

Civil Rights History Project
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Interviewee: Charles E. "Chuck" Siler
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Interviewer: Dr. David Cline
Videographer: John Bishop
Length: 01:42:04

David Cline: So, I'm going to do a quick little marker for the tape.

Charles "Chuck" Siler: Okay.

David Cline: And then, what I like to do, I usually start—we go fairly chronologically. I always start with people's family histories. I think that's—where they came from and—

Charles "Chuck" Siler: Oh. [Laughs]

DC: Obviously, and what informed them. So, we'll start there and—

CS: Yeah. Thanks to grandmother and grandfather—

DC: Yeah, exactly.

CS: Who didn't play. [Laughs]

DC: [Laughs] So—oh, and I should—I'll also just tell you right now that, because they're recording digitally, we stop every once in a while to just save the files.

CS: No problem.

DC: So, we’ll take little breaks.

CS: Yeah.

DC: And any time that *you* want to take a break, just let us know.

CS: Yeah, I’ve done this. [Laughs]

DC: Yeah, okay. And anywhere you want to take the interview, you take it.

CS: If you ever get to Baton Rouge, the new museum, the state museum that’s there, you’ll hear me, and we did a lot of digital recording there.

DC: Okay. You’ve been on this side. Yeah, great.

CS: Yeah. I’ve been on both sides, though. I’ve done a bunch of radio and stuff like that, too. [Laughs]

DC: Okay. I like being on this side. [Laughs] Alright, great.

CS: I prefer that side, but—yeah.

DC: So, today it is the tenth of May, and we are at the African American Museum in Fair Park, in Dallas, Texas. This is David Cline talking, David Cline from UNC’s Southern Oral History Program and Virginia Tech. And I’m here with Charles “Chuck” Siler. Also with John Bishop, who is behind the camera, John Bishop of Media Generation and UCLA. And we’re all here today as part of the Civil Rights History Project on behalf of the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian’s Museum of African American History and Culture. And, Chuck, I just wanted to say thank you so much for being part of this project.

CS: [Laughs] You’re welcome. I’m happy to be here.

DC: And if we could start, if you could just tell us a little bit about the family into which you were born—

CS: Okay.

DC: And how you may have seen that environment shaping the kind of work and things that you went on to do.

CS: You know, it’s—well, I think what is—I’ll have to—I had a big family, for one. My mother and father were divorced early, though my father and I did get to be good friends later in life. My mother was a beautician. And so, naturally, she was in a position to hear everybody’s business, and I think she was well-trusted because she didn’t tell what she heard. [Laughs]

My grandmother was a piano player. Her career was spent playing for churches, teaching music, choirs, this and that. I was her oldest grandchild, her first grandchild, so I could have been a little bit spoiled. My grandfather—I was the first grandchild that he had that he had a chance to spend any time with. And he was alive until I was seven, so he was an influence in terms of the fact that he abetted my creativity, I guess.

My grandmother found me when I was, as she said, about fifteen or sixteen months old—I had found a pencil. And we had these lower half of the walls in the house that they had bought were wooden, and she saw me trying to draw on the wall. And she—her story was that I wasn’t just scratching on the wall, but I was trying to draw little stick figures and things. So, she gave me, told me if I wanted to do that, ask for paper and pencil. And so, two of the first words that learned, according to her, were “paper” and “pencil,” because she said I started asking her for that almost every day. But the upside for her was she could put me in a corner with a pad, a Big Chief Indian pad, which I remember, and a pencil, and leave me there all day.

So, the upside was, she used to always start out reading every day with the cartoons. Her attitude was she’d get a laugh in first, then get to the serious news. And I come from a family of folk who had, I think, great senses of humor. My father, in fact, also—when I got to know him as

an adult, I discovered that his sense of humor was very well intact, too. And my mother is ninety-two, and she still can be funny [laughs] when she wants to.

But my mother had six brothers, all of whom had a lot of influence on me. And one of my father's—his oldest brother, Eugene, was another influence. He lived about forty, fifty miles away in Lafayette, Louisiana, but we were in contact. My family in Baton Rouge was one that encouraged me. [0:05:00] All of them were readers, so I grew up reading. I started reading when I was, and my younger brother, when we were both about two. You know, we were able to read a sentence.

When I started school, I was five, and they let me, you know—my first grade teacher was a neighbor, and she took me because I was the only black kid in the neighborhood at the time. And so, I went to school with her. And I did well enough that she asked the principal, who also lived in the neighborhood—but things were different then, because my parents—my mother had gone to school or had been taught by half of the same folk who taught me years later. So, everyone knew everyone else.

DC: Um-hmm.

CS: You know, I had relatives who—

DC: And these were segregated schools?

CS: Yeah. I had folk who—one of my aunts was secretary at my high school. Another one taught home economics, who was married to my mother's brother. And so, you know, there were those people there. My Uncle Ralph was head custodian at my high school and became, later, parish-wide supervisor of custodial things in Baton Rouge. So, the family was very well-known, in terms of that. He was also a caterer, great cook, you know, and I learned a lot from

that. My wife tells me she married me because I could read and cook. And I have to blame my family for that.

But at times, too, when I did things that were sort of, as they like to say now, out of the box, I was supported by that. You guys made me start thinking about this, because I was trying to go back to when I first protested something. And my first protest, [laughs] as much as I laugh about it now, was against Boy Scouts. Because in the '50s, when I was probably eleven or twelve years old, we marched in the Boy Scout parade and we were proud of the fact that we had little drill teams and we could learn moves and this and that. But in Baton Rouge, they put the black Boy Scouts behind the horses. And I think I did the first two years, and I had to clean my shoes after that. I decided I wasn't going to do that. Well, I had a Scout master who wasn't in line with that with me. So, I quit the Boy Scouts and started with the Explorer post at my school. But it was the first active protest that I did and got away with.

We—I went to McKinley High in Baton Rouge. McKinley was well-known for being great at academics, great at athletics, and we would fight anybody and usually win. And South Baton Rouge was, you know, inner city, urban. It wasn't as bad as some of the inner cities now. We didn't shoot as many—you know, folk weren't getting shot, this or that, but you would fight, and you had to learn to do that kind of thing. When the Southern University demonstration and March of 1960 happened, they had to lock us on campus, because we were ready to go out and do it.

DC: Um-hmm. So, tell me a little bit more about that, when you say you were ready to go out—in what way?

CS: We were ready to go and join the demonstration! You know, we heard about it. Somebody said, “Students from Southern are marching downtown!” [Laughing] And most of us were ready to say, “Let’s go! Let’s go and join them,” you know.

DC: Um-hmm. Do you feel like you had a sense of what was going on politically in the world or in your community?

CS: We knew, because we had had—you know, I’ve told kids this, and I hate [laughs] to say it again. But I think the kids that I used to talk to about the Civil Rights Movement when I worked—I worked at the state museum, you may have that, in Louisiana, but there were a few schools that I went to where they were interested in things like the Civil Rights Movement, and there were social studies teachers who had the signs up, the “white” and “black,” you know, “white” and “colored” at that time. And I told them about things that we used to do to protest. You know, we would take a paper cup, go into the men’s room, use it, and pour it over the white water fountains. It was our way of protesting what we couldn’t—you know, because we couldn’t—you know, and we were treated badly. You know, folk would throw money at you.

My Uncle Gene started the first black cleaners in Lafayette, Louisiana. He had to, in the early days, sit in his shop at night with his gun, [0:10:00] because they threw bricks, they shot, they [10:03]. But he had a reputation for shooting back. And he was a person that, until he died, I loved the man like—he was—you know, he felt that since my father and mother had divorced and had gone, he felt obligated to be close to me, keep me linked to the Siler side of the family. Well, the Silers had left Alabama, my uncles and my father and that bunch, because they had a reputation for shooting back. And Mobile and that area where they were from, in the ’30s and ’40s, that wasn’t a part of it.

My father also played baseball, which let him see a lot of it. He had some good friends. Satchel Paige was one of them that I happened to meet once, and I thought that was—it was one of the great moments of my life in 1967. But my father stayed involved with baseball most of his life. He started [11:01] Connie Mack Baseball League and he had—he told me the stories about the fights that they had in California. But that league sent over six hundred players to the pros. And when I worked at Southern for a few years, later, I started with one of the coaches at Southern, Lee Flintroy, played ball with my father for the Black Pelicans in New Orleans. And when he found out that—he played third base, second base, and my father was a shortstop—and he said, “You’re Chuck Siler’s son,” da-da-ta-da, and I put them in touch, and a lot of guys out of Compton went through Southern and to the other HBCUs. So, you know, little things like that, that family network of sorts.

Most of my uncles, with possibly one exception, worked for themselves. My Uncle Peter, who was one of those that I was named after—his name was Ernest, hence the E in my name. My Uncle T.J. was an insurance salesman. Most of them had been in World War II. All of them—my Uncle Earl was a tailor. They had learned these things. My two youngest uncles had been in—well, one was in Korea. One was in service as a medic during the Korean War, but he couldn’t get a job when he got out. So, he worked as a waiter and, like I said, he was the one who later became supervisor of—

DC: Oh, right.

CS: In the Baton Rouge school district, of custodial services. And he had his own business until after, long after he retired. The thing was, they tended to be independent. My grandfather spoiled me. Like I said, I was the first grandchild that he had, in two families, to have time with. And so, you know, we would listen to all the old radio shows when he had to

babysit me, because my grandmother had choir rehearsals and things during the week. This was her living, and she made, for that time, a fairly good living playing music.

First thing—and John would appreciate this—that she told me was the story about what got her into gospel. One part was she was raised by her uncle and aunt, who—her uncle was a Methodist minister named Mansfield Jones. But she got punished because she was playing blues. She liked to play the blues. She played a stride type piano. There’s a piano player out there now who I’ve heard play with her, and I wish I had recorded it, named Henry Butler, who has a style very similar: big left hand, big honking left hand. And she played the “Yellow Dog Blues” for me. I have loved the blues ever since. Okay, for all she did with gospel, the blues got me, okay. And a lot of my friends that I grew up with in Baton Rouge are blues players and things like that. And so, we—you know, I’m still tied to that.

The act of civil disobedience—my senior year in high school, after the Southern demonstration, a group of us—I’m trying to remember names—Moses Edwards, Betty Jones, Enola Price, Theotis Washington, who is not with us any longer, were among—we were a part of the, some of us were NAACP Youth Council folks.

DC: Okay. And you said Betty—?

CS: Jones.

DC: Jones, and Moses—?

CS: Betty T. Jones, yeah.

DC: Who’s the first one? Moses—?

CS: Edwards.

DC: Edwards, okay.

CS: Yeah, and I think Moses is still alive. We graduated, class of '60. But after we took our final examinations, about two weeks [0:15:00] before we were supposed to march, we decided that we were going to pull our protesting. So, my family looked up one night, and there I was, with a picket sign in front of the State Library, [laughs] because we had tried to use it, and they didn't let us in, you know. So, we—

DC: There was a—was there a black—there was a black, so-called black branch somewhere else?

CS: There were black branches. We had the Carver Branch Library, and I spent a lot of time there, because they finally moved, at one point, moved it around the corner from my house. And so, I would—you know, they had the read-twelve-books-and-you-get-the-certificate thing. I'd read forty books in the summertime so I could have three or four certificates, you know. But Mrs. Bennett, who was the librarian, had a son, Herbert Bennett, who was one of my first teachers, who was a very talented artist.

And, as I said, at that time, I had an uncle, Willie, Jr., they called him “Son,” who was also a very talented artist. But at that time there was very little outlet there. And my Uncle Son had to leave Baton Rouge because he had gotten into a fight with some guys. And the best description I can give you of him is he was—he looked like Burt Lancaster in brownface. He was about six feet tall and he had a Charles Atlas build. But he had been driving trucks and loading trucks since he was ten or eleven years old for the Bologna brothers in Baton Rouge. And so, he had this build that was there. He died after being shot by another American soldier, or he didn't die immediately. He lived nine more years, but he was shot with a machine gun and he had probably almost sixty surgeries over the years, removing shrapnel as it came to the surface, you know.

But during that time, he was very much an influence on me, also, because he was encouraging when it came to my art and he showed me that he could draw. And, you know, I had never seen anybody do it that well, nobody black. You know, I had seen all of these other things that, later, when I had a chance to study with some, I think, great artists, you know, I was able to appreciate it because of some of what had come there.

But my uncles and my grandmother, particularly when we hit the State Library—I’m going back to that—didn’t put me out of the house. You know, they—

DC: Can I stop you just for a second?

CS: Yeah.

DC: To ask two questions: One is you mentioned, sort of, you were on the cusp of graduation.

CS: Yeah.

DC: So, there was a timing issue going on, so if you could say a little bit about that. And then, also, specifically what it was that—why you targeted the library.

CS: We couldn’t use it! And I was, like I said, at Carver Branch, I tried these—I don’t know if I read every book in the library, but I read most of what I could find out, okay? And I went through one phase where I lived—the part of Baton Rouge where I grew up at one point in its history had been called “Moccasin Hole.” We had snakes all over the place, every kind of snake you could—you know, I mean, my backyard was a veritable—we—to overcome fear, I went and read everything I could on snakes. At one point, I wanted to be a herpetologist. I drew snakes, sketched snakes. And I had teachers, again, like Ben Hall, who was my biology teacher. Mr. Hall let me bring a pet snake in for a demonstration. It was a hognose snake, [laughing]

[19:10] was the Latin name. His name was Irving. He became a cartoon later, too. [Laughing] But Irving was the first opportunity that I had to do this.

I had teachers who always taught us—the saying when I was in school was that “you had to be twice as good, if you were black, to get half as much.” My teachers said, “Okay, you’ve got to be three, four, five times as good!” And we grew up with that. We had silent support from a lot of them, even though they couldn’t speak up, when we went out and protested. Now, the reason we did it, for the most part, after we—we had been planning it, but the reason we waited until after we finished our examinations [0:20:00] was because of the fact that they couldn’t use missing that against us, okay, and we had about two weeks. We finished examinations about this time in May. Our graduation was the twenty-sixth, which I’ll never forget, because it was my aunt’s birthday, and later, [laughing] my wedding day. We were married on the twenty-sixth of May.

But those—during that time, we started our protest. We started picketing. We started doing things, and they had to watch us. And there were other kids at Southern High, a few from Capitol, who were—Capitol Avenue, another one of the schools—who were getting involved in the activity, because Greenville had happened, then Southern happened. People don’t know this, but Southern’s first demonstration was the largest of the mass demonstrations to hit the South in 1960. Marvin Robinson, who lives here in Dallas now, he’s recovering from a stroke I was told. Donald Moss, who I think is back in Louisiana, I’m not certain.

But I’ve got a friend in Baton Rouge, Mayo Brew, who is from Winnfield. In Winnfield, they tried to integrate the library there, and he had a gun put to his head by the sheriff. And, you know, when he tells that story about it, I’ve never seen him talk about it without becoming emotional. You know, but if you’ve ever been shot at or if you’ve ever had someone threaten

you that way, you don't forget that. And it was something that, you know—it made it difficult for me to be nonviolent later.

DC: [21:45]

CS: Yeah. By the time—you know, I met Martin Luther King in 1962. I had a chance to shake his hand, and he, at the NAACP convention in Atlanta, walked around, came around the room and shook everybody—all the young folk—he shook our hands and, you know, he gave us a word or two of encouragement. But I'll have to backtrack to get to that point.

DC: Okay.

CS: But they wanted to put us out of school in '60, but they couldn't, one reason being all of the guys that I named that were a part of this, that I can remember now, were the best students in the class. Our valedictorian and salutatorian didn't participate, but then again, you know, different reasons. Most of us were the ones who had gone through it, who lived on the—you know, who lived out there with it, who put up with it, and we weren't as sheltered. And we were very forward and we were going to be out there, saying what we had to say. So, we did what—you know, we did what we could. We started that. Things settled down a bit. All of us went wherever to school. I went to Southern.

DC: Can I stop you just for a second?

CS: Yeah.

DC: And ask you about this sort of—

JB: [23:08]

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we're back.

DC: You talked a little bit about this already, but the support behind you I’m interested in. So, clearly, you’ve got—some of you have your families. You talked about, I mean, your family is so interesting because of this history of independent business owners and this kind of independence that your family, particularly, had but that you often see in, you know, beauticians and—

CS: One of the things—it’s funny, but my Uncle Ralph, when my grandmother died, and I were talking after the funeral. And he said, “You know your grandfather used to ride—.” My grandfather rode a bicycle to work. He had worked on the railroad, and as he got too old to work trains, he became the janitor at the roundhouse in Baton Rouge. I remember going with him when I was about three, four years old. He took me down to see these *giant* trains. You know, when you’re that tall, and the train is twenty feet, it looks huge. And everybody knew Willie, you know. And he always rode a bicycle to work. And my Uncle Ralph told me, he says, “You know, Daddy rode a bike—” and that’s what we all called him, “Daddy”—he said, “to work because he wasn’t going to pay a dime and have somebody tell him where to sit on the bus.”

Okay, he generally wore coveralls to work, but every Sunday morning, he was head deacon at this church, he was in a suit. And he would walk to church. You know, I had gone with him a few times here and there. But he was a, you know, he was a model of manhood. And I was his oldest grandchild, and at that time, he was going to, you know, give it. I didn’t know that then, but whatever was there was a part of what later made me [0:25:00] understand that I could speak up.

And I had learned from my mother and from my grandmother that, right or wrong, if I felt I was right, I was going to say it! Now, sometimes I got spanked for it. But my mother learned early on that I was hardheaded enough that if I knew I was right, and she learned that she

could spank me, and I told her the last time I got a spanking, I said, “Well, you can do this, but I’m not going to cry.” And so, I took the spanking and I looked back at her, and my question was, “Are you finished?” And I never got another one. But I had to sacrifice that, because then I had my mother and my grandmother in each ear, in stereo, talking to me about what I had done wrong when I did. So, I was kept on track.

In school, I had some teachers—Mr. Hall was one, in particular. I ran into his grandson a few weeks ago here that I hadn’t known, a Mr. Altamous, who had been in World War II, also, with my uncles, who had what we now call post-traumatic stress disorder. I didn’t understand—you know, guys would laugh, because they said they could set off a firecracker, and Mr. Altamous would dive under the desk. Well, when I got back from Vietnam, I apologized to Mr. Altamous for having been one of those guys who would laugh when somebody did something like that, and they would say, “Oh, Mr. Altamous—.” Well, I understood why he dove under the desk! I’d been through rocket attacks and things like that. Okay, so those loud noises—I’ve still got tinnitus from being too close to a howitzer, you know, without protection. And those kind of things, you know, you learn to appreciate later in life.

But these were the guys who also were supporting us quietly. They didn’t want to lose their jobs. We didn’t want them to lose their jobs. But they didn’t say—I never heard, “You’re wrong,” you know. Mr. Hall has two, some daughters who are still alive, who are like little sisters of mine, because Mr. Hall would sit there and tell you what they had, you know, and we heard the stories of what people had gone through, and they were reinforced in the neighborhood, all of that.

Freya Anderson, whose father was a member of the NAACP, was on the board of the NAACP in Baton Rouge, we were on a panel together at LSU in February of this year. And Dr.

Anderson, who was a dentist, was one of the leaders of the Civil Right Movement in Baton Rouge. In 1961, I started off. I was a foot soldier; I wasn't one of the leaders. I got involved because they needed somebody to make signs. I was an art major. And Diana Manning, who died a few years ago, and I were two of the first art majors to make signs.

DC: This is at Southern, when you were at Southern?

CS: Yeah, protest signs!

DC: Yeah.

CS: We were at Southern.

DC: Yeah.

CS: I was a sophomore. The funny thing is I was a member of the Persian Rifles Drill Team, and I was at the time a pledgee and I later became a PR. But the fire team leader next to me Hubert Brown, Hubert Gerold Brown, who later became known as H. Rap Brown. I've known him since junior high school. We got to be close in college, because we used to hitchhike to school together. We lived in the same part of town, and so, you know, we'd—for protection in part, too, because it wasn't easy to be out there, and it was always easier to hitchhike with somebody. And we would do that from Southern because we didn't have bus service to the school. And if you were up there late at night, you had to get home, so it was either walk or—and there was a part of Baton Rouge called “Dixie” that we didn't really want to walk through at night, because anything could happen on Scenic Highway. And so, we'd try to catch people coming off campus going home, and everybody got to know us over a period of time.

Well, in 1961, we started doing this. And then, they started teaching us nonviolent protest, you know, how to go into the famous curl and the whole thing if you were getting beaten.

DC: And you went to actual training sessions?

CS: We had sessions at—there was a College Inn off-campus. [Laughing] The guy let us use his place, and after they closed, they moved the tables aside. And we had Dave Dennis from CORE, [0:30:00] Jerome Smith, who is still in New Orleans. He runs an organization called Tambourine and Fan.

DC: Jerome—

CS: Yeah, we were all—

DC: What was the name again?

CS: Jerome Smith.

DC: Smith.

CS: Yeah. Jerome is—Jerome was a Freedom Rider. He has stories—like I said, he was a leader. Ronnie Moore is still in New Orleans. Ronnie’s daughter, Desi, is married to Wes Anderson, the saxophonist that played. And Ronnie, I think, is still running a program or working at Tulane, if I’m correct.

DC: Um-hmm. We’re actually going to talk to D’Army Bailey.

CS: D’Army?

DC: Yeah.

CS: Yeah! I know D’Army! Yeah.

JB: Can I interrupt for a second?

CS: Yeah.

JB: I have two things [30:51]. One is what [30:56]. Do you have a story about that?

CS: My uncle?

JB: Yeah.

CS: My uncle just happened to be a person that would fight back. The reason he had to leave Baton Rouge was because he got—two guys jumped him. It was during the time when they could get away with things, like beating up on black folk. I knew of cases where cops would have “billy club practice,” as we used to call it, on people. Okay? My uncle, as I said, was one of—he was strong enough to take, like, the front of a Volkswagen—he could literally lift it unassisted. You know, he was that strong. He hit a guy and supposedly broke his neck, from what I was told, and he had to leave.

When he got drafted, he was working in a war plant, you know, a munitions plant or something, up North, in Kansas or somewhere like that, as close as I can get to it, and he had changed his name. He added an R. Instead of Willie Moton, Jr.—the family name was Moton in Louisiana—he had added an R, he was Willie Morton, Jr. That was enough in those days to get—[laughing] [32:15]. But he went into the military.

I don’t know what prompted it, but he was a person who would fight back, okay, and generally he was a person whom, if you had a fight with, he was going to win, you know. You know, I didn’t want him to ever hit me. He made me go back and fight a guy who was bigger than me once. And I stayed in the fight more out of fear of *him* than getting hurt, and I took a good butt-whipping for about half an hour before the other guy gave up. Because every time I wanted to stop, I’d look, and he’d be standing there, just watching me.

And after it was all over, he told me, he says, “I didn’t say you had to *win* the fight.” He said, “I said you had to fight.” And his thing was, he says, “Bullies don’t want people to fight back.” Oh! He says, “They—.” I never had another fight with *that* guy again because he understood that I was going to—my uncle died not long after that. But one of those pieces of

shrapnel nicked something and, you know, that killed him. And he was like thirty-nine years old at the time. But the thing was, you know, it was one of the lessons I learned.

My Uncle Gene, who my wife knew, and my son also got to know, after his experience in Lafayette, moved out of the heart of town into a little area called Scott that, at the time, was fairly well unincorporated. But he had about two acres of land, maybe three, and he was never further away than maybe twenty feet from one of his hidden guns, because he was always wary of that. My father was also—you know, all of them, they weren't NRA, but the terrorists they were worried about were a totally different brand. Okay?

DC: Um-hmm.

CS: One of the brothers, Earl, became a minister in Perris, California, and his son, Don, is a bishop now. I don't know how they do these things. I'm not a good churchgoer, okay. [Laughs] But the family has a history like that. My Uncle Gene used to kid. He told me, he said, “I didn't shoot the sheriff,” he said, “but I almost shot the deputy!”

DC: [Laughs]

CS: And they were looking for him at one point. And the guy who was the deputy that saw where he was hiding was a friend of his and knew he wasn't guilty of anything [0:35:00] and told the guys he wasn't there. This is the story he told me later. He said, and so, he was able to get away and get away from Mobile. He had to leave. And so, you know, I had that growing up. I had these guys, these voices in my—and all of them were standing up.

My Uncle Ralph—the funniest story that I've ever heard on him was a guy walked up to him when he was on his knees, saying his prayers in the barracks when he was in the Army, and started playing the dozens with him. Well, my Uncle Ralph got up, beat the guy, I mean, beat him really good, then turned around and got back on his knees and finished saying his prayers.

You know, and I always had these guys saying, you know—so, when it came down to that, when I was nineteen years old, and that activity started, I was going to be a part of it. And I went from painting protest signs to going through the training, and then I went on a sit-in for the first time. And that was, you know, different because—I joke about it now. I can’t help it. I think it’s a part of what made me decide that, maybe at eighty, I’m going to become a full-time standup comic or something.

But every guy that—the terrorists that we had to deal with, I don’t know where they got these guys from, but these guys were all 6’8”, 6’9”. They all looked like pro football players. They were all—they didn’t have their hoods on but , you know, we knew who they were. And they were there to intimidate. Well, at the time, I might have weighed a hundred and seventy-five, a hundred and eighty pounds. I was the same height that I am now, but [laughing] that’s a lot of difference when it comes to looking at three-hundred pounders, you know, and their arms were as big as my waistline was at the time. So, we—I became more of an observer to a point after that, because my attitude was going to be that if something happened, I was going to have to fight, you know, if no more than just to get away. But I, you know, was not good at seeing women get hit or thinking I could take that without, you know, some kind of response to it.

We went to jail. Twelfth of December, if I recall the date correctly, a group of us were arrested and taken downtown for picketing. We were ticketing the Bon Marché Center, I think, out on Florida Street. And we were taken into the Baton Rouge jail and we were given the usual, “If you come back down here, we’re putting you in jail and we’re going to keep you,” you know. And Willie Bradford, who is in Shreveport now, Willie Bradford, Thomas Peete, and Theda Ambrose, I think, was with us. I’m trying to remember Janelle’s last name, and it just slipped my

mind. But Bradford turned to a cop and said, “What are you going to do with the other five thousand?”

And this guy turned red. I thought he was ready to hit him. But Bradford—and the thing, I think, that made it even worse was Brad was black, but Brad was, if you didn’t know he was black, you, you know, couldn’t tell. But, you know, he knew and he wasn’t hiding it. And he and Thomas Peete, who were very light-skinned guys, I think sometimes enraged the racists more so than the darker folk did. You know, they knew why we were—but these guys didn’t necessarily—you know, they could have slipped across the line and passed at Southern. Southern always looked like an integrated school because of the different, the broad range of color that you had there.

So, the next day we went back out. We protested again, and we wound up going to jail. I spent the Christmas holidays of 1961 in the East Baton Rouge Parish jail. Now, the day after that, not just Southern University students, but Baton Rouge citizens joined the march. And they had, from what I was told from the guys who were down there, at least five thousand people were down there. The press underplayed it. But we were up on the line on top of the jailhouse, and it was split. There was a neutral area, then there were cells on one side, cells on the street side. And we were—we walked over to the street side and we were standing up, looking out of the windows, [0:40:00] and we could see the crowd assemble. And there were people going in both directions as far as *we* could see through the oak trees that were down there.

DC: And they were protesting the businesses, or protesting your arrest?

CS: They were protesting our arrest.

DC: Your arrest?

CS: Yeah. We had been arrested once. There was a rally the night when we got back. We went back out the next day, because they dared us to come back, and we took the dare. Okay? I don't—if I recall correctly, I didn't stay at home that night, because they—I was afraid somebody might try to talk me out of it. But we went back downtown. One of the things I was kind of good at was, whenever we had protests, [laughs] I used to could do—I had this thing with voices. And when I knew sometimes—you know, I didn't tell the guys I was doing this all the time, but I would get on the phone and call down to the police and call in a report that, [speaking in a drawl] “they had some Nigras out there,” and they were, “oh, yeah, they're all over the place.” And they would go this way, and we'd be over here. And, you know, I had that streak. You know, I still have it. [Laughs] I couldn't be different.

But we went back down. They came and they put three hundred and forty of us, plus, in a space that was built for about forty-two people. When the demonstration came downtown, we were looking out and we saw, you know, everybody's dressed neatly. Nobody's about to start anything. And they started singing, “We Shall Overcome.” And we started singing back. Okay, there was thirteen of us then. An hour later, they had—they were bringing them in, you know, from the street.

DC: Thirteen from the first day?

CS: Yeah, we were in jail on one side, and the girls were—there was a wall separating us and the girls' line, or the female line, you know, the women's line. And we started singing back.

DC: From within the jail.

CS: From atop the jail, yeah. And they could hear us. And, you know, you got kind of a cheer or something that went up, and they started singing. And then, all of a sudden, we heard *pop, pop, pop*, and dogs. And the police actually rioted. It wasn't the protestors; they were

peaceful. But just the song “We Shall Overcome” set them off. And they used enough tear gas, and we were on like what would have been the fourth, the fifth floor of the building, I guess. We could smell the tear gas in the line. They moved us and locked down that half of the jail so that we couldn’t get into the cells on that side. They later opened it back up, because we didn’t have anywhere to go. It was almost standing room only. Okay?

We all came out of there a lot older than we went in. We were in there for three weeks. When we came out, it was January second, I guess. And our lawyers, Elie, Collins, and Douglas—Lolis Elie, Bob Collins, and Nils Douglas—came to get us out. Lolis Elie and I are still friends. His son is a journalist who is now living in L.A. He worked on the “Treme” television series as a story editor, but Lolis used to write for the *Picayune* in New Orleans. His father was a little guy. He was about 5’4” or 5’5”. And when they brought us downstairs to, you know, release us, he came through a crowd of giant deputies, and it was like Moses parting the waters. And Lolis was fearless, I guess you would say. [Laughs] That’s the only thing I can think of to describe him. He’s another person whom, you know, if I had to recommend people to talk to, is in New Orleans, and I’d say, “You’ve got to talk to Lolis Elie,” okay, because his stories were—had to be great.

But we continued to protest when we got out of jail. Felton Clark was president of the university, of Southern.

DC: Now, did you get bailed out? Or how did you get—?

CS: We were bailed out, yes.

DC: With charges? What were the charges?

CS: Illegal picketing, [0:45:00] things like that. The charges were thrown out before we ever got to trial. But they had, really—you know, they knew—most of the reason we were in jail

was to quash the protest, you know. Jail was used as a punitive form of punishment. It wasn't about whether we were right or wrong. It was that we shouldn't—we were out of—you know, we were uppity. Okay? And I've been called that since then, so it's not gone, you know, and I mean recently. [Laughs]

JB: [45:43]

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're on. We're back. We're on.

CS: Great.

DC: Okay. So, I guess, pick up where we left off, with the protest.

CS: Okay. When we were all finally, you know, banned from campus, again, somehow some of the people who were friendly—and since I lived in Baton Rouge, I was able to ease onto and off of campus to visit, you know, see my girlfriend at the time, things like that. But I started work—

DC: You were expelled as a student?

CS: Yeah. There were a variety of different reasons used, you know, grades, this and that. I was border—I think my grades were probably borderline because of the fact that I'd missed so many classes and things like that, though I passed—I'm trying to remember if I flunked anything. I may have flunked one course or something because of that. But we were all put out of school, basically. And a lot of people didn't return to school as a result that. I was, like I said, nineteen years old—well, '62, in May of 1962, in fact, I was eighteen still.

But Reverend Jemison and Reverend Robert Walker, who were with the NAACP in Baton Rouge, offered me a job working for the NAACP, running a voter registration project. And I walked over, I guess, two-thirds of the southern part of Baton Rouge, door-to-door, trying

to teach people how to pass what was supposed to be, and I say in quotes “a voter registration test.” Basically, it was a form that they had to fill out. And any and every excuse that could be used, you know, short of giving your birthdate down to the second, was used to hold, keep people out. We found some old voter registration forms and tests and things that they used to give that Rhonda had, and she has students nowadays who look at them and can’t believe what they had to go through then.

I worked out of an office on South Thirteenth Street, and I always think back about that, because it was an area where when I was a kid I had worked as a shoeshine boy and a cleanup guy at a barbershop on Thirteenth and Government Street in Baton Rouge. I was born about three blocks away on South Thirteenth—it’s now Eddie Robinson Drive, after the coach from Grambling. And, you know, it’s funny because Eddie and my mother and [48:34] were all classmates. And they all went to Leland College and stuff like that. But we—I worked that area. Fortunately, in that area, most of the black people knew me, though I had some who were determined not to get involved. One guy chased me out of his yard with a hoe. Another one had a dog that wouldn’t let me out of the yard once I got in. You know, he wanted to play, but whenever I started toward the gate, he growled. So, [laughs] when the man got home, he let me out. But I was active with the NAACP then.

DC: Why was that, do you think, that some were so reluctant to get involved?

CS: Fear! You know, they didn’t want to lose their jobs. I had some—I had a few relatives—usually it wasn’t the immediate relatives, you know. Those who may not have liked what I did didn’t say anything, because they would have had to put up with my grandmother. And my grandmother backed me. You know, I have to give her credit for that. She, you know, she knew that sometime it had to happen and that, you know, I had been raised to stand up. And

so, you know, it was consistent with how—with my upbringing, I guess, [0:50:00] if I had to say anything like that. And it was me, I guess, you know. I was also still, you know, trying to write and do things like that.

And so, through the spring and the summer of 1962, I worked out of that office during the protests. The NAACP secretary, a lady named Pearl George, who was just a few years older than I was, at the time, worked in the office with me when, you know, she wasn't going to school herself and whatever. She became a city councilperson years later. But Reverend Jelks, Arthur Jelks, and Reverend Walker were the two, and Dr. Anderson, were the NAACP folk who were closest to me at the time.

I—and I guess I can say this now—I went to the NAACP convention in Atlanta in 1962, representing Baton Rouge. You know, and I walked in and [laughs] I almost started a fight with a Klansman outside the Atlanta Convention Center. They were picketing. And, you know, I stopped in the middle of their picket line, to make them walk—you know, nineteen years old. I had just turned nineteen at the time, and so I was, you know—[laughs] I was almost two hundred pounds and big enough to think that I could beat them. And the guys had to say, “Come on. You know, [51:37].”

But a guy named Al Jones and I during the middle of that convention pulled a sit-in at a little place called the Crystal Club. And we had some kids, some Jewish kids, who were there, went in, bought food, and had it sitting in front of them. We walked in, they got up and let us sit down, and we proceeded to eat. Well, they didn't know what to do with us, so they locked the place, put hot water on the stove in pots, turned them up and steamed up the place, basically, I guess, trying to, you know, heat. Okay, I went to Vietnam because it wasn't cold. Okay? [Laughter] So, heat wasn't going to run us out. And Al—I hope he's still alive—

DC: [Laughing] And you’re from Louisiana.

CS: Yeah! You know, it’s like, I’m from Louisiana! You don’t—you know, summer or not, you don’t steam me out of a place and think that’s going to do it. I’ve been in much worse than that. And we got into sort of hot water with some of the NAACP leadership because we didn’t know at the time that we weren’t supposed to have done that because they had sort of had a no-protest agreement going on, and nobody told us about that, because I was there alone.

Ralph Cassimere, Dr. Raphael Cassimere, who was with the New Orleans chapter, was there then. We didn’t know each other, but I ran for a national office during that time for the Youth Commission, and they finally got rid of me on the fourth vote. Okay? But Clara Luper, Daisy Bates—oh boy, what’s my girl’s name. Oh, I’m trying—Ella Baker!

DC: Um-hmm.

CS: Those ladies took us aside and told us we were okay. You know, they had their problems with some of the leadership at the time, too. And, you know, I guess it was, in one sense, second-class citizenship for women that was still being overcome in terms of the old hierarchy. And the elitist group—you know, organizations did this, which was one of the things that put me outside of a lot of it and, I think, made me go where I am now. But Reverend Jelks was one of the people that I admired because—he was a country preacher. Reverend Walker, on the other hand, was a well-educated preacher. They were both AME ministers. But they were committed, and they kept us on track.

You know, because of them, I met Medgar Evers. I was at a meeting with he and his brother Charles, who I loved. Charles was one of my heroes, because Charlie Evers, you know, Charlie Evers said, [0:55:00] [laughing] told me, said once, he says, “If you ever hit me, all you lose is the swing.” He said, “You’re going get the blowback.” [Laughter] And, you know, I

was—philosophically, I was with him on that. But we had a meeting at the church on South Boulevard in Baton Rouge, and I didn’t realize, you know, that little, the impact of that, because three days later, Medgar Evers got shot. And I was one—I was very upset.

But I had gone—I was already back at school. I was writing for the school newspaper, cartooning for it, and stuff like that, and staying sort of in front of the dean of students’ desk almost every week for something that I had done. And he later told me he missed me, because he enjoyed our little [55:56]. [Laughing] He was always wondering what I was going to do next, or what we were going to do next as a staff because we had a group of, at that time, energized students. You know, we had a reason—1963, ’64, ’65—we had reason to want to—

DC: So, you did end up going back to school?

CS: Yeah. I ended up going back to school, back to Southern.

DC: Oh, okay. Back to Southern, okay.

CS: I started—in fact, I went back that fall. I almost—they tried to get me for a violation of a federal injunction in the fall of 1962, because I took some kids to Fuquay Elementary School and I embarrassed the principal, who, you know, who stood and gave a rant about us “Communist outside agitators” coming in and doing this and that, and I explained to him in front of the TV camera that I had grown up down the street from that school, so I wasn’t exactly an “outside agitator.” I was an “inside agitator” and I wasn’t going to stop agitating. Well, they wanted to put me in jail for a violation of a federal injunction: ten years, ten-thousand-dollar fine, ta-da-ta-da-ta-da.

Reverend Jelks called the NAACP office. And I think it was Gloster Current, who was from Dallas, was the attorney that came down and talked to the district attorney in Baton Rouge, Sargent Pitcher, whom, as funny as it might sound, had handled my mother’s divorce, and

whom, as a poor little kid, my grandmother had fed once or twice when he was growing up, and he remembered her. But my grandmother was very well-known around Baton Rouge, you know, because of her church work and her choirs, and this and that.

DC: Right.

CS: So, all of those factors, I think, had something to do with my not going to jail, because it was trumped up anyhow. The first thing was they were trying—the injunction was against CORE. I was a card-carrying NAACP member at the time, so NAA was not enjoined in that sense.

DC: Um-hmm. Interesting, yeah.

CS: Yeah. And the NAA also had litigatory force. They had, you know, they had Thurgood Marshall and people like that. [Laughs] And so, you know, they weren't going to win that fight. And, as I said, when we went to jail earlier in '61, the charges that they tried to put us, to lay on us then were kicked out before we ever got to court. Because, you know, they were basically unconstitutional. It was something that was punitive, that they were trying to do to make us shut up. They didn't do that. Instead, some of us went in different directions.

You know, I used to send nasty cartoons to the Ku Klux Klan headquarters. Robert Shelton I know didn't know who I was, would never know who I was on the streets, but I picked on the Klan. I still pick on, you know, the—I don't want to say just the conservatives, because I think anybody who's doing wrong. But as a registered Independent, I have the right to do that, [laughs] I think, and I still do.

DC: When did you—?

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we are rolling.

DC: Okay, so we’re back with Chuck Siler. You’ll notice that we did move locations, because it turns out that the planet actually moves, and the sun, so our light has shifted, so so have we. Chuck, if we could pick up—unfortunately, due to time, we’re going to move a little bit faster than we have been.

CS: Okay.

DC: But we had been talking about your work in protesting with the NAACP. [1:00:00] I wonder if we should move on to leaving college and going west, and then your work in the Army.

CS: Left college. I went west, moved to California. I got involved with theater, with the American Theater of Being with Frank Silvera. I managed to trade off production design for some acting classes and a little bit of money and things like that and started what was going to later become some time in Hollywood. I did work a little bit with Willis Thomas and the guys at the Hollywood NAA in the ’70s.

But I was drafted in ’67, and I wound up going through one of those funny things, careers in the military, that probably would make a good sit-com, because I was—I had to go to Vietnam to get the job that I wanted, you know, that I enjoyed doing. And it was basically because I had been through, here we go, nuclear weapons school, though I had a degree in art and a lot of experience writing for newspapers. And I did manage for three months to be editor of my college newspaper just so I could legitimately say that I had done that, and I had to have some folks in the administration lobbying on my behalf to do that. [Laughs] The president didn’t want that, but it happened, and my last summer at the school, I did edit the newspaper, and that next fall, I edited the alumni newsletter. So, I graduated from Southern. I finished officially in January of ’66, after going back to school.

My stay in California the first time was fairly short, not quite eight months, nine months. I went back—I came back to the states after the military. Now, in the military, again, we ran into—I was on charge of quarters the night that Martin Luther King was killed. And being one of the—I was one of the older guys in the company. I was twenty-four at the time. I was a late draftee, you know; I didn't know I was going to have to go. And there was turmoil. We had to talk folk out of—I was at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, at the time, and we had to talk folk out of fights. I had to talk to some white officers who were afraid to let black soldiers go into things and I had to tell them how *not* to go into some of the communities in Tucson, because the Hispanic and small black community that they had then, they were more afraid of what might happen there than what was going to happen in the other community where they were more likely to have problems, and that was the white community. But they managed to get through that. It was not a good time, okay?

When I got to Vietnam, I wound up, instead of being a truck driver, as they had wanted me to do after that strange odyssey from nuclear weapons to light vehicle driver school, and because I could type and I already had a degree and things like that, I was sent to an AG section as a senior clerk and I wound up, because someone told them about that, editing the AG newspaper. After about three weeks of doing that—

DC: What does AG stand for?

CS: Oh, Adjutant General.

DC: Okay.

CS: The information office needed a replacement. Our company clerk, who was from California and considered me a homeboy, told the guy, says, “We've got a guy over here who's got, you know, experience as a writer.” He had seen a scrapbook that I had with some of my stuff

in it. And Fred Carl, who was NCO I/C of the office, called me over and asked if I might be interested in the job. Well, they also—they knew I was an artist, because I had started cartooning in the AG newspaper, which was a mimeographed sheet. Okay, I learned to draw, I learned [laughs] etching from doing mimeograph and ditto and stuff like that. [Laughs] That old, okay? So, naturally, I said, “Yes.” And I had a chance to travel, [1:05:00] do stories and things like, you know. And we were attached to the First Logistical Command, which was the Command Information Office. I got to play with a little radio, we wrote stuff for television. We did, you know, we did a variety of things. And I hate to say I enjoyed that part of military service.

We had some problems because, again, we ran into racism, okay, and it was deeply embedded in the older NCOs. Now, I met Grendel Howard, who later became the first female sergeant major in the Army, who was a good friend of Fred Carl, who was my NCO I/C during that time. She came to visit. There was a major who later became a general, Sherian Cadoria, who went to Southern. She was a major at the time that I was there and was kind of surprised, because she was a senior my freshman year at Southern, and here was another Southerner who showed up in the office. So, I had friends. General Richards used the fact that I had a top-secret clearance from nuclear weapons to be able to do some things, some sessions and things like that, that other folk weren't cleared to do, but he could activate my clearance when he needed to and did.

I got to see the country. I got to write about the black soldiers who were doing things, you know, hometown news releases, which were something that our guys weren't getting a lot of. But, then again, I was the only black guy that I knew of, at the time, in the field doing stuff. There's a guy named Arnold Bourgeois, who was a cameraman in New Orleans, Channel Six, Arnold was on a [1:06:55] team, and I happened to go out with them when they were getting

ready to do a story. And we didn't realize for thirty years that we had met each other at the time until we started talking one day and did that. I came back, went to work for Southern. I was hired as sports information director and assistant public contacts director.

DC: Can I interrupt and just ask one question, which is, I mean, you had this position in Vietnam, where you were sort of—you were a voice for the black soldier, or you were, you know, helping send some news back home, right?

CS: Right. I took that up. I had a guy tell me that, you know—I was called a racist because of the fact that I was—I concentrated on that. But I had to point to a board that showed at one point that before I started doing it, we had probably five percent of the hometown news releases, for example—not the news stories, but, you know, “this guy is fixing,” you know, “is a mechanic doing this” kind of story. When we were out doing stories, those are little pickup things: take a picture of a guy, write a brief little thing, send it down to Long Binh. It would go out to their hometown newspaper.

DC: Right.

CS: You know, who, where they were from, those kind of things we'd put in, so they'd know where to send them. Okay, some of the guys that I met, we were talking about that earlier, like Charlie Black from St. Louis, these were guys that I just happened to meet because I was older. And, you know, they would come through, and we'd run into each other or talk. Henri Huet from the AP and I went out to this orphanage, and we were talking—you know, we were talking earlier about this—there were kids who had lost limbs. We saw one kid who had his jaw blown away. You know, I mean, he didn't have the lower half of his face, and they had to figure out ways to feed him, this and that. I don't—you know, I didn't think he was going to survive much longer.

But the things that you saw every day weren't—you know, the things that you see in war, even if you're not a grunt, you know, if you're not an infantryman, are things that you can't often talk to people about when you get back, because they have no way of understanding it. I have some good friends who were guys who are LAPD, in fact, in the '70s, who had been over there. We could have conversations. We could talk about what we had seen, and they understood the fact that there were race riots in Vietnam. People don't talk about that. Okay?

There were times when troops would come in from the fields and try to tell guys who were stationed in or near cities—I was—my information office was at Head & Headquarters Compound in Qui Nhon [1:10:00] There were fights downtown between soldiers who had come in out of the field, black and white soldiers, because white soldiers would tell the black guys, “You can't come in here.” Wait a minute! Hold up! You know, we're all green, supposedly. You know, and it doesn't mean light green go over here, and dark green go over there. That wasn't the way, you know, it was supposed to work.

I tended to be an advocate at times when it was necessary, when guys were getting into trouble. I had done a little troop-pushing when I was at Fort Huachuca, and I found out a lot of guys—I had a platoon of guys at one point that I was in charge of that had all been, for the most part, probably seventy percent of them had been in the stockade, usually for things that had nothing to do with crime—a lot of the Hispanic guys because they didn't understand the language. So, in my platoon, I started getting the guys who spoke English to work with the guys who didn't, you know, to help them because they were going to need that kind of thing.

When I came out of the military, I hadn't—I still haven't changed, like I said, basically. With what I do as a cartoonist now, it's a running commentary on what's going on. And, yes, I pick up and point out racism, you know, and it comes from both sides. Like I said, I'm an

Independent. I see some things from the Democrats and I see it from the Republicans. My best friend used to be media guy for the Libertarian Party, okay, one of my oldest close buddies. We fuss and fight. We’ll probably do it until we’re ninety if we can live that long.

But I was able to, going back—and I have to go back to 1962 for a minute. Two of the guys who became good friends of mine, Bill Rusky and Larry Wigg, at the time, were two young white guys who were trying to write a book about the Civil Rights Movement. I don’t know whatever happened after awhile, but Laurence Maxim Wigg was a part of the Maxim family that—the truck people. They talked me out of going to a Klan rally. They left me, actually. I wanted to go to a Klan rally with them and hide in the trunk of their car at Stone Mountain. That’s how silly I was. But they were at LSU for the summer and did that.

What I learned was, you know, I think, during that period of time, was how to take people according to who they were and how they were to me, as opposed to—because I made some friends that are, you know, I couldn’t ask somebody just because they were black to risk their life for me. And they did, and some guys did some things that were about the fact that we were friends, as opposed to the fact that we had different colors. So, I try to look at, you know, the heart of the person. I think that’s what’s important to me, in terms of where I am now.

And, again, Sam Caster was my buddy in Baton Rouge who died back in, what, ’99, 2000? But Sam was the one who said, you know, to him, you know, the four races of man were A, AB, B, and O. You know? And, again, you can’t tell who’s what because—we laughed. We were both Bs, and both our wives were Os. So, we said, “Well, we’re in interracial marriages, even though they look the same,” you know. [Laughs] He says, “If I’m going to the hospital,” he says, “I’m not going to ask you for a piece of skin. I’m not going to say, ‘Give me some skin,’

but I *will* say, ‘Give me some blood.’” You know? And so, we started looking at it like—and then, why we were friends, because sometimes friends have to question why you’re friends.

I learned over the years—when I worked at Southern, and I’m now trying to catch up so we can move forward, some of the guys that I had a good chance to work with when they were students—Mel Blount, Harold Carmichael, if you’re a football fan, Isiah Robertson, who played for the Rams—I was a few years older than them. I was twenty-six, and most of these guys were twenty-one, twenty-two, and I still refer to them as “my kids,” okay, because I was just older enough to deal with them.

Robert Love and I, who played for the Bulls, were classmates, and we were, you know—well, he was a year behind me, but we were good—you know, the friendships that you develop over these times and doing different things—when I worked at Grambling—well, not *at* Grambling, but for [1:15:00] Black Associated Sports Enterprises, this was the first black sports network on television. It should have been—it *should* have been what became BET. But we were trying to do things—I was trying to convince people that we should do films on folk like Robert Smalls. And they were going, “Who’s Robert Smalls?” Well, I had a bad attitude in those days, and I called a couple of producers some things that they didn’t really like when it came down to me saying, “You’re stupid.” But I didn’t have that restraint, you know.

After I ran my own business—I freelanced as a writer, as an artist, I did a little film work here, a little TV work there, I did some ghostwriting, rewriting of scripts for other people and things like that, or some freelance public relations for about ten years. Moved back to Louisiana and went to work for the first Division of Black Culture of any state in the country. My friend, Ruth Wesley, was director. Edwin Edwards, the guy they called “The Crook” in Louisiana, started that. Okay, The Crook did more for black people than most people who followed him.

And for some strange reason, though they never mention this, The Crook always left the state in the black. [Laughter] Yeah. Budget-wise, the state was always in the black when The Crook was running it. Now, like him or not, and I have friends who hate him, I try to look down the middle at it. Why do you hate the guy who was supposedly The Crook, who made money for everybody and who only took a dollar a year for his job? Yeah, okay, so maybe you should have paid him a percentage of what he made. You know, logically, for me, that might have made more sense, because if he was going to see over the state and he was making money—you know.

DC: Um-hmm.

CS: But we made strides there, I think, because we were able to move agenda forward. You know, we put out—I put out a national thing to all of the black radio stations in the country, or the radio stations with majority black audiences, about—and I’m not taking credit for this, but it became a thing. 365 Black was the idea. You know, we’re not just black in February.

DC: Um-hmm.

CS: Okay. By that time, it was, “We are black three hundred and sixty-five days a year.” Let’s go with this. The mayor of Baton Rouge could tell you about that, Kip Holden, because he was on radio at the time, and I used to do a few things with him to let him know, you know, to put history into his show. And he was concerned about that. He was good. He went back to law school, became a legislator, and now he’s on his third term, second or third term, as mayor of Baton Rouge. The—

DC: Can you comment on sort of culture and politics being intertwined and not separate entities?

CS: They are, very much so, because politics impact culture. And a part of how that happens is that if you are not concerned about the culture and you are in power, you can hurt

cultures by overlooking them. You know, I’m going to a meeting next week in Carrollton, where one of the former city council members is trying to create a project that stresses the diversity of the city, which is minority white, technically. But it’s, in terms of the majority of the city council and those who govern it, white. Conservative, also. So, we have to deal with that, but it’s *how* you have to deal with that. Okay?

Going back again, I moved back to Louisiana. After I left the Division of Black Culture, I went to work for the Louisiana State Museum. I took about not quite a year off. But when I went to the Louisiana State Museum, I was the second black curator there. I was the first black Louisianan and the first male to have a curatorial job there. We did get involved, and my wife knows, I’m not going to stay on this, but I fell in love with the Mardi Gras Indians. And I did that, in part, because of the fact that I had heard about my Indian heritage and the family, and this and that, from my father, from my uncle, from, you know, bits and pieces of this and that, and I wanted to find out about it. So, in ’94 I did an exhibit on that.

One of the funny things about it was a white photographer decided that I was being prejudiced because I—[1:20:00] the show was about African American photographers looking at the black Indians in New Orleans. And I wound up having to ask him to bring a note from his mother certifying that he was black. And, you know, he left us alone after that. But we’ve never been great friends since then and won’t be probably. But, you know, I’m not going to miss him. I have enough friends.

The thing that I discovered along the way was, again, interoffice politics also—not just, you know, state and local government, but it filters all the way down to the basic level, where you have to sometimes remind people that, “Look, stop and think before you react.” Because I look at it like this. I said the first thing the average white person that I know, and I’m using that

generically, is going to think about is how to do the white thing. The people who want to do right will think that, but stop.

You know, I’m not—I try not to be black-reactive. You know, I’m not going to just react out of what I—I’ve accepted what I am culturally. I know who I am. I define me. You know, I call myself an American African. I’m of African descent. But everybody on this planet, according to the folk that I know think about it, you know, and who are not bound by some religious myth or whatever, understand where mankind started—in that place we now call Africa. So, we’re all Africans in that sense. Maybe, as John Sinclair, the poet said, we should call this planet Africa and get on with it, you know. [Laughter] Because the climate made us look different and how we play with history comes out of who became the powers, who got to write the story, you know, that lion again. You know, when I found out that they, “Until the lion writes his own story, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.”

A friend, Kalid Hafiz, that I work with at JazzFest in New Orleans—I used to represent the museum doing things on the Black Heritage Stage, then it became the African Heritage Stage, you know, over a period of time. We have to make gradual changes to get people to understand what the culture was about and how we were approaching it, so that it could be informative for everyone and hopefully elevate the level of consciousness for all of the people we were dealing with. How we were able to—you know, I was able to go in the schools and talk to kids and tell them about what it was like being in jail because I had been in jail. They listened to that and understood that I wasn’t kidding. There is no b.s. here. I wasn’t a hero. I was a foot soldier. That’s what I think of myself as when it comes to civil rights. I was another person who was there. I was able to make some differences, but my differences were on the one-to-one level, more so than on the one-to-a thousand.

But I’ve always felt like this, and I’ve a little success in teaching kids about art and about history. And when I teach art, I teach art and history and music. You know, we talk about the blues, we talk about jazz, we talk about the history of African people in the world and the interactions between the groups of people, why and how people think of different things. This is what I think we need to know. I think we have to be self-defining. You know, I define Chuck Siler based on what I learn from history. But I’ve had a chance over the years to meet some, you know, meet all kinds of folks. I’ve had friends who did all sorts of things. You know, Lenny Bruce’s mother brought me chicken soup when I had the flu. [Laughs] You know? Sally Marr was her name, you know, and I knew her through other friends who were comics. You know, they knew me because I was a cartoonist. I was accepted as a comic because I did cartoons and sometimes wrote a line here, or two. You know, I’ve been an official cartoonist for two comedy clubs, The Comedy Store at one point in the early ’70s and The Improv in the early ’80s.

DC: Wow, yeah.

CS: Because I lived in the neighborhood. I hung out there. The comics knew I was a writer. They knew I was a cartoonist. We had sometimes very serious discussions about perceptions, how we perceive each other. What was funny? Why was it funny? You know? If you could tell a black joke, I could tell a good Polish joke. You know, I could tell a joke about anybody if it were that way and I wasn’t afraid to. Because if you thought you could bring it—“if you can’t take it, don’t bring it” was the case.

And, you know, I’ve got some old friends that we can’t laugh out loud about some of the things that we laughed about over the years. But they all understand that the bottom line is the humanity. This is what we have to work toward and this is how we have to deal with those people who are too stupid to understand, you know, who one plus one has to be three.

DC: Um-hmm.

CS: Are you giving time now? [Laughs]

DC: I think that—I was going to say I think that might be perfect right there. I was going to ask as a final question if you could comment on the power of the pen and the power of humor, but you basically just did it.

CS: I think this. People—you know, I have a good audience. You know, we were talking earlier, and I was telling you I’m regular editorial page cartoonist for the *Louisiana Weekly*. *The Black Commentator* uses my stuff. I’ve got, oh God, ten people, good friends—the Louisiana Folknet puts it out, whatever I, you know, send it to them. I’ve written about it and I still do write occasionally about it. You know, I’ll do a little review, things like that. I’ve got friends, I guess, from every walk of life. A lot of them are in academia. Some of them are now retired from there. A lot of them are professional journalists still. You know, I hear from them when—if I get slightly off-tack. You know, if I don’t use enough female characters in the cartoons, I have some lady friends who will say, “You don’t use enough women!” I say, “Okay!” You know, “I’m—remind me!” You know, because you do what’s instinctive, what’s natural. I find that if I can make a person laugh, more often than not, they will remember what I said. If I hear—I notice that when I—sometimes I do things and I’ll get responses from places that I didn’t expect or from people that I didn’t expect to hear from. Okay?

I had an instructor who died a few weeks ago. His name was Hill Perkins. When we did the Baton Rouge bus boycott—I was thinking about Doug Brinkley and some of the other guys who were there. Doug and, like I said, we were on different ends of the podium but we tied everybody in the middle. But I told the story about how Dr. Perkins used to close his classes. I

had humanities class under him in an amphitheater-style room, a choir room, and I always sat up in the back where I could watch everything going on.

And Dr. Perkins used to like to close with a little style, with *Cyrano de Bergerac*, whom I later found out was the father of modern science fiction in real life. Yeah! [Laughs] And, you know, he would recite Roxane’s realization that *Cyrano* was the person who wrote those letters from Christian, and girls would get up and walk out of class, leave their purses, leave their coats in the wintertime, and come back in, embarrassed. And I’d sit back there, saying, “I’ve got to be like that,” you know. I said, “I want to be like *him*. I want to be able to do *that*. I want to be able to make them listen.” You know? He was *one* of the teachers that I had who could convince a class like that, you know, the charismatic teacher. So, you try to take a little bit of each one of those.

DC: Um-hmm.

CS: But I had him almost fall out of his seat, because we used to play tennis together, and I told him he was the most literate trash-talking tennis player that I had ever met in my—and he loved it! But when I wrote my last column from a student newspaper, he sent me a note telling me to keep on doing that. You know, he says, “You ought to—” you know, he encouraged me, “Go on with that.” So, you know, here I am, fifty-some odd years later, trying to do the same thing. [1:30:00] And when I look back at the people who contributed to who I am, I carry a little piece of all of them.

You know, when John Franklin and Lonnie and the guys sent the letter, saying, you know, they want you to do this, it was just about—I got that letter about a few days after Ethan was born. Okay? I said, “I’ve got a grandson. I’ve got to leave *something*,” so that one day when my son takes his son to that museum, if they want to call up the interviewer and see if—I want

him to understand, you know, something about his heritage, his personal heritage. You know, what, who raised—who raised your daddy? You know? So, you can go out there and you can be your own man, because that’s what it’s about.

You know, it’s the same thing that you get when I talk to kids in my workshops. You know, we sit down and we talk about music. I tell them about who Alvin Batiste was, who Danny Barker was, who these musicians that came out of our hometown, the Tabby Thomases, you know, who Henry Butler is. I let them hear the music, let them hear brass band music, talk to them about the art of what the Mardi Gras Indians do, mobile art. Okay?

You know, you come into a museum like this—one of the greatest collections of folk art that you’re going to find is right here where we sit. Okay, Harry Robinson has been collecting it for years. The fact that we have to celebrate this, we have to understand why it’s done, what motivates the artist. It’s not money, because if it were just money—I’d like to be wealthy, but I don’t stop doing the art because of the fact that I’m not wealthy. Okay, I have something to say and I have an audience. I play with that. You know, I try to reach the audience. My audience extends it. And sometimes I hear from places, like I said, that I never expected to hear from, because a friend of mine sent it out to his business list. And I have one guy in California who does that. He’s got a big list. I wish mine were. But his people re-send it.

You know, email—if I had had email thirty years ago—if we had had email in 1960, the Civil Rights Movement would have been *over* by 1965, the way we were approaching it! Because we would have been hitting people—you wouldn’t have been able to open your computer without getting us! [Laughter] You know, the thing is, when I look back at that, I say, “Boy, when I had Mel and those guys at Southern, playing ball,” I said, “if I had had email then.” You know, it was mimeograph, copy, walk in, go to a press conference. And if you had to do it

with the pro teams, and I had that once with the Rams, I literally memorized my stats so I wouldn't have to stand up there and constantly refer to it, because of what was expected. Here was this guy from this little black school, okay, so those teachers who told me you had to be three times as good were whispering in my ear, saying, “You know, you've got to show them how good you are!”

And it's something that I think was a part of that motivation and it's a part of what—it's ongoing, in terms of what motivates me to try to continuously make a statement, you know, and to make a statement that is a human statement more so than just a statement. You know, someone asked me once, Mr. Hubbard, Jean Paul—I studied with Jean Paul Hubbard and Frank Hayden. Frank Hayden was a sculptor. We had a lot of one-on-one conversations. Harold [1:34:08], who taught me things that paid my rent for a long time, he taught commercial art, graphic design, in fact. These guys always stressed the fact that we had to, you know, be able to get out and not be them. You know, it's, “Don't say you're—you're not a little Jean Paul Hubbard. You're not a little Frank Hayden. You're going to be—we're sending you out to be Chuck Siler.” And this is what I represent, you know, all of these people who—I mean, the guys who went to jail with me, the Willie Bradfords. Willie Bradford jerked me away from a door that would have taken off my left hand, [1:35:00] because a deputy sheriff slapped on it.

There was a lady I forgot to mention, but I've got to do this to close it, if [1:35:07]. In 1962, when I was doing the voter registration project, there was a lady who lived in an area that they called The Park. I remember her name as Mrs. Williams. I could be wrong after all this time. But she reminded me when she went to register to vote, she got flunked twice, okay, over b.s. But she was determined—she was eighty-four years old in 1962—that she was going to vote before she died. She was going to be a registered voter. She was going to have the card.

And the third time she went in, I went with her. Now, I was young and stupid and not unlike a lot of folk. I was nineteen years old. I had my gun stashed under my jacket in the back, and if anybody had done anything, it could have been a real bad scene that day, and I would have been remembered for something else. Okay, but she was going to go in there. When she walked through, it was like Lolis Eli walking through those same guys about seven or eight months before, when we got out of jail that January. For whatever reason, they wanted to intimidate one old lady, and they failed horribly, because she walked through—she reminded me of Mary McLeod Bethune. I always think of her when I remember—this lady dressed well, put on her nice suit, and, “Charles, we’re going.” And someone drove us down. I forget who it was now.

But we walked in, and like I said, I was prepared to shoot somebody if they had decided to go that far. They didn’t, because when she walked in, she was *in charge*. They moved aside. She walked—and when she walked into the Registrar of Voters office, I was told, “You can’t go in there.” I said, “No problem.” I stood back against the wall, you know, and I got a corner, okay, a vantage point, *advantage* point, as Rita’s always looked for. Okay? And I was waiting. And I was standing there like this and I was pressing that little Beretta because I wanted—when she came out she had this smile on her face. Okay? That made all of it worth it. It was, you know, as good as it could get at that moment, because she got what she wanted and she got to vote before she died. And, you know, you think about being eighty-four in 1962. Her parents had been slaves. Okay, to her, it was important.

You know, I’m a person who gets upset when somebody tells me they can’t go—they’re not going to vote. I don’t care if you—you know, vote for the person who’s going to do you the least harm, if nothing else. But try to understand what and why you’re doing it. You know, understand—I learn from my wife every day, my wife being a government teacher. You know,

I’m one of her better students. And what happens, I pass the test when I can make her laugh, because to a large degree, that’s what it’s about. If I can put an idea that she passes on to me out and get a reaction from my public, one of the things that artists always want, and I think it happens in anything else. You don’t want ennui. You want a positive reaction or a negative reaction. You want a reaction!

I don’t care what the reaction is, because I’ve got a good friend who’s Republican, who is *diehard*, okay, diehard black Republican. He’s not quite as far right as Adam West or those people, and I’ve managed to bring him back a bit. But we’ve had some *great* arguments. But we love each other like brothers and we will fight intellectually like brothers. [1:40:00] And my point is, we have lessons—I have lessons—I learn from him, because I learn what that side is thinking. My buddy who’s a Libertarian, I learn what the Libertarians are thinking.

I have two good friends who are imams, okay. They aren’t radicals. You know, they aren’t going to go out and blow anybody up. They are parents! But we can talk, because—my Baptist minister buddies—I haven’t been—you know, I go to church for funerals. Okay? I have my own belief. It took years and it took black preachers who didn’t want to become a part of it to make me go to look. You know, the minister at the church that I used to attend wouldn’t let me do workshops for voter registration in his church, because he was afraid. Okay? I was not being afraid and I couldn’t respect him because of the fact that—how are you going to tell me you believe in something and you’re scared to stand up for it? You know, I said, “What would Jesus Christ do to you?” You know, “What would he have to say about you?” You know, what would the Prophet Muhammad have to say if you didn’t stand up? You know, I like the Quakers, because the American Friends Service Committee helped us out *a lot* during the Civil Rights Movement.

DC: Yeah, yeah.

CS: Yeah, they gave us places to meet. We did what we could, you know. So, that’s—
you know, I don’t know if there’s much more to say. [Laughs]

DC: And I don’t think we have much more time, [laughing] so I want to thank you.

CS: [Laughing] I’m waiting for you to say, “Stop!”

DC: I know. And I—well, I didn’t want to stop. I don’t want to stop, but we’ve got to get
on an airplane, unfortunately. So, let me just say, again, thank you so much.

CS: Oh, I—hey, I appreciate—

[Recording ends at 1:42:04]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Sally C. Council