# TRANSCRIPT: REV. DAVID FORBES

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| Interviewee: | Rev. David Forbes |
| Interviewer: | Dwana Waugh |
| Interview Date: | April 27, 2010 |
| Location: | Raleigh, North Carolina |
| Length: | One audio file, approximately 78 minutes |

START OF INTERVIEW

Dwana Waugh: Today is April 27, 2010. This is Dwana Waugh interviewing Rev. David Forbes. I just wanted to start by asking if you could talk a little bit about your parents and your childhood growing up.

David Forbes: My mother, Mabel Clemmons Forbes, was a remarkable, royal person. I best could describe her as a cross between a queen and a task mistress, because there were eight of us so she had to be, as nice as she was, a drill sergeant to be able to run that household. My father was a minister, a Pentecostal minister, and so we grew up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, all of us faith-oriented. Growing up in a house with eight children and two parents with three bedrooms meant that we were a very close family, physically and emotionally and socially. We had to learn how to get along in such close quarters. One bathroom, okay, and my house now has three bathrooms, but one bathroom with ten people is an interesting dynamic. We were a very friendly family, very gregarious, very playful, very interactive. We were poor but we didn't know it because our parents sought to provide well for us. We were very educational. Part of the ritual on a nightly basis was to sit at the dining room table and everybody did their

homework together. My father did his college work after all eight of us were born so he was a student at the same time that we were students, so a lot of that childhood memory is related to studying and playing and singing and the like.

DW: Were all of the eight of you close in age, or was there a gap?

DF: Most of us were close in age, like a year or a year and months, and then there was a gap between the baby and the knee baby of eight years, so that was a gap.

DW: And where do you fall in the line?

DF: I'm in the middle. I am the fifth child so there are four older than me and three younger than me, and of the eight, seven of us are still living.

DW: That's amazing.

DF: Five sisters and two brothers.

DW: Now you grew up in Goldsboro?

DF: I was born in Goldsboro, but my father, who was a minister, moved to Raleigh when I was maybe three or four years old, so for all intents and purposes my growing up got done here in Raleigh.

DW: Okay. Where did you live in Raleigh?

DF: In southeast Raleigh, on South Bloodworth Street, 915 South Bloodworth Street, in the church's parsonage. Providence Holy Church was the church.

DW: I'm not so familiar with Raleigh. Has it changed a lot since when you were growing up?

DF: It has changed a lot but the neighborhood where I grew up is still very much intact. There are no new houses there so the houses are as they were when I was growing up, sixty or more years ago.

DW: Wow.

DF: But the city generally has certainly grown and developed quite a bit.

DW: Now you were saying that your father ended up going to school. What school did he attend?

DF: He attended Shaw University, both undergraduate as well as the divinity school, so he got his baccalaureate and graduate degree from Shaw.

DW: And so education was very important to your family?

DF: Education was very important. Everybody was expected to study. Everybody was expected to perform, to do homework. The bigger children helped the younger children so there was kind of a mutual aid motif going there, and the expectation that you perform.

DW: What schools did you attend from elementary to high school?

DF: I attended Crosby-Garfield School that is now on Lenoir Street. Strengthening the Black Family uses that building, but the building is still there. I attended Washington Middle School, and that school is still on Fayetteville Street, and I attended John W. Ligon Junior/Senior High School, and that building is still here.

DW: Wow. That's remarkable that they're still in existence. So what ultimately led you to attend--? Well I'll back up. Could you talk a little bit about your decision-making process to ultimately go to college and attend Shaw?

DF: There was absolutely no question that all eight of us were going to go to college. Our daddy was in college and so we knew that that was achievable, and my older brothers and sisters had gone off to college and so I was going to go to college. I chose Shaw because it was in my neighborhood. I grew up hanging around, looking at

the football practices and going to the choir concerts, and so I felt organically a part of Shaw. There were not a whole lot of options. The only schools that I could go to in 1958 would be the African-American schools, the black schools--the Negro schools, they were called then--because Carolina, State, Duke were not options. They were segregated at this time as were the public schools. The public schools were segregated, rigidly so. In North Carolina you had white schools, Negro schools, and Indian schools, so east was east and west was west and never the three would meet.

DW: Yeah. So you were just saying you went to the choir practices and the football and Shaw was kind of part of the entertainment part of growing up. When you first went, what was your first year at Shaw like?

DF: It was very colorful, very exciting, obviously. You were making the transition from high school into college where you got bigger books, where you got more expectation academically. The social dimension was very, very nice, getting to know young people from all across the country and the social part of it, the dances and the sock hops. You're probably too young for a sock hop but we used to on Friday night sometimes go to the gym, take your shoes off and you dance in your socks.

DW: Oh. [Laughs]

DF: And so it was a very key and pivotal transition into college.

DW: How prepared did you feel from high school to your first year at Shaw? Did you feel like your teachers had prepared you adequately?

DF: Very much. To finish Ligon High School was a leading high school in the state so we were more than ready for college.

DW: Do you still keep in touch with many of your teachers and students from Ligon?

DF: I'm a member of the class of '58 and we meet regularly and engage in social activities and community projects and the like.

DW: That's great.

DF: Most of my teachers are passed, you know. That's sixty years--well, not sixty years ago but a while.

DW: Yeah. How large was your class?

DF: Close to two hundred.

DW: That's pretty large.

DF: Yes.

DW: And so you're still pretty active, all of the students are still pretty active and united.

DF: Yeah. Once a year there's a reunion and a meeting and a dance and a social, so we keep up with each other.

DW: So did most of the students end up going to Shaw, or did a majority of the students from your class end up going to Shaw as well?

DF: We were parceled around. Some went to Shaw, some went to St. Aug, some went to North Carolina Central, some went to A&T, some went to Winston-Salem, some went to Livingstone, so the African American schools each got their share. Probably the largest contingent went to Shaw. I recall having at least a dozen or more students who I graduated from high school [with] who were in the freshman class.

DW: I wanted to go back just a little bit. You had said that you grew up in a faith-based home and had a tradition, your father was a minister, was his father also a minister?

DF: His father was not a minister but my mother's father was a minister so there's pretty thick clergy on both sides of the family.

DW: Okay. So I was interested in, I know you were on the planning committee for the SNCC anniversary, I guess a couple weekends ago now. You would have been, in 1960, a sophomore or junior?

DF: I would have been a sophomore. I was nineteen years old.

DW: How did you come to get involved with the organization and just getting involved generally with SNCC?

DF: Well there's a general response and then there's a specific response. The general response is that I grew up in an era when the racial etiquette was highly oppressive. Segregation was real. Every area of life was proscribed by race. Where you were born was decided by your race, who your doctors were, where you went to school, where you went to a library--even libraries were segregated--where you would eat, everything was proscribed by race. And against that background the very excellent black teachers that we had taught us what the nation was all about. We had to memorize portions of the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain--." That was what you were learning in elementary school. "We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, ensure domestic--." So here you are learning what the country is supposed to be about, and then you're living diametrically opposed to

that, with whites being people of privilege and blacks and Native Americans being second- and third-class citizens. So it was that kind of tension that characterized my growing up years. By the time I get to high school I'm getting US history, I'm getting world history, I'm getting world literature, I'm getting humanities, I'm being broadened, and then by the time you get to college you're taking Western civilization and more American history and more world history and more language and literature so you're broadening. And the social science teachers spared no effort to get us to see that we were entitled, so you are developing a sense of entitlement. So when the civil rights developments began across the country, in Nashville, in Atlanta, in Jacksonville, in Memphis, and ultimately in Greensboro, that whetted the appetite of many of the students, that perhaps we were entering into a season and an era where we could choose to do what other students were doing, and that is to challenge the social and political system.

DW: I was going to ask you, but I guess you kind of touched on it, how big a role did your teachers play in pointing out this hypocrisy between the American ideals and the reality, or did you as students pick up on that more so?

DF: No, the professors generally were pretty transparent. Part of the reason that I'm so very grateful that I went to an African-American school is all of my teachers from grade school up, they invested themselves very deeply in reinventing themselves in us, so they gave us the benefit of their maturity, their wisdom, their travel, their journey. And so it was very natural that when the winds of civil rights began to blow that some of us—not all of us but many of us—chose to put our tails on the line. And it was pretty heady. It was dangerous. It was not a lighthearted endeavor.

DW: Yeah. I do want to go into the dangerous aspect, but I'm also curious about the courses you talked about, broadening up the courses and taking a broader curriculum. How much decision-making did you have as a student in choosing the courses that you took?

DF: Not a lot. These days a student can pretty much tailor make a curriculum pretty freely, but I came up under a curriculum where the vast majority of courses were required in light of what one's major was, so maybe there'd be a few electives but not many.

DW: Okay. And what was your major?

DF: Elementary education.

DW: Okay. And how soon did you decide that?

DF: Well when I got to Shaw they asked me what I wanted to major in and I said "school principal."

DW: Oh.

DF: And they said, "well, it would be helpful to be a teacher first."

DW: [Laughs]

DF: But that was where my ambition--. I had already made a connection to--. The highest professional pursuit in the community was school principal, doctor, lawyer, those kind, so I was shooting for one of the top.

DW: Yeah. So what made you decide that that's the career that you wanted to follow, to become a principal?

DF: I think I admired and looked up to the principals of the schools where I attended. They were intelligent people, they were leaders, because they led the faculty

and the students, and they appeared to be well paid because they drove nice cars and dressed nicely, so I think that was the identification.

DW: Yeah. So did you have any aspirations of being a member of the clergy at that time?

DF: No. My father was a clergyman and I saw how tough the life was for clergy. I think during the time that I was in high school my father was getting fifty dollars a week with eight children. I didn't [20:10].

DW: [Laughs] Yeah, wow. Yeah, that's a tough--.

DF: And of course he had to do a lot of traveling, doing revivals and the like, to augment that salary from the church.

DW: Yeah. Wow, that's a very small sum for that many people. So I guess going back to the danger aspect, a lot of accounts of looking back at the Civil Rights Movement kind of brings out that element of this wasn't--. It was a scary time and it wasn't just something to take lightly, to get involved. And you had mentioned how your teachers kind of invested in the students and kind of poured out their energies into the students, so I'm curious as to how--. I'm trying to figure out how to ask this question. I guess I'm just wondering about how your professors kind of saw students as being involved in the movement and what really pushed—given the danger and how entrenched segregation was in the South—what really kind of pushed you as a student, or other students, into going out into the community?

DF: The faculty did not push us. When we saw in the newspaper and on the television that students at A&T had challenged segregation in the lunch counters, and students in Nashville, it was identification, it was "if students over there can do it than

certainly we ought to consider it." And we did not do it quickly. We took some time to meet and to talk and to discuss, and counting the cost, counting the risk, counting the danger. Some faculty became natural advisors and counselors, helping us to evaluate and to count the cost. Some faculty said that we shouldn't do that, that it's too dangerous, so the faculty were not a monolith. There were those who seemed to understand the opportunity of that moment and those who thought that the risks were far too great. In terms of violence we recognized that the white power structure was not invested in changing. White privilege was very valuable and there were very few people who were open to equality and parity, and so they were not going to give up without a fight, so that's what was in our minds. Now fortunately here in Raleigh there was minimal violence but we saw Birmingham and Spartanburg and other places where there was considerable violence so there was in our minds the possibility that we might face some violence. In an earlier interview I indicated that North Carolina was very racist but Raleigh was a kind of genteel racism, kind of nice--. Racism, now, but kind of nice about it.

DW: If you had to rank it. [Laughs] How did you all decide--? How did you weigh out getting involved? I guess I'm getting at the decision-making processes that you went through.

DF: Well I mentioned earlier that after demonstrations across the South we first started with the student government, having conversations and discussions about whether or not in fact there was a role for us. And then we had broader meetings of the student body where we talked about what was going on around the South and talked about what was wrong here in Raleigh and what could we reasonably do to challenge segregation.

We decided to start at the lunch counters because that was the most humiliating area of racism that we felt you could go down to a five-and-dime store, a variety store, and you could buy a comb and brush, you could buy face cloths and soap, and you could buy shoes and you could buy dresses and you could buy stuff, but in that same store there is a section of the store that is essentially a little restaurant, but that was only for white people. So they would take your money for merchandise and bric-a-brac but they would not serve you at their lunch counters, so that's what we challenged.

DW: So as a student could you describe a little what, I guess in terms of the relationship between Shaw and Raleigh and kind of what students did for fun? I know you mentioned the sock hops and some sporting events and things, but in terms of going into Raleigh as a student, was there anything that students really were able to engage in?

DF: There was not many social opportunities. Of course you had dating. It was very different from dating now because there were very rigid rules about how you interacted with a young lady, or a young lady with a man. If you were going to even walk downtown all of the women had to sign out and sign back in, and a Shaw lady was not expected to be seen in any questionable or compromised positions, like being in a car. You couldn't be in a car. So it was an era that was called essentially *in loco parentis*, which meant that the university was the parent for the parent. And so the faculty and staff made it their business to be sure that there would be no pregnancies, and of course there still were some. [Laughs]

DW: So given that, did many of the students get married pretty soon while in college?

DF: Some got married while in college, some married after college. I met my wife at Shaw and we got married her junior year. Of course I was already out teaching by then.

DW: So did you stay on campus at Shaw or did you still live at home?

DF: I lived at home for three years. At my third year my parents moved to New York City for a church there so my senior year I lived on campus.

DW: Okay. So there weren't any segregated movies or--?

DF: There were movies, and the movies were segregated. The Ambassador Theater, blacks had to sit in the balcony and the whites sat on the floor, which is ironic because really the balcony is the best perspective. [Laughs]

DW: [Laughs]

DF: So that was at least one ironic advantage to segregation, both at the Ambassador and State Theaters. There were two black theaters, the Royal Theater and the Lincoln Theater. The Lincoln Theater is still there on Cabarrus Street. I think it's a cyber café.

DW: Now were there differences in the movies that you could see at each of the theaters? Did some get--? I've heard before that in black movies the black westerns would only be shown, or not the first released movies would be shown at those.

DF: Absolutely. Your first run movies would not be at the black theaters, but we saw some good cinema and some of it was white. It was not all black, but you certainly were not going to see any black films in the white theaters, so again race, then and now, plays a major role.

DW: So in deciding to go into the five-and-dime stores and being frustrated with not being able to eat at the lunch counters, if blacks had their own kind of community within a segregated community why was there opposition to Jim Crow, I guess? Especially now you'll hear a lot of--.

DF: Well again, I mentioned earlier that we knew that the American way was about liberty and justice for all. We knew that it was about equality. The lunch counters were just a symbolic segue into addressing the myriad of social injustices. I mean from the womb to the tomb everything was race, so there was a desire to see that that system be vanquished. You could walk downtown on Fayetteville Street in front of the courthouse and there would be a water fountain, very porcelain and white with nice silver hardware, and there'd be a sign, "White." And you'd go over to the other side of the front of the courthouse and there's a rusted out spigot with a sign, "Colored." So that announced to you every time you saw that that you're paying the same amount of taxes as everybody else but there is a system that relegates you to being less than human. So that was what we sought to address.

DW: Now you were in the student body council at the time?

DF: Yes. I was very much a leader. I was president of the freshman class and before graduating president of the student government, and in light of that was drafted as a founding member of SNCC.

DW: One question that I've heard recently is kind of how SNCC gets remembered is you don't hear too much about the individual students who formed SNCC and kind of that danger that they had to face and their motivation for making changes in society. Could you talk just a little bit about after SNCC was formed and the decisions

that you all had to make as students and the challenges you had to face, either academically or socially or otherwise?

DF: Well SNCC was founded in response to a very wise lady. Ms. Baker was a Shaw graduate, Ella Baker, and a pretty radical student when she was on campus in the ’20s, and she made her way into a career of activism for the NAACP, for the Union Movement, and so in 1960 she was the field secretary for SCLC, Southern Christian Leadership Conference. And so when you had brush fire civil rights movements, sit-in movements across the South, it was her wisdom to have an invitational meeting which would be held at her alma mater, at Shaw, and bring students from around the South and the North together to learn from each other. When that meeting was held there was no intent to establish SNCC, but by bringing that cross section of students from around the country, some two hundred of them—a hundred and seventy-eight, I think it was—it made sense that as we began to talk about what was going on in Atlanta, what’s going on in Savannah, what’s going on in Jacksonville, what’s going on in Miami, what’s going on in Chattanooga, what’s going on in Greensboro, what’s going on in Raleigh/Durham, that there would be some efficacy to organize, and that’s what brought SNCC into organization. We heard the war stories of students being beaten, being hosed down with fire hoses and police dogs snapping at them, so it was that kind of sharing that gave us an opportunity to see what the risks were. But by the time we met in April of 1960 there was almost unanimous agreement that even if there were dangers and even if there were the threat of possible death that we had no choice but to move forward and to challenge bigotry and Jim Crow.

DW: Why do you think students were so poised to be able to make this challenge, more so than other groups of people?

DF: I think because we figured out that we did not have much to lose. We didn't have jobs, we were able to--. Yeah, it was natural that the students would figure out that there was less retribution that could be visited on us as students. Student life is a strange career. Many students never think about it, but the reality is once I became a public school teacher I couldn't do this stuff, but what was to stop me from making a difference? And now we can look back and see that it did make a difference, because had there not been civil rights and the activity of SNCC there would not have been the Voting Rights Act, and large numbers of people, millions of black folks, were not allowed to vote. There would not have been the Civil Rights Act which would give federal protection against violence to keep you from voting. And if you connect those lines it is very, very clear that had there not been SNCC and the Civil Rights Movement there would not be the advances. You wouldn't be working for Carolina. No way. Black students would not be studying at Carolina or Duke or State. There would not be a Mr. Obama in the White House had not these progressions taken place.

DW: So at the time did you have a sense that this was something big and lasting or was it kind of a--

DF: It was big.

DW: --flash in the pan?

DF: No, it was big. We were convinced that we had America where we wanted America because that SNCC conference, that initial SNCC meeting in May, there were journalists from all over the world, so here is America proudly standing with its apartheid

and the world is looking at how they are treating folks who are trying to change America and make it live up to its creed that all men are created equal, so it was an embarrassing position. Both the legal and the moral marbles were in our court, and we knew it. We knew it. Something had to give. Either they had to be prepared to open up the armories and bring out the tanks and the guns and mow us down, or they were going to have to change, because we were willing to die to make America live up to its creed. So we knew that something--. We did not know what was going to happen, but I mean even if we just went into the five-and-dime stores and be able to sit down, that would be a victory. Later we were to learn that if you could change the lunch counters you could change the swimming pools, you could change the libraries, you could change public accommodations, you could integrate the hotels. You couldn't go to a hotel. Can you imagine? Most of the students who came to Raleigh for the sit-in conference lived in homes because there were no hotels open.

DW: Wow.

DF: Hotels were for white folks. Everything was for white folks. And I know that's hard for you to imagine. It's hard for me to get my children to imagine it, but that was the way it was.

DW: Yeah. Well I wanted to ask, so in light of all of this, what did equality to you look like at this time? What would have been America living up to its creed?

DF: One of the professors at Shaw, his name was Dr. Grady Davis, he had a PhD from Harvard in psychology, and I remember him at one of the meetings saying, "You know, white folks want to know what we want. If they could only know what we want perhaps they would consider it. Well tell the white folks this is what we want: Whatever

they got is what we want, even if they got some diseases that we don't have we want some of them too. We want every single exposure to opportunity that this country has to offer." We got there real quick. We moved beyond a cup of coffee and a hamburger to wanting whatever they got is what we want.

DW: [Is it] Ella Baker's, "More than a Hamburger"--.

DF: Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

DW: I think especially now in recent times, at least in the past ten years, even sooner than that, there's been a lot of speculation, looking back at the Civil Rights Movement and assessing its victories or its failures.

DF: Well I think that I would be prevaricating if I said that I could see fifty years ago to now, but I knew that what had come before fifty years ago was going to have to change. I just didn't know how. I did not know when. I did not know the ultimate implications of desegregation and the pursuit of equality. I was nineteen years old. I couldn't--. I wasn't that--. But I saw something. I saw a crack in the door and that crack in the door was encouraging to go forward, go forward, because either they will kill us or this country is going to change, and thank God they chose not to kill us all. Some did get killed. Some did die for equality.

DW: It's so interesting, because I study desegregation of schools and there's always this tension between desegregation and equalization as if these are two completely separate thoughts, but it sounds like you're saying they're really on the same continuum. To be truly equal requires desegregation and having the same things as whites or the same things as people in power.

DF: Absolutely. Any policy that acquiesces to stratification based upon race is evil and unequal, and to me the idea is not that there be pure equality but that there be total equality of opportunity, because a Negro who's lazy, who doesn't want to study, he can't expect to become a principal. But everybody needs the pursuit of happiness, everybody, no matter what race, no matter what color, no matter what lifestyle, no matter what. We're all Americans, so nobody should be held back because of their error of birth. I had nothing to do with coming here handsomely chocolate.

DW: [Laughs]

DF: So that should never be held against me. A woman has nothing to do with her being a woman; therefore it is a tragedy that men make more than women. That is an embarrassment. And you call yourself a democracy. So somehow there will always be the need for tweaking of the American experiment to be sure that we live up to what it is that we profess.

DW: So after that weekend and after the sit-ins to desegregate the lunch counters, your last two years at Shaw how involved were you with maintaining pushing for this change, and in what arenas did you seek to do it?

DF: We continued the local effort, moving from the public accommodation at the lunch counters to the libraries, the swimming pools, even sit-ins at churches, because churches were rigidly segregated. I was essentially a national leader as a founding member of SNCC so I went around the country speaking and radicalizing on campuses, as well as there were many meetings that were being held during that time called mass meetings. So that was what I did.

DW: So the hundred and seventy-eight students that came that weekend, did you maintain a connection with--? I guess it may be difficult to track what happened to all one hundred and seventy-eight, but did you maintain--?

DF: Well the ones who stayed in contact were the founding members, because that hundred and seventy-eight--. Here in North Carolina myself and Charles Jones, who was an attorney in Charlotte, we were the only founding members of SNCC. Each state had one or two students who were nominated so the SNCC group would maybe represent twenty states. Then you would have forty students out of that hundred and seventy-eight who continued to meet. As a matter of fact we went to Atlanta--Morehouse--every month and met with Dr. King and Ella Baker and Wyatt Walker and others as they gave us counsel and advice and fundamental teaching about nonviolence and about direct social action.

DW: So when you graduated you had mentioned that as an elementary teacher you couldn't--

DF: No.

DW: --be involved with--.

DF: As a matter of fact when I was interviewed--. First of all Raleigh city schools had a pact that the top education students from Shaw would automatically be hired. I was one of the two, and the other one was hired and I kept waiting for my contract. The contract never came. So my high profile proclivities blocked me from getting the promised position. When I went to Wilson, where I ultimately was hired, the superintendent talked about pedagogy, talked about methods, talked about curriculum, talked about text books, I mean evaluated how savvy I was, and at the very end he asked

me, “Are you a member of the NAACP?” I said, “No, sir.” I lied, because there was this screening. Nobody wanted to have a radical person in their system, to make noise. So, yeah, it was serious.

DW: Since your parents had moved to New York did you give any thought to moving out of the South and teaching--?

DF: I ultimately did move to New York and taught in New York and did graduate school in New York.

DW: So you were hired at Wilson right out of Shaw?

DF: Yes.

DW: And how long did you teach there?

DF: Two years.

DW: And then you moved to New York for school and--

DF: Then I moved to New York, mm hmm.

DW: --teaching. So what was it like in those two years working in the Wilson schools and having said you weren’t part of the NAACP, but I’m sure it probably came through once you were teaching? What were those years like?

DF: Well my heart and my spirit were still about protest but I had enough sense to know that the role of public school teaching is not about protest. I’m now joining the establishment. So there was a transition, not in my spirit but in my understanding of the requirement of being a professional. For instance I didn’t try to organize the teachers or organize the neighborhoods. I didn’t get into community organization.

DW: So did you feel--? How did--? So coming from being a founding member of SNCC and then working in a school system, how did you reconcile your protest spirit with--?

DF: I think that what I did not bring by activism I compensated for a deeper understanding of the social and political issues as they impacted the enterprise of education. For instance in Wilson, a rural county, many of my students didn't come to school until all of the crops had been brought in because they were needed as field hands. That to me was problematic. That was problematic. [Pause]

DW: Okay. I think we were talking about the school, you recognizing kind of institutional problems.

DF: Yeah. I could see institutional problems. I could see issues of distribution. I could see on the occasional time when I went into white schools that they were set up different and had better stuff, and of course that paralleled what I had grown up with. I never got a new book in my whole elementary career. After the white schools used the books and they then got the new series they would shift the old books over to the black schools. That's how neighborhood schools worked. That's how separate but equal worked. Carter G. Woodson said that when white folks and black folks cooperate white folks do the operating and blacks do the co-ing.

DW: [Laughs]

DF: That's still true today.

DW: So you were teaching--. You graduated Shaw in '62?

DF: In '62.

DW: So the schools in Wilson were still--at least the elementary schools--were still segregated?

DF: Yes.

DW: Were there any--?

DF: Now the courts had ruled in ’54, but now this is ’64 but nothing has happened.

DW: Were you aware of any kind of token efforts?

DF: There were no token efforts. There were no token efforts in Raleigh until much later.

DW: So what prompted you then in 1964 to leave Wilson schools and go to New York?

DF: Adventure. My family had moved there. I had my mother and father and other brothers and sisters were there, so we kind of conclaved.

DW: And so did you go to school right out of teaching, or did you then work at a school?

DF: I started teaching and did a short stint of acting assistant principal and I started taking courses out at Adelphi for one year and on the basis of that--. I had a course with the dean--he taught a class--and he found a fellowship and a teaching assistantship so I was able to transition from teaching into full time study.

DW: How would you describe, if at all, any differences between the school system in Wilson versus as acting principal in New York City schools?

DF: Not a whole lot of difference. Inner city schools did not have what the suburban schools would have. I had not only Negro students but now I had Puerto Rican

students. That's where I got my Español from, my Spanish from, from teaching Puerto Rican students and having to speak to their parents. Inequality is inequality. I have not been able to discern any major regional differences. The presentation is different and the etiquette might differ but the substance is the same. Growing up black in white America is growing up black in white America, and the challenges and the need for pursuit of equality is a perennial and ongoing game.

DW: Well you had talked a bit about having to not protest as much. I know at this time SNCC, by the mid '60s, was starting to have a dividing line between its membership and those who wanted to focus on voting rights and those who were focusing on desegregating public accommodations. How in touch were you with the larger movement?

DF: Increasingly as I went professional I was less involved. Again that student career gives a perspective and an opportunity. Now I remained in some ways activist as I could as a professional. I remember participating in a demonstration in Harlem to stop the construction of a building project that was not in keeping with what the folks in the 'hood wanted, and we were lying down in front of bulldozers. New York is big enough that--. Wilson would not be big enough for you to protest in but New York is big enough that your anonymity will allow you many more options of activism without retribution.

DW: So after going to--. Well I guess I'll ask what did you end up going to school for in New York?

DF: I went to the school of social work at Adelphi and I majored in social administration, community organization, so there was some continuity with the study.

DW: And then once you finished, how did you end up becoming a member of the flock?

DF: After I finished school I did some social program administration. I headed up VISTA volunteers, I did some street work with gangs and the like, and young people. I migrated to Washington and did work for the mayor there, evaluating social programs. I worked at Howard for a program called University Year for Action, which was an internship program for Howard students to work at the community level as a part of their learning. Then I moved to Richmond where I was brought on the faculty at the school of social work as a dean of admissions and a faculty member.

DW: What school?

DF: VCU.

DW: Okay.

DF: Virginia Commonwealth University. From my youth, as far as the church is concerned, I was a musician, so over all of these years I continued to do church choirs and church music. And so in Richmond I joined a church where I was the director of the choir and felt the call of God on my life to do ministry and was licensed and began to pastor a church in Glen Allen, which is a suburb of Richmond, and subsequently came to Raleigh. I've been here in Raleigh for twenty-six years, back in Raleigh. So I left Raleigh, went to New York, made a u-turn, started dribbling back down to Silver Spring and Washington and Richmond and back in Raleigh.

DW: Now did your parents end up staying in New York?

DF: They stayed in New York.

DW: So are you happy with the decision to return to Raleigh?

DF: It's been an interesting journey. Thomas Wolfe, the novelist, has noted that you can't go back home, so this is home but it's not home because I changed so much over those years and Raleigh changed so much that it really is not like returning home. So it's been an interesting journey.

DW: Now I read somewhere an interview with your brother, your older brother--I think it was a Tavis Smiley interview--and he had mentioned how much he looked up to you and the active role you've played in your life and how you're a role model for him, even though you're the younger brother, and I think it was in context of activism in making moves in the community. With your church, from what I've read, you're very active in the community here. I guess how do you feel about [Laughs] your brother saying that, and just how did you come to have this mission at your church and passion for the community?

DF: I think it's been a thread. It goes all the way back to the teachers pouring into us their maturity and their wisdom, and also recognizing painfully that things will not get better unless we're working at making things get better. The respect that I have for my brother, we have mutual respect. He's a theological and preaching giant and I'm more the activist, more the social gadfly. I respect him much as my older brother and I think what I said about growing up in a house with eight children, I think all of us in our own way respect each other because we know from whence we've come. We've come a long, long way, and each of us achieved great things. The sociologists were saying in the '40s when we were growing up that if you were poor and Negro it was going to be a long shot to be successful. All eight of us went to college, all eight of us earned advanced degrees, all eight of us had distinguished careers, so all of us respect each other quite a bit.

DW: That's remarkable, to look back and see how far you've come.

DF: Mm hmm.

DW: I'm curious about your assessment with the anniversary of SNCC in the program having, I guess, almost two weeks out, what are your thoughts on how it was commemorated and how the program [went]?

DF: Well it was my honor to serve as the chairman of the local host committee and we had a hardworking variety of people, some from Carolina, some from Duke, from Shaw, from St. Aug, from the community, and it totally blew my mind, the success of the conference. We had twice the attendance that was expected, had outstanding speakers and outstanding personalities who were there. The conference was designed to celebrate the fifty-year span, to come together in reunion, to share stories and hopefully to pass on to current year students some sense of the heritage of protest and empowerment, that they would be able to see that just as we made a difference fifty years ago they can make a difference that fifty years from now will be recognized as having. So it was highly, highly successful, very exciting for me, and I've heard nothing but positive things from it.

DW: Yeah, so have I. I guess you may have answered this in part, but what would you want the legacy of SNCC to be? A hundred years from now, someone studying about SNCC, what would you want people to know?

DF: I would want people to know a hundred years from now that there was an era, a moment, in American life when a group of predominantly so-called powerless African American students chose to challenge the partial fulfillment of the American dream. And just as we now celebrate Dr. King and what he did I would hope that there would be

celebration that so-called rugged individualism in America makes every American potentially a force to push forward the achievement of liberty and justice for everybody. That would be my hope. I don't think it's about the romanticism. It's about that you count, that you are not powerless, that you don't have to acquiesce to your own detriment, but that when individuals stand up and challenge, legally and morally, that it can make a difference.

DW: So do you think--I guess mentioning about Rev. Dr. King, the way that he gets remembered--how do you think SNCC might be commemorated so that this memory doesn't fade?

DF: Well there were I think twenty-four authors who were at the conference. The more people write, the more faculty members guide their students to consume that record, I think that it's going to be out there, and in this age of the World Wide Web nobody has an excuse because you can Google anything, and that becomes a beginning. If you Google SNCC something will come up, and that story needs to be told.

DW: I wanted to conclude and ask you what do you see as persistent problems in society? In 2010 what are the key issues that you think really need to be addressed in light of civil rights?

DF: I think a good beginning is to look at what was wrong in 1960 and then ask the question, have those issues been totally vetted and fixed. There's still racism in these United States of America. There's still sexism in these United States. There's still homophobic realities that need to be addressed. Ask yourself whether or not--in fact as Ella Baker said and Dr. Grady Davis--whether or not every black has every opportunity that every white has, and as long as we answer that in the negative there's much work to

be done. Look at the disparities, disparities in education, disparities in housing, disparities in health, disparities in employment. We've almost normalized the fact that when there's ten percent unemployment in the nation there's thirty-five or forty percent in the 'hood. That's got to stop. That's got to stop. There should be no more black babies dying before birth than white babies. The technology is there, the knowledge is there; the issue is whether or not there's the will and whether or not there are those persons who refuse to be satisfied until in fact there is equality in the land.

DW: So how do you think--? What would be some steps that we can go about making these changes and making it more of an equal nation?

DF: I think by meeting and talking and crystallizing group-think and motivation to choose what initiatives a group of like-minded people want to address.

DW: Do you think today, given whatever political or social climate that exists, that there could be a group of students, or a group of--well, I guess mostly students [Laughs]--to come together and do the same thing SNCC students were able to do?

DF: Oh, absolutely, absolutely, and that's what we sought to do during the conference, to whet the appetite of students to realize like we did that you are in a strange career when you're a student that is fraught with multiple opportunities to make a difference.

DW: Okay. Well I guess I'll just conclude by asking if there was something that we haven't talked about or I didn't ask that you would like to add.

DF: Just to say it's been an incredible journey for me. I am still amazed at what difference individuals can make and I am amazed at how if you connect the dots it would

suggest that some targeted action by thinking young people today can connect some other dots that will make a major difference in making this nation live up to its creeds.

DW: Yeah, hopefully that will happen.

DF: Absolutely. It's been my pleasure. You are a wonderful interviewer.

DW: Oh, well thank you very much, and thank you for doing this with me.

DF: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcriber: Deborah Mitchum

Date: July 9, 2010