GREENSBORO VOICES/GREENSBORO CIVIL RIGHTS ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

INTERVIEWEE: Francis Herbin Lewis

INTERVIEWER: William Link

DATE: April 21, 1989

[Begin Tape 1, Side A]

WILLIAM LINK: This is William Link and the date is April 21, 1989, and I'm at UNCG [University of North Carolina at Greensboro]. And with me tonight is Francis Lewis. And I wonder if you'd mind just starting by telling me a little bit about yourself, about your childhood in Greensboro, when you were born and--

FRANCIS LEWIS: Well, I was born in Greensboro, April 1942. I'm one of seven children. Greensboro has been our home, has been my home--my parents were not originally from Greensboro, but had moved into the Greensboro area. I attended--

WL: Where are they from?

FL: Burlington, Alamance County. I attended elementary, junior high, high school, and college here in Greensboro. Most of my activities have been geared around the Greensboro area. I was married and I have two sons, age twenty and twenty-four, who are--well, one is away at college right now, one is at home.

WL: Growing up in Greensboro, what, I wonder if you have any observations about the way race relations worked here, you know, say your earliest memories. Do you have any early memories about--

FL: Well, the earliest memories that I would have would probably be a totally segregated society whereby there was no intermingling of the races. There was separate facilities--schools, recreational, whatever, were all on a separate basis. There was very little contact between, you know, the youth or, well, the adult or the youth, for that matter, except for the working relationships between the, between them. So that was basically what you could gather from the early years, as I can remember.

WL: Were there points of contact where black people and white people would mingle? For example, downtown or other public places? Not so much of that, even?

FL: Not very much. There may have been attempts through certain organizations to form coalitions that may have encouraged this type of, this type of mix, but it was on a limited basis. None that, none that was very evident. It was more or less, as I can remember, I really do not remember getting into any type of--

WL: But on a day-to-day basis, black people and white people on just an ordinary day-to-day basis didn't have much to do with each other.

FL: Right.

WL: What about the extent of--when you grew up, Greensboro was a segregated place, segregated drinking fountains and lunch counters and so forth. How did you react to that as a child? You remember any particular memories about that?

FL: Well, as a child and having grown up in that society, to a certain, until you have reached a certain point you accept that. Once you reach a point where you're able to rationalize and think for yourself and where you--and especially in a society or in an environment where you're taught values. In our home, values was important. Rights and wrongs were important. How you treated a fellow person was important. And these were values that were established in us as children.

So you lived those values at home, at church, in your community. But once you get out of your community, that particular aspect just didn't apply. You know, that is when you are able to start to see the differences or the, well, I guess the differences that were set up, the, really the inadequacies of segregation. Then you start to ask yourself, well, why? This is what we've been taught. This is what we're taught at home, this is what you're taught in the church, this is what you're taught in schools. But once you are outside of that black community, that no longer applied.

And so from that standpoint, once you start to reach a certain age and to start thinking about these things and expanding your horizons, then you start to ask why, you know. And why should this exist. You're taught, you know, you're going through school and you're taught history, you're taught the Constitution, you're taught your rights and this type of thing. But you're taught that they are there, but where are they? And so these are the types of things that you start to question as a result of being exposed to different types of educational background, experiences, and whatever.

One of the things is really just, I think from children, would be just the basic attitude that prevailed, you know, and the types of treatment in transportation, in the lunch counters, the type of treatment where it was very evident. It was not a type of thing

that was camouflaged or anything. But it was very evident that you would only be served or recognized if there was no one else there. And when I say no one else there, you were the last to be acknowledged, whether it was in a downtown department store or whether it was a lunch counter. Or if you were on a bus and you had paid the same fare, you had to get up if there was not enough seating for white patrons, and this type of thing. So it was, it was very blatant.

WL: That's not something you, as a child you wouldn't think about it until you really being to think about the wider world. That's what you're saying--

FL: Right, right. As younger children, yes. But as you get older and you start to take notice of these things--

WL: But do you remember about when you started to take notice? When those sort of things started to affect you?

FL: I really--you really hear a lot of things even as children. You hear of incidents. You've heard of different incidents that have happened and this type of thing. So you hear about, you're exposed to this all along. I don't say that you, there's any one point that you actually really become knowledgeable of it. But like I said, at some point you accept this, because you have not developed, your mind has not developed to the point that it has started to question these practices and this type of thing.

But I would think probably junior high school was probably the times that we really started to look at these things and ask questions as to why. Because at that particular point you're beginning to more or less be out on your own. Up until that point you are under the supervision of parents, what have you. You don't actually feel it as much as the person with you.

I can remember on occasions we'd go downtown. We would be downtown shopping and you would--one of the children may have the need to use restroom facilities, you know. And it was pointblank that you couldn't use them. That really starts you to wonder about the types of things that were existing in the society. It was not something that you chose to do, but that was a normal reaction with children out in public.

WL: Was there much of a generation gap here? I mean, how did your parents and your parents' generation deal with this kind of thing, at least from your perspective as a person growing up?

FL: Well, at that particular point I would think that most people, most of the adults were hesitant in terms of speaking out or being forceful or being upfront, in that most of them

were dependant upon certain types of employment, this type of thing. And the retaliation that you could receive from being outspoken would mean your job. And they had families. They had to think twice before they could actually take a stand, because it would not only jeopardize them, but it would jeopardize their families. Not to mention the physical abuse that was evident in some instances and what have you.

So there was a lot of things that they really had to take into consideration that probably perpetuated some of this to a degree, in that they could not speak out or felt that they could not speak out. And by the 1960s, the civil rights protests and demonstrations in the 1960s--that was begun by students who were not rightfully or gainfully employed or obligated to anyone in particular. They really had nothing to lose. So that was one of the things that allowed them to be as forceful as it was. I think that the thought was with the adults at that point, but as to how they would go about bringing the change was a different story.

WL: So there was always, you always got the message, as a child did you get the message that this was the wrong system obviously, and it was in contradiction to what you had at home and in your community. But it's something that couldn't be openly resisted because of the fears of retaliation?

FL: Right.

WL: You went to high school, junior high and high school in the 1950s, is that right?

FL: Right.

WL: It would have been starting junior high in about 1951, '52?

FL: I graduated in '59 so that would have been about 1953, that year.

WL: And this is a period during which was hope for change at least is--1945 is the Brown [*v. Board of Education*] decision.

FL: Right, that was during that particular time, yes. That were probably the first, those were probably the first instances of outright integration, with the exception of course of the integration of the [Nocor?] Park Golf Course. That and probably the desegregation of the schools, and I think that occurred in Greensboro, the desegregation of the public schools occurred in '67, '68, I think that was probably the first.

WL: Seventy-one, the busing started in '71.

FL: Right, so, but fifty--

WL: Fifty-four was the Brown decision.

FL: Right, and then it was about ’57, ’58 when they actually desegregated the schools.

WL: The first--

FL: Well, they really didn’t actually desegregate. They went into a token integration type thing where they basically would place one or two students into an atmosphere and that was the extent of it.

WL: They were always black students put in white schools rather than the reverse. Which junior high did you attend?

FL: Lincoln.

WL: Can you say something about the atmosphere there, what kind of school it was?

FL: Well, very different from today’s schools. We--our schools were so much more structured. We had a different, it was a different type of attitude that really prevailed in most of our schools then. The kids, the students enjoyed going to school. You had a dedicated faculty and staff. You looked forward to going to school everyday. The teachers knew your potential and they worked with you to bring out that potential in each student. It was the type of thing where they built up a pride in the students to make them want to excel and this type of thing.

It was just a totally different experience to what I see now as middle school and high school, this type of thing. They worked with--they were disciplinarians, they were teachers, they were peers, they were role models. They really cared about the student. They were dedicated teachers. I don’t know that you have that type of dedication now.

I can remember in junior high school, it was nothing for, if the teacher was concerned about a student’s welfare to visit the family, to talk with the family, you know, if there was a problem. But they communicated with the parents to let them know if there was a problem that existed in the school, if they thought there might a problem that might exist at home that might be affecting the student. They really went the total nine yards for the students.

WL: And they, as you said, they imbued a strong ethic of success and accomplishment and achievement.

FL: Right, so you didn't have a high dropout or failure rate, you know, because everybody really wanted to excel. I mean, even one or two excep[tions], not for themselves, too, but for the instructors, the teachers. They really wanted to do well.

WL: Did they convey it--was there any sort of, any message about the segregated system or either--

FL: Well, no more than pointing out the rights and the wrongs, the morals part, establishing within oneself a sense of worth, instilling into us the ideas that you can be whatever you want to be, that you should not let the color of your skin deter you or make you feel any different. But they always stressed to us to be proud of heritage, that the mind was the most important product. If you developed your mind then you could conquer the color of the skin. So there was always a positive attitude. It was an encouraging type of attitude.

WL: Was--where did you attend high school?

FL: Dudley.

WL: Dudley. Was it the same sort of thing there, on a larger scale I guess?

FL: Right, just a carry over.

WL: You mentioned before we turned the machine on that, in terms of your own interest in activism that began in junior high. To what extent was this true?

FL: Basically being involved with local organizations, NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] mainly, participating in voter registration drives during the summers when there was nothing else to do. Okay, this was something that allowed you to stay active, get out into the community, to work in these areas. If it was no more than maybe knocking on the doors, leaving a leaflet encouraging people to come out to a meeting maybe where they were stressing voter registration, explaining to them the importance of being registered voters, and just really reaching out in that vein. And I think that was probably my first involvement.

WL: What--how would you describe the NAACP in the 1950s? What type of organization was it?

FL: What type of organization was it?

WL: Yes. How successful was it?

FL: It probably has been a very successful tool in Greensboro but it's--because it has always brought issues to the surface and it has always addressed issues that have existed in and around the Greensboro area. It's probably been the longest standing organization over the years, in terms of the racial organizations that have thrived in the Greensboro area.

WL: And so you've worked in junior high and high school and summers. Enrolled--you started at A&T [North Carolina A&T State University] you said in 1959, after graduating Dudley in 1959?

FL: Right. Right.

WL: What sort of environment did you find at A&T? How would you categorize that?

FL: It was predominant, A&T has always been predominantly black in terms of the student body. Now there, you were, there was a wider exposure, because faculty administration was a mixed, you had mixed faculty and administration. There was really no apparent problems other than the fact that, I guess being limited as to where you were really going to be able to attend. Basically, if you were of, if you could afford to attend a private college, then your choices were a little wider there. But say for instance if your resources did not allow you to attend a private college or go out of town, then you had no other choice but to attend A&T, because at that particular time the other University of North Carolina campuses were not available.

WL: Excluded blacks.

FL: Right.

WL: Right. Were you counseled to go to A&T or was that--did you--

FL: No, the curriculum that I was following was at A&T, so it was more or less clear cut of the schools--I could not afford to go to some of the other schools that I would have liked to attend. So it was--

WL: Black schools.

FL: --so the program I was going to pursue was at A&T. That was pretty clear cut.

WL: When you were a student at A&T, this was a period from heightened activism, student activism, and did you sense that when you came, when you started there? Or was this something that started later once you were in there?

FL: Well, not really. Not so much sensing a change in growing up and through high school. Ezell Blair, who was one of the original four [who sat-in at Woolworth on February 1, 1960], David Richmond, we were all in school together, this type of thing. So we had all worked together at some point or another. So this was not anything really new to me. Having known some of the others, it was not, it was not something that was totally unexpected.

WL: Was there a sort of network of people that you knew in a sense, then, that went all the way back to junior high and high school?

FL: Well, the entire--well, I guess anyone from Greensboro would have been a network because we were so close knit, the black community in Greensboro. There was one junior high school, there was one high school, so you knew any other kid from Greensboro who was in a certain era. They knew everybody. So they, from junior high school through high school it was like a close network. They were all brought together either in junior high school or at the high school level

And so there was that bond, you know, between all of the students during that time, until such time as the--Grimsley was the only other high school. And until it was integrated and took a greater number of the kids out of the Dudley districts, then that was the only time that you would have seen any separation there of the students where the students would have really become a little bit, I guess divided, or not so close knit. And with the new schools that were built--Page--as they progressed up to that point.

WL: You were there then in the period, well, of the Woolworth sit-ins. And what, to what extent did, were you involved in that? Did you have [unclear] reservations about that?

FL: Did I have reservations?

WL: Observations, excuse me.

FL: Yes, well, yes, we, I guess we became involved in that probably from the beginning and more from a support standpoint. And the fact that we were natives of Greensboro, I felt that it was important for us to make a stand, to be a solid support for that in terms of we were the ones who stood to gain the most. The students would have been here for a period of time, four years maybe. They would have moved on to other areas. But the people in Greensboro were the ones, or the people who would be in Greensboro in the

future were the ones that would stand to gain from whatever accomplishments were made through the demonstrations. So I felt that we as natives of Greensboro should definitely be out supporting them. So that was one of the things I think that probably ranked high.

WL: What--you mentioned support. What kind of support specifically?

FL: Participation, working with them, being there for them, whatever was needed. We worked from all ranks. We sat with them, we provided support, we provided whatever backup resource that was needed. There was always that network, whether it was transportation, whether it was a place to meet, whether it was just being there, just showing in numbers, just showing support.

WL: At the Woolworth's?

FL: Right. Or wherever, whatever was going on.

WL: Was--there must have been a good deal of planning and coordination for all of this. There must have been--

FL: Well, it was, but it was, it was done as--there was not a lot of prior planning. From that standpoint, that's probably the only spontaneous thing that was, was just the decision to do it on that particular day or whatever. But--

WL: It was a spontaneous decision that--

FL: Yes, to go downtown. But it was something that had developed from over a period of time. These, the attitudes had been developed over a period of time. And I guess it was just a matter of when.

WL: Attitudes on the part of whom?

FL: Of the students.

WL: Was there a kind of, on campus, a consensus that something needed to be done?

FL: I don't really think so. I don't really think it was that openly discussed. I think when they probably decided it just came out of a jam session one evening, you know, just discussing this type of thing, and it was just decided to do that. But when they took the initiative, when the four took the initiative to go down, it just blossomed into or just mushroomed into a widespread thing.

And the general feeling was, “hey, I support you. Maybe I couldn’t do it, but I support you.” And with that, with all of that support pouring in, it just, it was really just the type of thing that, the type of encouragement or the type of thrust that you would really need to make the point that you were trying to make. So it was just like the right place at the right time, I guess, a decision that was made just right at the right time.

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

WL: We were talking about the Woolworth’s sit-ins in 1960. And you were mentioning that the decision by the four students to go down to Woolworth’s was spontaneous, but then after that occurred, it mushroomed into something bigger. Was there--the mushrooming that took place after the initial sit-in, after the ice was broken I guess, was there a sort of organizational system that came out of it? How did students work together on supporting--

FL: Yes, they worked together. There was a planning, they had a planning group that more or less sat down and set strategies of how they would--that more or less outlined how and what would be done, that mainly was responsible for maintaining the type of demonstration that they were interested in carrying out, which was a peaceful demonstration, making sure that things did not get out of hand. Certain people were meet, were, I guess, targeted to meet to discuss and what have you or to make arrangements. There was a lot of dialogue between the students and the officials of the city of Greensboro. So you had that group that worked closely with them.

WL: Negotiating with the sit-inners?

FL: Right. To make sure--and I think they were all interested in the fact that the demonstrations did not get out of hand. But I think they also wanted them to realize that they were really serious about it. And so I think we reached a happy medium there, because during the entire demonstrations we did not have any serious problems.

WL: What was the atmosphere downtown? Was there much hostility?

FL: Yes. At first very hostile, very hostile. But the Greensboro Police Department offered some security. And it generally, at times when things became volatile, what have you, they would close the stores, disburse the crowds, so that it did not erupt into violence. There were shoving incidents, you know, and maybe some minor incidents, but nothing really significant. Maybe someone spitting on you or something like this, but nothing just really violent.

WL: The whole approach of the student movement was nonviolence. Was that--that was something very consciously embraced, was that right?

FL: Right. Yes.

WL: Were there essentially training sessions in nonviolence? Did you have that kind of thing?

FL: Well, there wasn't. During the interim--also during the time, I guess, during high school during the times there were certain other organizations other than the NAACP that were active, were dealing with social problems in other areas. And they were teaching this nonviolent philosophy. This was the main, this was--for whatever change, it could not take place except in a nonviolent atmosphere. So there was several organizations that were set up in and around--from New York to Atlanta--that basically had the same type of philosophy and worked along with the NAACP. You had the SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee], CORE [Congress of Racial Equality]. You had--

WL: SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Council].

FL: Yes, SCLC, those types of organizations. They were perpetuating that type of philosophy. They were instilling this type of philosophy in whatever, even--not in a demonstration type. They were not teaching demonstration, but they were teaching philosophy about change. We cannot change it through violence. It has to be, you have to use the non[violence]--because that was the only way to accomplish it.

WL: Did--you mentioned that there were certain leaders or representatives that would do the negotiating with the city of Greensboro. How, well, what sort of attitudes did they convey about the city? Did the city negotiate well?

FL: In most instances, they were cooperative.

WL: Were there certain people in the white community in Greensboro that negotiated or provided better negotiating skills, certain people that didn't?

FL: Well, not really, because I think most of the negotiations were probably done with the mayor, with the city council, with the representatives that had been appointed by the mayor or the--for this particular purpose. Of course, there was support from the white community, from clergy, from educators. We had a lot of support from Guilford College, those students. We had support from UNCG [University of North Carolina at Greensboro] students.

So you had a wide range of support throughout the white community in Greensboro. It was not just something that was left with the black students. But we really did receive quite a bit of support and background from those factions. And I'm sure that they were able to do things on their behalf, if no more than to--just fellow people in the community--to maybe have the opportunity to point out to them, "Well, maybe this is something that does need to be reconsidered."

And I think once that type of thing--once it was brought to the conscious of people and they had the opportunity to look deep down inside as to what was actually going on, I think they took a different attitude, developed a different attitude about it. Because this was like something--you really didn't think about. You just did as your parents instilled in you. You just followed the pattern. You never really had to stop and think about if this is right or wrong, because that was just, you just can't, you fell into the same groove that you just continued to go. But really, when you really sat down and start doing some soul-searching, you may have a different attitude about some of the things that you do on an everyday basis.

WL: What about within the black community, was there--presumably there was considerable support outside the campus. How did that manifest itself?

FL: Well, they were very supportive in terms of maybe some of them were not actively involved, but they were very supportive. Like I say, there were some people who could not afford to come upfront to say, "I will actually become physically involved." But I think from this, from the community, after the, the shock of the initial sit-in and after they realized that this was not something that was going to go away, most of them embraced it wholeheartedly.

At first, you know, a lot of them asked, "Why are you doing this?" And they really felt that it was not only going to endanger them, but their jobs and other people. They could not see the long-range effects. And it really came from being afraid, fear.

WL: So it was kind of a generation difference there, style and--what about the administration? Administration was obviously under a lot of pressure.

FL: At A&T?

WL: At A&T.

FL: I really doubt--I'm sure that they probably had to account for some of it. But as long as it did not affect the, as long as it did not affect the school as such, I really don't see anything that they really would have been pressured about. I'm sure that they probably were cautioned, well, you know, "Well, why you--." But this was a total decision by the

students. It was done off campus. And so it was really the type of thing that nobody really controlled except the students.

It was done off of the campus so there was not very much that they could do. The only thing that they did impress upon us was the fact that we could not let it interfere with our academic. There was no rules bent or anything of this nature. So from that standpoint there was really, you know--this was done on basically free times, this was done after class, in and around class. If you were downtown or whatever, if your class came up, it was your responsibility to get back to class and this type of thing.

So you were never at any point encouraged to do anything out of the parameters of the college. That stayed intact the entire time. But they were supportive. They were supportive. But I don't know that any of them bent any rules.

WL: What were the results of the sit-in from your point of view as a student? Did you regard the outcome as successful? Did you regard it as something that was only a small beginning?

FL: It was a step, it was a step that opened doors. And it started the progress that probably led to some other areas. But it was probably the most forceful step, that first step to really breaking down some of the major barriers in public accommodations and eating establishments. But that's a minute, that's very minute in part of the total picture.

WL: Well, of course, Woolworth's is only one place; there's a whole bunch of other places downtown. Were there many, were there any permanent organizations among the students at A&T that came out of this? Was there just sort of a general--

FL: Not really, because it was really a combination of student government, various organizations, the student body in general. So it really wasn't.

WL: A&T, however, remained a major leadership center for the important events of the next several years in Greensboro. And 1963 was sort of the big explosive. What other things occurred before 1963?

FL: Well, probably during that era--'60, '62, '63, that type of thing--you had sort of a carryover like a phase-out from the actual downtown sit-ins into the movie theatres, the era of the Mayfair, S&W Cafeteria, targeting the larger establishments and that type of thing. And it was just sort of a gradual movement into those areas.

WL: Was there a change in strategy along the way too? The strategy with Woolworth's is obviously a strategy of targeting one specific place and using the nonviolent method to demonstrate the larger social wrong.

FL: Right. As far as the movie theatres and this type of thing, you know, it was picketing, of course, and negotiations. The major cafeterias, Mayfair and S&W, larger cafeterias, it was the same type of strategies used at the lunch counter, with basically attempts to go in and be served, and basically the disruption of service, of those services, and that type of thing.

And basically education was one of the things that I think--educating people, pointing out these inadequacies, these differences, really bringing it out in the public light. I guess those would probably be the two main elements that you would want to use, is basically educating, bringing the issues to light. And then as a result of that, using some type of strategy to say to them that these issues should be addressed. And the next I guess would be economics, saying that if they're not addressed, they can affect you economically.

WL: What was the attitude of the downtown merchant community, [unclear]? It's probably hard to generalize, there must have been different people.

FL: Oh, some were furious, some were furious because we'd get to the point really where people would not come in to the downtown area for fear that something may happen. Of course, you know that at the Woolworth and Kress department stores when they would have to close the stores or lunch counter they lost money everyday. So it was an economic hardship on them. And then you had the boycotting of the merchants to indicate to them that if they could not be in sympathy with the others, they could be affected economically also. So there was a lot strategy. So some were, sure they were upset, but then why be upset? If they were not losing money--that money that they were losing was coming from the black community. So if they were losing enough money to be upset over, why not address the issues of the black community?

WL: What sort of attitude did the media take? In order to be--listed as one of your objectives is education, and obviously you depended on the media.

FL: Well, they covered it. And I guess as far as that particular era, back, as far back as say the sixties or whatever, I would suppose that there were certain things they could do. Their hands were probably tied to a great degree, depending upon the type of media or the type of projection that they were making to the public. So I'm sure they had to be--their hands had to be tied to a certain degree.

But I guess they would--it was a fair, it was a fair coverage and I guess a pretty accurate account of events. I think, you know, that that was one of the things too that helped the movement along, in that it was exposed not only on a local level, but it was

exposed on a national level also. And, you know, everybody in the country knew Greensboro, North Carolina.

WL: And in turn, that would in turn affect white leadership in Greensboro concerned about the national image of Greensboro.

FL: Right, right. Because, see, at that time--well, you know, Greensboro has always been, I guess, relatively conservative. They don't really like for anything to really make waves. And there has not been very much, so I guess this was, to them, I guess it was probably one of the major things that they probably had to face in the history of Greensboro.

WL: What was the attitude of the police through all of this? You talked about them briefly before, but just--

FL: To some degree, well, it was a cross-section of the Greensboro community. You had those that felt that you had no right, that you shouldn't be there. But they were there to protect the well-being of the students and the public, so they had to enforce that. So you had, you had, I guess they probably went the gambit of attitudes. But there was no outright hostilities that were, that you would, could say would have made a major impact.

The police chiefs were always on hand. They were very much in contact with what was going on. And the students really never really done, they really never did--I don't know. Well, any time that we were planning a demonstration they were informed as to when, where, and this type of thing. So they were never basically caught off guard. They worked really hand-in-hand and were always informed ahead of time of what was going to take place, what they were planning to do, so that they could be prepared. So they were never really caught off guard.

There was a mutual respect between the students and the police departments and the city officials. It wasn't an outright defiance, but it was, but it was an atmosphere that existed to let them know that they were serious about what they were doing.

WL: In the spring of 1963, of course, you had these very large demonstrations in Greensboro. And wasn't one of the characteristics of that that the extensive participation of the community, as well as students?

FL: Right. Yes, at that particular point the pressures then were off of the students, okay. And the atmosphere was more relaxed. So then you could have more community involvement, because the people felt then, "Okay, I really won't be penalized, so I can actual participate, rather than maybe just being a support person." And so I think that did bring about the whole change of attitude.

WL: Why was that? Was there a feeling that the ice had been broken with the earlier--

FL: Yeah, I think so, right. And I think the confidence factor had been built up among the community, too, that, "Well, this is--we won't be penalized as such. I don't have to worry about losing my job, because I feel confident now that I can speak out. I can say some of these things that I haven't been able to say in the past."

And the other thing was the fact that even the black and the white community were educated to the point that a lot of them realized these things that they had been taking for granted all of this time. They awoke to a realization that they had never known to exist. They had accepted and just moved with the masses. And I think it probably gave them something to think about. And as a result of that, I think they really, they had a chance to become involved and really to carry out their own thoughts and ideas.

WL: What kinds of organizations and organizational structures did, existed in the 1963 demonstrations? CORE was involved, student organizations as well.

FL: Right, the student org[anizations]--at that particular time, yeah, they had established local chapters of CORE, which more or less spearheaded and it worked out of those particular--

WL: Do you know when those were established in Greensboro? [Nineteen] sixty-two or sixty-three?

FL: Yeah, somewhere along in there. And I think Bill Thomas probably, was probably very effective in working with that CORE organization there during that era and was one of the leaders in that group.

WL: Was there much preparation this time, in contrast to the 1960--

FL: Not really, because it was like a movement. It was like a continuation of the type of--well, it was, I guess, a continuation in terms of just taking it one step further, what had been accomplished, then you would take it just one step further. So you had a lot of the groundwork that was already laid for you, had already been accomplished. So it was then where do we go from here? And you're mapping strategy for your next step and your next step.

It really didn't take a lot of, it really didn't take a lot of planning. A lot of resources, but because it was mostly volunteer help, there were field people from the [CORE] national office who came in occasionally to help. And possibly where there was support needed they would come in, and they would conduct meetings or whatever that

they felt necessary and help you with your strategies. And, you know, they moved from field office to field office.

WL: Was--to what extent was the movement in Greensboro in 1963 affected by events elsewhere, for example, Birmingham? Was it closely modeled on Birmingham? The same sort of strategy or--?

FL: Yes, to some degree. Just like CORE would basically have a philosophy that would run throughout. But then you would have to take it to your particular area, and to look at your particular area, and based upon the resources that you had to work with, the situations that existed in that particular area. So you could really, each area was a little bit unique. And so you wouldn't use basically the same--what may work in Charlotte may not necessarily work in Greensboro, or Raleigh, or Durham. So you just more or less tried to take a look at Greensboro and see what should we do here or how do we go about accomplishing this particular feat.

WL: In addition to CORE, national organizations like CORE, what other kinds of local organizations in the black community were important in 1963?

FL: Probably CORE and the NAACP were probably the two most influential.

WL: What role did NAACP play?

FL: Just a support role, just a support.

WL: They don't--generally did not get directly--they are a legal or political organization, so they--

FL: Right, yeah, and right, and more or less advisory, this type of thing. CORE had their own legal counsel. Each one had their own legal counsel. Based upon their strategies, they had done research, this type of thing. They could basically advise you as to how you could approach certain situations or advise you as to what maybe not to attempt.

WL: What about churches? What kind of role did they play?

FL: Very supportive roles, because--they were very supportive. They opened the doors to the students. They, the clergy and our churches were very supportive, and they brought a lot of the issues out. This was a mean of reaching the masses. And so I think they were very supportive.

WL: Mobilization of a sort took place through the churches, and mass meetings were held in the churches.

FL: Right, right. So they were always open to the students when they needed a place to meet, a place to work.

WL: Must have been a kind of exciting time to be at A&T, is that right, do you think?

FL: I, yeah--well, I guess when you look back on it and you see that, well, it changed history. It's probably when you reflect back, it's probably more exciting. At that particular time it was doing what you had to do, going about the course, or taking on a job, executing a job. We did not know at that point just where we would be going. We did not know the impact that it would have. But we knew what we wanted, we wanted to make a statement. And as a result of making that statement--

[End of Tape 1, Side B--Beginning of Tape 2, Side A]

WL: We were talking about the 1963 marches, and I wonder if you'd mind discussing the role of Jesse Jackson, since he's one of the key figures that comes out of 1963.

FL: Right. In that particular area, Jesse was one of the, I guess one of the leaders, the upfront leaders at that particular time. Jesse had come to A&T, and he had established himself as a role model on the campus. Jesse was a very good student, very interested in history and social issues. So Jesse was a very good leader, very knowledgeable. He had established himself as a peer on the campus.

And during the '63 demonstrations he played a very important role, because he was very knowledgeable. He was very well spoken. He was--he had a, he had a talent for dealing with social issues. So I think that's probably what helped prompt him into the position that he was in. He was at that particular point, I think he was probably anticipating some type of career in public life, what have you, and it was a good preparation for him. But he was one of the ring leaders in 1963.

WL: Was he a captivating speaker as [unclear]?

FL: Yes, very good, yes. And Jesse could, even in quietness, he was just as captivating. He always had something interesting or challenging to say. I'd taken some classes with him, and he always had--he was probably, captivated the class as much as the instructor in most instances. Oh, he was a well-rounded, he was a well-rounded student.

WL: Did--how would you describe the overall strategy of the 1963 demonstrations?

FL: Well--

WL: Obviously it was a lot more ambitious and a lot more extensive than anything that had preceded it.

FL: Right. Well, I guess at that particular point, I think we were probably reaching out to a wider range. In the sixties [1960], you know, we dealt with, basically concentrated on two stores, concentrated on two establishments--

WL: Kress's and Woolworth's.

FL: Right. And then in '63, we were venturing out into the city on a wider scale. And we were having to make a statement to them that we felt the need for the city, for the entire city, to make a change--not just the Woolworth, not just the Kress. So we had to probably reinforce that. And I think it was a little bit tougher, because the city at that time was still getting pressures from people who did not want to see these changes made in this length of time. They were still not ready for these changes.

So you were still getting pressured from both fractions. Some held fast to their convictions, so you were really having to fight. Some changed initially, right, but then you had to reach the ones who were not subject to that easy change, this is the type of thing. And at that particular time, when we started in '60, that was started without notice, okay. They were able to map strategies to combat, to--

WL: Counter the movement.

FL: Right, counter the movements. So therefore you really had to have more thrust there. You had to apply more pressure.

WL: What kind of strategies were--

FL: Basically marching. Our '63 were basically marches. The majority of it was marches. Basic disruption of services, that type of thing. Meetings.

WL: The obstacles you were running into, or the businessmen that were giving you the most trouble, I suppose, were enterprises that were locally run, rather than Woolworth's and Kress, which were nationally run and less susceptible to what the national company wanted them to do. Mayfair Cafeteria, I guess, was sort of the symbol of this.

FL: Right, and that was probably one of the hardest, too. But then, of course, once he [Mayfair owner Boyd Morris] bent to the pressures, that was probably the end of his business. But by it being a locally owned establishment, it was probably one of the last ones to fold.

WL: What was--since you were asking the city essentially to change its policy, as opposed to 1960 when you were asking Woolworth's to change its policy, you were asking--I mean, you know, from the vantage point of thirty years almost--you were asking a lot out of the city, really. And you were asking--

FL: Well, not really, when you think of what the city has gotten in return.

WL: Oh, no, I absolutely agree. But you were asking for a major change in policy, which required a lot of leadership on their part. How much leadership did you get out of the city do you think, during this particular crisis?

FL: That's hard to say.

WL: Were they--to what degree were they resistant, to what degree where they were willing to go along with the change?

FL: Well, I think they probably tried to resist most of the change as long as they could. But at the points where they felt that they couldn't resist any longer--challenges to the validities of certain policies and things like this that were really pointing out, constitutionally, that some of these practices should not or were not in the, well, what really was a violation of rights.

I don't think they had any choice but to but to make the change, because I don't, because at that particular point, everyone was looking at Greensboro. So Greensboro did not want to be, Greensboro did not want to be—Greensboro did not want any more adverse publicity. They did not want to be that one sore thumb. I don't believe that--I think they held out as long as they could. But then once they realized they could not hold out any longer, that these changes were in fact going to have to be made, then some were implemented.

WL: How fast do public accommodations desegregate after the marches?

FL: After the '63?

WL: Yeah.

FL: Well, it was--I mean, they just continued. Once the major holdouts--the Mayfairs and the S&Ws--it was not a big problem. And see, the one thing that they did not realize is--I would assume that they felt that their businesses would actually just be overrun, but there was very little change. There was very little change once they changed their policies and opened the door. There was very little change.

And so business went on as usual, because I don't think anybody was saying to them, "We want to come in and sit down everyday at every meal and eat a meal. But I do want to feel like I have that option if I happen to be downtown at lunch, that I have the option to come and eat if I would like." Because I don't really know how long it was before I even went to sit down, and I don't know how many times I've been there to sit down. I think maybe shortly after the Kress, Woolworth's, we went down as--and this was a type of thing, "You must. You've accomplished it, you must." But I probably--

WL: You were just curious.

FL: --once or twice.

WL: It wasn't something that people even noticed perhaps. This happened so suddenly, even quickly, I suppose.

FL: Right, once it was all over. Once it opened up, it was a totally different atmosphere.

WL: That's the way it should be. No one noticed.

FL: Right.

WL: You graduated from A&T in 19--

FL: I left '64.

WL: Sixty-four. And what was your first job?

FL: I went to work with an insurance company at that particular time, and I think that was probably their first experience with hiring blacks. And again, we get back into this tokenism type of thing. I worked there for about eighteen months before I went into architecture.

But it was an, it was a similar experience, really. It was an experience of having to educate and say to people that there is no difference, we function the same way. But a lot of those people whom I worked with never had the experience of working with a black, you know, on a comparable capacity--but didn't hide it, didn't have any major problems.

WL: But the ice had to be broken all the time? There were attitudes and stereotypes that--

FL: Oh yeah. You had a lot who did not speak to you, would not eat lunch with you, you know, this type of thing. But in eighteen months' time you would have been surprised at the type of attitude change that had come about.

So it was, it was, it's a give-and-take situation. I had to give, and I had to take. I had to understand, and they had to do the same. But all in all, it was a good experience.

WL: How did you--worked eighteen months in insurance and then into architecture? How did that work?

FL: I had, well, I guess for one reason is that there were so very few opportunities available for blacks in architecture. At that particular time--and let me see, I believe probably maybe three or four architects, black architects in the state of North Carolina. Two were on the faculty at A&T, one was in practice here in Greensboro, and one worked with another firm here in Greensboro. So there was not a great opportunity, because blacks were not thought of to be in architecture. They just did not feel that that was a career orientated towards blacks. So they were few and far between.

I was lucky enough to have met Clinton Gravely. He was working with a firm in Greensboro after he graduated from Howard [University]. And he was working with a firm in Greensboro, and in 1967 he opened his firm. And I had met him prior to that, and I had worked with him on some freelancing projects. And as a result, when he opened the office, he gave me the opportunity to come and work with him. So it was just a lucky opportunity.

WL: But at A&T, you mean you're looking, you're looking at your prospects, they must not have seemed too--

FL: No, not really. Not in architecture as such. There were drafting positions. Our program at A&T was orientated towards engineering and architecture, so there were a lot of options in engineering.

WL: I see. So you could kind of slide over--

FL: Right. So a lot of our students went with the engineering options. That's where the majority of them went.

WL: Having lived in Greensboro all of your life, just looking back several decades, how would you characterize changes or things that haven't changed in Greensboro in terms of race, race relations?

FL: Well, I guess there have been a lot of changes that I can see, because some things that you--well, even I can look back and say, "Well, I can remember when this particular situation existed, when we were not allowed to have the opportunities to go in different places, participate in different things." So I can see that type of change. Just the freedom to be able to go into a restaurant or into a fast food [restaurant] and pick up a sandwich if you're in a hurry, if you're on the run, that type of thing.

There's a lot of change. There's a lot of change in job opportunities. There're blacks working positions now that were unheard of during that time--city, state, federal governments, what have you. Even in private industry. There was not very much to look forward [to] thirty years ago, except being an educator. Those were the typical careers. You did not have the marketing aspects open to you or the options open to you, sales. You know, some of the opportunities that we have open to us now just were not open to us at that time. So a lot of job opportunities.

Housing, that type of thing. Being able to live and acquire adequate housing.

WL: How about the political system? Is that--

FL: Still very much the same. It hasn't been, it still has not changed very much. Basically, it's a dominated type, type of system that's not, doesn't seem to be interested in very much change there. It seems that they welcome some representation from the fringes, but not, it's not--it's basically still structured in and around the immediate core. And maybe it's not so much the black to white, but it is area now.

WL: There's a hierarchy. There's a power hierarchy.

FL: Right. And you have the protected interests, and you can see that as expansion in and around the city is done. You have areas that are well-protected, you have other areas that are not. Very little, very little consideration is given to that type of thing. I don't see very much change in that. And basically, it falls within the parameters of the people who are making the laws protect their own interest. The things that would be allowed in certain areas of the city would not be allowed in northwest Greensboro, that type of thing. So you have that type of thing.

WL: What about schools? Of course, big change.

FL: Yeah, there has been a big change in schools, I guess since ’71 when they started busing. And I guess there are pros and cons with the schools as I see them. I don’t really have a big problem with schools as long as the schools are doing what the schools are put there to do, and that’s educate the children.

I’ve not--there are pros and cons as far as the busing issue. I have strong points against and I have strong points for. I think the main issue with the schools is not so much the integration or the mixtures or the busing as much as it is some of the decisions that are made within the schools, the discipline that has been taken out of the schools. No matter where they are, they aren’t going to be able to function without some type of discipline.

WL: And that’s a big difference from your experience when you were in the fifties.

FL: Right. And I think probably the exposure is good, in that the children are exposed to a wider range of experiences in the course of their elementary to high school education than we were when we came along. Because we grew up with and went all the way through high school with the same kids from the same community, so you did not know, or you did not know what was going on in other segments of the city, and that type of thing.

Just--I think basically the basic attitude or the basic problem I see with the schools that I see today versus thirty years ago, about when I was in school, is just the decisions, some of the decisions that have been made affecting control, discipline, and the basics, you know. I feel like sometimes that maybe there’s too much emphasis placed on some of the other curriculums rather than the basics, because we really received the basics.

WL: You’re an advocate of the basics?

FL: Yes. I mean I feel like you really need to know English before you go into a French or a Spanish, or, you know, German class. You really need to know--if you haven’t grasped basic English, then your first priority should be teach that child English. Or teach that child to add, subtract, multiply, and divide before you put him on a computer. And once, I think once they grasp that, they can move further. But until they grasp that, you can move them from year to year, but they’ll never grasp it.

WL: On balance, would you say then that there’s been a great progress in race relations in the city? Or what evidence is there that things haven’t changed all that much?

FL: Well, I think they’re more open now and they can communicate, the different factions, whatever. They can sit down and discuss issues now openly that they could not sit down and discuss during my era.

WL: It was all that isolation.

FL: Right. So I think now they can candidly sit down and discuss issues and come to decisions that are to the betterment of the entire city. I think they can do that. Now I'm not saying that this is occurring all of the time, because no matter what you do, you're still going to have personal ideas projected. But I think it's more open now. I think they can sit down and they can talk about issues. I think they are more cognizant of what is being done, okay. There are things, there are established medians that they know they have to work within or account or be accountable for.

So I think, you know, the city of Greensboro is probably not where it ought to be. But it has the tools and the mechanisms to work its problems, to work within its problems to come up with a suitable solution. And I think that's probably the one good thing about the city, is that they can sit down and address issues and resolve them more or less without major conflict.

[End of Interview]