GREENSBORO VOICES/GREENSBORO CIVIL RIGHTS ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Edward Bryant

INTERVIEWER: Justin Payne

DATE: December 4, 2008

JUSTIN PAYNE: All right, to begin could we—I need to state that this is Justin Payne interviewing Ed Bryant over the phone, from Greensboro College, to his home in Richmond, Virginia, on Thursday, December 4, 2008.

EDWARD BRYANT: Correct.

JP: What is your date of birth?

EB: Eleven, five, thirty-six. [November 5, 1936]

JP: Where were you born and raised?

EB: Richmond, to both questions.

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

EB: My father was Edward Hunter Bryant [Perin?] Sr.—I'm junior—and he was born in Richmond. And my mother—Matilda Ann Rees was her maiden name, and she was born in Gloucester County, Virginia.

JP: What level of education did your parents have?

EB: My father had a high school education; my mother had a college education.

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

EB: My father was in business management for a number of—well most of his career, and my mother taught school off and on.

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

EB: I attended Thomas Jefferson [High School] in Richmond, and you want a graduation date?

JP: Yes sir.

EB: Nineteen-fifty-five.

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

EB: The economic climate—well both were positive, in the sense that it was still post-World War II and the economy was in a sustained growth period, and socially it was beginning to blossom out. But as to matters of race and certain other things, it was still restricted.

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

EB: Excellent. [pause] Do you want me to add anything parenthetically as we go or just respond?

JP: For these beginning questions it doesn't really make that much of a difference. These questions are mainly just to frame your childhood—childhood experience, pretty much.

EB: Sure. Say again?

JP: These beginning questions are more just a standard frame—

EB: Yeah, that's fine. Go ahead.

JP: All right. Were there many black people in the area in which you grew up?

EB: No.

JP: What were—if—do you remember any of them at all?

EB: Growing up?

JP: Yes sir.

EB: No.

JP: All right.

EB: There were none—well, not in my area. There was a black community about two miles away.

JP: What was the general sentiment regarding black people in your community?

EB: Segregation.

JP: Do you remember any specific instances, either positive or negative, which involved black people in your community?

EB: In my community?

JP: Yes sir.

EB: Yes.

JP: [pause] Would you like to elaborate on that?

EB: Well I'll give you—the most vivid example I remember is riding on public transportation before I got a license to drive, so let's say I was fourteen. And at that point blacks were supposed to sit, literally, at the back of the bus if they were displaced by whites. And I was, let's say, fourteen, and I got on the bus and there was a woman, probably sixty, a black woman, and she looked up. Before I could say or do anything, she got up and went to the back of the bus and sat down. And that is imprinted on my mind.

JP: Why did you decide to go to Greensboro College?

EB: At the time I was looking for a small coed college.

JP: What was your major, and why did that subject appeal to you?

EB: I think I ended up with a double major in English and social science or social studies. And what was your other question?

JP: Why did those subjects appeal to you?

EB: No particular reason, just in general.

JP: How would you des—

EB: Well that's not entirely true. My generation, my parents generation, were very—it was very important that we wrote and spoke correctly, so getting into English on the grammar side, then got into literature.

JP: All right. How would you describe the situation between blacks and whites in Greensboro during the time that you attended college?

EB: Segregation.

JP: Did it differ in any significant way from where you grew up?

EB: I really can't opine to that because I was living at that kind of mess of a colligate [chuckles], you know, period.

JP: All right. Prior to 1960, were people on campus well informed about civil rights?

EB: I don't think so, no. It was a non-event.

JP: Did they—did anything—or was anything said on campus regarding the ongoing struggles for desegregation or fair treatment?

EB: After the sit-ins there was a lot, but not a whole lot before, not among students.

JP: All right. Do you remember any specific instances, either positive or negative, which involved blacks in the Greensboro area?

EB: Prior to the sit-ins?

JP: Yes sir.

EB: No.

JP: Were there any—were there many black people on campus during the time that you attended school?

EB: Not in any—other than custodial type work, I don't recall any.

JP: How would you describe the general sentiment on the Greensboro College campus regarding blacks?

EB: Well it really wasn't a point of discussion, so I would assume it was segregationist. But we didn't discuss it as a topic.

JP: Would you say that was similar between the faculty or the administration as well?

EB: No, I think the faculty was a little ahead of us generally. And in particular a faculty member was kind of inspirational in getting this started.

JP: Really? Which faculty member was that?

EB: That's what I was afraid you were going to ask me. He was a social science/studies [professor], and I'm going to have to go back to my annual to find it. I can see him, but I can't remember his name. I can visualize him.

JP: Do you remember what class he taught?

EB: When I go back to my annual I will. But I do recall the conversation—and I think this is important, particularly from a GC [Greensboro College] stand point—that he mentioned to us one day in class that maybe there was some activity in town that ought to check into, or something along those lines. He—he was kind of the spark.

JP: All right. Were there any—well, that was the next question. [chuckles] Had you taken an interest in the issue of race prior to coming to Greensboro College?

EB: Not actively, no.

JP: When did you begin taking an interest in the issue?

EB: Go ahead.

JP: Excuse me?

EB: I didn't hear you, that's all.

JP: When did you begin taking an issue—or an interest in the issue of race?

EB: Well I became aware of it, as I told you, when I was thirteen or fourteen. I mean I became personally aware of it. It was always, you know, separate restrooms, separate restaurants, separate water fountains, which is incomprehensible to anybody—well my daughter's thirty-six and she knows it, but she still has trouble believing or accepting it, I guess. But in terms of overt action, not until GC.

JP: All right. In what way did you participate in the Greensboro civil rights movement?

EB: We went down to the Woolworth's store, and it was packed with people. And once we got in we tried to get up to the [soda] fountain—you know the seats at the fountain. And once we got there we—they were all occupied. They were all occupied by black students, mostly male as I recall. And then the crowd was mostly white, and I think there—[cough] excuse me—a fair number of people were as we were, and that was trying to figure what was going on. And then you had a contingency of what I would generally classify as redneck hecklers. Well maybe they weren't rednecks, but they were hecklers. So it was kind of a—it had an immediate impact. It was kind of a transforming moment.

JP: How did you participate?

EB: I'm sorry?

JP: How did you participate?

EB: We participated in speaking with black students and some white people and then the coup d'état so to speak was when one of the reporters asked for our comments. And we gave comments, and he or she wrote them down, and then they appeared in the paper. And that's when it hit the fan.

JP: What other members of Greensboro College went with you?

EB: There were two men, and I think Lowell Thomas was one. And again I'll have to check. If you have a name it might help me.

JP: Lowell Lott?

EB: Lowell Lott, I'm sorry.

JP: What about Richard O'Neal?

EB: Yeah.

JP: Was there anybody else with you?

EB: No—well, not that I recall.

JP: What did you do once you went down there, other than just speak to them? Did you sit down or anything like that?

EB: No, we couldn't sit down. All the seats were occupied by the black students.

JP: All right. What did you and the black students talk about?

EB: What was going on. We weren't—they were bringing us up to speed, and they were well organized—very well organized.

JP: Did you support what they were doing?

EB: Yes.

JP: Do you remember what day in particular you went down there?

EB: No, it was during the week and classes were in session, but I don't—I mean no, just to answer your question.

JP: Once you—what kind of responses did you personally receive from the white people who were against the protest?

EB: In there, none that I recall. There was a lot of, you know, I want to say—yeah, shouting and derogatory comments being made generally, but I don't recall anybody zeroing in on us. I mean the black students did, but I don't recall the crowd doing it.

JP: Did you return for more than one day, or was that one day the only day that you participated?

EB: Well we—I had ongoing contact with them. And I'm not sure we went back to Woolworth's, but I had subsequent meetings with some of the black leaders.

JP: Once you got back to campus—

EB: I'm sorry, can you speak up?

JP: Once you got back to campus, what was the reaction from your fellow students?

EB: Well after it came out in the press, a lot of them were ticked off.

JP: Did you receive any repercussions for this from the students?

EB: From the students, yeah. We had some signs saying “nigger lover” and that kind of stuff.

JP: What about from the faculty and administration?

EB: Yeah, the administration—at lower levels, anyway—was kind of outraged. And a fellow named Dean Wold was the dean of students, and I had a lot of contact with him because I was involved in student government, so he and I had a working relationship. And after this thing perked for a bit, three or four days, the board—certain board trustees called him and so forth. He suggested that I withdraw from the college, and I refused to do that. Then the next day or two days later the president of the college intervened and, you know, said we were fine and he would sustain our right to speak personally on any issue.

JP: How did you react to the press’s involvement in this issue?

EB: [pause] Say that another way. I mean, I responded to their questions.

JP: Once the newspaper article came out, what did you think about the article?

EB: I thought it was, as I recall, accurate.

JP: Were you upset that they published it, or that you were mentioned in it?

EB: No, no. My father subsequently was a little upset, but he, all things considered, held his tongue. And his company had a plant in Greensboro, and the manager of that plant made sure my father knew what was going on.

JP: Did he actively contact you and try to convince you not to do anything?

EB: My father?

JP: Yes sir.

EB: No. He contacted me but he didn’t—he just cautioned me, as any parent would, to be [cavalier?]

JP: Do you think that your involvement in the sit-ins had an impact on the Greensboro College campus?

EB: Oh, yeah. [laughs] Yeah.

JP: You laugh. Why do you laugh?

EB: Were you asking me or commenting?

JP: Commenting.

EB: Okay.

JP: Why do you—apparently it had a large impact. How did you see that impact on the campus?

EB: Well, from a personal perspective I had a lot of friends on campus because I was a people person. I was active in student activities. So I don't recall anybody accosting me personally on that. But there were signs and different things put up, as I said, about "nigger lovers" and so forth. And frankly we just—we didn't give a damn what they thought because it was painfully obvious to us that there was—you know, something was on the way, and it was positive. [pause] You there?

JP: Yes sir. I've seen—I've been going through some records here at the school, and I saw that you were an author in the school newspaper [*The Collegian*].

EB: Correct.

JP: I read most of your "Around the Cracker Barrel's."

EB: Yeah. You're doing your homework.

JP: [chuckles] Yes sir. How did you—how did you come to the topics that you wrote about for that?

EB: I just—there was no agenda. I was just trying to write on general things of interest.

JP: I know at least some of them were very pro-civil rights. Were there any repercussions for that, that you were publishing in the school newspaper supporting civil rights?

EB: Not that I recall.

JP: Once you did leave GC—

EB: Once what?

JP: Once you did leave the college—

EB: Yeah.

JP: —how did your actions here—did you actions here involving the civil rights movement, did it impact any social relations afterwards?

EB: No, no.

JP: Did you stay aware of the civil rights movement after you left Greensboro?

EB: I'm sorry, say again?

JP: Did you remain aware of the civil rights movement in its ups and downs—

EB: Yes.

JP: —after you left?

EB: Yes. And when the time's appropriate I want to come back to some post-sit-in discussions with blacks. But go ahead.

JP: That was actually what I was about to ask you about, that previously you said that you contacted them and were involved in other movements.

EB: Right.

JP: Could you elaborate on that?

EB: Yeah, sure. There were a number of what I would call alpha or elite-type students in that group, and they were extremely well educated. And a lot of the ones I talked to obviously came from, for a lack of a better term, a cultured background. And a couple of them had fathers who were lawyers or otherwise had established themselves in businesses, I think in the North. I'm pretty sure in the north. And they wanted us to join with them and do a number of things. First thing they wanted us to do was kind of join them in—not a loyalty pledge, but a statement. And then the most, I guess, stringent thing they wanted to do was wanted us to become parties in a suit against the state and federal government.

JP: Did you do those?

EB: No, we didn't do either. That's—that's when I was—I think I'd been accepted into law school, and I'd already raised enough hell. I said, "We've made—," I was speaking for myself. I said, "I've made a statement and, you know, I support you and I will in the press, but I'm not going to go to court and do those things."

JP: What law school did you get accepted to?

EB: University of Richmond [School of Law].

JP: Did you participate in any other movements, any protests, or anything like that?

EB: Not at that time.

JP: Skipping ahead some, I've read somewhere in another paper that you had participated in a community worship service honoring Dr. Martin Luther King. What did you speak about?

EB: I think that was—I think that was on campus, was it not?

JP: I think the paper said it was at a local church right here near the campus, but I'm not positive—

EB: Well it doesn't make a difference. I just spoke on the civil rights movement as it was—as I saw it, you know, through the eyes of Greensboro College.

JP: Have you spoken at any other events concerning civil rights?

EB: Oh, sure.

JP: Could you list some of those, maybe?

EB: Well they have been local and they've been to various groups—activist groups, for lack of a better term. And I was involved for about ten years, between '90 and 2000—maybe '85 and 1995, with a group here called Richmond Hill, and they are a Christian based organization. Their common theme is to bring the cities—i.e. the inner cities—into, you know, the mainstream. So I was active in that group.

JP: All right. [pause]

EB: You there?

JP: Yeah. Another question I'd like to ask you is did you—

EB: Speak up, Justin, you're a young man.

JP: Sorry about that. Have you participated in any civil rights movements in Richmond once you got accepted into law school?

EB: No.

JP: All right. That's the end of my formal questions. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

EB: Sure.

JP: What would you like to add?

EB: Okay. I think that it's important that—and I can't draw a parallel with my generation and yours, because I assume you're in your late teens or early twenties, is that accurate?

JP: Yes sir.

EB: But the civil rights movement was really transforming in the lifestyle that in the South had been the benchmark, and that was total separation. It was very obvious when you came in contact with well educated blacks—and I had not until Greensboro—that that was a myth. And I can remember after talking with some of the black students and

looking at them and, you know, it's eye to eye and toe to toe, that they were just a great bunch of people, depending on who they were and what they were, as opposed to just being black or white. So that was a very transforming moment.

And to bring it to the most present thing: to see [President Barack] Obama elected forty-eight years later after the sit-ins is just beyond my belief, because very few of us get to see something we really believe in happen in such a short period of time. And that, believe me, is a very short period for something this bold to happen.

But I think also that the college set an atmosphere, for lack of a better term, that allowed us to—not allowed us, but, you know, helped us do the things that you're supposed to do when you're learning, and that is explore. And it just so happen that we started exploring something that initially didn't seem as important as it became. But I think, you know, that would kind of be a general thrust. And it's hard to convey the feeling unless you've actually gone through something transforming. I think Obama's election brings that home as well as anything I can think about right now.

End of story, unless you've got something else.

JP: I don't have any other questions, but is there anything else you would like to add about your time you were at the college or in Greensboro in general?

EB: Sure. No, my time on the campus was very positive, and I was proactive in a lot of stuff, the newspaper being one of them. And it was during a period where the school still had the reputation of being an all female college. And that was—we fought that somewhere in those "Around the Cracker Barrel" things. I address that at least once, if not more. And I think we made progress on that, and it was the old fashion way just by being nice and persistent and not screaming and hollering. But they had a lot of faculty and administration who, you know, were older and had been through a female institution, and it was hard for them to make a change. And being young aggressive students, you know, nothing was sacred, so we didn't mind going after that. But it was all in a positive sense. Back in those days, women had a curfew, believe it or not, and the men did not.

JP: Was that in college?

EB: That was of some concern for the women. It was not to us.

JP: Was that a college rule or city rule?

EB: No, college. All college—not all, but virtually all colleges in the fifties and sixties had a curfew for women. And I'm making this up, but let's say it was eleven o'clock during the week and twelve o'clock on Saturday night, and my college love and I wanted to be up all night—[chuckling] not literally—but that was a no-no in all the usual formal ways. But I think, you know, being at the college and being in a city, it's not unlike the

University of Richmond, or more like VCU [Virginia Commonwealth University], I would guess, was positive.

JP: All right.

EB: I thought Greensboro was a good community. In fact we have friends living there now.

JP: Did you enjoy your time on the newspaper staff?

EB: I'm sorry?

JP: Did you enjoy your time on the newspaper staff?

EB: Oh, sure. Oh, yeah.

JP: All right.

EB: I mean I had—I could write about anything I wanted to, and some of the things were pretty controversial—I mean beyond what we had discussed. And I think—it's coming back as I discuss it—but I think one time I went after some faculty members in the school of music, and I caught some flak on that one. I never got threatened on anything except the sit-ins.

JP: All right. I have no more questions for you.

EB: Okay.

JP: If you—

EB: Well send me a transcript and the documents and I'll take it from there.

JP: I will certainly do that. I should probably have those done by the beginning or end of next week.

EB: Okay. That's fine. Thanks for your time, and I'll get back to you after I've read it.

JP: All right. Thank you. And I'm, once—I'm sorry that we couldn't do this in person.

EB: Okay. Thank you.

JP: Thank you very much. Bye.

[End of Interview]