

RODNEY N. POWELL, MD, MPH
Nashville Room, Nashville Public Library
Recorded March 29, 2005

Site: Telephone interview

Interviewer: K. G. Bennett, Librarian, Nashville Room, Nashville Public Library

Transcribed by: Carolyn James, September 26-28, 2005

Edited by: Rodney Powell

Copyright 2005 by the Nashville Public Library, Nashville, Tennessee

[TAPE 1, SIDE A] [COUNTER: 000]

BENNETT: This is Kathy Bennett. Today is March 29, 2005, and I'm at the Nashville Public Library in Nashville, Tennessee, in the Nashville Room, and I'm going to speak with Dr. Rodney Powell, who was a student at Meharry Medical College at the time of the Nashville Student Sit-In Movement.

Thank you again, and what is your name, address, and current employment?

POWELL: All right. My name is Rodney N. Powell, 156 Forest Ridge Way, Honolulu, Hawaii 96822, and I'm happy to say I just retired.

BENNETT: Congratulations.

POWELL: Previously I was a professor of Community Health and Preventive Medicine at the University of Hawaii, and formerly a professor of Pediatrics at University of Minnesota.

BENNETT: Has that been your entire professional career, with community health?

POWELL: The major focus of my career has been in international health, assisting developing countries to create health care training systems for medical assistants and for doctors.

BENNETT: And what role did Meharry play in directing your career in this manner?

POWELL: I was not exposed to many of the hardships that people living in the rural South experienced, and I think it was my first insight into the power of preventive medicine, as opposed to curative medicine, in addressing many of these inequities and health disparities among racial and ethnic minorities in the South.

BENNETT: Where were you born?

POWELL: I was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

BENNETT: And where did you grow up?

POWELL: I grew up in Philadelphia.

BENNETT: And how did you happen to go to Meharry?

POWELL: That's an interesting question. I was a sophomore at the St. Joseph University, a Jesuit school in Philadelphia, and during that time, the May 17, 1954, Supreme Court decision to desegregate schools came about. I was fascinated by the Separate But Equal doctrine. And the more I read about and tried to understand what was happening in the deep South, the more I realized my reference points were quite different.

So when it came to medical school, I deliberately chose Meharry, to go south and have that experience.

BENNETT: And what about your family – your parents – were there any Southern roots?

POWELL: My mother was born in Savannah, Georgia, but they moved, I think, during her late childhood period, to Philadelphia.

BENNETT: And what were your parents' names?

POWELL: My father's name was Raymond Powell. My mother, Norma Perry Powell.

BENNETT: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

POWELL: Yes. I have two sisters and one brother, two of whom have deceased.

BENNETT: You mentioned you went to St. Joseph's there in Philadelphia area. Is the school actually in Philadelphia, then?

POWELL: Yes, it is.

BENNETT: And did you go to – what were the names of your elementary and high school, is what I wanted to ask.

POWELL: My elementary school was Commodore John Barry, and my high school was John Bartram.

BENNETT: Okay, were they both public schools?

POWELL: Yes, they were both public schools.

BENNETT: Now, was your experience in your home town segregated in any way?

POWELL: It wasn't segregated in a direct way, but I certainly was aware of the discrepancies that were afforded to me and my white counterparts, my white classmates.

In my senior year of high school, I ran for student council president against a Caucasian girl, and it was a close race, but I won. The principal, a person whom I had greatly admired before, at that point declared that we should have a co- or shared presidency. I was really dismayed by this, and

fortunately the teacher who sponsored the student council vigorously objected. And so I got to serve as I was duly elected.

But that really was one of my first and most memorable experiences coming up against the northern form of Jim Crow.

BENNETT: And was the college experience along the same – did you have any experiences there as an undergraduate?

POWELL: My experiences at St. Joseph University, I think I have to separate into several categories. The academic experience was superb. They did, however, emphasize religious dogma and although I think I was nominally – or more than nominally – Catholic, their emphasis on the fact that as a Jesuit product we were required to be able to give intellectual assent to our religious beliefs and to faith, drove me towards being very critical as I examined them. And the more I examined them, the more critical I became.

Eventually I was sort of accused of heresy and schismaticism, almost to the point that my scholarship was threatened. And part of the reason for that was that I am a gay American and although I was not out of the closet at that point, I certainly had some insight about my feelings, and the Church's homophobic dogma was so condemning and alienating.

So it wasn't along the racial lines that I experienced oppression there, but I certainly experienced it subliminally as a gay person.

BENNETT: Now, what – when you moved, then, to Nashville, was there any kind of eye-opening experience, or was it what you had expected it would be?

POWELL: Ohh, yes, it was an eye-opening experience, because I had never experienced black culture in such an in-depth way as I did in Nashville, and particularly in that part between Meharry and Fisk. And I found myself feeling somewhat alienated. I just didn't share many of the interests, and, I think, values, of my classmates.

I spent my freshman year at Meharry, ironically, with a Boy Scout troop, because I had come from a background in the Boy Scouts and actually it had been part of my salvation, surviving in the ghettos of Philadelphia.

And part of it was also the black experience of homophobia that in many ways I found even more oppressing than white racism because of the way it was expressed. It was just so out there. And although I wasn't out, the feelings about gays was just so pronounced. And, of course, a person like myself hid, quite successfully.

But it was my exposure to the international students there at Fisk that provided a great deal of my social outlet and a place where I made friends with people that I shared more common interests.

BENNETT: What year did you enter Meharry?

POWELL: 1957.

BENNETT: So when you speak about the International Center, I'm thinking of Marian and Nelson Fuson?

POWELL: Yes. We became great friends, and in fact they have come to Hawaii numerous times because of a Quaker organization here, and we have been able to reestablish contact. I must say I have lost contact with them again.

[9/28/05 – Nelson Fuson comments, 'When I got knocked out trying to integrate a movie theater in downtown Nashville, Rodney took care of me for a while, although he was not a doctor yet. The blacks were refused admittance. The whites who were there to participate in the demonstration were attacked. The whites thought we were traitors, and I got knocked out.']

BENNETT: And also the Schrags was another name. Oswald Schrag?

POWELL: I didn't have the same kind of personal connection.

BENNETT: What type of things, then, were you exposed to at the International Center there at Fisk?

POWELL: Meeting students from other places. And, being a medical student, the weekends, when you could take time out for some relaxation, were really important. And they always had great movies, which is what attracted me over there, as well as just meeting students from other countries.

And it was through the International Center that I first encountered some of the other people who emerged then as leaders in the Student Movement, and my sophomore year I was drawn into that group – my sophomore year in medical school.

BENNETT: And who are you thinking of?

POWELL: Among that group, Diane Nash, certainly. And Bernard Lafayette. I also met Jim Lawson during that time.

BENNETT: Did you attend any of the training sessions that were held?

POWELL: I attended several, but not nearly as many as students at Fisk and the Baptist Theological Seminary and Tennessee A & I were able to go to. It was just that my schedule – the medical school curriculum – didn't allow for as much freedom to do that.

BENNETT: When you were going through these training sessions and being exposed to the kind of New Wave thinking, I guess, or – certainly, I guess, with the Fellowship of Reconciliation and some of the other organizations involved – what – how – was that – I guess I just wanted to know how you felt about that, or how you followed through on that? Did you follow through on some of the reading yourself, with Gandhi, and –

POWELL: I had been very much aware of Gandhi's Salt March of 1930 to protest the British salt monopoly, and I was very much aware of the power of Gandhi's nonviolent protests initiating a turning point in the movement for India's independence from Britain. And so I easily resonated to understanding the power of nonviolence, and I very much gravitated to the application of this that was being taught by Jim Lawson. And I had followed Martin Luther King's use of nonviolence in Montgomery. So I was primed to respond to and be part of any effort using this approach.

BENNETT: Did you ever try to recruit or organize other students from Meharry?

POWELL: There were only a handful of students who were even interested in being part of this, so it wasn't so much a matter of recruitment as it was a matter that we found each other.

BENNETT: And do you remember any of those names, of your fellow students?

POWELL: Yes. Margaret Clayton Young was in my wife's class, who was one year behind me, and my former wife, Gloria Johnson. I'm trying to think of Henry's last name. He was in my wife's class, and it's just escaping me right now. Michele Kildare, who was in my class. As I say, it was such a handful of students, I know I'm missing a couple of names, but not many.

BENNETT: Did you ever – it's sort of curious, you know, you wonder at some point what makes people kind of join in, and what makes them – not.

POWELL: Yeah. I think the students who responded – it wasn't so much that their social conscience was awakened as that they came there with that – with those concerns and insights beyond just being at Meharry to get a medical degree. That there were issues of justice and equality that impacted on well-being as much as physical illness did. And I think if you didn't have that insight when you got there, you didn't leave with it.

BENNETT: I see. So it's a matter of having reached a point before your arrival.

POWELL: Certainly that was my experience, and that's how I interpreted the responses of the students who did get involved from Meharry.

BENNETT: Now, did you participate, then, in the sit-ins as they began in early February, 1960?

POWELL: Yes, I did.

BENNETT: In what role?

POWELL: Initially, after the workshops, just as a participant. And so, as a participant, I went to the encounters at lunch counters and at Harvey's, and that one particular restaurant which I can't remember the name of, where it wasn't a sit-in, it was a stand-in, because we had blocked the entrance [Tic Toc?]. Which was one of my more moving experiences.

But as the Movement proceeded and the students began to plan, a small group of us just emerged in what have been called leadership positions, and it was just a matter of self-initiative,

I think. Self-initiative and response by the other students accepting that leadership. I was older than the students at Fisk and Tennessee A & I and the Baptist Theological Center, so maybe that also added to why I evolved into that position. But mostly I think because I was really far more interested in that than I was in my medical studies. (chuckle)

BENNETT: Who was the President at Meharry at that time? I mean, I guess I can find this out easily.

POWELL: His name was West, I think. Harold West, maybe.

BENNETT: Was there any – was Meharry supportive of your involvement?

POWELL: Absolutely not. I ended up with Diane Nash staying back in Nashville to help coordinate and provide administrative support and direction for the Freedom Rides when that occurred, and the reason I did is that it was just before graduation, and I was told that if I were absent from graduation, my degree would be forfeited.

And so, you might recall it was in May of 1961 that CORE initiated the Freedom Rides, and then it was later in May that our Nashville group decided that we had to continue the Freedom Rides because we couldn't be defeated in the face of violence. And at that point I was told by one of the Associate Deans, quite pointedly, that if I was not there at graduation, if I were arrested, forget my degree.

So after struggling through all this for four years, I had a few more days to go and my internship at the University of Minnesota Hospitals was scheduled to begin July 1, I decided to stay behind.

MILLER: Was this transmitted to you in person or by letter?

POWELL: It was transmitted in person. And we were told that the white trustees very much disapproved of any involvement of Meharry students. I got very little support and probably more condemnation from my professors at Meharry.

A few were supportive. They were beginning to come around, and understanding the power and significance of the Student Movement. And, you know, this was after the success of the lunch counter confrontation with the mayor following the bombing of Looby's home when Diane got him to admit that segregation was wrong and he would desegregate the lunch counters.

BENNETT: The reason I asked is, you don't hear much about Meharry faculty.

POWELL: Yeah. Well, Meharry faculty was on the sidelines, that's why. I think there were – the professors who were not antagonistic, however, were concerned for me.

BENNETT: Did you work at all with Dr. Matthew Walker?

POWELL: Of course, as a student I did, rotating through surgery, but not in this capacity of involvement in the Student Movement. Dr. Walker was among the people who understood and

gave support to the Movement, as opposed to others who just condemned it and said we were destroying the reputation of the school.

BENNETT: Did you live on campus?

POWELL: Only in my freshman year.

BENNETT: Now, were you arrested at any point?

POWELL: Yes.

BENNETT: And would that be more than one time?

POWELL: There was one time we were arrested and released so quickly I don't know whether to consider it an arrest. The other time we spent several hours before we were released.

BENNETT: And what were the circumstances of your arrest?

POWELL: The circumstances were being arrested sitting in at the lunch counters.

BENNETT: Do you recall the charge?

POWELL: I assume it was disorderly conduct.

BENNETT: Now, I wanted to ask – did you have much to – did you meet over at First Baptist Church, did you get to know Rev. Kelly Miller Smith during your time?

POWELL: Yes. Rev. Kelly Miller Smith, along with C. T. Vivian and Jim Lawson, were my heroes at that time.

BENNETT: And how did they live that out? How did they demonstrate that?

POWELL: By their leadership and support of the Movement by opening the resources of their churches. I mean, the Movement would have not been effective without the sustained support from those churches, particularly Rev. Kelly Miller Smith's church. I mean, it was the meeting place, it was the core of community support.

BENNETT: Did you belong to a church yourself while you were here in Nashville?

POWELL: No, I did not.

BENNETT: Now, can you describe one particular day of demonstrations – one specific day?

POWELL: Well, there were two days. Of course, there was the march following the bombing of attorney Looby's home, and that was a very powerful experience. The response of the Nashville

community, not just the student community but the entire community, and it was an interracial response. People of good will joined in. But I'm sure that's been well-described.

On a more personal basis, we were standing in at a restaurant [Tic Toc?] and the owner had hired a couple of bouncers at the front door who were trying to keep a pathway open. And as students moved into this pathway, he would take his elbows and just violently shove them out of the way. And he did this to several girls.

And I remember when I moved up to the front of the line, he swung his elbows into my chest. Which had no impact, no effect on me. And then he grabbed me by my collar and tried to move me, and at this point I'm told I was staring him in the eyes.

And Rev. Vivian came over to me and said, "Go back to the church and renew yourself to nonviolence." And I realized that my commitment to nonviolence up to that point was very much a strategy, but philosophically, I guess, I was experiencing a lot of rage. And I'm sure it was that adrenaline rush that caused this huge guy not to be able to move me one way or the other, either by pushing me and hitting me, or by grabbing me and trying to shove me.

But I'm so grateful that C. T. Vivian did that, because had I exploded into a violent counter-rage, that would have discredited the Movement, and I would have always regretted that. And, philosophically, I have much more understanding and sustained commitment to nonviolence, not just as a strategy but as a way of life now.

BENNETT: Has that been a consistent base in your life, then?

POWELL: Oh yes, it has. And it very much informs my approach both personally and as an activist in gay and lesbian civil rights efforts.

BENNETT: Now you mentioned that – were you near Meharry at the time when Looby's home was bombed?

POWELL: That happened early in the morning. I'm sure I was in my apartment, which was on Jefferson Street, as I recall.

BENNETT: And did you get to hear Dr. King speak at any of the times that he was here in Nashville?

POWELL: Yes, I did. I can't tell you what occasions they were, though.

BENNETT: What were your family's – do you recall your family's response to your participation?

POWELL: It was in retrospect, mostly. My parents would – I don't know if they would have been opposed, but they certainly wanted me to complete my medical education, and they would not have wanted me to put it in jeopardy for some other reason. But afterwards, I did begin to share my involvement, and my mother was very supportive and understanding. And my father, a

man of few words, didn't express disapproval, so I take that (laughs) as that it was okay with him.

BENNETT: And what about grandparents?

POWELL: My grandparents had deceased at that point.

BENNETT: Now, following the Sit-Ins in your final year of medical school, it sounds as if you were participating some in the Stand-Ins and the desegregation of restaurants in Nashville just prior to the Freedom Rides in 1961.

POWELL: Mm-hm.

BENNETT: What kind of – I guess after Ben West did announce the desegregation of lunch counters, how did the Movement kind of sustain its energy when so much had been focused on this?

POWELL: The – oh, let's see. I'm trying to remember the date when that happened.

BENNETT: Yeah, that's late April, 1960.

POWELL: Right. Well, what my memory seems to be recalling is that in the summer, from there I went to – I did an externship. But then coming back in the fall of 1960

BENNETT: I'm going to turn the tape.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A] [COUNTER: 424]
[START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B][COUNTER: 000]

BENNETT: This was with medical school?

POWELL: No, it was with the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland.

How did we sustain the Movement? That's a very good question, and I seem to be really vague on exactly what we did do. I know we ended, to a large extent, with the – my involvement with the effort with the Freedom Rides, in terms of specific protest activities, because desegregation of the lunch counters went very smoothly after that.

I think our efforts turned to organizing other students. You know, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee began to form, and I think our focus and our energies were growing beyond Nashville, and helping to foster a larger Movement.

BENNETT: And did Highlander play a part in this? Did you ever go to Highlander?

POWELL: I never went to Highlander, but Guy Carawan and others from there were involved with us in Nashville. I know some students did go to Highlander but I was not among them.

BENNETT: Now, how would you – so, following your graduation from Meharry, then, you moved up to Minnesota?

POWELL: Yes.

BENNETT: Did you have any sort of time of – when you kind of – I don't want to say 'depression' but more of a 'down' time following the intensity of the Movement?

POWELL: No, not really. The Nashville involvement and support of the Freedom, the continuation of the Freedom Ride, was my last major event as a student leader in the Nashville group, and I went from there to an extremely intense internship at University of Minnesota. And, if you can imagine, I had spent a considerable amount of my time outside of the classroom during medical school. I thought I had to totally devote myself to medicine and my internship if I were going to be a competent diagnostician and practitioner. So I didn't have time to be depressed. (laughs)

And then following my internship, I accepted a fellowship in pediatric neuropathology at the National Institutes of Health, and was only there for three months when I succumbed to the temptation to join the Peace Corps as a Peace Corps physician.

My internship ended in June of '62 and by September, October of '62 I was in that first group of Peace Corps volunteers that landed in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. We were the third group to leave the country under President Kennedy's Peace Corps Movement.

BENNETT: So you worked under – who was the first Director –

POWELL: Harris Wafford? Oh, no, no. Harris Wafford was the Director of the Ethiopia Peace Corps Group. You're thinking of Sargent Shriver.

BENNETT: That's right, yeah.

POWELL: I think he was the Director then, and he later tried to have me fired and sent home because I went from Ethiopia to what was then Tanganyika in 1963 and it was during that time that I picked up a *Time* magazine, I suppose it was, and learned of the death of Medgar Evers.

And I was – now, you asked me about depression.

BENNETT: Yeah.

POWELL: That really depressed me. And as I read about it, it was also at a time when the Embassy was preparing for its July 4 celebration, and I simply told people that I knew, that I was not going to attend, that I – I had nothing to celebrate in terms of freedom in this country. And that spread around to the other black Americans that were in Tanganyika with the U.S. Agency, with National Development, with the Voice of America, those at the American Embassy.

And then slowly other black Americans began to say, 'Well, I'm not going, either.'

My former wife, I think, really is the one who spread this, simply by telling her friends, because she was active with them because of our child. And suddenly Associated Press picked it up that there was an organized boycott, by black Americans at the Embassy in Tanganyika.

The Ambassador called me in and told me he was going to call a press conference in which I was to retract this, and I told him that was impossible: (a) I didn't organize it, (b) I totally supported the sentiment, and (c) if he wanted to really see what a protest was like, I'd be happy to organize one.

And at that point Sargent Shriver sent the Medical Director from Washington to come and escort me home. The Medical Director also turned out to be a good friend of mine who was a former Peace Corps physician in Nigeria, and when he understood how this came about and what had happened, he suggested to Shriver that he leave it alone, and I got to finish my tour.

BENNETT: Good.

POWELL: I'm sorry – that was quite a diversion.

BENNETT: It's – actually, I appreciate it. I think that another interesting topic is how people who aren't in America responded to these various tragedies.

POWELL: Yes.

BENNETT: And I think that's pretty significant.

POWELL: Yeah, I wish we could all understand what Martin Luther King taught us, that injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere.

BENNETT: Mm-hm. So your wife was serving at the same time, your ex-wife was in the Peace Corps with you also?

POWELL: Yes.

BENNETT: Okay. And was your child born in Africa, then?

POWELL: One child was born in Nashville during her senior year of med school, between '61 and '62. She was one year behind me. And our other child was born in Tanganyika – who held dual citizenship for the longest time. But actually now she's a lawyer and a resident in Germany with her husband there.

BENNETT: Now, how would you say that this experience with the Sit-Ins – changed you?

POWELL: Well, it very much focused my concerns and commitment to social justice, and not just for black Americans, but for all oppressed people, and it very much influenced my view of conservative Christianity and how the Biblical texts have been abused and interpreted and codified into laws that initially oppressed black Americans in slavery and segregated schools, racism, and their support of bans on interracial marriage.

And most importantly, it has provided me the focus that I use in trying to combat Christian homophobia towards homosexual Americans. And I still use the lessons learned and that commitment to love and nonviolence that I learned under the guidance and auspices of Martin Luther King, to guide me.

BENNETT: Are you formally part of any group or organization, or do you work –

POWELL: My formal association is with a group called Soulforce, which is an interfaith group of Christians trying to change Christian teachings regarding gay and lesbian Americans. And I helped to organize the efforts here in Hawaii to try to achieve same-sex marriage, to change the laws regarding marriage here. And that's still my current involvement.

BENNETT: It seems to me that James Lawson has had some involvement with that.

POWELL: Yes, he has been involved with Soulforce. And sometimes Arun Gandhi, grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, has been involved with Soulforce. The most recent experience I recall was our protest in Cleveland several years ago, and Arun was arrested with us.

BENNETT: What memories or facts do you think are important to preserve regarding the Movement here in Nashville in particular? You know, what made the Nashville Movement extraordinary?

POWELL: What made the Nashville Movement extraordinary was the initiative and commitment by youth. I don't know if I can say that strongly enough. And I think that's the lesson learned that I feel has to really be preserved.

To really change the kinds of oppression that we saw and experienced as black Americans, you have to go beyond thinking you can do it though the Executive Branch or just through the Judicial Branch, or the Legislative Branch, or even all three of them.

To bring about an environment that will sustain those changes, I think you have to be committed and involved, and there's a level of energy that maybe stems from the recklessness that only youth can bring to a Movement, that's really essential.

What I find in the efforts now that I'm doing with the GLBT Movement is that the white experience is so different from the black experience in terms of dealing with oppression, and there's this incredible reliance that focus groups and getting laws changed will simply right the wrongs. And as we have learned in this last election, it doesn't work that way. And what's missing is nonviolent protest.

BENNETT: Are there any final thoughts that you would like to share regarding the Sit-In Movement or the actions of the city leaders, businesses, churches,

POWELL: Yeah. And I don't want this – since it's going to be probably my final remarks, too – to come across as bitter or sour grapes. But when David Halberstam finished his book *The*

Children, and there was this big celebration, inauguration of the book, in Nashville, I think it was in 1998 –

BENNETT: I think it might have been a couple of years earlier. I attended over at the Fisk Memorial Chapel.

POWELL: At the chapel, yes. Well, at any rate – I don't have the dates firmly in mind – I remember C. T. Vivian spoke before me, and he said the Sit-In Movement and those protests were 'old hat' and the next effort was economic gains. And I spoke after him and I remember saying something to the effect that I really disagreed with him, because I was still, as a gay American, I was still struggling for my civil rights.

And it was very interesting. Very few of the members of the student group that were there had anything to say that was supportive about that. And later I wanted to recruit their endorsement and support with Soul Force for what we were trying to do, and not one would respond. And much to my dismay, not even C. T. Vivian responded. But Jim Lawson has been involved. And I find that inability to put themselves in the place of other oppressed groups to be very disconcerting and disappointing.

BENNETT: Well, my final question was, how do you continue contact with those who participated?

POWELL: I don't. (laughs)

BENNETT: (laughs) Okay.

POWELL: We just don't share anything beyond that experience. And, for some of them, they have remained – and I use the word even with its pejorative connotations – mired in that experience and haven't moved on. And I – but among that group there's no one I have continued contact with, except my former wife. We're still good friends.

BENNETT: Well, that's great. Yeah. Well, I really appreciate your time. We're about at probably about 50 minutes altogether, that we've interviewed, and unless there – is there anything else you would like to share at all?

POWELL: I think we covered everything. I think your questions and the focus you've devised has gotten out all the things I wanted to say.

BENNETT: That's great. Thank you very much. I'm going to turn this off right now. This will end our interview today, March 29, 2005.

[COUNTER: 195]