Civil Rights History Project
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Interviewee:	Lonnie King
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Interviewer:	Emilye Crosby
Videographer:	John Bishop
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Emilye Crosby: This is Emilye Crosby and, its May 29, 2013 and I'm here with John Bishop and we're interviewing Mr. Lonnie King in the Southwest Library Branch of the Fulton County Library here in Atlanta as part of the Southern Oral History Project's Civil Rights History Project, sponsored by the Smithsonian Museum of African American History and Culture and the Library of Congress, the American Folklife Center.

John Bishop: [00:00:36].

EC: And so Mr. King, we're very pleased that you're with us here today.

Lonnie King: Well thank you very much for coming to record my comments [coughs] about this great era in our history.

EC: It's obviously so important. Can you tell me about your family and your early background?

LK: Yes I was born in a little town called Arlington, Georgia, which is down 27 miles southwest of Albany. The county was Calhoun County. [Coughs] My mother's name was Bertha

Lee Smith King and she was one of 17 children. My father's name was L.C. King, Senior and he had, like, seven or eight brothers – brothers and sisters. They divorced when I was about two, I guess and I stayed my grandfather until I was eight. My grandfather kept me really until he died and they sent me to Atlanta to be with my mother. I guess, Dr. Crosby, if I had to pinpoint my beginnings, I would have to say I believe I was born looking up at the bottom. I was not on the bottom, I was looking up at the bottom. The bottom was up there. So the likelihood that I might even go to college, much less finish college and do some others things was probably a little remote considering the environment that I grew up in. However, I have to attribute a great deal of my desire for freedom and my passion and my commitment, and I guess my long distance running attitude to my grandfather, who was my mentor. He grew up Joseph P. Smith, he was an evangelist, who was also a note singer with perfect pitch in his voice.

EC: Wow.

LK: He was a tremendous person. A lot of my feelings about matters and attitudes about matters today flow from those years, those six years I was under his tutelage. And as I reflect talking to you now, I guess it's akin to what John Locke once said, that what you teach a child in the first six years of their lives will influence how they're going to be the rest of their lives. That you write on that blank slate and I guess my granddad wrote a few things on my blank slate. One of the things that I know he wrote on my blank slate was the fact that, "One day we have to change the system." I remember in 1942, I was walking home from school, in the first grade and I saw my first plane, a crop duster, drop leaflets—that was the campaign during those days in the rural areas. And so I picked up one of the leaflets and took it home and I could read every word and I understood every word that I read because they had taught me to read before I went to school, but there was one word that I didn't understand. Now the crop duster was hired by

Eugene Talmadge, who was running for governor at that time. I said, "Granddaddy, what is 'the nigger'"? He said, "Where'd you get that?" I said, "The plane just dropped this and I picked it up and I can understand everything, but I have never head of – what is a nigger? Why do we need to keep a nigger in its place? Keep the nigger in its place." He said, "Come here, sit on my knee and I'll talk to you." And he proceeded to tell me about Talmadge [00:05:00] and about racism. And a comment that he made to me, that sticks with me today, he said, "You know, we're still in a form of slavery. The difference is that we can go home at night. We don't have anybody that is an assigned overseer. But for all practical purposes, the system that we're in is one that is oppressive."

As fate would have it, a few weeks later, I happened to be at the kitchen table with he and my grandmother – [00:05:40] my grandmother – and I saw these envelopes on the table. I was an inquisitive kid. Nosey.

EC: [Laughs]

LK: I picked it up and I said, "Granddaddy what is the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People? He said, "That's a national civil rights organization. And I'm recruiting memberships for them." Memberships were 50 cents I believe at that time. He said, "Son one day, this organization is going to set us free." He said, "They've got lawyers in New York," so forth and so on. So when you look at that kind of orientation and heard it preached on Sunday, about freedom, so forth and so on, he was painting on my blank slate, or writing on my blank slate, a kind of attitude – a resistance attitude to racism and discrimination that I think served me well in 1960.

EC: What were those churches?

LK: Actually, he was an evangelist so he didn't actually have a church. He was always on the circuit preaching at different churches all over that part of southwest Georgia and northeast Alabama.

EC: You might have been young enough, you wouldn't have known this, but that was right around the time that Ms. [Ella] Baker was traveling around in that area, doing membership drives. Do you have any idea if she might have come through there?

LK: I don't know whether she came through there or not. That was 1941, 42. Was she – she was with NAACP at that time?

EC: She was and I've seen a few flyers from that part of southwest Georgia.

LK: She was there, come to think of it. That – she has two stints at the NAACP I think?

EC: Well, two different positions.

LK: Right.

EC: Though, she was I think – I can't remember what they called the first position, maybe Field Secretary, and then Director of Branches.

LK: Yeah, yeah. I don't remember if she ever met my grandfather. She probably did.

EC: Because she was the person, right?

LK: I was a little kid. Yeah.

EC: What kind of work did your grandfather do?

LK: He was a farmer. He was a sharecropper. He had ten acres that he rented from [coughs] some man that owned the property [coughs]. And they would divide up in the fall whatever. I don't know whether or not he ever broke even. I just know that he was sharecropper and I used to go to the field, I was too young to do any work so I would go and watch him. I never forget [00:08:34] I had ventured down into the cornfield part of his ten acres and I ran into

a rattlesnake and of course I knew to run from a rattlesnake. So when I got back to the wagon, I said Granddaddy, "I just ran upon a rattlesnake down there." He said, "I don't think there are rattlesnakes." "I said I just ran upon one, Granddaddy." He said, "I'm going down here. If I don't find a rattlesnake – if I don't find a rattlesnake, I'm going to spank your butt." I said, "Granddaddy you don't think the rattlesnake is going to wait until you come down to there, do you?" [Laughter] He went down there, he didn't find the rattlesnake, but he did not beat me either, you know. But these anecdotes, they make me feel really good to think about the man and what he did for me. One of the things he used to tell me is that you need to always try to tell the truth when something comes up. It's easier to tell the truth than to lie, because when you lie, you've got to remember the lie in order to not get caught in the lie. So, "Just tell the truth and it keeps coming out right." All those kinds of things make a difference when you're young and coming up.

EC: It must have been a real difficult experience, then, to have him pass and go onto a new home.

LK: It was terrible. [00:10:00] It was terrible. But I came here at eight years of age and I guess we can move on to Atlanta now. My mother was a member of Ebenezer Baptist Church so I came in March and they had the Spring Revival in April and so Reverend King Senior opened the doors of the church on that first night when I went to the revival. My mother was in the choir. So when they opened the doors of the church, [coughs] I got up and I went down and I joined. I could see my mother looking at me. I had not talked to her about it. And she had some concerns, I could tell, so when we got on the bus to go home, she said, "You didn't tell me you were going to join the church." I said, "We didn't talk about it. We didn't talk about it." She said, "You know what you're doing?" I said, "Yes. I know what I'm doing." So she didn't say any more

about it. But she was shocked that I did it at eight. But you know, anyway. But while at Ebenezer, I was there from ’45 until ’54 when I went into the military. And I was in the – my mother, she took me to church almost every day in the week. I mean there was something going on.

EC: [Laughs]

LK: Oh Jesus. When I wasn’t at the church, she had me at the YMCA. I’ll cover that later. But anyway, while I was there at the Ebenezer Baptist Church, Daddy King [Martin Luther King, Sr.], Mrs. King, were always asking me to lead something, head something. That was when I [coughs] formed something called the Ebenezer Youth Organization that’s still running down there now. I was the first chairman and the organizer of it. But that’s also when I met his children. You know, A.D. [King, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s brother] and I had a paper route together.

EC: Mm-hmm.

LK: Yeah and of course, M.L. [Martin Luther King, Jr.] was older than A.D. and I always knew he was going to be a great preacher because on Thursday nights, while my mother was there rehearsing downstairs with the choir, he’d be upstairs practicing his preaching. You know, his dad was the pastor so he could get the key. So Martin King, it was almost like he never played, he was always serious.

EC: He would be in there, you know, [00:12:33].

LK: Yeah.

EC: So did you ever offer him any feedback?

LK: No, I didn’t. We were just friends, that’s all. And I guess it probably helped that my name was the same as theirs so they knew who I was, you know. In fact, that may have been the

reason why they kept asking me to do things. I had the same name. But anyway, that served me well later on during the movement, which I'm sure we'll talk about later on.

EC: Yeah. So it sounds like you were very much – very much immersed in these black institutions coming up in Atlanta.

LK: Yes. Yes. The Butler Street YMCA. [Coughs] In addition to the church, my mother took me down to the Butler Street YMCA when I was eight, before I even started school because she kept me out of school for several months because I was eight, but I was promoted to the fifth grade and she felt that I was going too fast. So she had me sit at home. [Laughs]

EC: [Laughs]

LK: From March until September. She said, "Because if I let you go, you'll not get promoted to the sixth grade and you'll just be nine. I'm just not sure if I want to do that." So I had to sit home and what have you. But, she also went down to the Butler Street YMCA, a historic Y that's now closed, believe it or not. But it was built in 1890 or something [1894]. She asked me to go down there and I went.

But what I had just learned as I have been writing for my dissertation, the manager was 85 years old. I interviewed him because he was around Atlanta during that time and I knew he was around the Y. His name was Mr. Eugene Thomas. Very lucid man, retired from the public school system. So I went to see Mr. Thomas and I said, "Mr. Thomas, let me talk to you about my tenure at the Y and also about Atlanta and the environment in the '40s when you were an adult here." He said, "Okay," and we talked about all that. But he said, "But we'll specifically talk about you." He said, "I was there." He was an assistant to Mr. J.D. Winston who was the director of the boy's division at that time. And so, he told me that my mother came down there to see [00:15:00] Mr. Winston in 1945 to tell her that she had a son who was coming into Atlanta

from Arlington, Georgia, and she wanted me to come down there and wanted him to look out for me while I was down there. And that I should not let me leave there until six o'clock, because by that time she would have time to get home from her job as a maid. And Mr. Winston agreed to that. I did not know until I talked to Mr. Thomas that she came down there another time just to see how things were going and wanted to know if Mr. Winston, if I was a good boy or a bad boy because if I was a bad boy she was going to whip my behind right there. I said, "Okay. I didn't know any of this stuff." It was all done behind my back, but I guess for my benefit.

EC: Right.

LK: Those were some good times. Our young people could – when parents were not necessarily afraid of molestation of their children by people like – nowadays you've got to watch out, you don't know what's going to go on. But during those days, people trusted one another. People looked out for their kids and those things had a tremendous bearing on you. So I grew up in the Butler Street YMCA. Yeah, I left there in '54. I was there – first of all I was there so much and so they hired me.

EC: Okay.

LK: [Laughs] They hired me down there at 50 cents a day and I was just around helping. I was just a little helper around there. And I knew I had gotten paid 50 cents a days for basically just kind of being there, picking up towels, you name it. Then I said, "Mr. Thomas, it just dawned on me. Where did you all get the budget to pay me 50 cents a day?" He said, "There was no budget." I said, "Well, where did the money come from?" He said, "We all chipped in 50 cents apiece." That's what he said, "We paid it, the senior staff put together a little money to pay this so this eight, nine, ten year old kid –" I was shocked that it had happened, but it had happened. Dr. Crosby, I believe when you boil it all down, when you look at all these things,

God was preparing me for 1960 because while I was at the YMCA, for all those years, I ran into all the movers and shakers in Atlanta.

EC: Yeah.

LK: They were playing Bridge and I was a little kid around watching them play Bridge and I learned table tennis and I taught a lot of them to play table tennis. I was like a little mascot that was always around. So when the movement came in Greensboro erupted –

EC: Mm-hmm.

LK: As I reflect back to it now, I had been prepared for leadership of the movement in Atlanta. Because in order to make it work, you had to find a way to merge the town and the gown. And because I had met so many people at the Y that knew me from when I was a child, that helped me a great deal when I called them to ask, "Can I get your help?" One more thing that I think is important in my development. My mother was amazing. She couldn't pay my tuition at Morehouse. I had gone over there on a partial scholarship and didn't really have enough to really have a full scholarship.

So I decided to do something that I never thought I would never do, which was to go into the military. And I went into the Navy and I went there because the Navy offered me the chance to come in on what they called a "kiddie cruise." That would be three years. If you went in before 18 years, you'd get out a day before you're 21. And so I went in just before I was 18 and got out in 3 years. While I was in the Navy, I ran into the more virulent racists you could ever encounter under the umbrella of the United States of America. When I was in boot camp, I was the educational petty officer for my 80-some guys who was in my group. My job was to teach them the "Three R's" in order for them to graduate after 11 weeks.

When I finished, I was in charge of about twenty people who went to the USS [00:19:55] aircraft carrier in California. So I had all the records [00:20:00] and everything. So when I got there and we saluted the officer that was there the day we came aboard, they sent us down to something that was called the X1 division. That's the orientation division. For two weeks. When we finished the orientation division, [00:20:18], they then gave us all a billet. They all gave us a job. So I was the only black person of the folks. Nineteen white people plus me. Every last white person got a good job, by that I mean as a yeoman, which is the same as a secretary, air control man, fire control man. You name it, those jobs that were, that you had some relationship to those jobs to a civilian career. Except two people in the group. Two of us were sent to the deck floors to chip paint and mop and scrub and you name it. That was me. I had the highest GCT in the group and the young guy coming from Kentucky had the lowest GCT. I knew all that stuff because I was in charge of the record keeping. So, the black guy, and the white guy with the lowest GCT got assigned to the deck floors. It's too late to get out by that time, of course I'm there.

EC: [Laughs]

LK: So I go down to begin my work chipping paint. But that wasn't enough. I got a call after I was down there about a month – I was going to be assigned to another job. And this time I was assigned the job of cleaning the head. Now, the head was the restroom for 200 people who worked on the deck floors in that aircraft carrier. That's the janitor's job, basically. So I went up there and I remember something Dr. [Benjamin] Mays said when I was a freshman. He said, "When you go to Morehouse College and you do the best that you can, whatever job that you do, do it better than anybody else other than God. And if it's your fate to be a lawyer, be the best lawyer, be the best preacher, best doctor. But if fate falls upon you where you have to be a ditch

digger, be the best ditch digger that has ever been done." And I said, "Well, my job wasn't ditch digging, but it was cleaning up this restroom. So I said let me take his admonition." So I went out and I requisitioned paint, brass polish, you name it. And I turned the place into a very nice looking, well-lit, bright bathroom. So therefore, I only had to work maybe a half-hour in the morning and a half-hour in the afternoon after lunch. The rest of time, I could read books.

EC: [Laughs]

LK: And I want you to know, that what I had was so appealing to a third class petty officer, he put in a petition to bump me out of that job and put me back in the deck crew.

EC: [Laughs] So you made cleaning the bathroom look like a good job.

LK: Any job that you would make in the South, it seems to me that would – that some whites would say, "I would rather have that job, put that nigger out of here." So that's what happened to me.

So then, I applied for general technician school, but you had to have two years left, so they sent me, an acceptance one year, eleven months, and twenty-nine days to go on my enlistment, which meant then that I had to sign up an additional year. I said, "I'm not going to do this. I'm not going to put up with this." As fate would have it, the dispersing office put out a plan – put out a request for someone to become a dispersing clerk striker – a dispersing clerk trainee and I applied for it. The division officer called me down to have an interview with them. Ensign J.C. Klaren. K-L-A-R-E-N. Klaren asked me why did I apply and I told him I thought I could do the job. "Can you type?" I said, "No, but I can learn how to do it." He says, "Well," and I'm paraphrasing now. [00:25:00] He says, "We don't want a Negro down here. All of the folks in here are from the South. And it would just not be the thing." And I said, "Well hold on now. My parents pay taxes too, just like theirs." "Yeah, but it wouldn't work." [Coughs]

I went to see the chaplain on the ship and told him about my plight. He said, "Did they do that?" I said, "Yes they did. I'm going to ask them." "Yes they did." He didn't do a thing, just took the notes down. [Coughs] So I'm now back on the deck floors – and I decided that I would ask the division officer who was over the deck floors for an appointment. That was the lieutenant [coughs] J.G. Horne, H-O-R-N-E, from Louisiana. I forgot the name of the town in Louisiana. I went in and I told him the same thing I told the chaplain. J.G. Horne listened to me. He said, "Come with me." He took me down to that same Ensign who said that they didn't want me down there. Lieutenant J.G. Horne said, "Mr. King tells me," – first of all, he said "Mr. King." I was a Private.

EC: That's a little tone.

LK: He said, "Mr. King said that – " He told him the story. "Is that true?" He said, "Well, they don't want him down here." He said, "Then it is true." "Yes." He said, "If his name is not in the planner by the end of the day tomorrow to transfer down here, I'm going to go to the chief of naval personnel and get your commission." He said, "Mr. King come on. Let's go." The next morning, my name was listed to be transferred down because of that white man down in Louisiana who stepped up to the plate to tell another white man he's wrong.

EC: Had you had interactions with him before?

LK: Nope. Saw him all the time, but he'd speak and I'd speak, but never. There was nothing. See you had a hierarchy.

EC: Yeah.

LK: You had the division officer, then you had chief petty officer, then you had a first class, then you had a second class, you had some third classes. So I was just poor little seaman,

you know, down here. So no. They didn't really talk to you unless they wanted to see you. They passed by and be friendly, but the point was you didn't have any contact with them, per se.

EC: Do you think he did that because he had some sense of you, or for him was it a principle?

LK: No I think he did it because he thought it was fair, and not right. Now I may be wrong, but I'm just telling you what happened, that's how I got down there. So when I got there, the guys wouldn't talk to me. They were just angry I guess because I had broken the color line on that ship. [Coughs] One guy named Welky [coughs] from Seattle, Washington, was in that group and he was a guy who was – he had been to dispersing school. One day he came over to me and he said, "Lonnie, I been there for weeks now and nobody had taught me for anything. I was just there." He said, "I went to dispersing school. Are you willing to stay on board ship and learn this stuff?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "I'll teach you." He said, "It's going to be quite – now you can take the exam. I mean, the next exam is in November." This is August of 1954 – '55, sorry. August of '55. [Coughs]

So I started studying all the books and then another guy named John Bloom from Tempe, Arizona, who also was in that group, joined in to help with – he was going to teach me how to type. To make a long story short, I took the exam with four other white guys for third class petty officer in November. When the results came back, I was the only one who passed. So all the sudden the guy who they didn't want me down there, now is one of the bosses. Revolution down there, okay? So I stayed there and I became, you know, staff sergeant, DK Five.

And then I got out. I was talking to a good friend of mine by the name of Everett Render, R-E-N-D-E-R, who was my manager when I was a prizefighter in the Navy. And I told Everett Render [00:30:00] in the folkshole in the front of the aircraft carrier – we called it a folkshole –

in Hong Kong, China. Everett was getting out of the Navy and I was going to be in it a bit longer than he. "Lonnie, why don't you come to San Francisco because I'm going to be working for Pacific Bell and I could get you a job there." I said, "I'm going back to Atlanta, finish Morehouse." He said, "Why you going back down there?" I said, "Everett, there's going to come a time, I believe, that we going to throw off the shackles of segregation down there and I want to be there." I told him that in 1957.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

EC: Periodically, when recording, we shut the file.

LK: So when I came back to Morehouse in '57, I played football, so forth and so on and therefore I got to know a lot of people.

EC: Can I interrupt for a second?

LK: Sure.

EC: When you went into the Navy, did you have any expectations going in about what kind of environment it would be in terms of racism or opportunity?

LK: Well I think my mother had more of an eye. I remember now my mother had to sign for me to go in because I was not 18. [Coughs] And so when we went down to the recruiting office, my mother said to the recruiter officer, "I don't want my son to be – to become a seagoing busboy," was what she said. I didn't know what she wanted, what she meant. And so, she explained she didn't want me to go to sea and all I was going to be doing is being a steward's maid serving the officers. So they didn't make me a steward's maid, they made me a deck force [laughs] person.

EC: [Laughs] They were being ingenious.

LK: Right. She told the officer that she was signing those forms for me to go in with the premise that he would not be a seagoing busboy. So few knew what I was going in to. She thought she was protecting me. I guess she did. She prevented me from being a seagoing busboy.

EC: [Laughs]

LK: But how about a janitor? She didn't put that in. So anyway.

When I came back, I played football. I played first string quarterback for Morehouse and ran a few a touchdowns for them and that meant then that I knew a lot of people at Morehouse and Spelman, which served me well later. [Coughs] So, when the Greensboro Four sat down on February the first, I was reading the newspaper, [00:32:43] and went to my good friend Joseph Pierce and said, "Joe, why don't we organize and do something here." And he read it and said, "Okay, let's do it." I said, "Let's go talk to this guy over here. I met him in '57. He was a *Time Magazine* intern and he was in high school, so he should be able to write. We need to have somebody who can write."

EC: [Laughs]

LK: "To tell the story as we organize." And that guy was Julian Bond. So we went to see him and Julian was reluctant at first, but he finally agreed to sign on. So the three of us then began to organize.

EC: Did he explain his reluctance?

LK: He basically just said he thought with all that was happening, somebody else would probably do it. He didn't want to get involved necessarily at that point. But I kind of pressured him just a little bit. It didn't take too much, I mean. Intellectually he understood it, you know. But I think I might have caught him off guard at the time I talked to him. When you read his

family's – his daddy's history – you can realize his daddy was a tremendous scholar and wrote a lot of great things about civil rights.

EC: Mm-hmm.

LK: So think it was in his blood and all, but I think I kind of surprised him in the beginning. But we had our first meeting of the students at Morehouse at Sale Hall Annex. About 20-something people came.

EC: I'm really interested in like how these meetings were organized? Who you went and talked to and how you really –

LK: Well I actually started with the people I knew best that were football players. You know, who were blocking from your own side. I got a lot of them to come. I got people from Clark College to come, James Felder, who was head of the SGA [Student Government Association] over there. But most of them were from Morehouse, because that was my base. [Clears throat] I learned at that time how extensive the president's apparatus was because I guess within a matter of a day or two I got this call from Mrs. – Well, actually [00:35:00] not a call, she came down to [00:35:03] Mrs. Hill was Dr. Mays' secretary, I don't know her first name. But her last name was Hill. She came into the place where I was and she did this. She said, "Mr. King I'm Mrs. Hill, Dr. Mays wants to see you at three o'clock in the conference room at Harkness Hall." And she also told Julian and Joe Pierce and I said, "Well, we're in trouble now."

EC: They knew exactly who it was, too. Not just something that brewing, but exactly who.

LK: Yeah, yeah. They had good spies. [Laughs] Anyway, [clears throat] when we got in the room, all of a sudden, all of the SGA people from the other places, from the other schools were there, along with Julian, Joe Pierce and me. And so, Dr. Clement, who was the chairman –

Dr. Rufus Clement, president of AU [Atlanta University], was chairman of the meeting and all the council, the college president – Dr. Clement said, well he laid out that they knew what was going on and they talked about the evils of segregation and what have you. But the thesis that they used was that, "You need to let the NAACP handle this. They're equipped to do this, they have the lawyers to do this. [Clears throat] Your parents did not send you here to start a revolution. They sent you here to get an education. You can lead the revolution later on." Dr. Mays, who was the second senior person, spoke next. He reiterated Dr. Clement's position and also added that he was a life membership chairman of the NAACP and he had spoken to Roy Wilkins before the meeting and they were going to provide any legal assistance that we need. Dr. [Albert] Manley from Spelman echoed the same position. Dr. Brawley, president of Clark, made what I considered to be the most asinine comment of anybody that was made that day. He said if we went downtown to sit-in that we would embarrass him. I couldn't believe the man said that, but that's what he said.

And then we came to Dr. Harry V. Richardson, who was the president of Interdenominational Theological Center. Dr. Richardson waited about a good ten seconds before he said anything. Classic Baptist preacher, I guess. And he began, and I'm paraphrasing, "I think the students are right." We all looked around. He had broken the commonality that I think was agreed upon by the presidents before the meeting. And he went on to knock it out of the park. And he in fact said that it was time for a change. "It's going to be risky." But he said, "I have a Ph.D. I'm the president of a major institution in higher education. I can go downtown and spend my money, buy clothes, buy anything I want down there. But if I want to stop in the nice restaurant to have a lunch, I can't go in there. Is there something wrong with that picture?" Now he said, "I support the students." I can see the presidents get upset. But before they could really

settle down, Dr. Frank Cunningham, the president of Morris Brown College spoke up and said, "I agree with Dr. Richardson." I knew then that we had them split up. He made an eloquent speech. He was a philosopher.

Then Dr. Clement while he was thinking, he said, "Well, who's going to speak for the students?" So everybody looked at me – because I was the agitator. So I started speaking and I laid out the premise that this thing is growing. The AU Center has always been a citadel of higher – of learning for African Americans and there is no reason why we should be left behind. So forth and so on. [Clears throat] When I finished, Dr. Clement said, "We still think you ought to let the NAACP handle this thing legally. [00:40:00] However, why don't you write a manifesto and tell the public why you are doing this?" I think he said, "You're from the AU Center. You are going to need to have an intellectual doctrine. That you draft, not us. That you draft. That would set forth why you are doing whatever it is you might do later on."

EC: What You might do!

LK: Well I was always knew that that was, from his perspective, he was playing chess with us. In other words, if you are still going to do this, we're going to play a chess move here and have you write something. And if you get all caught up in writing, that might overtake you and you'll just be the philosophers of the movement as opposed to activists in the movement. That was a part of what I think – so he also said, "Put a full-page ad in all the papers. I will raise the money. I'll get it all done." I accepted the challenge when I appointed Rosalyn Pope [a student at Spelman] to edit it. I asked Julian to join her. Charles Black to join her. I think it was Morris Dylan I believe I asked to join. Bottom line is all these people I knew had been English majors in some way or another and would write a great document. And Rosalyn is so brilliant

until it's just unreal how brilliant she is. But you'd never know it unless you just sit down and talked with her one day. She's not the kind who goes around and brags.

But that document was written. Well actually what happened is Rosalyn called me the night before we were supposed to go back and show it to the presidents for their approval. She called me and she said, "Lonnie, the committee you appointed haven't done a thing." She said, "Julian got me some data from *A Second Look*." She said, "But the others haven't done anything." I said Rosalyn, "It's show time. We've got to have a document for the presidents in the morning, so write the damn thing." So she said, "Okay," and so she wrote it. Typed it at Dr. Zinn's house, Howard Zinn. And I think Julian may have typed it, but they used Zinn's typewriter to get it done. So when the presidents saw it the next day, they were very pleased at the document. They might have made one or two comments. By and large, about 99 percent of what Rosalyn had written, everybody agreed with. And it was published. Clement had raised $12,000 to pay for the stuff and it cost about $4,000 in all and he had about $8,000 left there for our benefit if we needed it. And it was published in the *Atlanta Journal*, the *Atlanta Constitution*, and I believe the *Atlanta Daily World.* Dr. Clement, I think, told me that Mr. [Cornelius] Scott, who headed the *Daily World*, the black newspaper, wanted cash upfront before he would run it. But the white papers sent him a bill. He was upset about that.

[Laughter]

LK: But anyway, but that publication ended up being reprinted in the *New York Times*. Full page, free. *The Nation* magazine ran it on – see we did it on the ninth of March. *The Nation* magazine ran it, full-page ad in their magazine, on the second of April, 1960. *The Harvard Crimson* ran it. Senator Jacob Javits had it read into the *Congressional Record* and it's there for

posterity right now. And it was – and it's been used all around the world by a lot of different people.

EC: It's a wonderful document, still.

LK: The limitation is I happened to be looking – doing some research recently on this era in the area. Low and behold I found a document that had been written by Miles College students in 1962 and it basically was nothing but, "The Appeal of Human Rights," retitled, "This We Believe." And Atlanta had been taken out and Birmingham had been put in. [Laughs]

EC: [Laughs]

LK: I told Rosalyn, I said Rosalyn, imitation is the best form of flattery.

EC: Yeah. Yeah.

LK: But anyway. [Clears throat] But we started this movement. [Clears throat] I explained a lot there in the documents. Now should I give you the narrative about what happened?

EC: Do you mind if I ask you a few questions about it?

LK: Sure, Sure. May 17, the boycott. I'm trying to figure out if you want to ask me those questions, or should I just keep talking. Because I can talk on and on and on about it.

EC: I know. There's so much. In some ways I'd like to have you, you know, to keep going, tell the narrative and then come back. But if – [00:45:00] So when the presidents brought you all in and it was you and Joe Pierce and Julian and the student body presidents.

LK: And vice president and a secretary. Three from each school.

EC: So three from each school, did they decide to get the student government folks involved?

LK: The presidents did that. We didn't.

EC: Yeah. Because you know I was talking to a few people and they said that, you know, some of the presidents were never really involved other than signing the document and that one of them chose not to sign the document, which was how Mary Anne Smith –

LK: Oh you mean the president of the Student Government Association. Yes that's true. The guy named Hickman who was from Macon, Georgia, had a Methodist – I think the white Methodists in Macon had given him a scholarship to come to Morris Brown. So he was afraid of losing his scholarship so Mary Anne signed it as the secretary.

EC: So, you know, out of that you appointed a committee to try to write this and Rosalyn Pope ends up doing the writing. Then I know at a certain point there was a Committee on Appeal.

LK: That started right after that.

EC: And so how did you, I'm very interested in – in who emerged as the leaders and how that happened? You know, are these people who are in official leadership positions as athletes or student government? Were there people that just emerged or it is a combination?

LK: Well, let me see if I can answer that this way. Once we published "The Appeal" – [Pause] At about the time we published "The Appeal," the best way I can answer this. That was a runt group headed by Dr. Lonnie Cross. He was a Ph.D. at in Mathematics at AU. He took his students down there to sit-in as Richardson's before we could get there.

EC: I never heard that before.

LK: It's, there's no documentation.

EC: Oh no I'm just very interested.

LK: So what happened is, it was buzzing – the campus was buzzing with all this activity so they knew what was going on. So he wanted to get there and put his name down before we got

there. My position was that all the schools should come together to form a coalition called the Committee on the Appeal for Human Rights, which we later did after it was published. But prior to that he has pulled this little sit-in down there, with his students, maybe five or six of them.

And so I contacted Dr. Clement and raised with him respectfully that we couldn't afford Clark going down one day, AU another day, Morris Brown another day. I said, "That is a dividing – that's a divide and conquer, if ever I've seen one. Because all you going to see is the [00:48:15] say well, "Who do I – who do I negotiate with? Morris Brown or Morehouse?" I said, "We need to have one voice. I said what's the common denominator here? The common denominator is that we are all African Americans, or Negroes, we're all being subjected to the same kind of discrimination by the same institutions downtown. So to go down there now with these divided voices makes no sense." Clement agreed with me.

He called an all campus meeting down at Ware Hall, which is on their campus. Had all the AU students come to hear him and me. So Dr. Clement gave the exposition as to why the meeting was being held and he said – he argued that we ought to be together. That's the position that we've taken and that the presidents agree with that – we are – we will do it as one body. And we were saying to Dr. Cross, "It is counterproductive for you to take your class down and do that. Don't do it. Let's do it in some kind of organized fashion." And so he said, Lonnie, why don't you explain to them what you're going to try to do. And so I gave the exposition.

Dr. Cross, when I finished, jumped up and challenged me. And he challenged the right to as a professor to take his class downtown and he wasn't going to listen to any student. So Dr. Clement said to him, "Dr. Cross would you sit down." [00:50:00] So Cross sat down and then I spoke again and then Cross jumped up again and then Clements said, "Dr. Cross would you sit down." And Cross tried to get a little bit insubordinate with him, but Clements said,

[emphatically] "Dr. Cross sit down!" I knew then that Cross had been fired. You don't do that to those guys during that period of time. So Cross's contract was not renewed in May. So, I knew that he was [00:50:32] as a result.

But Clement backed us. Backed me and all of us about the idea of putting a coalition together. So after "The Appeal" was published, we sat down in that same conference room and just decided that every school would have three representatives on this policy council and then the 18 members would pick a chairperson and then that chairperson then – that school from which the chairperson comes can send another person. So I was chosen to be the original chairman, founding chairman, I guess you could call it. So therefore another person from Morehouse could be added to it. It ended up being Don Clark, who was the president of the SGA, Julian Bond, and Adam Benson, I think he was vice president of the SGA. That's only from Morehouse, I think.

EC: Yeah right. That's really interesting, so at that point President Clement, although he was trying to slow you down initially – is this a strategic decision that this is going to happen and if it's going to happen, this is the best way for it to happen?

LK: I think so yes. I think he realized that – that the event had overcome their authority. They were concerned about losing their attacking strategy. That was a legitimate concern. I didn't realize how legitimate it was until recently when I started doing research. The Governor of Georgia, Ernest Stanley, when "The Appeal" was published, said, "That document could not have been written by college students anywhere in America. It had to be written by students – by somebody from Moscow."

EC: [Laughs]

LK: And what I learned was he instructed Eugene Cook, who was the Attorney General, to check on the 501c3 status of all the HBCUs. I'm the one who picked up the documents on that. The bottom line is that they were under siege. We didn't know about it at the time, but they were risking their 501c3 status, at least the state part of it. But you know there must have been a serious conflict in the minds of the college presidents.

EC: I was just thinking that.

LK: When you think about what Dr. Richardson said. With all this training, Clement from Wisconsin, Mays from Bates and University of Chicago. All these people with education and there was a ceiling. You could just go so far. And the duality on the part of the folks who ran the system, that duality didn't bother them at all. That's just the way it's supposed to be in this country. Dr. Crosby, I see this whole thing as akin to – that period as akin to a volcano in the sense that it was simmering below the surface and all these things, be it the different – I guess you would say, [pause] different systems under the surface were going on. Dangerously powerful, but you couldn't see it because the culture was such that you hid the oppression – it was there, but you hid how you felt about it.

And I think that when the young men who sat down in Greensboro, that was the catalyst. That was the – that was the one thing that cause the volcano to erupt. And I don't see any other way you could answer it because within 120 days, 70,000 black kids were raising sin [00:55:00] all over the South. Because segregation was ubiquitous. It existed everywhere and so I think that – that along with the Second World War, a lot of veterans came back and when you think about it – they said, "My daddy." Veterans of the Second World War had children that were going to school at that time, and where could you get a better set of "shock troops?" People who were in school, away from their home town, therefore the normal oppressive means for "keeping niggers

in their place," you could not employ. Because if the kid is from Miami, how you going to get folks in Miami to fire his mama? All the other places. So, they tried it now. Because if you look at what happened during that time, every time we got arrested, they put our name, rank, and serial number in the paper. Even, in my case, they put down, I lived at 2275 Gordon Road apartment number 2A just to make sure you knew where he was.

EC: How did your mother feel?

LK: My mother was scared to death, but was supportive. Let me tell you two things about my mother that I think are important to this. Between March 15 and May 17 of 1960, I was having some difficulty getting people to organize in terms of numbers beyond the 30, 40, or 50. I knew that I needed more than that in order to make this work, and so I was talking to my mother about it. I said, "Momma, I need more people." She said, "You – ?" I said, "I've been to the campus. I need more people." She said, "People are afraid." She said, "Go over to Spelman." She said, "The ladies will probably know who you are because of your football status, and in order to organize, to get the Spelman women behind you. Because if you get the Spelman women behind you, the Morehouse men are coming to come because of the girls. The Clark folk will come and Morris Brown. And so as fate would have it, when you go back and reflect on this thing, you know, there was a divine hand in all of this because let me tell you what else happened. I got a telephone call from Dr. Manley. Dr. Roy Wilkins was coming to town to speak at Spelman around the first of April and he wanted me to come and present the students' view. The issue was, "Should we go back to class?" Basically.

EC: [Laughs]

LK: And so, and so Manley and Wilkins, they were taking the affirmative positions and they wanted me to come argue the negative positions. And so I was scared to death.

EC: [Laughs] Were you?

LK: Yes. It's imposing to go and debate a man with an international reputation like Roy Wilkins. Suave. Well-educated. Been at the stuff for thirty-some years. Here we are, the three of us up on the stage and the place is packed with all the ladies from Spelman. So Dr. Manley introduced Dr. Wilkins, and Wilkins knocked it out of the park. I mean he was smooth as silk. Oh god!

EC: [Laughs]

LK: I remembered I had a course in public speaking, at Spelman interestingly enough. And the guy, Dr. Cochran, said that, if you think you're being outdone in a debate, learn how to "damn him with faint praise." He said, "Give them their due, and then you do your, 'however.'" And so I used my public speaking training that I got from him and when I got up I praised Mr. Wilkins like you wouldn't believe. But it was all true, now. All the stuff they he had done. I laid it out and it was almost as if I were making the history speech all over again. But then I pivoted, and I made the speech about, "the time had come," and I went on and used an alliteration technique on that. And I ended by saying, "Mr. Wilkins, if not now, when? If not us, who?" And I sat down and the girls went wild.

[Laughter]

LK: Mr. Wilkins did this. [01:00:00] He said [makes a motion].

EC: Did he really?

LK: He and I – I guess we were on the same page. I guess we had some other dealings later on, but those ladies came and the rest is history. I mean on May 17 when we had that big march here we had almost 4,000 people going downtown. We emptied Spelman's campus and Morehouse's campus.

EC: I wanted to ask you about that. I'm so glad you brought that up. You know one of the things I wanted to ask you was when I was doing this research, and it's just preliminary, but one of the things I'm very interested in is women's role in all of this and so of course, Atlanta is a wonderful place to look at that because it seemed like you had great participation and so.

LK: But it's unheralded. It has not been written.

EC: That's true. It gets – well we can talk about that sometime. But, so I don't know enough to know whether this is actually accurate, but impressionistically, it looks like there may be a disproportionate high number of Spelman participants relative to some of the other campuses.

LK: Absolutely.

EC: Is that true?

LK: Absolutely. I have identified 169 Spelman ladies who either went to jail or were out there risking things. Now there were more than that at rallies and picketing and stuff. But those that went to jail, I think it was 169. Morehouse didn't come anywhere near close to that. Morehouse would be number two. Clark would be number three, Morris Brown number four. But Spelman, my momma was right. The Spelman ladies would make it happen. If they get behind you, they would make it happen.

EC: Do you have an explanation for why they were so responsive? I mean obviously you came and you gave this great talk. But you could do that at Morehouse right or the other campuses.

LK: I couldn't carry as many men as I could carry women at that time. I'm just going to be honest with you.

EC: Yep. Well there were women on other campuses, too.

LK: Women don't have something else. Women don't have something else. At Morehouse, I think I ran into a lot jealously from other young men. Whose position was, "Lonnie was not elected president of SGA, so why we following him." You know? No one else was risking their life but me. Nonetheless, I think that was a part of it. I think it was male jealously, some of it.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

LK: We were talking about Spelman and Morehouse participation. Women at Spelman, I think they were backbone of the movement in my opinion. Women don't get hung up on who's the leader. They, if there's a job to be done, and they want to do that job, they will get involved. They don't get caught up on who's doing it. Also, women don't mind following a man. And that's kind of the way it is. The husband's the head of the house. They don't get upset about that. And I think that was one of the things that helped that.

But we're now in May of 1960, so I was invited to come and speak to the state NAACP. And so when I spoke to them, I announced that we were going to march on May 17 to the capital to commemorate the *Brown* decision that had been made six years earlier on May 17, 1954. I did not know that there was a reporter there from the *Atlanta Constitution Journal.* The following morning it was headlines: "Student leader announces massive march on the capitol." The town went wild. Mind you they were still buzzing from "The Appeal of Human Rights" and all of us going to jail and all that kind of stuff. But they knew something was happening. Well, Governor Vandiver called out the state patrol. They surrounded the capitol almost arm-to-arm with billy clubs and dogs to keep us from coming down to the capitol. So, I had asked the students to meet me in front of the library that morning at ten o'clock, and we did. Thousands of them. So before

we marched off, Mrs. Hill. Same lady. I see her coming. I knew Mays wanted to see me. [01:05:00]

EC: [Laughs]

LK: And so I told John Mack, who was my co-chairman, to keep them busy while I go see what Dr. Mays wants. And so I went up there and so on. When I got there, it was Mays and his wife Mrs. Sadie Mays. So Mays had said he has just – he had just spoken to Herbert Jenkins, he was the chief of police and that all the state troopers were down there with their billy clubs and what have you. And the whites were yelling around. He said, "It looks like it's going to be a big mob down there." [Clears throat] And Jenkins emphasized that his jurisdiction ends at the capitol. He's not in charge of those state troopers. The governor is. So he couldn't protect us.

EC: Can I ask you? Is he saying that because he, because he can't and he's issuing a warning, or is he just saying, "I'm washing my hands of it?"

LK: He's [saying], "Don't come because you might get hurt today."

EC: And so is he concerned about you getting hurt?

LK: I think Jenkins was a part of – he was the legal – police arm of the power structure in Atlanta. Atlanta has a reputation as being the city too busy to hate. It would have not have been good for business if some students got beaten up in Atlanta. So they lose some money. That's all is was about. Not about love for the students.

EC: They weren't worried about your little –

LK: That's right. So Dr. Mays asked me not to go. I give these people credit; they never ordered me to do anything. They would let me know how they felt and they gave me a chance to respond. And so when he gave me all these reasons why we shouldn't do it, because of the risk of the danger, I said, "Dr. Mays, let me take you back to a speech you made when I was a

sophomore." I said, "Your speech was entitled, 'Never Sacrifice a Principle for Peace.' You remember that?" He said, "Yes."

EC: [Laughter] He couldn't say anything else, could he?

LK: I said you are asking me to sacrifice this principle to end this segregation because I might get killed. Therefore, in order to have peace, I've got to leave it alone. He said, "Mr. King, where you going to end up?" I said, "The Ebenezer Baptist Church." He says, "Sadie and I will be there." That was the end of it. So I went back to speak to the students and I did not know that Mays followed me until I read his book recently, *Born to Rebel*. I happened to be reading the book and I went to – and I got to that section. He had followed me back. And he heard me tell the students that he describes in his book that there were people downtown who wanted to hurt us. And this is a nonviolent movement. "If you cannot take the blows, don't go. If you cannot afford to be spat on, don't go." And I went through an alliteration of things – that we only want people who were willing to be nonviolent as a *tactic*. I'm not asking you to be nonviolent in your life, just as a tactic. And when I finished my speech, not one of those 3,000-plus kids said that they wanted to back out. And Mays describes that in his book. I didn't even know that followed me down there until I read his book. He said in his book he knew then that I had matured, was the way he put it.

EC: [Laughs] So what is he suggesting?

LK: Well I think before then, Mays probably thought I was precipitous. I hadn't considered all the factors involved. The harm that might come to the students. I think it was only at that point he realized that I was very serious about this and I had a lot of folks behind me. Now I tell you, Dr. Crosby, if I did not have thousands of students backing me, I couldn't have done it.

EC: Absolutely.

LK: I don't care how good your cause is, if you don't have any followers, you're just – you're just whistling Dixie. But anyway, we went down there on May 17, that day, and we marched down. And we got a lot of pictures around about that. So Chief Jenkins, the aforementioned, got out of his patrol car and started walking with me down at the corner of [01:10:00] Mitchell Street and Walker Street that comes right in there. So the two of us is just walking along and he said, "It's going to be dangerous at the capital." I said, "Yes, I know. Dr. Mays told me you all talked." He says, "Well I think you ought not to do this." And I said, "Well, keep talking to me." I said, "I think we have to do it." So we walked up until we got to Spring Street and Mitchell, which is where the new post office is. Where the new Russell Building is now. So I said, "Chief, if you give me a direct order as a chief law enforcement officer in this city, at Whitehall Street – which is down Peachtree Street – I will turn." I said, "Because I'm not trying to get anybody hurt. We are making a point." He said, "Okay, I'll do that."

But let me tell you what was my thinking. Look at the environment. The Chamber of Commerce was against us. The white community was against us. College presidents were scared. A lot of parents were scared. I said that if one student gets killed, then I'm playing into the arms of the enemies of what we're trying to do. I said, "It is very clear now that never had this number of students marched on anything in this town." So I felt like I had made my point. Now I know that it's a little bit conservative, but I decided to err on the side of conservatism to save the movement because I felt that if one person got beaten up by a billy club, that there would be forces that would be arguing to shut me down. And so I followed his order. I gave him that suggestion.

EC: This was a lot of responsibility.

LK: Yeah. It was hell, but then, as fate would have it, we had so many people marching until about the last 200, they got lost so they went on by the capitol. And when they got there, I learned from the leader of that part, Charles Black, that they – it was awful. They didn't beat anybody, but they were heckled by all the white bystanders and the state troopers. It was a menacing thing.

But I saw something else, Dr. Crosby, when I've looked at all the stuff lately. When you look at – when you look at one of the photographs taken from the capitol, at that church across the street and all the folks out there, there were a number of African Americans – young African American men, who were not students. And I looked at that and I said, "Wait a minute. What's up here?" I can't prove this, because folks are dead now. But there may have been a black vigilante group in Atlanta that could have very easily stepped into the fray if there was any kind of confrontation, of a racial nature. I was shocked to see them. And I will come back to that later on, because I had another chance to see something similar to that.

EC: I'm very interested in that.

LK: Okay. There may have very well been, if you would put your pen right there, I would just flash to tell you why I'm connected. I'm connecting my own – We started the boycott of the food stores, chains right after that. And one of the chains, one of the stores we went to was call Mann Brothers over in West End Atlanta. All the grocery stores hired blacks as janitors and maids and stock clerks, but never as cashiers and never as managers or assistant managers. Even if the community was 100 percent black, everybody was white who was in charge. So we pulled this boycott off over there and it was a high wire act. So the newspaper in the West End had this front-page editorial the Saturday before I came over there, because I announced that I was

coming, all of us were coming. And read that they compared me to Hitler and that [01:15:00] I was coming over there to change things.

When I got over there that Saturday, it was Charles Black, Frank Holloway, and me and about 300 whites across the street heckling us. There was a white guy, about 5'7", who was there by us with his hand in his pocket. We were marching up and down with our picket signs, what have you. All of a sudden, this white guy lunged at me and doused an acid-like substance on me that burned me like you wouldn't believe. I mean just burned my skin and clothes and my shirt was destroyed and I couldn't see. Terrible, it even impacted two guys – it impacted Frank Holloway and Charles, who were behind me. So they rushed me to the hospital and I won't go into all of that except – Well, I went to two service stations. The first service station did not let me get any water, to relieve, but the second one did allow me to do that. Well, I learned later on that day that it was on the news and the pool hall on – it wasn't Martin King, but it was Hunter Street then – a black pool hall emptied of all the men and they came over. And they ran to West End to see what was going on. I think Atlanta was very close to having a racial conflagration during that period of time. But I think that cooler heads prevailed and they were willing to allow these students to try to work this out. But I think – think that there was possibly a potential for Birmingham kind of violence here, but it would have been whites versus blacks like you wouldn't believe. That's just –

EC: Do you think that there were people who spoke to some of the men and asked them to wait, or do you think they had a sense of, "We're seeing how things go or how far it goes."

LK: I'm not sure it was organized. But I would go with the latter point that you made. I don't know of anybody talking to them because it dawned on me. I mean I knew about the pool hall emptying, but I had not seen those pictures of those fellows that were down there, because it

was an all-white mob down there. And I was saying, there in the middle of this all-white mob, what are these young black guys, like 18 to 25, hovering around back there, in the background? Just spectators, what's that all about?

EC: Mm-hmm.

LK: Okay.

EC: Mm-hmm.

LK: Where do you want to go next?

EC: Well you know, you mentioned before, you went on that march on May 17, talking to the students about, you know, being prepared to be nonviolent. And I know in places like Nashville they had really intense workshops and in other places, they did, "just don't hit back," kind of, and that they're very different approaches. Did you have any kind of training or was it simply – at any point in the process?

LK: No, we did not. Our panel, our committee took the view that nonviolence should be a tactic, not a way of life, and therefore there was no reason for us to go through all these – now, I don't know what happened after I left, but I doubt seriously if there was anyone there who ran a workshop. Nashville is known for having done that.

EC: Mm-hmm.

LK: I can't really speak to whether that's more effective than just people just adopting it as a tactic.

EC: And I know that many people, not many, but I know that there were also places – and I don't know even if it's a lot – I know SNCC did some of this – workshops, just on, so people have some practice in not responding. But it wasn't necessarily philosophical. It was still

very practical, but it was just so people, you know, could go through what it might be like just so they are better prepared. But, I think a lot of people also did it, "just don't hit back." That's it.

LK: Let me just try to rush through. A lot of what I have written, I really covered some of this, let me try to rush through. In Atlanta, let me talk about some institutions. The *Atlanta Daily World*, the oldest, it was the oldest potentially daily African American newspaper in the country, [01:20:00] possibly in the world, really. They were unalterably opposed to the movement, and what we were trying to do. So Julian was basically our arm and I had hired Julian that summer to write the publication called, *The Student Movement and You*. We used the summer of 1960 to okay – May 17 was a big rally. Then it's exam time, then people are gone. So we had to organize for the fall, the fall campaign.

We had to also organize a boycott, because we determined that we needed to boycott downtown Atlanta in order to make them come through, in agree to integrate. And we chose Richards Department Store as the kingpin. All downtown, but Richards for sure. In order to do that, then, we had to battle with the old-line black leadership, who thought that Richards was a great store, even though they were segregated, stayed segregated. But how do you get around that? Ninety percent of African Americans in this town at this time were making a small amount of money; that ten percent were teachers and doctors and what have you. But the bulk of the GNP was with the low-income, the $5 a day and [01:26:35] people. So we needed to then organize around our strength, and our strength was in the numbers.

And I remembered when I was going through Economics with Dr. Williams, he used to say, "He'd much rather have the fast dime than the slow dollar." He said, "There are a whole lot more dimes then there are dollars, and there are a lot of folks who have dimes." And I used that along with another Economics major named Dr. Hugo Scholar, who taught me about John Foster

Dulles and his policy about the domino theory. You know, economists felt that in the Pacific Basin if Korea falls, the rest of the basin will fall and all become communist all the way over. Like dominos, they'll fall in line. So I took the position that Richards Department Store was like a major domino. If we could knock down that domino piece, the rest will fall because it's the largest store in the southeast.

So we took them all – I went down there in June of 1960 for a meeting with – I sat down so I sat in. I took folks, I took Dr. Zinn from Spelman, his daughter and his wife, myself, and I think Carolyn Long down there. And we met in the big Magnolia Room. So they, of course, they closed the Magnolia Room when we got there. And then Chief Jenkins was the guy who took me to jail. Not to be arrested, but to have a conference meeting with "Big Rich" in his office. Chief Jenkin's office. So when I got there, "Big Rich" was red as a beet and he talked about how good he had been for Negro citizens, and he mentioned how he had supported the AU Center and he was the first one to ever put Mr. and Mrs. on the names of his customers when they sent bills out. First one to give them charge plates and so forth and so on. And, "You need to go take this your students back to class." So I gave him a similar speech, "No, no, you have to change." So "Big Rich" said he, and I'm paraphrasing, "If you bring your black ass down here, I'm going to lock you up and throw the keys away," basically. And I said, "Mr. Richards, I will be back in the fall, and when I come back, I'm going to bring thousands with me." He turned redder and he told Chief Jenkins, "I'm through." And he got up and walked out. And so they took me back to my office down over there on Albany Avenue, the Chief's people did.

Well now I'm writing *The Student Movement and You*, and Mr. Scott, who owns the *Atlanta Daily World* is constantly editorializing against the movement. So we put out 20,000 leaflets per Sunday.

EC: 20,000.

LK: To the churches, [01:25:00] building the movement. And one day in June 1960, in walks this man that I thought was white in my office. And I was a little edgy. Tall six-foot-three, six-foot-four white guy who had gotten all the way back to my office. I didn't know if he was going to kill me or what. So I guess I must have looked apprehensive and he sat down. And he had the *Atlanta Daily World* in his hand and he said, "My name is Kossut Hill, and you are Lonnie King?" I said, "Yes." He said, "I own Hill Office Supplies." The way he said it I knew he had to be a black guy. But he looked as white as anybody. He said, "This is a shame what this man is doing." He said, "He's doing this because he wants the white advertising, and he's selling out the cause on human dignity." He said, "I own the rights to use the name of the *Atlanta Inquirer* and I'm already going to start a newspaper." He said, "I've got an editor by the name of William Strong, but I don't have any writers." He said, "If you can help me find people to start circulation, I will start it because I have an offset press." So the two of us came together and we agreed that I would stop *The Student Movement and You*, have Julian go and write along with John Gibson and James Gibson, his brother, and others, form the underbelly for that paper. And on the 31 of July, and you can find it, in 1960 – you might want to see that first issue.

EC: I've seen it.

LK: Oh you have.

EC: I have. It's a wonderful paper.

LK: And it's still around.

EC: I know.

LK: You know, but that was started by Kossut Hill, myself, and the students. It's not the folks that you read about. They came there later, but it was Mr. Hill who has not been given his

due, but I am going to give him his due because the man did it and nobody else could do it. Kossut Hill, not Jesse Hill, Kossut Hill.

EC: Had you had any sense of that? I mean, you must have been unhappy with *The World* and the coverage you were getting.

LK: Oh, no question about it.

EC: Did you think about – I mean it must have been wonderful to have that opportunity.

LK: Well we went to – a lot of things were happening at the same time. We went to Colonial Stores and A&P stores right after that march and asked for these cashiers and what have you. I got a telephone call from Mr. Scott telling me – C.A. Scott – telling me, asking me if I would come down and see him. So I went down there to him, and he proceeded to tell me he's going to lose a $9,000 dollar ad with the Colonial Stores if I didn't stop the picketing. And so Mr. Scott was spitting all over me. Have you seen those folks who talk to you and they're so mad and they just start spitting? He was spitting all over me, so I'm just sitting here listening to him beat up on me. So I said, "Mr. Scott, in every revolution some people get hurt. But you don't call off the revolution because somebody might get hurt." I said, "You know what, this is your time to get hurt. I'm not going to do it." He cursed me out and I left. But the bottom line is, he just grew to hate me. I guess I'm sure he – I'm sure that when Mr. Hill started the newspaper later, that really got him because we were able to get the real estate – the black real estate people – we got them to take the ads out of Mr. Scott's paper and put them in the *Atlanta* [laughs]. So he really was upset with me, I guess.

EC: I'm going to say, you need somebody to taste your food for you

[Laughter]

LK: Yeah. Boy he was upset with me, but I think we – he never changed. He was always like that to his death, but I think we whipped his behind badly.

EC: Two things real quick. Can you spell Mr. Hill's first name?

LK: K-O-U-S-S-E-T, I believe it was. He was the son of the first African American doctor in this town. And his wife was Ginger Hill, who was head of – she succeeded Whitney Young as the head of the Atlanta University School of Social Work.

EC: And, I noticed you published some columns. [01:30:00]

LK: Well it was a combination of me and Julian.

EC: Okay.

LK: I wrote, I had several, but I think Julian had written about a third of them because here was the deal. Dr. Crosby, when you're trying to run a movement as big as this thing was, you didn't have time –

EC: A little busy?

LK: I was a little busy. Plus I worked all night at the post office, you know, from 6:30 to 3:00, so I didn't have time to write. I said Julian, since I hired you, write my article when I'm not able to write it. So he did that.

EC: So did you all discuss what to focus on?

LK: Oh yeah. Yeah, but that was – see once we hired Mr. Carl Holburn to come in and he's the editor who took over from Mr. Bill Strong, we then tried to merge the message what was on the editorial page and what was in the cartoons. So if you didn't read the editorial, look at the cartoon and you'd still get the message. And I have to give you a man by the name of Maurice Pennington, who you may not have heard about. His interest is one that – I had forgotten that I had written a – When we went to jail – and we'll talk about that later on – in October of 1960,

Martin King and I were in the same cell because we were leaders in the movement, you know what I'm saying? And I wrote an article, "A Letter from the Fulton County Jail" –

EC: [Laughs]

LK: And I had forgotten that I written the article until Dr. – the doctor, he heads the School of Social Work at the University of Georgia. He wrote a biography of Don Hallowell, and he had all these newspapers. He said, "Let me send you a copy of what you said when you were – when you were in prison." Yes, I did write that, but also Julian wrote some also. Some said Julian ghost wrote all of them. That's not true. Julian wrote some of them and I wrote some.

EC: You said you wanted to say something about Maurice Pennington.

LK: Yes Maurice Pennington was, in my view but for his race, he would have been one of the greatest illustrators, or cartoonists in the country. At the time that Herblock was so big, Pennington was just as good. And I wish you could see some of his work. We are going to have a big exhibit in Atlanta 18 and 19 of October at AU library and it'll be there for 30 days, and it's going to be there for five years for thirty days. And we're going to show as many of the artifacts of the movement as we can possibly pull together. It's going to be a big show. If you get a chance, it'd be good to come back down here for that because it's going to be a big deal. There's just a whole lotta stuff. A whole lotta stuff that people have not seen. We have 30 some cartoons from Mr. Pennington that are just out of sight, that are going to be there. Plus he took a hundred and something pictures of the movement, those will also be down there. Action stuff.

EC: There's some wonderful stuff from the Atlanta Movement, the student movement.

LK: Where did you see them?

EC: I saw some of them in the AU archives.

LK: Okay, yes. Okay.

EC: I believe some of them were from one of the anniversary committees that you're involved with.

LK: Okay, yes.

EC: You had some exhibits? Is that correct?

LK: Yes. We just added to that exhibit, that's all. There's a lot more down there now and, by Bob Tolbert, you're going to have – we'll have enough out there to go all the way around. Because there's stuff out there, it's just a matter of putting it in one place, that's all.

EC: Well what I saw wasn't actually on display, it was –

LK: In the boxes.

EC: In the boxes.

LK: Yeah well we are going to take stuff out of the boxes, and we're going to add more stuff to those boxes.

EC: Wonderful. That's wonderful.

LK: Mrs. Pennington is waiting to sign a document that I prepared for her. But she's going to loan – or lend – us a lot of his stuff for five years. I tried to get it forever, but five years is fine.

EC: That's a good start, right? So I know there's a lot to talk about with Atlanta still, but can we take a detour and talk about the founding of SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee]?

LK: Sure.

EC: And I know the basic story, but I understand that you were present at the meeting in Raleigh? Of course. Can you tell me what you remember from that meeting?

LK: Well let me just say this to you. And this is not, this hasn't been written that many times and you are going to get people that are going to be upset about it, but you ought to ask Reverend Dr. Otis Marks. Because have you talked to him? Ask him about the founding of SNCC, because he was there.

Once we got going in that spring, [01:35:00] I recommended to our committee that I go meet with Martin King and see can I get him to pull together a meeting of all us student leaders to form some kind of a South-wide organization. And Marks can attest to that. He was in that meeting. I called up Dr. King, and as you already know, I knew him, set up the meeting, and so we went down there to see him. In the meeting was Ella Baker, Dr. King, and me, and a couple of other students. My memory's getting a little foggy, who was there and all of that. But I made the argument that the people that we were battling were highly organized, and I pointed out that we were battling a system that, from Maryland to Texas, they're on the same page. And I cited the fact that when Virginia passed the Anti-Trespass Law, Maryland quickly passed it, then North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama – all around, all around – all these states passed the same kind of laws, almost word for word. Like ALEC [the American Legislative Exchange Council] today. So the people that we were fighting, they're organized and my point was that there was no known force that I've ever heard of in the world where you had a revolution that was unorganized. The people that you're battling are organized, so you've got to get organized to beat them. I said, "One example to that, Dr. King, might be the French Revolution where the masses rose up. But when you look beyond the French Revolution, look into the inner core, you learned that there was an enlightened middle class back there that was pushing."

So Ella Baker, on the other hand, and this is contrary to what you read, opposed organizing this way. So it was a battle between her and me. She said that we needed to allow the movement organization to kind of flow up from the grassroots. She used an Indian expression, to, what's the phrase, [01:37:36] Yeah, she used that expression as the basis for her position. Martin King said – he agreed with me and he said, "I'm going to put $500 and I want you and Ella get a place for us to call this conference over Easter weekend." Of course she finished Shaw and so she got Shaw to host it. We were there. For whatever reason, Ella and Martin parted company during that period of time. So by the time she got to the conference, she either was out the door or was about to go out the door.

EC: In a couple of months.

LK: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I don't – my impression is that Ms. Baker. How do I put this? A lot of African American preachers are very chauvinistic. And Ms. Baker, from their perspective, did not know her place. And she was an outspoken person who would say what was on her mind and that always got in trouble with these preachers. I think that might have gotten her in trouble with Martin King, to be honest with you. If not him, then some of his people around. So we were there, Dr. Albert Davis, who was the head of Atlanta Medical Society. We rented a brand new, 1960 white Buick for us to go up there. There was six of us in the car who went from Atlanta, to that conference. I think Johnny Parham, who was also part of our group, flew in from some other place. But he was there, too. My recollection is that it was Julian, Ben Brown, Mary Ann Smith, Marianne Wright Edelman, and I believe it must have been Charlie Frank Lyles, L-Y-L-E-S. He was a guy from Summer Hill who went to Texas.

But anyway, but we were all there and SNCC was formed, as you well know. A lot of – it was good to see 300 people roughly that were there under the same umbrella. [01:40:00] Now,

there are those who claim that Dr. King wanted SNCC to become a junior arm of SCLC. I don't want to doubt that he never aspired to that, but he never talked to me about that. And I don't know anybody else that he talked to about that. There were those you thought that was what he was trying to do. If there's evidence, I don't have the evidence. Because I honestly believe, Dr. Crosby, considering the man's charisma, if King had wanted us to become a junior arm of SCLC, it would have happened. I mean, I don't – there was nobody there who had the force of oratory that could have overwritten King, if he had wanted to do it. But I didn't see that happening at all.

EC: I have a very small technical question, a detail question. I know Marion Barry was the, the first temporary chair of the temporary committee, but I've seen different things. Some people say that he was elected in April, and some people say he was elected – or some documents, I mean it's a variety of different kinds of evidence – at the first May coordinating committee meeting here in Atlanta. Do you have a recollection of that?

LK: Yeah. Marion Barry. Okay that was a battle going on here, okay? My name got put up as the first chairman. Of course Nashville brought in a guy Marion Barry, that I had never heard of before as their candidate. I thought it would have been Diane Nash, but it was Barry. So you had – you had this jockeying going along. So finally, a compromise was reached. Let's elect Barry as a temporary chairman and we'll move the headquarters to Atlanta. And we paid the rent for the first several months and the records already show that. I've got the records on that.

EC: I've seen that.

LK: The Atlanta office paid the rent.

EC: I hadn't seen *that*, but I have seen some of the financial records that show that the Atlanta group was the only group that, you know, was putting in the donations.

LK: Right, right, but it was for the rent. But my position was, "We need this organization, to coordinate and what have you." There are some people that have the view that if you didn't write it down, then it didn't happen. That's not really true, but having said that, the move to Atlanta was the best thing that I think SNCC could have done. I don't think they could have done it in Nashville.

EC: In retrospect, from an outside perspective, it seems like a logical move.

LK: It was logical because Atlanta historically has been the citadel of intellectual thinking and action in the Civil Rights Movement beginning really with W.E.B. Du Bois, when he was at AU for 25 years and he had all those wonderful things that he did over there. It's unfortunate that this town, until recently, has never recognized this man's things. I think Clark AU just put up a statue for him.

EC: Um-hmm.

LK: But that's been one of those things that they name all the streets after people who have done nothing in this town, or in this country. But because they are part of a certain clique that can get these things done – What about a guy like Du Bois? He was a giant, not just in these United States of America, but in the world. But it's a very interesting town. I'll put it like that.

EC: Can I ask you about Diane Nash? You mentioned Nash and that you would have thought she would be the person from Nashville?

LK: She should have. She should have been.

EC: Can you speak to that?

LK: Diane Nash, in my view, was the Nashville movement and that that I mean this? Others were there, but they weren't Diane Nash. Diane was articulate, she was a beautiful woman, very photogenic, very committed. And very intelligent and had a following. I never did

understand how, except maybe for sexism, I never understood how Bevel, Marion, and for that matter, John Lewis, kind of leapfrogged over her. I never understood that because she was in fact the leader in Nashville. It was Diane. The others were followers of her. Now Jim Lawson [01:45:00] was going – well he was in the Vanderbilt School of Religion, but he was an adult, who was kind of working with the students. But it was Diane, and I so never understood that to be honest with you. She's an unsung, a real unsung hero of the movement in Nashville, in my opinion. Risked her life in order to make this thing happen.

EC: I've seem some accounts and you know, again, you get little snippets here and there and people's memories are different, and some of the, there's some stuff in the papers and some of it's contradictory. But one account, and I think Marion Barry says this, is that the expectation was that Diane Nash would, that the Nashville group wanted to put a Nashville person as the chair. And they mentioned this competition with Atlanta. But at some point or at some meeting, she wasn't present and he was, so he became kind of the person.

LK: The consensus? That may have happened because they were having the meetings, you know, because we didn't know anything about that part of it. I was just shocked though when they came back, when Barry's name was put forth. I was shocked about that.

EC: And did that –

LK: Because she was the one who literally put them on the map up there.

EC: Now was that at Shaw in April or was that in Atlanta in May?

LK: Diane? Well – we actually elected a temporary chairman at Shaw, pending going to the next meeting.

EC: Okay.

LK: Yeah, but Barry – by being the temporary chairman also ended up being the chairman anyway. You know, whoever gets that first leg in. But I never understood what the Nashville folks were doing when they overlooked the lady who really brought them to the table.

EC: So did you, you had a sense of her reputation and her work before you get to – ?

LK: Oh yes. Oh yeah. Diane Nash was, in my view, Diane Nash was the most articulate advocate of the movement at that time. And I never understood what was happening in Nashville, to be honest with you. Except maybe sexism.

EC: Did you have a sense of other student leaders from other communities before that Raleigh meeting?

LK: Yeah I had read about Franklin Forbes, I guess is his name. I had heard about him. I had heard about a guy named –

EC: Which community?

LK: Forbes was at Shaw University.

EC: Was it – was it –

LK: It might have been David Forbes.

EC: David Forbes.

LK: Not Franklin. David Forbes. I heard about him and I heard about Ed King who came to SNCC, who was put out of Kentucky State. And I heard about a guy named Robinson who led the movement down at Southern. I forgot Robinson's – was it Max?

EC: Marvin –

LK: Marvin Robinson, yes. I had heard about him. I heard about the two sisters down in Tallahassee.

EC: The Stephens Sisters?

LK: Is it –

EC: Priscilla and Patricia.

LK: Yeah their dad is a pastor. I heard about them. I heard about Chuck McDew in Orangeburg, South Carolina. Who else? The movement down in Savannah was run by the NAACP. I had heard about Mr. [W.W.] Law, but you're talking about students now. I heard about the students being kicked out of Alabama State, but I didn't know any names until August, when Bernard Lee came to join us in Atlanta. Of course, you knew the names of the four kids from Greensboro, but I never met them. In fact, you know what, I don't recall whether or not those boys were there? Were they there at Raleigh?

EC: Ezell Blair for sure was.

LK: Okay.

EC: And he went to a few of the coordinating committee meetings. But they were never really active in –

LK: Yeah come to think of it.

EC: Beyond that spark in the early days there.

LK: Now there was another young man, but I learned about him after SNCC got started. That was Hank Thomas.

EC: Mm-hmm.

LK: Hank Thomas and another guy who ran around with Hank all the time, Reginald Robinson. I had to invite them later, later on during the year.

EC: I'll let you get back to the other narrative, but can I ask you about Ed King first?

LK: Sure!

EC: Because not too many people seem to have known him well, or have been able to describe him and his role. And I was wondering, I know that you two worked, I think, closely together, at least in proximity.

LK: Yeah I have a picture of Ed King. Ed King – [01:50:00]

EC: Is that the one at one of the demonstrations?

LK: Well he's actually – yeah. Yeah. Ed King was – The first person to come in and help as a secretary in our administrative office was Jane Stembridge. And the second person was Ed King. There are a lot of folks who want to pretend like they don't know Ed King, but Ed King was here and he was actually running this office for SNCC. I don't know why people want to write him out, but – he died in January of last year.

EC: Oh really because I had heard he passed years ago.

LK: No. Ed King died in Prince George's County.

EC: Really?

LK: Yes I can get you the newspaper stuff.

EC: I'd like to see it because I'd heard that.

LK: Ed King. I'd been looking for the man and so finally one day here, I said let me go find Ed King because he never comes back to these reunions and what have you. And I looked it up and sure enough he died in January of 2012 in Prince George's County. And it is the same person. He was born in Virginia, which you probably know. I'm not sure whether it was Roanoke or what have you. And they talked about how he was expelled from Kentucky State and I said, "That's him, that's him." I felt badly because I had wanted to reach him several years ago, but did not know how to find him. Come to find out the man was less than thirty miles away from me.

EC: It's amazing.

LK: But he just kind of dropped out of sight.

EC: Right, I know he went back to school. He went to, near Ohio.

LK: Wilberforce?

EC: Yeah, mm-hmm. So can you describe him for me or his role as student secretary?

LK: Yeah, Ed King was very effective in being a coordinator at SNCC. He worked very closely with us in the Atlanta Movement and the person that was especially close to him was Mary Ann Wilson. They were very close. Ed was an articulate speaker, he was courageous, well organized, and did a job for SNCC at a time when we needed somebody. And he's kind of unheralded, to be honest with you, okay. There was another guy named Ed King who was a white guy from Mississippi. And a lot of folks have confused those two, there were two Ed Kings.

EC: Yeah, so I know there's –

JB: [01:52:34-01:52:45]

LK: Well, let's go as far as we can.

EC: And we'll talk about that – So, are you ready John?

LK: Why don't you get all your questions in and then I will do my best to weave other stuff in as you ask questions. Because I want to make sure that I answer all your stuff, okay?

EC: Well you know some other people may be interested in hearing some stuff about the big points of the – So why don't you tell me. I know we talked through some of the boycott activity you were doing in the summer of 1960, but then, you resumed the big campaign with the Atlanta Student Movement in the fall. And I know you had the, you know, the big arrest with Martin Luther King and some of the strategic decisions and what happened in the spring. So if

you want to talk about some of those things that you think are particularly significant, then maybe I can fill back in.

LK: Well, we put the plan together once we got the *Inquirer* going and we began to get people joining us. We spoke all over town trying to build up a groundswell for the fall campaign. And it was two pronged: sit-ins, accompanied with boycotts, and so forth and so on. And by the way, I just found out here recently, Richards lost ten million dollars during the time period I was talking about. I just found out.

EC: Somebody told me, it might have been Julian Bond, that you all were looking to the stock exchange? Was that your idea? The Economics major?

LK; Yes, yes. The Economics major. Dr. Hugo Scholar and Dr. E.B. Williams. We watched them every Sunday. They stopped publishing after a while. But anyway, where was I?

EC: You were talking about the two-pronged approach of the sit-ins and the boycott coming in, planning the fall campaign.

LK: Yes. In September the students were back. We had the plans, so I presented the summer work as part of the fall campaign what we wanted to do. And I had to battle with, believe it or not, with A.D. King, Martin's younger brother, and Bernard Lee to try to get that approved. The issue was, do we wait until October 19 or do we go now? [01:55:00] And my point was we want to time this with the presidential election.

EC: So they were ready to get started.

LK: They wanted to go. They wanted to go.

EC: Go now.

LK: Now, now, now. And we said, "No, let's – " And so I prevailed only because the Spelman folks backed me. You know, they – they backed me and we waited until October 19.

Now mind you I had called Martin King in August to tell him about what we were going to do and he agreed to come at that time. And so Herschelle Sullivan Challenor came back from Paris in September and she become the co-chairman to take the place of the guy from AU who had graduated, John Mack. So she led the Spelman delegation and I convinced her to back me on waiting until October 19. So, on [October] 18, I said Herschelle, "Give M.L. a call, give Dr. King – I called him M.L. – but give Dr. King a call and tell him to meet me on the bridge at ten in the morning." So she came back and she said, Martin said he can't go.

EC: And for our audience, that's the bridge at Richards.

LK: Yeah at Richards Department Store, on the second floor there was a cafeteria, separate, that was over the street between Broad and Forsyth. It was like a – yeah. You could sit in the cafeteria and then you could look at the traffic going up and down those streets. It separated the store from Holmes, which was on the left side, from the regular Richards facility. And so when she called him, he told her that he couldn't go. And I said, "Well Herschelle, talk to the students here. Let me go talk to him." Because I knew we had a relationship from 1945, you follow me? So I called him up and of course on the phone was his daddy. A.D. was on the phone for some reason, instead of being out there, but he was on the phone. Wyatt Tee Walker was in the room.

EC: You had the whole range.

LK: They were all there. And he, in his very slow deliberate way, he said, "I can't go because I was arrested and I'm on probation from the arrest with William Smith out in DeKalb County. And, if I get arrested, they will probably revoke my parole." Well not parole.

EC: Probation?

LK: Probation. Probation. And so, and his dad, of course, he was bombastic. Daddy King. Anyway, I ignored Daddy King and other folks on the phone and just talked to him. And I said, "M.L., Atlanta is your hometown. You need to go with us." He had never been to jail voluntarily before then and always, they would come and get him. I said, "But, if you get arrested with us, it'll be in the national news and I think that's what the movement needs." And I said, "Rev. King Senior, do you remember a sermon you preached a few years ago called, 'You Can't Lead from the Back?' You've got to lead from the front?" I said, "Well, M.L., you can't lead from the back. You got to lead from the front." That was designed to silence his daddy, who was on my case, by putting it back in his face. And also M.L. heard that sermon, too, because he was there. He said, "L.C. – they called me L.C." He said, "What time should I come tomorrow?" I said, "Ten o'clock on the bridge." He said, "I'll be there." That's how that happened.

Well I believe you talked to Harris Walker who is still alive, by the way. I was surprised that he was still alive. I called him and left a message for him when I found out he's still alive and I got a call back on my answering machine where he wanted to know if this is the Lonnie King who got me fired? [Laughs]

EC: [Laughs]

LK: Oh god. And so I called him back and –

EC: How many lives did you impact, right?

LK: I said, "Yes, I did you fired." Of course he told me later on about all that happened between him and the Kennedys [02:00:00] and all that kind of stuff. He spoke out at school when he did certain things. Well anyway. Harris said that when King was arrested, it was like a firestone all over the community. All of America, black America. African Americans had been voting, except for Roosevelt, for Republicans since 1865, 1867, I guess. But when Kennedy

interceded, or his brother had interceded and Kennedy got the credit for it, after he called Coretta, it switched the votes in a lot of different states, you know, Illinois, Michigan, all over the place. It really was the difference in that election. It was not the dead people in Chicago, but it was the live African Americans who voted with their feet for this guy named Kennedy, because they didn't know Kennedy from anybody else. A lot of them didn't like him because he was Catholic. But, King had become by then, a symbol of change in the African American community, and that's why they switched over to Kennedy. The historians have tried to minimize the arrest of King, by giving it – what's the phrase I used earlier, "damned him with faint praise" – but the reality of it is but for that arrest, Nixon would have been president. And all of the stuff could have been different had Nixon become president.

EC: Was your thinking on that influenced by, or I don't know influenced by, part of the same kind of thinking that let SNCC to send delegations to the platform? To speak to the platform committees at the conventions that summer?

LK: I don't know. I wasn't that involved in that part of it. All I was trying to do was try to put the issue of civil rights on the front pages of the people's agenda for this country. I felt that the person who could do it was King and I also felt that the students in Atlanta were organized well enough that we could make it happen. And – and of course that is – that is – what happened. Interestingly enough, I have learned as I've done more research lately, Richard Nixon did prepare a statement to get involved with the situation; he was trying to neutralize what Kennedy *might* have done. Because he was going to call Mrs. King and he was going to – he prepared a statement and gave it to E. Frederic Morrow, who was the black assistant to the president during that time, President Eisenhower. He said, "Let the old man read this statement because this is what I'm going to say." And when Eisenhower got the statement, he said, "No." And so Nixon

didn't do it because he didn't want to buck the boss. That was a fatal mistake on his part because what would have happened if Nixon *and* Kennedy both had spoken out against the injustice that was being perpetrated on King? It might have neutralized the electorate and Nixon probably would have won.

EC: That's an interesting –

[Recording stops and then resumes]

EC: About the organizational level of the Atlanta Student Movement? We've been talking now so I don't know if you've lost it. But we were talking about how well-organized the Atlanta Student Movement was.

LK: I think the difference – I think there were two things that were involved here. One, is that, I went to the military and learned a lot about how to organize. Plus, I grew up with people who were in the Civil Rights Movement, they were [02:04:05], and I listened to them as a little boy, sucking all this stuff up. Plus, there was a guy who returned here and we called him "El Comandante." He was a retired master sergeant, I guess he was. And he came by and asked me if he could work with us and I told him yes. He said, "I'll work full time, no pay." He was retired, you know. So Comandante came in and got with me and he was able to pull together a lot of – he put some meat on the bones that I had come up with, okay? He was not the one who put the ingredients together, he was the one who put the *plan* together.

You mentioned the two-way radio. [02:05:00] I'll tell you that's how that came about. Walkie talkies. Every time we would – well the merchants had a survival strategy. They assumed that if we came in, we'd probably came in by bus or we came in by car. Once you close the lunch counters, we would go on about our business. And so that was their tactic. When the students show up, don't arrest them. Just close. So our response to that was – it was a chess game. Our

response was to get us some walkie talkies, two way radios, and we have teams of people who was downtown with radios in their car. And our communications headquarters was on Chestnut Street, we had like a centralized place where we could talk to all of them. And so we had spotters. Let's assume for instance, Richards Department Store closed the lunch counter, the Magnolia Room. So our people would go on and leave because they weren't going to arrest anyone, because they knew that we wanted to be arrested, so they weren't going to do that. And so we would leave, they'd reopen that counter. What they didn't know we left sentries around with walkie talkies. And what they would do is that they would call over say, "They just reopened again." And we sent the cars and sent people right back in. They never figured out what we were doing and so we really harassed them. So finally they just closed them all.

[Laughter]

LK: But a guy named Ronald Yancey and another guy whose daddy owned the [02:06:45] Lighting Company, they developed that communications system for us and they actually ran it from over there. Ronald Yancey, who was by the way the first black person to finish Georgia Tech.

EC: Okay.

LK: He lives up in Columbia, Maryland now. He's retired.

EC: Mary Ann Smith was telling me and then I saw a little newspaper clip about it, that, after the *Boynton v. Virginia* case, after that decision was handed down, that the Atlanta students had these sort of these mini freedom rides in December '60.

LK: Well, let me go into that. On or about the fourth of December 1960, the court ruled in *Boynton v. Virginia* that you shouldn't have discrimination in interstate commerce on these buses and trains. So we had a committee meeting in the next day or two and we were discussing

that issue. And so we decided that we would go and test *Boynton v. Virginia*. We sent a team to Chattanooga; Columbia, South Carolina; Jacksonville, Florida; Birmingham, Alabama, yeah. Mary Ann and her sister, I think, went to Birmingham, Alabama.

EC: Mm-hmm.

LK: And got arrested, I think, when they got back to Atlanta.

EC: That's what she said, yeah.

LK: Mr. Maurice Pennington, the same artist, and his nephew, and Morris Dillard went to Chattanooga and got arrested. Norma June Wilson and I've forgotten who went with her now. They went to Jacksonville and they got arrested down in Macon. Charles Black and Otis Moss, who you might talk to later on, they went to South Carolina. They were hassled up in Athens, but they were not arrested. The idea was to test this decision. Claude Sitton, do you remember him?

EC: I know – I mean I know who he is.

LK: Claude Sitton wrote in *The New York Times* a few days later about the sit-in.

EC: Do you have that article?

LK: I know that it was written, I don't have it. I could probably get it though.

EC: I have tried to find it.

LK: But he did write it and Jim Farmer called me and asked me, "Tell me more about it." And I told him. He said, "Well, I tried this earlier, several years ago. I didn't really get too far up on the other side of the Mason-Dixon line." He said, "I think maybe we want to do it." I said, "Okay, when are you going to do it?" "I'm going to do it in the spring." So he said, "We're going to come to Atlanta." I said, "When you get to Atlanta, give me a call and I'll come and talk to you all." And sure enough when he got here, [02:10:00] we went over to Clark College where he was staying and we did talk to him.

I was looking at the NAACP files recently in the Library of Congress, and there was a letter in there from Marvin Rich. You remember him? Marvin Rich to Roy Wilkins, detailing how they were planning the freedom rides in the spring. That letter was in February of 1961. So to answer your question, yes, we had the first one okay, but it was the first one in modern times you could say. Jim Farmer had done it earlier, back in the ’40s –

EC: The Fellowship of Reconciliation in like ’47 when that – yeah.

LK: Yeah, yeah, yeah. But I think it was outside the South.

EC: It was. It was the Upper South is what they did.

LK: Right. But they have – we have pictures of all that.

EC: Do you? So are they part of the exhibit?

LK: We have pictures of everybody – yeah they are a part of the exhibit. We have pictures of Norma June Wilson, and Mary Ann and Norma June with Mary Ann and I believe we may have them of Pennington, too. And I think they have a receipt.

EC: That’s –

LK: All that’s going to be there.

EC: Mary Ann Wilson showed me her jail – her arrest receipt.

LK: These are things that have not been brought out, but we are going to have them over there.

EC: That’s fantastic.

[To JB] We’re okay?

I mean I know that one of the things that has been written about a lot with the Atlanta Student Movement is the sort of relationship between the students and the adults?

LK: I called my 19-year-old grandson [laughs].

JB: [02:11:45]

EC: Alright, is what happened in spring of 1961 around the, you know, the sort of compromise, the – I don't know if that's something you want to talk about, for the record.

LK: Yeah, I'd be happy to. On the first of February 1960. Well no, back during the fall campaign, the Chamber of Commerce types and the mayor, all of them were kind of trying to settle this, but the whites merchants would not agree. [Pause] The powers that be in the white community wanted to try to see if they could find a way to settle the situation on their terms, or terms more favorable to them. And so, they had a series of meetings out in the black community with these Negro leaders who were not in charge of the Movement. They were going to be negotiating for us. Well, once they put all these plans together, they were going to integrate everything after the schools desegregated in the fall. No after the schools desegregated, not in the fall, but whenever they did it. Someone said in that meeting – I wasn't there, but I was told by Senator Leroy Johnson – someone said, "Well whose gonna – we don't control the students. They only meet with us when they're going to do strategy. How we gonna tell Lonnie King? We can't do it unless we get him involved."

EC: Did you know they were having these meetings?

LK: Nope, nope. Did not. They were doing it behind my back. So Jesse Hill said, "Well, I can get him to come to a meeting." And they said, "Can you get him to come to a meeting and he won't know what it's going to be?" He said, "Well, he trusts me. I can get him to come." And sure enough Jesse Hill called me to ask me to come to this meeting with the Chamber of Commerce. "Most important meeting of your life." "But what is it about again?" "Trust me. Trust me." And so I said, "Okay." So when I got to the meeting, here are all these powers that be

that I've been battling along with the black leaders that were kind of pushed to the side because they didn't have the troops. I had the troops, you follow me?

And so, they presented to me the proposition. They were going to integrate. By this time now there's the court decision that the schools have to integrate by the fall. See they first had these meetings in late December, January, but then the court ruled and said they were going do it now after the schools open. Desegregate. And so they wanted a verbal agreement with me to do that. And I'm not going to do that. So, Daddy King jumped up and he said, "I'm tired of you boy. You're going to wreck this town. [02:15:00] I baptized you." And so I just ignored it, and the irony of it all, Dr. Crosby, was that the man who came to my defense in that meeting was a man named Frank Neely, who was the Chairman of the Board of Richards Department Store. He was sitting directly across from me and had to hit me on my leg with his cane. He said, "Reverend King. He's the only one here who has a constituency. He was elected. We all appointed ourselves." Because what I wanted – I said, "Let me take this proposition back to the group that I'm representing," and that's what upset King.

EC: So this meeting that you were at, this was white and black?

LK: I was snookered into a Chamber of Commerce meeting.

EC: Okay so it wasn't just – for some reason I thought there was a meeting that was with the black leaders. But this was –

LK: No the black leaders were meeting –

EC: Yeah I know they were meeting with them –

LK: They were meeting with them separately, and they pulled us together because they had to get me into it.

EC: They pulled you into the whole group. And you were the only student.

LK: Herschelle Sullivan joined there.

EC: She was at the meeting as well?

LK: I asked her to come with me. Right. She didn't have anything to say, but she was just there because I wanted a witness. Well, when Neely made that comment that I was not wrong. Ivan Allen and H.E. Waldon called for a recess. And this time Dr. Clement came over to me and – he's president of the AU. He came over and said, "You are between a rock and a hard place." I said, "Yeah. He said you're damned if you do and damned if you don't." And that's all he said. Williams said, "I don't know what to tell you." That's a real state man. And then over comes one of my great admirers – I mean, he was a great admirer of mine and I was a great admirer of his – Mr. John [H.] Calhoun, who had been the head of the NAACP. He had gone to jail rather than give up the NAACP list to the government that was going to fire these teachers. He says, "Lonnie, I think you ought to go along with this." I said, "Why?" He said, "Are you aware that this is the first time that we have ever been able to get white folks in the South to agree to voluntarily do wholesale desegregation without it being mandated by the federal court? I said, "Yeah, I'm aware of that." He said, "I'm 60 years old, and I have been segregated every single day of my life and if I have to wait from March until September when I can go downtown and eat anywhere I want to eat and spend my money without being put in the back, or being put into the colored section." He said, "That's a short time." He said, "I know you don't like it, but I recommend as one of your advisors that you go along with it." I thought about it and I said, when we reconvened I said, "I will go along with this on two conditions. One, that it's in writing and two that I will also be able to go and present it to my students." And that's kind of the way things ended.

When we left the meeting and before I could get back to the school, Ivan Allen had held a press conference. I guess he had the press out there in the anteroom somewhere. He announced that the "Negro student leaders have agreed to end the boycott and that the lunch counters will be open tomorrow, segregated." That's was all he had to say. And there was a firestorm in this town. I mean a literal firestorm. That was when I think the whole town realized that the community had backed us and they were upset. They knew that we were probably close to victory. So I went back and presented it to the students, and Herschelle and I resigned, because we had just been very much pressured into this meeting.

EC: Did you have any thoughts at that time of going back to the students and saying, "Okay, we're just going to keep going?"

LK: No I did not. I did not. I just went back and I resigned, Herschelle resigned, and the students unanimously [02:20:00] refused to accept our resignations. Said, "You have taken us this far, let's call a mass meeting and see what the public thinks." So we called a mass meeting for the tenth of March at the Rush Memorial Baptist Church. No, not Rush Memorial. Not Rush at all. At Dr. Stinson's church, Warren Memorial and over 2,000 people showed up *inside*. I don't know how many folks were outside. They had speakers all over the place. It was a wild, wild session. They condemned all the adult leaders for what they had done. All of it. And Daddy King got up and said that he had been fighting for civil rights – he was trying to get order – for over thirty years in this town. And before he could make the other sentence, a woman in a white dress, a nurse, got up and said, "And that's what's wrong." When she said that, the place erupted. King had to sit down. Well I had spoken to M.L. earlier and he had just come back to town. He had a little cold. I called him up and I said, "I need him to come and calm this crowd down." I

said, "Because I'm nervous about what's going to happen here. They just booed your daddy." He said, "Okay, I'll be there."

EC: So he wasn't there to start with.

LK: He was on Sunset. But no he was not there. But when he got there, I told the Reverend Borders that he was there. Or whoever was in charge. I said, "We need to let M.L. speak." So when King got up there, man he made the greatest speech of his career. The March on Washington speech does not compare to what that man did that night. He took that crowd to the mountaintop, to the valley, he mixed a lot of different speeches into one speech. He had tears in his eyes as he was talking because they had just booed his daddy. But the one thing he said that I think really carried the crowd was when he said, "The agreement may not be all that it should be. But, we cannot afford to have the cancer of disease of disunity in this community. Because if we do, we'll lose. We gotta back this. It's not perfect. But it's a start." And the people calmed down. I mean he literally calmed that who crowd down. I mean the guy was a pied piper.

So by now the students and the town kept the boycott going. I mean, even though the agreement was there, they still wouldn't go back down there to shop. Reverend Wilburn got up, James Wilburn from Union Baptist Church got up and he said that, "We're not going back downtown until after September." In other words, "If you are going to integrate in September, we'll come back in September." But it was a very, very, powerful meeting. Of conflicting forces. You had the students, you had the young adults, the "Young Turks." You had the Old Guard, and you had one or two whites in the audience. Ivan Allen was in the audience, the former mayor. He was in the audience. He's the one who engineered this thing. He was in the audience.

EC: He was the one who made that press conference, right?

LK: He was in the audience. He was in the audience. And in one of his things he wrote that he did not realize how powerful that man was until he went to that meeting.

EC: Yeah. Was he there to watch and make sure who said what?

LK: Spy. Spy. Spy. He sat in the back, way back in the back.

EC: So it sounds like from what you said and what I've read that the vast majority of the people in the community, at least who were expressing their opinion, were really against that decision.

LK: Absolutely.

EC: But that it's this small group of traditional leaders that's made this – that's negotiated this and was put in that, you know, once you are in that position, then people went along with it because of that issue of unity?

LK: I think so, yes. So here's the deal. I think that a lot of the people were angry because we had – well I had been tricked.

EC: Right.

LK: A lot of them were angry about that. But on the other hand, I think the more sober people realized that we had never been to this place before in this town and I think they just decided to back [02:25:00] down and just say, "I'm not going to go downtown." But let me tell you – the one thing that has not come out that often – I asked at the height of the boycott, I asked people to send me their credit card, Richards credit card. I asked a rhetorical question. "If a college student asked you to send him or her your credit card today, would you send it?"

EC: [Laughs]

LK: Three hundred and fifty three people sent me their credit card. And we put them in safety deposit boxes at Citizens First Bank and we sent them back to them when the boycott was

over. I'm telling you that because that tells you, even though that's a small number, that's telling you the breadth, and the length, and the depth to which this movement had reached the masses. Not the classes, but the masses. You know, when people believe enough in what you're doing to say, "I trust my credit in your hands." How did those folks know Lonnie King? The college student. Who's he? I'm not some prominent preacher, but we had been – but I think people saw that I was honest. I wasn't trying to steal anything. I wasn't trying to get anywhere – I was just trying to end this system of segregation. That's all. And people backed it. Again it's that fast dime versus that slow dollar.

EC: So, if we are going to wrap up the videotape portion of this soon.

LK: I'm going to let you carry. I'm going to respond.

EC: I was actually wondering if you'd like to – if we need to end it for you. You said you needed to go at four.

LK: Yeah.

EC: Would you like to say a few words about how this has impacted your life and influenced you? What you think is significant to use for the your last ten minutes in this forum? Perhaps we can follow up either in another format or another day?

LK: Dr. Crosby, I see this as a continuation of a journey that began in my life with my granddaddy when you think about him recruiting those fifty cent memberships. He had his collar turned on backwards as a preacher. And I'm sure he was alive because he was a preacher. Because to be a member of the NAACP, even in some of these towns today, is dangerous. And so I think in a way I was in the right place at the right time with the right whatever to be able to bring all this stuff to bear in one place at one time in 1960. But I was just one of a lot of people, at least a hundred of us I think, in different places who had a similar kind of a role. Some much

larger, some a lot smaller. The thing that I see in retrospect is that the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s was the greatest movement in this country since the ending of slavery. Because what it did was it – the movement acted like a volcano erupting that become something akin to a giant firecracker that when it got to a certain apogee, those firecrackers that explode, and things just kind of simmer down. When African Americans, Negroes, challenged the system and won, and got Title VII, which had in it the section dealing with discrimination based on race, color, creed, national origin, sex – that opened up the floodgates, or that created the umbrella that created the groundswell for the women's movement, the Latinos, the gays. And so when these things, the embers began to flow back down and reach all kinds of people.

The irony of it all though is that the masses of blacks, men who lost their lives or whatever, they're still at the back of the bus in terms of economics. And women are – have taken over, they have become, almost, the conductor of the bus. [02:30:00] When you look at the Fortune 500 companies, there are proliferating all over the place, Hispanics are doing a great job, even though they trying to hold them down, they are doing a great job of beginning to inculcate themselves into the mainstream. Asians have done the same thing.

But I cannot just blame the system entirely on the plight of African Americans. I think it also has to do with a lot of African Americans not preparing themselves as they should for opportunities as they open. And for also not being long distance runners, too. We have to accept, in my opinion, that there are going to be people around who do not like you. Who don't like how you look, what you wear, your color. That's always the case. I mean people aren't going to marry people that don't –that don't appeal to them. So you got this prejudice going on that's almost innate. But how do you overcome it? You overcome it by preaching, changing the laws, and hopefully we can change the customs in the long run, change people's attitudes. But not

enough of the African American community, in my view, is willing to realize that many of us are born looking up to the bottom. And in order to get out from the bottom you've got to work. You've got to work.

A classical example is one that you may have seen in the newspaper, on MSNBC the other day. There's a young woman in town who finished high school as valedictorian of her class a few days ago. A young black woman. She and her sister finished – her sister was the salutatorian at another high school. The two of them, plus two other siblings, and their mother have lived in a homeless shelter for the last several years. They had to turn out the lights in this homeless shelter at a certain time. So what did this young woman do? She put a blanket over her head and she used the light from her cell phone to study. So now she's coming to Spelman College on a full scholarship, this is the first bed that she can sleep in in years. She's not coming as a freshman. She's coming as a junior because she took these advanced courses while she was going to high school. She wants to become an oncologist. I don't know what her sister wants to become. But apparently, she didn't say, "Oh I'm black, or I'm in these bad circumstances."

The question is how do you get yourself together to get out of that circumstance? And I don't think we have enough people in my community who are trying to encourage, are trying to write the right thing on the young people's slate. That's part of my problem as I see it. So I'm going to go to my grave, maybe later rather than sooner, but before I go, I certainly hope that I can encourage people to take a second look at what's happening. We cannot afford to blame the system for everything. Because we are part of the system and we need to do our job to try to get these young people. That's the hope of this whole world attuned to looking for the top.

EC: Thank you Mr. King. I appreciate that.

[Recording ends at 2:33:48]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Sarah E. Summers