

CHARLES KIMBROUGH
Nashville Room, Nashville Public Library
Recorded September 14, 2005
Site: Nashville Room
Interviewer: Gwen Smith, Volunteer, Nashville Room
Videographer: Rachel Lawson
Transcribed by: Carolyn James, November 30, December 1, 2 and 5, 2005
Edited by:
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[TAPE 1, SIDE A] [COUNTER: 000]

SMITH: Hello. I'm Gwen Smith, and this is our one hundredth interview for the Civil Rights Oral History Project at the Nashville Public Library. Today we will be interviewing Dr. Charles Kimbrough.

Welcome, Dr. Kimbrough, and thank you for consenting to be a part of the project. We know that you have a lot of information to share with us, and if you will just start the interview by giving us your name, address, and your current employment.

KIMBROUGH: Miss Smith, thank you for having me. I feel honored to be your one hundredth person interviewed. I live here in Nashville, Tennessee at 3852 Augusta Drive, and I've been here in Nashville almost long enough, I guess, to be called a Nashvillian. I've been here since 1969. Of course, prior to that, I went to school at Tennessee State.

SMITH: And your current employment?

KIMBROUGH: Well, the fact is, I have as a motto that I'm not going to retire, and I am self-employed, in that I'm a real estate broker and involved with some real estate development. I serve, at no pay of course, as an associate minister at Spruce Street Missionary Baptist Church.

SMITH: And tell us your place of birth. Where did you grow up?

KIMBROUGH: Well, I grew up on at Rural Route, Prospect, Tennessee, where Pulaski is the county seat, infamous for being the birthplace of the KKK [Ku Klux Klan], and until I was twenty years old, I was based basically around Prospect.

SMITH: And that's in Giles County, correct?

KIMBROUGH: Giles County. Yes, it is.

SMITH: What were your parents' names, and do you have any siblings, and what are their names?

KIMBROUGH: Both my parents, of course, are deceased, but Sterling Kimbrough was my father and Azee Smith Kimbrough, of course, was my mother. I say 'of course' because her maiden name was Smith.

So we grew up in the rural community where cotton was plentiful (laughs) to pick, corn to shuck, peas, hay, that kind of thing. Livestock, namely cattle and horses. That was my surroundings.

SMITH: Did you have any siblings?

KIMBROUGH: Yes, there were six of us. I have two older brothers who have passed, and the youngest in the family was my sister. She's passed. And I have a brother in Upper Marlboro, Maryland, and my sister still lives in the homeplace area.

SMITH: Good. Where did you go to school, and that includes your elementary, high school, and beyond high

school.

KIMBROUGH: Well, that was a story in itself, in that when I went to school in the early years, I was something like five or six miles from school, and I had the satisfaction at that time of having my mom take me about halfway to school on a horse, and I was able to walk the rest of the way with the older children.

That was for, I guess, three years, and then we had a little school about three-fourths of a mile from our house and that served as the church and schoolhouse. I went there and had the satisfaction of graduating from Beasley Chapel Elementary School. I knew all of the members of the graduating class, since there were only two of us, my cousin (laughs) and myself.

SMITH: And you were at this school how many years?

KIMBROUGH: Well, I went there from about the third grade through the eighth grade.

SMITH: So that was like a one room school?

KIMBROUGH: One room school.

SMITH: One of the Rosenwald schools?

KIMBROUGH: No, I don't think to my knowledge Rosenwald was involved in that. I think that was a community effort and just at that time gave us someplace to finish what most of the children were doing then, finishing grade school.

SMITH: So then after the eighth grade you went to what school?

KIMBROUGH: Well, I had hopes of going to high school at that point. In fact, I asked Papa. I told him I wanted to go to high school. I don't know how I created the vision, or the vision was created, but I asked him anyway, because it was kind of unusual. But he remembered it.

SMITH: Why was it unusual for an eighth grader to want to go to high school?

KIMBROUGH: Well, the high school, the only school that was available to -- if you will accept a term for that area -- 'colored children' -- was ten miles away. Transportation. But Papa told me that he thought he should kind of set a scene for me so I could understand -- that my two older brothers were not there any longer, and somebody had to help him on the farm.

And I looked around for somebody, and focused back on myself (laughs), so I stayed there until I was drafted. At that time I was not accepted in the Army, the end of the war having passed, and I guess not many people were needed.

I had had an accident that affected my eye when I was two years old, and so the doctor said, 'I'm not going to keep you in the service, although your vision is good. But with this defect being as it is, and you'll be in the Army, and dust and grime, dirt will be getting in your eyes. So I'm going to send you on back.'

Well, a full health person who failed to meet military requirements -- we didn't look favorably on the person who was rejected. But I came back on home.

At the age of eighteen, a bus started running about a mile from our house to Bridgeforth High School in Pulaski, and I told Papa that I was going to high school, and went there.

SMITH: Let's go back so we can get this, because this is very important that we keep this within a time frame. Now, you finished eighth grade and stayed on the farm approximately four years and worked with your father. Then you went to the military. About how long were you in the military?

KIMBROUGH: I was drafted but I was rejected at that point. I was rejected at eighteen, then went to high school for two years.

SMITH: Well, I commend you for wanting to go back to school after several years of absence. So now we are at the Bridgeforth High School in Pulaski and you are approximately eighteen years of age, correct? What happened next?

KIMBROUGH: Well, at the age of eighteen, I had just really stayed out for two years. I would ordinarily have been going at about the age of sixteen to high school. I finished eighth grade at age sixteen, and that's when I made my request to go to high school, and Papa said, 'You got to stay here.' So I stayed there two years and then got drafted.

[Then at age eighteen] I was doing well in high school. However, I played football. Knew very little about it, but I played football, and got pretty good, I guess, according to some, at that point. I enjoyed my high school years even though I stayed out two or three days to work on the farm sometimes. I still enjoyed high school. Fortunately, after coming to school, somebody said, 'You know, you made the Honor Roll.'

I said, 'Gee whiz.' I kept going.

And then, after two years, I was too old to play football. Somehow I envisioned in my mind that that would be good enough to get a scholarship to go to college. And so after not being able to go to college from playing football, because I only had two years experience, I realized that I was not going to be able to go to college even if I stayed and finished, because I knew that in the Kimbrough family there were not funds for my going to college.

So I had volunteered at that point for the service, and lo and behold, I'm told -- I don't know it to be factual, but so many things that indicated it could very well have been, until I had a good score as a volunteer for the Army, and so, lo and behold, I went into the Army and stayed for a period of six years. That's quite a story in itself.

SMITH: So you were approximately twenty years old when you volunteered for the Army.

KIMBROUGH: Right. Let's look at your home town. You've mentioned it a couple of times in the interview. Was it segregated in any way, and if so, how was it segregated, and what was your family's response to the segregation?

SMITH: Well, it was segregated in about every way that segregation could exist, you know. The Colored fountain, the White fountain. Wherever there was public accommodations for people, they were rigidly segregated. And the Kimbroughs, I guess, my father having a fourth grade education, there was not a vision of doing anything about segregation except knowing what we were to do, and they tended to guard us around situations that would be painful for us in the segregated way.

We knew when we went to Pulaski, which was a big day on a Saturday, you got to go to town. You didn't request service that other people requested. It was just a normal thing to go to the grocery store and ask somebody to cut you fifteen or twenty cents worth of cheese and bologna, and you knew at that time that you were going to eat it in the back of the store if you were going to eat at all, so you didn't question that.

However, at the same time, my grandfather did not accept those accommodations. So, to get around that kind of environment, we would eat before we left Grandpa's and would eat when we came back. We didn't eat in town.

SMITH: I understand. What made the South a different kind of place in the 1960s? Can you give examples in terms of food, entertainment and way of life, humor or church practices?

KIMBROUGH: Well, I think there were people who had started to question the social aspects of our society. In fact, I didn't know any better than to challenge it. And when I say, 'I didn't know any better,' I could say, on the other hand, I was sensitized to differences in the way that people were treated. And even before I went into the Army, I had personally started questioning. But I did it in a way that -- I didn't get the approval of parents, there

were certain things I just questioned.

So I would say that in the South there were challenges in the sense of different people doing different things to bring about change, even if you did something -- if you went to a water fountain, or rest room, that policies and practices said you shouldn't go, maybe such and such a person got beat up or kicked out or what have you. Then I think this kind of infuriated enough people until the people started doing things that let it be known that this was not acceptable to us. We called ourselves a human being even if you said you are not going to treat us as such. So the churches were no different, I wouldn't think.

I happened to have been a student at Tennessee State in 1955 when Billy Graham came to Vanderbilt University. And he had a prayer practice I have learned. He just didn't -- his setting up, even though he didn't question the city and meet with the city, but his practice, the way he organized his evangelistic crusades, everybody came, regardless of their race. Black and white, they sat together. And I think that kind of setting also kind of over-spilled in the community, over the black and the whites. That kind of thing.

SMITH: Interesting, because that's something in my next question, describing segregated Nashville, Tennessee and the South during your time here as a student. You've sort of given us a little brief overview there with the Billy Graham crusade. Now focus in on the lunch counters, the theaters, the stores, swimming pools, amusement parks such as Fair Park, or any other memory that you have of that time in the '50's and early '60's in Nashville.

KIMBROUGH: Well, in the '50's I was here. It was '55. I graduated in '56. But upheavals had begun taking place. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. came to Nashville. And I remember one of the things that he said.

It was that if, in Alabama, people could just pay bus fare and get on the buses, at that time segregated as they were in Nashville, that would even be an improvement. Because at least here in Nashville we didn't have to give our fare to the bus driver and then go to the middle door to get on the bus so we wouldn't have to pass or walk by white people. In Nashville we just got on and got a seat, even though there was a Colored and a White section in the bus. So that was one of the things.

The other was, we thought at Tennessee State, for instance, when Roy Acuff would come and play at Tennessee State, that was a big thing. We never thought of going to the Grand Old Opry. We knew that was off limits, even if people were inclined to go. Not that many African-Americans were country music fans (laughs), but had we chosen to go, we would not have been able to. You might remember that recently they just put DeFord Bailey in the Music Hall of Fame here. And, of course, he was an entertainer. They had their way of handling that.

Nashville was generally segregated. You know, we went to theaters, sat in the back. We would climb some stairs and sat in the back. And I would say, as I have many times, the winds of segregation didn't blow over Nashville, it just -- I guess that's why such a movement had started here in Nashville, because it was pretty rigidly segregated.

SMITH: What inspired you to become a part of the Civil Rights Movement?

KIMBROUGH: Well, when I went to Tuskegee in 1956, Tuskegee being in Macon County, Alabama. Macon County was twenty-eight sided. It's pretty hard to imagine, probably, but it was gerrymandered to keep black people from voting. Took some creativity of evildoers, we would say, that just took a county and went in and around and bypassed most of the black voting population. So those kind of things draw your attention to what the real issue is with respect to race.

And at Tuskegee, there was no NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]. There was no NAACP activities in the state of Alabama all during the time that I was in school there, because they declared the NAACP was not registered in the state of Alabama. There were so many things happening as a result of social injustice until, gee whiz, you thought, 'What can be done about this?'

And I happen to have been a part of the Tuskegee Civic Association, which perhaps would not have been, had there been an NAACP in the state. But the late Dr. Charles Gomillion raised some profound questions about the differences in treatment of blacks and whites, and so I would think that probably those kind of things gave me

the kind of commitment that was started in me, and hopefully developed through the years.

SMITH: Let's go back with our timeline. You went in the service at age twenty and stayed for six years. Then you came to Tennessee State.

KIMBROUGH: Right. Majored in biology.

SMITH: Graduated with the class of '56, and after graduation you went to Tuskegee to the School of Veterinary Medicine. While you were in Tuskegee, which is, of course, located in Alabama, you became active with the Alabama Movement. So you've had experience with both the Nashville Movement as well as the Alabama Movement. Anything else you want to say about either of the two Movements before we go to the next question?

KIMBROUGH: Well, there's volumes of not necessarily my involvement, but of my experiences and what I saw.

SMITH: Well, we'll refer to those as we go along.

Can you name one person who made a difference and who led you to the Movement at this time? You mentioned a person earlier in Alabama. Was there anyone in particular in Nashville that you'd like to mention a name?

KIMBROUGH: Well, as far as Nashville goes, in the early '60's I was not in Nashville. I took the state boards veterinary medical exam, and got my license to practice, some would say as the first black veterinarian in the state of Tennessee. I say 'some would say' because that's often referred to as kind of a mostly landmark effort.

But to know you are rubbing elbows with racism every day, in so many walks of life, you just get tooled, or equipped, and you imagine all the things that you must do if you are going to be a human being.

An example of that was, while we were at Tuskegee, I happened to serve as the president of the senior class in the School of Veterinary Medicine. And there was almost no reason, ever, to keep me out of school. I kept feeling a sense of behind-ness. After all, I was a latecomer, almost late doing everything with respect to education. So staying out of school was something that I just about did not do.

However, I happened to have been at Tuskegee when Dr. King and some students came to Tuskegee. And they came there because some students had been kicked out of Alabama State in Montgomery because they dared to go to the federal restaurant there in Montgomery. And so when they were kicked out, they came to Tuskegee.

And it just so happened to have been at that time, Dr. King was so much trouble for a lot of the 'society of the ills' until he had been indicted for income tax evasion. _____ [COUNTER: 357] has a marvelous way of bringing some efforts and concerns together. There Dr. King is, as an indicted income tax evader, according to the state of Alabama, and there are two students who don't know how to behave (chuckles) in an Alabama state college.

So they came to Tuskegee and asked for support of the students at Tuskegee. And, of course, being the senior class president, I went to the meeting at Greenway Missionary Baptist Church. The oratory was about the students being kicked out, and 'Are you going to stand with us?' and the students are doing their 'Aaay-men,' high fivin' so to speak.

And then the request was made, 'Since you going to stand with us, stay out of school. Don't go to your classes for one day.' And when that was made, I happened to have been there and one of my professors was there.

And one professor who was not there, when I went to him to tell him that we were going to stay out of school, he said, 'Well now, people are sitting in and they are doing this, they're doing that. But if you don't get an education, you won't amount to anything anyway.'

And so my question to him was, 'If you cannot be recognized as a human being, tell me how you're going to feel

about your education that you get.' I said, 'Now, we have our pets and we have our animals that we have to go to clinic to take care of. We will do that, but we're not attending class. We will take care of our patient rolls.'

Fortunately, Dr. Cooper, who was there, recognized that he had committed to that, too, and we went on. That's why I'm saying this this was kind of monumental in my kick-off as it relates to the things I've tried to do later in life.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A] [COUNTER: 408]

[START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B] [COUNTER: 000]

SMITH: Dr. Kimbrough, you are really giving us some good insight into the Movement. Did you have any training under any of the civil rights leaders such as Rev. Lawson on the Fisk campus, or other renowned leaders in the Movement? Were you ever in any formal training sessions? If so, how did they help you?

KIMBROUGH: Well, I was not in the formal training sessions. I happen to have had some good people around me. Charles Gomillion at Tuskegee. Those Tuskegee Civic Association meetings, I attended them, and I think they were paramount. But I was not in Nashville at the time that Dr. Lawson was doing trainings. I think at that time I was so focused on trying to see that I did get an education, until I was taking kind of a correspondence course (laughs) through the media at that time. I was not close to the situation in that I did not formally go to those classes. But I had a great appreciation for them.

SMITH: With the media coverage, what were your thoughts when you heard that Z. Alexander Looby's home had been bombed, or Martin Luther King, Jr. was speaking at Fisk, or any other significant activity in the Nashville community? Did you have any thoughts about anything after hearing about those events? Keep in mind, we know you were in Alabama at the time.

KIMBROUGH: Yes, Dr. Wright, who was the President at Fisk, had to return, because of the upheavals with the students and supposed law enforcement agencies at the time of the Sit-Ins. And I think my mind was pretty much made up that this would not be anything that I would any longer ignore, regardless to how it surfaced -- that I would have to be involved at some level.

SMITH: Now, you mentioned Dr. Wright returned to Fisk? Where was he?

KIMBROUGH: I'm sorry. He was at Tuskegee, and his trip was cut short by having to return because the students at Fisk were involved in the Sit-Ins and some things were going on with respect to the Movement in Nashville.

SMITH: Another significant group of people during this time were called the Freedom Riders. Share with us, if you'd like to, information on any involvement you might have had with the Freedom Riders.

KIMBROUGH: Well, let me say this. Since an early age, I've been an avid reader, and I didn't participate in the Freedom Rides, but I knew, and I read as much as I could about any event that happened. And so that was very inspirational to me, to know that there were people who would stand up for human dignity.

Then I had an experience as relates to riding on buses. When I came back, having spent some seven months in the hospital from Korea, I returned to come home after being away for some four years, and got on a Greyhound bus in Indiana. And an individual wanted to seat me to accommodate his seating pattern. He wanted to seat me beside a beautiful black lady on the bus. He said one of us would have to move, and I must have been the focus of attention there at the bus station for about half an hour before we moved on.

So I guess I've been kind of ticklish about people not having a privilege, even though these students in their bus rides through the South was doing that. Because they were riding -- you remember, I'm sure -- that there were whites and blacks, and they paired and so forth. But the bus system, being on the back of the bus, [not] riding in an integrated way, has been the subject of segregated policies for a long time.

So it didn't take -- the Freedom Riders really involved my appreciation for their sacrifices, because I understood, or tried to understand, exactly what they were going through.

SMITH: And their efforts definitely made a change.

KIMBROUGH: Oh, definitely. Very definitely.

SMITH: Let's go back again with our time frame. You said something about Korea. So you were in the service. Where were you stationed?

KIMBROUGH: Well, when I went over, in '47, which was the same year that I enlisted, as a volunteer, I went to Korea. I went to Inchon, Korea in September of '47, and stayed in Korea until December of '48. The troops were de-activated and went to Japan and stayed there for about eighteen months. I had more money in my pocket and lost sight of my going to college and so forth, temporarily. I just wanted to get a little more money. I had two thousand dollars. Gee, it's 1950, that's a lot of money. Ooh, boy.

And so I re-enlisted. Hm. That was not a part of my agenda, but I re-enlisted. And as soon as I re-enlisted, the war started in Korea. So the troops who were in Japan went to Korea, because there's not that much difference, in terms of distance. Being close there, we were some of the first troops there to hopefully put down the Koreans who had crossed the 38th Parallel.

I was there for a short while, was wounded, and, to me, I didn't want to come back. You can get brainwashed in the Army, you know. Your buddies are there, and you learn to -- well, your first thing is -- not the reason that anything started, but you're there, and you're there for your country. You're there for your country even though you might not be able to vote in some parts of Tennessee and have to have a Tent City in West Tennessee in order to get the vote. But that's your country, and your buddies are there.

But due to my injury, the type of injury, I came back stateside, and then I had almost two years left, so I went to France, went to a number of places.

SMITH: So at this point you are trying to decide what you're going to do. And what made you decide you wanted to go to Tuskegee?

KIMBROUGH: Well, I went to Tennessee State, majored in Biology, supposedly a pretty good student. Nobody knew me when I started to go to Meharry, and they asked for references. Nobody knew Sterling Kimbrough in the back forty [acres] in Rural Route, Giles County. I didn't mention Dr. Spotswood, that I knew him. I just thought I was smart enough to get in. I didn't know all the strings you have to pull (laughs). So I didn't get in, to go to Meharry.

I had said I was going to Indiana University to pursue my M.D. I did know somebody who had inspired me in that area. But Dr. T. S. Williams came from Tuskegee on a Career Day and asked if anybody was there who knew a veterinarian. And lo and behold, I remembered a Dr. Baylor down in Giles County.

So, he said, 'I can't offer you the M.D., but I can offer you the D.V.M.' [Doctor of Veterinary Medicine]

Well, I've always said in life, 'If you can't take [Route] 41, you might go 41-A. (laughs) It might still get you to the same place.' So I wound up at Tuskegee.

At that time, in order to go to Veterinary Medical School, Tuskegee was the only school you could go to in the South. They had a program called the Southern Regional Plan. Since the southern states supported segregation in the sense that if you're not able to go to a white veterinary medical school, since we know that's off limits, we have a regional plan where any student who goes to Tuskegee could go there as an in-state student.

So I went to Tuskegee.

SMITH: And you graduated from veterinarian school. And what happened then?

KIMBROUGH: Well, while I was at Tuskegee, I did a few things that I'd been wanting to do. I went to Chicago during the summer. I worked at the University of Chicago where they had extensive research programs, and worked with a lot of animals that were used for research. I took the exam to get into the United States Department of Agriculture program.

So, inasmuch as I did not go directly to practice, even though I took the exam, in my junior year I started going to Illinois as a research person during the summer, the time that I was not in school at Tuskegee. So that landed me -- after I did that, then when I did decide that I was going to take a certain job, I went with the United States government. And most of my career in veterinary medicine, even though I maintained my license to practice, because that was a treasured aspect of my involvement, I was with the regulatory departments of the federal government.

SMITH: Let's reflect now on the late '50's and early '60's. We've established the fact that you were in Nashville part of that time, and you were also in Alabama. Did you ever feel threatened or did you feel any fear? How did you really feel during that time?

KIMBROUGH: Well, I think that you are cushioned by different aspects of society. For instance, when we were at Tuskegee, we started being involved in protesting certain conditions in the town of Tuskegee. The campus was involved where there were certain things not done in the segment in which we lived, they were done differently downtown.

We had little corner stores where you didn't have sales. So we started marching in downtown Tuskegee so that we could be involved as students, receiving the same kind of rights as other people received. On your college campus, you know, you have a mixture of students from a lot of different places where different things are done, or have been done, to enhance your feeling more like a human being, get away from [being] the second-class citizen.

Tuskegee was one of those places that we started boycotting stores and doing things to let them know that we had spending power. We started ignoring these corner stores that they had kind of provided for us, and going downtown. And once we got downtown, we let it be known that we were not going to stand for some of the things that had been in existence.

So we boycotted some stores because they wanted to remind you that you could come up to this mark, but there was a mark that other people had that you were not supposed to tread on. So that was the one thing that I think ticked a lot of us off, that here we can't vote in Macon County. Even the people who lived there couldn't vote.

Great facilities there. A V.A. [Veterans Administration] hospital was there in Tuskegee. And apparently, thinking of the people who were in the preventive mode, they knew a lot of professional blacks were in and around Tuskegee, and so they envisioned a kind of minority role, if they allowed blacks to exercise their citizenship privilege. So we were involved in that kind of thing.

SMITH: I see. Now, in reference to the Tennessee area, specifically Pulaski, and during this time, were there any personal losses that you felt because of your involvement, like loss of friends, family, education, health, or income? Did you feel that there were any personal losses that you had during the Civil Rights era?

KIMBROUGH: Not in the strictest sense of the word. I think denial was something that was accepted, regrettably and reluctantly. But we didn't have the kind of Movement in the rural sector. Here in Nashville, of course, there was not a great challenge from the student sections of which I was a part at that time, about the conditions that existed here.

SMITH: Now, Nashville was known as one of the major areas for the Movement. Names such as Rev. C.T. Vivian, Rev. Kelly Miller Smith, as well as Rev. James Lawson. What do you think accounts for the high level of leadership of these gentlemen in reference to Nashville?

KIMBROUGH: Well, I think in each case almost, these individuals were exposed -- I believe that James Lawson

went to India for some portion of his early years as an adult, and as a part of his ministry. And so he was well-acquainted with Mahatma Gandhi's tactics in defying racial and class injustices.

Kelly Miller Smith was from Mound Bayou, Mississippi. He happened to have been my pastor in later life. But he understood the foundation and the thoughts of division and racism.

And, of course, C.T., he had great experiences in Selma and in other parts of the country. But he came face to face with Jim Clark down there, the Sheriff that was 'protecting' Selma. And, by the way, I happened to have been a part of the Selma March. I wasn't there on Bloody Sunday. I was in Illinois at that time as a veterinarian, and the president of the [NAACP] branch that I started in Randolph County, and we drove to Selma and participated in a great deal of that march.

So it's the kind of things that you experience. If people who have been in this denial mode could see what has happened to the lives of people who have decided to take a stand against the injustice, we'd probably have -- and [do] have -- a better world, I think, as a result. But the first thought was, 'We're going to resist. We're not going to have any of this around here.' Never the question of, 'Now, what is happening to you?' 'What has happened to you?' 'What am I doing as Mayor?' 'What am I doing as Sheriff?' 'What am I doing as a policeman?' 'What am I doing as an owner of a store, to cause you to be so unhappy?' (laughs)

So it was the kind of leadership that molded people into Kelly Miller Smith or James Lawson, C.T. Vivian, these people who came across the stone wall, the irresistible force meeting the immovable object (laughs).

SMITH: You know, you've given us a lot of information in reference to your training and your background, and also your reflections on those leaders. But now I want to focus on Charles Kimbrough, because you did get your degree in veterinary medicine, and you indicated you worked in Illinois and Indiana. But you came back to Nashville around the late '60's and you came in running, being involved in the Movement at that time.

So would you share with us some of the initiatives that you brought into the city, maybe with reference to the NAACP or just whatever you'd like to say, because I know you have been a trailblazer in this city, also.

KIMBROUGH: Well, when I left Tuskegee, there was no NAACP there. And I committed myself that one of the first things that I would do as a professional, when I left Tuskegee, that I was going to join the NAACP. I believed in its principles and objectives, and I said, 'Now, why is it that you can go and supposedly fight for your country. You can do so many things to protect this land of the free and the home of the brave, and you can do something, almost, for everybody but your conditions.'

So when I went to Illinois, there was no NAACP in Randolph County. I lived in the little town of Sparta, rigidly segregated, and I had been told, through my civics and history, that Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves. And I took that seriously, and still do. I'm not going to debate what the conditions or what the intent was. But he was the author of the Emancipation Proclamation.

I said, 'Now, here I am in the state of Illinois, the Land of Lincoln. Left Alabama where there is no NAACP for me to join. I come to Sparta, Illinois, where there was a branch of the NAACP in 1956, but the people who had been a part of that gave up on it because they were threatened by people who said that if they had the NAACP, they'd lose their job as teachers.'

I said, 'I don't accept that.'

So, even though there was not an NAACP in Randolph County, as a veterinarian I had some other counties, and I happened to have gone up to work at Alton, Illinois, and I joined the NAACP. And I didn't know how uncomfortable some black people would become, until you start doing something about conditions. I served in various capacities in Illinois.

Then when I came to Nashville in '69, I just started being involved, started off first, I think, working with the Education Committee, went to Memphis for meetings of the NAACP, and I guess the rest is history. I just felt, and still do, that organizations will be no better than the people who serve in them, and lead them. And you

must have some reason to say you are who you are, not that it's an honor, except to serve people, and I just believe in that, and have done it, I think, to the best of my ability.

SMITH: You were one of the hardest working presidents of the organization. Did you not serve more than one term?

KIMBROUGH: I served about seven and a half years, close to eight years, and at that time, you know, we had executive directors, secretaries, paid staff since then. You know, the president of the NAACP is not paid. We didn't even have -- the office was not open, even though the office was given to the NAACP, we had no open office while I was there. But we did have, I think, a program, though.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B] [COUNTER: 348]

[START OF TAPE 2, SIDE A] [COUNTER: 000]

SMITH: Dr. Kimbrough, you just mentioned that you had been president for almost eight years of the NAACP Nashville branch. What are some of the high points of those years, and what are some of the initiatives that you feel most proud of?

KIMBROUGH: Well, there are a few. There's a well-known pastor in this city, whose name I won't call, but this individual does not mind telling you, 'Until you were the president of the NAACP, we didn't think of serving as a chaplain of the jails. We didn't think of doing anything but assisting somebody doing that. We didn't think thoughts of being Chief of Police.'

Of course, time brings about a change, regardless of whether Charles Kimbrough does anything or not. But I do know there was a time that black preachers just went to the jails to see people and visit, and so at that time I asked the Sheriff, I said, 'We have all these black people in jail, why don't we have a black chaplain, somebody who can relate, hopefully, a little closer than others might, to some of the conditions that caused these people to be here?'

So they kind of stiff-armed us at first. But communication is good, between people, even when they are different. And so this brought about a chaplaincy that black people have served in.

Then there was this matter of police brutality. Blacks getting shot in the back, mostly not armed. We're not talking about somebody threatening the lives of policemen. They'd be shot in the back, and the policemen would say, 'Well, I can't outrun people. This gun can run faster.'

So we challenged that mentality. And I believe that in the state of Tennessee, as a result of that, we now have the Fleeing Felon Act, where if a policeman is not threatened, you don't shoot a person just because somebody stole a loaf of bread, or somebody is cornered between two buildings, they are obviously not armed, but you wind up shooting them anyway. You know, it didn't make a lot of sense.

So the chaplaincy, the matter of addressing police brutality, it was one of the main things.

And then, of course, the school. We had some good people who were a great deal more educated than I am, in the academic sense, I think, who served, volunteered. All these people who worked with me, worked with the branch. Because without the branch and NAACP, Charles Kimbrough is just another black man. So I didn't go out there on my own. It was the NAACP.

But we addressed issues such as the inequities in suspension and expulsions and so forth. We didn't mind telling the people at the School Board, 'Because you suspend black students more, and quicker, than you do white students, or you expel them, you need never think that black people don't treasure education.'

See, that's one thing that motivated me to go on to school, because even when our parents and grandparents did not have a formal education, they said, 'Boy -- girl -- you get something that nobody can take away from you. You get an education.' And so I suppose those wheels keep turning in our minds, and so we went and addressed

some things as it relates to the inequities of the school system. And I think those are some of the things I'd like to remember, that we tried to do. And if there's anything about our efforts, that these were the kind of things that we would have in mind.

SMITH: Even though you are not president at this time, you are still very active. What are some of the things you're doing now with the NAACP?

KIMBROUGH: (laughs) Spending too much time taking care of things. When you work in Civil Rights, you have to put a lot of things on the back burner. If you're married, you have to have a mate who thinks a great deal as you think, and who will allow you, if you please, to make a lot of time.

2003 would be a good example. Blondell and I felt that since we had been instrumental in trying to get change brought to the branch -- and I'm indebted to the community for thinking that I tried to serve faithfully and honestly -- but we thought that the doors of the branch have to be open. How can the foundation give a branch office space and the doors are not open?

So Blondell and I spent all of 2003, mostly from 10:00 until 6:00, sometimes 10:00 to 5:00, to keep those doors open. And we had some beautiful people. It is amazing what people will do if they know that they are appreciated. We had a staff of volunteers, and that's what we have done, and our fundraisers and banquets, we do some things to generate funds and get people involved.

SMITH: As we look back over this interview, and, again, we thank you for consenting to do this for us, because it's going to be one of the treasured interviews that we have on file, because you have gone in several directions, including the Movement in the '50's and '60's not only in Nashville, but in Alabama, and then we come back to Nashville with the NAACP where you served as president for approximately eight years. So we have a lot of depth in this interview.

If you could just summarize, or just give us some insight as to where you think we are now in our city, in reference to the Movement, the groundwork being laid in the early '60's, where do you think we are now? And where do you think we need to be?

KIMBROUGH: Well, in the scriptural sense, we've left Egypt on the way to Canaan Land, and some would think that we've arrived, but we have not arrived. And there's a lot of climbing of mountains to do.

I was here in the Library on Sunday as the commemoration of the efforts to integrate schools here in Nashville, and there was a lot of good points brought out. A lot of the things that are undone, and retrogression, in my opinion, is because we have not communicated in the community as a whole. Not just black people, but white people and black people, all the mixtures, are going to have to come together to take on some of the contagions of the community.

Yes, bless the bread that was eaten yesterday. The meal that's coming up, you can be thankful for that. At the same time, until we address issues and see that on the table, in the minds of some people is still a Nathan Bedford Forrest mentality toward black people, mainly.

Until the Governor or President -- we need a trickle-down effect in certain areas, from the masses below to the leadership above. As long as we say, 'Well, there's no need for Affirmative Action,' and having some people think that they can buy into that and do on their own. We've been left too far behind to say that we don't need some light on the road so we can travel by that.

And I've thought about this. I didn't say anything but just sit, Sunday, and listen. But so many people are so disappointed with school integration and desegregation efforts.

Now, if you remember, what do we do at this point? This city, not that there's a law against it, but you didn't have that many voices saying, 'Listen, we cannot have the kind of boycotting of schools that was carried on here when it was announced that one grade a year -- one grade a year -- would be desegregated.' School desegregation 'with all deliberate speed.' For Nashville it meant one grade a year.

And yet we had a young man [John Kasper?] who led people around Nashville, went to the Courthouse, 'We're not going to have any school desegregation. We're not going to have school busing.'

My point is, if we're going to leave from here, if we're ever going to get to Canaan Land, there will need to be people who are committed. Not accept schools that are so-called non-performing and find a way to politically kick them out. What has happened here? What do we do? You don't stop a trip because you have a flat tire. You get a repair of the tire, you change the tire, you do something to get it repaired to go on to the city that you're approaching, or wherever your destination is.

There's a book that Dr. King has, *Where Do We Go From Here?* So where do we go from here? It will depend on our determination. And determination is in the minds of the people who are on the road to wherever we're going. I would hate to see this city lose a lot of its opportunities, as well as this country, because we didn't put forth a good-faith effort, because we kicked our schools around, made a political football out of them.

Because if we don't have -- I mention education because if we don't have the training of our young people, if we just put our good values before a few, and our bad values before a lot of people, then we will not arrive. The American Dream will not be realized.

SMITH: How can we best impart to students today about the Civil Rights Movement?

KIMBROUGH: Well, on the books, the State of Tennessee has -- you can probably tell this a little better than I -- but I know one thing that happened because we were seeing, or talking about, or making an effort to have, Black History taught in our schools. We were asking that teachers have a course in Human Relations. Unfortunately, a majority of teachers said, 'Well, we know the subject matter. We don't need Human Relations.' And I think that's a part of our dilemma.

So it is really difficult, but not impossible, to teach people about our history. But the people who are involved in the history must believe that it's important for it to be taught. There are some schoolteachers, I'm told, that when it comes to teaching Black History during Black History Month, they want to teach Human Relations Month. 'Let's talk about everybody. Let's talk about all the other ethnicities in the community.'

Unfortunately, important as they are, other minorities came to this county, from a racial standpoint, on the backs of Black people. So what's wrong with teaching Black History, since Black people were so instrumental in the building of this country?

So it is going to take an effort where the Superintendent, the Director of Schools, is not threatened, doesn't feel threatened, to have Black History and see that it's taught. The Governor should be appalled that Black History is not taught in all the schools. And it should be taught beyond Black History Month. It should be incorporated in the fabric of the curriculum of high schools, as well as other aspects of our education.

SMITH: As we conclude this interview, share with us how you would like to be remembered as a part of Nashville history. How Charles Kimbrough would like to be remembered.

KIMBROUGH: Well, I would like to be remembered as one who has taken the opportunity to try to do some things as it relates to self-improvement. And by self-improvement, had the opportunity to try to serve some of the most wonderful people in the world. And out of serving, or trying to serve, these people, gained a little notoriety which did not swell his head past the point of recognizing there was so much left undone, and that it's just good to be on the road trying to reach the City of Love and Human Development. I don't see anything other than an effort to serve. Not to be known, but to serve, and to serve with others.

SMITH: Thank you, Dr. Kimbrough. And I do know you've received many, many awards and honors, but I remember you as being a servant, and I'm glad that we've had a chance to talk today. And again, we thank you for all this information, and we know that it's going to be used by many people as they listen to, or read, this interview. And we just wish you well. And thank you again.

KIMBROUGH: Well, thank you. I've watched you through the years as a profound teacher, as a very effective teacher, and leader in our community and in our school system, and I'm just honored to have you take this time with me, and allowing me to share with you and the community.

SMITH: Thank you, and we hope you will have a good rest of the day, and thank you, Rachel, for helping us with this.

LAWSON: Thank you. Thank you, Dr. Kimbrough.

[END OF INTERVIEW] [COUNTER: 224]