GREENSBORO VOICES/GREENSBORO PUBLIC LIBRARY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEWEE: William A. Thomas Jr.

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EUGENE PFAFF: --significant, and it comes from my interview with John Hatchett. And he felt that when Mr. Farmer came down in the fall of 1962, that he urged that the local CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] chapter suspend demonstrations to give the [Bland] Worley committee a chance to bring out its report. And Mr. Hatchett said he felt there was even strong pressure from Mr. Farmer that this local chapter could lose its affiliation if it bucked the national office on this advice. What would be your response to that?

WILLIAM THOMAS, JR: I, I have no recollection of any such threat or implication. I do recall that there may have been a difference of opinion in terms of which strategy should be used. But I never felt any strong coercion on the part of national in terms of what direction we were going to take. I totally disagree with the amount of influence that the national CORE chapter, or any other outsiders, had on the direction that we took, with the exception of the local people that were actively involved in it.

EP: Mr. Hatchett then--although he hastened to tell me that it wasn't a sharp break, or there was any serious degree of ill feeling--but he did feel that he and Reverend [James] Bush and Lois Lucas had been pushing for more long-term, long-range, economic goals. And that the members of the executive committee and advisors that came after them--or after the beginning of the year of 1963--were for immediate direct action techniques focusing on the public accommodations sites. And that they were more or less told, "Well, you served your function. You can no longer serve as spokesman for CORE." And that this was when Tony [A. Knighton] Stanley and Elizabeth Laizner and several others came into more prominence. What would be your reaction to this assessment?

WT: I don't quite assess it the same way. I never saw it really as a break, as such. I think that any time you have more than one person working, you have a disagreement. There may have been some discussions as to which immediate goals were obtainable. And if I recall correctly, it was our view that it would be easier to see some results in terms of public accommodations as opposed to "economic gains."

The type of objectives that we were talking about, you could--you knew immediately if that lunch counter was open, all right, but you did not, you could not see the economic gains. The economic gains were, in our opinion, more of long-range types of objectives. Not putting them off--you should start working on them then. But the immediate focus was, hey, you can desegregate that lunch counter now. It does not have to be put off. And we want that done now. And I think that was the thinking behind that. Those goals were easily, easier obtainable than the long-range economic issues that we still have today.

And I think history would, would speak to that, would bear us out in terms of our assessment in terms of trying to tackle and solve those types of problems at that time. You still have the same types of problems now.

EP: What was the working relationship between the executive committee and the Coordinating Committee of Pro-integration Groups, on which, I understand, you and Reverend Stanley served? Was it a close working relationship?

WT: In terms of what? I don't quite understand your question.

EP: Well, I gather that, from Lewis Brandon, that it was CORE's idea to set this up to draw upon the resources of the power groups in the black community, to have a united front once the demonstrations began. And that CORE always maintained its independence in controlling the demonstrations, but it was agreed that the Coordinating Committee would speak as one voice through Reverend Hairston.

WT: Oh, that assessment is basically correct. It has been some fifteen years, and the details of much that occurred is quite hazy. I don't know if that's intentional or not. I find that whole period of my life to be very painful and difficult. I, it was not a part of my life that I particularly enjoyed, because I really saw no need for it to have to occurred. But it did happen, and I think we did something to help change history.

But I do feel that CORE attempted at that time to maintain liaisons. We had good dialogue with other people that had similar objectives. And I think we worked well within the framework that we had to work with.

EP: I get the impression that, with the exception of George Simkins and some very activist ministers, that generally the black community was reluctant to ally itself with the activities of CORE until the mass demonstrations made it imperative. Would you say that there was a slow coming around of the support of the adult community, or not?

WT: Well, I think that was true throughout the South. Greensboro's not unique in that. Nonviolent demonstration was relatively new. And to expect people of the adult

community to totally go against everything that they had been taught, looking back on it, is sort of asinine. I think that, again, looking at it, it was a snowball effect. And at that particular time, it was a radical move to be involved in.

I think that at the particular time when we did begin to receive more grassroots support from the adult black community, they were responding to a crisis. And I think that basically, that's one of the big problems that we have now. You cannot maintain that type of intensity--that we do tend to respond to crisis, and that's what they did.

You know, I guess the answer to your question is it did take some time, but at the proper time they did respond. And I think it was a normal type of thing. I think it occurred throughout the South.

EP: One thing that I have a very difficult--it seems like a crucial point to me, but it's hard to pin down. At one time I thought that this called meeting by the Coordinating Committee with Mayor Pro Tem Trotter took place the evening that the students were released--that is, May twenty-second--from the polio hospital. Lewis Brandon says, "No, no, that happened May fifteenth, the night of the first mass arrest," and that it took that long to convince [Mayor David] Schenck to actually name the committee.

Do you have any insight as to--I guess what I'm saying is, was this a condition that the Coordinating Committee got from the city before the students were released? Is this something that had happened a lot earlier, as much as a week earlier?

WT: It, it probably was. Lewis was very active in that. And, you know, quite honestly I just do not recall the details. The thing that sort of sticks in my mind in terms of release--I really think the students were really tricked out of jail. That at the time that they were actually released, I don't--you know, again, if I remember correctly, it was--I think they were told one thing and something else was actually happening on the outside. I don't really recall the details too much.

EP: So they didn't really get out with any promises or concessions from the city?

WT: I think that that may have been rumored. But I don't know if they had actually sat down and had a meeting. I just don't recall the details of that.

EP: I was wondering when you--after the demonstrations ceased, I understand you worked as a field secretary for CORE, in the summer of 1963.

WT: That's correct.

EP: Looking at the correspondence that went between you and Marvin Rich in the CORE papers, I get the impression that they didn't feel they had the money for you to continue

on staff. Had it been your intention to continue working for CORE if they had kept you on?

WT: You mean as a lifetime avocation?

EP: Well, for the immediate future.

WT: No. No. I had all intentions of going back to school in September. That was really a summer type of thing.

EP: That fall there were several interviews with you at, at the CORE office. And you expressed a great deal of dissatisfaction with the kind of statements that were coming out of the Human Relations Commission, the slow progress that they were making, and you said that demonstrations could be geared up again that fall. And there were a couple of small demonstrations, which I gather did not result in the opening of the Travelodge Inn and the Oaks Motel. Is that true, and if so, why was it hard to generate more demonstrations that fall?

WT: Well, again, avoiding the specifics, I would attempt to answer that in terms of generalities. As I indicated earlier, I think that the mass demonstrations [were] a response to a crisis. By the fall, no crisis existed. I think that, you know, you cannot expect people to stay--I mean, at the drop of a hat, to get involved in that type of activity without a certain climate existing in the community. And by the fall, that type of climate was not existing. Even though the problems were still there, the crisis was no longer there.

And in order to motivate people, to get people to react to that type of thing regardless of the goals, and regardless of the fact that people could sit down and intellectualize, "Hey, this should be done, and that should be done", it would take a certain type of climate in order to motivate people to engage in that type of abnormal activity or behavior. No one enjoys walking up and down the street trying to force someone to do something that they should be doing.

So I'm saying that without that type of emergent crisis type of climate, it is very difficult to motivate people. And I think that that's what's happening again now. That that's the reason you don't see more of, you know, the type of demonstrations that occurred in the sixties. And I think that that's probably what happened at that particular point--that without the crisis existing, we would have had to manufacture a crisis and create a type of climate where people would respond.

EP: I understand that there had all along been discussions of what would have been a more--well, I hesitate to use the word radicalizing--but much more aggressive, direct-action techniques discussed, such as the sit down in the square-- which eventually did happen--

the flooding of the major department stores with hundreds of people and then just sitting on the floor. Were these discussed all along, or just as it appeared that the effectiveness of the marches was becoming routine and losing their pressure value against the city?

WT: At what point they were actually discussed, I don't recall. I do know that from time to time we would assess the effectiveness of whatever we were doing, and that from time to time some of us felt that more aggressive types of demonstration may have been called for. Greensboro, perhaps, was one of the more passive Southern communities that I've seen. And I really think that, that they aided in not creating that type of climate where people would have responded more readily, because we did not have the brutality that was faced in some places. That would have raised the consciousness of people, you know. It would have forced people to rally around you. That didn't happen here. So we really--I think the people don't really understand the difficulty and the effectiveness that our leadership had in motivating people. It was not easy. We had to constantly reassess, and see where we were, and try to figure out the best thing to do in order to motivate people to get them to respond.

EP: I understand that there was quite a bit of controversy concerning the sit down in the square. For instance, Pat Patterson says that he was against it, and that there was a division of a number of the people who felt that this should not be done.

I remember Lois Lucas said something to the effect that she was worried that a lot of people who had not had experience in CORE self-discipline and nonviolent techniques were going to be there, and that a lot of the leadership, for one reason or another, was not there. Was there this division over the application of that tactic?

WT: Again, you, you choose to use the word division. I don't know of anything--

EP: Difference of opinion.

WT: Yeah. Well, see, I don't know of anything that we did that was unanimous. It just doesn't work that way. I mean, in the Reagan administration, in the Carter administration, the Kennedy administration, the PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization], wherever. You don't have unanimous--very rarely do you have a unanimous type of situation where people say, "This is what we're going to do." I'm sure that there were differences of opinions. However, as you can see from the effectiveness of it, that when it became time to move, there was sufficient support where whatever we elected to do, it was effective. I'm not really interested on dwelling on the differences, because there will always be differences. Any time you have more than one person, we're going to have differences.

EP: Well, it's not that I'm looking for points to criticize. But in any highly charged and dynamic movement like this, it seems that there are going to be separate factions, if you will, pushing for certain strategies or goals. And I assume that these were present in CORE, in the local CORE.

WT: I think part of the problem is people visualize the local CORE chapter as being a more structured type of entity than it really was, number one. Again, in terms of different goals, different strategies--during the course of meetings, conversations, I'm sure that people came out with different types of ideas. Overall, I would tend to think that our goals were the same. There may have been a difference in terms of timing. There may have been differences in terms of whether or not certain demonstrations should take on more aggressive types of behavior, as I'm sure that there were. But, again, I don't really see that as a problem. I really don't even know how to respond to you, because I could not replay those differences to you now, because I just don't recall who was in favor of what and who was not. I did not see them as that significant. I honestly could not tell you what Mr. Patterson's response was, as opposed to Mr. Jackson's, as opposed to Mr. Stanley's. I just don't know. I didn't see them as that renowned.

EP: I gather that this tactic did have your support.

WT: Oh, sure.

EP: I was wondering, you mentioned Jesse Jackson. And I have the opinion, from a number of people talking, that certainly he was very dynamic, a gifted speaker, but that he did not have the leadership role in CORE that the press popularly attributed to him. And you said that you had no difficulty working with him. Did he try to, to assume more of a leadership role, or was it his understanding that his was a more or less front man role or--

WT: No, I don't think it was an understanding. I think it was just something that happened. Jesse was not one of the initiators in the whole thing. Jesse was an athlete. He was a student leader on campus. And we actually solicited Jesse's support, and we got it. I don't think it was a matter of an understanding, or, there was never a real conflict. I think it was a matter of assessing one's talent and being able to use it to our benefit, which we did.

We recognized that Jesse, at that point, was charismatic. He could speak. And we used it. But in terms of a lot of the detail, day-to-day type of work that, that was required at certain periods, Jesse was not involved in all of that. But it was no problem with that.

EP: Do you recall the members of the task force that originally came down here for the Freedom Highways program? And which of these did you work most effectively with? I

gather that the ones that stayed in Greensboro most of the time were Jerome Smith, Isaac Reynolds and George Raymond.

WT: Yes.

EP: Was their role merely to suggest possible strategies, explain what had been done, or did they try to direct the activities in the local CORE chapter?

WT: Well, again, when you say direct, there was not a dichotomy of, "Hey, I'm your supervisor," type thing. They were here, number one, because we wanted them here. And they had had more experience and the type of leadership qualities that I'm speaking of. How do you motivate people, okay? They had been involved in that throughout the country. How do you get people to respond? Once they respond, what types of strategies are needed in order to get the power structure to move, anticipating that? They had been involved in that. So they were here at that role, more so as advisors.

Again, to reiterate, I never felt any pressure from anyone outside of Greensboro in terms of what we should be about. We were able to make our own decisions with the existence of certain people that you mentioned in terms of being able to benefit from their experience. But short of that, that's what their role was.

EP: The only time--the reason I ask that question is, the only time I saw any really strong directive was one time Gordon Carey [assistant director of CORE] wrote Isaac Reynolds saying that he should go down to Greensboro and convey as strongly as he could, verbally, that CORE did not want Greensboro CORE members to participate in the rallies in support of the Monroe Defense Fund that was currently holding rallies for support of Robert Williams in the Williams case [Williams, a black man, was accused of kidnapping a white couple in Monroe, NC].

WT: Well, see, that was a political matter that I don't really care to get involved in. If you will recall what that Robert Williams case was all about, there were all types of inferences in terms of the Communist involvement, et cetera. And I think that what Gordon Carey was afraid of [was] that if, in fact, Greensboro got involved in that, it would only give fuel to the fire that what we were doing was part of the same mold. And I think that that was a political decision that was made, that, hey, we do not want what's happening in Greensboro to become identified with that, to give people an out to say, hey, you know, it's just a bunch of Communists in Greensboro that's creating all the trouble. I really don't see a real problem with that either.

EP: Before I leave this subject of the role of the field representatives, there was another memo that--again, with Isaac Reynolds--where he said that he was going to hold meetings at

A&T campus. And he used the term, “under the guise of the American Friends Service Committee.” And I wonder why he would feel that he would have to put it under the guise of another organization, rather than just coming out and saying this is--you know, we’re trying to recruit for the CORE chapter.

WT: Oh, I really can’t say. I have no idea of what was happening with that.

EP: Was there much support for CORE as an organization on the Bennett [College] and A&T [North Carolina A&T State University] campuses?

WT: Oh, I think there was a tremendous amount. That’s where all the students came from. There was no real problem with that.

EP: But I gather that the size of CORE didn’t vary very much during these two years.

WT: Well, CORE was, was--it was sort of like a nucleus. I don’t think anyone ever tried to recruit a thousand members. It would have been unworkable anyway. We knew that when we needed numbers, bodies, how to get them. But, you know, hell, I couldn’t have worked with a thousand people, setting up that type of structure to make decisions. It would have been unmanageable.

EP: I gather the bulk of the work that was done, in terms of planning and strategy, was done within the executive committee. Again, I assume for the reason you just reiterated. It was a small group of people that would permit discussion of--

WT: Yeah, dialogue and some manageable decision-making type process.

EP: Did this concept of them taking the decisions of the-- or suggestions of the executive committee to the group as a whole, was that able to continue under the pressure of the day-to-day demonstrations? Or did you more or less just have to present fait accomplis to, to the membership at large?

WT: Oh, many, many times, as you indicated, because of the radical change in events, you did not have time for a democratic type of decision-making process. And many times we made decisions, and we took responsibility for them.

EP: Was there any voices ever raised in objection to this from the membership?

WT: Probably. But, I mean, I don’t recall anything that I would want to get into.

EP: Sure. I was wondering about the--you said you had a good working relationship with the Coordinating Committee. Did this, I gather, ad hoc group continue to monitor the situation that summer after the demonstrations ceased, or did it fade away or end abruptly?

WT: No. If I remember correctly, they did continue to monitor the situation. And it was in existence for even a period after I left Greensboro, if I recall correctly.

EP: Now, I recall that you served on a committee with George Evans. And he told me that the main work of that committee was really the subcommittees. Some were in charge of talking to the theatre managers, some to the restaurant owners, some to the hotel managers. Do you know with which subcommittee you worked?

WT: No, I don't. I would probably tend to think that I was probably involved with most of it, in that my main purpose of being on that committee was to in fact represent the student aspects.

See, we, we had to force the "power structure" to recognize the student leadership. That was always an uphill battle. They didn't want to deal with young black folk because we were up-starters.

EP: They wanted to deal with the traditional--

WT: They wanted to deal with the old traditionalists. And we said, "Hey, they're not in the street raising hell. And if you want us out of the street raising hell, then you're going to have to deal with us--maybe in an unorthodox way, but you're going to have to deal with us." So that was the first accomplishment, to make Schenck sit down across the table with me and talk to me man-to-man.

EP: Ezell Blair [Jr., now goes by Jibreel Khazan] tells me that back when they were doing the sit-ins with Woolworth's, they appreciated the role of the Greensboro Citizens Association, but they felt that students were being kind of shunted aside, and it was kind of--they were getting information secondhand. They wanted to negotiate directly.

WT: Well, that, that's part of the problem that I'm talking about. And it was not until some time that that problem was alleviated. And it was only alleviated at the point where the students became so troublesome that they recognized--we had to tell them, that, "Hey, Otis Hairston don't have those people in the street. Bill Thomas have those people in the street. And if you want them out of the street, then damn it, you've got to deal with me. Don't send messages by him or anybody else." And it got to that point. And that's when we became more involved in the negotiation of the resolution of the problems.

EP: Did that have the support of the older members of the community that were on the Coordinating Committee?

WT: It, it probably did not initially. But the whole thing was an educational type thing for them, too. And they came around. And at a certain point they, in fact, supported that type of involvement.

EP: So CORE always maintained--insisted upon its autonomy to make decisions?

WT: Not so much its autonomy. We had our own autonomy within our own organization, in terms of what CORE was going to do. But we also had working relationships with other groups, in terms of things that we were going to do in conjunction with them.

But I think that what we insisted on was our ability to make certain decisions for us, but also to maintain our identity to be a part of the decision-making process, because we recognized the integral role that we were playing. And no decisions were going to be made without us that affected what we were about unless we were a part of them.

EP: Is it too strong a term to say that you were sometimes suspicious of what the Coordinating Committee would do? I mean, commit CORE to certain agreements or compromises?

WT: It wasn't a matter of being suspicious. It was a matter, again, of, "Hey, we have reached our adulthood, and you are going to have to deal with us. We don't want anyone making decisions."

Part of that old racist attitude of the white folk that were sitting down there [was] they didn't want to deal with no young black folk, you know. And we're saying, "Hey, if you want to solve the problem, you're going to have to deal with us, no one else. Not my daddy. My daddy ain't down there. I'm down here. Now you're going to have to deal with me. I'm the problem and I am the solution." And it was that type of attitude. It wasn't that I had a problem with what George Simkins was about. I wanted to be about it myself. I was capable of representing myself. But they didn't want to get their hands dirty with us. But we had to force them to do that.

EP: The reason, I guess, I keep probing or asking questions on this, in the book that I mentioned earlier by Elliott Rudwick and August Meier about CORE [*CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942-1968*], they said that a lot of communities that CORE went into and established chapters, there was some problems that NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] felt that CORE was pirating away personnel from their youth chapters. And that there was a problem of

sharing expenses, and a problem of one group or the other getting credit, publicity that the other was doing. And I understand this did, indeed, sometimes happen, like down in Charlotte or up at Statesville--

WT: We didn't have those problems in Greensboro.

EP: No problem there. And I gather that was because of the close working relationship with George Simkins?

WT: That's correct.

EP: You had his complete support and everything?

WT: That's correct. George Simkins was probably one of the primary persons responsible for bringing CORE in. You see, again, you have to put that in perspective. But I really don't want to get into it, because it's too time consuming. But if, if you're a historian, you will look at the role that nonviolent direct behavior played in our history. Put it in a timeframe, and then look and see what the NAACP had been about. The NAACP was not that type of organization during that time. They were not involved in that type of behavior. They had to be taught that, hey, this is the way to do things, too, with the exception of going into court.

So I mean, hell, it was friction, you know. I mean, it was an educational process to get them involved, the same way it was with everyone else in the country, because they were primarily a black organization that was working in the area of civil rights. They had never been involved in that type of thing.

EP: Did you--CORE always maintained that its function was very different from the NAACP. Rather than the chapter sending it money, it existed to send the chapters money. Did you ever receive much money from the CORE national office?

WT: I'm just trying to think before I answer that. I don't recall receiving money period from the national office, quite frankly.

EP: Did you request funds?

WT: I don't, I don't really think so. If I--again, it's hazy. Our fundraising activities were basically local.

EP: What sort of activities were those? I saw something about mention of a Freedom Dance, that sort of thing.

WT: Well, we had just basic dances, rallies where people would contribute. But it was nothing major.

EP: I saw repeated reference to a record of freedom songs that were to go on sale and to generate money for CORE all over the country.

WT: CORE may have done that. We in Greensboro I don't think were involved in that.

EP: Well, the reason I ask [is] Evander Gilmer said he thought maybe such a record had been cut over at A&T. Did you know anything about that?

WT: No, not at A&T. I heard of a CORE record being cut, but I don't think it was in Greensboro.

EP: So, so you never got into selling it to generate funds.

WT: No. No.

EP: How about the James Baldwin lecture? I understand that he did come to Greensboro, and that this did generate some funds for the local chapter as well as the national office.

WT: It probably did, but what the details of that was, I just don't recall at this point. I don't even know if the national participated. I just don't know.

EP: Were there a lot of--I understand that CORE was successful in getting Dr. [Milton] Barnes to sign for the bail bonds, at least initially, until the "jail no bail" strategy came into effect. Was it just from him? Was this a broad-based support? I've heard stories that people were listing their property to underwrite these bonds and that this was one aspect of support from the black community.

WT: I think that's accurate. Dr. Barnes played a very integral role. But there were also other black adults in the community that supported us both financially, morally, and as activists.

EP: Were there major expenses for CORE?

WT: What do you call major expenses?

EP: Telephone calls.

WT: We had a telephone bill.

EP: Okay. I know that there were several requests for funds from the field workers, among other things, to reimburse your mother for food fixed and telephone calls made from your telephone. Did these amount to pretty sizeable debts for the CORE chapter?

WT: I don't, I really don't remember.

EP: Okay. The reason--another reason I ask is I talked to [Ulysses] Ralph Lee, and he said he became chairman after you. And that--he said he spent most of his time trying to get CORE out from the financial obligations that it had incurred during the demonstrations. Would you know anything about this?

WT: What type of financial--

EP: He didn't go into details, except to say, generally, for instance, they had to pay rent on their office--

WT: Wait, I'm trying to even picture Ralph Lee.

EP: Okay. He was from Brooklyn. And when I asked him about the sequence of officers, he said he thought that he ran for chairman against Pat Patterson, and won after you resigned as chairman. And that--

WT: I wasn't here then.

EP: I see. Yeah. That would have been the fall of '63.

WT: The name rings a bell, but I cannot put a face on it. You know, again, there was an office, but how much money was incurred in that, I don't know, because the Esa's[?]-- the rent was negligible over there.

EP: So it was over at Esa's?

WT: Yeah. So, again, I don't know of any great financial problems that existed.

EP: I guess I was asking, did CORE make any attempts to try to be--you said there was a very loose structure to CORE, and with the installing of an office--was this an attempt to try to make a more organized administrative structure of CORE?

WT: No. It was just an attempt to have somewhere to work out of, as opposed to my house or the Church of the Redeemer.

EP: I see. Was this office in existence at the time of the demonstration, or subsequently?

WT: I think it was subsequently.

EP: I see. You mentioned that you had some health problems at the time of the demonstrations. And I believe when we spoke in person in Greensboro at the time, in 1980, you said you were lucky to be walking. Could I ask what was the nature of these health problems?

WT: Yeah, but they--I don't really know how they fit into what we're doing here.

EP: Well, I guess the reason I ask is several people said they were amazed that you worked as hard as you did. And that they felt you really pushed yourself physically in doing that. No, it's not important. I just thought I would mention it.

WT: I just--I don't even--you know, I don't see that as any great contribution to anything, with the exception that I did have some health problems. And I've been able to overcome them basically in everything I've attempted to do, with the exception of athletics. But other than that, they are not that significant.

EP: Okay. I gather that it was quite a strain on you. As a matter of fact, you said sometimes you wished you had been arrested to get some rest.

WT: Oh, sure.

EP: That you were going practically on a twenty-four hour basis.

WT: That's correct.

EP: Well, just to summarize this, the way I visualize the demonstration is it's kind of like strategy and counter-strategy, response and counter-response, between CORE and the city administration. Was it a highly fluid situation where you'd have to maybe make plans and adjustments in view of what happened that day, or maybe even an hour before?

WT: That's, that's exactly correct, an hour before, ten minutes before, on the spot.

EP: You mentioned your dissatisfaction over the Human Relations Commission. Was it the fact that it wasn't moving rapidly or forcefully enough to open up these public accommodations, or was it that they really weren't moving to provide the more long-range economic goals?

WT: It was a little bit of both. I think the problem was that there was a powerless type of committee that had to basically use its influence to attempt to persuade. It had no real power to do anything. And with the exception of trying to open up dialogue--which is a very, very slow process--that was it. It had no power to pressure anyone to do a damn thing. So it was, by the nature of what it was, it was a very slow process.

EP: Did you work very closely with other CORE chapters in the other cities in--

WT: Not really. I mean, I knew people that were involved, but I was not that actively involved in other cities.

EP: Was--the most time that I saw this inter-city cooperation seems to be occasionally members of Greensboro CORE would go over to High Point and picket the McDonald's there with B. Elton Cox--

WT: That's correct.

EP: --and they did go to Durham.

WT: We went to Durham a few times.

EP: I understand that there were some pretty powerful and important mass rallies there in which substantive things were discussed about the direction CORE would take in North Carolina. I know at one, Roy Wilkins and James Farmer both addressed the meeting. Do you recall these meetings over at St. Joseph's over there?

WT: I do, but I don't remember any of the details of them. I mean, again, nothing was earth-shattering.

EP: So the focus for the Greensboro CORE was Greensboro?

WT: That's correct.

EP: Did you approve of the end of the demonstrations and the boycott in June of '63, or did you think you should have continued on that summer?

WT: I think the problem with continuing any types of demonstrations on a very intensified level in the summer was the lack of manpower, quite honestly. Students left. They're not here. And we basically depended upon students to a large measure for our support. So, from a very tactical point of view, it's almost impossible to continue anything beyond that point, again, without extreme crisis. So I think that we had, from an intelligent point of view, supported--

EP: I just wanted to bring this to a close by saying at one time I had mentioned that the newspaper talked about you and Mr. Farmer going up to Washington [D.C.] together. And the speculation was that you were going to talk either with Bobby Kennedy or somebody on his staff.

WT: I did have that occasion to speak with the then attorney general.

EP: Oh, you spoke directly with the attorney general?

WT: Yes, I did.

EP: Do you recall what it was about? Was it specifically to try to get him to put pressure on the theatre chains here in town?

WT: I'm trying to remember if--I don't remember if the restaurants were open then or not.

EP: I get the impression that they weren't, that the first big breakthrough came in the first few days of June with the theatres. And that what seems to be reported in the press is that Bobby Kennedy called in the mostly northern owners of these chains and said, you know, desegregate. And that they in turn called down to people like Neil McGill [manager of Carolina Theatre] and Jack Bellows[?]--

WT: I don't know if it was that simplified or not. I have a problem with oversimplifying most things that occur. We did solicit his support, both in terms of ultimately reaching those types of goals, but also in his official capacity as the then United States attorney general. We were concerned about the potential violence, not only in Greensboro, but also in other areas of the country. So we spoke to him about a number of different things. And he was very, very sympathetic and sensitive to the issues that we raised with him.

EP: A number of people who've written about the civil rights movement, particularly people who were involved in organizations like CORE and SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] and so forth, are saying that the perception of the

aggressiveness with which the Justice Department moved under the Kennedy administration has been exaggerated, and that, really, a great deal of both pressure and compromises had to be done with the Kennedy administration.

WT: Oh, they, they were not God-sent. Again, they had constraints under which they had to operate. The president is not all-powerful. And he's a politician, and he wanted to be reelected. He had to be sensitive to the times, even though he was in a position to exert a lot of leadership. And I think he did in fact exert a certain amount of leadership. But there were, again, disagreements with that. And I think many of us felt that they did not go as far as perhaps they could have gone or should have gone.

EP: Did you meet much with people like Terry Sanford or his representatives?

WT: I did have the occasion to meet on several times with the governor.

EP: Do you think he was sincere in trying to not just put an end to the demonstrations, but substantively do something for civil rights and black people in North Carolina?

WT: I think, basically, Terry Sanford was probably a bit ahead of his time in North Carolina. And he, he exerted a certain amount of leadership. And for that particular time, I think, in terms of his efforts, he was as sincere as he could be.

EP: Were these occasional communications, or was the CORE chapter here, either directly or through McKissick or someone else, in constant contact with the--

WT: I was not in constant contact, but we knew that we could get to him if we needed to.

EP: All right. I guess--oh, one additional thing. I gather that Richard Ramsey was basically in charge of trying to recruit white student participation.

WT: I, I totally disagree with that assessment of what Dick's role was.

EP: What was his role?

WT: He was just another member of CORE that was actively involved that happened to be white.

EP: The reason I asked that was someone said that he was a secretary for the AFSC [American Friends Service Committee] in charge of colored chapters.

WT: Yeah, he did, he was employed by the American Friends Service Committee. But his role in CORE was not just to recruit whites.

EP: Was his role as a representative of that organization, or just as an individual?

WT: No. He was as an individual.

EP: I see.

WT: I mean, Charlie Davis was also employed by American Friends. Sarah Herbin at one point--

[End of Tape 1, Side A--Begin Tape 1, Side B]

WT: --organization, that's all.

EP: Did--

[recorder paused]

EP: Did CORE seek out these organizations to work with as organizations?

WT: No, not really.

EP: So they were content to just draw support from the black community and to function as a CORE chapter.

WT: Draw support from basically the black community, but anyone else that had the same objectives and ideology that we had.

EP: Did CORE try to enroll support from the white campuses?

WT: It was not an active type of recruitment.

EP: So if whites wanted to participate, they were welcome, but you didn't go out and send representatives?

WT: No.

EP: Did you--did the CORE chapter have any connection with that week of picketing down on Tate Street by the WC [Woman's College, later The University of North Carolina at Greensboro] students?

WT: I'm not, I don't remember the incident. I'm not sure if I was here at the time or not.

EP: That would have been in the last week of May in '63

WT: What were they picketing for?

EP: Well, it--the legislature passed a resolution at WC to picket the Cinema Theatre and two restaurants on Tate Street that were segregated. And, of course, the paper said it was under the auspices of the CORE chapter at WC.

WT: We probably were involved. I just, again, I just don't remember the details of it.

EP: Well, to sum up, you--did you leave Greensboro in the fall of '63 and therefore cease your involvement with the CORE chapter here?

WT: Yes, I did.

EP: Did you ever come back and work with it again?

WT: No.

EP: So your total involvement ended with '63?

WT: That's correct.

EP: But your younger brother, I gather, was more or less the last chairman of the chapter.

WT: That's right.

EP: Did--CORE shifted its activities down to Mississippi and Louisiana after the demonstrations here. And it looks like most of the CORE chapters did fade away within a year or two.

WT: Well, again, I think that what happened--their demise came about as a result of the elimination of the crisis that they responded to.

EP: So you didn't feel that the national office abandoned its chapters.

WT: Oh, no.

EP: To summarize, if I may, your position here, you're saying that these inter-organizational rivalries that existed in other parts of the country did not manifest itself in Greensboro.

WT: No, not to the same extent.

EP: And that you did work well with George Simkins of the NAACP and with the adult black community.

WT: That's correct.

EP: And, I gather that you think that the demonstrations were effective in at least initiating this process of voluntary desegregation prior to the '64 Civil Rights Act.

WT: That's correct.

EP: And the one last point, I gather--Hatchett, Reverend Hatchett felt that it was a mistake for the "jail, no bail," because it took troops off the street that you needed. But I gather that you think just the opposite.

WT: Yes, I do.

[End of Interview]