Seeing Both Sides: A Narrative Interview with Chauncey Alexander: Part One

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Chauncey Alexander has been named "Master Builder" of social work - 65 years of it. In public welfare, mental health, community organization, social policy, education, and in professional leadership, he has led the social work profession. Besides all of that, Chauncey is thoughtful, caring, and always driven by an inquiring mind.

-Sally Alexander, 2003

Interviewer's Introduction

Some social work leaders are larger than life when you only know them from a distance, solely from their professional roles. When I mentioned to some of my colleagues that I would be interviewing Chauncey Alexander, there was often a sense of awe, as well as fond recollections from those who knew him. After all, Chauncey was the Executive Director of the National Association of Social Workers from 1969-1982, a time when the profession coalesced and developed in stature and clout, as well as a time of massive social change and turbulence. Chauncey was at the helm when NASW became what it is today: the centralized, efficient, recognized professional association that most social workers take for granted. As we shall hear in these interviews, this involved a lot of hard work and developing and implementing a vision of NASW, which significantly changed the nature of the organization and has endured.

Chauncey held many other leadership positions – directing agencies and regional associations, leading professional organizations, teaching social work at the graduate level—too numerous to include here (see attached summary of resume). He also published many articles, essays, chapters, op-ed pieces, and delivered numerous papers and speeches. Chauncey's involvement in community projects and initiatives as well as his service on agency boards is Herculean. If anyone could be called "Mr. Social Work," it is Chauncey Alexander.

This is the first of three interviews conducted with Chauncey in September of 2002. (The remaining two will be published in future issues of *Reflections*). They were held in Chauncey's home in Southern California, with his wife Sally present. I had never met Chauncey before these interviews, although I was well aware of his leadership of NASW. Chauncey was open and gracious with his time and willingness to share professional and personal stories and perspectives. He had also been weakened by a number of physical ailments and treatments. It was very helpful to have Sally present as she filled in some gaps,

prodded Chauncey with leading questions and directly responded to my questions with her own knowledge and perspectives. In the first interview, we focused on what led up to Chauncey's career as a social worker: his family and community influences, childhood, military service and work in a number of interesting professions before becoming a social worker. The second interview tracks Chauncey's professional career, particularly his work as Director of NASW. The final interview considers Chauncey's later work and affords him the opportunity to reflect on his career, the state of the country and social work's obligations and challenges.

The public figure is often a more complex person than meets the eye. For those who know Chauncey in his leadership roles, who would suspect that he was disruptive at school? That he stole and was a bootlegger during his childhood? He also endured accusations of being a communist and other forms of red-baiting throughout much of his career. As a young man, he worked as a longshoreman, as a replacement for striking workers, which involved some dangerous, potentially violent situations, although these stories sound humorous when described by such an esteemed citizen and professional leader.

A theme that is developed in these interviews is Chauncey's ability to see both sides of an issue and his capacity to effectively work with diverse and disparate people, in a variety of jobs and settings. For example, Chauncey managed to work as a union organizer with the legendary trade union leader Harry Bridges, despite confiding to Bridges that he had previously been a "scab" while working as a longshoreman. While growing up during the Depression, he had friends who were honor students and pals who were involved with liquor running. He was adamantly against the Vietnam War, despite having a son serving in the military and a brother who died in the conflict. Chauncey understood both sides of the tracks and perhaps this helped to sustain his unceasing compassion for those who are socially marginalized and disadvantaged and his strong commitment to quality services and social justice. Chauncey is a straight shooter and a man with integrity; he was not afraid to resign if he felt that the situation called for it. He demonstrated courage in the face of adversity and a strong moral compass. Social workers, our clients and consumers and our society have all benefited from his work. Here is his story as told to me last September.

Interview One

Josh Miller: You've obviously had an extremely illustrious career. I would be interested in hearing about what led up to that career: how did you get involved in social work at all, and particularly social work administration?

Chauncey Alexander: I was raised in Kansas City, Missouri and was there until I was eleven. My father was a banker at first, and then became a used car salesman. And so our life was very much middle class. And, until I was thirteen or fourteen I was quite religious because [my father] taught Sunday school.

JM: What denomination?

CA: Methodist most of the time. My life turned around radically when I was thirteen or fourteen because [we moved] to California, right at the end of the Depression. We were very poor.

JM: Is that why your family moved?

CA: No, we moved because my dad was fairly wealthy, because he had made money in Kansas City and he moved to California for a new life and new interests. For the first few years, things were plentiful but then the

Depression hit and his business went to hell and he came out [to California]. He was very much into medicine and science and developed this healing lamp that was used for helping people in trouble.

Sally: Is that the lamp that didn't cast any shadow?

CA: No, that was the second one - (laughs) - he developed an operating lamp that didn't cast shadows on the operation. He was very much into science and scientific things and medicine.

JM: He invented these lamps?

CA: Yes. We ate the business when the Depression came. Gradually, by selling off pieces of it we managed to continue to live during that time. I had been very religious, as I think most social workers tend to be. When I was nine I had read through the Bible totally to find out what was going on. I rejected religion at about fourteen or fifteen, because there were a number of contradictions that I ran into. One was that they rode one of the ministers out of the church because he had been consorting with a woman. I knew that two or three other men of the church had been consorting with her. She was very popular (laughs). That contradiction made me angry. And I was arguing with my father constantly about religious matters. I was constantly seeing contradictions in religion. I think it was partly connected to the anger that I was feeling about the situation: Tough times, I didn't have what a lot of the other kids had. And I was fighting with my father on various issues at the time that were mostly family matters, so that was a point where I rejected religion entirely and I began to feel more comfortable.

JM: Can I ask you a couple of questions about that?

CA: Of course.

JM: It sounds like you had been deeply religious when you were younger.

CA: Yes.

JM: And that this was also very tied into your father's passionate beliefs.

CA: Very much so.

JM: And then you're saying you became very disillusioned. And the two things you mentioned were that you saw some of the hypocrisy within the church and experienced the Depression, kind of like: "How could this happen?" Was that part of your loss of faith?

CA: Yes. Because there were so many things that I saw where a good and gentle God would not allow such things to happen. So I rejected that and that was an important part of my professional development. The other part of it was that I was always going to be a doctor because my grandfather was a physician and I was always told all my life, when I was young, that I looked like my grandfather and was going to be a doctor. [My grandfather] was a country doctor in a small town in Missouri. I always took subjects around medicine and did so with the intent of being a doctor up until my last year in college, when it became evident that I would never have the economic opportunity to do it. So I shifted to psychology.

JM: So it was really due to economic reasons that you decided not to pursue a medical career.

CA: Yes. But at the same time, I was excited and interested in psychology. I went to Glendale Junior College for two years and then was accepted into UCLA. In the sum-

mer, after I had just graduated from high school, I had a telling experience. My friend Al Smith and I were looking for jobs and we answered a query for people to work on ships. We both applied and were accepted. I was handling the Captain's mess. About the time we shipped out, the 1934 longshoreman strike had hit in San Francisco and we were on the way to San Francisco. We were stranded for two or three days in the harbor. During that time, the crew mutinied and took off to work as longshoremen because there was great pay. There was nothing else for us to do, so we went with them and got hired on there as strike breakers. I remember it well because as I was signing up there was a big box (laughs), next to the table. I looked into the box and there were guns and knives and everything that people were disposing of when they came on the ship (laughs). Al left but I didn't have the opportunity to leave because I didn't have any money, so I stayed there. I had no knowledge of what a strike was anyway, growing up in Glendale. Towards the end of the strike we hired a boat to take us to get out; the whole waterfront was enclosed with barbed wire and you couldn't get through one way or the other unless you were let through and we were strikebreakers. So we hired a boat and it took us to where the ferries would come in and we slipped in a door as the ferry was letting people off so we would merge with the people, to avoid being noticed. But we were picked up, I don't know how they knew, but we were picked up and followed. And so we got on and off streetcars and noticed people were following us, and finally lost them. By that time I was in the company of two or three people who were helpful, they were older men, I was just a young guy so they were very helpful. We stayed a couple of days in San Francisco in a small hotel and finally got the bus back to Glendale. I had all kinds of experiences of manhood during that time.

Sally: Tell us.

CA: One was that there was a guy that was in our crew (they had 18 to a crew and in the morning they would send you out to different places, different ships to load or unload) who was, I think, mentally ill. He was always very hostile to everybody. We were working a job and he starting picking on me and we wound up in a fight. I didn't feel like I had any argument with him and it was a strange experience that I should have to be in a fight with this guy (laughs). So we were fighting down in the hold of the ship with very uneven surfaces. I would slap him hard across the face when he'd get near me and kept him away from me. He was trying to hit me as hard as he could (laughs). So I would just dance around him and keep away from him and at the same time I would try to keep him off of me and finally he got so tired that he just couldn't fight anymore. It was a telling thing for me because I could have demolished him, I think, but didn't. I felt like I shouldn't hurt a person like that.

JM: It sounds like you also learned to restrain yourself, that you didn't want to hurt him, because you saw that he had some problems with his own control.

CA: Yes. I guess that's so. I hadn't thought about that before, but I think that's right. I felt like I could just move in and knock him over and but I didn't do that because he was a sick person.

JM: Here you were, 18 and working as a strikebreaker and working with some pretty tough guys doing really hard work. When you think back on that now, what do you feel you took away from that, that stayed with you in your career, in your life, if anything?

CA: Well, I remember specifically then, going back and entering college at the time

that I felt a great deal of confidence because I had been in a situation with tough guys, although a lot of them were not tough (laughs).

JM: Tough on the surface?

CA: A lot of people were in that strike for economic purposes.

JM: They were desperate?

CA: Yes. For example I was in the ship, we had bunks and the fellow who was in the bunk beneath, next to me, was a young farmer from middle California, and he was down there only because he had no other place to work. On weekends he would slip out and get away somehow, and come back on Mondays and work there all week. Things like that. They were telling. I learned a lot. One of the people took me under his wing, a tall guy who had been an engineer, who was out of work and he protected me a couple of times from people.

JM: I guess what I'm hearing you say is that doing this really took you outside of your usual comfort zone.

CA: Very much.

JM: And that you took away from this a sense of confidence because if you could handle this you could handle other situations.

CA: Yes.

JM: There were men who you learned from, who taught you things.

CA: There were, yes. I think that's true because when I went into college at the time I felt like I had had more life experience than some of the people around me.

JM: I imagine you did.

CA: One of the interesting things about that is that later I was a union organizer for a short while and one of the people I worked for was Harry Bridges.

JM: Wow. Just for the sake of people who don't remember Harry Bridges, say who he was.

CA: He was the head of the ILU. [International Longshoremen Union] He ran the strike....

Sally: That you broke - you were one of the strikebreakers.

CA: (laughs) He didn't know that. And at the time, he would come down to Southern California and we'd have meetings about every two weeks. We'd get plans of what to do and what we were organizing. I started driving Harry to the airport. So one time I told him the story about my working as a strikebreaker. I was very tremulous about it.

JM: Sure.

CA: (laughs) It was a terrible thing to do. But, I told Harry about it and he started laughing. I felt all the fear just wash away (laughs). It was a very telling experience. We had a good relationship after that.

JM: What was he like as a person?

CA: A very down to business kind of guy. He would get right to the things that he needed to. I had this job organizing architects, engineers, chemists, and technicians [for the longshoreman's union]. It was very difficult, and I was organizing Lockheed. On one of my trips taking him to the airport I started telling him about what I was doing and a problem I had. In a matter of a few minutes, he just layed out a plan and an idea of how to

organize these guys. It was special because they were all middle class, upper class workers, a very difficult group to deal with. I was just astounded by what he told me about how to go about it.

JM: I don't want to jump ahead, but as I was reading some of the things you've written and thinking of your career, something that stood out for me was your capacity to see a lot of different sides of things, like Harry Bridges. I mean, here you were a strikebreaker at one point and then you were a union organizer. It sounds like early on, you had to see things from a number of different perspectives.

CA: Well, I learned that, I think.

JM: Do you think that influenced your ability, too, to see the bigger picture and a variety of perspectives?

CA: I guess that did. I think that was always an advantage that I had, to see many sides of things.

JM: The other thing that I remember reading about is how when you were hired by Whitney Young, one of the things that interested him about you was that you had clear plans about things and here you are describing Harry Bridges as somebody who, when you would ask him for advice, gave you very clear plans. I don't know if you see the connection or not.

CA: (laughs) I don't know whether there was a connection there. So much of everything seemed like a learning experience to me.

JM: Chauncey, can I go back a bit to your family and childhood? You talked about your father and what you did and the influence he had and the struggles you had with religion. Where did your mother fit in, while this was going on, because I thought I had read somewhere that she also did a lot of volunteer work and that this had an influence on you.

CA: Well, my mother was a very strong woman and had great influence on our lives. She always gave us an idea of what to do and what not to do and how to do it. She was a farmer's daughter, one of eleven children. She was extremely active in the community. In Glendale she was head of the Salvation Army effort as a volunteer and she was extremely active in the Democratic Party (laughs).

JM: Did that have an influence on your interest in eventually going into human services and social work?

CA: It probably had a great influence. In the first place, she had me working in a lot of these places. Also, my sociology professor at UCLA asked me what I was going to do when I had graduated in '34, and I told him I didn't know. He suggested I apply for a job in social work and I thought that was a good idea so I went down and I went to the welfare office for a job. I met this very nice woman who interviewed me and then said that she didn't think I belonged in social work (laughs). She didn't think I should be in social work, at least at that time, because all of my jobs were in industry and I didn't have any experience with people. I went home and was really depressed and my mother asked me about it. So she said, "You go down and see the supervisor" (whom she knew). So I went down and met him and he talked about everything except the thing I was interested in for about a half an hour, told me all the ways he was doing good. Then he asked me what I was interested in, and I said I was interested in the job over at the welfare office. So he picked up the phone and called them and I went over and saw the same woman and she

welcomed me with open arms. She said that she thought she had a very good job for me (laughs).

JM: What did you make in her change of stance about your suitability for social work?

CA: I learned a lot about politics (laughs).

JM: (laughs) It sounds like it. So before we leave your youth...I'm interested in this because people know you as an adult...but as a child, what kind of person were you?

CA: Oh gosh, I'm not sure I know (laughs).

JM: (laughs) Did you have lots of friends?

CA: Yes.

JM: Were you a good student?

CA: I was a good student from one standpoint and a bad student from another. I was always in trouble.

JM: Really?

CA: Always.

Sally: He had red hair.

JM: Does that explain it? (laughs)

CA: Yes. In the first place, I went through the first five grades in Missouri without being able to see. The way I handled that was I would walk up to put paper in the wastebasket and then I would read everything I could on the board and then go back to my seat. It wasn't until I came to California that they examined my eyes and gave me glasses.

JM: Is that why you were getting into trouble?

CA: That was probably some of it. It finally got so bad that every Friday, I would have to come to the teacher and she would give me a note as to whether or not I had been good enough during the week to go to the show on Saturday (laughs). That was their way of handling it.

JM: It wasn't like you were getting into fights with kids or you were not listening or not doing your work...

CA: No, I was just pestering everybody and just making it difficult, I guess, for the teacher to teach. And asking questions and raising my hand and doing all kinds of things like that. I was a fast learner.

JM: You were saying you were a fast learner, do you think that was part of why you were getting into trouble, that you were sometimes just getting bored with things and you were in a sense working at a faster pace than the teacher and perhaps the class?

CA: Yes, yes, I do remember being bored. It wasn't until the time I got in college that I felt challenged by a subject, and then that was delightful.

Sally: One of the stories that fascinated me was his friendship with two different kinds of people. He had friends who were always getting in trouble and he had friends that were good guys. A couple of his friends have ended up in jail...tell him a little bit about that.

This is during the time of "prohibition."

CA: This was '30 to '34. We were very poor at that time.

JM: In Glendale?

CA: It was a middle class town, but everybody was poor.

JM: That's interesting.

CA: Yes and I wore one pair of pants to school for the entire year. Every night I pressed those pants. And they were red and I only had them because my aunt bought them for me. I hated them because they were red (laughs). That was the type of problem we had and we always had something to eat because Mom would always arrange it some way. So I felt I had an understanding of poverty.

Sally: So how did you make money in Prohibition? Come on, tell the story.

CA: (laughs) Well, one of the things that I did the last couple years of high school was I and the minister's son were bootleggers for the high school. The [professional] bootleggers rented a house three or four blocks away and would pull in there at night with their trucks and then would deliver it somewhere. So we got to stealing the liquor and selling it to the...

JM: Stealing their liquor?

CA: Yes, stealing their liquor.

JM: Wasn't that a bit dangerous?

CA: Mm-hmm (laughs).

Sally: Yes (laughs).

JM: Wasn't that taking a bit of a risk?

CA: Yes. The last two times that we stole anything from them, they heard us, came out, and shot at us as we were loping across the field. We sold the liquor to the kids at lunchtime. We had a regular supply operation, some of the kids in the school would let us know that somebody was producing wine at their house; so we would go and steal the wine and then sell it at school. This ended when we heard about a fellow that was making wine in his garage and we stole a huge, regular size barrel full of wine. It must have weighed a couple of hundred pounds because we couldn't carry it.

I never told anyone about this. We put it on the end of the car and balanced it there, and then I was on one running board and one of the other guys was on the other running board, holding it on there. So we took off and it was just about slipping away from us so we stopped under a light. The police rolled up next to us and asked us what we were doing. Then they saw the wine. So they took us to the police station and questioned us for about three hours. And it turned out that they were talking about a man whose daughter was really the queen of Hoover High. She was a very beautiful girl and he was the bootlegger for the area. They were questioning us because they thought we were working for him. We spent three hours there and finally they turned us loose and kept the barrel.

JM: And that ended your career?

CA: (laughs) And that ended our career.

JM: I assume that your parents didn't know that this was going on.

CA: Oh, yes. The police took us home at about 3:00 in the morning.

Sally: What'd your mother do then?

CA: She was, of course, upset, and so was my dad. There was nothing to say, they knew it was bad business and they didn't want me doing such things and she was a popular woman in town. It didn't help her reputation any.

JM: So it sounds like you were hanging out with two different groups of kids.

CA: The difference was very significant. One group was the school leaders and were economically better, and the other group was economically very poor. The poorer ones went to San Quentin. The wealthier ones were officers in the army and got good positions.

JM: So you could really see very different trajectories for people depending on their class.

CA: Exactly. You certainly could.

JM: And were the people who were from poorer families the ones who were involved in the bootlegging with you?

CA: They were. With the poorer group, our prime objective was to take off and steal food. We would drive around until we saw a house where there was a party going on and then we would come around and work our way around the back, get in the back door or back window or something and steal enough food for all of us.

JM: You must have been awfully hungry.

CA: I don't know whether we were hungry for food; we might have been hungry for something else. But we certainly enjoyed it. And it involved a number of things. It involved the ability to get over high fences; it tested your ability to do these things.

JM: It sounds like it was such a complex time, moving to California at this time in California's history, the depression, people hanging together, some people being well-off, some people suddenly becoming very poor.

CA: Yes.

JM: But it's also interesting to me that it sounds like as an adolescent and also as a young adult that sometimes you would do things on the other sides of the rules, as it were, like, the food and the bootlegging or the strike breaking.

CA: I think it helped my ability to see differences, to see what was happening to people.

JM: To help you realize why people ended up doing what they did?

CA: Why they got in trouble. And why it was wrong to put them in prison.

JM: Did you have any siblings?

CA: Yes. I had two brothers and a sister. My sister is living. My brother, Kenny, who is next to me, was a good athlete too. He got in enough trouble and went to jail.

JM: Was he younger than you?

CA: Yes, he was two years younger.

JM: Same types of activities that you were doing?

CA: Uh-huh. Similar. But in high school we ran with different crowds and he was a good student but he got in difficulty. (Becomes sad and emotional.)

JM: Sometimes these conversations bring up some old, painful things.

CA: Well, he meant a lot to me. I tried to keep him out of jail, but it didn't work and he got out of jail by going into the army. And he went in and went to Hawaii and was there when things struck.

JM: So he was in Pearl Harbor?

CA: Yes. He was at work for a general who was in charge of all of the Asian theater and he had, he had thirty one [missions] over Tokyo. I don't know why the hell I'm crying (laughs).

Sally: It's crazy! He never does this (laughs)!

JM: Well, it sounds like it's a strong feeling you are really getting in touch with as you go through this.

CA: I must be (laughs).

JM: Did Kenny survive the war?

CA: Yes, he did. He later became Lucius Clay's navigator.

JM: Who was Lucius Clay?

CA: Lucius Clay was head of all the armed forces and so he traveled all over the world, and at the latter part of the war, and after the war he left the military and became a consultant. He was in charge of the whole research program for the Air Force and he was on that job when he died of a heart attack. We were always fighting and I was close to him and yet I wasn't.

JM: A complicated relationship?

CA: Yes, and it wasn't until years later when we were both in the army that we kind of got together and, it melded our relationship together.

Sally: And George, tell him about George.

CA: George was about eight or ten years younger. We both took him under our wing and taught him as much as we could and (becomes choked up, laughs) he didn't get into trouble. He later became a pilot in the navy. He was lost in Vietnam. He was flying a couple of officials somewhere and the plane disappeared.

JM: I can't imagine what it was like for you, having to deal with social workers, particularly when you were at NASW, many of whom were against the war and were liberal people in the peace movement, and you lost a brother in the war. It must have been very hard to have that happen.

CA: I was very much against the war. Sally and I were marching; we were doing whatever we could against the war.

Sally: His son was over in Vietnam.

JM: So you had family members who were involved, and yet you were personally against it.

CA: My son was in the Vietnam War and he was a sergeant in the army.

JM: Just going back to WWII, you were not called up?

CA: Actually I was called up seven times. The fellow at our draft board was very angry about the fact that he hadn't been accepted for a job as a social worker, and I was a social worker and I was not in the army, so I got drafted. It was after the Battle of the Bulge, and so they were drafting everybody. I went to the induction center and they noted I was a social worker and referred me to a psychiatrist. I became his assistant.

Sally: Were you not doing at that time psychiatric social work?

CA: Yes, I had been a psychiatric social worker.

JM: So you already had your master's degree?

CA: Yes. I was already out of it, and the psychiatrist was Phil Shapiro, who was a terrific guy, very progressive and from San Francisco. And he and I worked together for a year or so at the induction station. Our job was to keep people out of the military (laughs). And then Phil and I were moved to start the first social work military program for taking care of guys who were coming back.

JM: People who had like shell shock, and what we would now call Post Traumatic Stress Disorder?

CA: Yes. We started the first general services, a psychiatric unit for this. I was a PFC (Private First Class) then and remained a PFC during my entire military career (laughs).

Sally: There's a reason.

CA: Because I had worked as a union organizer.

JM: So that in a sense haunted you in your career in the military?

CA: But that was the way it was.

Sally: How did you get out, to transfer to the Philippines?

CA: I was working hard and we got an officer in there, who had been in the police department and he was going after all the radicals. Plus the fact that we had revolt at the, at the camp. We had a group of about 60 guys who had been on the first islands and nobody could handle them. They were very tough and they came to our place and we were working with them and they precipitated this action, which was a revolt against the fellow who was the head of the camp. Phil Shapiro and I did all kinds of therapy, [including art therapy]. Phil did a statue of Michelangelo's David. This [former police officer] came in and he saw this statue and went up to it and snatched the genitals off of it, saying, "What's this going on here? We can't have this! You'll have all these soldiers masturbating around the place." That was the kind of nut he was (laughs).

JM: A sensitive, compassionate kind of guy.

CA: Yes(laughs). And his actions led to this revolt by the guys, and we were asked about it, and told him exactly what we thought. Some weeks later I got transferred out of the outfit. In five days, I was on my way to the Pacific on a ship going to Japan. While we were on our way peace was declared. So we were detoured and went to the Philippines. And so in the Philippines, I went to the nearest hospital and said, "I'm a psychiatric social worker. Do you need any?" And they said, "Oh yeah" quick, and they got me transferred there real fast. I was there about two or three days and then I was transferred back (laughs). This happened twice, so then I gave up.

JM: But why was that, Chauncey?

CA: Because I had been a union organizer.

JM: Still that same thing.

CA: . . .and I had a record as being a radical, so. . .

JM: So it kind of followed you.

CA: Oh yes.

Sally: Forever.

CA: In many ways it led me (laughs).

JM: It led you and followed you.

Chauncey went on to describe his relationship with the Huckalaps, Filipinos who had fought the Japanese and were now protesting over their job conditions. Chauncey advised the "Hucks," drawing on his experience as a union organizer and advocated within the military on their behalf. He showed me a collection of Filipino woodcuts that depict the Japanese slaughtering Filipinos as well as demonstrations that occurred while Chauncey was there.

TO BE CONTINUED