

Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?

I'm a sixth generation New Orleanian on both sides of my family, we have been here since the 1790s. I went to public schools in New Orleans, I got my first two degrees at the University of New Orleans and received my doctorate in History at the Lehigh University in Pennsylvania. In between I was active in the civil rights movement as a member of the NAACP since 1960: I have been involved continually in direct and political action and educational reform. Now, I am doing a number of things for the city's tricentennial (2018).

You were member and eventually president (1960-1966) of the NAACP Youth Council in New Orleans - what did the NAACP teach you?

The NAACP taught me discipline and persistence. Continuing to work eventually pays off. I would not have expected things that happened then, including the election of black mayors, cabinet members and senators,, much less a black President to happen when I joined the NAACP in 1960. It made you think that the big prize would be possible to grasp.

What were your biggest frustrations during this movement? Could you give some examples?

There were times where we thought we did not make much progress. I remember when we had the direct actions at Canal street. It took us over two years and sometimes I was there, picketing alone because I was the president and I could not not fail to show up, and sometimes this was very frustrating. But we were part of a national organisation. So we would attend state meetings, regional meetings and if we lost hope for a moment, we would get hope learning about the successes of youth councils in other parts of the country.

Why do you think the Canal Street Campaign turned out such a success and how did you inspire so many people to pursue the picketing, taking it to the streets, rather than waiting for legal reform? In general, was it difficult to bring up a collectivity in the group, motivate people? Or was it a given - daily motivation to fight for civil rights?

We inspired each other. We had very young children (from the age of seven) who participated in the movement, they were fearless and persistent. I remember one day picketing by myself when it was very cold. Then there were three children coming up, age 8, 9 and 11. They had mittens on. I remember that these little kids had come, whereas the older members had stayed home. That kept you energized. In general, the singing and marching and sense of collectivity of the movement gave you the sense that you could win.

What have been the accomplishments and what have been the failures of the movement, especially in New Orleans? What would you have done differently now?

The biggest gain was the impact on labour opportunities. We didn't have black garbage men, sales clerks, bus drivers etc. before the 1960s. We worked on voter registration as well so we worked on creating political opportunities. It was very difficult to register because of all the challenges they had to go through. Many political leaders in New Orleans today are black leaders. So we made progress in politics, government. and employment.

Some of the frustrations were related to lack of progress of the poorest of the African Americans. If you had an education, you were advantaged, but many of the poorest got left behind. A leadership vacuum was created. None of us really knew how far we had to go. We were fighting for freedom and equality but sometimes the very meaning of that was difficult to grasp fully.

For example, some small black businesses had thrived because blacks had to go there, However, with more business opportunities and bigger business coming up, this was more difficult for these small black business to maintain viability. No one had foreseen that at that time. Looking back, we only looked at the good that we'd accomplish and had not calculated any of the negative consequences.

So the 'leadership vacuum' is not something you'd have anticipated on?

No, because it's a different reality. When better housing opened up in other areas, blacks with money left, but these were the people who were teachers, doctors, and lawyers, etc, who had been most involved in local civil rights activities, who would advocate on behalf of their neighbours. Subsequently, a lot of them moved out and eventually sent their kids to private schools so they did not have the same concerns anymore about the public schools where the vast majority of the working-class blacks sent their kids to. However, I sent my own kids to public schools, to get them to know the world as it is. And I have to continue to advocate on behalf of public schools, not just for my children, but others as well.

Why do you think the people you just talked about did not send their children to public school, out of principle?

I think they acted more narrowly, not maliciously. People care about the future of their children and want to give them the best opportunities. And as the good book says, your heart is where your treasure is. If you don't have children in public schools, you may not be as sensitive to their needs and concerns.

Were you/any of your friends at severe risks during the movement?

Yes and no. I mean you were always at some risk. I was often afraid as I was the president and my decisions would affect other people. I remember one incident where we went outside of New Orleans to organize a new youth council in a small parish in Southwest Louisiana. Whoever had organised it was given permission to meet in a public playground. We met at night, with no lights. They would not turn on the lights. I could not see the people I was talking to, and I am sure they could not see me. At the time I was probably more angry that the officials had not turned on the lights, but later on I thought that something could have happened to us.

Another time, we were asked to help organise a new branch and youth council in the Eastern part of Louisiana and we had to travel by bus through Mississippi for that. It was very bad at that time in the mid 1960s and I didn't know much about that. But I remember one of the older members saying, if we go, we have to get out there before dark. What does this mean? We went, we had the meeting, and we did get out before dark but the building where we went burnt down that night. It makes you wonder what would have happened... So things in New Orleans were bad but outside of New Orleans they were considerably worse. Young people don't expect to die. So we did things then that I would not even dream about doing today. We felt we were winning and we laughed at the people opposing us. But looking back I don't think we realised how dangerous it was.

Who was your biggest inspirer during this time? And who is now?

Martin Luther King, Jr. is certainly one of them. I did not meet him, maybe I shook his hand when he was a speaker at the convention in Atlanta. He was certainly inspirational to me. But locally, our advisor to the youth council, Llewelyn Soniat was always optimistic, I think sometimes unrealistically so, but he was always saying 'we're winning, we're winning'! I remember asking him: 'did you really believe that?' and he said 'well I had to say something!'. I think we needed that spirit. There were a lot of fearless young women in the movement who were very brave and I think that they were the bravest. They would confront any situation. I think even a lot of things I did was because they would put me on the spot - I had to follow them. The majority of the members were women and they were fabulous. Very courageous.

How was the cooperation with CORE? Did you experience any radical differences in approach to the civil rights in the different movements?

At first, it was very good because we were all young people, students, of the same age. Many of us had attended the same high schools so we had pretty much the same goals. Again, it's the 1960's, and I remember the phrase 'no enemies to the left'. If you were not against us, you were with us. And many young people had the same goals. I think CORE members were

maybe a little more impatient. We got along really well. A lot of the CORE members after the first year went to other places in Louisiana which were much more dangerous than New Orleans. I think they started off with the 'two-year campaign' and they pulled out. We didn't. They moved on to other things. But we were persistent.

What do you consider to be unique to the CRM in New Orleans?

I believe that we created an ecumenical movement before it was official, because we brought together people from different parts of the city: Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and even a few Muslims who were not very numerous at that time. But we brought together people from different backgrounds who in the past may have been much more separated. It gave us a sense that we were really one, as opposed to other people.

I ask this because I read in Rogers' book that the role of Creoles in the CRM in New Orleans made an impact on the political gains of the movement. Do you agree with that?

Yes and no. I think that people define 'Creoles' differently. My grandmother would always say she was 'Creole', not 'a Creole'. She would say it to describe her culture. It depends on how you describe your culture. New Orleans is an embracing city; people are allowed to become a New Orleanian no matter where they come from. People from the outside see separation. For example you are tested by being invited over for food; if you ate it you were okay, but if not, you were "funny" and something was wrong with you.

There was some colour consciousness, but less than people talk about it. Because I knew dark-skinned Creoles like myself who were very embracing, and I knew light-skinned who were maybe not considered Creole but who were a bit more aloof. Who didn't really think of themselves as Creoles and looked down on so-called Creoles who they considered quaint or less sophisticated. Most Creoles were downtown New Orleanians who enjoyed a good time in eating and entertainment, as opposed to Uptown black New Orleanians, of all complexions, many who were much more focussed on making money rather than on having a good time.

People often miss that the many of the black middle class (Creoles) we had was Protestant, or former Catholics. These were people who were educated, some of them were teachers, a few of them were doctors or dentists. They were professionally trained as opposed to a lot of the working-class Creoles that were artisans such as carpenters or brick layers or the few people who were involved in the building trades. There weren't that many people you would define as middle class.

Blacks define class a little bit differently from whites, basically by income. So some of the blacks who had less education were people who worked on the docks, longshoremen, but based on income they would be middle-class. So middle-class black people would be postal

carriers, civil servants, school teachers and a few black professionals. So there weren't that many. There were so few black lawyers that at one time I knew *every* black lawyer in New Orleans.

So there were always differences, but a lot of them were neighbourhood differences. People tend to group with people who are most similar to them. It's something I noticed when I came to UNO in 1959: whites sat among whites, blacks among blacks. People sit together with people they already know; very often former school mates. When the high schools began to integrate, I could see changes taking place. So there were some fractional class differences, but a lot of them broke down. We used to talk about the fact that the president of Dillard University could not have gotten a job selling socks in the department stores, because of his colour. So you face the same discriminations - you're forced to interact.

You said: 'The strength came from the camaraderie within the group'. Were there also significant disagreements within the NAACP Youth Council? If so, what did they consider?

Sure there were, but mostly pettiness. We were a very close group. I think even ten or eleven couples got married. We did not only meet but we also socialized together. There were some personal differences and there were differences about tactics. We would take a vote on it. There were people with significant differences who left, but the majority stayed. I can't stress it too much; discipline and persistence. Some people got frustrated and left and only five of us were involved in the full length of the two-year campaign, from beginning to the end, whereas there were hundreds of others involved.

There was me, my wife, Soniat, his son and Joseph Rome, a boy who was only nine when he started. People would come and go. There were times when I got frustrated too. I remember, one day it was hot outside and a lot of people were picketing. One of the members came to me and said she saw her neighbour who 'had crossed a line', she couldn't take it, and she left. So yes, people get frustrated.

I would imagine more than five people to be at the core of the movement over two years...

Yeah, many people claimed to have been involved in the movement, some, who claimed to have marched with M.L. King, Jr. but if those claims were true, nobody could have gotten next to him. Some people now invent civil rights records. There weren't that many people involved. Why? I think most people want instant gratification, and that's not the way it happens.

Did you experience any big differences with your NAACP colleagues in other cities in Louisiana? Did they have a different mentality?

I didn't understand at that time, but I understand now. There were places where it was extremely dangerous to be involved. I couldn't appreciate, for example, why people in Northern Louisiana were not as actively involved but I later understood that as bad as things were in New Orleans, we didn't have the same kind of pressures they had as in Shreveport, Monroe or Alexandria. So we were a little bit frustrated with them for not moving forward, but it was sometimes even very difficult simply to identify with NAACP.

When I first signed up for NAACP, it did not have the name NAACP on the return card, just the address, because there were people fearful of being known to be involved. As things began to open up in the big cities in the South in the 1960s, people became less fearful, but it was still very dangerous; the burning down of the building I talked about happened in 1965 by an active KKK group... After that, one of the black priests who had reluctantly joined, almost immediately requested that his name to be taken off the list because he was frightened. There was progress, but it was still dangerous.

White people involved in the movement were often targets of segregationists as well, how did you deal with that?

We welcomed them and tried to protect them as much as we could. It was a movement that brought people together from all kinds of different backgrounds and more importantly it created friendships for life. I think that's the most important thing that people don't realise. We made a difference. I remember I ran into a man about 15 years ago, who remembered me from the picketing at Canal Street. At that time he was only 7.

You wrote:

"But in the late sixties, Just when we thought we were almost free, just as we were about to cross over our Jordan River into the Promised Land the civil rights coalition began to fall apart. Even the NAACP and Urban League were attacked from within and without for being non responsive to the "real" needs of the community. Actually, the critics identified a major dichotomy within the civil rights movement. Many of the civil rights gains could be enjoyed only by the better educated middle class blacks. For many of the poorest African Americans, having the right to stop at a Burger King or a Shoney's without the economic means was a cruel hoax. Additionally, as better housing became available many middle class black leaders began to desert the old neighborhoods, leaving the poor feeling more alienated and frustrated, and leaderless."

Why do you think the NAACP got out of touch with the community it was supposed to address?

I was not conscious of that at the time, but the movement was organised and led by middle-class blacks. The gains and goals were basically for middle class blacks. The whole idea is to move the lower classes up, but we weren't as successful. If you were a middle-class black in the 1950s and you earned income that would have allowed you to go to a better part of the city, or eat at a restaurant, you could not go because you were black. Once the barriers were broken down, you could go. In theory, poorer black people could go too,----- if they had money, but they didn't have money.

This is something a lot of people miss when they talk about M.L. King, Jr; he talked about this in the fall of 1967. He realised that he had gone as far as he could go in winning rights just for blacks. He realised that he had to advocate on behalf of all of the dispossessed people, all of the poor people, which he called 'the poor people's campaign'. However, it's very hard to bring this group together who are natural allies, but often fight against each other.. And it's still kind of elusive.

How do you get people together whose economic interests are similar, but not their social interests? People often vote against their own interests. That's hard. I wonder after 50 years, how successful would M.L. King have been in his 'poor people's campaign'? It would have been difficult. Bringing together the underclasses - the vast majority of people who are not middle class.

But what caused the 'going down' of the movement?

In the mid 1960s, you had the disruption of the Northern cities, Harlem, Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, where a lot of poor blacks were trapped, but nobody really saw their problems. The movement didn't do much for them, because they were still poor and probably as much discriminated in respect to housing as here. Growing up in New Orleans and the South, you thought of New York as the Mecca where everything is "perfect." After the riots in those city's we realized this was not the case. Many of the problems were economic and I don't think we understood it as clearly.

New Orleans did not change as much as the Northern cities. There were sporadic protests; we had a confrontation with the police and Black Panthers in the fall of 1970; but the Panthers were not violent; they organized a breakfast program and tried to get people registered to vote. The police really targeted them. In New Orleans there weren't as many outbreaks as you had in other places. I think, maybe because we have all the festivities; Mardi Gras, Jazz fest, Oyster fest, Strawberry fest... there's always something that people are celebrating. I think that might make people temporarily forget the bigger issues at hand.

Bell Hooks writes in one of her articles on White Supremacy that the white participants in the CRM in the 1960s she encountered were fighting the system of black oppression at first, but eventually realised they would be better off fighting this system from within

and thought that the problem of racism was not as big anymore. Did you experience anything similar around that time?

We couldn't see the bigger picture. I remember we were in a fastfood restaurant in 1984 in Vicksburg, Mississippi, on a Sunday morning. We were coming back from an NAACP meeting. Other than the black employees, we were the only blacks in the restaurant. I thought about it; a few years earlier, there might have been a mob action. I wondered to myself: why were white people fighting so hard to keep us out of here? And why had we fought so hard to get in? Was this all this was about?

I think for a lot of white people, the movement was about civil rights, opening public accommodations. Blacks, they said, should have the same rights to go to public places, get food, and so forth. I think many people sensed that that was what the movement was about and after civil rights laws were passed, it was over. Many white people wondered, "what do they want now?" We passed legislation, now what? But the civil rights laws didn't cost anything. It didn't cost whites anything. M.L. King, Jr. however was talking about a fundamental restructuring of the country's economy. Guaranteed health care, Education, housing, etc. This would cost something. Those who had something, had to give up something, and many refused to give.

But politicians, lawyers and everyone working on civil rights at the time knew that this was necessary, right?

I don't think they did. They only understood it much later. A lot of people thought that just passing civil rights laws would make everything just fine. You don't realise that having a right to go to a lunch counter doesn't mean that you have the money to afford it. This is what M.L. King, Jr. talked about in the last few months of his life. We have to do something for the poorest of the poor.

W.E.B. Du Bois was one of the few people who talked about this in his book *Black Reconstruction*: he talks about that the most difficult thing is to bring together the natural allies who are often fighting against each other. How do you do that? M.L. King, Jr. tried. I'm not saying there haven't been some efforts to make society more humane, but if you think in terms of the opposition to universal health care, why would people who have it oppose it for people who need it the most?

How do you think stepping aside from social movements in this regard can be challenged?

Different things affect people differently. Charles Dickens would write about this in one of his novels; rich people would cry crocodiles' tears about something bad happening at the other side of the world, whereas they would close eyes to similar struggles in their own close

surroundings. I think a big part of the problem is that people don't empathize nearly enough with their neighbors.

Change does not come in instantly. Sometimes it's glacier-like. You have to change individual by individual by individual. You have to learn how to measure progress in small increments; millimeters, not miles. That's where discipline and persistence pays off. You change one life at a time. You cannot change everybody.

What has been the impact of the accomplishments of the CRM in New Orleans on present-day segregational problems? To what extent was it radical?

I think we have eliminated most of the physical forms of racism. We still have this ongoing debate among ourselves as to the need for integration. Some people have said that we don't really need integration, but need to work out differences among ourselves. I think that's too limited. Because the problems are the same - you can't isolate problems and say well, I live here, I can solve problems here; they spill over to the whole community. Problems have to be worked on as a group. I think now, we depend too much on black politicians. A political agenda is not the same as a civil rights agenda. I think black politicians are much more concerned about staying in power. A lot of them have been effective, but politics comes with compromises. So we need black political leaders, but we also need gadflies, who sting the politicians, trigger them to not compromise on their principles. I don't think we have that as much today as we had it forty or fifty years ago.

Why is that?

I think because when I was growing up, the community leaders were the doctors, attorneys, teachers. Nowadays, community leaders are serving in the government. A black mayor, a black councilman, a black legislator, something like that - less attached to the community itself. The civil rights movement was not run by political leaders. I think that is a big change. And even the modern civil rights organisations are far too dependent upon black politicians for support. As such, you might overlook their failings, you don't criticize them as much. There are black politicians we would not nearly criticize as much as we did white politicians in the past. Because they're ours. I think you're much better off if you can be more objective.

Is there anything else you'd like to say?

I'd tell young people not to give up. Sometimes, I get pessimistic but then I think "don't give up. People can change." I met Nelson Mandela not long after he became President of South Africa. I never forget what he said when someone asked him whether he was bitter about the years he spent in prison. He said he was always encouraged by what was happening in America at the time. He and his fellows learned to encourage themselves. They did, and in

fact follow the progress of the CRM in America They were convinced that meaningful change could come to South Africa. But change would only come when people agreed to change. He would tell people 'change yourself, change the person who's looking back at you in the mirror'. And that's the hardest thing to do. To be honest with yourself. But it's necessary for change to come.