Black Power Chronicles: Reggie Robinson

Karen Spellman interviews Reggie Robinson, a Civil Rights and Black Power Movement icon, about his life and activism. Robinson recounts his upbringing in East Baltimore, his involvement in the church, and his transition to activism through the Civic Interest Group (CIG) and SNCC. He details his role in voter registration, organizing demonstrations, and his assignment to Mississippi. Robinson also discusses his work with SNCC, including his interactions with key figures like Ella Baker and Bob Moses. He reflects on his later involvement in community development in Washington, DC, and his efforts to promote economic development and community building through events like the annual fish fry and Juneteenth Celebration.

Karen Spellman: Good afternoon. I'm Karen Spellman, and it's June the 7th, 2017. I'm part of the Black Power Chronicles project, conducting an oral history at the University of the District of Columbia here in Washington, DC. This afternoon, I'm proud to be able to conduct the interview with one of the icons of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement, Reginald James Robinson.

We are just fortunate to have him. This is a very rare interview because he doesn't talk to too many people too often anymore about his past. So, welcome, Reggie, to the program this afternoon.

Reggie Robinson: Glad to be here.

Karen Spellman: Thank you. Let's start at the beginning. Why don't you tell the audience about your childhood, how you grew up, and what influences you had in your upbringing that tilted you toward becoming a servant of the people?

Reggie Robinson: I grew up in East Baltimore [MD]. I was the third of three children. I guess being in the church—my family was surrounded by a church. My dad came from Smithfield, Virginia, and my mom came from North Carolina. In those days, the church was very instrumental in helping folks get their lives together.

So my father, along with my uncles, built a church in East Baltimore called Faith Baptist Church, which is still sitting on the corner of Ashland [Avenue] and Bond [Street] today. Johns Hopkins hasn’t taken it over yet.

Most of our activities were centered around the church. I went to Dunbar High School, which was also in the neighborhood. I learned to swim at Chick Webb Memorial [Recreation] Center—the first indoor pool in East Baltimore.

My uncle was the head trustee of this particular church, and my aunt—my mother's older sister—was head of the missionaries. At age seven, eight, or nine, we would go to the indigent hospital and dump bedpans, read to people, wash people's faces, wash people's feet, and stuff like that.

And we were Sunbeams.[1] So I came through the church being a Sunbeam and then became a young missionary.

But then, after a fashion, I was sitting in a French class in the 10th grade, looking out on Caroline Street, wondering why I was sitting in this French class when I had other activities on the street. So, I decided that I would go on the street. I did. I very soon thereafter found that the street was not all that I expected it to be.

And a good cousin of mine, Josephine, was a supervisor at Social Security. She had gone to a school called Cortez Peters Business College. So, my cousin kind of pulled my coat and said, "You know, you ought to come in and act like you got some sense." And she said, "If you want to, I'll go talk to Uncle Leroy"—which was my daddy.

And my daddy loved Josephine, everybody loved Josephine—because she was a supervisor at Social Security. In them days, that's big. That's big doing.

Josephine got me into [school]—got my dad to give me another chance—and I enrolled in Cortez Peters Business College.

This was, I guess, about 1959. Along about [19]60, the dean of the school, Walter Dixon, who also was the first Black city councilman of Baltimore, had put in a public accommodations bill in Baltimore. And he came to me one day, and he says, "I want you to go to a meeting to represent the school." I said, "What are you talking about?"

We called him "clone dome" because he had a big bald head. But anyway, he said, "I want you to go to this meeting with the rest of these students, and I want you to represent the school."

So I went to this meeting, and all of these people there were from Morgan [State University], Johns Hopkins, Loyola —all of the big schools in Baltimore. All of the students were there.

[1] Sunbeams refers to a youth group within the church, often associated with Baptist and other Christian denominations, where young children are taught religious values, service, and community care, preparing them for greater roles in church ministry such as becoming young missionaries.

And it was the Civic Interest Group [CIG], which was the student group in Baltimore, which was the affiliate of SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] at the time.

I got involved with that and began to demonstrate. And we would go and close down restaurants. We had two Renaults [cars], and we used to pile in the Renaults. And I was kind of like in the strategy department, and we would map out where these Renaults would go—like lunchtime—and then everybody would jump out of the cars and go into these white restaurants and take up all the seats.

And then, when the police came and read the Miranda Act, we would get up—unless we had designated somebody to go to jail. Everybody would get up, get back in the Renaults, and go to another restaurant. And we would do that until the Baltimore commerce folks got very upset and decided to talk to us about that.

But I stayed with CIG and then I was asked to become the treasurer of the group. Well, some monies came down. I didn't find out until later on that this money was for the campaign of Clarence Mitchell III, who was about to go to the State House. But there was a voter registration project put on, and most of the work was done in Clarence's district.

Well, anyway, I was made treasurer because I went to Cortez Peters, and I knew a little bit about accounting. I knew a debit from a credit, and I could do a balance sheet and go back and tell the advisory group what we had spent. I'd keep receipts and stuff, and I would work with the advisory group, and they would then give us money. And then we would continue to do our sit-ins and bail money and stuff like that.

Clarence was the representative from Maryland to the SNCC Coordinating Committee. At this time, his folks were telling him that he had to make a choice of either staying with the students or coming back into the family fold to do whatever it is they wanted him to do.

So the spot became open. So I kind of wiggled my way around, and I got to be the representative to go to the next meeting. That was in June of [19]61. That meeting was in Louisville, Kentucky.

Now, what happened was, a couple of nights before we were supposed to go, we had a party and I got hit in the eye with a pretzel. So I had gone to the doctor, and by the time I got ready to go to Kentucky, I had this black pirate's patch over my eye.

When I walked into the SNCC meeting, of course, I didn't realize—everybody thought that I had gotten injured on a demonstration or something or another. But I was a new face in town, and everybody was saying how Clarence was never around in the meetings, and he was never reporting in, and this, that, and the other. So I said, "Well, that's that."

I didn't know anybody. I got in town on Friday. So Saturday, we were having a little get-together and we were at Anne Braden's house.

Well, of course, I was still unknown, didn't know anybody, and I just kind of moseyed out on Anne's back porch and had a beer and was just standing there. And this lady walked out to me, and she said, "I know you, son."

And I said, "You do?"

She said, "Yes. Who's your people?"

And I told her who my father was, and she said, "No, that's not it. Who's your mama?"

And I told her my mama was Leovester Jenkins from Littleton, North Carolina.

She said, "Aha! You are McKinley."

I said, "No, my uncle is McKinley."

She said, "I know. And you look just like him."

I was talking to Ms. Ella Baker, who, in fact, grew up with my mama in Littleton, North Carolina. They had been girls growing up together. She knew all my uncles and everybody. And this uncle that she said I looked like was my Uncle McKinley, who lived in New York, who she worked with in New York.

Then, of course, I got to know Miss Ella. By the time I came back into the meeting, I was treated a little differently. The guys began to come around me.

I had the charge of bringing the next SNCC meeting back to Baltimore, because ever since the students had sat in Greensboro [NC], all the activity had been in the South, and nothing had come North.

And now we're discussing voter registration and direct action, so we're getting ready to make the big change. And [Martin Luther] King is saying to us, "You can't do it because you're going to get killed," and all of this kind of stuff.

I got the meeting back to Baltimore. Now, this is July [19]61. We get the meeting back to Baltimore, and it's decided that we're going to have a big mass meeting.

On our advisory committee was a man by the name of Sam Daniels, who was the big—I don't know what you call him in the Masons, but he was the biggest Mason in town. So he gave us the Masonic Temple to have a rally.

Of course, King was in town. Everybody wanted to see King and everything. So as folks were getting together to come in, I said to the SNCC group, "Why don't we do something different this time? As soon as people sit down, take the collection? Let's not wait for the preachers to say their

prayers and everything. We're going to take the collection and then let them go on and do whatever they're going to do."

And we did. So by the time Wyatt Tee [Walker] got up and was getting ready to make his plea for the collection, he was told that we had gotten the money and gone. And so we split the money between the Civic Interest Group and SNCC. The local group and SNCC.

So then, I was viewed as the voter registration expert. We had registered some 35,000 people in a couple of months. But what we did in Baltimore—we had sound trucks, we had buses, and we rode through the neighborhood giving out sodas and everything else and taking people down on the buses to the registrar's office. Big lines, press, everything. We could gather people that way in Baltimore.

I was considered to be a voter registration expert. I was asked if I wanted to go into Mississippi. I thought about it, and I said, "Yes, I want to go." Then I was assigned to go and meet Bob Moses in Cleveland, Mississippi, up at Amzie Moore's house.

I took the train into Atlanta. [Ralph Edwin] Ed King was our Executive Secretary at the time. He met me at the station in black tie and tails because he had just integrated the opera the night before, and he had been hanging out in Pascal's all night long.

Ed was quite the character. He just took me around to everybody and introduced me to everybody. And then we got the word that Bob was not in Cleveland but in McComb [MS]. The next morning, I took the train out of New Orleans [LA] up to McComb.

There, I was met by George Heads, a local guy in McComb. I was dressed in a black suit, black tie, white shirt, little briefcase—because we were always told back in them days, you had to dress the part. We weren't dressing in jeans then. We had to wear our uniform, suited up.

So, they thought I was a young preacher that just came to town. George took me to [Curtis Conway] C.C. Bryant's house, where I met Bob. And then we started talking, and then Bob and I left, and I got my orders from Bob—to go and open up a bank account, open up a store, go to the store and get office supplies, set up an office, set up the school, and just do the general kinds of get-together work before anybody else was coming to town.

And the next person that came to town was John Hardy.

Karen Spellman: Before you go into more detail about Mississippi, I want to back up just a little bit, because a lot of the young people, young social justice activists now, ask us about how SNCC was organized. How was it set up? What kind of hierarchy was it? How did people communicate with each other?

As you came in from the outside, from the Civic Interest Group, and began working with the SNCC folks—how did the flow work with you? And who was doing the flowing?

Reggie Robinson: After the introduction from Ms. Baker, I was accepted by [Charles] Sherrod and the powers that be—like [Charles] McDew, [Charles] Charlie Jones, Tim Jenkins, Diane Nash, and everybody that was sitting around that table at that time. I was kind of taken in.

After I got my orders, I assumed that I was a soldier. Well, better still, I always like to think that I was a cowboy and that I'm coming to town with a fast gun. But I'm told by the ranchers what to do. So I would do what I was told to do.

And the hierarchy at that time, as far as I was concerned, was McDew, who was the chair at that [time]. Ms. Baker, of course, was the head leader. Tim Jenkins was the lawyer. And then, when I got to McComb, Bob was the director.

Whatever it was that was to be done, they would know what was to be done. And if I could do it, I would do it. In terms of hierarchy, I guess I just took the low road and became a worker, as well as just being an old cowpoke and just getting in there, doing what I was supposed to do.

After we had been in McComb for a little while, Herbert Lee got killed. And we were told—this was a man that was from the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People], who was working with us—was killed in the cotton gin by a state representative for working with us.

We were told by the sheriff that we should leave town and not go to his funeral. And Amzie Moore, who was one of our other advisor-kind-of people, said to us, "If you leave now, you'll never be able to come back. You'll never be able to do anything." So what we did—we turned the funeral into a mass meeting.

Then we continued on until the students marched out of Burglund High School. And that's when they came down. They really came down on us. I think we really got scared at that point, because they whooped us pretty bad. That was the first time we'd really been whooped pretty bad.

So we gathered, and then we decided to leave and come back to Atlanta and regroup—to get our thinking together—because we were in total disarray.

And by that time, Ruby Doris Robinson was in the picture. And Ruby became the person that told you what to do, when to do it, and where to go.

At that point, I was then sent back North to do recruiting and also to work on Route 40, because CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] was trying to deal with the road between New York and DC. A lot of diplomats were using that road and couldn't stop over. And we couldn't stop over

on that road coming between New York and DC, so we were doing demonstrations up and down that road. At this point, Ruby was the boss lady.

Karen Spellman: Why don't you describe a little bit about Ruby? Describe Ruby and her personality? I think it would be very instructive to some of the people who believe that SNCC was a male-dominated group to explain how she made herself known.

Reggie Robinson: Ruby was a sincere kind of person, and a very matter-of-fact kind of person. A very soft kind of person as well, but she had a kind of bossy and direct way of telling you what to do.

Because if you were out somewhere, and you were relying on—we had what was called a WATS line, which was a wide-area telephone and we could call in.[2] And then we'd get a phone call back.

If you were out there—and I traveled a lot by myself—so I would be very relieved when I talked to Ruby. If I'm just sitting in a bus station in Salisbury, North Carolina, on a light just leaving Livingston College, and got to catch a bus at four in the morning, and nobody else is around—all you got to do is talk to Ruby.

And Ruby is telling you to be cool and be careful, and getting your courage up to do what you got to do. I think that's the kind of person she was. She was a good boss and a very, very beautiful person.

But anyway, getting back to—I was in Baltimore, doing Route 40. I get a call from Ruby saying there were some people at the CORE office coming in from New York, getting ready to go to Crisfield, Maryland, and do a demonstration. And only one of them had been in any action at all, and that was Angeline Butler, who had been in at Fisk [University]. But the rest of these people had never been involved in anything.

So she said, "Get on over there and find out what's going on." And by the time I got to the office and we had a conversation, next thing I knew, we were on a bus to Crisfield, Maryland, going to Governor Tawes' restaurant—just before Christmas of [19]62.

The slogan was going to be, "There was no room in the end." And we all went. That was the first and only time in the six years I worked for SNCC that I got arrested on a demonstration.

There were other times I was assigned. Like when the kids went to jail in McComb. We had to support them. So, somebody had to go into the jail and talk to them and let them know everything was okay. And that person was me.

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[2] A WATS (Wide Area Telephone Service) line was a crucial communication tool used by civil rights activists to coordinate organizing efforts, report incidents of violence, and stay connected across different regions.

I had to go inside the jail, inside the cell, just like a lawyer, and calm Curtis [Hayes] and Hollis [Watkins] and Bobby Talbot and all of those young folks down, and tell them, "Be cool. Everything's gonna be all right. We'll get you out very shortly," so that they wouldn't be afraid. And then get out. I had done that. But here I am in jail in Princess Anne, Maryland.

Backing up again to Maryland. We decided to stay in over the weekend. I came out of jail, did the bail, did the PR stuff, and worked with a young man by the name of [Frederick] Freddie St. Clair from Cambridge, Maryland, and Walter Black. Walter was from Easton, Maryland. Freddie St. Clair was from Cambridge, Maryland.

They were the bailiffs. We got everybody out, and by that Christmas, we all went to New York and hung out. So after the New Year, we had discussed what we were going to do with Cambridge, because by now, the St. Clairs had asked us to come in. Freddie St. Clair became the first chairman of the Cambridge Nonviolent Action Committee.

Freddie St. Clair, who is Gloria Richardson Dandridge's cousin—had to eventually give up the job because he was also his father's best man. His father owned a funeral business. So they also had a business.

So Freddie couldn't be the chairman of the group and also run his business too. Eventually, Gloria took over. They kept it kind of in the family, and the St. Clairs go way, way back on the Eastern Shore.

I stayed in Cambridge for three years, and I dare say that Cambridge was exactly what I was taught at Highlander by Miss Bernice Robinson, Septima Clark, and Ms. Baker—that we were not to go to these towns to live, but to create people, to create organizations that are viable enough to operate on their own, to become part of a whole, and then move on to the next zone or the next arena.

So it came time for me to move on. SNCC was having a conference in Atlanta

Karen Spellman: What year was this?

Reggie Robinson: This is about [19]63 now. And Ruby, boss lady, says, "I want you—on the way down to Atlanta," because I'm still in Maryland. [She says], "On the way down, stop at all of the campuses and talk up the conference."

I did that. I got into Atlanta early, and when I got in, we had gotten a call from a young Reverend Johnson from Selma University that they were interested in somebody coming and talking to them because they were interested in doing something. This is somebody at Selma University.

Ruby said, "Okay, Reg, you got it. Go ahead. And while you're down there, go up the other end to Huntsville [AL] and go as far as you can go before the conference."

But I got to Selma, Alabama, and I stayed on the campus for about two weeks. And I found Mrs. [Amelia] Boynton. I found a group of young ministers that we dubbed the name 12 High.

Karen Spellman: What did that mean?

Reggie Robinson: We don't know why we named them 12 High, okay? We just put a tag on them: the 12 High.

So at the conference, it was decided that since Bernard Lafayette was a young minister, that he could probably relate to the group a lot better than I could. So then it was decided that he would go back to Selma at that point. That's when Bernard went into Selma.

But the beginnings of Selma, I went in and, as Jack Minnis had taught us—to do the surveys, and look around, and look at the topographical areas, look at the population, look at everything you could. Just do a whole big survey of the city. And so I did that. And then I turned it loose.

Karen Spellman: What brought you into DC and what date did you arrive in Washington?

Reggie Robinson: I got to DC in [19]66—around December [19]66—because SNCC was on its way in another direction at that particular time. I was stuck in Atlanta because nobody was really telling anybody which direction to go. Everything was in disarray.

Charles McDew called me and said, "I want you to come to DC and be my assistant at the United Planning Organization [UPO] at the NDC [Neighborhood Development Center] One Center down at Ninth and P Street. And you're going to be working with your old buddy, Ralph Featherstone."

Fleet Foot and me—that's Ralph Featherstone for those who don't know. We called him Fleet Foot because he used to be a track star. We had an apartment together on Park Road. We had about eight or nine, maybe ten, community workers.

And the community workers were kind of famous people: Petey Greene, Miss Lillian Greene. There was an old hustler by the name of Nakisaki. And then there was an old numbers runner named Buckle Jaws Johnson.

All of these folks were in the community. And this was when they were getting ready for—the Model Cities was just about coming in at that point. Because [Walter] Fauntroy was supposedly out in front of all of this kind of stuff.

But what we were really trying to do was get folks not to sell their houses. And one of the first plots of land that left was the group of houses on P Street, going west in back of Shiloh Church where the school is now.

We were trying to keep the community together—with Oak Street Market and all those things—and try to keep people from selling this stuff and keep the community together. That's why we had all of these local folks as community workers, because the other people in the community knew who they were.

Karen Spellman: Were these community workers staff, employees of UPO staff?

Reggie Robinson: They were staff.

Karen Spellman: Describe the structure of how UPO got out in the community, how the personnel worked, and what an NDC—Neighborhood Development Center—was.

Reggie Robinson: You'd have kind of like an outpost. The big office was down on Vermont Avenue, but then you'd have these outposts. In Northwest, you had One, Two, and Three. You had one down at 9th [Street] and P [Street]. You had another one at 14th [Street] and Clifton [Street]. And you had Number Three up at Park Road, which was called Change.

Each one of these places had a director, probably an assistant director, and a social worker. You had several community workers who would fan out in the community to collect data on any and every kind of problem that you could possibly think of.

One of the things that came out of NDC One was Bona Bond, which was Petey and his boy Reverend Jefferson. [They started] Bona Bond, which was a bonding company that bonded guys who were just coming out of prison to get jobs.

Because every time they'd go for a job, somebody would say, "You can't get this job because you just got out of prison." So this bonding company would bond you to get this particular job, if necessary. We were doing that kind of stuff.

Then came Ernie Middleton with the youth. They stuck a youth division onto the project. Each one of the centers became its own youth division. Then they started trying to reach down to the youth. They were trying to build up the Kennedy Center at that time. The Kennedy Center didn't get built up until much, much later—until the community absolutely changed. But they still tried to deal with the kids.

Karen Spellman: Kennedy Recreation Center.

Reggie Robinson: Yes, Kennedy Recreation Center.

Karen Spellman: At P and 7th [Street]?

Reggie Robinson: Right, P and 7th. But then they tried to do things with the youth and there were a lot of gangs around, so we were doing gang work.

This was before Marion [Barry] came along with Pride [Incorporated]. The Youth Department was hiring the young gangs to try and consolidate them, to get them into another vision other than shooting and cutting and get them to stay in school.

Karen Spellman: Let me backtrack just a little bit to the Meredith March in Mississippi. When you were a part of the Meredith March, did you manage to get down there and be a part of the demonstration? And on that march was the time when Stokely [Carmichael] called for Black Power.

What happened to you as a result of Black Power? Were you there when Stokely and [Willie] Ricks called for Black Power? And in your mind, at the time when you heard it, what did it mean to you personally in the work that you were doing in SNCC at the time?

Reggie Robinson: I wasn't there. I was in Mississippi at that particular time, but I was in touch primarily with [Robert] Bob Mants, out of Alabama. And what it said to me was that we were going to take another direction. Other than voter registration and getting folks elected, we were now going to try and deal with some economic development.

And my idea was that we were going to start trying to find ways of people making money—resources that would put people to work, resources that would really put people in houses and getting people into businesses.

I'm very sorry that it got kind of turned around once our friends left Alabama and went back to California, and then they pulled out the guns. And then all of a sudden, we were to go around shooting folks. It just took away—from where I sat—just took away the whole idea of what we were trying to do.

Because we were talking about freedom schools. We were talking about anything but shooting. We were talking about survival. We were talking about economic development, as I thought.

Karen Spellman: Did the Washington Black Power translation when Marion came to DC in [19]65 to set up the SNCC office—were you a part of that? And did you become involved with the local SNCC action here in DC?

Reggie Robinson: I was coming out of Philadelphia [PA]. That was my last assignment before I was sent to Atlanta. I was running the Philadelphia office. I [had] come from New York, because I'd been doing special gift fundraising with Bobbi Yancy in the New York SNCC office.

Then we met some folks, and they decided that we would set up an office in Philadelphia to raise money. I met several Black professional guys in Philadelphia that set me up in an apartment, set me up in an office, set me up in terms of knowing who was who in town. And we were ready to raise money.

We were out on the [Philadelphia] Main Line in the Jewish community, and we were doing quite well until—I can't think of the young man's name, but he came through.

He said he was with SNCC and he got kind of crazy with his situation. And they started beating up on him, and he started shooting and carrying on. And away went the money, and away went the folks kind of liking us in Philly. And down went that kind of operation.

So then I was sent back to Atlanta, waiting to go to Texas. Because Jim was getting ready to send me—Jim Forman, who at that time was also the second big boss—was getting ready to send me to Texas to work with some people. I forget who it was now, or even which city it was. I think it was Houston.

Karen Spellman: Was it Houston, Dallas, or San Antonio?

Reggie Robinson: San Antonio. And there was a group that had said they wanted to talk with us about helping to raise money. But then, like I said, everything was in disarray at that time, and I'm waiting around Atlanta. And of course, our man Stanley was running the office—Stanley Wise. And we didn't know which end was up and which end was down at that point in time. No puns.

Chuck came along and said come up to DC and I left. We stayed a year here, and then we both left. Then I left here after a year and went back to Mississippi. Ed Brown got me to go down and work with the Child Development Group in Mississippi [CDGM], doing the same thing—running the social service department, which also had community outreach people, who were the tentacles that touched the community.

That was my gang. At my right hand was our old friend, Myrtle Glasgow. Myrtle would take care of my proposals, because I wasn't academically writing and everything. So she would take care of that part, and I would take care of the organizing part.

We had a good thing going on until I was in a meeting, and they were splitting up CDGM. And Senator Stennis had sent one of his people to this meeting. And this guy—every time he would say something, he would say, "You boys. Can I say something to you boys? Do you boys understand?"

Finally, I couldn't take no more and I looked him dead in his face and said, "Do you see any boy?" I used a little French in this room.

Well, all of the Negroes fell out the chairs. And of course, two, three days later, I get a call from the boss's office, and he said, "You know I gotta let you go." I said, "I knew you were gonna let me go when I spoke up, because you wasn't going to say nothing. Y'all wasn't going to say a word. So yeah, I know."

And I went back, because I got another job. I went to work for Noel Day, who was out of Boston—who ran for Congress against McCormick one time, who married [Margaret] Peggy Dammond and our girl from New York.

Karen Spellman: Bring yourself back to Washington at this point. You were traveling there.

Reggie Robinson: I'd been out there by myself. Okay, so I do get back to Washington after about four years. I got married in between. That didn't last either. But anyway, things happen. And so I came back—I got back here, I guess, about [19]71.

Karen Spellman: Describe DC. What was going on in DC in [19]71?

Reggie Robinson: The biggest thing that was happening in DC at that time was a challenge for the charter. That meant that we were trying to unseat the Dixiecrats who were running the city. And it was being run by [John] McMillan out of South Carolina, so we had to unseat him in order to get the rest of them out.

So we finally did it. And we didn't get home rule, but we did get the chance to—as Marion puts it—we didn't get a chance to "play with some money." We got a chance to hire some people and do something with some money. And they say Marion used the money to hire people who would have never, ever, ever got a job.

You can meet some folks now who are 40 years old who will tell you, "Marion Barry gave me my first job and gave me my first start."

There were some people who were in business that, if it wasn't for the fact that Marion used the money the way that he did in trying to develop our community...because we had a community full of restaurants, full of shoe stores and we owned businesses.

U Street was a great street to be on. You could get you a fish sandwich almost every other door. Now you can hardly get [one] except for Henry's at 17th [Street] and U. You can't even get a fish sandwich on U Street.

But in them days, we were doing what I thought was Black Power. We were using our money to do business and to grow. As a matter of fact, we had a computer company on the corner of 14th and Kenyon [Street] called Afro-American Data Dynamics.

For those of you who are computer literate, we had a PDP-11/45—the only machine outside of a university between here and Florida, owned by Black folks. And all we were trying to do was just teach folks how to use computers.

But we were a little bit before our time, and PEPCO [Potomac Electric Power Company] kind of beat us out, because the machine ate up more than we could pay PEPCO to keep it running.

Karen Spellman: Who were the people that started Afro-American Data Dynamics?

Reggie Robinson: Afro-American Data Dynamics was started by Milton White, who was a captain in the Air Force and also a professor at Howard University, and Teixeira Nash, who was a local artist. One of the main things that we did with that computer—we called Marion's first election to the numbers.

Karen Spellman: In 1978.

Reggie Robinson: In 1978. We ran the numbers. I took the printout to the big boss and said, "Look, here. You is the winner."

He said, "What are you talking about?"

I said, "If you can read, you can see right here. You is the winner."

And then I took it to some other folks who were kind of skeptical about who Marion was and hadn't gotten on his team yet. For instance, Mr. Lucy…and we went fishing. And I took out the printout. In them days, you had them big, long printout sheets.

We were fishing, and we looked it over, and there it was. There were the numbers, and it came out to the numbers.

Karen Spellman: Before Marion won the election in [19]78, he, of course, started Pride Incorporated. And I wondered if you had been involved with Pride, and could you give folks an idea about what Pride did and what it meant to Washington, DC?

Reggie Robinson: Marion had started a very simple project, primarily of taking gangs and teaching them how to sweep. Actually, teaching them how to work and make money. Then he turned that into a business. He was able to send some of those guys to college.

He had three levels in there: sell, rel, and hell. Hell was when you were really tough to deal with, but he would continue to try and work with you and bring you around. These were no [regular] like teenagers that we were dealing with. These were sho' nuff gangster kids.

He had developed a way to talk to them, to show them a way, and show them how to make money, and show them that if they worked hard, they could make it. Him and his wife at the time, Mary Treadwell, did a very good job of doing that. Pride lasted a long, long time.

Karen Spellman: Do you remember roughly what the dates were when Pride was started?

Reggie Robinson: No, I don't. I don't remember the dates.

Karen Spellman: I know it was on U Street, right?

Reggie Robinson: Yeah, right there on the corner—16th and U. And then after Pride, I took a little hiatus. I was unemployed. Between then and when Data Dynamics went down, I drew unemployment for a while. Then after that, I went to work for the District government in 1981.

Karen Spellman: And Marion was elected in [19]78. Did you participate in any of the campaign work? Or were you around to see the campaign happening? Talk about that a little bit.

Reggie Robinson: I wasn't directly involved in the campaign. I was always on the fringes. He would give me a call to do certain things. I would do certain things for him. I would run errands. I would do certain things for him, whatever he would ask me to do.

But I was never paid by the staff. I didn't want to be on the staff. Because sometimes, being on staff hinders you from being creative and doing whatever you think you need to do. So, I didn't go on staff. I stayed on the outside.

Karen Spellman: Did you work with Marshall Brown at any point in your community organizing? And can you kind of describe the significance of people like Marshall Brown? In and around—he was very much like you, in a way. Folks who worked the street.

Reggie Robinson: The only real time we really worked together was when his son, Kwame, decided to run for office. He came to me and said what he wanted to do, and he didn't have anybody to help him out at that particular time, so he asked me to come and help him out.

I went on the corners with him in the morning and waved signs and did everything that we needed to do to get the campaign started. And I worked the very first campaign with Marshall, and we won the first campaign. I didn't do very much in the second campaign, but Marshall and I became very, very good friends.

We didn't so much work together as a friendship, but we did do a few things together, like organizing a few things here and there. When he went to Ohio to work for Hillary Clinton, he gave me a call, and I did a few things for him in that light. It was always like that. It was always like that.

Karen Spellman: Let's go back to how you entered city government. Marion had won the election in 1978, took office in [19]79. Then how did you become involved with the Barry administration?

Reggie Robinson: Well, I got a call from the grand—I'm not gonna say it.

Karen Spellman: This is an interview for young people.

Reggie Robinson: I got a call from Ivanhoe Donaldson, who—we had been friends in SNCC and been friends for years. This was the second year for the youth development stuff. They were getting ready to go computerized. They were gonna try and computerize all of this stuff.

Karen Spellman: What was the youth stuff? Tell us.

Reggie Robinson: It was the [Marion Barry Summer] Youth Employment Program. Sandra Hill, who was in charge of getting the applications organized in such a fashion as to go into the computer, she needed somebody in back of her to assist her.

So, Ivanhoe asked me to come aboard to assist Sandra Hill in her efforts, only because he knew I knew something about computers. I was reluctant, because again, I didn't want to come into government, because it was too confining.

And I've never been really in situations where I was confined in what I was to do. I was always told what was needed to be done, and then I would go and do it. I knew I was going to have difficulties, but Sandra was easy to work with. Some of the other people were not so easy to work with.

But anyway, I went in, and we put together a good program that year. We hired some 40,000 people that summer. Everybody got paid on time. Everybody went to the right jobs, and everything clicked because we spent hours checking and rechecking, and checking and rechecking, and matching stuff, and making sure that everything was the way it was supposed to be. And then that school year, we hired some 25,000 kids. So the year became very, very good.

Then I realized that this may be my last opportunity to work or to really receive a check that would lead me to some kind of retirement of some sort. So again, I looked around and I spotted a little something in the disability department. It was a spot for an Investigator, and I opted for that. And I got it. And I became the Investigator for the Employment Division.

And then from there, again, what happened [was] they were still operating by paper. Again, I got caught up into the mechanism. And so by the time I left, I had helped develop the mechanism by which it was automated.

Karen Spellman: So you were an ex-SNCC—well, SNCC people are never ex-SNCC. But you were a SNCC person that went into the Barry administration.

What was it like in the Barry administration? Did other people who were in the movement find a place in the Barry administration? And, or did they run for city council? Who were some of those folks that you saw, besides Marshall's son, Kwame?

Did you have a relationship with Johnny Wilson, for example?

Reggie Robinson: I had a relationship with Johnny when I first came back to town. Let me get a little swamp water here. That's why I was able to hang out as long as I did without getting a real job. Because I would do things for Johnny.

Johnny was like the head of—he was like my contact through the charter. I was taking my orders from him as to what I was doing. Even in his first campaign, I was helping him in his first campaign.

Karen Spellman: Do you remember what year that was?

Reggie Robinson: Hmmm.

Karen Spellman: Don't bother, but [it was] his first campaign.

Reggie Robinson: His first campaign came out of that. But I came back here in [19]71, so what was that [19]71, [19]73, [19]74, somewhere around there?

Karen Spellman: We can get it, don't worry.

Reggie Robinson: We were working on the charter and working on other kinds of stuff. Johnny would hand me certain kinds of consultancies and then ask me to do things. Johnny was my contact person for the first four or five years I was here.

Karen Spellman: And how did Johnny's career evolve from the charter commission? What was his job there, and then how did he evolve into—?

Reggie Robinson: He was like the head coordinator for the charter. He was like the head organizer for the charter. He was putting together most of the strategies, along with Fauntroy and the rest of them.

He was helping to raise the money and doing all of the dirty work and all the menial kinds of stuff that nobody else had to do. And then I would get it. But it didn't matter. I mean, if he needed me to do something, I would do it.

And that's just the kind of friendships that we had. Most of my friends, if they ask me to do something, I don't mind doing it.

Karen Spellman: A lot of people that will probably see this tape don't know Johnny Wilson. Could you give us your personal description of who he was and what he stood for, and his significance for Washington, DC?

Reggie Robinson: He came out of Princess Anne, Maryland. He went to the University of Maryland at Eastern Shore. He worked for years as a lobbyist before he started the charter business—before he became head of the charter operation.

He was a good-looking guy. Very funny, very generous to his friends. He was important. He became City Council Chair, and he was going to be mayor.

But Johnny had, for years, had a sickness that we—that close folks knew about. And Johnny would not take his medicine. So, he stopped taking his medicine, and he just kind of gave up on life, because he just got disgusted with the situation. Because it just wasn't panning out for him, I think.

But he was a good guy, and he was very important to the city. He started out in Ward Two, and then, as I said, he became City Council Chair—the second most important elected person in the city.

Karen Spellman: Folks say that Johnny taught Marion how to do the city budget.

Reggie Robinson: No doubt. Because he did have a good head on him when he would put himself to it. When he was really, really serious, he was a very, terribly, terribly smart person. Very, very sharp. Very sharp. He made Marion shine.

Karen Spellman: Let me ask you about the independent institutions that grew up during the Black Power era, and some of the people who were involved in those.

One of the people I wanted to ask you about—to get your take on his significance for DC and for the Black Arts Movement—is Gaston Neal. Buddy Gaston.

Reggie Robinson: Yes, good old Gaston.

Karen Spellman: Who was at one time the Poet Laureate of Washington.

Reggie Robinson: Yes, indeed. Yes, indeed. And one of the best book salesmen ever to be.

Karen Spellman: Do you remember some of Gaston's work in the Black Arts Movement at all? Do you recall any of the plays that he did, the street theater pieces? I knew he was a neighborhood development worker. I remember that.

Reggie Robinson: I see a buddy of his. I can't think of his name. He was on my staff. He was a tall guy. He was a musician. He was Gaston's number one man. I recall them doing something down at Shiloh one time. I can't think of that guy's team name, but anyway.

He was very instrumental in doing the artsy kinds of stuff around town. How much? I don't really know. But he was a very, very likable, lovable guy. And a real good friend.

Karen Spellman: You knew Kwame Ture, or Stokely Carmichael, from your SNCC work. As he evolved, do you have any memories that you'd like to share with us about the significance of his work and his energy and his vision?

Reggie Robinson: He was the most misunderstood person that I know.

What he would say would be very true and very hard to take, and that's why I think people was afraid of him. Because he told the truth. His words were very sharp. And you had to be in your right mind in order to accept what he was saying. Because if you didn't, it scared you to death.

In some ways, he was really funny. I wasn't there, but I was told about a time in Alabama that some of the boys ran into a little bit of trouble, and somebody threw him a loaded pistol. And he threw it back and said, "I'll meet y'all back at the house."

Well, that didn't quite sit with some of the guys, because he was out there advocating one thing, and it seemed like he was turning his back on the other.

Then in another instance, we were down in Waveland, Mississippi, and somebody was coming in on the pier. And we were all laying on the deck, and he was laying there next to me, and Feather, and Jim. And our nonviolence had left us.

Like I said, I guess he was a misunderstood kind of person. And folks who didn't know him, I guess, just didn't know him.

Karen Spellman: Okay, so we're getting to the conclusion.I know you're tired, and this has been a wonderful remembrance. It has to be hard to think about 50 or 60 years back and try to get the story the way it should have been told.

But this has been very, very, very, very fruitful in terms of getting some of that history that we don't have, and a lot of young people don't have.

Now, to conclude, I wanted to just talk about you, as—one of the SNCC folks described you as the glue of the Washington, DC, activist community. And you were famous for two events that you carried on for many years in Washington.

One was Reggie's Annual Fish Fry. And the other was the Juneteenth Celebration, where you would organize folks from all over to go down and camp with you in that mosquito-infested area of Assateague. I had suffered through that.

So, I wanted to ask you, what was the impetus for doing that kind of community-building work that you did? And what do you think? Did you get a good vibe out of it? What was the importance of it to you, personally?

Reggie Robinson: The Juneteenth situation came out of a conversation with me, Charlie [Cobb], and Ann [Chinn]. Because Charlie and Ann had been traveling for a little bit, and they found this place called Assateague Island.

And they said, "You know, we ought to do something on Juneteenth."

So I said, "Well, let's just call some folks together, see what folks will do."

So,the first time, we asked folks if they wanted to go with us. A few folks said, "Yeah," and we went down to a place that would only allow you to set up at night. It's like going to a homeless shelter. You had to get there before the rest of the folks got there, else you wouldn't get a spot. And then you had to pick up your stuff the next morning and take it with you.

But after about a couple of years, Ann and Charlie found this place in Chincoteague [Virginia] that allowed us to set up our tents for weeks at a time. So, then it became a kind of thing where we'd tell folks, we'd show pictures of it, and folks would say, "Yeah, we want to try and do it."

And before we knew it, people were coming. And we would have—sometimes, at our height, we would have maybe four or five hundred people down in there.

We would cook our own food and have our own kind of celebration. And those who would come new, we would introduce them to Yukon Jack—which is almost a 250 proof whiskey. That was between me and Charlie.

Every time Charlie would go to Africa or would leave, me and Charlie would sit and drink us a bottle of Yukon Jack before he left. And then we would drink off the bottle when he came back. So we used that as a celebration. Juneteenth just became a thing for people to just be with us on that. And that became a good success.

Now, the fish fries…I just decided that I just like to cook fish and like to smile and see my friends eat fish and slobber on themselves and drop fish on the floor and get drunk and just have a good time.

Because it seemed like we were always going to some funeral, or we were going to something miserable or dangerous. So, it was just one of those kinds of outlet things that just became an annual kind of thing that I just do. And so it just happened.

Karen Spellman: It didn't just happen. You organized it very well.

Reggie Robinson: I'd call folks. I also kept a list of SNCC folks for a long, long time. And that was because I had that computer back in the day. And anybody that was looking for anybody could call me to find out who's who. I just became the person to call.

Karen Spellman: Movement communicator.

Reggie Robinson: I didn't volunteer for it. It just kind of happened that way.

Karen Spellman: Dropped in your lap.

Reggie Robinson: I guess that's the way the fish frying and Juneteenth just kind of happened. And it was good things that happened.

Karen Spellman: Having participated in both of them kind of frequently, I can tell you, the whole Washington, DC, activist community is very indebted to you for doing what you did—keeping us all together, being the glue of activism here in Washington.

So we're about at the end now. Do you have anything that you'd like to say that I haven't asked you about?

Reggie Robinson: I would hope that one of the things that we would begin to really think about doing is moving more towards economic development. We done done voter registration. We got the most Black elected officials in Mississippi, and the folks are still poor.

We don't control no industries. We don't hire nobody. That's what I want to see happen. I want to see us put some institutions on the corner. And if we don't do no more than get a laundromat, we got to wash our drawers.

We ride bicycles. We've got scientists. We should have a group of money that allows somebody to set up a situation where we can go back to McComb, Mississippi—now that we know the mayor there. Or Cambridge, Maryland, and say, "Look here, here's what we're going to do. We're going to study your town and see what is best in your town economically to do."

And we got this whole pot of money. If Oprah can put up $20 million for a goddamn—excuse me—for a museum down there, then they can put up $20 million for economic development. And have this money there—not for people to control, but for people to use—to develop jobs. And people can be free, and people can work, and people can make money.

An institution that says everybody ain't got to be academic. There's plenty of jobs to be done that don't call for college. But we need the money to develop those jobs. We need our Black money to come in there and say, "Here it is. Get the job done."

That's what I want to see done.

Karen Spellman: Well, millions of people will hear your message, I hope, as we develop our Oral History Program for Black Power Chronicles.

So, on behalf of Black Power Chronicles, I'd like to thank you so much for coming and spending this afternoon at the University of the District of Columbia. Love you.

Reggie Robinson: Love you too, sweetie. Hope I gave you what you were looking for.

Karen Spellman: You got it. You got it. I wanted to hear from you and I did. Thank you.