

*Civil Rights History Project*  
*Interview completed by the Southern Oral History Program*  
*under contract to the*  
*Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History & Culture*  
*and the Library of Congress, 2011*

Interviewee: Mr. William Saunders

Interview Date: June 9, 2011

Location: Offices of Committee on Better Racial Assurance [COBRA], Human Services Agency, 3962 Rivers Avenue, North Charleston, South Carolina, where Mr. Saunders is founder/CEO

Interviewer: Professor Kerry Taylor, Ph.D., Department of History, The Citadel

Videographer: John Bishop

Length: 1:23:43

Special Notes: Professor Taylor, an alumnus of UNC-Chapel Hill and the Southern Oral History Program, kindly offered to conduct this interview on account of his several years of close acquaintanceship with Mr. Saunders. Joseph Mosnier, Ph.D., Civil Rights History Project manager and lead interviewer, was present as an observer.

John Bishop: Okay, it's rolling. Can we just have everyone be quiet for about fifteen seconds just to get the room tone? [Pause] [Sounds of birds singing] Okay, that's the end of room tone.

Joe Mosnier: My name is Joe Mosnier of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I'm in North Charleston, South Carolina, with John Bishop, our videographer, on Thursday, June 9, 2011. We are here to do an oral history interview for the Civil Rights History Project, which is a joint undertaking of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture and the Library of Congress.

Um, our interview today will be conducted by Professor Kerry Taylor of the Department of History at The Citadel, um, here in Charleston, and we're delighted to have Kerry with us, um, to contribute. Um, we are here today to interview Mr. William Saunders. And with that, I think, Kerry, I will turn it over to you. Thank you.

Kerry Taylor: Very good. Mr. Saunders, to start us out, could you tell us where and when you were born?

William Saunders: I was born in New York City in 1935. I was sent to Johns Island when I was eighteen months old on a train with a tag to be picked up on John Street from the train station, where my grandfather picked me up.

KT: And you were sent from New York, New York City, to Charleston to be with your grandparents?

WS: My grandparents on Johns Island.

KT: Uh-huh.

WS: Charleston just is where the train went.

KT: Right.

WS: My mother was from Johns Island. She moved to New York, and that's where I was born.

KT: Um-hmm. Now, did you have brothers and sisters? Tell me a little bit more about the family.

WS: Well, I had, um, I had – at that point I guess I had three brothers and sisters. Later on, I had another brother that was born.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: But my brothers and sisters was on Johns Island when I came.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: They were living with their father and grandfather – the other side of the family.

KT: Okay. But you were raised by your, uh, your grandparents?

WS: Yeah, my mother's, um, father and mother.

KT: UM-hmm. Tell me a little bit about Johns Island in the 1930s and the 1940s. What kind of a place was it like to grow up?

WS: Well, I think, um, Dr. Kerry, [laughs] looking at it now is so different from looking at it then, because at that time it was not all that nice a place. Now, [laughs] it seems to be a paradise compared to a long time ago. But, you know, we ate everything from the river, from the woods. We grew everything, um, on it, and everybody had access to the land. Um, you'd go to the river. You'd go in the woods to hunt. There were berries and so many things grew wild, nuts. And everything was just, just so good, as I look back over it. It was a good place to grow up.

KT: Um-hmm. Now, were – tell me, your grandparents, uh – your grandfather was a farmer. Is that –?

WS: Yeah, he was a farmer, but he died when I was seven. He died in 1943.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: And I was just eight years old when he died. But he was a farmer. He was really an unusual fellow. Um, he used to survey land – had no formal education, but he used to, um, survey land for other people. And he had something made like an "A" and he could wind that around. Every time he'd do it five or six times, that's an acre, you know. And we got trees – he would plant trees at those places, and those things are still there today. He was really good. You

know, we're just now beginning to get black civil engineers now. For a long time, we had none. But coming from Africa, they had their own things.

KT: And Johns Island, this was predominantly an African American community that you grew up in?

WS: Yes, um, you know, on Johns Island, it's probably at that point about seventy-five or eighty percent, um, African American.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: And, um, one other thing that my grandparents or all the elders would tell young blacks is that you can do anything that you want to, but you've got to stay away from white men, because you can get into trouble. You *can't* win, no matter what you do. You can't win. And we understood that, and so there was very little conflict with them in those times.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: You know, I talked a little bit earlier. It was so much fun. You made your own toys. Um, we used have cans that you put holes in and roll it and make noise like motors and all of that stuff. And we used to work from what they called from "can to can't," from the time you can see in the morning until you can't see at night. Uh, we had no fat people [laughs], because everybody worked. Ate a whole lot of food, but everybody worked very – physical labor, you know, um, folk used to work until sometimes they'd pass out.

KT: Um-hmm. [5:00] From what age would you begin to come to Charleston, or what would bring you to Charleston as a young person?

WS: [Sighs] I, hmm – God, when I, the first time I guess I really came to Charleston is that I got burned. I was supposed to come to Charleston to buy some shoes. My brother was older than me, so I never got any new clothes. Everything I got was, um, what he had. And

then, God made it that my feet grew bigger than his, [laughs] so they had to send me to Charleston to buy some used shoes, you know. Nobody got new shoes. There was a place that used to get old shoes, and they would redo them. And I stood in front of a fire and got my leg on fire, burned myself up pretty bad, and they had to take me to the doctor. And that's how I came to Charleston that first time.

KT: How did your leg catch on fire?

WS: It was in the wintertime, and everybody used to have fire by the road, waiting to get a ride –

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: On a truck or bus that was coming by. And I stood too close to the fire, and it caught my pants on fire and it burned me pretty bad. I've got some bad scars from that.

KT: Now, uh, and then you eventually came to Charleston for high school.

WS: Well, you know, but that was a long time after – I came to Charleston many times before that, because we had a farm.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: And then we started bringing stuff to the market to sell. I used to even sell something called lightwood. I don't know if any of you know what lightwood was, but it's the inner side of a pine tree that died, and you cut it up, and you use it to start fire. It was like what they call 'splinters' now, but you can light it, and it has like oil in it. And I used to cut that and I used to sell those for ten cents a bunch. And I used to bring it to Charleston, ten or fifteen bunches of it, that I had a dollar and twenty cents.

I used to also bring chicken. And we were talking earlier, um, things has changed so much. My grandmother would give me two chickens to bring to the market, and I would get five

dollars for those two chickens. You can imagine – that was very, very expensive. Eggs was a dollar and something a dozen. Nobody that grew chicken ate chicken. You know [laughs], we brought the chicken to the market, you sold it, and then the people that bought it would give you back the, um, the heart, the liver, and all of those stuff. And then, that goes back, and my grandparents then would make a real, uh, stew out of that with black pepper and onion and garlic. And they made it so good, it'd make you eat seven to bad health. [Laughter] I mean, it was really, really good stuff.

KT: Um-hmm. Now, I know that Esau Jenkins was someone who, uh, you know, who you have a long history with and has had a big impact on your life. Do you remember how old you were when you met Esau Jenkins and under what circumstances?

WS: Oh, he was the Sunday School superintendent and the teacher in one of the classes, so I knew him from the time I started going to church, five or six years old.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: And he was also *always* involved in the politics of things. Our school didn't have any, um – you know, no lights or anything. And he had the contract to bring wood to the school, what we used to catch fire with and stuff like that. He also end up with the bomb – excuse me – the bus that when the kids got a chance to go to Burke [High] School, because we couldn't go to the white high school on Johns Island, he entered with a contract to bring, um, kids over to this school.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: But Esau did so many amazing things. He was a businessman. He ran for the Constituent School Board on Johns Island in 1956. There has never been another election held from '56 to '70. [Laughs] They just stopped having elections! Um, that was one of the most –

I'm still trying to find today how you stop having elections in America, but they did. And all they did is, any time somebody wanted off, they just appointed a new person, a new white male, and it just went on.

KT: To keep Esau off the board?

WS: Well, no, but to keep blacks off the board. After I did some studies, and this has been in the last few years, they stopped having elections all over Charleston County –

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: Because they was afraid at that point that blacks were going to get elected to school board. When Stokely Carmichael and some of them – and we're skipping some stuff – but when Stokely Carmichael and them came to Johns Island in 1967, uh, we started making decisions that we wanted some blacks on the school board in District 9. And so, what we did, we told them we wanted three people on the board, we gave them the names of those three people, and we said if you don't do it, then we're going to hold an election. And we'll set it up where we're going to hold a black election, and we'll have a Black School Board and we'll have a White School Board.

So, what they did to avoid that, they appointed one person that we wanted and they appointed Esau Jenkins to that board, from '56 – this was '68. So, they appointed him. And they appointed him for one reason: that Esau Jenkins and I was getting along pretty bad [10:00] at that point, and that was the reason they appointed him.

KT: Yeah.

WS: Esau was one of the founders of SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference] with Dr. King [Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.]. Dr. King stayed on Johns Island with us, my wife

did the cooking and all that stuff, but I was a part of Stokely Carmichael and the Student Nonviolent [Coordinating Committee], like Malcolm X, so those two groups was not mixing.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: And they appointed Esau so Esau and I could have a fight.

KT: Yeah. [Laughs] Yeah. Do you – what were the kinds of things that began to contribute to your political sensibilities as a young person?

WS: Well, I caught so much hell, um, as a young person, um, and having some ambition. I – my grandmother gave me, I think back in probably '49, a couple of acres of land that I could plant for myself. And I was catching the bus, trying to get to – after I graduated from, um, elementary school and went to the ninth grade, um, and trying to do farming. I couldn't even come up with the money to buy lunch and stuff like that. And the kids in Charleston teased us so much, the way that we dressed, the way that we talked. I mean, we were just really outcasts at this high school.

And the second year there, as a sophomore, a group of us got together and decided to volunteer for the Army. And I was sixteen at that time, but they really didn't care like they do today. Um, they let my age be eighteen, [laughs] and I was able to go into the military. Um, I went to Fort Jackson and then – it was one of the most amazing things – to California. Got on a plane and went to Hawaii, took my basic training in Hawaii, and only volunteers could go there. And my suffering – after I look back at it, I suffered more racism in the United States Army than I've suffered any place in my life before or after, and this was at Schofield Barracks in Hawaii, you know.

And we left right from there, went straight to Korea, no vacation, no nothing, went straight to war. And they took us in on an LST [Landing Ship, Tank], where they dropped the

front of it in the water, where you run up on the beach with the guns and bayonets and stuff like that, and that was one of the scariest things. And you and I were talking earlier how that's still – having flashbacks with some of that stuff. But we were about three miles away from fighting anybody. Go ahead.

KT: You confronted more racism in Hawaii than you had encountered in – on Johns Island or in Charleston even?

WS: Hawaii and the military, even in Korea.

KT: Yeah.

WS: The racism was real, real bad in Korea, but – and in Hawaii. And I just realized, later on, it was right after – 1951. They had just really integrated the Army.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: There were four blacks in our company, with one Hispanic, one Indian, and we were the really – and I didn't realize until many years later that, um, all of these people were poor white men, who also had a lot of problems.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: And the only place that they could vent any of those problems was on people like me. So, they had their own problems, reasons, and we had a lot of fights with that.

KT: What kinds of – I mean, do you remember particular instances of –?

WS: Oh, I had physical fights. And, you know, a guy would beat me, but I – [laughing] my grandmother told me I had such a bad temper, and I get real mad. I don't give up, so I don't stop when people say to stop. So, I end up being the one getting in trouble. Um, but they did so many things to, um, the blacks. We had one guy, one of my best friends, who died recently, um,

they made him dig a six by six by six hole. And then the sergeant dropped a dime in it and then made him close it up.

You know, those are the kinds of stuff that we went through. And it's a lot of it, uh, coming back to me more and more now, just having a lot of flashbacks with that.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: Even in Korea in the war, I mean, the – God, my first sergeant, who I didn't know, um, on the frontline, we'd just fought for two days, and I was going up the hill, on top. And he said, "You black son-of-a-bitch, if you come up here, I'll blow your brains out," [laughs] and he had a .45 on me. And I decided after a point – I was carrying a – my rifle was in the hole, and I could roll and get my gun, you know, like you saw in some of the movies. And then I said [laughing], "That .45 will blow a hole straight through you," because I had seen .45s shot people, their whole back out [i.e., blown out]. I went back to my hole and stayed there.

When it was time for us to leave, he sent for me and said that, um – made me lead the whole company out, because, being in front, you get killed first. So, he wanted to make sure that I was in front going out, um, and those kinds of stuff. So, there's a lot of stuff that, um, that we can laugh about, because if you don't, you cry about it. So, but the racism was just really heavy.

And coming back, even into California when we got back as heroes, because I got wounded, and we were there in California, and they start calling out the white soldiers' names and then they called the black soldiers. I never understood that until we got on [15:00], but black and white soldiers couldn't ride in the same train coach across America. So, you had to ride in separate coaches.

And I got into Fort Jackson. I was in the hospital for four months for my wound, so I got paid, got about five hundred dollars, which was a, you know, a monumental amount of money

[laughs] back in those days. And we went into Columbia, South Carolina, and I ran into the Greyhound bus station. My buddy kept the bags, and I ran into the Greyhound bus station. And a cop came to me with his gun pushed down and said, “Boy, what’s wrong with you? You know you don’t belong in here!”

And I never knew that I didn’t belong, um, in a Greyhound bus station, because I’d never left, been off of Johns Island to go through that kind of segregation. Um, I said, “No, Officer, I didn’t know I didn’t belong here. Where do I belong?” And he showed me the back of the bus station where blacks bought their tickets outside. And when the bus comes, whites loaded in the bus, and any seats that are left in the back, we had access to those seats.

And my bitterness, um, really began at that time, really hard. Um, I just didn’t understand it. And I used to call all whites racists at that point, because here are some guys that I was with for a year, and yet not one of them said, “Well, Bill, let me get the ticket for you,” or, “Let him get his ticket.” Nobody. Every one – all of my white friends just dropped their heads. Nobody said anything.

KT: So, they became South Carolinians upon returning to the state?

WS: Yeah. You know, the only place that I’ve ever *really* been an American was basically in Hawaii, a little bit there, and Korea and in Japan. I’ve never been an American in America. I’ve always been a second-class citizen in America.

KT: Tell me about your war wound, your injury.

WS: Well, I stepped on a booby trap on, God, December 26, 1951. It’ll never go away. And one of the really odd things, because I was assistant squad leader, and the snow was almost two feet deep, and the rule was everybody walk in the same – the squad leader walks there, and everybody, fourteen men walk right in that same track. And I was the last man in the thing, and

it went off on me, um, which really – that’s the kind of luck [laughs] I’ve practiced most of my life. And, you know, it hit me, and I went up. It hit my M-1 rifle and busted it in half. And then it was what you call a booby trap trip-flare that had went way up, about fifty feet in the air, and lit up. And that’s how they used to shoot people, because they would show you where you are.

And I laid – I knew I had lost my leg and I felt it was there. And some of the soldiers said, “Well, we want to go get a stretcher for you and take you back.” [Laughs] I said, “No, I’ll walk.” Um, so the medics said there wasn’t nothing wrong with me, because I couldn’t walk if something was wrong. And about four o’clock that morning we were attacked by the Koreans. Um, we fought until about five or six-thirty that morning. And my foot is swollen up so big it’s about to burst open. And the medic said, “Well, we’ll send you down to let them check it.” By the time I got to the aid station, the doctor said, “It’s broken.”

KT: Yeah.

WS: And they put me in a hospital airplane, in a Jeep, then on a hospital airplane, and I went to Japan and spent four months in the hospital there.

KT: And never returned to Korea.

WS: Yeah! After my four months was over, [laughs] went *back* to Korea on the frontline! Uh, they changed the law with – all laws have always changed with me! Uh, anytime you got a broken bone, you went home [laughs] – except they changed the law right at that time. Had nothing to do with me; it’s just my – my luck was like that. I went back to Korea for another two months.

KT: Oh, okay. So, what were your intentions upon returning to South Carolina? What hopes or plans did you have?

WS: Well, again, when I decided – still fighting like I’m doing today. I was about nineteen then, eighteen, nineteen, but I was still trying to be a man and I wanted to do some stuff to prove that I was. So, when I got – they sent me back to, um, Fort Lewis, Washington, to Tacoma, and I went to administrative school. I took typing and all kinds of administrative stuff.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: I end up being company clerk and I was able to make sergeant before I got discharged. I was in charge of sending out people to get promoted, [laughs] so I was in charge of who got, at least got to be eligible to be put in, so I got – made – a lot of friends came back as sergeants. I end up making sergeant down in Fort Lewis.

And what I wanted to do – I felt like I could make a difference. Um, I wanted to be a man, not a black man – it would be years before I got the whole black thing. Um, but I wanted to be a man. I wanted to prove that I was good enough and that I could compete. So, when I came back out of the Army, I joined with Esau Jenkins. We talked about some of that.

But some of the laws that they’re trying to make today with this voter ID, it goes back to that period of time when, um, blacks [20:00] had to read a part of the Constitution to, um, to get, register to vote. So, I used to teach people how to, um, read and write those things. But a lot of the folk that we had from Johns Island you couldn’t teach them to read, but they would memorize the Constitution [laughs] and they would go and take the test and pass it. [Laughs] And then, they would, “God, this old lady reads so well.” [Laughs] But she memorized it the whole time. But, you know, and I did a lot of things at that point just to prove – we had the Progressive Club.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: Where, um, people used to – Esau Jenkins had an adult education school there. So, I got to be business manager of the Progressive Club. Um, and, again, Dr. King came over and stayed with us. This was in the, um, in the '50s.

In 1959, I went to Highlander Research Center, the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee. And, um, they raided the place while I was there, and they, um, arrested Septima Clark. I mean, they really physically abused her and arrested her. She and Guy Carawan was taken off to jail. And they took all of their property that they had – they had said Septima Clark was selling beer – [laughs] under the charge of selling beer, breaking the law. They had beer and sodas and crackers and stuff, and they had it out on a table, and you could get anything you wanted and if you wanted to leave a donation, you could. But they lost all of their property for that.

My bitterness continued, right from the military, continued to build. And I wanted to – they wanted to search all of the cars, and I refused to give them the keys. And, um, Esau Jenkins and, um, I. DeQuincey Newman, they were there. They came and made me give the guy the keys, um, because I was going to make them break it open. Again, I said, “This nonviolent thing is not for me. I’ve got to get out of this.” And I left that '59.

I went back to Highlander again, but I really decided at that point the nonviolent thing, getting beat up for no reason at all, was not going to work for me. And I start searching then, and I heard about Malcolm X and then Stokely Carmichael and some of these folks end up coming to Johns Island to see me.

KT: Had that been your first –?

JB: Can we stop for just a sec?

KT: Oh, sure.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

WS: Got it?

JB: It's start enough to do it, even if it's not really doing it, so [laughs]. It's on; it's back on. We're okay.

KT: Okay. Had that been your first visit to Highlander?

WS: Yeah, 1959.

KT: And what were the circumstances – was it Esau Jenkins who facilitated that? Or how did you get – what was the purpose of the visit?

WS: Esau Jenkins, um, was the one in charge. But what they're doing, to go to Highlander, they had brought people from all over the South just to sit and talk to each other. Because so many of the times, we thought we had the worst problem, and other people had different problems.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: So, I'm meeting with people from Appalachia, um, poor whites that really – the strip mining and all of that stuff. We got a chance to see how poor people were being treated, not black people or Indian, but it was about poor people. It still – it took a while before I got all the way where I needed to go with that, but I started looking at people and started looking at our country as a class system and not a race system. Um, it gets to be race at the bottom, but most of the time it's not racial – it's class.

KT: But that was your first exposure to a larger that was emerging?

WS: Right, with white and black, and everybody from all over the place. [Sounds of sirens begin in background and continue] And Myles Horton, who was the director there, was just a brilliant guy. He was able to work through the union and everything that was changing.

He was a part of change. And he used to say to us, “I’ve got a little problem of my own now,” what he had then. But he said, “You can’t help people to do things. Then you want to tell them what to do. [Laughs] You’ve got to let them do what they think is best after you’ve helped them to get to where they need to start from.” And he did a good job on that.

KT: So, you – but already in 1959, you’re beginning to question the, uh, the, the, at least the nonviolent aspect of the mainstream Civil Rights Movement?

WS: Yeah, and I don’t like the term “nonviolent,” in that sense, because most of us that was in there because you had to be violent or nonviolent, when we believed in nonviolence. We just didn’t believe in people beating you up for nothing. And that’s a diff – but it’s never been cleared for that.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: And I couldn’t take – they came to me, you know, even during some of this stuff. And folk talk about turning your cheek; I only had one cheek, so I couldn’t turn it.

KT: Do you remember discussions with Esau Jenkins about this, you know, this difference in strategies?

WS: Um, somewhat, but he was really, really strong in that area.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: He and Dr. King and all, they really believed. It was not [25:00] a fad or anything. They really believed in that.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: And so, I supported – I did all of the work that they needed done for the nonviolent movement. I just didn’t march. I just didn’t do the other stuff.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: But the paperwork, the food, where we had it on Johns Island, wherever – I did the supportive background stuff for that. But I couldn't go out and get beat up.

We had Fannie Lou Hamer. All of these people came and stayed on Johns Island. Fannie Lou told stories that I was just going through the other day that, um, she was telling us at Progressive Club, that she, uh, would be marching and didn't get beat up as often, because she would say, "Hit me, motherfucker, I'll kill you! Hit me, motherfucker, I'll kill you!" [Laughs] And so, she would just keep on walking around and doing that, and the cop would just look at her and say, "That woman is crazy; ain't messing with that woman." [Laughs] But there were a lot of tactics that folk used not to get beat up.

KT: Um-hmm. What were you doing for work at the time?

WS: I spent – after I got out of the Army at nineteen, I went back to high school and graduated from high school, um, in 1956. And I went to work in a mattress factory and I made mattresses for twenty years. And I wanted at a point to have – at the school, when I went back to school, I took bricklaying, which I wanted as a background trade which I could do. But I wanted a job that folk couldn't come and just fire me. If I was at the Post Office or Navy yard, I could get fired anytime for just being involved in anything racial. Making mattresses, [laughs] there was no reason to get rid of me.

And, you know, my boss, Mr. Julius Weil, I'll never forget him, because I was working for him, and he came to me one day and said, "You are lazy." You know, and I had sort of a small attitude. And he said, "I like you." He said, "Because lazy people come up with an easier way to do stuff." [Laughing] "You know, we used to have," he said – because I started making things that everybody – it'd take two people to carry a mattress back to the truck. I built a thing where we put twenty mattresses on it to take it, you know. [Laughter]

All of this stuff that they used to do, I changed. They ended up making me foreman. And while this stuff was going on, he even put a telephone by my sewing machine, so I had my own private telephone [laughs] during the Movement. So, it was a very interesting thing. And I follow that right now, that lazy people really get a whole lot more done than people just don't care but just like to work, [laughs] you know. If there's another way to do it, I'll find it.

KT: But your boss tolerated your activism?

WS: Yeah, but not just tolerated. Um, I kept educating them about what was going on. And I used to – I've been arrested so many times. Five times I've actually been in jail. I've been in jail because the officer said I didn't dim my lights, and the only lights the car had was dim lights. You know, I've been in jail for mufflers. And a lot of times my boss used to let me take the truck home, um, because cops would be waiting for me when I'd get off from work, and they would, um, they would arrest me for certain things, and I would go to jail.

And that's the thing – I started talking about writing, you know, when I did, went into "Love, Religion, and Politics" [note: his long-in-process memoir/writing project], because I knew at some point I was going to get killed, um, by some of these people. Um, and so, I want people, my kids especially, to know who I was and what my life's about. I'm still writing.

[Laughter]

KT: You begin the "Lowcountry Newsletter." And about when and why did you initiate that project?

WS: There was a guy that's still – and I think the Smithsonian has probably got some stuff on him – Howard Levy. Howard Levy was a captain in the Army, a dermatologist that refused to go to Vietnam, and he was waiting to go to jail. [Someone coughs] He was working with some Campbell's Food folks – Campbell's Food folks in Columbia, and he was putting out

a small paper up there. Um, and he came, we met, and I got him to come to Johns Island. We ran into the white high school, because the black high school that they built in 1951, uh, really had – the books in the library didn't have anything that schools should have. So, we ran into the white high school and took pictures and showed the difference between the black high school and the white high school. And we were able to publish those things. And then, when Howard was going to jail, um, he gave me all of his stuff.

And the American Friends Service [Committee] was helping me at that point, and they were the ones had a [printing] press in North Carolina, and they gave me the press. [Laughs] The press was as big as this room [laughs], uh, 1819 or something, or 1918. It was an old, old press, but we were able to use that, and that's how we were putting it out. We felt that the only way that you can really inform people is to [30:00] be able to give them information.

We had some folk that was close to us, a concerned citizen, one of our members was working at the Navy yard. And we would do the – when we first started, before we had the press, we would do just a mimeograph. And then, he would take the mimeograph to the [laughs] Naval Base, and then he would run off fifty or sixty copies and bring it back that we could distribute in the community. So, um, that's how we got – before we got the press – we were putting out information.

KT: And at this point, your target audience was mostly Johns Island and Wadmalaw Island?

WS: Yeah, District 9, Johns Island and Wadmalaw Island, yes.

KT: Um-hmm. And that was the focus of your organizing?

WS: Yeah, just those two islands. Those were the target for us, the district where our school systems were, and we were the majority in those schools. Um, but, you know, there were

so many things going on politically that we needed to do that we wanted to be a part of. And what we did, when we decided – when Esau Jenkins and them got appointed to that school board, after that, the leaders of Charleston came up with a scam.

It is a scam that they've still got working today. They decided that they're going to put together a consolidated school board. We had eight school boards. They're going to get a consolidated school board and set it on top of those eight school boards. They said that they're going to leave those in place, but this school board was going to be able to manage all of the money, and they're going to do all of the teacher stuff. So, it really took away all of the power. And then, they made it at-large voting, so the whole of Charleston County vote for those nine, and it hasn't changed. This was 1968; it still hasn't changed. You know, everybody got a vote, um, on those, on those, um, members of that school board.

And then, in 1970, they started back having elections for these constituent boards, which began to be more and more powerless as days go. But you've got – just had an election recently, where some people – nobody ran for the board at all, there were vacancies. And I still find that this is the only place in the country that you've got a school system structured the way that it is. And there's no way that anybody could ever do anything to make a difference with the Charleston County school system.

KT: So, you know, I know that, um, for instance, that Millicent Brown and her father with the NAACP were very active in, uh, you know, bringing, uh, you know, some of the desegregation cases that, um, you know, eventually led to the desegregation of the Charleston schools, so I know that the NAACP was very involved in that effort. Um, what role did you play during that time period in this larger question of school desegregation?

WS: Well, during that time with Millicent Brown and them, that was mostly before my time in being involved in that. Um, but the NAACP and most of those black groups before Dr. King had an interest in just certain kids, certain colored kids, going to school with whites. It had nothing to do with the broader scope of all kids going to school. And, again, that's why Dr. King – I mean, the NAACP had such a problem with, uh, with Dr. King, because he was for everybody. He was talking about everybody having access to a good education.

Um, but when the, this *Brown v. Board of Education* – in Charleston, they had two schools, ICS [Immaculate Conception School] and Avery [Avery Normal School], which were structured for the elite black kids, um, and people like me didn't have the access to any of those kind of schools. And when those schools were going out of business, that's when the integration started, but it was not for me. It was for a certain group of folk in Charleston to go to those schools.

And that's why I like the first Supreme Court decision on *desegregation*, where people can go if they wanted to or go to school nearest to them. And then, when they changed it to integration that you *had* to go, that – I was against busing, the same as George Wallace. I had my same – I didn't see people being bused forty miles just so you're integrating something. So, so I made a lot of enemies with the black leaders of Charleston. They really, really hated me. I fought against integration in 1965. Um, I said, "America needed integration, not black people. Um, and America is telling people all over the world that it's doing all these beautiful things for everybody, you know, so we don't need to fight for that." And, um, Esau and all of those folk had a real serious problem with me.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: And they actually believed that if black kids and white kids [35:00] went to the same school, they was going to learn the same way, they would be taught the same. But they were so wrong with that. But, um, again, they beat me up. I ran for the OEO [Office of Economic Opportunity] Commission board in '67, and the black leadership of Charleston, um, took a petition to the governor and said that, um, not to certify me. I won the election, but I had to be certified by the governor, Governor McNair. Now, the black leaders with the NAACP here in Charleston, um, asked him not to certify me, and he didn't.

KT: This was for the Office of Economic Opportunity?

WS: Yeah.

KT: The regional board?

WS: Yeah, the local Charleston County board, and I won. And then after I refused to – they wouldn't certify me – I still went as a member. Um, and there was a black lady, Henrietta Canty, from Georgia. She eventually ran for mayor there. But she came, and I told her at this meeting that I was not certified. And she closed up her book, and Charleston County, I think, was getting a million dollars then for the OEO project. She said, “When you certify him, call me,” and she left.

Um, [laughs] and then, they came to me and said, “Will you go through another election?” I said, “No.” Uh, when they tried some other tactic and it didn't work, then the governor said, “Well, I'm not going to certify anybody anymore.” [Laughs] So, I was able to serve, um, from that.

They got even with Mrs. Canty, too. These folk was really angry with her, and they did the stuff that America does so well. They promoted her, [laughter] so she would never be, she

would never be out in the field anymore to be involved. She got a desk job. But, uh, that was one of those things that really, uh, that folk really saw me as a militant.

KT: Yeah.

WS: But saw me against integration: “How could you be against integration?”

KT: Um-hmm. So, it’s on the issue of, uh, nonviolence, self-defense, also, uh, school integration, you diverge from the mainstream civil rights leaders locally?

WS: Yeah. See, my thing was with Malcolm X, and I meant to say that when we started, that –

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: My thing was about human rights, and I have never gotten past that. Uh, I let folk use me as civil rights, but you have to really have human rights before you can get any damn civil rights. And most people have not gotten there yet. Um, it was going well for a while, but it’s not there anymore.

KT: When did you first become aware of some issues taking place down at the Medical College [of South Carolina in Charleston]?

WS: Again, one of those, um, newsletters that you, that you saw a while ago. We were meeting with some people down there and we saw the condition of some of those women and, uh, some of the other people, some of the black men that was working there from the Island [Johns Island]. And we saw also the, uh, South Carolina, in terms of the, uh – wouldn’t pay minimum wage, um, those kinds of stuff. So, we started to look for a reason to help.

And when they fired, I think it was five black nurses, uh, for not doing what, uh, they knew they were not supposed to do, but this nurse wanted them to do, they fired them. They came to me, and I was able to help them get reinstated. Um, there was guy named Reginald

Barrett. He was on the Civil Rights Commission – excuse me – and he was able to get them reinstated. And then, we felt at a point that we could really, um – these five nurses were so good that they stood up, and there were so many people there that didn't have the guts to stand up, so that's when we decided that we wanted to see if we could organize them.

And we started organizing at Mr. Barrett's house. We told the five that was fired, and there was six of them altogether, would they bring six people, and they brought six people. The next week we asked them, "Would y'all twelve bring twelve?" And they did, until we couldn't meet at his house anymore. We started meeting at this factory, cigar factory, the D.P.O. Hall [note: a union hall and social hall for tobacco workers], and we started that. And we got to the point that we organized – God, we had about three hundred people, um, in that organization at that point.

KT: And they came together for what reason? What was the pretext of their, uh – these meetings?

WS: Well, money, but also respect.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: And they had – in the [Medical College] Hospital, they had places where, you know, blacks ate their lunch in the boiler room and all of those kinds of stuff, so they really wanted the respect. But, also, there were no job classifications. You would find some place where a nurse's aide was making more than a, um, nurse, a practical, a licensed practical nurse. It depends on whether the supervisor likes you or not.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: The county – I mean, the state had no job description or any of those things. So, we wanted to make sure that all of those things, um, was changed.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: And that people were treated like people. Um, and that was a real, real [40:00] hard thing for a lot of folk to understand. And I think that you would find that, again, that the – that group of blacks that I was talking about that had a problem with me never got involved with this organizing. Um, Esau Jenkins came in almost at the end of it.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: He did a lot of work in it, coming down to the end of it, in helping out. They would not – the NAACP did not participate. None of those folks would participate in any of that.

KT: Because –?

WS: Mostly because of me, [laughs] you know. Um, most folk understand me. I got a lot of enemies and I keep telling people I made them all myself. You know, I mean, people come at me almost all the time, went at people, or went at them, in a way that they – it caused them to be angry at me.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: Um, and that's a – they use it as an excuse that they didn't like the tactics or any of those kinds of things, but mostly it was about me and the militancy. And the other person that was – we had some leaders that – one of the leaders of this was also a Black Muslim, Otis Robinson, who was the leader of the Muslims here. And he was really an eloquent speaker and he was tall – he could really do stuff with people.

Um, the night that Dr. King got killed, I mean, he talked to those folk really about – because we had about two hundred people in the union hall – and he instructed them about going home, staying out of trouble, you could get killed tonight because of what's going to be going on. Um, and they did – all of the stuff that we needed, he did.

When, um, the president of the [Medical College] Hospital sent out a notice that he would never do anything, um, for these people because they, uh, they're not important to the Hospital, you know, "We don't even need them." And, uh, they came back; they were so hurt and down. And Otis told them that, "You *are* somebody." Jesse Jackson took it later on. But he said, "You *are* somebody. Although you don't operate on people and all this stuff, but you're with the patient twenty-four hours a day. You clean them, you feed them, you talk to them. You are *with* them. You *are* somebody. You *are* somebody." And that's how that whole thing, that "I am somebody," um, came out of that. And Otis Robinson did that.

KT: That was Otis Robinson's –?

WS: Otis Robinson. That was him. He did that. He really fired up folk in terms of being proud of themselves –

KT: Yeah.

WS: The kind of job that they did. It didn't matter, um, that they weren't operating. He would tell them, "The surgeon be with the guy ten minutes. You're with him twenty-four hours a day. Now, who's the most important to this person?" So, that's how we got to the point with that hospital worker. And we finally, you know – they forced the issue that we had to call in a union, and SCLC came in.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: But when they came in, we were – the people were organized. Um, all they did, they started working with the people in the community and the powers to be. But we had the people together.

KT: But for several months a group of, uh, mostly black women and other low-wage hospital workers, as well as their community supporters, had been meeting at the D.P.O. Hall.

WS: Yeah. And, you know, and people keep saying “mostly women,” but there were a lot of men, the orderlies and the cooks and –

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: And all of these folks. They were men. This thing about women being this majority and did all of this stuff – didn’t start until 1980-something, [laughs] but it was a complete community effort. I got arrested with them the first night at that hospital. And they put us – you all were taking earlier – they put us in a cell with no windows, no – you know, just this one door. And I was in there with some guys, and I’m claustrophobic, scared, you know, and I’m looking – and they’re looking at me as the leader. And I was really out of it.

And I had guys that was with me for two years almost – started singing. And then someone started telling jokes, and they were just funny. People started laughing and stuff. And they came and took us out of that cell and put us in a lit-up cell. And it was one of those things that really impressed me, in terms of there is something that all of us could do, that if you wait your turn [laughs] –

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: There is something.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: Because I was handicapped, totally handicapped, [car horn sounds] with that, you know.

And I wanted to go back to the workers, because when we had some white workers come to join the union, and the, um, the blacks were afraid of them, because they thought of them as being spies.

KT: Right.

WS: And we, um, you know, we knew they weren't spies, because we knew who the spies were. They were black! [Laughs] We had them covered; we were dealing with them. But when these whites went back to work, they didn't have a job anymore. And we never saw them anymore, because the spies told who they were and what they were.

And when I looked at it again, Kerry, it was so hard for me that I missed it, because those folk had special restrooms, they had a lounge, and all of that stuff [45:00] in the [Medical College] Hospital, but they weren't making any money. They couldn't do anything for their families that the other workers couldn't do. They were making the same money, except given these special privileges, and so these two groups would be against each other.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: And I started really taking a close look at this class system of our government.

KT: At what point did SCLC enter into the picture?

WS: Along with – they came – the union and SCLC came together.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: They came about in January or sometime in '69, January or February of '69.

KT: And this is Local 1199 who –

WS: Came out of New York.

KT: They were then based in New York.

WS: Right. They came, but they were working hand-in-hand in New York with SCLC.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: Dr. King was involved in some of those kinds of stuff. And they had some very powerful people.

KT: Yeah.

WS: Andy Young got really, um, involved in it.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: Again, he's a brilliant guy. We have some difference of opinion today about what happened with that strike, but, um, but he did a lot of stuff. Um, you know, so many of us, the folk that went to jail, he did good stuff to help people to want to go to jail.

Um, I had a lot of young blacks – what I did that it was so important for me that we don't visit much, but I found so many people that was in trouble before, young black males I'm talking about right now. So, we had them as guards for the hospital workers. And I used to have a bunch of young black males would come to me in the morning, um, "Mr. Bill, you want me to go to jail today, sir?"

[Laughing] And so, we would, um, we would have them line up and go to jail [laughter], um, because when they went to jail, they took over the jail. See, they were picked up, been to jail over and over and over again, so they go in as trustees, they go in whatever. So, when [Reverend Ralph] Abernathy was going to go to jail, we made sure we had folk already there, um, to protect him. And [for] all of the other people, we had folk in jail.

And the thing that has so, been so good for me, after that hospital strike, all of these guys went back to school. One of them is a minister today. But it changed their lives. They needed something to hope on.

KT: Right.

WS: They needed to be responsible, or somebody to see them as somebody. But they used to be lined up, man, [laughs] just to go to jail. Um, it was a different time.

KT: Yeah.

WS: It was really a different time. I think the [Medical College] Hospital strike changed South Carolina. It really did. Um, it brought a lot of things, um, the Human Affairs Commission, but it made people feel like “I *am* somebody.” Um, blacks began to get elected to public office. No blacks were elected to public office before that [Medical College] Hospital strike.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: So, it made all the difference in the world.

KT: Tell me more about –

JB: Can we pause one second?

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we’re back.

KT: Tell me more about your contribution to the strike. What role did you play?

WS: Well, again, what I did, mostly, I was a person folk came to with problems and stuff like that, and what’s going to go on, and how do you solve those kinds of problems. And I would be working in the mattress factory five and a half days a week, but I would know exactly what was going on. You know, one of the things I did do, and I used to smoke up to that strike. [Laughs] I had decided when I go to jail I was not going to have any habit that I had to have, so I haven’t smoked since 1969. Um, but people depended on me for a lot of things. And during the curfew, I would be one of the few people that would be out during the curfew.

There was a vice-president of the Medical University [of South Carolina Hospital] that I really would like to get some recognition for at some point. His name was William Huff. He was a white guy, who again finally was poised. His son owned a seafood restaurant down on Folly Road. But they – him and I used to meet sometimes at twelve o’clock at night, um, during

the curfew. And he would tell me where the [Medical College] Hospital trustees were, what was going on inside, and I could tell him where, um, Andy Young and everybody else over at the union – and how can we bring these two groups together? And we would make proposals to each other, what he would go back and say to the trustees, and what I would go and say to the, um, folk that were working with – and we were able to do that until we got the trustees and the hospital workers' leadership to meet in Moncks Corner, up there away from everybody.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: And they asked me to come along to – just to ask, to help them with questions. And the hospital workers had about ten demands and, um, what we did was anytime they got to one that the trustees couldn't deal with, I wouldn't let them fight over it. We'd just skip that one, and we were able to solve eight of them that day. And the trustees were saying to them at that point, "Oh, God, we thought y'all were awful people." And they thought the trustees were awful people. But other folk were promoting [50:00] who these two groups of people were, not – and if you can meet with people, um, you can reach them. You don't even have to agree, but you can, you can reach them.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: And that's how that [Medical College] Hospital strike began to come to an end, because of that meeting that we were able to put together.

KT: You had, uh – so, in part, you played a key role in the back channel negotiations, uh, but you were also a trusted advisor to the workers, uh, and then, you'd also mentioned about, uh, kind of, uh, working the street crew and coordinating those efforts.

WS: Yeah, I see myself as a person – I watched the gentleman that put this, all of this equipment together [referring to videographer John Bishop]. But I always saw myself as the guy

that set the props, built the stage, set – not the player, not the star, but to be able to make sure that people can star.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: And that's what I did, uh, be able to set stages for folk to play on, and that the good people come and play on them.

KT: Now, as, uh, as the strike became more closely identified with SCLC, I'd imagine that officially it, uh, you know, they were advocating nonviolent strategies. Did you find yourself in tension with some of the SCLC leaders at that point or – ?

WS: Not at all. I don't have a problem with any – I didn't have a problem with that. I still don't. I had a problem with SCLC and the union on another note. And I wanted them to send the hospital workers' leaders into some training so they would be prepared to take over when the strike was over, and they was refusing to do that. They were using Miss [Mary] Moultrie all over the country to get more unions going, all kinds of stuff, but they were never – they were not training them to be able to run an office. And there was no way that you can go from a hospital worker to an administrator running union dues and all the other stuff that came in. I mean, so I had a real problem with them in that area.

KT: Yeah.

WS: But not the nonviolence. I don't have a problem with nonviolence. I just can't do it myself, but I didn't have a problem with that.

KT: And for the most part, things remained peaceful in the streets of Charleston, even though you had a heavy military presence and law enforcement and, uh, mass arrests.

WS: Well, you know, one of the things I told the FBI, and they came to me, you know, quite a few times. But, uh, they – that in Charleston, because they were concerned about riots

and guns and stuff, and I said, you know, “We will never have a riot in Charleston. We’ll have a war. Because we’re equipped to fight a war and we’ve got all the equipment and everything. We’ve got access to under the streets and everything. So, it’s not about that. You’re not going to find us burning down our community or any of those things. Uh, we just want to be treated fairly.” But, um, weapons – um, handguns and stuff is not any weapon. There are other stuff that you used in wars, and they understood that very much.

Um, the head of SLED [South Carolina Law Enforcement Division], our state law enforcement, he began to – matter of fact, one of the persons that we – was one of the, um, the, the, um, people that was passing the information on was a guy that was working for the federal government. Um, I never learned until later on during that time that, um, that an IRS agent is really somebody that carry guns, that can arrest people, and all of that stuff. I didn’t know that until after that. But they, you know, but they – that was one of those guys. And we were able to, um, to deal with that. He left town.

And one day, the, uh – not too far from where we are – the, uh, head of SLED, uh, Chief Pete Strom, brought him back to Charleston, and, um, he was in the back of the car. Chief called me and said that he wanted me to meet with him. Would I mind? And I told him, I said, “Chief, you got the damn power. Anywhere you want me to be, you know you can make me be, so why are you asking me that?” So, he told me to meet him up at the motel right on Dorchester Road here at five o’clock that evening.

And I got in my car at the mattress factory downtown, and they had police officers lined up from, um, [laughs] downtown Charleston to that motel. I could see the cars and like go by. And, I mean, I was young. I did one of the dumbest things that anybody ever could do. When I got in the parking lot where the Chief, where the SLED car was, I got out of my car and I went in

the trunk of my car and lifted up the trunk and just stood there. And, I mean, these guys was all over the parking lot, not knowing what the hell to do, you know. And I just stood there and looked in the trunk for a good while and then I slammed the trunk. [Laughter] And then, uh – and there's no reason that they didn't kill me at that particular time. I still flash back on that, that that was really dumb.

And I went over to the Chief's car, and [55:00] he told me again what he was there for, and that this guy knew about it, um, that was with him, and that there was some plans to kill me. Um, and what he was there for is that he wanted to really be able to give me some protection. And I told him that, "Chief, *please* don't protect me! [Laughter] *Please* don't! Don't do nothing dumb to help me, you know. Y'all helped King and Kennedy and all of these people – *please* don't save me!" And at that point, we knew who was wanting to do something to me.

KT: Yeah.

WS: We already knew that there were some other white union men that had some problems with me and [unintelligible word, at 55:42.] So, we were aware of that and protecting our own selves. But I – we just sort of told him that we can handle our own protection at that point.

KT: You had some sort of apparatus for protecting yourself and protecting the strike leaders?

WS: Yeah. Yeah, and we – and our apparatus was offensive. Um, I today don't believe in defense. I don't know nothing that ever been won on defense, whether you're playing ball or anything else. Everything is won on defense. And what we did was that: What would happen if something happens? All kinds of stuff would happen if something happens. And it was all, you know, it was all out there, um, what could happen. So we, and we operated that way.

We did stuff like, um, Abernathy – the worst part they had with the arrest and stuff of [Reverend Ralph] Abernathy, one – that night, um, that evening they were supposed to be ending the strike. And we were waiting at Brooks Motel, which was the black motel where our office ended up being. And, um, the Governor called me; he had one of the blacks that was a part of his group, um, to call me over there and said he wanted to talk to me, Governor McNair.

And I went over, and the Governor said, “Bill, what I want you to do for me is that I want you to go to Morris Brown A.M.E. Church tonight and I want you to tell the people that we will end the strike tomorrow. Don’t worry about it. Just tell them. And they’ve got enough faith in you that they would believe you, that everyone will go home happy.” And I said, “Okay, Governor. Let me call you back.”

So, I went and I thought about it. And I went back and I asked them to call the governor. I said, “Governor, why don’t you send me a telegram? And I will go to the church and I will read the telegram from you that you’re going to end this strike tomorrow.” And he said, “Bill, let me get back to you.” He called me back in about fifteen minutes and said that he *could not* send me a telegram, but he *will end* the strike tomorrow. All I had to do was go and tell the people, because the people got faith enough in me to do it. I said, “Okay, Governor, I’ll do it.”

And I went. Dr. Abernathy was on his car, leaning on a car, reading his Bible. And I told him, said, “Governor, uh, Reverend, uh – Reverend Abernathy, there’s nothing I could do.” And I got in my car and I went to Johns Island. [Laughs] And they arrested maybe two hundred people that night from that church. I mean, stuff just went bizarre there. But I just went home, because I *knew* he was lying to me. But he was setting me up that I was the one that people were going to hate –

KT: Yeah.

WS: Um, because I was going to tell them a lie, you know. So, that's – and that's when that strike got to where they, because when Lane – and, uh, Mr. Hugh Lane [president and CEO of Citizens & Southern National Bank], who you know a little bit about, got involved and talking to somebody in the Nixon Cabinet. And they called him and asked Mr. Lane, said, “What can we do to end this strike?” And he said – he's a banker and this cold businessman. Liked him a lot. He said, “Cut off the money.” HEW was giving Medical College [of South Carolina] seventy-five million dollars. “Cut off all the money and tell them they can end the strike and tell people that they're doing it because they want to be good to the community, or tell them that they're doing it because y'all made them do it. But that's what you need to do is to cut off the money.”

And then, he came back to the Community Relations Committee, which you've got some papers on, and said that – told – asked me to hold off another two weeks or so, because he had something working. And at that point we were working with the longshoremen, because they were about to shut down the port, um, at that point also. So, I asked them to not do that, and we would just wait. And, um, and then they ended the strike. But it was that, was that thing. And there are a lot of people take credit for Hugh Lane and a lot of folk was involved in that ending.

And one of the things that is so hard for me with it, and you were talking to me earlier about my own bitterness and my hurt, but you wouldn't find nowhere where anybody in Charleston got credit for doing anything good with that strike. It was SCLC and the union. They did everything. No – none of the local people did anything, put their lives and stuff on the line. It wasn't there. [1:00:00] It was about – I mean, Andy Young grew up, I mean, he got to be – he went to Congress and all kinds of stuff. That was a new beginning for him. And I'm not angry

about that, um, because that's what he does best. But some people from here needed to be credited, because we're the ones that did the stage.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: We did all the stage setting and the props. And we're the ones that took all of the beatings.

KT: How did you feel about the settlement?

WS: Um, the settlement to me was really, really nothing. But I think, to me, we were going to make our own type of settlement in that. And that's how come – one of the things we wanted was the Human Affairs Commission, which came out of that, but folks started doing their own thing. They were registering and voting and different stuff happening in the city of Charleston. We ended up not too long after having six blacks on the City Council, when we had none – no elected blacks on City Council. We had people elected to the House of Representatives. We had people elected to County Council and the School Board – got blacks elected to School Board.

So, people have to be responsible for themselves. All you can do is set the stage for them to do it. Now, if they don't want – I've got ten kids and I said, "I don't want y'all to have the excuse that I had. I didn't have access. I'm going to give you access. Now, if you don't use the damn access, that's your problem. But I'm going to make sure you have access." And a lot of folk that call me – none of my kids liked me till they were twenty-five. [Laughs] They just – I mean, literally, hate me, um, and they called me an awful father.

But, you know, I had – one of my kids got in trouble. Had graduated from high school, he goes with two kids, and they stole wine out of a grocery store, um, and got caught. And then, my wife and daughters, they're going to be mad at the store [laughs] that these kids stole the

wine from! And then, they're going to say other kids were leading my kid. And I said, "No! My kid had to be the leader. He can't be my kid and got other kids leading him astray. No, he's the leader." So, um, you know, they all hate me, I tell you. They really do. They really hate me. But, by God's grace, I'm still here.

But you have to be responsible. As bad a childhood as I had, and I used to deal with so many young people with a bad childhood, being mistreated, it doesn't give you an excuse to hurt people. It doesn't give you an excuse to kill people, like a lot of folk are doing right now. Just because somebody did something to them, you know, that they've got a right to go and hurt other people. That doesn't give you the right to do anything. Um, you've still got a chance to do something.

KT: From the hospital workers strike, you went right into a sanitation workers strike that oftentimes gets missed, uh.

WS: Yeah, we had both of those things going on. Right after that, we had the sanitation strike. And some of the stuff, even some of the local hospital strikes, sort of went on. There were no settlements there. And one of the reasons – I'm glad you brought that back up, because one of the reasons that we had, we went against the Medical College [of South Carolina] because it was a state institution. There were a lot of small hospitals, but if we won against a state hospital, then we won against the whole state. So, every place that people were working for the state, either The Citadel, or in Greenville, South Carolina, and Columbia, they all began to make minimum wage, all began to have access to training programs. All of the stuff that we were fighting for, uh, benefited the whole state.

And with the sanitation department, we were able to take that over to them, because, again, they were not even paid minimum wage. Blacks couldn't even drive the truck, the

sanitation – couldn't even ride in the front of the truck when it's raining, um, until after that sanitation strike. So, we were able to win that. But, again, some of my own bitterness is that I trust people and I trust laws that folk write. And a lot of times, the laws are just written for a certain period of time.

And what they did, um, what we did, like with the sanitation workers, they had some mean white guys that was running it. So, what we did, and what they did is they switched them and put some mean black guys. And so, the black guys, now, are mistreating – you've been a part of that, okay; they're mistreating the people worse than these whites *ever* did. Um, so, it is that kind of stuff that we have to come to grips with. Again, we're dealing with class –

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: The same class system. And nobody is teaching that, um, you know. You know, the way that these black men have treated – and not only the black men are treating *blacks*, but we've got all these *women* now working at the sanitation department, driving trucks and doing all kinds of stuff and being treated *awful*. I mean, sexism *and* racism are playing into it, and all the mistreatment is coming from black men.

KT: Over the last few years, I know that you've been involved in, uh, in organizing the sanitation workers, other city workers. [1:05:00] How did that all come about – is the, um, I guess the re-emergence of Local 1199 in Charleston?

WS: Well, I guess, you know, folk still come back to me with some of my – I guess being involved and stuff like that. It is *hard* right now to make people responsible for themselves. It's very hard. And with the sanitation workers, we find they have so much infighting with themselves, being mistreated, but they see themselves more as the enemy, so they can fight among themselves and win. And poor people are that way.

Um, and I right now, I've sort of backed out of it for the period of time with my own mind, because I started going back over my own life. And you talk about the involvement with it, I – in 1980, I wanted to be a senator. One of my biggest ambitions to be a state senator, a club of forty-six people [note: the South Carolina state senate includes forty-six members], and they're really elite group. And I even got some write-in votes in 1968. But in 1980 I ran for the state senate and I won the Democratic primary and I won the Democratic runoff, and we were able to do some stuff.

But again, during that election, the NAACP opposed me, and they brought people from Atlanta and everywhere and out on the Islands and telling folk that they didn't want me to be elected. And the reason that they didn't want me to be elected is because of my own family background. They wanted a black person to be elected, the first black senator, to have a very good background from their line, and they had already made arrangement who that person was going to be. Um, and so, they wanted me to lose. Um, it was still a very close race.

KT: Yeah.

WS: And I think the only reason, again, I still lost that race was because of Ronald Reagan. And it was the first year that white people began to pull the master lever. Up to that point, they didn't do that.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: But they wanted I. DeQuincey Newman to be the first black senator. They already made arrangements that, um, Alex Sanders, who you know, used to be the president of the College of Charleston, was going to resign from the senate to get a judgeship, and they were going to have a special election for I.D. to be that, um, be that first black senator. So, um, a lot

of my bitterness runs very, very deep, and it's not a one-sided thing, you know. But my hopes with a lot of stuff – I just got sidetracked by, by people.

KT: The NAACP opposed you in the primary and the runoff, but in the general, as well?

WS: Yeah, the general. Yeah.

KT: And they backed [Senator Glenn] McConnell?

WS: Well, they didn't back anybody. They didn't come out backing McConnell, but you would find that they, that they – that it was backing McConnell. Robert Ford led that thing for McConnell and them at that particular point. And they brought some confusion, like they're doing with the road thing. Robert put out some tickets, and they would put my name on it with a Republican and tell folk, and the folk would not, you know, they're scared that's something I had sold out or something. It's easy to mess with people that are not totally engaged.

[Sounds of sirens in background begin and continue]

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: And that's – I keep hoping that we can come up with a way that we can be able to give people the truth. Um, Glenn McConnell, during that run with me, he would tell people that he was going to build a Cooper River Bridge in debate. And I would tell folk, "No freshman senator [laughs] in the state of South Carolina can build any damn bridge," you know, but they, they believed him! [Laughs] And it'd take twenty-five years later before, um, Jim Clyburn [U.S. Representative James Clyburn] and, um, [Arthur] Ravenel and some of them could put that bridge together, Senator [Fritz] Hollings and them. But we love – as Americans we love people to lie to us. We love politicians to tell us lies, and then we can fight their silly lies later on.

But I have a lot of bitterness in terms of – with my own life in terms of what I could have done if I had the right kind of family background and those kinds of stuff. And you need to start

off with something. You know, being the first generation in my family to go through or attempting to do anything – it's not a good place to be. Somebody asked me recently, um, you know, am I training anybody to take my place? [Laughs] I wouldn't wish this life on a damn soul. [Laughter] I wouldn't want nobody to live this life that I have lived, um, you know. I want to – I tell God I want to see it through. But, you know, I don't want to change anything. But no, I don't wish it on anybody. It's been very, very hard, and being misunderstood most of the time.

[Sounds of sirens in background get progressively louder]

KT: Tell me before we – I have a few kind of wrap-up questions for you, but I wanted you to first tell me a little bit about your career in radio and how you got in –

JB: Let's stop till [sirens outside subside]. [1:10:00]

KT: Good time for a break?

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we're rolling again.

KT: Tell me how you got into radio.

WS: Well, you know, getting into radio was – again, my interest was to get into communication, to being able to help people. And most people don't know that this country was structured so well for radio. It said that nobody could own a radio station unless serving the community. You had to serve the community before you make a nickel. You couldn't have even gotten into TV. You couldn't, so, so, and you had to – when I was doing radio, I couldn't run but five commercials at one time. Then I had to do something for the public. Now, they can run three hours worth of commercials, and nobody cares. Ronald Reagan, again, made those changes [note: that is, allowed the corporate consolidation of media].

But we were able to really start people into radio where they really believe in what we were doing. We had people that would take off the knob that you change the station, the family, [laughs] that you could not switch, that nobody in the house could change, um, the station. I got – our station got the number one rating. We had a daytime radio station, and we got the number one rating out of about twenty-seven stations. And folk came at me almost with a lawsuit, said that there was something that we were doing illegal with the diaries that they sent out, um, and that I'd been having to bringing them to church or some stuff like that. But was happening at that time with parents, black parents, I mean, the kids and everybody listened to what their parents listened to on the radio, um, you know. And on Sundays, we were number one, because we did gospel and talk and jazz.

KT: Um-hmm.

WS: So, it was really something, and I loved it. I love anything that, that you don't have a script. You've got to think. We're getting away now from teaching, and I'm worried about you professors and stuff, that teaching kids to think. You know, how do you do this without a computer? You know, how do you do this, and you don't have any electricity? You know, uh, those kinds of stuff – even to cook. You know, what happens if you don't have any gas or electricity? Can you still eat? Um, you know, and those kinds of things – it's frightening for me, because we are making robots out of our young people.

I've got some grandkids that I want to teach some stuff, but they've got all kinds of little gadgets that they're playing with, um, you know. [Laughter] I've watched kids riding in cars with parents and never look up to see whether a car's coming to hit the car or any of those kinds of stuff. We're really allowing our country to go in a way that scares the hell out of me. Um, I

don't mind having problems with enemies or anything like that, as long as we can do something to help you.

We're dealing with the road across Johns Island right now. We have brought everybody from Johns Island together, you know, ex-Klansmen and farmers and all of – we're all together. And what we do, I've started it myself with this Concerned Citizens, we don't talk about religion and we don't talk about politics. We just talk about the issue. And if you're dealing with the issue, that's where you are. And you don't have to worry about any of these things if you're dealing with right and wrong, but we put other stuff in there. Is it right? You know? Or is it wrong? So, it doesn't matter who the hell you are. Is it right or wrong? And that's what I deal with.

KT: Of what are you proudest?

WS: My proudest is that I'm seventy-six years old and never been indicted by my government. [Pause] That was one of my biggest fears. It's still looming over me. But my government is the one that gets rid of most people like me. And so, I've just lived this long and not been indicted. I even came very close a couple of times. Even getting me off the Public Service Commission was one of those – kind of threatened indictment and stuff like that. But I am kind of proud of that.

KT: Who taught you to organize?

WS: Nobody. [Laughs] You know, that's one of the things I've gotten into trouble with interviewers like you before, because somebody has to teach you and not – the biggest teacher I've had in anything is losing. If you continue to lose, you find ways to make it work. And that's been – I had to learn, even in my elementary school days and stuff, to be able to work from

a negative or a positive, because I never had a teacher that liked me, from where I stood, and then I would ask questions that other kids would not do. So, um, nobody taught me. [1:15:00]

But if you know the need – if you know the need, you can work up a formula. One of my teachers, algebra teacher, really hated me, I mean, with a passion. And he gave a test one day when I came – I was out for one day, and I came in, and he gave a test. And I was able to do all of the problems, but he still marked my paper wrong, because I didn't use the formula that the book had. And I created my own formula in my head, um, and he said it had to be that. And, of course, I raised a lot of hell in the classroom, and they went and got the principal.

And the principal came, and I said, "Please, just give him the problem," because he's also math. And he did it altogether a different way. [Laughter] So, I was vindicated by that. And he said that, "It doesn't matter how you do it. Can you check the answer? Do you have a way to do it?" And that's the thing that's important, um, to be able to devise your own formula.

And one other thing, Kerry, that I really teach – I still teach Sunday School – that you've got to learn to enjoy the process. Most people do not enjoy the process. They're looking for the end results. And that's why I ask you all the time – I started to ask him earlier: What do you want to be when you grow up? Because if you get to the point you're already grown up, you done lost it. You've got to have some ambition to want to do something beyond what you're doing, you know, the process.

I never have but a three-, four- or five-year plan at the most, you know, but it evolves for me. But, um, you know, if you're satisfied with what you're doing – I used to get so angry at the black teachers, because they look forward to getting thirty years and retiring. Most of them die or end up alcoholic after that time. You've got nothing to do. You've got to have something to

do, you know. I work all the time, seven days a week, but I enjoy what I do. Even when it's hurting me, I still enjoy it, being able to make anything work.

KT: How have you changed since coming back from Korea?

WS: You know, again, you know the problem I've got with change. [Laughs] So, I don't like to change anything, but I like to improve upon or enhance, um, stuff. And I think that coming back from Korea, it enlightened me to where I would want to be or how I could help people. One of the most important things that we have not talked about is Gullah, you know. But when I got out of the military, Gullah was such a bad word, and I hated it, you know. But we were able to in 1969 or '70 get the law passed that Gullah is now a language. You know, those kinds of stuff.

Right now, we didn't talk about at all, but we have the most sickle cell anemia in this area than any place in the country. And I started the sickle cell program back in 1970 that we still run today, um, still running fifteen to sixteen percent with [sickle cell] traits and stuff. And the government right now has cut seventy-five percent of our budget, so we've got people out there that's suffering. But it is still – it's just – it's a teachable thing. Now, if you can test somebody to make sure that they don't have the trait, or if they've got the trait that they don't marry somebody that has the trait, the possibility of having a child with sickle cell anemia – David Mack [III] and I, one of the young men that works for me here in the [South Carolina] House of Representatives, dealing with a kid, a four-year-old boy, last week, four years that had a stroke –

KT: Uhhmm.

WS: Having a stroke at four years old. And there's so much suffering out on the Islands and stuff. And the money has been cut to the bone for the education and all that stuff. But people are suffering, especially in South Carolina right now. Nobody in South Carolina at the

top and the Republican Party believes in equal justice. They don't believe in good education. They don't want health care. They don't want any – the only thing they've got a problem with is immigration, um, gay people, you know, and a few other little things like that. But they're just – they're not interested in anything that serves people, you know. Right now, they want to test welfare recipients [laughs] for – make them take a drug test, you know, to get two hundred dollars a month. We gave Boeing seven hundred million dollars – what the hell bigger welfare you can get than that? Um, it just – but again, and that's why I get in trouble, um, because I deal with truth.

KT: Are there any topics that we might have touched upon that you wanted to return to and say a little bit more about? Or maybe there's something that I didn't bring up that, uh, some kind of final wrap-up thoughts that you might have.

WS: Well, again, you know, I am so concerned about the environment, uh, the way that the environment is being treated right at this particular point. And, um, out on the Island where I live and where we've been able to keep things pretty nice, I mean, it's just – it's a war now with developers and the mayors and stuff like that. And all you have to do is right now purchase three or four politicians, and it doesn't matter – they get what they want done.

And the question that I'm hoping that even with the Smithsonian focus, we have to find out now who democracy is working for. I know it's not working for poor people. Who does it work for? Do you have to have a lot of power for democracy to work for you? We had – right now we had *five* votes from County Council on building a road across Johns Island. They lost *five times*. They're still going to have another vote. And they're going to vote until they win.

KT: Um-hmm. And that will be the final vote.

WS: And that will be the final vote. And they've got the people that I'm living around, white and black, that say, "They're going to do what they want to do." And American people *can't do* that. We can't say that folk, "Although we know we're right, they're going to do what they want to do." And that's where our history is so important for American history, because folk used to go against those grains and make it work. People didn't give up on it.

But these days it's the political leaders that have really been bought. And we've got four or five of them that folk are just getting to do what they want. Developers are telling them what to do, and that's what they're doing, you know. Even on Johns Island right now, where they've got developers are going into the high school and to the churches and giving a thousand dollars here, and a thousand dollars to this kid, and they're taking over the organization that used to help people, so they're putting money into it, and everybody is saying, "I'm grateful for this money," you know.

I am through, uh, but it's a bitter thing, you know. And I can tell you the only person I'm getting along with well is me. [Laughs] I'm not getting along well with anybody but me, um, you know. I drink some sherry wine and I write and I think and I pray a lot. And I do believe in God and I know by God's grace I've been able to get to this point in history. Um, but it scares me for my country. We've got leadership right now in the state of South Carolina – all over the country – but especially in the state of South Carolina, we have a total lack of leadership. And leaders are ones that, you know – and it's such a difference between a leader and a manager. And folk are taking managers and calling them leaders, you know. I am through. I'm really through.

KT: Well, thank you very much for sitting down with us today.

WS: You're welcome.

KT: I know it's been well appreciated by the group present and, uh, I think many, many more people will benefit from your reflections, so thank you very much.

WS: Well, we've got to do something about tomorrow. Um, we've sort of lost yesterday and today. But we've got to do something about tomorrow, because if we don't, we all are going to be lost, and I'm talking about the generations, two-three generations – it's tomorrow.

KT: Great. Thank you.

[Recording ends at 1:23:43]

END OF INTERVIEW