Oral History Interview with Andrew Cohn

Asia Jeffries [00:00:01] But the reason that I wanted to interview you today is because my professor assigned a project to collect oral histories from people that we consider activists. So that's just why I want to interview you. If you like you can go ahead introduce yourself.

Andrew Cohn [00:00:17] Yes. My name is Andrew Cohen. I was born and raised in Alamance County.

Asia Jeffries [00:00:25] Okay so Im going to go ahead and get started on asking questions. So you already said you are from alamance county.

Andrew Cohn [00:00:34] I can't understand what you were saying.

Asia Jeffries [00:00:36] You were born in Alamance County but what city were you born in exactly? Burlington. And can you just explain what your life was like?

Andrew Cohn [00:00:47] When my life as a child, I did not know racism, I went to the hospital and when I went to the hospital, I saw separation because blacks and white were seperated.

Andrew Cohn [00:00:59] Where I was born on Avon street. We all lived together, we all helpe these people, but back then in the forties, it was a separation between blacks and whites and I began to understand the learned of it then.

Andrew Cohn [00:01:14] And as I grew up on Avon, all my friends were Caucasians. And we played like we were brothers and sisters, we ate each other's house. We went to each other houses and we had a good time growing up until we were teenagers. Then life was little different because we only could do certain things, like we couldn't go to the movies and if we did. We had to go upstairs in the balcony. We couldn't go to the parks. We couldn't go to Mcdonalds. Once Mcdonalds were 12 cents a hamburger, and most of us would mow yards to make money shine shoes.

Andrew Cohn [00:02:01] Pick up gallon bottles and sell them to host a warehouse and things of that nature, we only have to play that street because we had no facilities.

Andrew Cohn [00:02:15] And but, you know, all of that we went through, we we made it.

Asia Jeffries [00:02:25] So you only attended segregated schools?

Andrew Cohn [00:02:28] Yes. We in school, we we went to segregated schools and we couldn't ride the bus because they said you had to live five miles and beyond your home where you live.

Andrew Cohn [00:02:42] So we have to walk by four and a half miles every day to go to school. And then we have to go by Broad Street and one of the schools that was about three blocks from the house, we had to walk past Broad street and go to Jordan Sellers. J.F Gun Elementary and then Jordan Sellers.

Asia Jeffries [00:03:04] So I know from my experience growing up, they told them when they educated us about segregation, they said that they weren't educated decently. Was that your experience? Or did you guys have education that you thought was decent.

Andrew Cohn [00:03:21] Where education was to us, we only received the second hand material that were handed down from one school to the black school. And so we always were all behind, like when they kept the books for years and after four years, they would pass them over to J.F Gunn elementary or Jordan Sellers. And we were used books behind them, not books that they used during the same time period.

Asia Jeffries [00:03:48] do you think that the black community during segregation was more united? And do you believe that the separate but equal statement behind segregation was correct?

Andrew Cohn [00:04:04] Well, I think we were more united because we help one another. nowadays is not as easily accepted helping your neighborhood like we did in the time when I was growing up, because there were two or three people, maybe four people had gardens and they would exchange their fruit or vegetables

Andrew Cohn [00:04:27] to one another one. One might have peas and corn and beans. Another might have potatoes and corn to another my sew watermelon. So they did it that, and made some made jelly and all different kinds of thing

Andrew Cohn [00:04:44] But they learned, the mother learned how to survive part time. They were canned food for the winter because they didn't have wanted to buy. So what they done in collaboration put up things like teas and beans and squash and cucumbers.

Andrew Cohn [00:05:05] But when the time when we see more at the local level, we don't do that anymore.

Andrew Cohn [00:05:12] yea i so I know everybody's wants fast food nowadays.

Asia Jeffries [00:05:16] Yes. Yes, sir. That's a McDonald's so far. Know you talked about growing up, playing with, you know, the neighbors that were white as well.

Asia Jeffries [00:05:27] What was your first encounter with someone being racist towards you and how did you react?

Andrew Cohn [00:05:34] Well, usually when we are my cousins and I contrast in Canada, we will fight one another state to prove that we were just an equal if they were if we had a few fights now. But but then we became friends because racism starts at home are an even bigger because long as those kids are not taught racism, they were lovable and they came and they we embraced each other when they passed one around. But when they passed around, it was different. But they didn't treat us in a different way. We could have with a word and whatever we decide to do, they would do it.

Andrew Cohn [00:06:24] Which brings us back to the comments.

Asia Jeffries [00:06:28] Um, talk to my grandma a little bit. And she mentioned that there was a few protests around Burlinson during the civil rights movement personally participate in any state.

Andrew Cohn [00:06:36] Yes, I marched a demonstrator. I took some action. I was there one. Leon was shot and killed around Hellenism.

Andrew Cohn [00:06:48] And I was part of an organization which was called A Young Man's Club for Better Relationship one up and fought for. I was a policeman. If I'm not mistaken, is a young black girl at the Johns Hopkins Center, and we went in protest today and there was this young boy that was incarcerated so we wouldn't get them released and so on only went up to the day when they opened up the new sealed organophosphate. We already from that point on, we already had contact with the police department and the mayor and we got a good report from the cops. When we saw injustice, we didn't go to fight. We want to sit down and we talk things over. And, you know, gradually it was a great improvement. We got help from me law in college and early in the late 70s when no one but a swimming pool and a merry go round, we went over there and cleaned it all up and we had to sit in Manager MacIntire to allow us. You just see the machines to clear out a whole lot.

Andrew Cohn [00:08:11] I'm not arguing that through attack made it better for people to come come to because it was not a street where you can go into and come out because it was one way and one way out. So we got to fix what we could have all the way through to get through it and back out of issues.

Andrew Cohn [00:08:29] And a lot of the that the organization that I was in was very successful. We had we had people never helping us from Chapel Hill. We had, you know, we were very organized and everyone worked together.

Asia Jeffries [00:08:49] So when you say that during that time, you guys practiced respectability politics and not more the guy down.

Andrew Cohn [00:09:00] Yeah, we we were very acceptable, I think, to things that we thought that was right. It was going to benefit us as black people because we knew the day already was there. What we wanted to get to some time we would apprehend because everyone was not for what you have for for and you have more against it. So it took a time period to develop that relationship with them, to get them to accept us as not three fifths human, but one hundred percent in the Constitution, that we all are equal under the eyes of God. I know that of the city. But, you know, it was just the way they felt because they would be bed. When you embedded with some you have a problem with. We wasn't embedded. We were we all felt like we were just as equal. But they felt but we did bring them back. So we we were respectful of what we did because we were surrounded by whites. It was only one street did have white. I mean, we had blacks to me. Let me correct you. Avon had most of the blacks. Then you have maybe two, three, two, one six three seven three six three seven straight people aren't brown. And then you had to himself may have history and she may have street.

Andrew Cohn [00:10:34] You just stop at the corner of Avon be but then in nineteen seventy nine because it's our main street, always go to Church Street to see the ball.

Asia Jeffries [00:10:46] The know I know the twenty twenty. There's been a lot of protest all over the country but there has been a lot of protest here. Rallies in many grand. What do you think about these protests and how do you see them similar or different from the protest back in for first responders?

Andrew Cohn [00:11:08] But then we didn't think anything of the statue until we really found out that the South lost the war.

Andrew Cohn [00:11:17] So why do we why do you think the society of blacks it relevant so southern general that was in the war, I think is a place for the statue to be? I don't necessarily you got to take them down. I think it should be moved in the area. So, no, they want to go to it and see it need to go to a park dedicated in some way, but not in the middle of town, because every time you go back, you see you recognize that is a Confederate attack. That is not a faction of the Union, but it is a statue of the Confederacy. So we don't really understand the Confederacy and. We live under democracy in the United States of America, which qualifies all of us as well.

Asia Jeffries [00:12:09] Do you think that a lot of people here, these statues down because they believe is the symbol of hate and not heritage?

Andrew Cohn [00:12:18] It it is a symbol of hate. And and they are they claiming it is their heritage.

Andrew Cohn [00:12:25] But it wasn't our heritage in the north after they defeated the south, gained the south horses and buggies and things, that they go back home and apply and survive doing well. So, you know, they were defeated. So we became one union on one hand with liberty and justice. So therefore, they took that in front.

Andrew Cohn [00:12:50] And before they had money hit the Statue of Liberty, Rick reckoned early nineteen hundreds, the latter part of the 18th and up until the nineteen hundred, maybe in 1930, 1940. Other than that, they I hadn't heard any statue being erected. We learn, we learn of Robert E. Lee and Andrew Jackson and some the confederacies in school. But a lot of things that I've learned that you didn't learn because you remove the books off the record books that I will use have showed by Jim Crow to show those about lynching. But I don't think that's in the books today. I hadn't sold in a long time. So, you know, you can answer that part of the question whether or not you you run across books like this show that mr.

Asia Jeffries [00:13:43] What I can definitely say up until I reach college, I was never educated about slavery, about Jim Crow. And that is the biggest challenge I would say is very different than a white supremacist version of the history of American gathering.

Andrew Cohn [00:14:04] Perceive America cannot be American contingent unless they include the black history of America like it was three years ago, A.J., I found out that the fight in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in nineteen twenty nine was born in Tulsa because the blacks were fortunate enough to get only become schoolteachers, lawyers, doctors, pharmacists and coolroom. Hospitals get your own school. They're all college. But the white man didn't want to have nothing to say. No blacks were getting ahead of them.

Andrew Cohn [00:14:54] So they got together and came in nice and bone and drop bombs in America on the blacktail that wiped it out. And Kilowog five hundred. And I think that they paid some restitution back, know, maybe about 10 to 20 years ago, but they did. And then after they did it so it wouldn't be remember they took their land, took everything they had after they got to kill them every day and a lot of other places. And it was never restored. I think it's about bad as the thirty five blocks is not that they only have three blocks that is left there because they run a superhighway to the area that the blacks own his land.

Andrew Cohn [00:15:43] So not only do they take the land from the end, they took the land from the blacks that earned the boat and they took possession of it and they may

want to work together. And then, you know, if you look at the map to certain things of Louisiana, Kentucky and Tulsa, Oklahoma, New York, North Carolina and Wilmington, what he was just killed in in nineteen thirty five, he found out that the government issued some crack along and injected blacks with citrus and gonorrhea and general disease. And I learned about this when I was like twenty five years ago. And then that they did all the time. They did. And they they dehumanize young girls the size of your family. They all girls that mom was on welfare in order to stop the black race from being properly castrate the girls. What is not castration is not a name I can't think of right now, but they give it to young women in room when those girls got married. I know my mother's husband was done that way back in nineteen.

Andrew Cohn [00:17:01] In L.A. County that they just took her out of her uterus out so she can have children, so the government ordered them, you know, they always tried to decide the black population. I OK, this part. I mean, and even they even looked at one day this week, Asian. I heard a grandma saying we're going to do some basketball court to get involved.

Andrew Cohn [00:17:31] Let's be honest. We have never get back in so that your attitude about you have to do something to the population of blacks. Oh, so you've got to put a roadblock to the way forward and, you know, all kinds of tactics when the Constitution gives up the right to vote. And if we deny that right, then we are we are disrespecting our ancestry because that is our ancestors that died for us, that we are where we are today because of what a lot of world will be in school, will be out on coffee and tobacco field moving is not allowed to start talking about voting because I was like, why is the right to vote so important?

Andrew Cohn [00:18:18] Because I know personally I went to January twenty two or three different protests and this protest were hanging out, you know, to motivate and encouraging people to vote. What do you think? And also, what would you like to see?

Andrew Cohn [00:18:36] A vote can change a lot of things because there are some good people on both sides. And I say that to say this because when good people got good moral principles, I believe in God. They can do the right thing. When a person's in a position that they want to do it for the money sake of popularity is that will do right because he goes they have watches and not show justice and mercy and we just see they see that one never loved would do. If you love your neighbor like the Bible, say love thy neighbor as I love that saying you ain't going to make a rule of a law.

Andrew Cohn [00:19:20] Prohibit your neighbor from having the opportunity to vote because a lot of roadblocks just stop people from voting. It them a constitutional right, because early back in the thirties, they came up with a poll that you have to pay to vote and day to day reform is better to be doing since the election.

Asia Jeffries [00:19:44] It seems like every time we get close to the finish line, the finish line means it does. So I'm I'm pretty sure you watch the election. I lost the election. So we know that Joe Biden is the president elect. But then again, it's not really wanting to leave office.

Asia Jeffries [00:20:05] So what do you think will arise when the black community specifically in a second term is that we have seen the CDC, who was Trump when not have a second term this year, and I don't know where to get out, get what you have with one million dollars. He's not going to win it all the way.

Andrew Cohn [00:20:27] He could win it. They will give it to black and Latino and Asian people won't vote, OK, because he and the other I'll never get back to him because he was a terrible attaran to somebody who is like a dictator. He want to tell you what to do. They want to tell you that Zubia said we're not we're not out of the currency. We're not unlike Stalin, Lenin. We are not under Khrushchev for fear of Castro.

Andrew Cohn [00:20:59] We know that kind of rule of dictatorship.

Asia Jeffries [00:21:04] So why do you think he ever won in the first place? Why do you think he's our president now?

Andrew Cohn [00:21:11] Because he offered the plans that they have in there. But you're a white supremacist. A way to say they can get away with just about anything. You remember the statement that he made and he could go out in the streets in New York. He shoots back and kill him. It wouldn't happen. Happened to him. He wouldn't be charged. You see, he says, man, we had more killings of black. Me as an independent is like long op ed. Your young boy was running in the community that was shot down by police officers and Sonny and Rihanna. Taylor no, not this is not all that kind of thing. Just by being black, young man was shot and. Sitting in his car with his girlfriend and a baby shot and killed because he said, I got a gun in my apartment, you want to man murder one of these man three or four or five times like a young boy walking down the street was shot in the back and to 15. Dad, you know, all this type of thing, you know? And I see people fight the police and they still dealing with ballistics and anything, and they didn't lock them up in front and walk him into the car. But if we do a deal, we won't be shot. We'll move on to the next step.

Asia Jeffries [00:22:36] That is very true. So what actions do you see in order to make the killing of that mean pacifically by the police? What do you think needs to be done to keep incidents like that from happening?

Andrew Cohn [00:22:50] Not all policemen are bad, and we say that this is just a few you know, it's a few rotten apples in every group. So you have to weed out these type of people and don't allow them to just want to shoot from the sheriff's department and the police department or get in any other kind of fellow agents because their reputation go farther than, you know. And just that's what's happening to me. And I think they were shot down wherever you go when you have a gun in Chicago. He left the police department at one a.m. as a sheriff department right in the same county. So it just doesn't make sense. And he should have at least 20 years in jail. Why do you think these police officers do not tend to get the benefit of the crimes they call these lovely policemen, officers come from a military establishment. And when you train as a soldier in the army, you're trained to kill every person that's not on your side. You feel like he's your enemy. You shoot him because they don't give the soldiers when they come out of the army had been in a war the type of treatment that they need before they go back and to say you've got to deprogram these soldiers when they go back out in the community, they know how to act properly like soldiers. I remember you remember if you go back to your age about five or six months ago when the folks in Michigan went into the Capitol to check on cars, AK 47 rifles, that should have been just law. You know why you need a gun. If you're going to protest, you protest, go protest, sit down and talk it over. They went it would go on. Like, if you don't do what I say, I'm OK. To me, that's a story that's an open door. And you've got to go to a meeting. You've got to have you're going to need to go.

Andrew Cohn [00:25:04] Go. It should be allowed to get on the stand. We don't have to eliminate abolition of what we're doing. That's going to damage. The Constitution's Second Amendment were written where they say everybody need to omniscience. We've got the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, Marines, Secret Service, the CIA. We got all of this. So why do we need guns but a shotgun and a rifle to go on for a bad rap for rushing over?

Asia Jeffries [00:25:33] I agree. I don't think the assault rifles should be given to just regular individuals because they're very easy to get. And I don't think that that should be something that people should be allowed to get.

Asia Jeffries [00:25:44] But even during during the election time, there were some supporters that went to voting polls with guns, but the outcome for them was not violent. I mean, they the police didn't assault them for being there, for protesting with weapons. But if you look on this summer when Black Lives Matter was really going strong in protest and in almost every protest, even though we were unarmed, there was police interference.

Andrew Cohn [00:26:16] And do you think that's a privilege that Trump supporters get that we don't get to a certain extent because you had to backing because he was saying things that kept urging that type of thing, because when they were, it was burning. And I read, I feel that we build this. We can destroy. What was wrong, you don't destroy something that you believe you invest in, it didn't make it better not only for you, but for the community. I don't think burning down stuff is the answer. I think the protest is the best example. And I think the best example would Mohandas Gandhi, when he did it in India and when Martin Luther King came through and put in put it in place where nonviolent demonstration was the answer and the key, because that begin to wake up the system that we live in today and nonviolence, even though they were attacked by dogs, bitten by the dog while waterhole was shot on, they were biblical. They will take John Lewis. He would be unconscious. And he was a man who fought for injustice up until his death about a month ago, maybe two months ago.

Andrew Cohn [00:27:49] And now remember all of this agent? I remember all of the pain from 1960 through nineteen. Well, it started back when Emmett Till was killed by a white mob in Mississippi when they took a drill that you drill a hole through one drilled through his brain, you see them unconscious. They could have used all of it, turned out and ended up here. They did put black titanium, used to put on the streets in wrapped up with feathers and throw them into the water. Gee, they don't teach you me. See, I know that because I want to do it. I remember that. And I got a good man. I remember. OK, so it was it was a custom kill him and they hung like me. End up in 1960 somewhere in America. I never got it. If I were young children today, you would look at least one day at critical sun and candy land and you will get the picture. How we were treated is starting to now about where we go. We as a black race, we in the early years of slavery, we knew we didn't have access to our all when they see what I'm saying. So, you know, we can't we overcome a lot.

Andrew Cohn [00:29:14] We don't bring it up. And if you say it, I knew I had a conversation Monday with people down to the register D I was sitting down to a researcher, later asked me to get up and plan Cisco, somebody getting ready to get married. I said I thought it was a positive first come, first serve it and it kind of angered me not to ever actually obtain him for I'm in that same room. We had to wait a year. We did have a man get a double machine. So, you know, you still live with people. This prejudice. And then I'll talk to another student here and another Caucasian, and they were discussing that, that you cheated in the election. Absolutely nobody cheated. One lady that wrote out

a ballot that one day and two days later she died before she had a chance to mail it and our daughter mailed it and she voted for Trump. Would you say you live in a way that people don't really tell the truth? Well, the more you read the believe a lie rather than the truth, the truth is here. That's why the crop has been turned down over almost a dozen times because they had no proof to prove what they were talking about.

Asia Jeffries [00:30:36] So considering everything that you've experienced during your lifetime. Do you believe that is impossible, to come to a place of racial solidarity with Richard Engel this week?

Andrew Cohn [00:30:48] There will be, but I don't think it'll be in my generation. It might be in your generation.

Andrew Cohn [00:30:53] I think America's future is coming closer together Sunday at Easter with the and the longer we educate our children today and tell them, you know what, the important to vote Backspacer in Georgia and because we've got a lot of kids is not going. I know my brother got a daughter and the son didn't vote young in their 20s, so they didn't vote. But they need to be taught the importance of voting. And when you learn the importance of voting, you know, the power is in to vote.

Asia Jeffries [00:31:34] This was my first election being able to vote and great.

Asia Jeffries [00:31:38] But I wasn't going to vote at first because I didn't understand why voting was so important to my grandma, sat me down, disappointed me. You once you guys are growing up and how voting is the way to create change, to be free. You know, once I realized that my ancestors worked hard here and for us to be in the position to vote for me to and throw it away benefits.

Andrew Cohn [00:32:04] I mean, your grandmother had to experience it. We can go to the front door. We went to Zaftig. We had to go to the back door. But I did have a talk to the old elder man just born in 1890. He told me his reasons and he didn't say black, didn't make him look different because he lived in the white community because he was white, that his friend would not support his business trips and all. We could get them to support his business that he had to have somewhere at the back door in order to accommodate the black community. But he said he told me in nineteen fifty five, what if things ever change, if they refers to welcome blacks. And so when that happens, I want just and he saw me and he waited on me. That showed me to everybody. Don't make the same way that a lot of people here and you find have to. Most of the people are, the people are less educated. They create this problem if they're less educated, Caucasian people are the one they don't want and don't want to have. And they see someone in black to do want to have some day in the contest with them and not allow them or deny them for that progress to for additional benefit.

Asia Jeffries [00:33:31] That's totally true. I mean, I talked to, you know, my grandma and talking to you. The reason I picked to give you is because I think there's a disconnect between the older generation and my generation. And I think that this interview was a great way to bridge that disconnect and just relate what I'm going through, how I'm growing up and how he grew up. So totally different on the things that I do and that there are still some racist people out here.

Asia Jeffries [00:33:59] But I've never really dealt with a lot of in your face, racism is just like sneaky things, is nothing that's ever been, like, blatant right now.

Andrew Cohn [00:34:11] We we came black face to face discrimination. And you and the generation that you come to be, you sneaky undermine ways to to be your race generation. So that's what you got to fight against.

Andrew Cohn [00:34:33] The sneaky Paul, you know, seeing a large part of the situation, because really it just made Michael come third generation, just about my enemies right now. So we came to. Whenever you and I can go through the same thing and we went through the way, we went through, but you will experience it from a certain area because you're going to be driving some time and people have road rage is over, not because of somebody might pass them and they get mad and cut in front of you and you have to slam on. Right. All types of Palestine's. You know, if you want to go buy me this program, go back, I want to kick you right away, but, you know, make a road rage out of, you know, you know, you have different generation of people. But I think your generation got me a whole lot better than the generation that I grew up with situation because.

Asia Jeffries [00:35:37] No, I mean, I think as we've come a long way in the last four years have made progress. There's still room to progress to do and there's still improvements to be made. But I can honestly say that I'm growing up in a world that know the country generations before me never would have imagined and thought.

Asia Jeffries [00:35:56] I'm very appreciative of growing up at the time. Now, mostly the biggest difficulty is beyond my generation is the use of the N-word. And I will say, like, this is an issue, at least in my probably because it's so overused in rap songs that everybody listens to white black. So the capital is hard for white people to understand. This is why I have a friend say the word in my presence. And it's like, you know, we try to tell you that they don't understand.

Andrew Cohn [00:36:36] We live in the depths of how far back that we're seeing the reason why, because there was a slap in the face and when a Caucasian news that he would be trying to blow up your generation, take it as a bad word each other every day. Hey, here's a girl you know, but is not to me.

Andrew Cohn [00:37:05] Because if you do that to me, to me, it's an insult to you and your generation is just a bad word. So that's how you have to deal with that and you can do it. The show was extended to you and your category that we were in, which the reason why she shouldn't you that she should know why you should know why you shouldn't use the N-word, because it was an insult on the black generation, was it belittlement, Jewish values and politics. So so another word got a whole lot of words in the dictionary. There is a lot of art in the dictionary. Yeah.

Asia Jeffries [00:37:52] Before it goes out, is there anything else you'd like to discuss, talk about or add anything on here in Alameda County or in North Carolina specifically?

Andrew Cohn [00:38:03] And we don't want to mention one man. Name someone so that you don't someone's hardware, our own and the Presbyterian Church of about 11. They did a lot for me. They gave me a football suit, basketball to have me. I have a team on my team. Do you have access to Presbyterian, to a basketball court? I left Miami with a good man to lead.

Andrew Cohn [00:38:33] He was a man and he wanted to have the black generation who went right direction. And I appreciate what he's done. He will get a lot down, but not without potential witnesses.

Andrew Cohn [00:38:46] But there are good white people in this world. Oh, yeah, definitely. I want to help the movement, though, who you are trying to. I just want to thank you so much for your interview and understanding of who these people have to stop.

Asia Jeffries [00:39:03] I have to bring you a paper decides, OK, they will give you a long interview. All right. The go back and years and years. Just listen to stories like doing these, understand? All right. We need to thank you so much, but we thank you.

Andrew Cohn [00:39:24] Thank you. Have a great day, young lady. And I wish you to record what a lot of you got to be restrictions. Yes, sir. If you need any information, OK. Thank you. And put that on. Put Michael on. And, you know, every night at my house, if sources are saying, oh, OK, that's right. You want your mom. Yes. There certain. All right. All right. It's been a good day. I enjoyed it. And I would do it again sometime.

Asia Jeffries [00:39:55] Yes, sir. Thank you. This is not right. Bye bye. Where's the need for consistency?