FRANK J. OMOWALE SATTERWHITE:
A TRANSFORMATIVE LIFE

By Bill Wong

Omowale Satterwhite's life and work are a story of major transformations – from a good student dreaming of a university presidency to becoming an innovative community builder, from a young African American who at first stood on the sidelines of a burgeoning civil rights movement to becoming an activist and political leader of a small black-majority California town winning rights of self-determination.

It is a story that mirrors the growth, development and complexity of America's evolution into a more equitable multicultural society in the latter part of the 20th century and into the 21st century.

Satterwhite is now at a time and place – he's 64 years old and has been president and chief executive officer of the National Community Development Institute (NCDI) and its predecessor Community Development Institute (CDI) in their combined 28-year history – to reflect on his roots and his journey and his dedication to helping underserved communities gain a degree of control over their own destinies, and on lessons he can pass on to the current and future generations of community builders.

"As a capacity builder, what I've learned is that we have to help people no matter what their perspectives are and where their situation is... That's why I ask the bigger questions, to help people see beyond the moment, to think about the possibilities, to think about their own dormant capacity to bring about the social change that they desire, and what it will take in terms of how they have to grow or change or evolve or re-focus to get that job done," he said.

Over the past several decades, NCDI and its predecessor, the Community Development Institute (CDI), have helped numerous organizations and some communities build their capacities to bring about positive social changes. His work in East Palo Alto, California, in the shadows the elite Stanford University, where he got his doctorate degree, encapsulates the different strands of his upbringing, education, awakening, and maturation.

How Satterwhite and NCDI have been able to help organizations and communities find their own way make for a fascinating tale.

The Early Years

It begins in Akron, Ohio, during and after the World War II years. His parents, Arthur and Ethel Satterwhite, moved to Akron, the tire capital of America, from rural Georgia and Alabama during the 1930s, when

the Great American Depression was in full bloom.

His father worked on the assembly line of the Goodrich Tire Co., while his mother cleaned the homes of wealthy white Akron families. His father later became an entrepreneurial independent contractor, and young Omowale remembers accompanying him to construction job sites where the father did plastering work. His mother went on to work in a cafeteria at Akron University.

"We were really very, very poor," Satterwhite recalls. "We grew up in a household that was rooted in an extended family. In our household, there were very small living spaces, but there were usually between 15 and 20 people living in those spaces at one time. My extended family was my mother and her three children, one uncle and his wife and six children, then a grandmother, a grandfather and they actually had three other children, and then two or three or four cousins. This was a typical family setting, and this was true throughout all my years until I left Akron."

His family's struggling circumstances did not deter young Omowale from his education. Indeed, his parents – both only with high school educations and divorced when Omowale was young – and close relatives nurtured Omowale and his older brother and sister to do well in school.

"There was this element of always having to learn and grow," Satterwhite said. "It was both family and non-related extended family -- the 'village' -- that raised the challenge. I just knew that it was my responsibility to go to college."

The Middle and High School Years

Young Omowale did well in middle school. "Once I got into middle school, my academic engine was revved from what was happening in the school setting itself," he said.

He did homework three or four hours a night. His favorite subject was math; his least favorites were chemistry and physics.

In high school, he was considered a classroom leader because he was a very good student, but wasn't considered a school leader in the sense of being a student council officer, editor of the newspaper, or star athlete. He remembers ranking fourth or fifth academically in his senior year. Fellow students chose him as "The Most Likely to Succeed." He was one of a small number of African Americans in the college-prep track in high school.

It was in his high school years that the Urban League of Akron took a special interest in Omowale. He won the Urban League's Youth of the Year award in his senior year.

An Urban League member who had graduated from Howard University Medical School escorted Omowale to the Howard campus in Washington, D.C., for a visit. "(That) influenced me to go to Howard rather than the local (Akron) university."

Several black teachers in middle and high school also took a special interest in Omowale. "It was this extended support group that also had a really significant influence on my going to college," he said.

White teachers too helped steer Omowale toward college. "They gave me opportunities to excel, to demonstrate my academic ability and to challenge and support me in my work. I could think of a half dozen black and white teachers over the course of my elementary, middle and high school years who played a big role."

Howard & Race Consciousness

His undergraduate years at Howard in the early 1960s were critical to young Omowale's multifaceted development. For one thing, his race consciousness was awakened at Howard, a largely African American university. For another, a beginning career path began to clarify.

Growing up in Akron, he personally experienced a number of overt racial tensions that existed between whites and blacks in his school years. "I figured out how to live in both worlds," he said.

He had white friends, and he had black friends. Rarely did they mingle. He studied with and went on field trips with white students. The main reason was that these activities were largely for college-prep students, the vast majority of whom were white.

His middle and high school social life was different. That's when he hung out with African Americans. "In the hallways between classes, during the lunch hour, at the athletic events, at the school events, dances, I was always with my peers and these were invariably other black students."

A white school official noticed Omowale's socializing pattern. "The counselor called me in and admonished me for hanging out with the black students because that might be a bad influence on me. I was very cordial. I listened, I said thank you. And then I went on and did what I always had done. I hung out with the kids that were a part of my life."

Whenever black-white tensions cropped up, he didn't necessarily choose either side. "I watched this kind of racial dynamic unfold in high school and just observed it from the side and consciously made efforts to fit into both worlds," he said.

Young Omowale wasn't immune to the racial divide. Living near Akron University, he remembers an African American sports star who also participated in ROTC at the university. The highest ROTC rank this star athlete could achieve was squad sergeant, a rather low rank in Satterwhite's estimation. That told him something of the difficulties that African American men, even high-achieving ones, had in breaking racial barriers.

His own experience as a Howard freshman enrolled in its ROTC program began to raise his racial consciousness. He noticed that up the command chain of Howard's ROTC, all the lead officers were African Americans.

"It was the Howard experience beginning with that ROTC in the very first week that caused me to realize that black people can be independent, can function, can make a difference, can do their own thing, and can be self-determining. It was in that space that I began to explore these questions even though at that time I wasn't aware what was going on in my mind. I distinctly remember that, "Wow, these people are all black! Isn't that cool!"

At Howard, Omowale was a member of the NAACP, his first affiliation with an organization dedicated to working on civil rights issues.

Howard & A Career Path

Satterwhite's love of math continued at Howard. Initially, it was his major area of study and his minor area of concentration was teaching. Later, he decided to concentrate on education and completed a course of study to qualify as a teacher at the kindergarten-through-12th grade level. He student-taught at both elementary and secondary levels. "I was committed to that," he said.

An influential mentor was Howard's vice president for student affairs, who urged Satterwhite to aim toward student personnel work at a university level. He arranged for Satterwhite to study at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, Illinois, for his master's degree in college administration with a focus on college student personnel work.

That got him thinking about his future career. "Rather than teach or try to influence at the public school level, I decided to try to teach and influence at the university level in a predominately black college like Howard," Satterwhite said.

The Graduate Years: A Growing Race Consciousness

The two years he spent studying for a master's degree at Southern Illinois solidified his desire to work at a university level, but he had honed his target to becoming a president of a predominantly black college.

Satterwhite's evolving race consciousness got further exposure in Carbondale, not too far from the well-publicized racial tensions between white and black people in Cairo, Illinois.

One incident at Southern Illinois deepened Satterwhite's racial consciousness. He worked in the dean's office as part of his master's program in student personnel work. The dean's office had to resolve a delicate racially-charged situation.

The incident involved a white football coach kicking and jumping on a black football player. The player objected, while the coach said coaches have a right to do anything they wanted to players.

The player approached Satterwhite for help. Satterwhite took the issue to his supervisor and advocated on behalf of the player, who faced suspension for fighting back against the coach.

"My supervisor said kicking people is wrong," Satterwhite recounts. "That was probably the first time I actually stood up for racial equity in an institutional setting. I actually pushed back. The student left the football team, but he didn't leave school. But it was the first time that I was willing to take action to resolve an issue about racial equity and injustice."

When he got to Stanford in 1967 to pursue a Ph.D. in the School of Education, great social, political and cultural forces were coursing through the American landscape. The civil-rights, anti-Vietnam War, and counter-cultural movements were heating up on campuses and communities. Satterwhite landed in the middle of some of the San Francisco Bay Area's most virulent political, racial and cultural storms.

"When I came to Stanford (in 1967), I was not a political activist," he recalls. "I was watching the dynamics that were going on in the country called the Black Power Movement. I wasn't *of* it or *in* it."

During his orientation week at Stanford, he started to be "in it" in the form of a meeting of the Black Student Union, which was active in East Palo Alto, the largely African American unincorporated community adjacent to the mostly white upscale city of Palo Alto, where Stanford is a major presence. "I rolled up my sleeves with lots of other black students and went into East Palo Alto."

He tutored at an East Palo Alto high school and even became the leader of the Stanford student-tutoring program at this high school. His activism grew at Stanford. At a university-wide gathering following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Satterwhite grabbed the microphone from the university president. "We made our demands and confronted the university," he said.

"By the end of '68, I'd become politicized and radicalized and very angry, as one often becomes when one comes into the consciousness of oneself and one's duty and responsibility to struggle for justice and equity in the world."

His going to a Black Power conference in Philadelphia in the fall of 1968 "radicalized me," he said. "I came out of that angry and hateful and radical and destined to work in the community on behalf of black issues... As I became radicalized, I read every book that I could get my hands on. I read about politics and struggle and what was going on in Africa and China and third-world liberation struggles that were going on all over the world."

From Academia to Activism

Satterwhite completed his Ph.D. coursework at Stanford in 1969, but hadn't yet finished his thesis document. Meanwhile, he continued his activism in East Palo Alto as part of that community's Nairobi movement – an Afro-centric cultural and education program that included schools for pre-schoolers through the college years.

He also got a job as assistant director of a regional office of the College Entrance Examination Board, giving him a budget to "travel all over the country visiting people and places to learn about and assist people working to solve social problems in the black community."

All of his political work diverted his attention from finishing his Ph.D. thesis paper. Suddenly, a job offer came from Oberlin College in Ohio to establish its first black studies program. He took it, but returned to Stanford two years later to resume writing his thesis. He learned at Oberlin that "the politics of working in a university is as fierce as the politics of working in the community."

About six months before he was headed to Oberlin, Howard University offered Satterwhite a job that could lead to him becoming vice president of the student services division. He turned that offer down. "I knew that I was making my life choice because by then, I knew I didn't want to be a president and that I didn't want to go into a university," he said.

This decision marked a turn in the career road for Satterwhite. That road now headed back to East Palo Alto, this time to be the deputy superintendent of the school district. "I told them I didn't know anything about running a school district. The community members said, "Well, nobody else does. You were trained to work in the public schools. So why don't you do this for us?" He added, "This was a way to step up to the plate, not be selfish and honor my duty to respond to the community's voice. At the same time I could position myself to grow and develop a new role."

East Palo Alto: The School District Years

Satterwhite was the number two decision-maker in the East Palo Alto school district for almost four years. He assisted the superintendent to implement a "community family" curriculum, a partnership between the school and community with an emphasis on Afro-centric education "to build esteem as well as to build skills." At the time, the student population of East Palo Alto was about 80 percent African American.

During this time, with a new curriculum, student performance scores "climbed steadily, but not significantly," Satterwhite said.

One lesson learned, he said, was that having the right philosophy and approach were only part of the struggle. You also need quality middle managers to carry out the vision and mission. Not all the middle managers – essentially, the school principals – subscribed to the curricular model advanced by the superintendent and Satterwhite.

One innovation was a team-teaching approach. Instead of one teacher and, say, 30 students, the "community family" curriculum called for four teachers responsible for 125 students in a "quasi-ungraded situation" with an Afro-centric self-esteem building focus. Parent participation was high, Satterwhite said.

Roots of Community Development Institute

His East Palo Alto school administration experience highlighted Satterwhite's growing leadership role. "It became clear to me that I needed to take my own independent path and frame my own thinking around what I would be able to do to be a mechanism for social change that I could make a solid contribution to and make a difference in their life," he said.

But the time spent as a school district leader exhausted him. Her took a break and just rested. And he took time to finish writing his Ph.D. thesis on what a black curriculum ought to be in a university.

Then he volunteered at Nairobi High School in East Palo Alto, and established a master's degree program for an entity called Institute for the Study of Community Economic Development (ISCED), a University Without Walls masters program for the executive staff of community development corporations. Foundations were funding these community development corporations, but there was no academic track for their leaders to get academic degrees. That was the purpose of the master's program. But his work ended abruptly when its funding was cut off.

The Community Development Institute was founded in 1979 as the community service division of ISCED. After ISCED lost its funding, Satterwhite incorporated CDI in 1982. The first major community project of ISCED and CDI was the incorporation of East Palo Alto to become a city. That occurred in 1983, and Satterwhite was the staff organizer who brought that about.

Along the way, Satterwhite thought about how struggling black communities gained a degree of power and control over their destinies and how they could become more viable.

"I started out by assuming that if we educated the race, that the race would free itself from white domination. This was in the late 1960s and early 1970's. That's when I got involved in East Palo Alto as an assistant to the superintendent of public schools. Then it occurred to me that education was not enough to free the race.

"We had to also have political self-determination. That's when I was elected to serve on the East Palo Alto Municipal Council and was actively involved in the community control movement in public education.

"A few years later, it occurred to me that being educated and having political self-determination are necessary, but not sufficient. You also have to have economic self-reliance in order to free yourself. So I began looking at community economic development.

"Eventually I discovered that even more fundamental than people getting educated or having political self-determination or economic self-reliance was having an infrastructure that allows you to lead, govern, educate and provide for yourselves.

"The institutions in our community were failing. When you look at a viable community, the institutions are strong, not just the public agencies being responsive to wealth but the social infrastructure. The networks were strong and viable and stable and self-perpetuating.

"In our communities, the reverse was true. I decided by the late 1970s that to free our people, we had to build the capacity of the leaders and the institutions so that they can lead, govern, educate and provide."

Thus, the roots of the Community Development Institute's mission formed.

East Palo Alto: The Incorporation Fight

As far back as 1919, residents of East Palo Alto, all white at the time, wanted to set up their own political jurisdiction. In the 1960s, when residents were predominantly black, there was a referendum to

rename East Palo Alto to Nairobi. That referendum lost by a wide margin.

Once he got to Stanford and became active in East Palo Alto, Satterwhite heard activists talk about their desire to incorporate the town. Even while serving as a school-district leader, he won a seat in 1972 on the municipal council, East Palo Alto's chief governing body. In his campaign, he supported incorporation, a position opposed by other interest groups and powerful individuals.

In 1976, Satterwhite chose not to run again for the municipal council. This was also when he become exhausted from his school district service. But a couple of years later, he plunged back into the incorporation battle, this time chairing an independent incorporation committee, while at the same time holding down the presidency of the CDI.

A fierce political battle ensued and incorporation lost in 1981, but two years later, it won. Both votes were close – less than a twenty-five vote loss in the first election and twenty-five vote win in the second election. East Palo Alto officially became a city on its own in 1983, and Satterwhite won a seat on the newly incorporated city's chief governing body, the city council. He served two years and didn't run again. "I was tired. I didn't want to do it any more," he said.

Satterwhite said East Palo Alto voters chose incorporation to control the police, resources, land-use decisions, and municipal services. One valuable lesson he learned from that grueling political battle was that one doesn't need everyone to support you, just 50 percent plus one vote. Another lesson was the need to focus on the end goal. A third was the importance of data. "The learning or what we today call 'knowledge transfer' was really, really critical," he said.

Going Independent

Politics being what they are, the financial support of CDI under Satterwhite's leadership was threatened because of Satterwhite's pro-incorporation advocacy. He realized that being funder-dependent left CDI vulnerable.

"It was at that point that it was clear to me that I needed to generate an independent source of income. Up to that point, I still hadn't become a full-time consultant, but I was nearing it. All my consulting at that point was just to put money into balancing the budget at CDI. From that point forward, it became a major reason why I now began to do the consulting," he said.

From about 1986 to 1999, CDI grew more independent of traditional funders like foundations. From a third to a half of CDI's revenues came from independent consulting services.

"Generating an independent stream of revenue as an intentional activity became primary in my work," he said. "By then I had started doing enough consulting so that I didn't have to figure out where I was going to get this independent revenue from. What I had to do was go ahead and roll up my sleeves and make this consulting thing work."

His Niche and Methodology

Satterwhite filled a niche – working almost exclusively with grassroots nonprofit social-justice or environmental-justice or social-service organizations, all trying to effect positive social changes.

Very few consultants were doing this kind of work in the way that Satterwhite was doing it, not as an oracle from on high, but someone who encouraged organizational leaders to explore and exploit their own strengths so their own capacities would grow to lead and catalyze change.

He explains his methodology thusly: "You go, you listen and you create a space for people to set their own agenda, have their own conversations and you do exceptional work prepping for the dialogue, facilitating the dialogue, documenting it, and staffing the whole process so that people only have to show up and do their best thinking.

"If you want to empower people, then you have to create a space for them to make the choices about the journey that they're going take. If you want to be conscious of the principle of equity, then the consultant can't drive the process."

Satterwhite added, "Groups came to me because I began to grow this reputation and because the word was getting around among the social-justice groups, this is a consultant that can be a resource that won't show up with an attitude or with all the airs that mainstream consultants have when they work in communities of color or with grassroots organizations."

By 1999, CDI under Satterwhite's leadership had worked with more than 1,000 organizations in approximately 80 cities in 35 states.

National Community Development Institute

In 1998, Satterwhite received a two-year $750,000 capacity-building grant from the Packard Foundation. He decided to use the funds to establish a separate entity called the National Community Development Institute and establish it in Oakland, California, "because there was at the time so many national organizations in Oakland that do something around community change."

After hiring a new president, he withdrew from CDI in East Palo Alto and concentrated on getting the new NCDI off the ground in Oakland. Its mission was straightforward – build capacity for social change in communities of color.

"My logic was, and it had been for years, that the quality of life in the community is a function of the capacity of its social institutions to provide basic goods and services and to address the common good. In each community where the institutions were viable and strong, the community thrived. The communities where institutions were weak or unstable, communities didn't thrive."

NCDI has a three-program structure – education and training, organizational services, and community building. Its portfolio has expanded from working with individual nonprofit groups to providing technical support to peer organizations and working on large community initiatives.

It currently has a staff of 10 in Oakland, four in Detroit and four more in Indianapolis. The staff is basically funded by project work in those different sites.

A Lifetime of Lessons Learned

In thinking back on his life and work, Satterwhite cited several lessons learned. They are, in his own words:

- To do the work that we had to do, you have to genuinely believe that a community or an organization has the capacity to lead, govern, educate and provide for itself, be self-sustaining and self-determining; to operate effectively and efficiently and to have impact. You have to genuinely believe there's a dormant capacity in the places where I go that, if aroused, will enable people to fish for themselves. That's the fundamental thing. If you don't believe that, then you'll give them a fish.
- White supremacy is alive and kicking. A lot of the oppression and the social conditions that we find in communities of color are actually derived from a set of historic relationships to white power and white privilege.
- On the other hand, in our communities, both within and across ethnic groups, we are eating each other alive. While it's okay to look externally and say if there was no racism or if there wasn't this outside force, we wouldn't be having all these problems. Well, the truth is that many negative things are happening in communities of color that have taken on a life of their own. You have to appreciate that the dynamics that are creating the negative conditions in communities of color are both internal and external.
- Think of a center circle and then a series of unconnected circles on the outside. In every social dimension in this country, there's somebody in the center with privilege and somebody on the outside without privilege, and the people on the outside are not monolithic. I probably encounter people incidentally in the inner circle because of the nature of the work, but I find

myself intentionally encountering people in the outer circles. There's some truth in the need to connect the two circles. What I've learned is that we have to help people no matter what their perspectives are and where their circle is. That's why I ask the bigger questions, to see beyond the moment, to think about the possibilities, to think about their own dormant capacity to bring about the social change that they desire, and what it will take in terms of how they have to grow or change or evolve or re-focus to get that job done.

- There are power and self-interest dynamics going on where we work, and you have to honor them all, but you have to try to help people step out of the moment and see the bigger picture.
- Organizations need to be learning organizations. People stay stuck in the past. They need to be more entrepreneurial. Most of the groups I know talk about wanting social change, and they have their hands out waiting for the next foundation grant. There's something wrong with that picture.
- People don't get along. There's a lot of stuff going on, but because they don't get along, they can't get to the problems. So we help people structure an organizational culture where everybody's voice is heard, where people build trusting and personal relationships.
- Lastly, I'm 64 years old. Everybody has to have a succession strategy and pipeline strategy. We have to get younger people into the process and move over, and we have to have an orderly way of making that happen.

Succession Strategy

NCDI has a succession strategy to fill Satterwhite's chief executive officer role, once he chooses to step down. "By the end of the year, I will transition out of being the president and will assume the role of founder and senior advisor," he said.

The plan is for NCDI's executive vice president to become president by the end of 2007 and take over full control of NCDI.