

## Sostre at 100: A Revolutionary Life March 22, 2023, Harry Belafonte Library

GARRETT FELBER:

Pardon me, I'm going to speak from notes here because I'm going to get overwhelmed and lost. But I wanted to share a little bit, briefly, about how we came to be here tonight. And especially why I'm so excited to be in this particular place at this particular time and with you all here and online. So, my name is Garrett Felber, I'm an organizer and an educator. I'm also writing a biography on Martin Sostre and last year, I was out here interviewing Martin's wife, Liz, and his son Vinny generously offered for me to come with him to Martin's resting place. And it was on that trip that Vinnie shared with me that one of the things on Martin's bucket list was to live to be 100. And so it was at that point that I knew that we had to organize something for this week, and I mean, I said it would be very small and it got a little bit out of hand. But I'm glad it got out of hand, in a good way. So, I'm just so honored that Vinny and Liz could be here with us tonight. For folks who don't know, Martin Sostre passed away in 2015 at the age of 92. And when he died, there was not a single major obituary. It was only several years later that the New York Times featured him in its overlooked features section. And even there, he was remembered largely as a jailhouse lawyer and a prison reformer.

We are here to celebrate a revolutionary life. From some of society's most repressive spaces, Martin envisioned a classless society. Free from domination or coercion in which all people would enjoy the world in common. He was an internationalist and understood that white supremacy, capitalism, militarism, colonialism, and sexism were all interlocking global systems of power that needed to be abolished. And he viewed the prison as a concentrated manifestation of a repressive state, and he believed that true liberation could only come about through its demise. When Martin was released for the last time from prison in 1976 at a press conference, some of the journalists there asked him if he wanted to be a politician or a lawyer. He responded, "I am with the people. I am what you call an organizer."

So, several days after what would've been Martin's 100th birthday it's my absolute pleasure to be here tonight to honor a continuous life of revolutionary struggle. And I want to say especially why I'm grateful to be in the space tonight, at 115th Street. This would've been Martin's childhood library branch. Just a few blocks from where he grew up during the Great Depression. He was born at Harlem Hospital to Puerto Rican parents in 1923 and during his youth he was particularly impacted by radical public spaces in Harlem during the 1930s. He saw Paul Robeson speak on the streets; he frequented Lewis Michaux's National Memorial Bookstore on 125th Street. And he recalled his father going to Club Mella, which was a Spanish speaking socialist fraternal organization on 116th and 5th Avenue. And around the time that Martin would have been five years old, here at the 115th Street library, the Puerto Rican librarian Pura Belpré established the Puerto Rico Librería, dedicated to, quote, "cultivating Spanish letters, promoting an interest in study and upholding the faith of Puerto Rican youth and the cause of

independence.” These were three principles which Sostre remained deeply committed to the remainder of his long life.

It is these sorts of public community spaces that fascists, whether they be Republican fascists or Democrat fascists, have spent the last half century trying to destroy and eviscerate through enclosure and privatization. And of course, the footsoldiers of that violence are cops. Sostre returned in 1976 to an unprecedented fiscal crisis in New York and like today, libraries and public universities were the first on the chopping block. Within the first months of being released, Martin spoke at CUNY in solidarity with students striking over the imposition of tuition, and the end of open admissions. He told them this, “This is war. We must use all means necessary.” He pointed to the militant fight of public library workers to retain their funding, and he challenged the students, what are you going to do? Are you going to lay down and be slaves, or are you going to fight? This was the vision of struggle that Martin believed in. The line is drawn, he once wrote. Either you are a co-operator with the oppression, with your own impression and dehumanization, or you are a resistor. If you won't stand up for your own personal liberty, human dignity, and self respect all that rhetoric about liberating other people is just bullshit rhetoric. The struggle for liberation begins with the individual wherever and where she or he is oppressed.

So, tonight, in honoring Martin we're also, in solidarity with workers at CUNY and NYPL, as they face a fascist mayor and political ruling class intent on getting the last vestiges of the commons and building a full blown police state in its stead. Lastly, I want to say that I'm so honored by the people who are here tonight with us in this room, in the audience, onstage later, online. All of whom organized and struggled with Martin. They fought to save his life from the state that was intent on killing him and have continued to carry forward his work and legacy, as he would've wanted, not with rhetoric, but through concerted action and results. He once wrote, “Nothing disappears in this world. Either it lies dormant, awaiting the propitious moment to manifest itself, or it manifests itself in different forms and manners. Once an act or thought is set in motion, nothing can stop it.” So, I hope that during the events tonight and tomorrow, we will bear witness to the many forms and manners through which Martin's energy in the world has been made manifest and, I'm sure, set in motion new energy and forms yet unknown.

So, very briefly, before I had the mic to Martin's son, Vinny, I just want to introduce our program for the night and say some heartfelt thank yous to everyone. So, we're going to begin the evening with a viewing of *Frame Up!*, which is a 30 minute documentary film that was made by Pacific Street Films over 13 months, beginning in 1973, with Martin's appeal trail and it ends in 1974. And you'll notice that at the end of the film, Martin is still in prison. And the film actually became, throughout 1975, one of the most effective ways that the defense committees used to raise awareness and funds about his case. Then we will have a panel discussion moderated by William C. Anderson, who's been one of the most prolific and thoughtful writers about Martin's influence, along with Martin's comrades spanning nearly 40 years of organizing.

And lastly, please bear with me for some long thank yous, because you don't organize an event like this without funding and collectivity, and a lot of people chipping in. We are grateful to the following funders, Julie Ehrlich and Alexis Ortiz of the Mellon Foundation. Nadia Ben-Youssef at the Center for Constitutional Rights, Mariame Kaba and Project NIA, Moira Marquis at Saxapahaw Prison Books, Derecka Purnell, Lisa Lowe, The New York Public Library's Jail and Prison service team, the entire Harry Belafonte staff, especially Eliza O'Connor and Tequila Davis. Meenakshi Poolapalli. Kris Bergbom, and Spencer Howard at Park Boulevard Productions, our live captionist, Joanna Lundberg and Joel and Steve with Pacific street films.

So, Sarah made me promise not to put her in the spotlight tonight, and I was going to honor that because I'm trying to get better at honoring people's wishes, even when they do amazing work. But then she sort of went rogue and she put some really nice words in the program about me. So, I felt like what's good for the goose is good for the gander. So, let me just say briefly, I was looking to do this event, and I went to a lot of different places, and got a lot of silence or, you know, we will give you \$100, good luck, that kind of thing. I got connected with Sarah, who I don't think even had \$100. But was so enthusiastic, knew about Martin, knew about his work. Wanted to make this happen. And I don't know if you've met these library workers before, who are like superheroes. But they have bad ass politics, they organize, they know what you need before you even ask for it. They're like, oh, I already did that. Sarah is that and more. And I want to embarrass her with a big round of applause and say thank you Sarah. [Applause] So let that be a warning next time you go thinking about putting something in the program.

All right. And finally, thank you to all of Martin's friends and comrades and family for being here tonight. It's so special to have all of you in one place. Particularly Liz and Vinny. So I'm gonna hand it over to you. [Applause]

VINNY SOSTRE:

This is insane. This is my first time giving a speech, so I hope I can make it through it. [Applause] Of course, I have to start out with thanking my amazing mother and beautiful wife for making it out tonight. My mom, Liz, especially, has been through a lot recently. It's her first time out in five years. [Applause] So, thank you for finding the strength and courage to be here tonight. It means the world to me. Of course, I have to thank the man with the plan, Garrett, for putting this all together. The New York Public Library system for making it happen.

But my dad was also big on the people behind the scenes of a movement, the unseen faces. So I want to thank everybody who can't be here tonight, and contributed in even the smallest way to make this happen. So as you know, Garrett is now the foremost expert on my dad's life and work. So I'm gonna leave that up to him. All I want to say is, I had the best dad that any son could ask for. I mean, I miss him so much. The wisdom, the sense of humor. But it's the simple things, you know? It's always the simple things. Coming home after school and seeing him reading the paper in the corner. Or watching the news with him almost every night. In fact, I remember one time we were watching the news together, it was during the Iraq war. I'm

watching, I'm getting upset. And I look at him. I'm like, dad, this war is bullshit. And you know I'm expecting a, "right on son," or something like that. He looks at me and he goes, so? What are you going to do about it? And I said, damn, dad. I'm just a young guy. This is a war halfway around the world. What can I possibly do about it? Well, he said. And he proceeded to list the first three steps I could take right here in the neighborhood. It was amazing. It was truly amazing. But those words, "What are you going to do about it," stuck with me forever.

Whenever I'm feeling hopeless, helpless, I hear my dad's voice in my head. What are you going to do about it? And it gives me strength. Because he knew that there's always something that you can do to make a difference. And that's a message for everyone. And I know we've heard this before, oh, be the change you want to see in the world. And that type of thing. The difference is, my dad would give you the steps that you could take to make it happen. He always had a plan. Always brilliant and completely out of the box. So, even though his plans were amazing, as I said, they were always brilliant, completely out of the box. And yes, sometimes they would require more than just a peaceful protest. So, there was a certain optimism about the man and his message. Wherever he was, it was the right place to be. Whatever time it was, it was the perfect time to get things going. And he continued giving advice and making plans until his final days.

So my dad passed away at 92 years old and understandably, a lot of people would say wow, he lived a long life, you know? That's amazing for him to live so long. And I totally appreciate and understand the sentiment. But I think it's also easy to forget that the older somebody is when they pass away, the bigger hole they leave behind. And besides, as Garrett said, my dad wanted to live to 100. That was a major goal of his. He would always say, don't sell me short! Don't sell me short now, I'm living to 100! And that's why, when Garrett asked me if I wanted to have an event for his 100th birthday, it took me about a 100th of a second to say yes. And I'm so happy that so many other people said yes too. So, thank you all for coming out tonight to celebrate the man, the message, and the movement. So, we didn't sell you short, dad, you did it. 100 years and still going strong. [Applause]

GARRETT FELBER:

Thank you, Vinny. [Applause]

One thing I would like to do right now, just before we start the panel, is to just take a moment to honor a guest who we have here and I'm so happy that she could be here. One of the people who, unfortunately, is absent from that film, *Frame Up!*, is Geraldine Pointer, who was Martin's codefendant. And Geraldine was in the store that night on July 15th, 1967. She was running, at the time, the East West Bookshop. One of the other book stores in Buffalo. And she was part of the frameup, had five children at the time under the age of ten, was separated from those children, did over two years in prison. And really was one of the first Black women political prisoners of that era. And has still not really been honored for that sacrifice and struggle.

So, I just want to take a moment right now. Geraldine is, in my mind, owed more than an apology by the city of Buffalo. She is owed reparations and I think we need to take a moment to thank her for being with us here tonight. Thank you, Geraldine. [Applause]

[Applause]

WILLIAM C. ANDERSON:

Hi, everybody. Thank you for coming out tonight. This is an emotional event. I'm about to start crying right now. It's an overwhelming thing for me because seeing all of these people that I've been talking with Garrett about and reading, and learning about this history, how it's been so overlooked and neglected, and just seeing this recognition with Geraldine, with everybody that's here is really amazing, and this is I'm just so overjoyed to see such an amazing turnout, and thank you to all of the staff, everybody that has been helping make this happen, all the people who are putting in work. Thank you to Garrett, thank you to everyone who's on the stage with me.

My name is William C. Anderson I'm a writer and an activist, and this has become an amazing part of my life. Martin's story has really affected me and transformed my politics, and I was introduced to Martin by Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin and we'll get into that history, as we discuss everything today. But just want to just say thanks for coming out tonight and for being in this space with us. This is something that we shouldn't take for granted, at a time when there is a mayor in the city who is trying to cut and destroy libraries. And we do not want to take for granted the fact that gathering in spaces like this and having the ability to talk and learn together, and to have this love and respect for education, and for books is something that is, you know, unfortunately under attack all across this country right now.

So, I just want to acknowledge that before we get started. So, we just watched this film and I just want to ask everybody, if we can start at the end and work our way back towards me. If you can just tell me who you are and if someone were to walk up to you on the street and say, "Who was Martin Sostre? Who was he to you?" You can just answer that question for me, just tell me who you are and who Martin was to you. And I just want to get everybody introduced that way. So, if you can just start at the end and work your way down, that would be wonderful.

ANTONIO RODRIGUEZ:

My name is Antonio Rodriguez. I, right now, work for the Department of Homeless Services. It's great to see young people here because part of my job is getting young people to come out and be involved in education and cultural events. When I was a young student in 1974, in Plattsburgh, New York, someone came to me and showed me an article in a progressive newspaper saying that there was going to be a political prisoner making a court appearance downtown at the courthouse, and his name was Martin Sostre. So, we had never heard of him or heard of his case, but it felt like something that we should check out and find out what was going on. So, a few of us went down to the courtroom and I still remember when they brought him out, he had chains on his legs, a belt around his stomach with a short chain and handcuffs,

so he had to do kind of like, that slave shuffle. I remember it was 1974 and I thought, wow, this is not 1864. How could there be a Black man in chains? It was burned into my mind. So, as we learned about his case, we decided that we had to try to do something.

At the end of the film, it says that Martin is still in prison because a couple years later, as Martin described, he was fighting on the issue of the rectal examinations that he would not submit to that because this was a form of dehumanization of the prisoners. So, when he would not submit, they would forcibly try to have him submit to it and then they would assault him. So, as a way of adding more years on to him and as a way of trying to shut him up because he was such a force in the prison system, they assaulted him and then they charged him with assault. Assault of three prison guards, and he was being put on trial while he was in prison, in that town, Plattsburgh, where I was attending college. Just to give you a little context, Plattsburgh is part of the north country. It's up all the way up near, not far from, the Canadian border, and at the time in the 70s, they actually had one of the biggest KKK chapters in the country.

There was only one black family in the entire town, and one of the difficulties that we had and that we knew that Martin was going to have was that everybody in that area either worked or had family members or friends that worked at the prison, or at the local Air Force base, which was a strategic air command base. So, it was a very difficult context. We knew that Martin probably was not going to be able to get any justice.

So, we started a defense committee. And we did not know at the time there were defense committees throughout the state and in different towns around the country, but Martin became a way for us to be able to connect a little bit what we were trying to do in the community to what was going on in the prison system, and what was going on all over the world, in terms of black people and people of color fighting for their rights. And it was an education for us, and that, his case and his leadership, allowed us to connect with all those larger issues and made us better activists and just better human beings, to be honest.

WILLIAM C. ANDERSON:

Thank you. Go ahead and tell us about yourself as well.

SANDY SHEVACK:

My name is Sandy Shevack. To answer your question, if someone came up to me and asked me who Martin Sostre was, I would say that he was an activist who took the books and made it reality. He created, he took the ideology that was in the books, and created tangible results. I worked with Martin for 22 years, we renovated five buildings together. Created 15 units of affordable housing. Two facilities today that house the Angela Kidz pre-school in Passaic and the starlet academy, run by Carol Sobh, who's here today. And, you know, on Saturdays, the Bella Chanel Mentoring Program for Girls that's run by— that's founded and directed by Kim Cottrell, with the assistance of Anthony Dye.

Martin said that it's one thing going to demonstrations, that has its place. Creating tangible, revolutionary opportunities and results is where the rubber meets the road. It's where you put it on the line, where you work in ripping up roofs in the heat or in the cold. Teaching young people marketable skills, teaching them, you know, why conditions are the way they are, that this is not natural, all right. And people would come up to Martin and I and say, "oh wow, what an exceptional program." Martin would say, "yeah, that is the problem. That it is exceptional. It should not be exceptional. And you shouldn't accept the conditions that exist." He interlinked national, local to international causes. He saw himself as being part of an international movement.

When I went to Nicaragua and came back, and the flag was presented, the Sandanistas presented me with the flag. The fifth and most difficult building that took three and a half years to renovate into The New World Preschool, we flew the Sandinista flag on that building in Patterson, New Jersey. And it really ticked off the local establishment. As a matter of fact, when we first got that building, okay, the city found out that we got the building and they immediately put—the mayor put in a demolition order, Mayor of Patterson put a demolition order in. So, I'm running, "hey Martin, man, we've got this demolition order." He's cool, you know, "mhm, mhm, all right, let me get the law books, you know? He had the city attorney on the phone and I'm overhearing half of it. He's giving this man hell. And at the end of it, he hangs up the phone, he said, "we got the building." He said, "yeah, use the law against them. You know? You study the law and you use it against them." I don't want to go too much so let me state this. I arranged the series of speaking engagements for him in Passaic. So I got to know him and on one of the speaking engagements, I'm taking him back to New York and he says, "pull over, Sandy". So, I find a parking space, "what's this all about? are you hungry?" He said "Yeah I'm hungry, but not for food." He said, "I'm hungry for revolution, I'm hungry for change." Okay, well, you're not going to find it in my car, Martin. You know, where are we going with this? "Come here. Politely, come here." There's a 32 years difference between us, so I'm listening to a teacher, all right? We look at a building, brick building. I love brick buildings, vacant. We are peering inside and we can't see too much because I found out there were mirrors all over the place. I found out that it used to be a clothing store. He said, what do you know about this building? This is a scene out of Laurel and Hardy, right? I said, "well it's vacant." He said, "I know it's vacant." He said, "who owns it?" "I don't know who owns it." "Go to city hall, go to the tax assessor's office, find out who owns this, okay?" I said "But, you know, I don't have any money." I said "do you?" He said, "no." He says "But you have to have a plan before you can get anything. If you don't have a well-articulated plan, if you don't have that vision, we're not going to get anything."

So I found out the city owned the building and it was good, he said, no leans on it. He said, "get the key. Please, get the key." We made an arrangement, we headed into the building. It was winter. It was 25 by 100 feet, half of the place was covered with snow and ice. You could look up, see the sky, and there is snow coming down. And I said, I've seen enough. And Martin said, "yeah, so have I. this is it." I said "yeah, this is it, man. Let's go." He said, no, he says "this *is* it."

And just like, snowflakes coming down between us. I said, "you know, there's one bite of the apple. If we get foundation money and we don't make this happen, he said, you know, nothing may happen after this. He said, "this is it because you don't see what I see." I said, "well, what do you see?" He said, "I see a community center, I see a facility that's going to change people's lives and empower this community." I said, "okay." I said, you know more, I don't know anything about construction. We will go with it. Took us a year and a half, we got enough foundation grants to buy the building at auction. Nobody wanted it.

It took about eight months to renovate it, it became, it still is, a community facility that houses the Angela Kidz Preschool and the Bella Chanel Mentoring Program on Saturdays. And that was, you know, the beginning of a lot of struggle.

I've heard people say, well, what happened to Martin after he got out of prison? He was busting his behind. That's what was happening. You know, doing the hard lifting, the hard work. Intellectually and physically. And for a man who is in his 60s, I mean, he did work that was unbelievable and we both worked other jobs. He was doing tenant organizing, I was working on Patterson ambulance at night, which was difficult getting home, getting some rest. I come into the building and, like, you know, a whole entire room with sheetrock, then spackled, I was like, where does this man get the energy to do this kind of stuff alone? How did he put that sheet rock on the ceiling alone? I just don't understand it. And what I would say is that he put ideology into practice. He changed people's lives to this day. They've been impacted by Martin's intelligence, his commitment to struggle, and his commitment to work.

WILLIAM C. ANDERSON:

Thank you, thank you. Sylvia, you want to talk too? And Sylvia, if we can just keep the rest of these answers just to, like, two minutes because I want to try to get, I want to make sure that everybody gets to talk. I know that there is a lot of memories and I just want to make sure, I have to make sure we stay on time. It is a hard job. No, you're good, you're good.

SANDY SHEVACK:

22 years. I mean –

WILLIAM C. ANDERSON:

I know, there's a lot to talk about, so I just want to make sure everybody gets to talk. So, thank you. Sylvia, go ahead.

SYLVIA RODRIGUEZ:

Hi my name is Sylvia Rodriguez. Antonio is my brother. I learned about Martin through my brother. We were both going to Plattsburgh State at the time and I just remember Antonio and his girlfriend at the time, Marjorie, telling me about this man who is in prison. I learned about him, we read about him, we read articles, we picked up the Crime of Martin Sostre book. And at the time, we didn't know anything about, like, the prison movement. But there was just



something about Martin and Martin's story. We knew the trial was going to be held in Plattsburgh and the fact that Martin was just working so hard to fight the system from within the system was what sort of triggered my wanting to work for this man, to help him get out and to help him get the justice that he deserved. Is that two minutes?

WILLIAM C. ANDERSON:

If you want it to be.

SYLVIA RODRIGUEZ:

We just ended up, the trial was up there, so we ended up having demonstrations, we really went into the community and we shared everything that we learned about him with every and anyone we ran into. Whether it was the college students or people that lived in the town. Then once the trial started, Liz Fink, who is one of the lead lawyers on the case, had a couple of us go into Clinton facility to meet Martin. And once I met him and then we started writing to each other, I got to really see his determination, his revolutionary spirit, but also his humanity. And he impacted me. After that, it was like, how could I not be involved? How could you see a problem, like his son was saying, and not do something about it? So, that's who Martin was and continues to be, for me.

WILLIAM C. ANDERSON:

Thank you. Lorenzo?

LORENZO KOM'BOA ERVIN:

Okay, in 1969, I was brought from Germany, where I had been arrested for hijacking a plane earlier that year back to New York state and put in the federal house of detention, and I faced the death penalty for hijacking a plane to Cuba, and so, I needed help. I couldn't get any attorneys or anybody else to help me. I didn't know anything at all of Martin Sostre, except that he was a brilliant mind, a jailhouse lawyer. They said, you should talk to him. So, I did go and talk to him and that brief conversation changed the course of my life. And I was facing the death penalty. Martin told me to go back to court. You go to federal court, you tell them you are going to scream and let everybody know how you were tortured, How you were drug back to the United States and how you were falsely charged. And you're going to force them to drop the death penalty phase of your case. And I did this, and sure enough, they were rushing to get me inside to talk to me and my weak lawyers, and made a deal to drop the death penalty phase of my case. Now, I still faced life in prison and I got life in prison. That's another story. The main thing, I was alive to fight it. Martin told me over the course of two months that I stayed there fighting extradition a great many things about radical politics, about how to do, you know, writ writing, as he called it, jailhouse writ writing, jailhouse lawyering, and I absorbed all of that. And the really important thing about Martin, as a prison activist, is that he changed the face of the prison.

He created the prison movement as a modern movement. He fought for democratic rights for prisoners, the rights, or, you know, to worship whatever religion they wanna worship. He fought for the right to receive revolutionary literature, and actually pushed our ability to speak about radical political ideas and not be thrown into solitary confinement. Or if we were, to be able to fight it, fight out of solitary confinement because they had rules they had to abide by then. Martin Sostre changed my life in the sense that I became an extension of Martin Sostre. I did jailhouse lawyering throughout the 15 years I was in prison, and because he taught me so much, I was able to get out of prison on my own, to fight the parole system, fight the prison system, and to be able to build an international defense committee on my own. Looking at his defense committee, which were so effective. I want to thank you all for that. His defense committee gave me a method of striking out in my own case. And I was able to get out of prison after 15 years, otherwise I would be there right now. Two life terms without the possibility of parole, plus 90 years, and I would be in prison right now, if it were not for that, or dead by now. So, Martin gave me so much. He made me an anarchist and a revolutionary, which I was already an activist, revolutionary activist, but he made me an anarchist. And provided me the tools to keep fighting the struggle in his name all these years. Thank you.

WILLIAM C. ANDERSON:

Thanks. [Applause] Jerry?

JERRY ROSS:

My name is Jerry Ross. At the time I met Martin, my name was Jerry Gross. I was a philosophy major at the University of Buffalo, city of no illusions. And I went to the bookstore because I wanted to buy the little red book by Mao Tse Tung. I wanted to buy Ho Chi Minh's memoirs, writings of Fidel Castro. So, as soon as I walk into the bookstore, there is Martin with a big smile on his face explaining why he's selling pop records and African carvings. He's giving me a little lecture on what the bookstore is all about. He got me very interested, and at that time, any isms, I was interested in learning about any kind of-isms. So, Martin was very good at explaining socialism, communism, anarchism, all those kinds of things. Then I read in the paper that the Buffalo police department had gone down to his bookstore and hosed it down with fire hoses during a little mini uprising. And I went over to the bookstore. Usually, you know, here I am coming from a white suburb, I'm a white kid, Kenmore, New York, which was just a suburb of Buffalo. And the only time I go down into the ghetto is to go listen to jazz at the Buffalo jazz station, but I would go to Jefferson Avenue to his bookstore because of Martin. I became a friend of Martin's. I met Geraldine in the bookstore, I became a friend of Geraldine's. And, anyway, so, I got students at the University of Buffalo to donate books to restock Martin's bookstore.

So, things were starting to turn around a little bit. Then suddenly, I read in the paper that Martin X was arrested. There was a riot in the black community, and they were blaming it on Martin, and he was arrested for heroin. So, the very next morning, I read that he was being arraigned down at the courthouse. So, I went down there as soon as I could. And I asked, I went to the first

row, Martin's at the front there being arraigned in front of the court, and, preliminary hearing, they called it. And I leaned over, the separation between Martin and the public, and I said, Martin, can I organize a Defense Committee for you? And he said, yeah, Jerry, go for it. And that changed my entire life because right after that, and on the activities that ensued, J. Edgar Hoover took a very good interest in me, very big interest in me. To make a long story short I organized the Martin Sostre defense committee with the help of YAWF.

I was chairman of Youth Against War and Fascism, YAWF. And that was a youth group attached to Workers World Party, which was a socialist party in Buffalo. So, at some point, I was also a defendant of the Buffalo nine. I had two federal trials, I had 28 arrests myself. And at one point, after all the trials were over and all my arrests were over, I went out west to Oregon. But on my way, at one point, I passed through L.A. and I got in touch with Amnesty International. I told them about Martin and they adopted Martin as a prisoner of conscience. It took a while, but eventually, they adopted Martin as a prisoner of conscience, and I think that had a big impact eventually. I kept in touch with Martin. I had to leave Buffalo for my own— I would've been continuously harassed by the federal government and local Buffalo police, so I changed my name actually. I went to Arizona and in a small town in Arizona, I dropped the G and became Jerry Ross.

Since then, I became a painter, an artist. Can somebody hold up that painting back there on the table? That is a portrait I did of Martin based on his original mugshot. And please go over there and take a look at it when you can. Can you stand up? Ron Ford has the original painting that he had purchased from me, while we were both in Eugene, Oregon. He donated it to the Burchfield Penney Museum in Buffalo, where it now is in the permanent collection there. So, to make a long story short, I became an artist and I've now had five or six shows in Italy, and shows in Las Vegas, and in Oregon, and I'm only mentioning that because in those days, in the 60s, they were always trying to depict us as punks, no good, you know, people that would not amount to anything, and you can see that they always do that to try to demoralize you and put you down. But, you know, we know who we are, and we know what we can do. Thank you very much.

[Applause]

WILLIAM C. ANDERSON:

So, I just wanna, I really wanna just direct some very specific questions at everybody now and kind of pull some elements out that I know about all of your relationships with Martin and your different stories. And so, one of the common threads I feel like I encounter so much when I learn about Martin and think about his legacy is Martin was a radical educator and he was a person who was a teacher who created other teachers. And my own awareness around Martin Sostre, like I said, came from Lorenzo, who had this short but powerful experience encountering him during their incarceration. And when I met Lorenzo, we had a short encounter and then he completely transformed my life, and I was telling him earlier that I felt that that was a part of Martin's legacy, that he had this influence that was so powerful and it didn't take a lot of time,

and it didn't require a huge effort. It was just he could just be changed by someone in a moment's notice. So, Sylvia, could you tell me how you felt influenced and how you felt changed by your encounter with Martin and just tell me how you felt about him as an educator, and as an influential person?

SYLVIA RODRIGUEZ:

Well, I think first off, just learning about the prison system. I was only 18 and I didn't know that much about the American prison system. So, Martin definitely opened my eyes to the treatment, especially of Black and people of color here. I know Michelle Alexander has written a book now, but Martin was looking at things so early on. You and I talked about that in the other room, about, he was challenging not just the rectal exams, he was challenging solitary confinement. I wasn't aware of the fact that he was talking about stop and frisks back then, you know? Now we know what that means. So, I actually had been in communication with him through letters after I had met him. He was very happy that there was someone he could actually write to in Spanish. So he wrote to me in, I guess, one of his first language. And he always educated me in the letters. He informed me, he discussed what we were doing with the committee. But then he also, there was always a human element. I was pregnant when we started the defense committee and, you know, a year later, I was getting letters from him and he was asking me about my son. So, he never forgot the human side of it also. So, for someone being that young, for me, that meant a lot. Because it was easy to initially, especially after reading the Crime of Martin Sostre book, to sort of put him on a pedestal and see him as larger than life. And in many ways, he was. At the same time, he was very real, you know? He never gave up, which I thought was amazing. One of the things that was great about being in communication with Garrett when Garrett first reached out and he found my brother. We sort of assumed that Martin went home after he received clemency and that was the end of it. We continued doing politics. And we should've known that Martin would've continued and obviously, he did, you know? So, we were so happy to hear the stories of him continuing and then the stories from earlier on. Like I said, we were pretty young, so, you know, for us, we didn't think about the Martin before and the Martin after. Speaking to his son earlier, he said his dad always looked forward and his wife also mentioned the same thing. He was always about the here and now and then, what am I going to do next? And I think it's a wonderful legacy, and for everyone to be here, to have met him at different stages in his life, but still, everyone was impacted by him. I think that says the world, ya know? Says a whole lot about him.

WILLIAM C. ANDERSON:

And Sandy, can you tell me what the after was like? What was it like to work with Martin after, to see his outlook? What was it like?

SANDY SHEVACK:

A teacher, more than just a teacher, a practitioner of theory. Taking that theory and actualizing it. Educating young people. Within the space of 40 Market Street, to articulate even more, there was, we sponsored an air conditioning and refrigeration program. The Anderson Lee Air

Conditioning and Refrigeration Program that was certified by the state of New Jersey, Department of Education, so that when people went through that program, they actually had the certifications to give them a livable wage. And with the refrigerators and the air conditioners that were refurbished, Peace Works. We hooked up with Peace Works and they sent those air conditioners and refrigerators to clinics in Sandinista, Nicaragua. I mean, that is activism, okay?

WILLIAM C. ANDERSON:

I'd say so. That's huge. Antonio, can you tell me a little bit about how you felt Martin was influential in your life and as an educator, and as someone who led by example as well?

ANTONIO RODRIGUEZ:

Well, you know, watching the film, as Garrett mentioned, that was a big tool for defense committees that was set up for Martin in different cities. One of the things that really stood out to me, you really see Martin's spirit and his great sense of humor when we showed that in Plattsburgh, I must have seen it 30 times because we showed it all the time. And people really reacted to it. Showed the power of art because of his ability to communicate and educate, and even though he was quite the intellectual, if you read his letters from prison and in other writings, he knew that in talking to people, he had to break things down in a way that they could understand. And through all the brutality that he had to go through, it's still amazing and they preserve it in that film, that great sense of humor and people just responded so much. It helped us so much in humanizing him to the people in that community in Plattsburgh, who are not open to the fact of listening to a Black prisoner. So, early on, it helped me to learn, how do we take big, gigantic issues and break them down so it means something to people? And how do we communicate to people in a way that they can feel? And he had that ability through all his difficult struggles to just be, you saw his kindness and his humanity.

Like I said, his great sense of humor. Especially in the 70s, that was not a little thing. People always thought of radicals and communists, and revolutionaries as being dour or having an inability to joke and all of that. You see that he could do it despite those difficult circumstances. So, the communication thing is, I think, probably the number one thing I learned from him, personally.

WILLIAM C. ANDERSON:

Jerry, can you tell me, I know in the Open Road interview with Martin Sostre, that he said that his defense committee was an opportunity for him to put anarchist principles into practice because he took an unorthodox approach to how he organized with you on that committee. Can you speak to some of that, some of the maybe unorthodox and different ways he thought about things and approached?

JERRY ROSS:

Well, the out in Oregon, I will give an example. Out in Oregon, there are two kinds of anarchists. There's the lifestyle anarchists, people that go out in the forests and reject the modern world,

then there's the social anarchists, like the Black Bloc in Portland in Seattle that you see fighting the fascists in the streets. Martin was of the latter. He would be out in the streets fighting the fascists. And I saw Martin, Martin was just a complete genius. I saw him in action in the court. In the courtroom. During the trial, when the trial first started up, they had jury selection. It was an all white jury.

So, Martin challenged that, and he interviewed each juror himself, as is Martin was, of course, his own attorney. To see him working the courtroom, he was like a Clarence Darrow. He was unbelievable. He showed the racial prejudices of each of those white jurors and when the judge started attacking him and telling him to shut up, Martin kept talking and denounced the judge. That's when they gagged him right there in the courtroom. I had to sit through all that and I'm taking notes, trying to take down everything Martin is talking so fast, I can't keep up with him. But he was a complete genius. He put that anarchism, that direct action thing, he just lived it, it was him. His smile would light up a room. He was just, he was radioactive and revolutionary. Humor and brilliance. I can't say enough about him. But did I answer the question?

WILLIAM C. ANDERSON:

Yeah, you did, you did, thank you. There is an extensive legacy of anarchists being in court and giving grand speeches and fighting and bringing a sort of unorthodox approach and rejection of the norms of the courtroom and of the criminal legal system, and bringing this confrontational approach into not only the prison but into the courtroom.

And as we can see, Martin's legacy has been neglected so severely. Oftentimes when you might read about historic anarchists who were in court and who were rejecting the system and who were speaking out, you don't often see him considered in that way, or remembered in that way, and I think that's something that brings me to ask Lorenzo to speak for a second about...

JERRY ROSS:

Can I say one more thing?

WILLIAM C. ANDERSON:

Yeah, sure, go ahead.

JERRY ROSS:

With regard to Geraldine, I think people out here need help her...

WILLIAM C. ANDERSON:

We'll come back to that. We'll come back to that.

JERRY ROSS:

She's been a victim of wrongful arrest and imprisonment. I would hope that somebody would take action.

WILLIAM C. ANDERSON:

We are, we're going to come right back to that. So, I want to go to Lorenzo next, though, and definitely ask you, Lorenzo, to speak to that element that I was just talking about, this neglect of his influence on the anarchist movement through you and your work and how he, as you've told me many times, gave you a political education that transformed your politics, and he's really a forebear of what many are coming to know as Black anarchism today.

So can you talk a little about how he shaped your politics and how he is a forebear for the Black anarchist movement in the many people who would come afterwards and be influenced?

LORENZO KOM'BOA ERVIN:

Well, you know anarchism, in those days, was considered a white movement. For many years, in fact, it was considered a white movement. Some of it changed over the course of the last several decades now. He was the first one to tell me, because I was not sympathetic to anarchism at all when I met him. But he was able to explain to me that this was a universal political theory and that it can be used by anyone and any people to liberate themselves. It didn't require a so-called leader. All it required was the masses of people willing to fight, and organizers willing to stand with people. And so for me and other black prisoners, and people in the street but prisoners particularly, we created the first collectives of black anarchists, or anarchists period, in the prison system. And Martin was the most important thing to him, you've got to understand about Martin Sostre, he was a revolutionary and he was the one individual that laid the preconditions for the prisons struggle of the 1970s. And that was a Black-led movement. And that was a movement... Because it was an anarchist movement at that moment, it didn't believe the propaganda line that the state was doing things for our benefit, or doing things for the benefit of our communities and so forth. So we started suing the prison system all over the country. We were able to defeat the regime that prevented you from receiving revolutionary literature or political theories that the authorities didn't like, and so forth. We had lawsuits all over the country as a result of what Martin did in *Sostre vs. Otis*, we filed lawsuits everywhere, all over the Federal system. We did away with a prison censorship regime there so that you could receive revolutionary literature or any other kind of literature. We were then able to take that to a higher level and started building cultural groups inside the prison system. Educational... We subverted and changed the educational system inside the prisons. In fact, the prison I was in, which was always known as the Ku Klux Klan jail in Terre Haute, Indiana, where - right now they execute - the Federal government executes people. It's a vile place. But that was challenged and defeated because we created an inter-racial anti-klan movement that destroyed the prison system that had that kind of racism there. We were able to organize against it. So the things I could say that happened, were things that Black anarchists, or Black revolutionaries were able to impact. I wouldn't have ever been able to read George Jackson's book if it were not for Martin Sostre filing *Sostre vs. Otis*. None of us would've been able to read any kind of political literature or have discussions without going to solitary confinement for years, just for that.

So I went through prison, 15 years, two life sentences, and the only reason I got out of prison was because I knew what I'd been taught by Martin Sostre. I changed, not just me, but helped to change prisons themselves as institutions, that people were dying in and people were suffering in. We turned those institutions into educational institutions for the masses of prisoners, so that people could get out of prison. We helped, I helped a lot of people, even people on death row. Just for myself, I helped them to get out of prison, in cases when no one thought they would ever get out. People in some of the most racist states, in Alabama and so forth, we were able to organize legal study groups. We, at one point even got the national lawyers guild to help us. So all of this came from my initial education, from Martin Sostre. So, it wasn't just a question of meeting and forgetting about him.

WILLIAM C. ANDERSON:  
Right.

LORENZO KOM'BOA ERVIN:  
He changed my life.

WILLIAM C. ANDERSON:  
You know, I think one of the most beautiful things about his legacy is that something that is becoming really kind of clear from everything you're talking about is that he didn't have a real hard-core sectarianism about his politics and I think it seems pretty clear that he was more interested in people having political education and understanding the broadness and the multifacetedness of movement and of struggle.

And so Sandy, I wanted to ask you, at that point that you were working with him, why do you feel he wasn't committed to what I once saw him call this wooden line of orthodoxy and dogma? You are talking about him being someone who was committed to praxis and bringing politics to life. Why do you think he was over able to overcome and see the bigger picture in all of it?

SANDY SHEVACK:  
He wasn't dogmatic, is that what you mean? He wasn't dogmatic, he was pragmatic. He realized that people were at different stages of political development, where opportunities— to create opportunities and utilize opportunities as they came across. He was not a hard liner when it came to... He saw that life had some ambiguity to it. I should also point out that we had a lot of support. Abby Hofmann donated books to the community center that we opened in Passaic. Ben Chavis of the Willmington 10 came to speak. Paul Bermanzohn of the Greensboro Massacre. We took the kids to see, the youth to see Angela Davis. So we were bringing in a whole array of speakers.

WILLIAM C. ANDERSON:



And Angela also spoke out on Martin's behalf, right? As well as Sartre, right? Jean Paul Sartre as well.

SANDY SHEVACK:

Oh definitely. Yes. And in Angela's book, her own biography, *If They Come in the Morning*, there are pages dedicated to Martin and his case. So yeah, he didn't have a solid, rigid line that if you weren't on that line he didn't want to talk to you or deal with you. He realized that people were at different stages of development and he worked with that.

WILLIAM C. ANDERSON:

Can you also tell me, why do you think that we don't know as much as we should know about Martin? What do you think his legacy has been so deeply neglected for someone who had that much of an appeal, who was that well known at that time? Why do you think we don't know as much as we should know about him today?

SANDY SHEVACK:

I can only say for the 22 years that I was with him that he was working. In buildings, at night. You know, as I said, doing that hard lifting. There's nothing glamorous about that. It's fulfilling, but change requires effort, and as you said, it's more than just going to a demonstration here and there. It's commitment on a daily basis.

WILLIAM C. ANDERSON:

So I want to leave some time for what you have to say but I just want to also ask if anybody had - we're getting kind of close to time and right before we get to your comment you want to make - I want to ask if there was anything, any memories that anyone could share that felt special, that you would want to tell everybody here that has gathered to think and consider Martin tonight. If there's anything that you could just come up with that you felt was special, that you hold dear that felt okay to share with us about Martin tonight?

ANTONIO RODRIGUEZ:

I guess the one thing that I would want to share is that when he was found guilty of the assault charges in Plattsburgh, because of his example, we all thought well, if he's found guilty do we just walk away after all the work we've done? And not knowing what was going to happen to him? And we decided that we needed to stand up and speak out. We were young and very inexperienced. We weren't part of larger political organizations. We were just a bunch of mostly students. We didn't know what would happen, but again, through Martin's example, I read a formal statement that we had all agreed upon condemning the trial as part of oppression and racism. And the people in the courtroom stood up, people raised their fists. Some people got very upset and didn't just express their displeasure in a way that was acceptable. Anyway, the judge charged us with contempt of court and 12 of us ended up getting 30 days in jail. We were supposed to be in the local jail but they shipped us down to Albany to a prison. Sylvia mentioned she was pregnant at the time. So, we became what was called the Plattsburgh 12. It was a great

thing because it galvanized people. After we were in the jail we heard that after the courtroom was cleared, there was a woman standing there and she ended up being a local celebrity, the wife of a prominent doctor, and the judge said Mrs. Smith, what are you doing here? And she wanted to be arrested as well. So it was a memory that he, as I was saying, he made us into better people because he was a prisoner of conscience. He put it into action and it compelled us to try to do the same and it just gives a great example of somebody who was putting his conscience into action.

WILLIAM C. ANDERSON:

Yeah, we do want to recognize what you are just raising as well, Jerry, about Geraldine. I wanted to give you some space to raise the issues that we know are very serious.

JERRY ROSS:

I just want to mention, first I'll say that a lot of us after the 60s and 70s, going into the 80s, we started getting into spirituality. A lot of people don't know that Martin practiced kundalini yoga in Greenhaven penitentiary, where he had an iron mattress. It was the cold of winter, no blanket. How do you think you survived that and stayed alive? He practiced Kundalini and meditation and brought the energy up. He heated himself through his mental powers. We know that from his letters from prison.

But in regard to Geraldine, she was a victim of wrongful arrest and imprisonment. Her charges were unfounded, and there was no probable cause for her arrest in the first place. So she was detained for an unreasonable amount of time, two years. Her kids were sent to foster homes. So we need people out there, somebody, to get a hold of a civil rights attorney, to challenge the validity of the search and seizure and the credibility of the evidence against her. Her civil rights were violated during her arrest and imprisonment. There was police misconduct. An excessive use of force against her. There was racial profiling, violations of due process rights, violation of parental rights. So we need to hold the arresting officers to account, the Buffalo and State police departments to account. And she needs to be compensated for damages, for lost wages, for emotional distress, and medical expenses. Please, somebody out there, get that started.

WILLIAM C. ANDERSON:

Thank you. [Applause]

Well, this has been absolutely amazing. It's been an absolute honor to share a stage with you all. I can't thank you enough for all of the things that you have done, both in relation to Martin and outside of your connection with Martin. This has just been an amazing conversation, and I really think everybody should give a round of applause to these amazing people up here.

[Applause]

LORENZO KOM'BOA ERVIN: I wanted to leave people with this information. We created a Martin Sostre Institute about two years ago. Based on not just the memories of Martin Sostre but also the idea and the understanding that Martin was a political organizer against the prison system against capitalism and racism. So we created this movement with the idea that we would get people to join it who are interested in what he was as an individual of course, but more important, what he was as an organizer. And we would be very happy if people would join the Martin Sostre Institute.

WILLIAM C. ANDERSON:

There is a new website. You can find more information on [martinsostre.com](http://martinsostre.com). You can follow the institute on Twitter, and we're hopefully going to be expanding the social media even more so than that soon. Definitely try to get involved with us, not only talking about Martin's legacy, but putting the principles that he lived by into practice, because we don't want this to just become just about remembering. We want to take action and do things that Martin would have inspired us to do. Thank you Lorenzo for raising that. And thank you everyone for attending tonight. This has been an amazing event. Just one more round of applause. [Applause]

We want to acknowledge that it is Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin's birthday month. We want to sing him happy birthday. [Applause]

So I'm going to embarrass myself by starting to sing...

ALL [singing]:

Happy birthday to you.

Happy birthday to you.

Happy birthday dear Lorenzo.

Happy birthday to you!

[Applause]

WILLIAM C. ANDERSON:

Everybody have a good night!