everybody in the community and with members of our church. This church community was also an influence. Being raised in that kind of setting where people shared, sharing was a virtue, and education was valued was key. All of this formed the basis for my penchant for looking at health care as such an important part of life for everyone.

AN: What brought you to the South Bronx for the first time? Were the living conditions there different from what you had experienced in Philadelphia?

CS: I was kicking around after high school and deciding whether I was going to go to college or what I was going to do. I got an opportunity to join VISTA, which was a national program that was started in 1965 as part of the "War on Poverty."

Volunteers in Service to America was an interesting experience because they trained you to organize people in the community before they sent you out into the streets and poor communities to do work. That experience of having been trained on how to knock on doors, or what to look for, or how to explain to people what interests were theirs and how to fight for their own interests was critical. All those things became very important for me. It helped me to understand what I needed to do once I did get out there and gave me organizing skills.

For the most part, they were sending young people from more well-to-do communities to assist disadvantaged ones. Like, Jay Rockefeller was a VISTA volunteer during the same time that I was; he was assigned to West Virginia. I think I might have been the very first working-class kid to become a member of VISTA. I was assigned to the South Bronx after training.

VISTA's focus was poverty. Mostly welfare issues, housing, a lot of housing. One of my assignments as a VISTA volunteer was to work with the New York City Housing Authority. I was lucky enough to work with two very amazing housing inspectors who cared about the community and who took you around and showed you what housing code violations were and that kind of thing. Dealing with housing meant confronting the health conditions in the South Bronx, especially substandard housing, lead poisoning, and rats—there were rats biting babies. My work with VISTA in the South Bronx was around housing, health care just automatically fell in line with this because the bad housing conditions led to the bad health conditions.

I was from the Philadelphia [Pennsylvania] suburbs and I had never seen such horrible conditions. The housing conditions, the environmental issues. The infant mortality rate was staggering. The lead exposure was unbelievable; so much lead poisoning and nobody was doing anything about it. There was tuberculosis. People were getting shot. Mental health was a major problem. The health conditions were pretty much like a Third World country.

One in four people in the South Bronx and Harlem at that time were addicted to heroin. This was

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alondra Nelson is with the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Columbia University, New York, NY.

Correspondence should be sent to Alondra Nelson, Professor of Sociology and Dean of Social Science, Columbia University, Dept of Sociology, 606 West 122nd Street, Ste 501, New York, NY 10027 (e-mail: alondra.nelson@columbia.edu). Reprints can be ordered at http://www.ajph.org by clicking the "Reprints" link.

This article was accepted July 21, 2016.

doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2016.303407

another issue. There was one drug rehabilitation program in the South Bronx and one in Harlem, and both of them used methadone as the method of helping people addicted to heroin. We know the horrors of the use of methadone and all the horrible things that happen to people. Their bones become brittle; it eats the bone marrow. It was the worst possible chemical to use to help people with drug rehabilitation. It seemed that there were other ways, more positive ways to assist people with drug addiction.

They had one hospital in the whole community for large numbers of people that needed health care. That was Lincoln Hospital, a teaching hospital, and it was extremely inadequate. The people who were running it didn't really care about the people in the community. If they did, they would have done things to make the conditions better, like establishing some preventive health programs, like collaborating with people in other related fields, such as the housing authorities.

It was the horrible conditions I witnessed in the South Bronx that spurred me on to do work in the health area. Seeing all these young kids, adults, and elderly dying from these issues, I knew something had to be done about it. Seeing these conditions and also recognizing that for so many people in this community that this was just "par for the course" spurred me to want to do something.

There were other young people who agreed with me. As all of this was occurring, young people were getting together to talk about what we were seeing and to try to figure out what could be done. It was almost inevitable that we would organize to do something about the health care conditions in the South Bronx as well as other poor, disenfranchised communities in New York City.

We had some of the doctors, the young interns and residents at Lincoln and other areas of the South Bronx, come together with us and start working with us. We tried to pick up as much information and knowledge as we could from them so that we could understand more clearly what it is we were facing and how to figure out what to do about it. By the time I got done with my VISTA training and the training in health care with the doctors, I was pretty knowledgeable about what was going on and how to give people in the community the top-notch assistance that they needed.

AN: When does your VISTA advocacy become something more radical?

CS: It's kind of interesting. One piece of my [VISTA] job was to work with kids who were in gangs and to discourage gang violence between the different groups of kids. I also worked with a tutoring program with the kids on 158th and Trinity Avenue [in the Bronx]. There was an elementary school there, and we started a program to help kids who were supposedly not able to learn. (By the way, those kids in our little class all went to college and are all amazing people now.)

We were told that they couldn't learn and that they were in the sixth grade and they didn't know how to read. We taught those kids how to read. But in the process, we couldn't work with those kids without being in contact with their families. Some of the kids' parents did not speak English at all. They spoke only Spanish. The kids would be their translators. And [some of the parents] were intimidated by the [social welfare] institutions, so they weren't able to go to the welfare office and request assistance because they didn't think that anyone would understand them or they worried that their kids would be taken away from them.

I started with going to welfare offices with people in the community. I began to accompany them to make housing complaints. I also began to accompany those kids' family members to the emergency room at Lincoln Hospital. In all of those experiences, I was horrified to see that there was little care on the part of the system for these people and there was really little assistance available and that to get what you needed you had to fight. It hit me that—and this almost happened organically—in order just to live a decent life, you have to struggle. I don't think I was radicalized by anything other than the horrible conditions under which the people had to live and figuring out what can we do to make things better. That's the main thing.

When I left VISTA, I was hired at the Lincoln Hospital Mental Health Services as a community mental health worker. The workers at the mental health center were organizing to demand better working conditions. This became an opportunity for me to get a political education as part of my on-the-job training, as it were. They wanted the administrators to pay more attention to the needs of the patients and the people in the community who were some of the mental health patients.

They were making legitimate demands. I went to my first union meeting and learned they were planning to take over mental health services. They asked me if I would help by doing some organizing and helping with getting some information out, which of course I was happy to do. In the process of this action, those workers who were radicalized had contact with the Black Panther Party. The Black Panther Party came to assist us during the takeover of the mental health services. They brought food. They brought water. They brought ideas of how to do this activism in the most organized way. We spent a lot of time with them discussing how to do this [activist work] in a way that would really be helpful and not just a shot in the dark.

AN: What were some of your first impressions of the Black Panther Party?

CS: The Black Panther Party was very focused. They were very smart and they helped us to develop strategy. They helped us write flyers and break down what was going on in the community so that we could have a relationship with the people in the community we were fighting for. That was all their doing, as a matter of fact. After working with them for a while, they asked me if I would be interested in becoming a Black Panther, and let me tell you, I was so impressed with these people because they were so good and so caring and so intelligent. They weren't crazy. They were planning and strategizing. I really hope that people recognize how focused on making positive change in general the Black Panther Party was and also specifically in New York City. They were brilliant and focused on doing the best possible things.

AN: You arrived at Lincoln Hospital at the start of a strike and soon after there is a takeover? What are your recollections of the 1970 Lincoln takeover?

CS: There was continual work. We demanded the administrators who had been running the

programs step down, resign and got that. The mental health workers also took over the nurse's residence . . . until some of the demands were met.

There was organizing going on. The Black Panthers actually recruited several people out of that struggle to become members of the Party. [Black Panther Party member] Afeni Shakur, who passed away recently, was an amazing housing organizer and organized hundreds of rent strikes throughout the South Bronx and in Harlem. If you walk up to Edgecombe Avenue [in Harlem] today, there are several buildings there that the people in the building still own as a result of Afeni Shakur's organizing. That's pretty important.

AN: Can you speak about the Black Panther Party's health activism?

CS: The Black Panther Party in New York City developed the concept that it was important to do research, to study, and to fight over sickle cell anemia. Nobody was doing anything about sickle cell at that time. It was the Panthers who demanded that research be done and that people do something about sickle cell. The people in the community were very much helped by the work of the Black Panther Party in this area.

They also were excellent collaborators. It was the Black Panther Party that brought some of the radical doctors around to help us look at what it was we were doing in a more thoroughgoing way. We did not do superficial things and that's the one thing that I'd like to make sure young people understand: there's no way to do this work in a superficial way. You have to study, you have to understand the details. You have to understand the material conditions. You have to plan based on your knowledge and not based on opinion or speculation.

The Black Panther Party helped me to intensify my organizing skills, to enhance my organizing skills, to study more. We studied every day to understand how the system worked and to tell you the truth, we were still very naïve. I'm still learning that. We were very naïve about how the system functioned and how to effect change inside of the system. They taught me so much and made it clear that if we do the right things and we unite with other people we can make change. That's another piece that the Black Panther Party really focused on, the importance of uniting with other people no matter what our differences were. That's why we had the Rainbow Coalition in New York City. We had I Wor Kuen, which was an organization of Asians. We had the Young Lords. We had the White Patriots. We had the Black Panther Party as an organized group of people that was multiracial and multinational and trying to focus on making changes for all the communities and sharing information, sharing equipment.

As Black Panthers, we did door-to-door disease screenings for conditions that were preventable, like tuberculosis, diabetes, lead poisoning. We were organized to do things out in the streets, out in the community. We'd knock on doors and take our basic health equipment. We worked in teams: a doctor, a nurse, a community health worker or a volunteer, and somebody to take notes. We learned to document *everything*, so that people didn't think you were nuts when we said, "This is what we learned about the conditions in this community, on this day, and this is how we were able to help." We made lots of [doctor and hospital] referrals to people that we ran into. This whole concept that people are talking about . . . now [i.e., community-based referrals] was something that we began doing in the 1960s. This has become part of the process of working with people on a global scale . . . All we had to do is ask the Black Panther Party how to do it.

AN: How do you transition from the Black Panther Party to the Young Lords Party?

CS: I was working as a community mental health worker. I was knocking on doors. I was assigned to a school program, and I would go into the schools, work with the kids with psychological issues, and I would also go and visit their homes. As I was doing that, I started learning Spanish—a pretty important thing if you're going to be working and organizing in a majority Latino community. In that process, I met the Young Lords. The Young Lords . . . were working with the Black Panther Party in coalition around a lot of issues. Health care was one of the major focuses.

There was a split in the Black Panther Party [between the New York City chapters and the California chapters]. Members of the Black Panther Party—Afeni Shakur and Brother Rashid and Lumumba Shakur—brought me to the Young Lords and said, "This sister here is an excellent organizer, and we don't want her to be involved in the split." There was a little bit of vitriol between the Black Panther groups that were splitting. So I became a member of the Young Lords to be able to continue the organizing work that I had been doing with the Black Panther Party.

AN: What would you say are the greatest successes of your activism in the 1960s and 1970s?

CS: There are three very important successes that I think came out of that period. The first is the legislation that ended the use of lead paint in residential buildings. That was a big deal, and it happened as a result of sit-ins at city council meetings and demands made to the New York City health department by the Young Lords and the people who were in contact with them. That was so, so important.

At this time, hospital conditions were bad and people didn't have access to their own records and didn't have the right to be treated well. So, the second success, another important thing, is the Patient's Bill of Rights, which is the 10 points that you find in hospital rooms. The Patient's Bill of Rights was actually the result of a collaboration between members of the Young Lords and the Black Panther Party, with the assistance of the doctors, and written by me. Although it is considerably watered down now, you still find that Patient's Bill of Rights on the wall of every hospital. It's not as radical as the original . . . but still includes some of the issues we highlighted, such as the ability to have access to your medical records. The ability to be treated like a human being, not to have research done on you unless you give your consent. All those things are really important.

A third important thing is the Lincoln Hospital drug detoxification program, which still is in existence today. We started that program. It was established by Panama [Vicente "Panama" Alba] and Butch [Ford, a Bronx activist who had run a detox program in his home] with the support of the Young Lords, the Black Panthers, and the radical doctors. It's still in existence today, of course, but considerably watered down by the people who

"Lincoln Hospital Belongs to the People." New York City, 1970. From left to right: Dorothea Tillie, Cleo Silvers (seated), Pablo Guzman (seated), Juan Gonzalez (standing), Andrew Jackson (seated, face partially obscured), others unidentified. Courtesy of Hiram Maristany. Printed with permission.

are running it now. But it wouldn't have been there without our struggle.

AN: What are the biggest lessons learned or disappointments from your experience as an activist and organizer with the Black Panther Party and the Young Lord Party?

CS: There are definitely lessons learned and lots of disappointments. I think that the issue of free quality preventive health care for all is a key element of life for everybody. The fact that we still haven't been able to achieve this is a disappointment. We started out struggling for this in the health care field in the 1960s. That we still have not been able to achieve that is a really big disappointment to me.

When you say life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, life means health. A healthy life. The system digs its heels in hard, doing a disservice to all human beings by not making sure that quality free health care is available to all.

We still have many people who did wonderful things who are still languishing in jail—our political prisoners. That's a disappointment because many of them were not guilty of doing anything but helping people in the community. The fact that they are still imprisoned is a horrible thing for me.

AN: How did your experience as an activist and organizer in the 1960s and 1970s shape your later work?

CS: I went from working with the community mental health workers demanding education for hospital workers in the 1970s [to] working as a training coordinator in the education department of the 1199 Hospital Workers Union. I worked there for eight years. It all became very full circle.

It shaped the work that I did as executive director of For a Better Bronx, an environmental justice organization [in the early 2000s]. For a Better Bronx initiated many struggles. We were focused on shutting down a hospital waste incinerator in the South Bronx. The incinerator was burning hospital waste and polluting the air; the people in the surrounding area were breathing the air, and this was very dangerous. The South Bronx neighborhood is in a little triangle surrounded by highways, so people in the community were also breathing in exhaust from the cars. They were successful in getting that medical waste incinerator torn down and stopped the waste burning. There are several struggles that may still be going on around the air quality issues.

The area that we were in in the South Bronx is a food desert. Quality fresh fruits and vegetables were not available. There were no stores that sold these. If people wanted to get fresh fruits and vegetables at that time, they had to drive a long way to a grocery store because there were no markets in that area. We began to build community gardens and helped people learn how to grow their own fresh fruits and vegetables. Those community gardens still exist, and they are flourishing. They're doing wonderfully. For a Better Bronx actually was recognized for the work we did with the community gardens.

Another struggle that For a Better Bronx was engaged in involved "brownfields." There were several factories that left the South Bronx, and when they did left all the toxins that they used right there in the community. They tore down the factories, and the kids would go and play on those surfaces and ingest whatever toxins and waste material was there.

More recently, I worked for the Selikoff Center for Occupational and Environmental Medicine at Mount Sinai. It's named for Dr. Irving J. Selikoff. Dr. Selikoff was very supportive of the work that the Young Lords and the Black Panthers were doing, so much so, that he used to give us [medical] equipment. I'm not so sure that the hospital was aware of all of his support for us, but he was very good to us.

AN: Was there a link between your activism with the Black Panther Party and Young Lords Party and your work decades later at Mount Sinai?

CS: Yes, there were definite links. For example, there was Dr. Stephen Levin, who was the medical director of the World Trade Center [Worker and Volunteer Medical Screening] program as well as the director of the Selikoff Center. Well I hired him as the director of the drug rehabilitation

program [at Lincoln Hospital] in 1969. Years later, he hired me to come and work as outreach director for the World Trade Center program. Steve Levin was an amazing doctor, who was a labor activist; he passed away in February of 2012. He was an amazing man. We owe a great debt to him for the work that he did over the years.

I never thought that I would be so involved in "the system," if you will, as to be working at Mount Sinai, which is a very large and well-recognized institution. I found a little niche in there as the community organizer, and I began to do work as an event planner. All the skills that I developed over the years as a community organizer and a labor organizer were what allowed me to be successful in working at Mount Sinai in the Selikoff Center. That was an interesting experience, a wonderful experience.

AN: Reflecting on activism of recent years, one is struck that that Occupy movement and the Black Lives Matter movement both incorporated health in their activist work. Why do you think that's the case?

CS: It is impossible to be involved in struggles—locally or nationally or internationally—and not begin to focus on the quality of health of human beings. It's inevitable that if you're struggling over issues of justice and equality that access to quality health care is a part of that. Health is an organic part of the struggle for justice and equality.

A lot of times, it is people being sick that keeps them from being able to struggle more. If people are well, then they're able to fight for their own needs. I think that young people eventually come to that conclusion.

It is wonderful to see young people rise up and become aware of the necessity to continue the struggle for equality and the struggle for justice and the struggle against police brutality and economic struggles. All of that is connected. I want to encourage young people to stay strong and don't sell out. You don't have to go and demand money. You can use the skills that you are acquiring now to carry you through a tremendous life of doing the things that you want to do, but you have to make the things that you want to do happen yourself. That's so important.

If Black Lives Matter and the Occupy movement missed one element that would have made them, I think, more successful than they were and are, it is the discipline of focus and study. It is very important to understand in depth who it is that you're struggling against and what the conditions are that have to be changed. Having a clear understanding of those conditions and the people who are responsible for them makes it a lot easier to do your work and to be successful.

Technology gives you the opportunity to make the organizing process a whole lot easier, but you have to come face-to-face with each other and with the people that you're fighting for and with the people who are responsible for the bad conditions that you're fighting against. Twitter's not going to get it. Facebook is not going to get it. You absolutely have to build a movement where you speak to each other, where you touch each other, where you look each other in the eye and know that these struggles are so, so important for you and the generation that's coming behind you.

AN: October 2016 marks the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Black Panther Party. At this anniversary moment, what's most important to remember about the work of the Panthers?

CS: People should know that the Panthers were an extremely sincere group of young people who were willing to put their lives on the line to fight for a quality life for *everybody*. They were not focused only on the Black community, but for all people. They were internationally focused as well as focused on the conditions here [in the United States]. They made connections between the problems that people were facing and were willing to take steps, like the free breakfast program, the free health clinics, education, [and] giving out food and clothing to the community.

The Black Panthers were pioneers of genuine struggle and care. They were the arbiters of love for the people. They were a tremendous organization that should be recognized for all the wonderful and positive contributions that they made to society and all over the world. AJPH

Alondra Nelson, PhD