Bio: **Charlotte Bunch** is an internationally renowned women's human rights activist, senior scholar, and founder of the Center for Women's Global Leadership at Rutgers University. She has authored numerous publications that reflect her interests in feminists theory's application to public policy questions, civil liberty, gender, sexuality, and global development, including Passionate Politics: Feminists Theory in Action and Demanding Accountability: The Global Campaign and Vienna Tribunal for Women's Human Rights.

Bunch has been the receipt of an assortment of honors and awards, such as the 2006 Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey Board of Trustees Award for Excellence in Research; the 2002 International Women's Forum Women Who Make a Difference Award; and the 1999 Eleanor Roosevelt Award for Human Rights presented by former president William Jefferson Clinton. She was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in 1996 in recognition of her committed, pioneering service as an educator, advocate, writer, and strategist.

An Interview with Charlotte Bunch
Conducted by Leadership Scholar Suzan Sanal, Class of 2010
Edited by Pilar Timpane

Suzan Sanal: What were your first images of women?

Charlotte Bunch: Well, first of all, you have to go back to the forties and fifties in the U.S. I grew up in a small town in New Mexico called Artesia with about 8,000 people — really in the middle of nowhere. My parents were small town social activists in the sense that they were what I call civic activists.

The first images that I really had of women doing interesting things was women missionaries who came to the local Methodist church where my family went every single Sunday. They showed slides of their work in other parts of the world. When I think about role models, it's not a particular person, but it was these women who I thought had the most interesting lives because they would come to the church and they would show pictures of all kinds of places: the Philippines, Africa, Latin America, wherever they were. And they would talk in a passionate way about what they were doing. So, for the first early years of my life I thought, I want to be a missionary.

Over the years, as I got into high school, I began to shift to sort of a more domestic U.S. version of that because I started to think about being a social worker. I was about twelve years old and somebody gave me a book called *Girls' Stories of Great Women*. I loved it. It was stories about people like Susan B. Anthony, and Jane Addams and Eleanor Roosevelt. And it inspired me. These were women who had interesting lives and who made a difference in the world. So, as a

child I really wanted adventure, I wanted to do something that mattered.

SS: When did you discover feminism and how has the theory shaped your career?

CB: Well, I don't think I heard the term feminism until probably when I was in college. But I think that when I look back on my life, I had a mother who really was a feminist. She never said the term "feminist." We never talked about feminism, but she was somebody who believed that women should and could do something with their lives. She was the first woman to be president of the local school board. She was the only woman on the school board in my town, and this was a small town. And she used to take me with her to meetings.

So, I think in that sense, I was introduced to feminism as a way of taking women seriously and women thinking that we could and should do something with our lives. But as a political idea, I don't think I discovered it until I was in college and I was studying history. Through the history of the United States, I learned more about the suffrage movement. As I mentioned I had heard about Susan B. Anthony, but I don't think I had a concept of a "movement." And so, I began to encounter it.

I didn't become an explicit feminist until a couple of years after that when I was out of college. I always say what made me a feminist was that I wanted to do things in the world and I thought I should be able to. And in college I actually got to, because I worked in the civil rights movement. I worked in the student Christian movement, which was a sort of Protestant version of liberation theology. But when I graduated from college, I began to encounter the barriers to women in the real world. And I didn't accept that because, in a way, that hadn't been the way I was raised. I began to say, "This is wrong."

I was in the right place at the right time. I was living in Washington, D.C., and I began to hear about women who had formed women's caucuses and I was very active in the sort of New Left, anti-war, civil rights movement circles so I was around people talking about these things. I got in that sense of, at the early stages of, what some people call the second wave of feminism — the wave of feminism in the late sixties in the U.S. And it just felt natural. I was very quickly immersed in women's liberation movement meetings, and helping to found groups and do things because it just felt like the right thing.

SS: What was your initial step into activism?

CB: The first time I began to really be aware of activism in a social movement sense, was with the civil rights movement in the south of the U.S. I went to Duke University in North Carolina in 1962, and I was a part of YWCA student Christian Movement study groups and we began to talk about racism. The sit-ins were starting to happen around segregation in North Carolina. So, my first conscious political action was to go to some of those demonstrations, particularly because I was active in a church-related group. We held a sit-in at a local church that was segregated, protesting the segregation of the church. I remember not long after that, opening the newspaper and seeing the picture of some of the black men at the Negro College in North Carolina in

Durham that I had met in these study groups, being arrested for demonstrating. So, I knew these people, it wasn't strange to me. I then sort of got one of my best friends and we went to one of the demonstrations. We were not in any way taking any leadership, but we started to support the civil rights movement.

I grew up with the notion that if you think something needs to be done, you should do something about it. What was really different for me was to start to think of that as something that I would build my life around. Not just something that I would do in addition to whatever else I had as a career.

SS: Was it challenging to professionalize your activism?

CB: Yes, it was challenging. It's not like you just walk into a job as a political organizer that easily. But I think that the way it happened for me — in a way I'm a transitional generation — because I grew up believing that I should do something with my life, but women were not necessarily expected to have careers. In a way, I had a space to be exploring.

Nobody thought that I had to declare my career right away because there was still this other assumption that girls will get married; career wasn't seen as that important. That began to shift as a result of the women's movement that I was a part of. I would say that I became an activist because that's what I loved doing. In the beginning, I didn't necessarily know that I would make it a career; I just wanted to do it and I found ways to do it. I associated with and worked for campus ministries because they had space for an activist.

I was very fortunate in that I started to work for a place in Washington called the Institute for Policy Studies, which was really an early New Left think tank. And then I began to really like — organizing and in a way I made it up; I made it into a career. I began to realize that I wanted to do this; I started to look for how to support myself to do it.

What happened for me is not quite the same today because there's much more emphasis on career for women as well, which is both good and bad. It's good in the sense of taking your life seriously, but I also think there needs to be some space for pursuing what you're passionate about.

I was passionate about activism, and I didn't worry in the beginning about how I would make it into a career. I just started doing it. And I looked for places where that was happening. Sometimes I was paid to do the work, sometimes I was a volunteer.

So, maybe five or six years after I started doing it, I realized this was what I wanted my career to be. I used to joke, "Well, I'll go back to law school some day." But I never did because I didn't have to [have a law degree to] do what I was doing. But it wouldn't have been a bad place to start to do what I was doing also.

SS: What skills or characteristics did you have to advance?

CB: I think that there were attitudes and there were skills. I think the attitude that I had was, "If you want to do something then you should try to do it and not just wait for somebody else to show you how to do it." So, I have always been a creator of organizations. I've created many groups and organizations around what I was interested in working on. Obviously, I also have skills in bringing people together or those organizations wouldn't have succeeded. I don't even think I knew that in the beginning. I think I learned I was good at organizing by trying to do it and by bringing people together.

I was good at writing. I write because I want to communicate an idea, not because I'm trying to get published. I always wrote as I would try to speak, to try to convince somebody of something. And I began to realize that those were the skills an organizer needs to have. I started to realize, "Okay, if I want to do this as a career, I either have to work as a consultant and do fundraising — which I did — or find an institution like the Institute for Policy Studies that supports people who want to bring policy changes, or ultimately a university, which is another place that is interested in how people work with ideas and try to make those ideas have an influence in society." So, I began to look for it. And that's where I said the attitude thing is important. You have to be willing to look for where you can do the kind of thing you want to do. And then, be willing to adjust those ideas to what you find.

SS: Was human rights first or the U.N.?

CB: Well, I think that's a really good question, because I think I was interested in human rights when I was very young, because I saw civil rights as a human rights question. But also, when I became a feminist, I sort of moved out of human rights and into more specific feminist women's organizing. And that's how I started to do work at the U.N.: as a feminist. I was looking for how I could connect what we were doing here in the U.S. Really throughout the seventies, I was mostly active in the domestic U.S. feminist movement and working mostly on lesbian feminism, feminist theory, feminist writing. I started a journal called *Quest: A Feminist Quarterly*, to bring together ideas of feminist theory and feminist practice. I started to get interested in the U.N. when they declared International Women's Year in 1975. And I saw that this was an opportunity to meet women in other parts of the world who were interested in human rights. At that time in 1974 to 1975, there were not a lot of places that women could get together internationally. There were women's movements that were starting to develop in many countries, but women didn't have access to the universities, women were not professors in the way they are today, women did not have any international venues in getting together.

At the women's conference in 1980, I got very excited at how much had developed, how many women's groups had formed during that period. I think I saw the U.N. as a place where we could get legitimacy and space to do our work, and I thought we could, over time, influence what the U.N. does, but in particular, influence governments through the U.N. It was possible.

I think what people forget about is that when the U.N. discusses international policy, it has an impact on where development agencies put their money. A lot of agencies in the global south — Africa, Asia, Latin America — got their first money because the U.N. said, We'll have a decade

on women. And that made it possible for there to be resources, to bring people together. Many groups in that period had no access to regional or international discussion except through the U.N.

So, that's how I became interested and the more time I spent meeting women and going to these conferences by the 1990s, I and the other women began to see that we could even organize for actually more policy change through the U.N. We began to look at how women could get access to refugee status, what it would mean if women were seen as human rights victims. So, it was a very practical question: how do you get women on the agenda? How do you get violence against women addressed at the international level?

I think that the idea of working at the U.N. for me was always connected to movement organizing and how we could find more space for having an influence and the U.N. has proven to be a very useful space in that regard.

During the course of doing that, I began to see the need for addressing human rights from a feminist perspective. But I was really doing work with the U.N. for almost a decade before I really started seeing women's rights as human rights as a [specific] piece of that work.

SS: How was it working with people from around the world as a white American woman?

CB: I have joined in the movement for feminism and women's liberation because I wanted a different life for myself also. I wanted to be able to live the life that I wanted to live as a lesbian. I wanted to be out. I know what it means to be silenced by that. I want a different idea about what it is to be an American in the world. So, I tried to live by the way I would like to see U.S. people engage in the world, which is a collaborative sharing of whatever we've learned that is useful, and a learning by which you would collaborate with anybody. And I think maybe my early years in the civil rights movement in the south of the U.S. were really helpful because it was a period in which black and white people worked together very closely. And we understood that we each brought to that struggle different things that were useful. There was an acknowledgement of privilege; there was an acknowledgement of racism. You don't attack and deal with racism out of guilt. You attack and deal with racism because you want to change that. So, I don't do my work for somebody else, I do it in solidarity as part of wanting to change the world that we live in.

I think what's important here is to [realize that] working in social movements is really about collaboration and it's about everyone having a voice and being able to voice their part of the picture if you will. And if we don't hear from all those different places and if we only privilege the dominant discourse then we're not going to get the change that we want. I know for the world to change to how I want it to change we have to know how sexism and racism, homophobia, classism and all the other problems affect different groups of women. Every time I engage with a group whose background is different than my own, I'm there to learn something about their experience of these questions and they're also there to learn something from me. We have an interchange in which I learn how to think more effectively about women's rights as

human rights and they learn from me more strategies they might use. And for me, that's the basis for successful organizing.

The problem of too many U.S. white Americans in the world is that they are completely apologetic and think they have nothing to offer. Or they're completely arrogant and think they have all the answers. And neither of those is true. We don't have all the answers. Our society is not what I want it to be. We don't have all the answers. But we do have some experience to bring to the table and that's what people want.

I didn't start this work as a person with power in the U.N., I started this work as a person who jumped up and grabbed the mic from those who had power to say something that wasn't being said. So, I know what it's like to be the one who doesn't have the mic, the voiceless. And part of my job now is to help give the mic to people who don't have that access.

SS: How was it struggling to be recognized as a leader? What is the importance of women's leadership? What are the negative stereotypes of women leaders?

CB: I think that women are still not listened to by and large. You will have people saying, Well you're talking women's rights, what does that have to do with human rights? There's a sense in which women's experiences are still discounted as somehow not really fully about the human experience.

I fully believe that something like violence against women affects everybody in society. All of us suffer from the way in which children learn to have disrespect for women at a very young age, whether it's in their personal homes or in the media. Women have a particular need to assert that our leadership is about a different way of being in the world.

SS: What's your vision for the future?

CB: Well my vision for the future is that women will continue to take greater leadership, because I think that our world is reaching a crisis on a number of issues. Whether we're talking about climate change in the environment, peace and security. Women need to be more active in trying to bring our experiences and our energy to these solutions.

I firmly believe that problems like violence against women are very connected to the violence in our globe; whether it's the violence against the earth or violence against other peoples. I feel like it's really the moment where women have to be able to say, You know, these things have to change, and we are one of the constituencies to bring that change about. It is a moment when [the U.N.] agenda can be more integrated, if women are able to bring their strength to it. And I'm hoping the next generation, like you, will really see this possibility and carry through the ideas that many of us have worked to get on the agenda but are not yet solved.

SS: What advice do you have for people who want to professionalize their activism like you have?

CB: Well, I think the first advice I would offer is you have to believe that it's possible to do it and you have to be willing to put yourself wherever you see possibilities to be engaged. And that means not waiting for the perfect job, not waiting for the career to fall into place, but really going to wherever you see action and possibility of making action around something you care about and moving and building from there.

Most of us started this work not as full paid jobs but as volunteers. I think it's important to have something that you can do to support yourself. To be willing to take jobs that you can take at any given moment as you pursue what you're really passionate about. And to believe in yourself that it can happen and you want to be a part of it.

I think that if you really believe and want to do this, you just have to find a place to go. Maybe move. I moved from Washington to New York at one point, because I decided I really wanted to do the work internationally. I didn't want to be dominated by the role of the U.S. government. I didn't have a job in New York — I went on unemployment. I came to New York, I went to the organizations I found interesting and went to their events. I got to know people. And eventually, I worked my way into doing consulting for them. You have to be more creative and you have to believe in yourself and you have to be kind of willing to take an opportunity. Keep clear about what you want to be doing. Keep engaged. And also be realistic of how you will support yourself in that process. It's not that you don't care about those things, but try to find a way that those things don't dominate you so you can go and be where you want to be.