

Civil Rights History Project
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Interviewee: Dr. William J. Anderson
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Interviewer: Joseph Mosnier, Ph.D.
Videographer: John Bishop
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John Bishop: And rolling.

Joe Mosnier: Today [clears throat] – excuse me, today is Tuesday, July 26th, 2011. My name is Joe Mosnier of the Southern Oral History program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I'm in Detroit, Michigan with our project videographer John Bishop to do an oral history interview for the Civil Rights History Project, which is a, a joint undertaking of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture and the Library of Congress. And we're delighted today to be with Dr. William J. Anderson. Dr. Anderson, thank you for the welcome and for taking time from your schedule to sit down with us.

William Anderson: And thank you for the opportunity of sharing my story, my experiences if you would, in the Civil Rights Movement. I was privileged to be a part of it.

JM: Yeah. Well, we're looking forward to the conversation. Absolutely. Um, you were, uh, you were as a child and young man, you were a very, uh, ambitious and, uh, and, uh, and active young person. You graduated high school I think at age fifteen?

WA: Yes.

JM: And um, I know you came up in Americus, Georgia. And I wondered if you might just to sort of get us started here today talk a little bit about the, the world of Americus, Georgia when you were growing up.

WA: I very often compare uh the conditions under which I grew up and that of Martin Luther King, Jr. Because we were barely 170 miles apart. We both experienced the same conditions. That is Americus was a small farming community with, uh, perhaps five, six thousand people. And the primary industries of course were farming, peanuts, cotton and, uh, even some pecans. And, uh, my parents were somewhat educated as compared to others in that my father finished high school, and he started college, Morehouse College, the most prestigious college for black men in the United States, probably in the world, but we don't know whether or not he ever graduated. But that was not important. The important thing was he went to college, which was probably a singular accomplishment within itself because very, very few blacks, especially males, had the opportunity to go to college.

My mother who was a high school graduate and she was teaching school as a high school graduate because she happened to be one of the most educated people in town. She went back to college after my sister, who was the youngest three children that she had. The youngest started school, then she went back to college. And she would go to college in the summer: Albany State, by the way, that became historic. But she would go

to school in the summer. And she would teach school during the school season. It took her twenty years. But in that twenty years she got her B.S. degree. A major, major accomplishment because we did not know of anyone in the Anderson family who had ever gone that far in college.

So my household, anyway, was one that recognized the value and the importance of education. And so they stressed that to the three of us. I had one brother, one sister. While maybe we would've been somewhat hesitant to go had we not had the push, but it was not even a discussion in my home. You're going to college. We don't care what you study. You can study farming. You can study singing. You can study whatever. But you're going to college.

But the town of Americus itself – you could define segregation and discrimination by Americus, Georgia. There was no such thing as an integration. The school system was totally separate. You could not have a sandwich in a lunch counter. There were no public transportation vehicles of any kind. So that was not an issue. There were totally segregated facilities, gas stations, what department stores were there. There were segregated facilities. Schools were totally segregated. So I'm saying that it was almost like two worlds in one: a black world and a white world. I guess I did not complain that much because I did not know any better, until later on I volunteered to go into the Navy.

But if you're looking, look back on it now and you say well, how could you possibly tolerated those kind of conditions where you could be walking down the street and a white boy would be coming toward you and say, "Nigger get off the sidewalk. You're where I want to walk." And I would get off the sidewalk and let him have it. How could you tolerate conditions whereby in your school system anyway – there was an

elementary school and a high school, but we all recognized we [5:00] never got a new book. We always had used books, second hand books that had been written in and sometimes torn up. There was a movie house in town, totally segregated again. The blacks had to sit in what we referred to as the buzzard roost, *up high*. You had to go in a separate entrance.

So those were the kinds of conditions that existed and were tolerated if not accepted, certainly not liked; but they were tolerated, primarily because we did not know any other way. So I guess I tried to figure out a way to get out of that situation. So number one, I elected to go to college. My brother preceded me, and he had gone to college so he had already set the stage. The oldest of the three, and he went to college, Morehouse College also. Don't know whether he ever got a degree or not. And that, again, is not important.

I went to college at Fort Valley State. I was probably attracted there more by having the opportunity to play football than to get a good education. That was secondary. But somewhere in the back of my mind, though, I always wanted to be a doctor, always wanted to be a doctor. So I knew I had to get a college education if I was going to be a doctor. So I went to Fort Valley for two years and then World War II broke out.

JM: Okay. Let me ask, before you talk about the war. How, how did your family afford to send you and your brother to college?

WA: They couldn't. Well, it did not cost like it costs today. This will amaze you: The tuition, room and board at Fort Valley State College was twenty-five dollars a month. Got that? Tuition, room and board: twenty-five dollars a month. I worked to

earn any extra money that I had. I worked as an assistant mail carrier. I worked in, I worked in the, um, what was the cafeteria, part-time, and I drove for the president.

And let me interject this parenthetically, the president of Fort Valley State College was Bond, his name was, uh – he was the father of Julian Bond, Horace Mann Bond, an educator, a renowned educator. And he was writing about education for blacks throughout the South. He selected me to be a driver, mind you sixteen years old now. I started college at fifteen, but by sixteen, I had a license and was driving for the president, taking care of his two children. He had a boy and a girl; Julian Bond was one of them. But anyway, I did not realize the advantage that I had over millions and millions of other blacks because I was in the presence of Horace Mann Bond who was one of the premier black educators in the United States, and he traveled throughout Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi studying education for blacks.

JM: Did you travel with him –

WA: I traveled – oh, I traveled with Horace Mann Bond. I drove for him. There was no public transportation.

JM: Of course.

WA: No airplanes, of course. Bus transportation was very limited. So any place we went, you drove and I drove for him.

JM: Fascinating. Yeah.

WA: So I, uh, when the war broke out, though, and I was at home on the weekend, as Americus is only about seventy miles from Fort Valley State. When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, the local newspaper, the *Americus Times-Recorder*, I will never forget, had a front-page headline and they came out with an extra. And you

heard them shouting on the street corners. I had never heard that in my life. “Extra, extra! The Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor!” I felt personally attacked. I was living in a society that was totally segregated, discrimination everywhere. I was hated. The Klansmen would threaten, all that – but I lived in that environment, yet when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, I felt as though they had attacked me personally. They had attacked my family personally. The next day I tried to volunteer for the Army. I was fourteen. My mother stopped it of course. She said, “No, no.” So I could not get in. But she waited a year or so, and as I approached sixteen, she finally decided he’s going to get in the military one way or the other and I volunteered for the Navy. But I did not know what I was volunteering for. [Laughs] It’s interesting because I just wanted to get into the military. I would’ve been a Tuskegee Airman if they’d have taken me [laughs].

JM: Yep. Yep.

WA. But since I couldn’t get to be a Tuskegee Airman – my mother wouldn’t sign, [10:00] I went to a recruiting station and I said, “I want to join.” They said, “Well, we’ve got two branches of service. We’ve got the Army and the Navy.” I had heard about the Army and seen the Army. I’ve seen them crawling around on their bellies getting shot at under barbed wire. And I said, “I don’t want that. Let me have the other one. And they said, “Oh that’s the Navy.” I said, “I’ll take it.” Then I was told there are two branches of the Navy. There’s the seaman’s branch, and there’s the steward’s branch. I don’t know anything about either one. All I know is, I want to get in the military. I want to get at those Japanese that attacked my home. So let me explain it to you: the stewards take care of the captain’s quarters. They do the cooking; they do the cleaning. I said, “Stop right there. I don’t care if the other one is shoveling horse

manure. I am not joining the military to be anybody's servant. I've had that." So I became a seaman.

JM: Yeah. Let me take you back for just a minute to –

WA: Okay.

JM: To this, this feeling you had after, in December of '41, after Pearl Harbor that this is – it is very interesting as you were saying you live in a world that's so sharply racially segregated and yet you feel personally engaged by this war question. Any reflection on that sense of identification even amidst a context that's as difficult as it was.

WA: I equate that to the response of some slaves when they were told, "The Emancipation Proclamation had been signed; you're free." They said, "Free to do what? This is the only home I've ever known. This is the only family I've ever known. Old master takes pretty good care of me. I'm not going to leave this freedom." So as bad as it was and segregation and discrimination – and it was horrible – it was the only home that I knew. So yes, I was willing to take up arms to protect a society that would enslave me.

JM: Tell me about, um, tell me about any recollections of your time in the service that really stand out maybe in a way that's racially inflected.

WA: It is – I, I look back now and knew it was by design. I did not recognize it initially. But my company was the last all black company to go into the United States Navy. Not a single member of my company – there were seventy-five in my company – not a single one of them had less than a high school education. That was unprecedented. I didn't realize it at the time. I mean, I was sixteen years old. I didn't know about the economic climate, the cultural climate, the educational climate, but I learned later on

everyone in my company had not less than a high school education. We were the most educated company in the United States Navy. We were a test. Who orchestrated that test? I don't know who planned it, whether the secretary of the Navy, I don't know. But we were a test. My company then excelled because we knew after a while that we were a test. We integrated a battalion, the first black company to integrate a battalion. This was at Great Lakes [Naval Training Center]. We excelled again because somehow or another our parents had instilled in all of us you've got to be better. You cannot be just as good as whites. You've got to be better. And everybody in my company excelled.

So I never had another opportunity when I finished my basic training. I was home on leave and had tonsillitis, would you believe. Today you give me a shot of penicillin and go on back to work. No, no. Then, [laughing] the doctor came to see me at home. I had a high fever, sore throat. All he had to do was call the naval base and say, "This soldier, this sailor is not able to travel right now." And they said, "Okay. Doctor, just let us know when he's ready and then send him on back." I stayed for two weeks for *tonsillitis*.

But when I got back to Great Lakes, my company had already shipped out and they went into the Seabees. Those were the construction workers. I was relieved. I was happy that I, that I missed my tour of duty. And so I was put on private duty. They said, "You're going out anyway. You're going out to fight the Japanese anyway." So they put me on a ship, and they made me a part of the Seventh Fleet, under, on the [USS] Joseph Auman under "Bull" Halsey [Admiral, Seventh Fleet, c. 1943]. I went out with the Seventh Fleet. They stopped in the Philippines for a few days – no, no – in the Hawaiian Islands for a few days, and then they dropped me off in the Philippine Islands down in the

Leyte Gulf [in the Philippines]. There, I think, they forgot about me. The war had just recently come to an end however the word had not gotten out to all of these remote islands that the war is over. So there were Japanese soldiers in the palm trees [15:00] and we said that they put them up there with a sack of rice and gave them a gun and said, “Just stay here and shoot everything that comes near.” So there was still some found in those trees even a year after the war had ended.

So when I got up there, just before we got off the ship, the captain of the ship said, “There’s a shortage of hospital corpsmen. Anyone who has any background at all in medicine report to the deck.” I had two years of pre-med. I reported. He said, “Okay, we’re going to send you to hospital corps school.” There were about a half a dozen of us who had a little bit of background at least from pre-med, and we went to hospital corps school for six weeks in the Philippine Islands. We became doctors in six weeks. We don’t know why it takes doctors so long now, but we became doctors in six weeks because hospital corpsmen were the primary care physicians of the military. So for the next year I took care of servicemen in the military. I always wore a gun of course. I did not have to shoot anybody, but everybody out there was armed.

JM: And that, [clears throat] that experience really confirmed your desire to go forward with the medical career.

WA: If there had ever been any doubt in my mind as to whether I wanted to be a doctor or not, that would’ve confirmed it. I enjoyed that to no end.

JM: Yeah. Coming out of the military how did you find your path forward towards a medical education?

WA: Now I'm convinced that I want to be a doctor. When I got out of the Navy, I went back to college. I met this wonderful woman that I eventually married. She said I was a big man on campus, and she was just a lowly freshman, but anyway, I met her and I started applying for medical school. In those days you did not have to have a degree. I had finished two years of college in what constituted pre-med, and I applied to every medical school in the United States and Canada. I was turned down for several reasons. One, Fort Valley State College was not recognized; it was not accredited by any accrediting agency, none. It was a very small school. There were three hundred students, total. Not three hundred in a class, three hundred students: twenty-six boys, and all the rest were girls – difficult for boys. But that was the situation as it was. So I got turned down by all of these colleges. I was eligible for some GI bill, two years, but there was a time that you had to either be in school or you would lose some of that credit.

So I moved up to Atlanta with my new wife, and I met Martin Luther King, Jr. and that was prophetic. I did not plan that. He was not “Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.” then. He was just “Marty.” He was a high school student. He was a high school senior; he was graduating the year I went up there. And he and my wife's brother were very good friends, very close friends. Again prophetic that I would meet the man who would eventually become the world leader when both of us – I was one year older than Martin. We met in Atlanta because I married the right girl.

But while I was waiting there to get into medical school, I had to be in some kind of school. So I went to mortuary science school, of all things, because the mortuary science curriculum was almost the same as pre-med curriculum for the second and third year and probably as much as the third and fourth year. If you can imagine the mortuary

science college having anatomy, physiology, chemistry, pathology, but those were the courses that were being offered. So, “Wow,” I said, “This will prepare me for medical school.” So I got that degree and would’ve stayed in Atlanta to get my college degree except that a funeral director, or funeral home owner in Montgomery by the name of [J.H.] Loveless invited me, offered me a position in Montgomery. He said, “If you come here, get your college degree and you can work whenever you want to. Set your own schedule. I’ll pay you fifteen dollars a week; set your own schedule.” I could not turn that down.

I went to Montgomery, again *prophetic*. Who did I meet in Montgomery at Montgomery State College? Ralph David Abernathy, not the “Right Reverend Dr. Ralph David Abernathy,” just “David Abernathy, schoolmate.” And we became very good friends. I think he and my wife were closer than you can imagine because he spent a lot of time at my home while I was working. I was working at the funeral home, going to school. I’d come home. My wife has fixed him my dinner. He’s ate my dinner! She’d have to start all over again. But he was as close as a brother. He would – became the godfather of our oldest child. That’s how close we were. [20:00]

So working the funeral home I was able to take enough classes that I graduated from Montgomery, from Alabama State College. It was called, by the way, Alabama State College for Negroes. Well, people look at me and they have to wonder, “Is he a Negro or is he white?” So what we would do as the bus would leave Montgomery going north on one of our tours, we’d black out the “for Negroes” on the side of the bus. That was the joke around there.

But anyway, I got my degree from Alabama State College for Negroes, and I was offered a job back in Atlanta at the College of Mortuary Science. There I'm still – I'm trying to get into medical school. My eye was on the prize, eyes on the prize. I'm trying to get into medical school. So now I took some graduate studies at Atlanta University, working toward a master's. I was singing in a radio choir at Wheat Street [Baptist] Church. One morning we were broadcasting from this television studio in Atlanta and a local radio station, WERD – we called it the “good word station” – the program director, Ken Knight, I will never forget him, he called the radio station where I was broadcasting from and said, “Would you be interested in a career in radio?” “Oh no. I'm going to be a doctor.” He said, “In case you change your mind, come by to see me.” So one Sunday afternoon I had nothing else to do. Couldn't get in medical school. I said I'm going down to visit this guy in radio. I went down the next week, “Would you mind reading a couple of passages?” Okay, I read it. He said, “You know you could do all right in radio.” I said, “All right, I'll try it out.” So I became a radio announcer. Every afternoon for two hours I was with a guy named Alley Pat. His name was James, James, uh, forgot his last name now. We called him Alley Pat – Patrick was his name. James Patrick. And James Patrick may still be doing radio in Atlanta. [JM laughs] But that was where I got the experience in radio.

The background in mortuary science, at the mortuary science school while I'm waiting – “Why did you do all of those things? You wanted to be a doctor.” Again, prophetic. When I finally got accepted in medical school, and it was only because of a friend of my father. He was a physician practicing in Albany. Albany, we consider that a suburb of Americus and vice versa. But my dad was an insurance man, I said, and his

office was in Albany. He was district manager of the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company, and his office was in Albany. And so I would go to Albany on occasion and he says, "Why don't you meet my doctor who is a graduate of the Des Moines Still College of Osteopathy." Well, I was curious. And I have that academic curiosity. I wanted to know what was osteopathy. I went to the dictionary and found it had to do with bones. So I told my dad, "I don't want to do that daddy. I want to be a real doctor. I want to give shots, deliver babies, do surgery. I want to be a real doctor." So finally he convinced me to come at least meet Dr. Willy Joe Reese. I was respectful of my father. He was a man of small stature, only about five-two, five-three and I was about five-ten or eleven. But I never challenged my father.

So I went to see, to visit this Dr. Reese. He had the biggest practice in town. He was doing minor surgery; he was delivering babies; he was giving shots; he was writing prescriptions. I said, "But dad, that's all I ever wanted to do." He said, "I tried to tell you that, you idiot." He could do that because he was my father. But Willy Joe Reese was doing everything that a black doctor could do in the rural South. Black doctors had no hospital privileges, so Reese happened to be a graduate of what was Des Moines Still College of Osteopathy. It is now Des Moines University. He knew the dean because he had a degree in biochemistry before he went to the college of osteopathic medicine, and they needed an instructor in biochemistry. So they made a deal with him. He had an MD degree that he could not use because it was from a school in New York that lost its accreditation. So a degree that could not be used, he couldn't get a license. So they said, "If you come here to teach biochemistry, you can then take courses in osteopathic medicine. You can get a degree in osteopathic medicine. Now you can get a license; you

can practice.” Good deal all the way around. So he called the dean and he says, “The son of my best friend wants to [25:00] become a doctor. Will you give him a chance?” “Oh, if he’s a friend of your best friend, yeah.”

So I went up to Des Moines, and this was back in 1952. I took the entrance exams on that trip, Ohio Reading Comprehension and Minnesota Multi-Phasic. I passed them both and was accepted on the spot. I have never, ever looked back. One of the best decision that has ever been made for me, mind you, *for* me because osteopathic profession has just, it has grown phenomenally, from six colleges to now thirty colleges, from fifteen osteopathic physicians to 75,000. And I had the privilege of becoming the president of the American Osteopathic Association.

So I’m saying I could never have planned this life out. Everything along the way: been married to a lady who made me friends with Martin Luther King, Jr., wind up in mortuary science school, where I learned how to be a mortician that helped me to pay my tuition to get through medical school. This radio program that got me interested, a little bit in radio also helped me to get to medical school because in Des Moines I was a radio announcer—

JM: Is that right?

WA: And I was a mortician. I prepared the cadavers for the medical school, and I had a radio program that started out – it was what was called the ethnic hour. One hour, one day a week they had four segments: Polish, Western, Negro and something else. And it was losing money. So I went by the radio station, and I told the manager, “I need a job in radio. I have some experience.” “There isn’t anything for you.” I said, “But you’ve

got this one-hour program of ethnic music.” I said, “I can do that program.” He said, “It’s not making any money.”

“I’ll make you an offer. I will do the program for free. I will go out and sell the ads. If it does not make any money, don’t pay me.” He said, “Are you nuts?” “Eh. A little bit, a little bit.” “Okay, I’ll give you a chance.” After about two or three months, the program went from one hour one day a week to four hours every night. Saturdays and Sundays, as much time as I wanted. A program that I labeled *Gala Time*, every night eight to twelve. I’d get off the radio station at twelve o’clock. I had to put all the records back because in those days, the radio announcer was everything. He was the radio announcer; he was the engineer; he was the newscaster; he was the sportscaster. I did it all. I was the only one in the studio. And so I would get done about one o’clock. Then I would go and study the rest of the night and be ready to go to class the next morning.

JB: Can we pause –

JM: We’ll pause for just a sec.

WA: Pause.

[Interview stops and then resumes]

JM: We’re back after a short break. Um, Dr. Anderson we were talking about, about Des Moines and, um, your work, this tremendous success really transforming this radio hour into a very, very substantial program *Gala Time*. Could you touch on, could you touch on racial questions inside that framework at all? Did you?

WA: Let’s start with, uh, when I first – now the interview took place several months before school started. It started like in September. There were social, civic, academics, scholarly organizations on campus. One of them was called the Square and

Compass Club, the Masons, and, uh, when I was a student at Alabama State College, having little to do, I joined the Masons. And so I figured a Mason is a Mason. So when I found out that there was a chapter on campus, I went to join it. And they said, "You can't join." "What do you mean? I'm a Mason. Here's my card. I'm a Mason, dues paying Mason." "Yeah, but you came from a clandestine Masonic organization." "What do you mean clandestine? You mean I'm colored?" "Well, pretty much so. You don't belong with the real Masons. You are an 'outside child' Mason." So I uh, I did not buck that. I did not challenge that. They had never heard of Martin Luther King, Jr. or the Civil Rights Movement. So I did not want to get put out of school, so I, I went along with it.

[30:00]

The other thing that happened was the dean, thinking he was doing something to my benefit, said to me, "Anderson, this is Des Moines. The races do not mix very well here. You're not to date any white women. You're not to socialize with any white women." That became almost an albatross for me because at one of the official school functions the chairman of the biochemistry department happened to be female, a white female, mind you. She had a couple of drinks I think. But something told her to tell one of my classmates to go and get me and bring me to her because she wanted to dance with me. Now what would you do? If I dance with her, I'll be put out of school by the dean. The dean's already told me that. If I don't dance with her, I'm going to flunk biochemistry and I'll be put out of school. What a dilemma. Well, I had another beer and I went and danced with her. Nothing happened. The school didn't collapse; no racial wars broke out. I was not put out of school. I was not even called to the dean's office. There was a fear that some people had that if there is integration it would prove to be

disastrous. The world will come to an end if white and blacks mix. Nothing happened. I can say in retrospect that was the beginning of desegregation of the city of Des Moines, Iowa.

There was a very popular pizza parlor there known as Babe's Pizza. And if anybody who had been to Des Moines, if they were there as much as fifty-five or sixty years ago, they knew about Babe's Pizza, a very popular hangout for school kids, college kids, especially from Des Moines Still College of Osteopathy, except that "no blacks." They would not serve a black. So did I run into it even in Des Moines, Iowa? Yes, I could not stay in a hotel. They had one class hotel downtown. Could not stay in there. So when I was up there for the interview, I stayed at the YMCA. Incidentally that ingratiated me to the YMCA because the YMCA was one of the few places in the United States that never had segregation. And so that's why, once I finished medical school and started into practice, I started raising money for the YMCA. I do it 'til today.

JM: Did Des Moines have, um, an active NAACP chapter in the mid-'50s?

WA: Yes.

JM: In the early to mid-'50s.

WA: When you say active, active but very small and not taking on many projects. But there were two or three people who were very active in trying to desegregate—

JM: Yeah.

WA: The city of Des Moines.

JM: Well, of course these were, you were in Des Moines during *Brown versus Board of Education*.

WA: Ah four, that was '54.

JM: Yeah.

WA: Uh huh. It was leading up to *Brown versus Board of Education*, right.

JM: Well, you were there '52, '56, yeah.

WA: Yeah, yeah.

JM: Brown, the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

WA: Montgomery Bus Boycott was '56.

JM: Yeah.

WA: I was graduating. I graduated in '56.

JM: Yeah.

WA: It went on though for the entire year of '56.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

WA: Up to '57. Yes.

JM: Emmitt Till's murder was summer of '55.

WA: But remember though, word did not travel around as fast as you might expect.

JM: Right.

WA: Newspaper articles from Montgomery never got to Des Moines. Nobody in Des Moines, as I knew, ever subscribed to the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*. Television was in its infancy. So very, very few people had televisions. So it was sort of like: the Emancipation Proclamation was signed in January, but they did not find out about it in Arkansas until June. The same thing was true pretty much even in 1952,

1956, 1954 – yeah , the schools had been desegregated, but the word did not get around the day when it was signed; it did not happen overnight.

JM: Did you have a feeling on leaving Des Moines and moving ahead with your life, you went up to Michigan for a year of, um, internship—

WA: Yes.

JM: That you were going to put your hands on this question of trying to change the social realities. Was that in your spirit at that time?

WA: Let's, let's prioritize my life.

JM: Sure.

WA: My ultimate objective was to become a doctor.

JM: Yep.

WA: And I took a lot of things to become a doctor [35:00] including: the internship that I got in Flint came about as a result of this same dean, John B. Schumaker who said the races don't mix. You are not to socialize with white women in Des Moines. That same dean, though, after I'd been there for three years, fourth year and I needed to get an internship – and Flint Osteopathic Hospital had one of the best internships in the country – he personally got on the phone and called the administrator, Keith Bowker. I will never forget him either. He called him and he says, "I've got this colored doctor; he's a fine student. He's not a troublemaker and he will make a fine intern for you." This was unprecedented. I had to go out for a personal interview before I could get a clinical clerkship there. Went up for a personal interview. And the House Staff Training Committee that selects interns called a special meeting just for me. They interviewed me because they could not challenge my credentials academically because I was in the top

ten percent of my class. There was one man there in family practice who says, “I don’t even know why we’re here. I move that we accept this man as an intern.” I was sitting there, and there were half a dozen other people. [Laughs] I think he put them on the spot because they could not think of a good reason to deny me. They couldn’t. I was accepted. The first black to ever get training outside of a college-owned hospital in history. That was 1955, is when I went there.

JM: Fascinating. Wow. Um –

JB: [request for a break in the interview]

JM: Yep, let’s stop for just a – .

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Ok, we’re back.

JM: We’re back after a short break. Um, what drew you back to Albany in ’57?

WA: My wife. It was not for lure of going back into this cesspool of segregation and discrimination. I was not going back there to change the world. Martin Luther King, Jr. was little known. I mean, I knew him personally, but in terms of his, his potential as a world leader was not well known in 1956 and ’57. We had just come out of the Montgomery bus boycott and all the other places in the South where this might have happened and said, “Oh hell no. It’s not going to happen here. It happened in Montgomery, but it’s not going to happen here.” So, it was not my intent to go down there and become a rabble-rouser and start desegregating Albany. What happened was my wife and I met a couple that were professors at University of Michigan, Flint campus. Bud and Ginger Edwards, very well educated people, both PhDs. We became friends. They got to know us very well because they had a couple of young kids, and of course we

had a couple of young kids. We had three I guess. Later had four; later had five. But anyway, we had some kids. And we would get together frequently. We didn't have much money so you know we couldn't go out to clubs or anything like that. We would just go into each other's homes. We would have dinner; we'd sit around and just talk. I said television was still in its infancy. So we would talk. Can you imagine a group of people just sitting around and talking for three or four hours? That's what we did.

So they got to know us very well. Nearing the end of my internship, and now I'm in the process of deciding where now I'm going to practice. In those days that's all you needed: internship, you could practice. There was a group of surgeons at Flint Osteopathic Hospital; Dederian was a key one: Sarkis Dederian. He and his partner said to me, "We would like to set you up in practice in Flint. We would finance you setting up in practice." His partner was named, was named Taverner: Taverner and Dederian. They said, "We don't want you to bury yourself – and they used those words – *bury yourself* in the colored neighborhood. We want you to at least get you on a border street because we feel, based on our experiences with you, you're going to have as many white patients as you have black patients. So be prepared to take both." It was good advice, I thought, because, in all humility, I said I was the best intern they ever had. But later on they wouldn't give me a residency in surgery. And now – there was a bit of, there was an ulterior motive there because they thought I would have a good practice and because they helped set me up in practice, I would refer my surgeries to them. And I would have.

But my wife, in one of these conversations with Bud and Ginger Edwards, [40:00] she says, um, "We've got to go back and talk to Bud and Ginger again. You want to stay here and practice because you can have a great practice right off from day one. But you

made a promise.” “What was that?” “You said if you ever got your education, you were going back down South, the rural South, where they need you. They don’t need you in Flint.” I said, ‘Damn. This woman remembers everything.’ Everything that she wants to remember. Because women have that phenomenal memory, you know, of selective memory the things they want you to remember. Because – in jest, I say my wife can tell you every bad thing I’ve ever done in my life. But she did remember, before I even got in to medical school, you said, if I ever got my education, I was going back.

So we were talking with Bud and Ginger Edwards. They sent me to another room. She’d talk with me; go back, send Bud and Ginger and go back. So the last time I went to talk to Bud and Ginger, they said, “Pack your bags. You’re going back.”

[Laughs].

JM: You didn’t want to go.

WA: Uh uh.

JM: Were Bud and Ginger white or African American?

WA: Black. Black.

JM: Yeah, ok. They’re an exceptional couple both to have PhDs—

WA: Yeah.

JM: In the ‘50s.

WA: Exceptional. They said, “You’re going back.” They knew this. As much as I challenged my wife, I can say in retrospect every major decision I ever made in our entire sixty-one years of marriage, was made by my wife. The decision to marry her, in jest I said, I didn’t propose to her, she told me. Well, she thought she told one of her college friends when she first met me, she said, “I’m going to marry him.” I didn’t know

it. [Laughs] So it was that woman who got me to know Martin Luther King, which resulted in me ultimately becoming a part of a major Civil Rights Movement. That was my wife.

JM: We'll talk more about her. I want to talk more about her very much. Um, so against your first instinct you went back to, you went back to Albany in '57.

WA: It wasn't exactly to Albany. As a matter of fact, I looked around. I did not know for sure where I wanted to practice. I thought about my hometown because they had – it was segregated, but there was a colored wing to the hospital. Because mind you, I was fighting two things: being an osteopathic physician, which was few in number in Georgia, and being black limited my opportunities to get hospital privileges anywhere. But the Negro hospital – [or rather, the] colored wing in Americus, but in Albany there was no such. Black patients were put in the basement where they had to compete with the laundry room and the furnaces and the steam pipes. But then I went to several other small towns, and they always had an interest in having a doctor yet they were willing to accept segregated conditions that existed. And the other hurdle was getting over you being an osteopathic physician and they were not well known in those days. So what prompted me to let us settle in Albany, my father's office was there. So he knew everybody in town; everybody in town knew him. So it was not like I had to be introduced.

But the one that convinced me more than anything else was C.B. King, attorney C. B. King. He and I – we had known each other for many years because my dad was in Albany, and I would go down there periodically. I knew the King family. He had a very outstanding family, the King family. Outstanding family. So in his office, I remember

when he finally convinced me. He said to me – he called me Andy – “Andy, Albany will be as good to you as you are to it.” That said to me if I put forth the effort, if I give these people good service, they’ll take care of me. That made up my mind for me.

And then, uh, Willy Joe Reese who was still in practice, he was getting somewhat up in age – when you got to the middle ‘50s it was up in age in those days because I was just barely out of my twenties. But Bill Reese, who was also in practice there, said to me, “You can come in with me if you so desire. Or if you want to do it on your own, I will help you any way I can to get you started.” Well, what else could I want? The leading lawyer, highly regarded and one of the busiest doctors in town! Then, it was settled. That’s why I elected to go to Albany. [45:00]

JM: Yeah. Did the practice unfold those first couple years pretty smoothly?

WA: They were standing at my door waiting to get in before I could open my doors even. I made a mistake actually. Being pressured by some people who knew I was there to start treating them before I completed an examination. I had, I had not set up a laboratory. Didn’t do any laboratory tests, and I started treating them and I missed a diagnosis of diabetes that I never should’ve missed if I had just been doing my routine. Because everybody came in, got a routine urinalysis, had a routine. But I’m saying that I was rushed into practice. But the day it was announced my office was open, my office was full all day every day. I would see as many as a hundred patients a day. I never lacked for patients. So if I was doing so well in practice, why would I get involved in civil rights. That was not my intent either.

JM: Let me ask one quick question—

WA: Sure.

JM: Before we turn to that.

WA: All right.

JM: So the stream of patients who came through your door would not have been just from the city of Albany or –

WA: All around.

JM: Yeah, ok. So you, you would've, not that you didn't know this already, but you would've seen in the health circumstances of your patients the reflection of the material condition of their lives.

WA: Um, I was amazed at how inadequate the health care was that these people were getting. Now there were two black doctors there. One was, had a limited practice by his choosing. And the other one was Willy Joe Reese who I said was getting up in age some and wanted to cut back some. So actually they resorted going to white doctors even when they didn't want to because that's all they had available. But in doing that, they had to go in the back door, sit in a separate waiting room and wait until all the white patients had been seen. Some of the black patients told me stories that were just unimaginable. Like for example: they'd have several black patients come in the office at the same time, not in the examining room, in the office. And they would sit around the table and the doctor would sit behind his desk and, "What is wrong with you, boy? And what is wrong you, boy? What is wrong with you, girl?" And make his diagnosis and make out the prescription based on that kind of examination. Some of these patients in chronic congestive heart failure had to come in once a week to get a shot of mercuhydrin, which was a diuretic. All these people needed was whole-leaf digitalis, plain digitalis which has been around for a hundred years. Those were the kind of patients I received

when I got there and said – I had to hark back to what my wife said, “These people need you, and you don’t need to be an Albert Einstein; you don’t need to be a major surgeon; you just need to be a good old country doctor that listens to the people and give them just basic stuff.” Give them digitalis; give them insulin, things that they were not getting.

JB: Let’s break for a sec.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Ok. [clears throat].

JM: Some I imagine would’ve had difficulty paying you.

WA: [Chuckles] That’s an understatement. My office fee was three dollars, home calls five dollars when I could get it. I never turned anybody down. I put a lot of money on the books but also I never went hungry. They would bring me a ham, a chicken, eggs, whatever they had. I had delivered babies for fifty dollars. Prenatal that they never got because they never came in – delivery, post-natal: fifty dollars. In other words, I didn’t get rich. I was never going to get rich practicing down there. However, I never went hungry; I never missed a house note; I never missed a car note. And so, when I did get involved in civil rights – and yet a little ahead of the story to let you know though – when I said to these people “follow me to jail,” a thousand people followed me to jail. Why? They did not know what the future would hold. They did not know how long they’d be in jail, whether they’d get bailed out, whether they’d have lawyers. They went because they trusted their doctor; they trusted their doctor. I don’t think they would’ve done that if I had not had that kind of relationship with them. So, I did all right. I was able to buy a Ford automobile. [Laughs] Eventually bought an Oldsmobile station

wagon. However they were run into the ground because we ran a carpool during the boycotts.

JM: Exactly. Um, uh, I just lost my question. Let me think here for one sec. Um. I'll come back to it. Um, in the late '50s – oh, I know what it was. Did you and your family, were you members of a church?

WA: Oh yeah.

JM: Yeah. Which church?

WA: We went to Albany, we went to my father's church. He had a church, and then he had a church in Americus. His church in Americus was Bethesda. His church in Albany was Mount Zion. Mount Zion Baptist Church: its pastor was E. James Grant who was about ninety years old then, but one of the most courageous men I have ever known. Courageous in the sense that he would be a pastor on Sundays, but he was principal of a school in Baker County during the week. Baker County had the reputation of being the most racist, the most violent county in the entire South. Blacks were known to go to jail down there and never be heard from again. It had such a terrible reputation that even white people from the South were reluctant to drive through Newton [GA], which was in Baker County. I got on the staff at a small hospital fifty miles away from Albany. It was down in Bainbridge, Georgia, a little hospital owned by a black doctor, fifty beds; he was the sole doctor, only doctor. He did everything. He said, "If your patients are willing to travel, you have privileges right here." And so I said, "What privileges do I have?" He said, "You have a license don't you?" "Oh, I have a license." "That's your privilege." And so the patients of mine who needed to be hospitalized, needed some surgery who were willing to travel to Bainbridge, we would go there. But I had to travel through

Newton, and I was a non-violent person, mind you, but I had did have a pistol toter's permit because I used to make house calls in strange places. I never knew when the Klan was going to decide, "Well, doc, you've done enough. We're going to hang you today." So I would put a pistol on the seat of my car as I would drive through Newton. And I said I would accept a ticket. If I got stopped I would take a ticket but I was not going to jail. And you hate to take that kind of fatalistic attitude, but I was not going to go to that jail because I knew too many people who had been lynched after being arrested in Newton.

JM: Did you ever, did you have patients come in who had been victims of white violence?

WA: Oh, God yes! Oh yeah.

JM: So this was not just an occasional thing. This was not infrequent.

WA: Oh no. As a matter of fact, the Klan held its rallies one-half block from my home. I could go out my back yard and see the flaming cross and see the hooded Klansmen and yelling their epithets. I could hear that they were very close. And blacks who would get arrested were very often, very frequently beaten up. As a matter of fact, the lawyer himself, C.B. King was going into the jail to visit one of his clients and was beaten by the sheriff himself. So was it common? A lawyer get beaten by the sheriff?

JM: I meant in – of course after '61, even prior in your first couple of years in Albany, did you see people come in as patients who had been –

WA: Not that many.

JM: Not that many.

WA: Not that many.

JM: Okay. Certainly after '61 right. Yeah. Yeah. Um, I want to ask too about the, about the local NAACP and the Criterion Club in those years before everything really accelerated.

WA: And the Urban League was there also.

JM: Ah yes.

WA: Add the Urban League.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

WA: And there were a couple of social clubs, because the Criterion Club was a civic club, and there was a woman's club called the Utilis, we called them Utilis Matrons but Utilis Matronae now. Something like, it was like a, it wasn't one of the Greek letters, but it was some kind of a social club that women belonged to and let me say that, and there were several neighborhoods that had organizations. Like the neighborhood that I lived in, I think we called it the Cedar Neighborhood. But anyway, it had, there were neighborhoods that had names, and the women primarily would be organized in these neighborhood groups, and they would very often petition the city for things like paving the streets, putting lights in, putting parks in. That kind of activity was going on a long time. And the Criterion Club – I was a member of the Criterion Club. Periodically, we would just go and meet with some of the city officials, and there were some of the city officials that would meet with you. They wouldn't do anything, but they would meet with you.

Asa Kelley was the mayor and Asa Kelley was, [55:00] stretching it a little bit, he was probably fairly liberal, fairly liberal, as was the chief of police, Laurie Pritchett. When I say they were fairly liberal, you could go and sit down and talk with them. They

could not do anything because they were held captive by this system of segregation and discrimination that demanded that they not do anything. Asa Kelley on occasion would have me to come to his office to talk because once the Albany Movement had been organized, we petitioned the mayor's office to establish a biracial commission. The mayor had no power to do that. I'll – that's what –

JM: Yes, we'll get. Yeah.

WA: I'll, I'll get to that.

JM: Yes.

WA: But going back, there were a number of liberal white people that the blacks could talk to. There was a lady called Miss B. She was the owner, operator of Bob's Candy. She took great pride in the fact that all of her workers were treated the same, black and white. They all were treated the same. That was unheard of in any other business or industry in 1956, here. And Miss B, she might still be alive. She would, she'd be ninety years old. But she was a very interesting lady. And, uh, there were a few places like that though where blacks and whites were equally treated.

JM: But I would, I would guess, say a woman like Miss B, she and any other emerging liberal minded whites, they did not have, they didn't speak publicly about that, did they?

WA: No, they couldn't. As a matter of fact Laurie Pritchett at one point, this was at the height of the movement, he had me in his office, he was as frustrated as anybody. With his hand over his heart, said to me, "Doc, is this the way you think you can make people like you?" And I said to him, "Chief, you'll never know whether you can like me

or not, as long as we're kept apart. This system keeps us apart." He and I became the best of friends. When it was over, we became the best of friends.

JM: I want to ask you about that. Let's remember to come back to that –

WA: All right. Well, I'll tell you what happened to him. But go ahead.

JM: So 19 – February 1960 and the Greensboro sit-ins and very soon the wave of sit-ins unfolds across the South and we start to hear about – well, if the word were to reach you, people would've start to hear about a group called SNCC and –

WA: Yeah.

JM: And the momentum is really gathering, and the Freedom Rides in '61 *and, and, and* [that is, there were many things happening] so it's in '61 that, October '61 that a few young men from SNCC come down to Albany, and things move forward from there. Do you remember your first sense of that something might be changing?

WA: Actually, they came in town before October. They came in town earlier, probably several months earlier. But it was very quiet. In other words, all they would do was they would go to homes and ask them would you register to vote, and some of them, fearless ones, "Oh yeah I'll try it." Knew they couldn't get it. But two or three people at a time would go with the SNCC people with the attempt to register to vote. Of course they never could get there. The registrar was always on vacation or taking a sixteen-hour lunch break. I do believe they had done away with poll tax at the time, but they had not done away with the literacy test. But they would make that so difficult that nobody could pass. So I'm saying it was just smar – sparsely done like that over a period of weeks. Then, since they weren't making any progress, they started demonstrations. And they and were in the form of no more than three or four with signs "Register to vote," and they

would go downtown and they would get arrested. And that began to build. And I saw that more and more. And the more they tried to get people to register to vote, the more they would get arrested for the least thing.

My office was in a section called Harlem, two blocks out of the heart of town. Sitting at my desk in my office, I could see these kids going downtown taking two or three people and getting arrested, getting yelled at, getting cursed. The black people who were registering to vote, they were getting threatened and intimidated, "We're going to cancel out your mortgage; you're going to lose your job." And I got uncomfortable. That's when it hit me, and I said to myself, they're doing that for me. They are trying to get people registered to vote for me, my family. So that's when I got out there and joined them.

JM: Um, hmm. Tell me your first impressions of, um, of Charles Sherrod, of Cordell Reagon.

WA: They were reckless. [1:00:00] They were fearless. But also, in the Criterion Club when we talk about it, we'd say but they had nothing to lose. They had no jobs; they had no property; they had no money. They had nothing to lose. All they had was dedication and commitment. That's all they had. As a matter of fact, Diane Nash at one point said, "When these people got in these demonstrations, they had already signed their will and last testament." In other words, if worse came to worse and they were killed; it was not totally unexpected.

But anyway uh, I was, I was, my conscious was stirred really. My conscious was stirred. As I said I took it to the Criterion Club first and I said, these, we got to do something. We have to get in front of these kids because we are their leaders, to

paraphrase Mahatma Gandhi. So they then said, “Well, let’s don’t do it ourselves. Let’s get the other clubs together.” And that’s when we called a meeting of the Criterion Club, NAACP, Urban League, the Utilis Matrons, and there might have been some other social clubs. We would call them together at the home of Ed Hamilton who was a dentist. He’s dead now. And he was also courageous to open up his home for this meeting when he knew we are being watched by the police, by the FBI, and I don’t know who else. But we organized there. I was elected president not because I had any experience whatsoever. I had none in civil rights. But I think I was elected because of two things. Number one: I did not depend on the white people for my living. I depended on the black patients. Number two: I had not been in Albany long enough to get any enemies among the blacks. [Laughs] So you’re ideal. No enemies, independent.

JM: And also probably young enough to be –

WA: Young enough –

JM: Generationally connected to the –

WA: To the youth.

JM: Loosely, yeah.

WA: Uh huh, because anybody over thirty could not be trusted by the youth.

Yeah, just young enough that the youth would follow me.

JM: Yeah.

WA: And that was the beginning.

JM: Yeah. Can you say, this is very interesting because obviously one of the key things – and this repeats in every, almost every place that you look at the core civil rights history: of course there are different opinions and different factions that emerge in a

community, by age, by economic position, et cetera, et cetera, philosophy. In Albany, can you talk a little bit about the different perspectives and the different groups and factions inside the black community, particularly because there will be tensions, of course, between different folks about how to proceed.

WA: I think we had the extremes. We had those: “What are you doing? You’re disrupting the peace and tranquility of this and I’m going to lose my job; I’m going to lose my house, foreclose on my mortgage,” and they stayed as far away from it as they could. They never came to any meetings. No mass meetings or anything else. That was the one extreme. At the other extreme there were those who were willing to throw caution to the wind as the pastor of Mount Zion. I’m saying here’s a man who depended on white racists in Baker County for his living yet he would open up his church for the mass move – mass meetings. Those are the extremes. There were some of those in the middle now that would give money. They didn’t want anybody to know it. There would come to the mass meetings, but they’re not going to get in a march, in a demonstration. So I’m saying that you had from all across the spectrums. Go for it; go for it. I’m with you; I’m with you. But I’m not going to get in line; I’m not coming to a mass meeting, but I want to slip you five dollars. So I’m saying I don’t believe there was a single black there that was untouched. But you had the extremes of, “Yes, I’m touched, but I’m not going to do anything about it. Either I’m afraid to, I’m reluctant to; I don’t want you to disturb me. I’m doing all right.” Or the others I said who: “We’re going all the way.”

Now I do believe there was, there was a pent up desire for freedom by many blacks. But they didn’t like it, but had no way to get out of it. And, uh, it was not until Martin Luther King came along that they realized there is a way other than what has been

the historic way of settling differences. Harkening back to the Revolutionary War, the Spanish-American War, we always settled our differences by wars. And that was the mindset of people. We can't beat them because we don't have the guns, the arms, and what not. So we'd just better learn how to deal with it. But then Martin Luther King came along with this new armamentarium, [1:05:00] and it was peace and nonviolence. And the fact that it was successful there, these people felt it can happen here, and would you believe they looked to me to be that Martin Luther King for Albany? Oh, no, no, no, no!

So after we finally got the organization together, and I was elected president, and the name just emerged. Nobody came and said "Well, let's have a whole list of names to choose from." In conversation someone said, "Well, let's call it a movement," and then, somebody said, "Well, let's make it Albany," and that's how the name happened, "Albany Movement." Then I think I said, "But none of us have any experience in this, but I know somebody who does." And now, that marriage, meeting Martin Luther King; that job in Montgomery, meeting Reverend Abernathy: these are people now that I could get on and call personally, personally.

Now there was some reluctance to bring them in. Let me say that. There was some reluctance because SNCC and NAACP depended on the drama of the hour to build up their coffers because they brought in more money as there was that. So we decided then, we made certain that Martin Luther King and Abernathy did not come in with the full SNCC organization and take over the Albany Movement.

JM: SCLC.

WA: SCLC. Right. What did I say? SCLC.

JM: You said SNCC, yeah, yeah.

WA: SNCC not come in and take over. Well, SNCC wanted to make sure that SCLC didn't come in and take over.

JM: Right, right, right.

WA: So, uh, then we agreed, ok, he'll come under those conditions. So – because my wife and I knew Martin and Ralph well enough that we could call them and ask them to come and let them know what the situation was. So they came down on our invitation, and they came to a church rally, and this was at Beulah, Beulah Baptist Church, Beulah.

JM: In facts I think there were –

WA: Shiloh, Shiloh.

JM: Shiloh? Yep.

WA: Shiloh was the first one; they came to Shiloh. How the word got out all over southwest Georgia, Joe, I will never know, but there was no radio, no televisions, no newspaper in many of these places. They didn't have electric lights, but the word spread throughout South Georgia, and literally thousands of people came to that mass meeting that night. We filled up both churches, Shiloh and Mount Zion. They're right across the street from each other. Martin came there, not with an entourage. He came there with Andy Young, Wyatt Walker and, uh, Abernathy. I believe that was it, the first trip. Because his intent was to speak at a rally and go back to Atlanta.

So he spoke at Shiloh, and as he was going to his seat, I said, "You have to go across the street to Mount Zion" and he did. And as he was going to his seat there I whispered in his ear, "You've got to go back to Shiloh." I mean, yeah, to Shiloh and he

says, "I've done that." He told me how tired he was. I said, "But these people have been waiting a hundred years for you and they could not get in these two churches." That's why when they emptied out, they filled up again. He spoke four times that one night. And my observation was every time he spoke, he got stronger. And Abernathy was a great warm up man. You know, you go to these theatrical productions there's always a warm up act that comes before the main act. Abernathy was great at that. Then Martin would come on and mesmerize the people. So he did that with no intentions of staying. But when he spoke –

JM: Except.

WA: Huh?

JM: I said, "Except something happens."

WA: Except when he spoke the last time, I said to a thousand people here, "Martin Luther King is committed to Albany, to the Albany Movement, and he's going to come back and be with us throughout." Andy Young has reported on numerous occasions I tricked Martin into coming down there to give a speech and then committed him to stay. And I say "guilty." I don't deny it. It was not intended to be trickery. But I had not talked with him about whether he would do it or not, but I saw, I saw him a stride toward freedom was being made because I saw how the people, they picked him up and carried him on. Yes, he was kind of tired when he got there. But the more he spoke, the stronger he got. And he saw these people are ready, and Martin could not have done any of this without the people. We all know that. The people had to be ready.

JM: So the next day.

WA: And the next day he went back to Atlanta. But then we started having mass meetings every night. We would have board meetings; we had a board. Slater King was [1:10:00] the vice president; Marion Page was secretary/treasurer. Goldie Jackson – Goldie Jackson was the secretary. Bo Jackson was the treasurer. We had a board. And we met, every night, if you can imagine. These mass meetings would go on sometimes to ten, eleven o'clock at night, and then we would go and have mass meetings for a couple of hours after that. And then I would try to practice. I lost about twenty-five or thirty pounds over a period of about six or eight months.

JM: Well, you also feeling picked up and carried along?

WA: Absolutely. If you don't get emotionally involved, you're not going to take those kind of risks, hear? Don't let anybody tell you that I can intellectually sit here and decide I'm going to go into the fire; I'm going to face down the Ku Klux Klan. Uh uh, you don't do that at an intellectual level. It's done; it's acted out at an emotional level, yes. And all of us got emotionally involved. When I can get up in church and say, "Okay, we're going to jail," and five hundred people get up behind me. You know they didn't sit down and think about that. They didn't go home and figure out who's going to pay the bills while I'm gone. "Can I, will I still have my job?" No, no, no. The people were ready for freedom. They have been enslaved literally, enslaved emotionally, enslaved economically. They have been enslaved for so many years they were ready for this change. The time was right.

JM: Yeah. Let's talk a little bit about, about the arrests and going to jail.

WA: Which time? [Laughs].

JM: I'm, I'm thinking about that first time you and Reverend King, Dr. King and Reverend Abernathy.

WA: No, that was not the first time.

JM: Yeah.

WA: The first time it was not me again; it was my wife. And we'd had a rally ever night leading up to a Sunday night, and we announced at the Sunday night – we would have rallies on Sunday night. On Sunday night we said, "Those who are ready to go to jail, we will meet here on Monday morning at 7 o'clock ready to go to jail." At breakfast that morning at home, and I had three children then, and I said to my children, "Before this is over, it is very likely that your father is going to be in jail. I want you to know I'm going to jail not for anything I've done wrong. I have not hurt anybody; I have not stolen; I haven't killed anybody. Nothing, not a thing like that. I'm going to jail for your rights. I'm going to jail for you to have the right to vote." Whether they understood it or not, I think they came to appreciate it quite a bit later.

So the next morning my wife and I together – Martin Luther King and Abernathy were not there then, it was just us. We led this group of a couple hundred people crazy enough to follow us downtown. We walked around what we called the town square, right in front of the courthouse, right in front of the jail, all the way around the block. Nothing happened. Did it a second time. Nothing happened. I said to my wife, "Honey, nothing is going to happen today. I'm going to my office; you take them around one more time and then go back to the church." So I peeled off, went to my office just two blocks away. That third time around, they were waiting. Locked up every one of them, including my wife.

JM: That – that might be a good time to talk a little bit more about

JB: We're going to stop here.

JM: Okay.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay.

JM: We're back on after a short break. Dr. Anderson, I want to, you just mentioned on this occasion, so your wife is in jail. And, um, tell me about your wife in the ways that matter to this, to this very forceful commitment that she would have and display in so many ways. And maybe you can broaden from there to reflect a little bit about, obviously at that time, in those years, there was a pretty sharp split in gender roles but, and that might, that might lead us to sometimes overlook the contributions of women. And I'm interested in your perspectives on her specifically and women generally.

WA: First about my wife who is very, very, very smart. She also had a way of getting you to do things that maybe you knew you weren't going to do. When I said that every major decision that I made, I attributed to her and the marriage: having the children, going from Des Moines to Flint and from Flint to Georgia, to getting involved in the civil rights activity. I'm saying that she, if she had not been right [1:15:00] there with me, I'm certain I would not have done it. I do believe we had a vision, a shared vision, and how does that happen I don't think anybody knows. But few of us are fortunate enough to have a mate that you can share a vision with. She made a lot of sacrifices to get me through medical school because I was not one of means. When we got married, we stayed with her mother, and her mother was not a lady of means. She

was a lady who had, who was abandoned by her husband and left with four children, and my wife, the oldest, the eldest of the four became the father if you would of her three siblings. So she grew up in an environment where she had to assume a lot of adult responsibilities before she was even seventeen or eighteen years old.

So, when I say that, when she saw me, what she saw in me I don't know. But she saw something in me that I did not see in myself because there were those occasions when I would, in despair, say, "There is no way I'm ever going to get out of college, get into medical school and become a doctor." And every time I would appear to be in despair she'll be the one to come along and say, "You can do it and I'll be with you. You can do it." So she literally gave up everything, what peace and comfort and tranquility she had in the home in Atlanta. When we went out to Des Moines, I went out first saying something like, "Well, let me get situated in school. I cannot afford, I don't have any money." We had six hundred dollars to our name; tuition was six hundred dollars.

So she was going to stay with her mother in Atlanta, and I was going to go back to visit at Thanksgiving, maybe Christmas, maybe spring break, maybe summer, but the lady that I stayed with in a rooming house, Miss Reeves, I'll never forget her. Miss Reeves, Lola Reeves a wonderful woman also. She saw me pacing the floor at night and couldn't concentrate, couldn't sit still, and she said to her neighbors and her fellow, her family, "He's never going to make it through medical school without his family." So she converted this one room into three partitions. She said, "Now this is your living room; this is your dining room; and this is your kitchen." I said, "But this is just one big room." She said, "You've got to have your family here."

So she helped me to bring my family up. And when my family got there, all of a sudden, my grades went up. She said I was smiling. I was able to get two or three jobs, and it was just the fact that she was there encouraging me, not ready to abandon me because I had this cockamamie idea about being a doctor, and she was just patient, long suffering, she understood me better than I understood myself. And above all whatever stupid cockamamie idea I came up with, she would support it. And if it was the wrong idea, she would somehow figure out a way to get me to change it.

So she was ready to go to Flint with me. She had been teaching some in Des Moines, and she went to Flint and immediately got a job teaching in elementary school. And so, I married not just a wife, I married really an experienced mother who had been functioning as a mother and a father for her siblings. And, uh, she used to say, “You act like you’re not even listening to me, but you realize after a while that what I’m telling you is the right thing, and you do it.” She said, “You’re stubborn like men are; you never want to admit that a woman is right. But she says, “I always know when I’ve gotten through to you and made you understand because you would do it. You wouldn’t admit it, but you would do it.” So she was a pillar. She was a pillar.

JM: How did you feel when she was arrested and – ?

WA: I was devastated. I was devastated because I had no idea where she was, what they were going to do to her, what kind of treatment she was getting. They put her out in Lee County. I had, I had never been there. I had no idea. It was like the Lee County farm, prison farm. And now I’m with my children, three children. I guess it could’ve been four by then, the young fourth, the fourth one. And had it not been for my in-laws – I call them in-laws once removed – my brother, my brother married a lady from

Birmingham, Alabama whose sister married John Chadwell [1:20:00] who was director of music at Albany State College. So when my wife was in jail and I didn't know what to do, I would not stay at home because the Klan was having their meetings regularly. It was the Chadwells. Richardene Chadwell and John Chadwell who says, "We'll take care of your children. Got that. You go ahead and do what you have to do." It gave me some comfort to know that my children were being well taken care of by John and Richardene Chadwell. So for several days I didn't see my wife. There was no communication, couldn't visit her, didn't know where. I was sleeping in a different place every night, but the Chadwells were taking care of the family.

JM: So you, that's very interesting. So I had read where you had written in another place that, of course you felt fear but not to the, not to the extent of paralysis or paranoia.

WA: And that, that's important. You can be afraid and not be paralyzed.

JM: Yeah.

WA: Good. Um hmm.

JM: But you, it was necessary for you to take precautions to that level. That's how, that's how pressing the danger was. It's very interesting. Yeah.

WA: You never, because the Ku Klux Klan had a reputation—

JM: Yeah.

WA: For murder, lynchings, mayhem a la [Emmett] Till. That's the work of the Klan doing that kind of stuff. So I was fully aware of that but not to the point where I was paralyzed. In other words, was I going on emotion? Was I going on nerves? Yes. There were those times I was going strictly on nerves and emotions. Not – intellect

would've said, "Run away from this. You don't have to take this. You're a doctor. You've got a license in Michigan. You can go back and practice." No. I couldn't leave. I could not emotionally leave.

JM: Yeah. Let's talk about the arrests and the negotiations with the city and then the –

WA: Well, let's go to when we, when we took the petition, all the petition said was – we took it to the mayor: "Appoint a biracial committee to study the problems of segregation and discrimination in Albany." I gave it to the mayor myself, Asa Kelley, who I'd say was, in my opinion, had a tendency toward being a liberal. He took it to the city council. They were to have their regular city council meeting. I think it was a Monday night. I went to the city council meeting to get the results. I had just come back home from a weekend vacation, and we were to send a committee, and nobody on the committee showed up but me. [Laughs] So I was in the city council chambers, and they went throughout the agenda and said nothing about our petition. So I got up in the chambers and said, "Mr. Mayor, what about our petition? I didn't hear anything about it." And he said, "We met in executive session before the open meeting and decided there are no common grounds for agreement, period." The newspaper the next day, the *Albany Herald*, reported: "Black doctor demands the end of segregation immediately and stormed out of the chambers." City council chambers. And of course, he published me in the newspaper the next day.

JM: And your address.

WA: And my address, and I started getting phone calls with threatening calls. You can just imagine the kind of calls I was getting.

JM: Did you know James Gray the publisher of the paper?

WA: From a distance I knew, I knew that he was a rabid segregationist who ironically made a complete turn around after I left. And actually he became a business partner for a black doctor who came to town and took over my practice. So it's amazing how, once you take that, that yoke of segregation and discrimination off of some white people, they become real people, and they put aside their racist attitudes. And Gray was one of those. Gray was more of a businessperson than he was a racist. And when he had the opportunity to capitalize on this side, he gave up his – he gave up his Klan membership because here was an opportunity for him to become a businessman. Dr. Gordon, Dr. Gordon, uh, became a business partner of Gray. Carl, Carl Gordon. They had a radio station together. They did some things in newspaper together, had other businesses. Carl Gordon is dead now. But, they became business partners.

JM: Yeah. How about the – let's talk about the kind of famous and much discussed uh, uh, moment when Dr. King takes bail on the presumption that the city will come through with some concessions and then none are forthcoming. [1:25:00]

WA: Well, on the, on that fateful day that you mentioned when King and I locked arms. Abernathy and my wife were directly behind us. And this was the march where we had over a thousand people, and we were marching down through Harlem, the main street from downtown, from Harlem downtown. They had called in the National Guard. The National Guard was lining the streets of Albany with ready arms. They had their guns; you've got to presume they were loaded. They were there.

One of the guardsmen stepped in front of me, Martin and I were together, and said, "You will stop this march now," and raised up his gun. I said to him, "If you hit

anybody in this line, hit me first. Hit me first.” He took the gun down and stepped aside, and we marched on down. All of us got arrested. Martin, Ralph and I were put in the same jail cell. It is coincidental that Martin was scheduled to go on *Meet the Press*. They sent my wife out to Leesburg [prison farm in Lee County] again. But he was scheduled to go on *Meet the Press* and, uh, the – who was the moderator for *Meet the Press*? Lawrence Spivak [host of “Meet the Press”] was the one who kept calling. Lawrence Spivak, he kept calling the jail, calling the chief of police, Laurie Pritchett, saying that Martin Luther King has got to come out of the jail because he’s to be on program tomorrow morning. And Martin would say, “I am not coming out of jail until these people are ready to sit down and talk.” And that was what it was all about. He wouldn’t come out. But then Martin said, “Being on “Meet the Press” is too important. We’ve got to get the message out. It’s too important of a venue to get the message out, so one of us has to go on that program.” I didn’t have to have that kind of experience. We drew straws. We were sitting in a jail cell and drew straws. I drew the short straw and Martin says, ‘You’re going on ‘Meet the Press.’”

JM: You really drew straws.

WA: Just like that. Just – we laughed about that some years later. Just like that. We drew straws to see who would come out of jail to go on “Meet the Press.”

JM: Is that when you had to, you had to post bond, and get on an airplane to fly to New York City?

WA: Uh huh.

JM: And you drew the short straw.

WA: Uh huh. And, um, Clarence Jones, who was a lawyer for M.L. King, was one of those who met me in New York, and that night I was up most of the night being briefed. The transcript of “Meet the Press” is in that book you just got.

JM: Um hmm. Um hmm. Yeah. What was your, uh, what was your reaction as events would unfold and, um, and you had this reversal with the, with the city of what you thought was something forthcoming in terms of some concessions?

WA: When we, because we were arrested again, and this time in Americus, and they took us out of jail Monday morning and took us into the court. There were three blacks I believe: Chapman, Cochran, and a guy who was the, the local manager of Pilgrim Insurance Company, and I might think of his name, but three blacks and three whites. The whites were a member of city council, and two others who I do not know who they were. But anyway, these six people met behind closed doors [clears throat], and there was a verbal agreement made that we will meet your demands for the biracial coun – um, appointment of a biracial committee. And we will study the issues of segregation and discrimination in the city facilities, verbal. They came out and Hollowell say, “Will there be a joint press conference if not a written document?” There was no written document.

JM: Hollowell of course being the African American attorney.

WA: Uh huh. Don Hollowell. Martin, Martin Luther King said, “We need a written document, a written statement for the press, at the very least a press conference and say it to the press.” They did not do either one. Hollowell was a fine lawyer, but he was more willing to accept them at their word that they would do that, that he did not insist on putting it in writing or having a press conference. Martin and I were sitting next

together in the courtroom and he says, “I don’t like this.” [1:30:00] That’s what he said, “I don’t really like this.” But everybody was let out of jail. They signed what they called straw bonds [i.e. no-cost bonds] but none of them were ever called back. We were called back, Abernathy, King and I, were called back for trial, and of course it was like a kangaroo court because when you go into the courtroom, the judge already had the decision already written out. And when the prosecuting attorney and defense attorneys would finish making their presentation he’d say, “Oh, here’s my decision.” But they reneged on everything they said in that conference. Now it was reported that Martin Luther King failed in Albany because he did not get anything. However, one by one they closed every public facility, library, parks, swimming pools, bus, lunch counters, everything was closed. What did we get out of Albany?

JM: Can I – ?

WA: Yes.

JM: I'd like to ask a few more things.

WA: Go ahead. All right. Go ahead.

JM: If you will sum up for sure, but I want to, there’s also, there’s also the, um – in the summer of ’62, when he comes back for sentencing and all, he wants – King and the SCLC, they, they want to see if they can’t reinvigorate the movement and push forward. He brings staff to Albany; he is arrested again, and this time, there’s – actually in front of that, there’s the, the, the hostile frankly, the hostile local federal judge –

WA: J. Robert Elliot.

JM: Exactly. Robert Elliot.

WA: I know.

JM: He issues an injunction –

WA: Yes.

JM: Preventing further protests, and there's the question in July, it's four days, should, should Dr. King ignore or adhere to that injunction.

WA: We appealed and went to Atlanta before Judge Tuttle.

JM: Yes.

WA: Albert Tuttle.

JM: Yes.

WA: And we were represented there, not just by Attorney King and Hollowell, but that's where Constance Motley came. Constance Motley, and, of course, the state was represented by the best that the state had to offer because they brought lawyers in from Emory, from the University of Georgia. And they cited case after case after case where we were breaking the laws. And Constance Motley without benefit of a single note stood up there and refuted every one of the cases they had cited and would say, "And if the attorney from the University of Georgia had looked at how this was appealed and you know, the next year, it was reversed." I mean, she was amazing. She just – and Albert Tuttle could do nothing but sit there and wonder. He had never seen a black female *lawyer* that smart. And of course –

JM: Coretta Scott King would later write that she thought that, um, that the quote was that the failure to, to ignore the injunction, move ahead was quote, "the factor that broke the backbone of the movement." In that moment, in that possible moment, was that your view?

WA: The thing that broke the back of it was the renegeing on the part of the city for what was agreed on. In other words, we were all elated because we had come to the agreement; we'd got what we'd asked for, but then one by one they closed all the facilities. So yeah, you got it, but what did it mean. It's like I won a 757 airplane and don't know how to fly a kite. So it was a failure in that we did not get anything tangible out of it. But what we got out of it, though, was a change in the attitudes and the perceptions. White people had come to believe, and I really think they believed it sincerely, "Black folks like it this way. They're satisfied at being servants." So attitude changed because the perception changed. "No, they don't like this. And look what they did. They rose up against us. So maybe we have to look at them differently." Black folks of course found courage in this new way to change the system and do it nonviolently. And so now they had made a determination, you know we can change this so we're not going to take it anymore. That was enough. When the attitudes would change and the perceptions would change, that was the end of segregation and discrimination as it was known [1:35:00] prior to that time.

JM: Right. Right. No, I very much agree. I think Albany was, uh –

JB: Can we stop for a sec?

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back.

JM: We're back after a short break. I want to say no, I think Albany was part of along unfolding process that involved struggle in many places and it was instrumental in the in the local ways you mentioned, in the, in its, what it showed by way of inspiration, what it showed by way of model and tactics and strategy and mass action. No. There's

no question. How were you feeling by late summer of '62? I mean that's a lot of stress and strain to absorb.

WA: I, I was literally exhausted. At one point I was exhausted to the point where my wife again, she said, "You've got to go away and get some rest." I was on a emotional high but physically I was deteriorating. So she took me from Albany, took me over to Tuskegee – I was a veteran – took me to veteran's hospital to make sure that I was physically all right. They checked me in a couple of days, and then she took me to her grandfather's home in Sylacauga. He was a minister, and I needed him for that spiritual revitalization. So between those two in a week, I was ready to go back into battle. But I needed that. I needed the assurance that physically I'm all right. I'll also need it that emotional strength. Now I am, I am not a religious fanatic. Let me say that. I am not a religious fanatic. But I do believe there is a divine plan. I do feel as though it was meant to be that I would wind up in Albany, Georgia leading a civil rights movement. Otherwise how did I marry this lady that put me with Martin Luther King? How in the world did I end up going to Montgomery of all places and meet Abernathy. I mean these things, in my opinion, just don't happen. Whether you believe in God or Yahweh or Allah or whoever, I do believe that everyone has a purpose in life. Everyone has as purpose in life, and as much as you try to ignore it, you can't.

JM: Yeah. Tell me about, um, you mentioned that very interesting fact that after, afterwards you would develop something of a relationship with on, on good terms with Laurie Pritchett.

WA: A few years afterwards – now, mind you, I went back down to Albany, probably two or three years later when things were beginning to settle down now: no

more demonstrations, no more arrests, no court hearings – I was down there for something, and I made what a policeman said was an illegal turn. And he said, “I’m going to give you a ticket.” “For what?” He said, “You made an illegal turn.” I said, “No, I didn’t.” “You giving me an argument.” “Yeah, I didn’t do that.” “You’re going to jail.” “All right. Take me to jail.” So he took me to jail and who was in jail, Chief Pritchett. I was being booked and Chief Pritchett heard me from his office. He said, “Is that Doc Anderson out there?” “Yeah.” “Come in to my office. What’s he, what are you arresting him for?” “He made an illegal turn.” He said, “Give me that ticket.” He said, “You’ll never arrest him in this town for an illegal turn. He’ll have to have a demonstration down here.” But then we were on friendly terms. The next time we got together was when *Eyes on the Prize* was being filmed in Atlanta, several years later. He heard that I was coming. I knew he was coming because the producers had contacted all of us who had been active in the Albany Movement. He got there ahead of me. And he wanted to find out where I was staying and he literally met me at the hotel. “Can we have dinner together?” My wife and his wife, the four of us, went out and had dinner together, and we relived those days in Albany. Thereafter, he visited me in Detroit because he would go up to Michigan State every once in a while for some police stuff. And I would go down to North Carolina – High Point, North Carolina. We exchanged cards regularly. We became good friends up until his death. So the Civil Rights Movement emancipated some white folks, and he’s an example of how because he was basically a decent man as was Kelley, but trapped.

JM: So you think, it’s interesting. So, so looking at that span of years after through the seventies and eighties, you think that, you that Laurie Pritchett had become a

different person, or I should say his views about race had been fundamentally transformed.

WA: Oh absolutely, but now wait a minute. I said, I think basically, fundamentally [1:40:00] he was a decent man. He was not a racist. That was not him. But he had been, he'd been placed in a position where he had to do what the city council said. If that, if he had been free to do what he wanted to do, mind you, he bucked the city council when he refused to let his policemen perpetrate any violence against the people. Because Bull Conner set the example of – this is the last thing you want to do is beat all these people up in, with all the cameras of the world looking on you. Because in Albany – literally reporters from all over the world came to Albany. He said, “That’s the last thing I want is this to go all over the world that we policemen beat up people like they do in South Africa.” So he didn’t want that. So all he had, all he needed was the opportunity to get out of that. And if Asa Kelley had lived, I believe he would’ve been the same way.

I was in Albany a month or so ago, and you were there for one of the events, but I was down there for SNCC also, their anniversary, I went down there with a lady by the name of Rhea Heil, Rhea Heil. She happened to be chairman of the board of one of the Detroit Medical Center hospitals. Needless to say, she is white. We went down there to, to Albany together. We went to everything together. There was barely a second look. Albany has been desegregated to the point where it’s as though it has always been this way. The federal court building is named after C.B. King. The mayor Willie Adams is black. Sheriff, black. Former chief of police, black. We went out to two or three restaurants while we were down there. And I had to call the attention, “Honey, you look

around here, and every table where you see a group, there will be one or two blacks.” I say, “This would never have been fifty years ago.” So ask me, “Was it worth it. Was it worth it?”

Then the crowning experience of this trip was to go back to Americus, Georgia, the Windsor Hotel. If you ever get the chance, Joe, Windsor Hotel: it was old, aristocratic hotel where Jimmy Carter stayed, where Al Capone stayed. I was there a bellhop. I did some other things that might have been somewhat illegal, but whatever the customer wanted, I got it as a bellhop. I was thirteen years old. There was a penthouse suite there. I never could have imagined staying in that penthouse suite as a guest. I went there with this lady of German descent and stayed in the penthouse suite. Was it worth it that I could do that freely now? It was worth it.

JM: Hmm. Did your children, how did your children talk to you over the years about their recollections of that experience?

WA: Two of the three of them were old enough to realize what was going on, and they wanted to get in it because they were high school kids. If you read the transcript from “Meet the Press,” I was chastised by Kilpatrick, said: “You’ve got children out there.” I said, “They’re citizens also.” But high school kids were in the marches going to jail and really, for them, it was fun. It was. It was, it was, they were having – they were laughing and talking and singing all the time. The sheriff would come in and say, “You’ve got to stop this singing in here.” They would just ignore him, go on singing and say, “What are you going to do? You know, electrocute us? We’re going to sing.” So my oldest two children wanted to go to jail. My wife was in jail. I was sleeping in different places every night and I just couldn’t handle that. That was too much. That was

when John and Richardene Chadwell said, “We’ll take care of the kids.” They wanted to be a part of it. Now they had been back to Albany this year. They take tremendous pride in the Albany Civil Rights Institute because they say, “The first thing we see when we walk in there is the quote from my father.”

JM: Yeah. Any final thoughts?

WA: I produce – I say I produce it. I am the one who organizes this visiting minority faculty series at Michigan State University. It’s been going on for twelve years. During the month [1:45:00] of February, Black History Month, every Thursday, I bring in a distinguished, primarily African American scholars from the civil right era, primarily. Some are brought in who are not African American like Tom Hayden, and some that are more contemporary like, uh, Charles Adams and, uh, who else have I had contemporary? Well, anyway, I even brought in, um, the boy from down in Georgia that stayed there with – he was there with SNCC, Charles Sherrod, Shirley Sherrod. You know about the controversy that she got into with the present administration? I brought her up there because she symbolizes the resistance that we had when people were not being treated right. In other words she was doing the right thing and somehow or another she got characterized, she was characterized as doing the wrong thing against white folks. And so anyway I brought her up.

So I am very proud of the fact I have been able to bring up for twelve years now distinguished African American scholars starting with, um, my friend in New York, Wyatt T. Walker, who was just outstanding. I brought people like Juanita Abernathy. All she had to do was just tell the story of how she lived and how her house was burned, how her husband’s property was taken away, and how he died ignominiously. And I

brought up people like Joe Lowery [Reverend Joseph Lowery] who was if you would the grandfather of the movement. I brought Bernice Johnson up twice. I brought Dorothy Cotton. These are the people that made the history, and what I have said to myself and others at Michigan State is, "Its one thing to read about it. It's another thing to actually talk to the people who lived it." It's sort of like the parallel I draw about Jesus Christ who came down off the cross and there was Doubting Thomas. Put your finger in the wound where the spear was. And I tell these people at Michigan State, come and talk to the people that went to jail, the people whose houses were bombed, the people who were put out of a job. Come and see them. These were real people. This is not fiction. These were real people.

JM: I'm very grateful, and it's been a real honor and a privilege.

WA: You're on time.

JM: Thank you, Dr. Anderson. What a pleasure to be with you. Thank you.

WA: You're very welcome and I'm glad to be able to do it and I say one of the reasons I do this is –

END OF INTERVIEW