

Transcript: Southern Oral History Project

Interviewee: Minister Benjamin Chavis Muhammad

Interviewer: Kieran Taylor

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START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

BCM: I'm Benjamin F. Chavis Muhammad. I was born in Oxford, North Carolina, January 22, 1948.

KT: Tell me, by any chance did you know your grandparents?

BCM: Yes.

KT: They were still living then when you were a child?

BCM: Well no, my grandparents were deceased at the time, but I knew of my grandparents, my great-grandparents, and my great-great-great-grandparents. My great-great-great-grandfather was the Reverend John Chavis, born in the mid-1700s, also in Granville County, North Carolina where Oxford is, which is the adjacent county to Durham County. Reverend John Chavis, my great-great-great grandfather, was the first black to be ordained in the Presbyterian church. He fought in the Revolutionary War. He was a contemporary of Nat Turner, and after the Nat Turner insurrection, the state of North Carolina, Virginia, Georgia, and South Carolina passed laws making it a felony to teach blacks how to read and write. So my great-great-great grandfather wound up opening up a school for whites in Raleigh and in Chapel Hill, but he had an underground school in northern Granville county, a community called Satterwhite, North Carolina, and my great-great-great grandfather, in 1838, was beaten to death because he was operating this school, I guess an illegal school, teaching blacks how to read and write, near the Virginia border in northern Granville county. So the reason I bring that up is because I come from a long

tradition of ministers, some in the Presbyterian church, some in the Episcopal church, some in the Baptist church and I myself am a minister in the United Church of Christ, but now also am a minister in the Nation of Islam.

I was brought up in a family that was very much involved in the early days of the civil rights movements in the late 40s and early 50s. I became a youth leader of the NAACP when I was twelve years old in Granville county, in Oxford. I got my first whiff of tear gas as a sophomore in high school here in Durham, North Carolina, prior to the sit-ins in Greensboro, where students from, at that time it was called North Carolina College for Negroes, were demonstrating against the segregated policy of the Kress Five and Dime Store, which was in downtown Durham at that time. Floyd McKissick, one of the founders of CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality, is one of my mentors. He's also my family's attorney. Floyd McKissick, his book, *Three-Fifths of a Man*, talked about the constitutional inequity for blacks even in the founding of the country. But just another historical note: my family lives on land in Granville county that's been in our family for over two hundred years.

One of the unwritten chapters of American history is the role blacks played in America prior to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia and the role that blacks played in the Revolutionary War, and the disenfranchisement of those blacks, not being allowed to play any role at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. So, my involvement in civil rights has a lot of antecedents. It's not just I woke up one night and decided to join the civil rights movement. I was born in a family that had a long tradition of fighting for freedom, justice, and equality.

KT: Where these stories, the stories of John Chavis, for instance, is that a story you grew up with or was it only subsequent to your activism?

BCM: That's a story I grew up with. No, I heard that story when I was four or five years old. That's a story I grew up with. In fact, one of my sisters, who's a professor here at North Carolina Central University, twenty or thirty years ago led expeditions to try to find John Chavis's grave, which she was successful in finally finding it on the Magnum plantation. We found the grave and there are books written. Magnum was a student of John Chavis. So it's a fascinating history, the intertwining, not intermingling, intertwining of blacks, so-called free blacks, slave blacks, and whites in Granville county. It's an interesting history. So no, I grew up with these stories. I knew what racism was. I couldn't spell it, but I knew what it was before I went to the first grade.

KT: Your parents were both educators?

BCM: Both educators. My mother was a school teacher for fifty-five years. She taught in the public schools in Granville county. My father was also an educator, but in those days, teachers didn't really make that much money, so my father really made money being a brick mason. My father worked at the North Carolina colored orphanage and my mother was a schoolteacher for North Carolina at the Angie B. Duke School for Colored Children on the campus of the North Carolina colored orphanage. There are two orphanages in Oxford: the colored orphanage and the white orphanage.

KT: Even before your high school years, you had been involved in some protest activity in Oxford?

BCM: Right. I desegregated my local library when I was in elementary school in Oxford. We could not go to the local library. We had something called the colored annex next to the First Baptist Church in Oxford and I always felt a sense of wanting to know why. I liked to read and in the colored school system, we had the hand-me-down books. So most of the textbooks that we used, from when I was in the first grade through the seventh

grade, were hand-me-down books, books with not both covers, because they had been used by the white school and passed on to the colored school system. I knew that in the library were all these books with both covers on them. I wanted a book with both covers.

Because I was somewhat prone to militance, my family was afraid that I was going to get myself into trouble. So after finishing the seventh grade, they sent me to the mountains of North Carolina. They sent me on a bus out of Oxford to live with my brother-in-law and sister in Lenoir, North Carolina; it's in the western part of the state. I went from the seventh grade to the ninth grade. I didn't attend the eighth grade. After finishing the ninth grade, I came back to Oxford for the tenth grade and it was during that time that I decided I was going in this library. My radicalization took place between the seventh grade and the ninth grade, by the time I came back to Oxford, even though I was still very young. I was a sophomore in high school at the age of fourteen, and put my license up: I changed my age myself on my permit, got my license. I was driving a car at fourteen. So I was doing things that older—as a teenager, I was hanging out with college kids. I was driving. I was spending time with Floyd McKissick. I became the editor of my high school newspaper. I was writing editorials as a high school student against the Vietnam War, pro-civil rights, against racial segregation.

KT: Did these early activities ever jeopardize your parents' teaching positions?

BCM: Oh, no question. The day I went into the library, I was walking home from school. I think I was thirteen; I had just turned thirteen. My birthday is January twenty-second. I had just turned thirteen. I was twelve and I had just turned thirteen. I was walking from school and they had just built this brand-new library called the Thornton Library in Oxford. I knew that this library was built with tax money but *[inaudible]* my parents paid taxes. I thought that was so unfair. But there were no signs saying "white only," because it

was known that blacks were not supposed to go. I didn't like the fact that the adults in my community were so obedient to segregation. I wondered, "Why are we not standing to this? We don't have to divide." I used to, in little small ways, when I would go in the dime store and there would be a colored water fountain there, I would never—I would always drink out of the white water fountain, not because I wanted white water, but just out of defiance.

So one day walking home from school, I just decided I'm going to get me a book with both covers today and I went into the library. It was around 3:45 pm. There was an elderly white woman in the library and she said, "Oh young man, you're in the wrong place. You're supposed to be at the annex." I said, "No ma'am. I'm not here to start any trouble. I just would like to get a book with both covers." And she said, "Aren't you Elizabeth's son?" That's my mother's name. I said, "Yes ma'am." She said, "Well you know, your mother's going to lose her job if you don't get out of this library." I said, "No ma'am, I'm not trying to get my mother to lose her job, but I'm not leaving until I get a book." So they called the police. They called my parents. By this time, a lot of my classmates from Mary Potter High School were standing looking through the glass outside, because they just knew that I was going to go to jail. And can I be very honest? I thought I was getting ready to go too; I was very nervous.

The police came and they also got on the phone, called my parents, said, "Come and get your son." One of the proudest days of my life: my parents got there--. One of the things you need to know, I asked the librarian, I said, "Well how can I do it?" She said, "You can't check out a book if you don't have a library card." I said, "Well, what do I need to do to get a library card?" She said, "You have to fill out an application." I said, "Well, can I have it?" She said, "I'm not supposed to give you an application." I said, "Well

ma'am, while we're debating, can I at least fill out the paper and then we can decide whether or not you accept it?" So she gave me the paper; I filled it out, handed it to her. The police officer came, chided the librarian, said, "You shouldn't have given him that paper." The librarian said, "Well what am I supposed to do?" I kind of felt, not sorry, but I was concerned that the librarian—I didn't want her to have a heart attack. (laughter) This was a very tense moment. You have almost now a hundred students looking outside the building, Oxford's finest police officers there.

So my parents arrive, both my mother and my father. My mother said, "What are you doing?" I said, "Well Mama, I'm not trying to start no trouble. I'm just--." I said, "I want to get a library card and I'd like to check out a book." The librarian knew my mother. She said, "Elizabeth, can't you talk to your son?" And my mother said, "Well, my son's right." So about ten seconds of silence went by. The police standing there, my parents, I'm standing there: who's going to make the next move? The elderly librarian grabbed the paper and said, "I'm processing this application." So she did what she'd do. There were no computers back then, so (typing noise on desk) old typewriter, typing the name on the card, said, "Here, young man." I got the card. I went and immediately got a book, sat down. My friends were looking in. They started filing in to get their card and get books.

It was a great feeling to be able to read a book in the public library. I was so nervous, I didn't even want to take the book out of the library, because I didn't want anything to happen to that book. So I thanked the librarian and said, "I'll be back tomorrow after school, but here's the book back. I'm not going to take the book out of the library." Now, I got a set of tongue-lashings from my parents all the way home. They said, "Son please, if you're ever going to do anything like that, let us know in advance." I said, "Well no, if I let you know in advance, it would never happen." But I did, I thanked my

mother and father. I said, "Now, I want to thank you. I know you put your job on the line and all of my classmates thank you because they got a chance to get a book."

Of course, back in those days, nobody had a single telephone line. It was called a party line. So it means there's about four or five families on the same line. You had to wait your turn to use the phone. The lines were just, everybody was kind of—because people I could hear other people. There were three white families and two black families on the same line, five families. But I could hear what the white people were saying about, "Do you know this nigger went up to the library and got a book? We're going to have a problem now. Do you know what's going to happen when they start reading books?" It was like a fear. But it was a good feeling.

That night, I made out a list. I said, "Look, we just don't want a little bit of freedom." I said, "Maybe I should have done that a couple years ago. Why did we just do it now?" So we made our little list: "We've got to do this at the dime store, the movies—we couldn't go to the movies—the swimming pool; we had a long list of things that we were going to challenge. That started my career.

KT: What year was the library desegregated?

BCM: This had to have been '61. I believe it was '61.

KT: You think you were thirteen.

BCM: Well okay, I could tell you I was born in '48, so by 1960, I'm twelve. So it was the beginning of 1961.

KT: Well, obviously if you knew Floyd McKissick, you had heard about what was happening in Greensboro.

BCM: And also here in Durham, because you recall, I think it was in 1959 or 1960, he enrolled his children in the public schools in Durham. That was prior to the sit-ins. I knew his daughters. She was a little bit older than me.

KT: Do you remember the Greensboro sit-ins as having a particular impact that these other—I know there was the Royal Ice Cream Parlor and a whole series of other activities are taking place—but do you remember anything, just noting that this is something different, this is a moment?

BCM: Well, I saw the college students, I thought—see you have to understand in those days, people who went to college were considered to be the privileged class. When you saw college students who were privileged even to be in college taking risks for people who had no chance to go to college, that became something big. It wasn't just the act of defiance; it was who was doing the defiance. The average working-class person could not even think about risking their job or their life, but here were these college students willing to risk even their privilege. So that was a big thing. I remember I heard about it on the radio. Back in those days, everybody didn't watch TV, but it was radio. It was the talk of the radio. In those days, there was no such thing as black-owned radio stations; there was just country western. But every once in awhile, you'd hear some news; you'd find out what was going on. And so like I say, I had put my license up, my age up, so I remember driving to Greensboro a year later, trying to find those students and trying to make sure I said, "Look, they did this in Greensboro. We can do the same thing in Durham." It was a contagious notion that the time had finally come that, in small ways and big ways, white supremacy could be challenged. Because you have to understand, prior to the 60s, the notion of challenging white supremacy was something unthinkable.

KT: You'd mentioned that it was really this year away; that's what crystallized, in terms of your—

BCM: Yeah, because I mean, I'm not—

KT: What was it about that—

BCM: I know this is oral history. I'm not encouraging people to leave their parents so they can be free. But I'm just saying it's a fact that when I left Oxford—well actually, there were no buses in Oxford. I came over to Durham. They put me on this Trailway bus to head up to Lenoir—I had just finished the seventh grade. I would say I was a child. But when I came back after finishing the ninth grade, skipping the eighth grade, I was a man. What I mean by that: in terms of how I thought, what risks I was ready to take, who I cared about. The year I was away from my family—keep in mind, this is very important. From the first grade to the seventh grade, I only, I had never seen a white student or a white person. Oxford was so segregated, you didn't even, except if you stopped at the service station or something or go to the local grocery, there was no interchange, no exchange.

The orphans that I went with were very poor. Nine months out of the year over in Oxford, my classmates, nobody wore shoes because orphans couldn't afford. So even though my mother and father taught, my father was a brick mason, I had shoes, I didn't wear shoes. I could not wear shoes. I learned how to identify with brothers and sisters who were less fortunate at a very early age. That's who I played marbles with. That's who I climbed trees with, frolicked with. But I realize that that was so--. In fact, I wanted them, the orphans, to run away from the orphanage. I wanted to try to help them to escape the orphanage. (laughter) And that would have gotten my parents in trouble, because they worked at the orphanage. (laughter) Even today, some of my classmates who were orphans, they live here in Durham. They remind me of that time.

So what I'm trying to say when I say I left as a child and came back as a man, I'm not talking about manhood now in terms of chronological age. I'm talking about worldview, level of consciousness. I realize that my desire was to grow up quickly, not just so I could drive or drink alcohol or smoke cigarettes, do the things that were banned, but I wanted to challenge another kind of thing that was banned. That day that I got on the bus going to Lenoir, the bus driver told me, "Make sure you go to the back of the bus." This is the Trailway bus. This is after the Montgomery bus boycott. So this is an interstate bus line. And when I got on the bus, there still was the colored waiting room and the white waiting room. This is 1960. And I knew that this had been successfully challenged in Alabama and I wanted to know why in North Carolina, why were we still accepting things, barriers that had been somewhat challenged successfully in other parts of the South? In North Carolina, I was always told North Carolina was the progressive southern state. This is the education state. This is the new South state. But I didn't see any evidence of that.

KT: You initially chose Saint Augustine's to attend?

BCM: A family school. My father went there. My three older sisters went there. I was brought up in the Episcopal church, Saint Augustine's Episcopal. So I went to Saint Augustine's.

KT: What do you remember about your year there? What was significant?

BCM: Keep in mind now, I finished high school in '64 or '65. I get there on the campus of Saint Aug in the fall, September, semester of '65. I meet a man named Golden Frinks, who was the state field secretary for the SCLC.

KT: How did you meet him? What were the circumstances?

BCM: We met in Raleigh. Students over at Shaw University were protesting the segregated movies and the segregated restaurants in downtown Raleigh, right down

Fayetteville Street. And the students from Saint Aug and the students from Shaw would gather and talk. This was the talk of both campuses. I know at Saint Aug, because it was Episcopalian you had something called mandatory chapel, you had to go to chapel. Even in the chapel, we were whispering to one another not what the preacher was talking about, but about when are we all going to get up enough nerve to go downtown. And people said, "Well, that's a long way to run back. You know they're going to chase you," you know, that kind of stuff.

KT: Was there a feeling that the Shaw students were out ahead of you?

BCM: No.

KT: Not necessarily?

BCM: No, but keep in mind, see, I was driving by then. I drove to college, even though I lived on campus. So I had a little bit more mobility. I used to go over to North Carolina State, which was integrated but not many black students. In fact, I first applied to North Carolina State, couldn't get accepted. I was a chemistry major. I remember when I went over to interview at North Carolina State, the advisor over there tried to talk me out of majoring in chemistry, says, "Don't you know how to play some musical instrument? What about music?" I said, "I want to study science." (laughter) So I got accepted at Saint Augustine's College and I was a chemistry major. I was a very good student, actually, but with the hunger and thirst to do something out in the community as well. So I met Golden Frinks at a restaurant on Person Street. It was a black-owned restaurant and Golden was in there talking to some of the Shaw students and some of the Saint Augustine's students about non-violent civil disobedience, particularly the civil disobedience part.

KT: He was already SCLC's representative for North Carolina?

BCM: Yes, right, statewide. There were two. He was the statewide field secretary, Golden Frinks. He was from Edenton, North Carolina. And Milton Fitch, who was from Wilson, North Carolina, was the state coordinator for SCLC. When I told Golden that I knew Floyd, he said, "Well, Floyd is a good lawyer, but we need to show you how to really do this civil rights stuff." I said, "Well, you know, I'm in school. I'm a freshman in college. I may not have time to travel up and down the state." But Golden invited me, I attended a workshop at Shaw on students participating in the non-violent struggle. And I kind of liked it.

Then I remember riding with Golden and Milton Fitch to Durham. I'm in the back seat; I'm the youngest person. We met up with Floyd. They allowed me to sit in on some of their meetings when they were discussing strategy: what school districts needed to be challenged. There was this big debate about do you bring about change through the courts or do you bring change in the street. Golden was saying lawyers were not going to make much progress. There was the Brown decision back in '54. It's 1960. Six years later, nothing's really been done. We've got to take to the streets. So Golden was the street organizer. I had an admiration for him for that, not that—I also admired Floyd McKissick.

So to make a long story short, I became a volunteer for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference my freshman year in college. My specific assignment was to talk about challenging white supremacy from a grassroots organizing perspective as students, and that every student should have some project in the community around where the college was. So my community was Raleigh. I was supposed to make a list of all the establishments that were overtly discriminating against blacks. Because I was driving, I would go around looking for the "white only" signs. I not only did it in Wake County, I went to Sampson County. I didn't have to go far in Sampson County. They had this big

billboard up in Sampson County saying, "Welcome to Sampson County. Ku Klux Klan territory," in lights blinking, a big billboard. And then of course, I was warned by my parents: "Don't ever go to Sampson County." In eastern North Carolina, you kind of know where the strongholds of the Klan were. And then in Wake Forest, there were all these little barbecue places where it didn't have "white only;" it said "go to the back," where they would serve you in the back. They would serve you, but you couldn't-- So I made the list of these different places.

There came a point in time where I was getting a lot of calls. The dean called me in from Saint Augustine's College. He said that they're getting information from other students that I'm persuading some of the students to get involved in things that may lead to something illegal. I said, "What do you mean?" I said, "I am encouraging students to go to some of the rallies." And what happened was during one of the demonstrations, a student from Shaw got bayoneted by a young National Guardsmen. Both administrations, Saint Augustine's as well as Shaw, had assembly programs basically to warn the students not to venture off campus particularly at certain hours and, it was amazing, not to allow quote, unquote "outside agitators" on campus. Who were the outside agitators? No names were called, but it was inferred that Golden Frinks was an outside agitator. I challenged that. I said, "No, we should have Golden on our campus teaching us how to do it the right way, because if we don't learn how to do it the right way, we're going to do it the wrong way and then get ourselves in trouble. Because a student got bayoneted at Shaw basically trying to challenge these National Guardsmen, who were already afraid." I have to mention, there came a point in time when the National Guard had to be deployed to Raleigh, because see what happened is it wasn't like in Greensboro, where there was like an organized civil

disobedience. In Raleigh, it was just popping up all over the place. People were just—
(laughter) saying, “I’m going to challenge,” and they didn’t have no—

KT: In the spring of ’66?

BCM: Yes.

KT: Or fall of—

BCM: Fall of ’65, fall of ’65. Then when the spring of ’66 came, it was just kind of even more intense. I went to summer school that summer, and I mean, tear gas. It was clear that the people that were being deployed were just as nervous as those of us that were demonstrating. There was the use of a lot of tear gas. So there was some points during the day in Raleigh, the whole city was like a ghost town. A lot of commerce stopped, and of course, then the chamber of commerce got angry: “We’re going to cut funds to these institutions. These college campuses are hotbeds of radicals,” and you know, this kind of stuff.

So what happened was I transferred. Again, you remember I told you I was put on a bus, sent up to Lenoir to be with my sister, June and her husband, Marvin. By ’66, they had moved to Charlotte and they were monitoring, they said, “Well, maybe you should transfer from Raleigh.” So also another thing: I got married. My high school girlfriend got pregnant, so on January 31, 1965, I get married. And I’m seventeen years old, I’m in college, with a wife and a child on the way. I transfer my credits to Charlotte. I’m still a chemistry major. And in UNC, there used be called a Charlotte College. It was the first year that UNCC became part of the university system.

KT: This is now fall of ’66?

BCM: Yes, the fall of ’66. What happened was they were late getting me in. I actually didn’t become formally enrolled until the spring of ’67.

KT: Okay.

BCM: But keep in mind now, by the spring of '67, I was a much more experienced SCLC person. Because by November of '66, I had become the statewide youth coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

KT: Well let me ask you: by this time SNCC has popularized the notion of black power, SCLC is increasingly falling under attack from kind of the youth wing of the movement as being either too dominated by Dr. King and the ministers or being too slow. I'm wondering did you ever feel a pull to be more a part of—

BCM: Well—

KT: What's behind your identification with SCLC?

BCM: I have to give it to Golden. I saw the SNCC people and with no disrespect to the SNCC people on campus, they were older, juniors and seniors in college. I was a freshman or sophomore, and because SCLC sort of reached out to me, I reached back to SCLC. Keep in mind, Golden Frinks was doing things in the name of SCLC that SNCC wasn't doing. Golden Frinks was backing up a truckload of chickens and turning them loose in the state legislature, while the legislature is in session. (laughter)

KT: When did he do this?

BCM: In 1966 and did it again in 1968.

KT: I didn't know that story.

BCM: Yeah, he disrupted--. (laughter) Again, I saw an identification with the downtrodden. I have to be careful. I'm not saying that SNCC did not identify with the downtrodden, because they certainly did that in Mississippi and other places. But again, I just have to give it to you like I saw it.

KT: Absolutely.

BCM: And we'd have marches, to give you an example. And it was usually young kids and some older people out there trying to march in these communities. Golden would take up money, would not put it in his pocket. I saw, he would go into a shoe store and buy forty or fifty pairs of shoes and give them out. Keep in mind now, for me, who was brought up with orphans that didn't have shoes, that impressed me. I saw a caring, a sincerity. To me, one of the things I learned about being a leader, you have to care about who's following you. You have to be concerned with their quality of life, even while they protest. So I became one of the youngest persons to accept the SCLC recruitment, I think. But I did it as a militant. I had a big afro. I knew the slang, the language.

The whole ministerial thing impressed me. While some people were critical of King using the black church, I thought that was absolutely the right thing to do. In fact, it was in this whole period of time that I felt a calling to the ministry myself, but I didn't want to accept the ministry. I thought the ministry was too confining. Dr. King was the minister; for me, that was enough. I'm following the minister. I didn't need to be a minister; I'm following the minister. King himself during this period had become more and more radical. He was talking more and more about economics. He was talking more and more about organizing the poor. He was talking about challenging the Vietnam War and linking the struggle for civil rights with human rights, and again the worldview of sort of opening up. That was very attractive to me.

In other words, SCLC, even though it was named the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, all of a sudden had a national perspective. SNCC was focused on a certain geography of the South. They were bringing people around the country to the South. SCLC operated in the South, was articulating a vision for the whole country

emanating out of the South. So there's a similarity, they're on parallel tracks, but the methodologies are different.

KT: And you were impressed by what they were doing in North Carolina in terms of connecting the base?

BCM: Right, exactly. This is the bible belt. I think SNCC may have made a mistake by not seeing the value of utilizing the black church. They saw the value of utilizing the colleges. But if you want to get the masses out in the streets, you've got to utilize the black churches.

KT: At this time, did you have contact with national SCLC people?

BCM: Sure.

KT: I mean, were you attending national retreats and—

BCM: I went to a retreat once at—

KT: Or the annual meetings, I guess?

BCM: At Franklinton. I never went to annual meetings. I went to a retreat at the Highlander Center, which was a training for staff. I went to a meeting in a place called Franklinton Center. It's in eastern North Carolina. There was a place down in Georgia.

KT: Dorchester?

BCM: I believe so. Then there was a place called Epps also in Alabama. There were these little—

KT: Retreat centers.

BCM: Retreat centers. I was about to say reeducation centers. One of the things a lot of people don't know about the movement is this was not somebody laying up in first-class hotels. This is the motel-six route. Everything was very economy.

KT: Right.

BCM: Because it wasn't about acquiring material wealth. One of the only things I can say, there was not a romantization of poverty, but we had to identify with the poor, how we dressed, the bibs, the overalls, (*inaudible*) shoes. Dr. King wore the suit. But by the time I got to Charlotte, which was a big, big city compared to Oxford or compared to Lenoir, I go out to the University of North Carolina. I'm the only black in the science department, the only black in any of my classes. T.J. Reddy, who later became a member of the Charlotte Three, later comes on campus, Charlie Parker, we all run track. I joined the UNCC track, which enabled us to travel around in different neighborhoods. And of course, while we were on the track team, we were also checking out places to organize and mobilize against the war. I founded an organization on the UNCC campus called UNCC Students for Action. If you look in the archive, there's all these papers about how we challenged. We took over the administration building, demanded an African American Studies program, which is alive today at Charlotte because of what we did.

[tape interruption]

BCM: I also became the president of the Black Student Union, the BSU. And then I got elected, which was the shock of my life, to be the president of the UNCC Student Union, which was in charge of all the programs on campus.

KT: So how did they let that happen? (laughter)

BCM: I guess I just became a likeable guy over on campus; I don't know. But UNCC Students for Action became a force on campus. I learned a lot interfacing with the SGA and things, but my heart was also in the community. So in '67, we staged peace-ins very critical of the war. I got involved with SSOC, the Southern Organizing Committee [*Southern Student Organizing Committee*]. I met Ann Braden, Carl Braden; I don't know if you know those names.

KT: Well how did you first meet Jim Grant?

BCM: Did I meet Jim before I went to Charlotte? No, in Charlotte. I think Jim Pierce from AFSCME introduced me to Jim Grant. Jim Grant was a chemistry major. He had a PhD in physical chemistry, it was one of the hardest chemistries, from the University of Pennsylvania. He was just down in North Carolina sort of doing a lot of grassroots antiwar work. I opened up an office of SCLC in Charlotte with help from AFSCME. Jim Grant joined me. He was a co-coordinator of the Charlotte SCLC.

So I'm doing all this work on campus, but my off-campus activity was through the SCLC. In '67, prior to Dr. King's assassination in '68, the state of North Carolina sentenced a young girl to the death penalty. Her name was Marie Hill. She was from Rocky Mount. She was sixteen years old. Golden and I organized something called the Mountaintop to Valley March. We're starting from Asheville; we're marching all the way to Raleigh. It took months to do that because we were stopping in every little community. I'm trying to be a college student, but yet I'm marching.

KT: Well, I was wondering about that. (laughter)

BCM: It was marching the day, rallying at night, staying up late, trying to put my studies in, rushing back to class. I was shuttling between being a college student and being a civil rights organizer for SCLC. Of course, the most tragic thing happened on April 4, '68, when Dr. King was killed, because we were planning to receive him in North Carolina the next day.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

BCM: That you begin to talk about, or hear the movement talk about political empowerment: running people for mayor, running people for governor, running people for

Congress, the whole linkage of changing civil rights laws into political empowerment. Dr. Reginald Hawkins is one of the forerunners of that kind of notion. George Leek, who was an AME Zion minister in Charlotte, offered the notion of running for mayor. It was kind of unheard of in those days, blacks daring to run for these big offices. But it was a direct consequence of opening up opportunity and civil rights. While a lot of stuff was around school desegregation, it wasn't limited to school desegregation or to the rights of workers around the sanitation strike. At that time, I was working for AFSCME. I was a short-order cook at a black-owned restaurant called the Varsity Restaurant. I mean, I would go there in the morning—

[conversation interruption]

BCM: My wife is having the second child by now. It was a challenge.

KT: Well I was wondering, I mean you're identifying with the peace movement, identifying with the sanitation workers, you're into electoral politics to some degree, you've got family responsibilities, a job, the campaign to free Marie Hill. Obviously there's tensions, but did you feel like some of the work suffered?

BCM: I know my academic work suffered. I passed, I finished, but I could have been a much better student. But to be very honest, the thirst and hunger for knowledge was informed by what was going on off-campus, not what was going on in campus. I struggled to get back to finish my college degree, knowing that I needed the degree, because I felt the degree could help me do better in the struggle off-campus. In other words, some people secure an education to isolate themselves from reality. It was just the opposite for me. I was getting whatever I could learn so I could be a better organizer, so I could be a better speaker, so I could be able to reference things.

In the mid-60s, there were these streams coming together. There was the labor movement, the civil rights movement, the peace movement, and the budding political empowerment all intersecting into one stream. So you begin to talk about the struggle and the movement, the movement with the capital M. It wasn't the labor movement or the civil rights—it was the movement. The composite of the movement were these streams: antiwar stream, pro-labor stream, grassroots antipoverty stream, and the intellectual stream too, because in those days, you had to write about this stuff. The pen also was a weapon, you know, James Baldwin's writings, Stokely's writings, the offering of black power, unpacking what that meant. All of a sudden, the identity crisis that the black community was facing: how do you define yourself? What do you call yourself? A lot of times, those notions came from the so-called intellectual crowd. But to me, I did not want to be one of these ivy tower intellectuals that look down on the people's movement and wrote theses and theories. No, to me, it has to be much more informed by the praxis of the struggle itself.

I mean, I can say that now, but at the time, yes it was a struggle for me personally just to keep up with the various responsibilities that I had. But it was also a growing—I was growing. I'm in my late teens now. I'm becoming an experienced organizer through trial and tribulations. I know what it's like to have speakers in a place and the place is empty. Or I know what it's like to have a place fill up with people and there's—

KT: There's no speaker. (laughter)

BCM: I learned how to pinch hit very quick. If somebody's expecting Golden Frinks or Milton Fitch, what can Ben Chavis say to fill in the void while we wait for those—sometimes they never show up. But for the sake of the movement, you learn you have to say things, do things that keep that spirit alive: motivation, inspiration. This is

another thing, again not to criticize my SNCC colleagues, you have to always be able to take the pulse of the people and respond to the pulse of the people, rather than lecturing to the people that this is what you do. No, you have to get people to come to that on their own if you really want them to have a movement that's alive. I remember C.T. Vivian, who's also a great tactician, would talk about how you move people. That is what the movement is all about. It's just not sitting around in some seminar or even having a retreat. It's what you do after the retreat. C.T. Vivian was another one of my mentors. Andy Young was a United Church of Christ minister. He was paid by the United Church of Christ to be in SCLC.

Then when Dr. King was killed—I mean, I'm jumping over some stuff—on February [April] the fourth, I cried literally. It was very painful. I was angry. I felt that Dr. King should have been more protected. He should never have been, in my view, never let out on that balcony. They knew there were threats on his life. One thing that I haven't told you was the constant harassment, but big brother wanted you to know that he was watching. I would be followed. Sometimes a sedan would pull up beside me and take pictures of everybody in the car. Again, these streams, the so-called militant stream, when Stokely leaves SCLC [SNCC] and becomes the prime minister of the Panthers, Cleve Sellers. Don Cox. I'm trying to figure out well, do all the black student unions now become a part of Panthers? All these things are happening, the rise of pan-Africanism out of the nationalists, caught up in all of that.

KT: Well, I'm wondering about that. I mean, how much contact at that point did you have with Howard Fuller?

BCM: A lot, a lot. Before they even named Malcolm X University, Fuller was even. Howard used to come to my house, I'd come to his house. We would ride. If we think that the houses were bugged, we would go down the street and talk a lot.

KT: So you know Nelson Johnson—

BCM: Of course.

KT: And Howard Fuller from—

BCM: From the very beginning. I knew Nelson Johnson before there was a YOB [Youth Organized for Black Unity] or SOBU [Students Organized for Black Unity], before they founded Malcolm X Liberation University.

KT: How would you describe your intellectual trajectory compared to somebody like Howard Fuller? I'm thinking of his embracing his Pan Africanism.

BCM: Well, we were all going through what I would call ideological evolution. We all somewhat were integrationists and with some of the failure of integrationism, we all tampered with nationalism and particularly seeing Malcolm, not over or against Martin, but on parallel tracks, different strategies. Again, I'm sort of the one—I was always with Martin, clearly. But I had also an identity. I kept my nationalist credentials and there came a point in time after I joined the United Church of Christ in the wake of Dr. King's assassination. Because when Dr. King was killed, we had not finished the Mountaintop to Valley March. We were still marching toward Raleigh.

[tape interruption]

BCM: King's assassination was another pivotal movement for me. Some people would say well, Dr. King's assassination marks the death of the movement or the decline of the movement or no one can really rise to take his mantle. I feel a little different. I felt that Dr. King was preparing, hopefully, a generation to take the baton and take it forward. I

was one of the ones who was arguing that we have to now make sure to keep Dr. King's dream alive. We have to keep the organization alive. SCLC is very important. Never think about dismantling SCLC. I was really a little concerned with Jessie establishing Operation Breadbasket, because I felt it should be more identified with SCLC as a theater to SCLC, not as a separate organization. But you know, I really admired Andy Young. He was there when Dr. King was assassinated. He was there during the autopsy. He never left Dr. King's side until he was entombed. Andy and I are very close to this day. Of course, he later went on and started doing the political empowerment. He ran for mayor against [inaudible].

But I'm going to go back to '68. So when Dr. King is assassinated, I sort of dry my tears. I call Golden. I say Golden, "We're going to finish this march. We're going to finish this march to save Marie Hill and we're going to finish this march to keep Dr. King's dream alive. People need to see us still marching. If in the wake of assassination, we start retreating and we start folding our tent," and Golden agreed. Now it's interesting, the mentee now is reminding the mentor, because a lot of the elder staff of Dr. King were bewildered in the wake of the assassination. They were even questioning, "Did we go too far? Should we be this close to the labor unions?" People always say that, "Well, Dr. King shouldn't have been with the garbage workers no way." And they were questioning. I said, "Well no, what we did was right, not wrong. You don't get to the mountaintop and then say, 'Well maybe we shouldn't even climb up there. Maybe we should be. We're here.' And we should not be ashamed of how we got there." Of course, without giving out all of SCLC's secrets, there was a big debate.

Some people, when Dr. King was killed, there was a sigh of relief, because they didn't want to go where Dr. King was going. They did not want to go against the government. They didn't want to be considered a militant or an adversary to the

government or a communist. You have to understand, they were trying to put that jacket on a lot of us. I got visited all the time about my association with--. Because you have to understand that J. Edgar Hoover did believe that this coalition of labor and the civil rights was somehow orchestrated by Moscow. I mean, they really believed that. They really thought that somehow Marxist-Leninists were the manipulators of the workers. I mean, this was like talked about, crazy.

So we're marching now and Golden sometimes gets weary and I take up the slack. I have a car. Golden sometimes didn't have a car man, no gas. I had gasoline from working. I learned how to make friends, that the movement refueled itself along the way. The more we marched, the more fuel we got. The moment you stop marching, you don't go nowhere. So at these rallies, I learned something about sustaining the movement. When we get outside of Raleigh, we may have eighty to ninety people who had marched all the way. Sometimes people would join you, march to the city limits and see you to the next stop. But we had about eighty or ninety people who marched all the way. It was at that point I met Rev. Bill Lamb, who was an organizer for the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice. He pulled me to the side. He says, "Man, why don't you come to meet Dr. Charles Cobb?" He's a native of Durham but he was the head of the Commission for Racial Justice.

[tape interruption]

BCM: I said to the Reverend, "Well look man, SCLC needs me. I really, I don't want to leave SCLC. Dr. King has just been killed and Golden and Milton Fitch, they need my help. They don't have any young people." I said, "I can't. I will meet Dr. Cobb and maybe we can talk about if SCLC and the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice can work together." Then Bill says, "Well, I know you're not making any money. I

know you've got a family to take care of. At the United Church of Christ, you can be a minister in the United Church of Christ and get your family taken care of, health insurance. You don't even have life insurance. If somebody shoots you out there on the highway, who's going to take care of your family?" And I thanked him and I appreciated his concern and those were real—I didn't want to be irresponsible to my family, because there were certain risks in what we were doing. I'm just giving you the highlights.

KT: Absolutely.

BCM: So we went on and finished the march, had a big rally at the state capitol, saved Marie Hill's life. She's alive today. They took her case to the Supreme Court. That was one the cases where the Supreme Court ruled that capital punishment was a cruel and unusual punishment. So they gave her a mandatory life sentence in place, but also discovered there were things done wrong in her trial. Now she's out.

KT: When did she get out, do you know about when?

BCM: She got out while I was in prison during the Wilmington Ten. It was during the 70s.

KT: So late 70s was when she was finally released.

BCM: Yeah, right. But I stayed with SCLC. I'm struggling now as I haven't finished college. I've got all of my professors angry at me, even the progressive ones. I'm a chemistry major. My faculty advisor is Dr. (inaudible). because I was in the BS track, he says, "Look, accept your BA and at least get this degree," because getting a BS required me to go back and take some more calculus courses. These professors were not going to bend. I needed to—and I didn't want them to bend. But I had enough requirements for the BA. So I went back and took some more electives to just get enough stuff to graduate in '68, '69.

I, by now, have two children. I moved my family back to Oxford in the spring of '69. I don't know if you read Tim Tyson's book; you know what happened in the spring of '69. While I finish up my degree requirements, I don't get my degree in '69. I don't get it until 1970, because I still had some incompletes I had to finish. So I get a job being a part-time teacher in Oxford until Henry Marrow gets killed. So then I have to reach back for all my SCLC, knowing how to protest and challenging that situation with all the force that I knew how to do it. I'm back at home now.

KT: In moving to Oxford, was there a sense that, to a degree, you're leaving the movement behind?

BCM: No, it was a sense of just transition. We closed the SCLC office. I have to tell you that the assassination of Dr. King was devastating on the movement. This reassessment that I talk about, the relationship between organized labor and the movement, caused some fractures.

KT: You had mentioned that before we started the interview, but could you tell me a little bit more about that? You had said that these were discussions that took place in the wake of the assassination?

BCM: Yes, right. There was no discussion like that before the assassination. But after the assassination, people were asking, I'm talking about internal to the movement, what was the efficacy of continuing to have such a close relationship with the labor movement. One, we felt, some felt that the association with the labor movement was causing us to be accused as communists. You have to understand, that was a real fear, that J. Edgar Hoover had an impact. Because what they were doing was, I don't know if you know, they would go visit pastors, members of pastors' churches, some of their families. They wouldn't come to those of us who were in the movement, because they knew they

couldn't do that. They would go around your associates. All of a sudden, even some of my professors at UNCC said, "We got a visitor today. They were just asking questions about you. Does he go the library? What kind of books is Chavis checking out?" It's crazy. It's like the Patriot Act now. That's not something that just fell out of the sky. So I remember in AFSCME in Charlotte, this whole thing about taking the workers out on strike, then the union itself reassessing its relationship with what they thought, the unionists, the rise of black militancy in the movement. The labor union was a little frightened by that.

KT: Right.

BCM: There was this radicalization going on. I'm taking a while to describe all this, but look man, from '68 to '72—and I say '72 because '72 is when we had the first national black political convention in Gary, Indiana, and also the first African Liberation Day, led by Owusu [Howard Fuller] from here to Washington. So all of a sudden now, you've got Diggs a members of congress putting on a dashiki, guys changing their names. Keep in mind, I'm in prison by then in '72. Well actually, I went to the Gary convention. I got arrested in Wilmington Ten as soon as I got back from the Gary convention. But the Wilmington Ten incident had happened. Of course, I knew a lot more about 1898. We introduced a resolution at the Gary convention to say that the government in Wilmington was illegally constituted based on the coup d'etat that happened. We actually got that resolution passed at the convention. I think you asked me about these ideologies.

KT: Right.

BCM: Yeah, we were all involved in them, and not only involved, but debated them. Howard Fuller changed his name to Owusu Sadaukai and my name got changed from Benjamin Chavis to Yusufu; my African name was Yusufu.

KT: How long did you go by that?

BCM: A couple years. I really wasn't feeling it too much. But the church I started in Wilmington was called the African Congregation of the Black Messiah. It was a black church with a red, black, and green cross on it. Albert Cleague, I should have told you, was the chairman of the board of the Commission for Racial Justice. He wrote the definitive book, called *The Black Messiah*, and started the Shrine of the Black Madonna. Malcolm mentions Cleague in some of his writings. So all this stuff sort of came together. One of the reasons why a lot of us called the same names was because the movement at the end of the day wasn't that big. I mean leaders in the movement, you could put them all in a room. You could put all of CORE, SCLC, SNCC, the Black Panthers, the RNA, you could get us all in a room. (laughter) So the fact that somebody was a nationalist one day, like LeRoi Jones, who became Imamu Baraka. He was a nationalist, then a pan-Africanist, and then he became a communist for a moment. If you talk to Amiri—he calls himself Amiri now—he still has some of those tendencies today.

Then I became very close with Angela Davis. We co-founded the National Alliance Against Racism and Political Repression, come to find out Angela's father and my father were classmates at Saint Augustine's College. She's from Birmingham, I'm from Oxford, but her family was Episcopalian. Then her mother was a member of the United Church of Christ, First Congregational Church in Birmingham. So all these things. Her name was Davis, my name was Chavis. She has a brother named Ben. We became very close. In fact, Angela and I not only became very close friends, we were—she may kill me for saying this—we were romantically involved at one time.

KT: At some point in the 70s?

BCM: Yes.

KT: Okay.

BCM: Her birthday is January twenty-sixth, my birthday is January twenty-second. There were a lot of things. I talked about I'm bringing her back to the church. She's talking about bringing me into the CP. (laughter) So we had this little thing.

KT: Well, the other thing that strikes me about both of you is you were both kind of the precocious children.

BCM: That's true.

KT: I mean, she was a thirty-year-old by the time she was sixteen, which it sounds like you had that.

BCM: Right, very similar. Then we sort of discovered each other in the wake of what happened to George Jackson. By now, I'm divorced, because the Wilmington Ten situation had a heavy toll on my family. I'm lonely. We just sort of found each other in the struggle and worked together. Angela was one of the reasons why the Wilmington Ten case became internationalized. There were billboards up in Cuba, students in France chaining themselves to the U.S. Embassy. I mean, I'm in jail, so who's spreading this word? It's Angela.

KT: Right. Just to get back to the debates within SCLC—actually, you and Jim Grant, you were the principal field organizers for the AFSCME strike in Charlotte, is that safe to say?

BCM: Yes.

KT: Then who were the AFSCME staffers coming in?

BCM: Jim Pierce was the principal staff person.

KT: Who had connections to the student movement earlier?

BCM: Some student movement, right. And Jim had the connection to Jessie Epps and then to Bill Lucy. Well, Bill Lucy was in the international. He really wasn't that much involved in Charlotte or Memphis. It was Jessie Epps and Jim Pierce.

KT: What was the time frame of the Charlotte sanitation strike?

BCM: Oh, during the same year. We were out on strike during the same period that the sanitation workers in Memphis were out in strike.

KT: And when was Charlotte resolved?

BCM: We resolved it—

KT: Was it after Memphis was resolved?

BCM: After Memphis.

KT: Okay. Then SCLC, the following year, they were in Charleston, right, with the 1199 and the—

BCM: Right, well some of SCLC was. You have to understand, there was a real division in SCLC after that.

KT: I see. So that's where a lot of these kinds of divisions played out?

BCM: Jessie went a whole 'nother way.

KT: He didn't want to be a part of the union trajectory?

BCM: I don't say he didn't want to be, but I felt that he wanted to start his own trajectory.

KT: And the feeling was—so I'm assuming that Ralph was more supportive of the union work?

BCM: That's a very good question. I think Reverend Abernathy really wanted to keep the legacy of King alive as King would have had it. Since Martin went to Memphis forthrightly in solidarity with labor, Abernathy wanted to keep that solidarity. But

Abernathy was also trying to reconnect back to the church base and he spent a lot of time. And Abernathy and Golden were very close.

KT: Is that right?

BCM: Right. Again, one time Abernathy was here in the state and I'm driving both of them around. Abernathy had this tendency to kind of nod off. We were traveling and just didn't get enough rest. So out of the clear blue sky, we're in the motel in Raleigh somewhere, we bring Brother Abernathy out there and he stretches out and goes to sleep. The first thing Golden does, while Abernathy is asleep on his back, Golden takes off Abernathy's shoes and gets a bottle of lotion and puts lotion on Abernathy's feet. Again, this whole caring thing. I think a book, I'll probably have to do it, somebody needs to write about Golden Frinks. He's one of the unsung heroes of SCLC. What made SCLC powerful was not only Dr. King's oratory, certainly his leadership, his fierce determination to practice what he preached, but it was also having a field staff that, in Dr. King's name, would have no reluctance to agitate for freedom, justice, and equality. We learned how to be constructive, creative, non-violent agitators. So it's interesting. By 1993, fast forward when I was interviewed by the NAACP, the first thing they wanted to ask me: "Do you still have that SCLC mentality?" (laughter) Because there was this division between SCLC and the NAACP.

KT: That was still a sore point?

BCM: Even by 1993, oh yeah. I mean, a lot of who I am today is the result of my SCLC background, which the United Church of Christ helped to facilitate that to flower and be more institutionalized, and get me to school. Because I had a chemistry degree, I had to go back and study religion and study philosophy and study theology.

KT: I don't think we're even going to make it to Wilmington in terms of your narrative. I know over the last few days, you've been doing a lot of talking about Wilmington. Is that something that—what time do you have?

BCM: 3:30.

KT: Do you do a lot of talking about the Wilmington experience or do you have opportunities to kind of think about what it meant for you personally or what it's meant historically? Or is this kind of a unique situation in that the anniversary and—

BCM: Well, I think the anniversary's unique, but you know, I've been talking about the Wilmington Ten case for thirty-five years.

KT: I was wondering if you feel like there's something that's kind of missed about it that you think is important for people to understand, that frequently gets lost in the way that Wilmington's retold.

BCM: Well again, for people who would like to understand what happened in Wilmington in 1971, they have to understand what happened in Wilmington in 1898, inextricably linked. Right before coming over here, we were on a program earlier at UNC radio and the announcer, he was reading from a script. In the script he was reading, he said, "The Wilmington Ten had their convictions overturned on a technicality." I said, "On a technicality? It wasn't a technicality. We were framed, and we were framed up by the local authorities, but were also assisted by the federal government." The ATF, the Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearm Division was involved with the frame-up of the Charlotte Three, was involved with the frame-up of the Raleigh Two, was involved with the frame-up of the Wilmington Ten. Same ATF agent, Stanley Noel. So the federal government was very much involved also in the frame-up of the Wilmington Ten. But the courts overturned our convictions because of prosecutorial misconduct. That's not a technicality. That's a major

admission by the federal courts that prosecutors sometimes use their what is perceived to be unlimited authority, not only to decide what they're going to charge you with, but to falsify allegations and go out and try to get witnesses and offer them various incentives to give false testimony. So to have our case overturned based on prosecutorial misconduct is stronger than having your case overturned on something that the judge forgot to do during the trial.

Another thing I think needs to be cleared up is the climate in Wilmington. When the young people decided to boycott, the boycott was not against the desegregation of the schools. The boycott was against the violence that the black students were being targeted with by white adults, who were opposed to the desegregation of the schools. Because a lot of times, I hear it on the news, the Wilmington Ten resulted, the incident resulted because the black students boycotted. No, the incident happened because paramilitary white supremacists decided to draw the blood of the young, of the black community, because they were angry at the court-ordered school desegregation. That's what happened. Of course, we could not get police protection. We were left having to defend ourselves. But by the grace of God, we were able to live through it.

The incident happened in '71. We were tried in '72, a year later, the same '72, another pivotal year, where it was clear Nixon in his final years, Watergate years, J. Edgar Hoover in his final years, Spiro Agnew and John Mitchell in their final years, were utilizing the government still to try to check the movement. You have to understand, when Dr. King was killed in '68, the whole country swung to the right, because they said, "We need to check black people's aspirations for freedom, justice, and equality." In national politics, the country elects Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew, who run on a law-and-order campaign; that was their rallying call. So when Nixon and Agnew get in, and John

Mitchell and all them, they believe they have a mandate to make sure that the unrest of the 60s—and you know what happened at '68, even at the Democratic convention with Daley beating up all those people, putting them down in the subway, so it wasn't just a Republican thing. It was an establishment thing of: "We've got to check this movement. These young people have become too radical. They're against the Vietnam War. God forbid, white radicals and black radicals have now joined forces," all this. There was a big paranoia going on.

The civil unrest that happened in the wake of Dr. King's assassination, the whole Kerner Commission report—that's a report that should be required reading for everybody, because that commission established what were the things that led to civil unrest: it was poverty, police brutality. Like an incident happens, it's like a flash point, but the condition has been there for a long time. Such was the case in Wilmington. From 1898 to 1971, the black community there it's cup had runneth over. They were not going to allow another 1898 to happen. So from my personal perspective, I was very honored from all of what I had previously been through, and I didn't go into the other, I had been arrested about thirty years by the time I had come to Wilmington, but it was all minor harassment charges by law enforcement. By the time we got to Wilmington, it was clear that there were powers that be that wanted to put us away for good, like there was this notion to put the movement away for good. A lot of people had to leave the country. A lot of people were exiled. Whenever I go to Paris now, I still see people who have been over there ever since the late 60s, early 70s; they left the country, couldn't come back.

KT: Why weren't you killed?

BCM: I would say I'm alive today by God's grace. I have been shot at many times.

I've been forced off the road many times in downtown Wilmington and out on the

highway. The Klan came to my house once in Oxford. Thank God, I was home, because they really didn't think I was at home; my car was in the shop. They were really coming down there to try to fight my mother, but I was at home. So you know, I'm alive, I believe, and I'm thankful to be alive, but that's why I'm still active. I plan next week to go to Coretta's funeral out my respect for her and what Dr. King's legacy continues to stand for.

I think the movement is needed more today in 2006 than it was needed thirty-five or forty years ago, fifty years ago. I'm optimistic, though, because I see in the hip hop generation a great new hope. Hip hop transcends race, transcends a lot of the divisions between urban and suburban, and over the last five years, Russell Simmons and I have—I mentor him to civil rights, he's mentoring me to hip hop. He's forty-eight, I'm fifty-eight. But hip hop itself is intergenerational. So I'm optimistic because I see a potential of young people not wanting to repeat the mistakes of the past. They want to learn from the past. But there's this strange thing that's going on, because so much of the past is being hidden from the youth. You have to almost have several different doctorates in several different fields just to go discover what the truth is. I think it's amazing that in a highly technological society, most Americans are relatively ignorant of what some of the realities of the 60s, of the 70s, what those realities were and how those realities impinge upon today, the same thing with 1898. There's a systematic attempt to either revise history or deny that it ever existed.

KT: Have you followed what's been happening in Greensboro with the Truth and Reconciliation, as well as the Wilmington?

BCM: Yes. I think those are very important efforts.

KT: I'm wondering if there's just anything that, maybe something we covered earlier, that you wanted to reiterate or something new that you think would be important to

include here. My feeling, if you are willing, is I feel like we just touched the surface of some things and would really like to, at some point, follow up, either next time you were in North Carolina or maybe someone to follow up with at least one or two other interviews to extend this at least into the 70s.

BCM: Well you know, it's a long story. I think we've done a good job today to begin it and I'm willing to. It's just a matter of scheduling.

KT: Yeah.

BCM: My concern, though, now is who's hands is this going to fall into? Is this open to the public?

KT: Generally yeah, the interviews are included in the collection over at the Southern Historical Collection and it would be available to any researcher or student who wanted to come and listen to the tape.

BCM: That's fine. I'm not trying to hide the story, but I am concerned that there are a lot of revisionists out here who I think use their intellectual abilities to write about this period of history, but sometimes miss the mark. I argue that it's better to put it all on the table than to put a little bit on the table and then make an assumption that you grasp the fullness of the situation, because you've got a little bit off the table. I mentioned that I work in hip hop now. Everywhere I go, people are more angry about hip hop than they are about what happened in 1898 or 1971.

KT: Angry at hip hop because of language or representations?

BCM: Misunderstanding. People tend to get angry about what they don't understand or are fearful, not so much angry, but fearful.

KT: Any closing thoughts?

BCM: Well, it's not a closing thought. I would say it's a thought as we transition to something else.

KT: Yeah.

BCM: The movement or the struggle has not been in vain. A lot of progress has been made. I believe that more progress will be made in the future, to the extent to which we grasp a better understanding of the past, we extract what learnings we can from the past, so that history will not repeat itself, but history will provide an opportunity for all people to have a better quality of life. Because at the end of the day, what is the struggle and the movement about, if it's not to improve the quality of life of those while they have life, in the world in which we live in today? What it means to be an American should—

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

KT: But the meaning of being an American—

BCM: Yeah well, what I'm trying to say is that, this may shock you, but I think America has to reap what it's sown. I think America has to repent for some of the wrong, repair. I'm in favor of reparations. Reparations is not just a monetary thing. It's a quality of life issue. We have more black people, more Latino people, more people of color in poverty in America in 2006, than we did in 1966. That concerns me. That's it.

KT: Thanks very much.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Emily Baran. March 2006.
Verified. April 2006. KT.