GREENSBORO VOICES/GREENSBORO CIVIL RIGHTS ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Richard O'Neal

INTERVIEWER: Justin Payne

DATE: September 26, 2008

JUSTIN PAYNE: All right. This is Justin Payne with Mr. Richard O'Neal, at his house in Greensboro, North Carolina. It is September 26, a Friday, of 2008. Just for the record, when were you born?

RICHARD O'NEAL: Nineteen-thirty-seven.

JP: Where were you born and raised at?

RO: I was raised—I have lived in Guilford County almost my entire life. I was born in Greensboro Hospital [now Women's Hospital of Greensboro], and grew up in the country and lived various places in Guilford County.

JP: What were the names of your father and mother?

RO: My father's name was Robert; mother's name was Flora, F-l-o-r-a.

JP: What level of education did your parents have?

RO: My mom graduated from high school, and my dad probably went to the eighth or ninth grade.

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

RO: My mother worked in an office when they first got married, and during World War II she worked in my uncle's restaurant. And my dad was—probably the major occupation before he went into the navy in World War II was a knitter in the hosiery mill. He tried—that lasted a few years after the war. And when textiles started to change, he went out on his own and became an independent paint contractor until he retired.

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

RO: I went to Bessemer High School, which is no longer, but there is a Bessemer Elementary School east of Greensboro. And that was part of the consolidation of Guilford County

schools, is the reason Bessemer was eliminated. And I graduated from Bessemer in 1955. I went to North Carolina State University for one year and decided that I wanted to be an engineer or an architect. So I was working that summer and a woman at work suggested that I apply to GC [Greensboro College] because they were accepting men on campus for the first year. So I went and applied. It was very easy then. I took a little ten minute test and the registrar came back ten minutes later and said I was accepted.

JP: Were you in the first year with—

RO: Yeah. I was in the first year of the males on campus. I think that two years prior to that there had been two or three day students, but that's the first year that men were on campus, and they were in the old faculty houses.

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

RO: Working class. In this part of the South, particularly where there were a lot of males, if your dad worked at a—any type of mill, whether it was Cone Mills or any type of mill, and you lived in the village, that usually was considered a lower group. My mom and dad had property that they were given to them by her parents, so they probably considered themselves one level above, although probably it was in reality not any difference really.

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

RO: Well Bessemer was a union school, so I was in school from first to twelfth grade. They had a separate building for the high school. Probably when I graduated there were maybe three-hundred, 325 people in the high school, probably about seventy in my graduating class. So it was a small union school.

JP: Were there any black people in the area in which you grew up?

RO: Yes, there were several tenant farmers in the area around where I lived, because it was basically a farming area. And there, north of Bessemer school about two miles, in what was called the Mt. Zion area, was a large black community. And I'll never forget one of the teachers—a history teacher in 1954, once the decision came down that—the *Brown [v. Board of Education]* decision, he said he didn't mind because he knew that he was going—if they demanded the change immediately, he was going to get some very good football players. So he was the history teacher and a coach. That's the one thing I'll remember, but as far as contact, very little. Very little contact when I was growing up, except when we came from East Greensboro, we went through the eastern part of Greensboro, which was the black community. We would drive through it to get to downtown Greensboro.

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

RO: I would say most people probably didn't think about it too much. It was—the blacks had the area that they lived. Some of them were tenant farmers and they had a small house on the larger farms. And most of the whites accepted this. Probably a majority of the blacks accepted this, at that particular—in the 1950s.

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

RO: Well when my two younger sisters were born there was a black woman who came and took care of my mother and each one of the sisters for probably two weeks after they came home from the hospital. Her name was Novie, and she did that for a lot of the women in our community. Probably what I remember the most was if we were driving through—we left home to go to downtown Greensboro, we were driving through the black community. My older brother, if somebody—if a black man or black woman driving pulled out what he thought was the wrong method, he always cussed about it. But my parents didn't say anything in particular. That would be the only thing that I remember. I rode the bus from the Bessemer community into downtown Greensboro. There was—the whites sat at the front and blacks sat at the back. And I didn't—in general, particularly in school, there was no contact with blacks except with the janitor. And people didn't talk about it, didn't discuss it, it was just the way things were. Really people probably didn't think too much about it.

JP: Why did you decide to go to Greensboro College and stay there for as long as you did?

RO: I was encouraged by a middle aged woman were I was working during the summer to apply, because as I said earlier at that point it was very easy for a male to apply and be accepted. And it was—I was expected to go to college and to graduate from college. That was just my parent's attitude, and I accepted that. And then once I got to Greensboro College, although I was a day student, I was on campus a lot. And I enjoyed it. You have to remember, there were about six-hundred female students and probably, counting day students, forty males. And that probably—I'm sure that was very appealing to nineteen year old when he first—for someone who first started there.

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

RO: I started out as a history major, and changed between my junior and senior year because I didn't get along too well with the professor. There was only one major professor in history at that point. And I had always enjoyed the courses in sociology, so I switched majors to sociology. That was my AB [Bachelor of Arts], was in sociology with a minor degree in history. And it was very easy. I just went into the registrar office—it was one of the Brock's that was the registrar; I can't think of the rest of her name—and I told her I wanted to change. And I don't think they had ever had to deal with men, because they went to GC, they went to work after college at GC, and she just accepted it. She didn't

inquire on why I wanted to change. She just allowed me to make the change of majors, which I don't think would happen nowadays with consoling.

JP: How would you describe the situation between blacks and whites in Greensboro during the time that you were attending college?

RO: There was—it was a—as far as I can recall, it was almost completely a segregated community. East Market Street, past the underpass—which is still there today on East Market Street—was the black community. And west of that was—and north and south, was the white community. At that point, once you pass the underpass going east on Market Street, there was probably four or five blocks exclusively for the black community, of any type of business you could name was in that particular block.

JP: Was this Warnersville?

RO: No, Warnersville is—would be south—would be considered south of Greensboro at that point. This was just East Market, where [North Carolina] A&T [State University] was sort of in the middle of that business section. Market was lined with business. They had theaters and everything. And the renewal—urban renewal in the 1960s tore all that down.

JP: Did this differ from where you had lived previously?

RO: No, because I grew up in Greensboro so I was familiar with that.

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

RO: Unless they had taken a course in sociology or had some kind of life experience outside of the college, I would say no.

JP: Do you remember any specific instances, either positive or negative, which involved blacks in the Greensboro area or on the college campus?

RO: Not on the college campus. Well, probably about 1958 there were four or five black gentlemen who went to one of the public golf courses in Greensboro, and they were arrested under the civil charge. Greensboro High School—which is now Grimsley—two years, probably 1956 or 1957, admitted the first black students. I think there was one girl and one young man who went to the all-white high school at that point. There was a lot of information in the newspaper, a lot of publicity about that. But as I said earlier, people in general didn't talk about it very much when I was growing up, when I was in high school, or even when I was in college.

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

RO: Only except for maintenance, cafeteria workers, maids, there were none. None of the faculty, none of the students.

JP: How would you describe the sentiment on the college campus regarding blacks? How the students, the faculty, and the administrators felt about them?

RO: Probably that the administrators were a little—were weary of what might happen, because A&T and Bennett were well known and very popular colleges at that point and they are just a few—literally just a few blocks away from Greensboro College. I don't think the students in general thought about it.

JP: Were there any specific teachers or administrators who stood out as being pro-civil rights?

RO: I would say I was probably—some of my attitudes were changed, or maybe I just learned something different, a different approach to looking at the situation between whites and blacks. One of the courses I had was entitled "The American Negro", and Gunner Myrdal did a—Swedish—did a famous study in the 1930s about segregation and black and white relationships in the thirties and forties. And that was quite an eye opener to all of us in that particular class. So unless someone was exposed to a class like that or had a professor who was inclined to make comments, in general I would say that other than that there was probably not too much said one way or the other, even by faculty.

JP: Do you remember who the teacher was who taught that class?

RO: It was—I don't think he had his doctorate. It was Mr. Taylor. He was the sociology department, period. I think he got his doctorate a few years after I graduated.

JP: When you—excuse me. [pause] Once the sit-ins began down at the Woolworth's counter in downtown Greensboro, you went down there, correct?

RO: Yeah.

JP: Do you remember which day?

RO: February 1 [1960].

JP: Was that—do you remember which—was that the first, second, third day?

RO: First day.

JP: So you were there the first day that it happened?

RO: Yeah.

JP: Am I right in assuming that you supported it?

RO: Yes.

JP: What prompted you to go down there?

RO: I think that one of the male day students, probably listening on a car radio, heard that there were some black students from A&T sitting down at the counter at Woolworth's. And he came in and told several of us. And there were about five or six of us male students that decided we'd go down there and see what was going on.

JP: Do you remember there names? The guys who went with you?

RO: Well the other two that sat down with me were Ed Bryant and Lowell—[pause]

JP: Lowell Lott?

RO: Lowell Lott, yes. The others I don't remember right off hand.

JP: Did any other members of the Greensboro College community go with you, like any girls?

RO: No, there was just about—it was probably five or six guys that went down.

JP: What did you do when you went there?

RO: Well we saw the Greensboro Four—as they were eventually called—were sitting with a space, a stool at the counter, between each one of them. The three of us just went in and sat down with them. Of course they were surprised. They didn't know what was coming. We introduced ourselves, told them we were from Greensboro College and we supported them. And we sat there for probably about an hour and talked to them back and forth.

JP: Were they supportive that you were there?

RO: I think that they were shocked at first, and then pleased that there was some individuals, white students, that would be supporting this. And I would guess—It probably was three o'clock or so by the time we got there. So according to the newspaper account the next day, apparently they left very soon after we did.

JP: Do you know what time they had gotten there?

RO: Probably sometime—they walked from after lunch, they said. They walked from A&T, so I would say probably sometime around 1:30 be my guess. We showed up maybe an hour, hour and a half later.

JP: What kind of responses did you get from the white people at the store who were against the protest?

RO: By the time we left, there were several people up and down the aisles. There weren't a whole lot; I would guess maybe twenty or thirty. And there were several young white

guys. We used to call them greasers, they had the slick hair sort of like Elvis Presley popularized. And when we got up to leave—the other guys from GC had stayed, but they were there in the background. We sort of went out as a group, and they made comments to us. And one of them sort of tripped—I don't even think it was Lowell or Ed—sort of tripped one of us going out. And I think one of them tried to sucker punch me and I just—I had polio when I was a child and I wear a long leg brace, and I just happened to turn apparently when he did, and he hit the top of my brace. So it—I felt a little jar, but it hurt him much more than it hurt—than it bothered me. But I'm sure he was going for the kidney, he just misjudged it when I was moving.

JP: Upon coming back to campus, what was the reaction from your fellow students?

RO: They didn't know we had been there. No one knew until the next day when our names appeared in the paper with—identifying us as students at Greensboro College.

JP: Did the—how did the faculty, the administration, and the students respond once they did find out that you had been there?

RO: Probably—my guess, probably February 3 I was called into the dean of students office. At that point they had a dean of students for men. It was Dean Wold. Yeah, I think he was from the music department. And we, all three of us, were called in individually. All three of us were told basically the same thing, and that if we wanted to graduate—continue to attend Greensboro College and graduate from Greensboro College, that we should have nothing to do, beyond what was already in the newspaper, with the sit-ins. And I think all three of us asked why. And he said because two members of the board of trustees and one of the largest benefactors of Greensboro College had called the president and put pressure on him. And one of those three owned a sort of localized cafeteria chain, and I'm sure he was worried about integration problems as far as cafeteria was concerned. So I had worked anywhere from twenty to thirty hours a week, attended school full time, and I was a full time student at GC for four years. And I reckon that was the first major decision I had to make as a young man. Because if I continued with this—because we were asked to attend some meetings on campus at A&T. If I continued with that and I was caught, then I would not graduate. So that was of course early February, and I was going to graduate in May. So I didn't have anything else to do with it, and neither did Ed or Lowell. But there were two or three other guys who went to A&T at night for meetings. And that's where the Students for Non-Violent Action was formed, really. That was the beginning of it. And SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] come out of it too, which was another student organization. And one of the guys, after he graduated—I don't know if he did it for a summer or for a year—went to work for one of the student groups down in Alabama or Mississippi. I don't even know if they were even—if at that point they were trying to register people; they were just trying to make others aware of what was going on.

JP: How did your personal friends respond to your actions there?

RO: Well most—most of the people at GC either didn't say anything, meaning they were opposed to what I'd done, or—several people congratulated me. I had been—on February 2, after our names had appeared in the paper, I came from work. I was walking in downtown Greensboro, I had afternoon classes, and there was this student there from Guilford College. At that point, Guilford College had afternoon and night sessions at the building just across the railroad tracks from Greensboro College. And he had taken probably a couple of courses at Greensboro College. He was going—they were driving west on Market Street, and I was almost in front of the campus. And he stuck his head out of the window and said, "Rick, you son of a bitching, nigger loving, bastard, I'm gonna get your ass!" And he drove off, and I never saw the guy again for the rest of my life. And that's when I knew maybe this is—maybe I had gotten myself into a little more than I had realized when on February 1 when we sat down. But that's the only major thing that happened.

Now my mom, three or four days after this occurred, a woman—apparently who she'd been to high school with—called up mother and congratulated her on my stand at Woolworth's. And mother didn't even know about it, and she threw me out of the house. And I'll have to give the Greensboro College administration some credit because—looking in retrospect—because I stayed on campus. There was—one of the guys had a cot. I don't know why he had a cot. And I stayed on campus during the week. And my dad would come by every Friday, pick up my dirty clothes and bring fresh clothing. And I didn't do it that often, because I was still working and I could eat at one of the restaurants downtown, but occasionally I would—at night I would go to the cafeteria. Nobody ever said a word to me. I hadn't paid a penny to go to the cafeteria. Probably maybe once or twice a week I went to the cafeteria and had to eat me a meal. I had a good friend, Joe Mitchell, who graduated from Guilford College, but he had taken some courses at GC. We'd been in Spanish class, the only two males in Spanish class for two years. And he invited me to stay at his house. And his parents were very accepting; so on the weekends that's where I stayed. I basically stayed there until about August that year, until I got a—had my first regular job.

And a friend of mine had asked me recently, did my mother and I ever talk about this. She never said a word to me, and I didn't say anything to her. If she said—if she had asked me something, I would have answered her. But she never said a word to me about the sit-ins or the fact that she threw me out of the house. As it turned out, years and years later I had to take over their finances and get them straight, because daddy didn't mind spending money. And I put—made them direct deposit social security and basically put my dad on an allowance, told him to go to the bank and get fifty dollars a week in cash. That would be his money. He liked it; that satisfied him. And Mother, from that point on until her death—my wife kids me about it—called me her "shining star" because I took

over the finance. I made sure all the bills were paid every month and so forth. So time made a big difference. Twenty-five to thirty-five years later I'm sure she'd forgotten a lot of that anyway.

JP: How did your brothers and sisters take that?

RO: Well my two sisters were too young to really understand. And my older brother was—is eight years older, and he was already out working. He had started his own family. He only said something to me one time, probably the first time he had really heard about it. But beyond that one, he's never said anything directly about the sit-ins or my participation in the sit-ins. Although he is—he's got the typical redneck attitude about blacks. He still does.

JP: You said you were in the newspaper for it?

RO: Yeah, they—that's how a lot of people found out about it because our names appeared in the newspaper. And I can't remember whether it was the morning or afternoon Greensboro paper at that point. But we were on the local—the second section, which was the local section, below the fold. So they—even the newspaper didn't quite comprehend at that point how important that event was.

JP: Did you think that they portrayed the event fairly or—?

RO: Well I think, yeah, they probably—that's when reporters were reporting the news and not making comments, as unfortunately we see too much of today. I think it was just a straight news report. Now later the news, after the sit-ins had been going on a while and the numbers had increased, there was probably a series of editorials in the Greensboro paper supporting the sit-ins and the reasons behind it.

JP: Do you think that your contribution to the sit-in altered the mentality on Greensboro College—on the Greensboro College campus?

RO: Oh I'm sure the campus was made aware that the three of us were involved, directly involved, that it probably made some people reconsider. I don't think my relationship with my sociology professor, Mr. Taylor, was the same after that. He probably was under pressure from the administration for his job for I don't know what they—I have no idea, but I'm sure he was put under pressure because one of his students—probably—and Lowell had been taking some classes—and at least two of his students were involved in that. And it was related to social history, so they—I'm sure he probably, for the rest of that semester, was working under a cloud as far as his job was concerned. I think he stayed two or three more years after that before he moved to another college.

JP: Where did you go after you left Greensboro College?

RO: I—well, before I graduated I had applied at two major employers in Greensboro: Personnel department at Cone Mills and Burlington Industries. And I knew after the first interview with one of them that didn't go well, but I was called back for a second interview on the other one. And I thought that probably I would be offered a job, but I got a call from the—I think the woman who was the assistant director of personnel. [She] said that some things had come up, and they didn't think they could hire me. Of course I will never know, and it's not important in the long run, whether they found out something about the sit-ins and so forth.

But I went to work about three months after I graduated at the Department of Public Welfare of Guilford County, as it was called. And I was a social worker for about four years. I worked for the last, probably, nine months I worked half time so I could go back to school and get my teacher certification, because by that point I decided I wanted to try teaching school. I had to go though—had to take about twelve hours and do student teaching. And when I finished my student teaching, I was down literally to about five dollars. And just by chance I got a call from the Greensboro public schools offering me a position with what was called the North Carolina Advancement School. It was a special school that Governor Terry Stanford set up in the 1960s. And I was hired by Greensboro schools to be their representative. And I taught and I was a counselor there for six months before the next full school year started at Greensboro Public School.

The Advancement School was set up for underachieving eighth grade boys all over North Carolina. And it was in an old hospital in Winston-Salem, and I think they had 250 students from all over North Carolina, black and white, attend. They tried all kinds of experimental things. A lot of the early computer stuff started while I was there. Greensboro public schools had no idea. They may have had somebody from Greensboro public schools I'm not aware of, who even would be willing to try some of the stuff we had there. That was quite an eye opener.

I went from there, very special school, funded very well by the state of North Carolina, and then went to public schools. And I was on my own, just like all young teachers are when they first start. And I stayed—to me I was fortunate. I stayed in that school, taught in that school, for twenty-seven years. I was in the same classroom for the last twenty-four years I taught. And it was as far away from the office as you could get. It was at the bus turnaround and the office was cat—diagonally up as far away they could get. And I enjoyed it. I really enjoyed teaching.

JP: What was the name of that school?

RO: Kiser [Middle School]. It was a junior high until the mid-eighties, and it's still there. It's a middle school. It's over next to Grimsley High School. It's right next to the stadium; the middle school next to the stadium.

JP: Did you remain aware of the civil rights movements that occurred in Greensboro after you left?

RO: Oh yeah. And I taught when they first integrated the faculties in Greensboro public schools. A couple—it was one male and one female, black teachers, who knew who I was because of the initial sit-ins. And they had been—one had been a student at Bennett and one had been a student at A&T. And they had been—probably this was when Jesse Jackson was very active at A&T. They both were arrested for civil disobedience and jail—so called jailed. They had the old polio hospital set up. It was an abandoned hospital, and they just put ten, twelve students in a room because they just didn't have anyplace to put them. [pause] Do you have another question?

JP: Yeah. Did your actions at the sit-ins impact your social relations after you left Greensboro College?

RO: Probably. I was fortunate. I went to work as a social worker. So I would—probably a majority of social workers were inclined to support the students at A&T—at least support the idea. For a few years after that I would occasionally see somebody that I graduated from high school with. And I know one guy in particular crossed the street deliberately because he didn't want to say anything to me. And I met another guy at a movie, and he—I spoke to him and he just nodded his head, that's all. But the ironic thing, fifty years later when we had our high school—fiftieth anniversary of high school graduation—that doesn't sound possible—nobody said a word. And most of them, since it was a small county school, two-thirds of them stayed close by this area, so most of them knew something about it. But nobody said a word.

JP: This is a question—we've gotten some reports at the museum that there were a couple of female college students who went down to the sit-ins a couple of days after you all did.

RO: Greensboro College students? I'm not aware. I don't think so. Now either on February 2 or February 3, Lowell Lott's sister Marylyn Lott and two girls from—it was called WC [Woman's College], or UNCG [The University of North Carolina at Greensboro] now, went down. They had their college blazers on, and they went down and sat down. And it wasn't just the Greensboro Four the second or third day, there were other students involved from A&T. And they sat down, and they were being harassed by the crowds that had gathered at Woolworth's. And they had to be escorted out of Woolworth's by the members of the football team from A&T and they got them into a taxi, sent them in a taxi back to WC's campus. And they received a lot of publicity. And I think because of that, GC was sort of lost in the shuffle. And if they hadn't gone, I don't know if there would have been some repercussions, other than the few things that happened immediately after the February 1 sit-in to the three of us. I think that they generated publicity. Their pictures were in the paper because they were very easily identified. They were three girls, had the

three—I don't know if they do that at UNCG. They have jackets now for each class. They still do that? And I'm sure they got into some difficulties with administration, although that was a public school setting and they didn't have the leeway that private schools like Greensboro College would have. But as far as—

I think when Jesse Jackson was involved—we have a good friend who graduated from GC probably in '63, and a couple of her classmates were very active in supporting Jesse Jackson during the meetings at A&T. Now I don't know of anyone else, besides the three of us and maybe a few students, and the few students that went sometime during February of 1960 to the meetings at night, and the few years later the students who supported Jesse Jackson. But I know at that point there were at least two female students, three maybe four years later, who—apparently they knew Jesse Jackson. They were in meetings with him and so forth. And I've never met Jesse Jackson. Of course I was out—had been out working three maybe four years before he became really so well known at A&T.

JP: That's it for my questions. Do you have anything that you would like to add?

RO: That's a good question. Well, people do make comments about how things have changed, and unfortunately some blacks don't want to accept that, which I think is kinda sad. It doesn't mean things are perfect or things are equal by any means, but they are so different than they were in the 1950s, and just use 1960 as a base date. And I would be interested to see how—one of the Greensboro Four I most respected was [Frank] McCain, and in today's paper he's the president of the board of trustees at A&T, the new president. I'd be interested to know what he has to—what he thinks about [President Barrack] Obama. There's a very strong possibility that he might be elected. It's too close to call. The debate's probably gonna make the difference. And we don't know what forty—what is it, thirty-nine, forty more days before we vote? And this is one time when I'll be glad it's over. I don't know if they'll ever make any changes in our system to shorten the time that people are campaigning. In our present system it's just not possible. There's some merit to the parliamentary system. That's one of the strong merits to me. Our system has worked fairly well, reasonably well.

[End of Interview]