BROCK MUSEUM/GREENSBORO COLLEGE ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Justin Payne

INTERVIEWER: Lewis Brandon

DATE: February 26, 2009

JUSTIN PAYNE: All right. This is Justin Payne interviewing Lewis Brandon on February 26, 2009, in the basement of the Greensboro College library. To begin with, I'd like to ask you a couple just entry level questions to get to know you.

LEWIS BRANDON: Okay.

JP: What's your date of birth?

LB: June 22, 1939.

JP: Where were you born and raised?

LB: Asheville, North Carolina.

JP: What are the names of your father and mother, and where were they born?

LB: My father's name was Lewis. He was Lewis Abraham Jr. He was born in Union, South Carolina. My mother's name was Orita[?] Garrett, and she was born in Asheville.

JP: What level of education did your parent's have?

LB: High school.

JP: What sort of work did your father and mother do?

LB: My mother was a homemaker for most of my young life, and then she became—became a cafeteria manger at a private school. My father worked between hotels and the railroad. He was a Pullman porter.

JP: Where and when did you attend high school and college?

LB: I attended high school in Asheville. I graduated from Stephen Sleet High School in Asheville in 1957. It was an all-black high school. And I left there and came to North Carolina A&T [University]. I graduated from A&T with a BS [bachelor's of science] and a master's degree.

JP: How would you describe the social economic climate in which you grew up?

LB: I grew up in a very segregated society. I was apart—segregation still existed when I was growing up, and I was a part of the movement that brought about some changes that ended segregation in the mid-sixties. So black people, when I was growing up, were relegated to segregated areas.

JP: How would you describe your education through high school?

LB: Very good. I had no problems when I got to college. And most of the students who left high school with me went on to achieve great things.

JP: All right. Now I'm going to start asking you some questions about J. C. Price [Junior High School].

LB: Okay.

JP: How were you affiliated with the J. C. Price School?

LB: I went there as a teacher, a science teacher, in 1968, and stayed until the end of 1970.

JP: What attracted you to J. C. Price?

LB: One, I was needing a job, and the other, they needed a science teacher. So I accepted the position. I had been there once before and was very impressed with the school and how it was conducted. Toward the end of the late fifties, my—one of my education classes went there for a conference, and was very impressed with what I saw. I didn't know that ten years later I'd be back there working.

JP: Did you live in the Warnersville area?

LB: No, I lived in Eastern Greensboro, the Benbow [Road] and Washington Street area. But I could walk from where I lived to J. C. Price, and I did. I walked to work and back.

JP: The community where you lived, what was that like?

LB: It was an all-black community. It was—the house that I was living in was—is known as the Sebastian house. It was built by Dr. Sebastian, who was one of the founders of L. Richardson [Memorial] Hospital, which was across the street from where I lived. But it was a segregated community in East Greensboro, not very far from A&T's campus.

JP: How much connection or interaction was there between the Warnersville community and the teachers or administration at Price?

LB: A lot of interaction. In most black communities, there're several entities: the church, the school, and the home, and so people were in and out of the schools all of the time. I often visited homes of the students that I was teaching. You would see parents bobbing in and out of the school to check on their kids. There was a good relationship between the school and the community.

JP: When you visited their houses, was that part of the school policy for teachers to do that, at that time?

LB: It was policy and practice. I mean in many instances black teachers lived in the neighborhoods that they worked in, so this was a carryover of that. I can remember in my neighborhood back in Asheville, my second grade teacher lived up the street from us. I would see her on Saturday nights because he son was the paper boy, and she would come around with him to collect. And then when I went to the church, a number of my teachers and the principal of my school were members of my church. So there was an intimate connection between the home, the school, and the churches.

JP: And that was very strong in Warnersville and J. C. Price?

LB: Oh, yes. Yes. You know, the school kind of was an extension of the home because we were able to disciple children beyond the home. Parents gave you that right. And then when the kid got home, they got another spanking. [laughs] Not that I spanked kids at school, but it's that relationship. You had a right to disciple kids and say things to kids that you probably couldn't say to them now.

JP: So you didn't actually have a paddle?

LB: No, I didn't. No. But other people did. The principal apparently had a paddle.

JP: Who was the principal there while you worked there?

LB: I was hired by Mr. [Abraham] Peeler, A. H. Peeler, who was a long time educator and civic leader in this community, who grew up in Greensboro, whose father was the president of Bennett College.

JP: Did he stay on as principal your whole time while teaching?

LB: Actually, he retired the end of my first year. Then [Melvin] "Mel" Swann became the principal, for the rest of my tenure at J. C. Price.

JP: What were some of your most fond memories while at J. C. Price?

LB: The kids were very energetic, very smart, very inquiring. And I still carry a folder with the names of my first class there. I had a little biographical sketch of them. And incidentally I had an opportunity to share one with a student a couple weeks ago I met at a place she was working. So I made a copy and gave it to her, so she could she what she was thinking about forty years ago. But with the kids, they were great kids and very smart.

And then my peers, my faculty—my fellow faculty members were very talented people—musicians, artists, scholars, you know—so it was a joy to work with them. And incidentally we still—The few of us that remain, we still get together twice a year to celebrate our friendship.

JP: About the teachers, how would you judge the quality of education that was given at Price?

LB: [coughs] Well it probably exceeded the quality of education anywhere else. I mean [in] black schools, many of the teachers who were teaching had master's degrees. And even though they went to schools in the South, they attended the universities in the North: Columbia University, New York University, Ohio State [University]. I mean you can just go down the line, and this was where they got their post-secondary—well their graduate degrees, from these institutions. And they were constantly going to school because, you know, when I was growing up the saying was that there are three things you can be: you can be a doctor, a lawyer, or a preacher—well and the fourth would be a school teacher. So many people who started out looking at other professions ended up being teachers. I started out as a pre-med student, but ended up teaching, you know, because getting into med schools for a lot of us was very limited.

And Price was unique. Mr. Peeler was a visionary. He was one of the first people who used all the vision aids, to a large degree, in schools. And he went around training

people in the use of all the vision aids. He had a darkroom at the school. The school had its own radio station. Kodak and RCA-Victor gave the school equipment back in the forties when—and the only school in North Carolina that received something was J. C. Price from these companies. Price was a very outstanding school.

JP: Would you say it was a forerunner in, or a—one of the best schools in the area—at least in the area, if not the state—for education?

LB: Yeah, yeah. It was, yeah. Bar none.

JP: Despite the limitations put on it by segregation?

LB: Yeah, bar none. It was a topnotch school. You look at some of their graduates, some of the graduates of Price, these are people who have accomplished great things.

JP: Do you know—I mean this is an awkward question to ask, because I know a lot of the people—other people I've interviewed don't know the answer to this, and it's a little bit odd to expect you to know the answer to this: but do you know how the education at Price actually compared to white schools in the area?

LB: We don't—Yeah, we don't know that because of the separation. But I mean when you look at the students and the mark that they've left, many of them ended up becoming professionals, you know. One of my students—that first class I had—is a physician in Stone Mountain, Georgia. Other students: school teachers, business people, lawyers. One of the A&T four, who started the sit-in movement, came from J. C. Price.

JP: Ezell Blair [Jr.—now Jibreel Khazan]?

LB: Ezell Blair. And then—I know his name would escape—Blackwell[?], who was [sneezes] a part of the [President Jimmy] Carter administration as a secretary. So I mean you can go back and trace and find people all over the place. Arthur Price[?] [unclear] because an international jazz singer, went to school there. His brother Red Price[?], a musician. So students did quite well. [coughs]

JP: Did you have much interaction with fellow white teachers in Greensboro or the district administration?

LB: Well the only white teachers I had contact with was we had one—three teachers at Price, in '68 and '69. And that was my only contact with white teachers, because we were still basically segregated.

JP: Do you remember any of the extracurricular activities at Price?

LB: Oh, yeah. There was always something going on—baseball games, football games, the basketball games, the dances, the programs in the auditorium, skits, dancing, the dance team, the cheerleaders. Yeah, I mean all of that.

JP: Do you remember any academic—

LB: And the band. What?

JP: Do you remember any academic clubs?

LB: There was a junior—something like a junior crown and scepter club, junior honor class, there was a science club, photography club. [coughs]

JP: How did these extracurricular activities and academic contests contribute to your students' education?

LB: Well they were an addendum to that. It was a way for kids to—to take the theory and apply it. You talk about music and they'll take a band class, but they could go out and perform and they can—you know, they have the marching band, a very good marching band, so there was opportunities for them to showcase their works. In your science classes, if you engage in a particular topic, you can do posters and science projects and things of that nature, which can help buttress what you have learned in the classroom.

JP: What are your memories or impressions of Principal Peeler?

LB: Well let me put it this way: I had a reputation of being somewhat of a radical in this community. I had been engaged in all the social change movements in Greensboro. And he kind of went out on a limb when he hired me, because I was having difficulties getting employed in other places. So I used to tell them that, 'If these people are mad with me," I said, "you're the one who is to blame for this, because you're the one who gave me a job so that I could stay in Greensboro." But we had a very good relationship. We often talked. He would—you know, I would always get these notes and things that he saw that he thought I might be interested in; he would drop it in the mail and send it to me.

But we, from day one—I started working with him—we used to have what we called OEO [Office of Economic Opportunity]. It was a federal program in Greensboro, and I was on the board. And a part of that was the Head Start program, and he was on the Head Start board. I met him during that, and later became one of his teachers.

But no, he was a great person. He was very conscious of what was going on in the community, and very active in trying to create equity in the community. He was a very good photographer, and his pictorial history of Greensboro is tremendous. I think much of it is in the [Greensboro] Historic Museum now.

JP: Do you remember what sorts of disciplinary standards and expectations he had for students and teachers?

LB: Very high. He wasn't one of those people who looked in on you all the time, as a teacher. He wasn't standing over you, but you knew what his expectations [were]. He developed a booklet that he gave to us called "First Pages." And at the beginning of each school year, he wrote out a missive on what he expected of teachers for the coming year. So that's—You measured up to that. And then every morning when you signed in, there was something on the counter, near the sign in books, that kind of reminded you of what the expectations were. That's how he conveyed what he wanted from his teachers.

And he could be a very stern disciplinarian when it came to students. I understand he used to paddle some. But he used other means of persuasion, taking kids out and showing them kinds of things that they could do, or some of the alternatives to what it was they were doing. He ran a tight ship. But he was very easy going, mild-mannered person.

JP: You said you taught while—When Mr. Peeler retired, how did the student react to that, to his announcement of his retirement?

LB: You know, they knew the new principal, because he was the assistant principal, so it wasn't a big change for them, because the person and other people who were stepping into place were already there. That's unlike bringing somebody in who didn't know the school, didn't know the teachers, the students, or the neighborhood. Mr. Swann did, so it wasn't so much of a—you know.

JP: Were they sad or disappointed or anything to see Mr. Peeler go?

LB: Well you know you hate to see people go, but you understand that change takes place. And Mr. Peeler was getting up there in age. He had been in the school system for a long time. The faculty had a big retirement ceremony for him and his family, but we all knew Mel Swann, so that helped.

JP: Did you teach at another school after Price?

LB: No, I—Well yeah, but it took sixteen years to get back into the public schools. I had started working for a foundation, Foundation for Community Development, which is based in Durham, but I was here in Greensboro. We were working on social and economic justice issue in the state.

JP: How do you think the desegregation in 1971 affected the students and teachers at Price?

LB: Can you hold? She's—Somebody's trying to get your attention. [pause] Say it again. I'm sorry.

JP: How do you think the desegregation in 1971 affected the students and teachers at Price?

LB: Well it broke the school up completely, because many of the people who had been there for years were moved to other places, so that cohesiveness that existed in that community, and particularly in the school, dissipated. And the other thing was the school became not a junior high school anymore, it became an elementary school. One thing—and this is something Mr. Peeler used to talk about—we had this teachers' lounge that was in bad shape, and the moment desegregation came people came and refurnished that whole room—put down carpet, painted, brought in new furniture, did all kinds of things to upgrade. But that never occurred in the time he was there. He was always asking for stuff. So you know [chuckles] that's kind of how desegregation started there at Price.

JP: Do you think the school and the community lost something when Price became desegregated?

LB: [coughs] Well, yeah. That school and all of the community—schools in the community, Greensboro community, lost because now you got people who are no longer connected to the community working in those communities. So they come in at eight o'clock, and then four o'clock they're gone. There's no bridge building, no continuity. And what is going on in the community, the community is now—is no longer those three things: the school, the home, and the church. It's just the splintered groups.

JP: Do you have any specific memories involving the closing of the Price school?

LB: No, because I was not involved. I was around, but I wasn't close to that. Again, it was an elementary school, so I wasn't really connected. I still had ties with people—some of the families in the community, but not with the school.

JP: Is there anything else you'd like to add about you time at J. C. Price?

LB: I think at that point in my life that was one of the best experiences that I've had. The relationships that I built there—not only with the teachers, but with the families—was great and is still an ongoing thing. I have relationships that I've made there that I still—still engaged in. A lot of the students there I interact with on a regular basis. One of the things I've tried to do is get them to stop calling me Mr. Brandon and just call me Lewis or call me Brandon, as people do. They, "Oh, we don't want to do that." But I still have strong ties with some of my students.

JP: That's about the end of my questions about J. C. Price.

LB: Okay.

JP: I'd like to ask you some questions about the civil rights movement you were involved in.

LB: Okay.

JP: How were you involved in the civil rights movement in Greensboro?

LB: Well I—My engagement started in 1960 with the February 1 movement. My roommate had seen it on television [coughs] and suggested that we go down, so the second day we both went down. From there I became a part of the student executive committee for justice, which was the group that kind of oversaw the demonstrations from that point on, and then—[coughs] excuse me—was the group that recruited the Dudley [High School] students when school closed in May of 1960. So I was very much a part of that. And then was instrumental in helping organize subsequent demonstrations in Greensboro.

When people talk about the civil rights movement in Greensboro, particularly the sit-ins, we're talking about three different distinct movements. There's the February 1 movement, which desegregated Kress and Woolworth, Meyer's Department Store and Walgreen's facilities in 1960. But they were the only—They were the four facilities that desegregated. Everything else was left segregated. So then February of '61 we began demonstrations at movie theaters in Greensboro, and that lasted until students left to go home for the spring. It didn't have the same kind of momentum that the first sit-in had. And then in 1962—'62 to June of '63 were the mass demonstrations in Greensboro, which broke down barriers in all areas of public accommodation: movie theaters, restaurants, hotels, that kind of thing. So I was involved in all of those, from the early sixties on through '63, but still continued out in other things.

JP: What particular events or protests did you participate in?

LB: All of them—the planning of them, the actual demonstration. I mean some cases getting arrested, but mostly—Well with the February 1 I served on the student executive committee for justice. In the ’62-’63 demonstration I was the first vice-chairman of CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality, which was managing those demonstrations. And then with movies theaters in 1961, I was one of five people who initiated that drive.

JP: What exactly happened at these protests?

LB: Well you know February 1 that was the constant sitting-in at the lunch counter, the picketing out there. There was one mass arrest in 1960—that was in April 21 of ’60 when forty-five students got arrested. Thirteen of those forty-five were Bennett [College] students. All the other ones involved picketing, marching, mass marches, mass arrests, that kind of thing. Those were the activities.

JP: And it was all nonviolent and all—?

LB: [coughs] For the most part, yes. That was kind of the technique that we had adopted. There was some heckling from other people. There may have been a scuffle or two. But for the most part our involvement was nonviolent, yeah.

JP: Do you have any specific memories that you would like to share concerning these events?

LB: Well they were necessary. If these events had not taken place, I’m not sure when the laws that were enforced at that time of separation would have changed. Because one of the things that happened was we were immediately criticized for going too fast, moving too fast, that Greensboro was a good place, and in time it would work these things out. That was kind of the position of the business community and the media: that we should go slow and that we were affecting good race relations in the community, even though there was this great divide between blacks and whites.

JP: Did any other teachers or students from J. C. Price participate in these events?

LB: Yeah. In ’62 and ’63 it was a community-wide protest. The first two protests were basically students. Otis Hairston, Reverend Otis Hairston, who was the pastor of Shiloh Baptist Church, was someone from the community, and he also attended J. C. Price school. But he was one of the leading ministers in the—all of the protests. But yeah, in ’62 and ’63 the whole community was involved. These mass demonstrations were not just students, but there were people from all segments of the community.

And by the way, people try to give—well UNCG [The University of North Carolina at Greensboro] a bigger role than they played in this whole thing, particularly in

1960. Actually, there were three students from Greensboro College who came up before the women from UNCG came. And the women from UNCG came only one day in 1960. But in the ’61 demonstrations and the ’62 demonstrations there was more participation from Greensboro College and from Guilford College, and I don’t remember UNCG engaged in those during that time. But we used to meet here on campus.

JP: On Greensboro College campus?

LB: Yeah. There’s a—the American Friends Service Committee had—The college secretary was Richard Ramsey, or Dick Ramsey as we called him. And what Dick tried to do was after that move—after the demonstration at the movies in 1961, was to pull the other campuses in too. And so we began to forge this relationship—tried to forge this relationship between all the campuses—A&T—well the five college campuses. And so there were meetings here. We have even—We organized an intercollegiate council where students would be hosting and do things with each other.

So we had planned this big gathering during the Christmas holiday. And after we had done the constitution for the intercollegiate council, UNCG did not accept it. At that time it was Women’s College. Again that was—When I looked at the thing, the line was drawn through “social.” So anyway we had planned this carol—Christmas caroling, and so since we couldn’t meet on UNCG campus, everybody met here. People from Guilford came over here. So we went along Market Street over to A&T and Bennett singing Christmas carols, and had cider and hot chocolate when we got there to the other end of campus.

But Greensboro College had—was open to working with—in the—yeah. Nobody really talks about Greensboro or Guilford. Everybody always raises UNCG, and they don’t mention the fact that the chancellor there called a student body meeting and said, “Don’t go back,” in 1960.

JP: It’s funny how history remembers things. [chuckles]

LB: Yeah, yeah.

JP: How did others in the community and at the school respond to your involvement in the civil rights movement?

LB: [coughs] Well part of the reason I was able to stay here is because I had people who on A&T’s campus who were willing to give me work. Most of my early work was at A&T in the biology department. My teachers, my mentors there found work for me. In fact that’s how I got the job at J. C. Price was that when a person reneged on a job at A&T, my mentor, the chairman of the biology department, began to look elsewhere. He was a

good friend of Mr. Peeler's, so I was able to get that. But for the most part the reason I was able to stay was because there were people in the community who helped us. I mean, you know, there was the Thomas family on East Market Street where I could go and eat, that kind of thing, wash my clothes and take care of myself. The community was very supportive, particularly the black community.

JP: In retrospect, how successful was the civil rights movement in Greensboro?

LB: Well let me put it this way—And this is how I explained it to some students at A&T the other night, because that's one of the questions you always get is about progress being made. And we were at the Carolina Theatre. They were getting ready to put on the performance "Bullet Holes in the Walls[: Reflections on Acts of Courage in the Struggle for Liberation]" at the Carolina Theatre, and it's a performance that looks at 1960, 1969, and 1979, and it's dance, music, and drama. And so we were sitting on the stage and I said, "You know, if we back track to 1960, we wouldn't be here on this stage. If we were in this facility, we would be," and I pointed to the area in the balcony where we would be sitting and the door where they would have to enter. And then I said to them, "The social climate is that today when we came into this building we came in through the front door, and we'll be sitting downstairs, and we're now in this room where we're having a reception." So that kind—I guess that sort of highlights where we are with this whole thing. I mean there are things that—But then I went on to say to them that even though that occur—that is occurring and has occurred, that we still have all these social ills, inequities that exist in the community that we have to work on.

So yeah, there's been a lot of change in the way things are done, but there're still problems. We've got homelessness. We've got healthcare issues. We've got people not working, you know, unemployed, people not able to take care of families. So those are the issues we've got to deal with. We've got issues with our police department, which is very corrupt. And that was the same way when we were doing this in the sixties. A lot of the major fights we had were against the police department in Greensboro.

JP: Is there anything else you'd like to add concerning the civil rights movement in Greensboro?

LB: [coughs] Not really, but it's—You know, one of the questions I heard recently was: now that Obama is president and all those changes have taken place, is the civil rights movement over? I don't think so. That was my answer. I think that when we look at the whole issue of immigration, particularly issues around Latinos in the community, there's the discrimination against gay and lesbians, we've still got civil rights issues.

JP: That concludes my questions. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about or any thoughts you'd like to share?

LB: I think that's it.

JP: All right.

LB: I appreciate it.

[End of Interview]