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G: This is Susan Glisson and I'm here with Steve Suitts. It's Friday, June 28, [2002] in Atlanta, Georgia and we're talking about the Southern Regional Council. Thank you very much with your time.

S: Always glad to talk with you.

G: Tell me a little bit about how you came to know of the Southern Regional Council and what you thought of its work.

S: I knew, learned about the council when I was in college at the University of Alabama because I sat on the human relations council in Tuscaloosa when all the state councils and the local councils were not a part of the Southern Regional Council as they once were. They still relied upon the council's literature and almost as a spiritual figure in Atlanta, so I knew about it then. When I worked for the Selma Interreligious Project, we would get publications from and occasionally see somebody who worked at the SRC. I guess I also knew about it because once Leslie Dunbar had gone to the Field Foundation, generally the Field Foundation supported some of the work that was done by the Selma project and later for the Alabama Civil Liberties Union where I was at. One knew about the council because he had been there.

G: In what capacity did you come on board with the SRC?

S: I was at the Alabama Civil Liberties Union and Southern Regional Council needed a director in 1977. **Marjory Fine Noles** who was on the executive committee at the Southern Regional Council and she was in Tuscaloosa at the law school. She asked me if I would be interested in applying. I was and I applied. I came over to Atlanta for an interview and they asked me to stay over the evening, and I did. Then [I] went home, met with the executive committee the next day, came home and got a letter from Julius Chambers offering me the job.

G: What was the general climate in which the SRC found itself doing work when you came on board in

1977?

S: It was an organization in deep crisis. Crisis of mission as much as a crisis of finances, both were critical. I had started the Alabama Civil Liberties Union from a box of files in an office in the backseat of my old Dodge that had push-button gears, it was that old. It was a technology that didn't stay with us. In fact, friends used to call it my book mobile because I would have the books in the back seat and all the ACLU files and this and that. A few people recommended that I really needed to apply the Dewey decimal system to my back system, but I never got that organized. I was not at all discouraged by the difficulties the institution [was] in and I was ready to see if I couldn't craft some strategies that went beyond Alabama. Much of what I had done at the Alabama Civil Liberties Union was trying to use litigation, design a litigation strategy that would help change events and circumstances around that program. Even though the Alabama Civil Liberties Union had just been involved in a major prison litigation that ultimately did some good and put the prison system under federal court order, I saw pretty clearly that the role of litigation in creating change in the deep South was coming to an end. I saw the council as a way of trying to muster some new ways and new strategies from changing hearts, minds, and public policy. That intrigued me. I remember when I was in the interview, one of the people on the interview panel I think **Joan Cassion** who was from Alabama who I knew, she was from Huntsville and her husband John had been the head of the National Democratic Party of Alabama which was a **Black** Mississippi freedom party with a different name. **Gwen Cherry**, lovely, lovely soul, **Gwen** was the vice president and she was the first Black woman to sit on the Florida legislature and certainly in this century probably the first Black woman all together. **Gwen**, who was one of my dearest and strongest supporters from day one, once told me, she said Steve, when you walked into that room

to the interview, I looked at you and I said to myself oh my God, how young and how White. Both were quite true, but in the interview we talked about what ought to be the strategies and I was very interested in, for example, finding ways in which non-profit groups could find legally permissible territory and roles in trying to provide information to legislative units and to help create and solidify Black caucuses **and force** in southern legislatures. It had been something that we had tried in part in Alabama under what we called the constitution lobby and it was a coalition of groups and work. That discussion obviously resonated with **Gwen** and I think it the group of people on the search committee and on the executive committee at that time I think were both stars and activists as a group who saw that they needed someone who wanted to do something and to do it in ways that the council had not done in the past. That=s what people willing to look at someone like me, a young White guy who has a few ideas and a lot of energy I suppose when they=re in a time of crisis. I am absolutely certain in my mind that had the Southern Regional Council not been in financial crisis, it would have found somebody else to choose to be the director and so it was a particular moment when my peculiar ideas and heritage and experience seemed to be attractive to the institution at that time. The marriage of moment and convenience I suppose.

G: Could you talk more specifically, in a sort of comparative kind of way, about the strategies that were in place, the program **Maddock Focus** that was in place when you came in, and then maybe how that shifted under your leadership?

S: Some of the programs had just died on the vine because of the financial troubles that I think it=s fair to say that for whatever reasons, the council had grown very quickly under George Esser=s leadership, and George had a vision of the council and he had a mission there. One thing

happened or another and it simply found itself in a deficit or at least having far less money than it had commitments. This staff of fifty, sixty people, seventy-five at one time, had to be reduced down in a matter of a few weeks to something like thirty and then down to twenty-five and twenty. There were some programs that had been alive and functioning that simply died because of lack of money and I didn't inherit those. I guess the one program which showed the difference between what was and what I tried to do was the southern governmental monitoring project which was in place with some money, dwindling amounts, when I arrived. Its notion was that it would monitor what governments would do and report on that to the general public and expose what was going on. There were two differences. One is it did not seem to me that it recognized the historical moment of the South, which was that we were in a period where finally, because of the Voting Rights Act and because of the Civil Rights Act and because of decades of activism and some hearts and minds changing, we were at a point where there was beginning to be a shift of power or the opportunities for a shift of power in southern politics between those who had power and those who hadn't. The monitoring project while recognizing that the states at that time under the Nixon administration especially had moved things to the state level a lot, did not appreciate well enough, I thought, that it was more important to try to capture and facilitate that legitimate Democratic shift of power to the hands of the poor and to African American citizens than it was to simply generally report. Second difference was I truly believed that while good government was an important issue, that the heart and soul of the issues of the South and the governments of the South revolved around race and income and later I began to appreciate more so in some areas, gender. I thought that reporting on such things as the Freedom of Information Acts in the South and the study of those was a contribution and could be very useful and an important tool at times, but I didn't think that really got to the real issues and it certainly wasn't the issues on which people resisted the

transfer of power or those who needed additional opportunities to influence public affairs. Those were I think the two major differences. In a sense, George Esser, I don't know that George would agree with this but I we'll find when I read this book, I think George really did have a belief in **Howard Odum's** original vision of the Southern Regional Council. That it somehow could transcend the issues of race and the issues of income and be a regional planning and monitoring organization that essentially got people to work somehow beyond those issues. I think for me it was the time where the historically dispossessed of the South had a chance to capitalize on the Democratic process. That seemed to me terribly important. That's where I was trying to focus and I think that was the differences that I saw in the program. When I talked to the executive committee, I didn't really articulate it in those words. I will have to admit to you I later did as documents will probably show. These were people who had been through a big crisis in their organization and I appreciated the difficulty. What I talked about was not so much the difference of what I was doing compared to what had been done, but that there were new opportunities emerging that the SRC could be a part of. I said this was an organization that was in financial and spiritual crisis. The spiritual crisis was... the real question was was there really a role for an interracial group? There was one view, shouldn't White liberals get out of the way and let Black folks do what they need to do? What good was there in interracial... I didn't have any qualms about what role an interracial group had. I had grown up in a county that had only fifty-six Black people in the entire jurisdiction, and I don't think I had ever saw anyone who wasn't White skinned until I was at least in the third or fourth grade. But I had worked with Black folks in college in the Black belt and I knew that out in the South, the real South, that when you knocked on a door at **John Horn's** little ole house in **Hale** County, Alabama and said John, I want to help you get some folks registered to vote and I'll go get some students down here and we'll get some cars

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and we=ll make them pull out some gas money, John didn=t care what I was only that I was genuine and honest about it. There was an intellectual debate going on and it was a **bona fide** debate in some ways, but that the real life of change in the South was out there where people were willing to help and willing to be helped by anybody that will. Those folks were the people I had been working with in Alabama, **and in** Mississippi from time to time, and I had trusted that that was the South. The heart of Dixie was really what the South was. So I didn=t have any qualms about it and sometimes that got me into trouble and sometimes it freed me up to do what I needed to do.

G: I don=t want to belabor the point, but I wonder if you could just talk specifically about the potential internal crisis that presented for personnel and organizational ongoing activities?

S: It was a very difficult time. I joked with members of the executive committee who continued to serve after I got to the council that I noted that they wisely failed to inform me of just how bad the financial crisis was or to show me the books. It was a lesson I learned later on. I got there in July, came over to Atlanta from Tuscaloosa and had a little U-Haul trailer that I put on to my **Maverick** Ford and came over...

G: Had gotten rid of the Dodge by now.

S: Yeah, the Dodge died. Had to move up in the world to a **Maverick** Ford which I guess it would be something like the Ford Motor company=s attempt to create a Civic, but didn=t quite make it. When I got here in July of 1977, I found out that there were people very dispirited, folks going through the motions, people who felt they had no supervisor and some who didn=t want a supervisor, and that there had been essentially no fund-raising going on for some time. One of the difficulties of all of this was that a good bit of the important people of the council had gone up to be a part of the Carter administration. Peter Petkas who was the interim director between George

Esser and me had left to go to I think **OMB**. Wayne Clark, who was head of the governmental monitoring project whom I fired went up to Washington afterwards. Patt Derian had gone up, **Connie Carter** who had been on the executive committee, Ray Marshall who had been part of a project. There was also a sense that the best had left the council, whether it was the staff or otherwise. The sense of we=re all hanging out here because we have no other place to go. That was a difficult situation for people to be in and not one that I really knew I had inherited. I have in my files at home on the council, I have a page from the CPA report for the year of 1978 and one from 1976. As I recall, the council went from having in the first end of 1976 something in the neighborhood of \$2 million to having something around \$55 million in 1978. The crisis of finances had to do with both the fact that there had not been any fund-raising, there had not been any new programs developed, there had not been any leadership, and for all intensive purposes many people had decided the council was an agency whose time had come to die. There were people, in fact, in the files, letters from people, good souls like **Joel Flashman** from North Carolina, who were council members who strongly advised that the council should fold. It was not only a lack of money and a lack of program direction and a lack of ideas and a lack of mission and self-respect by the people at the council, but there was also a general impression by funders and by several members of the council that the end had come. It was a bleak time. Julius Chambers was the president at the time and **Ray Wheeler** whose position in Charlotte was past president which at that time was an office, and **Gwendolyn Cherry** was the vice president. I don=t remember the secretary or treasurer right off hand, but they were the people who were my working group in the week to week effort to try to figure out what to do and how to turn the situation around. Even Leslie Dunbar, who at the time was at the Field Foundation had lost faith in the sense that he was unwilling to support SRC until it showed that it was in fact going to be able to survive.

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G: That=s enough of a plate of stuff to deal with, but were any of those problems complicated by any kind of lingering charges by Blacks that there weren=t leadership roles or by women that there weren=t?

S: Yeah. One of the programs that was winding down at the council in 1977 was the leadership development program which has actually always been one of my favorite programs, was then and I had tried vainly to keep it going. It was headed up by a fellow of great spirit who I really liked was **K.Z. Chatus**. **K.Z.** applied for my job. **K.Z.** was an African American man about at that time, I was in twenty-seven and he was probably forty-seven to fifty-five, somewhere in that neighborhood. There were others, other Black applicants, but he was the primary one and the executive committee members told me afterwards that they didn=t think... they wanted a new start. **K.Z.** was very graceful about it, he was graceful in the way **K.Z.** was graceful. The first time I met him he came in, shook my hand, and said you know I should be sitting behind that desk. I said well, that was a decision neither you nor I could make. The decision=s been made and we should make the best of it I hope. He laughed and said well, that=s a pretty good answer and we went on from there. There were so many people, both White folks and Black folks who had to leave the staff, that the drawer of complaints was very interracial. The letters written from men, women, Black, Whites. There weren=t any Hispanics on the staff at the time. **Al Kara** who was the regional officer for civil rights at the **AFLCIO**, he was a White man, was very put out with the council because of the way it did in fact dismiss people from employment and he thought it was against good labor standards and such. He had had a public dispute with Peter Petkas that had been in the papers. There were lots of people who thought that the SRC had not proven that it was going to... it had done things well or that it could do well. The time between when I accepted the job and

arrived at the job, the Atlanta constitution had a magazine back then, this was when **Daley** still had their Sunday magazines, and they had a feature article entitled "Liberals Without a Cause". It pretty well, I thought it... I probably thought it was a little unfair occasionally, but it pretty well captured the sense of where the organization was. It captured the racial tensions there, the labor tensions. It was fairly good rendering and Brian should be sure to look at that one. Actually, that wasn't the one I kept in my desk. There was another one that **Jim Fallows** had written about SRC, which essentially made the most damning of all assessments. He'd written it for something up near Washington. This is before we became well known or the editor of the News and World Report and such. **Jim Fallows** wrote a piece which essentially said here's this agency, I think it was in 1974, 1975, here's this agency that is soaking up \$5 [million] to \$6 million, which was its high point, a year talking about poverty and talking about problems in the South and doing very little about them, while there are all these other folks who are doing God's work and aren't getting hardly any support. I had been in one of those organizations that was doing God's work at the Selma project with the Alabama Civil Liberties Union, and I understood what the scarcity of resources meant in that situation. I kept that article to the last day of employment as a reminder that what the obligations for a regional organization is to make sure that it can always not only talk the talk, but walk the walk.

G: So you come in this self-described bleak situation. How in the world do you marshal resources and turn that around? What steps did you take?

S: There were days that I didn't think I would do it, when I really didn't. There were even moments before he died, **Ray Wheeler** and I, I guess even in 1979 said maybe we should... People just aren't going to respond. We had hoped that the Ford Foundation, which had been a long time

supporter would give this money actually on faith. It did not. We had hoped that the Field Foundation would give us money on faith, especially since Leslie had been willing to support some things I had been involved in in Alabama, but he too would not. In all, I could understand the reasoning. What we essentially had to do was to find a way in which to have some inexpensive ways of signaling what we can do, spend a little money to have as large an impact as possible, both for budgetary reasons and to signal what our concerns were and what our new style was. One of the things that we did because the laundering project essentially folded, the leisure development project folded. We were in 1978 with very little money, and depending... I love Leslie Dunbar dearly, but let me put it on the record that while Leslie was not willing to give us money on faith, the foundation down the stairs from him in New York on 85th Street, 86th Street, **David Ramage** of the New World Foundation did. I think it=s because David was a... went to seminary, trained Presbyterian and I think he thought giving on faith was a pretty natural **way** thing to do, actually he did. Of all the people who I have to credit for keeping us alive, it was this small foundation and especially **David Ramage** who not only gave us money, but promoted us and talked about us to other small foundations in New York that kept us able. David was the first foundation person to come see us, I just remembered this story, and he came in 1977. I came here in July of 1977, my wife and I married in Alabama in August of 1977, and I came back from our honeymoon in the **beaches** of South Carolina early because **David Ramage** was going to be here. I am White and I blister, sunburn very easily. So even though I had gone to the beach in August, had been on the beach under an umbrella with a towel over me, with long pants on and sun screen on, I still got sunburn all over. I was miserable. So here I was having cut my honeymoon short, coming back blistered from sunburn all over to meet **David Ramage**. He was such a great spirit when he learned that I had done that and was very supportive emotionally and

otherwise. I have always truly been eternally grateful to him. He went on to Chicago to visit the two head of the seminaries there and I lost touch with them. He headed up this chair **of the ward**, People for the American Way a few years back. Tried to trace him down last time I was in Chicago, but didn't do it. With that little foundation support, the small foundations that kept us alive, what we did was we issued some reports on what we called the segregated governments of the South, all of the regional boards, the different kinds of groups. We essentially tallied up how many all White governing boards, advisory boards and such still existed. The State Board of Transportation and the State Board of... how many were still completely all White and it was a shocking number. We did and it got a lot of play, didn't do a lot to tell you the truth, but it did signal what our issue was. It signaled that we were alive and well, and did at least put the issue into public discussion.

G: And that you weren't going to retrench from racial issues.

S: That's right. Then we started doing a series or the courts. This was the time when President Carter had set up a system for the appointment of federal judges. One of the reports that Leslie had done when he was at SRC was looking at B this was right before the Civil Rights Act was to be passed B looking at the federal courts and the patters of employment and racial discrimination in the courts. The real reason for that original report was to try to establish a basis for helping to assure that the southern federal courts were not given jurisdiction over section five of the Voting Rights Act, and it did make a contribution to that. I was intrigued by that, to look at that, so we did a report on the employment practices in the federal courts of the South, which did in fact create a

good bit of publicity. We then pursued it in other ways. There were hearings held by **Don Edwards** of the subcommittee on civil rights in the House on this, and that subcommittee proceeding, I was going to ask to testify on it, [our report was] the basis for the inquiry B they looked more broadly at other courts in the country B and it was the basis of the judicial conference passing a resolution establishing the first affirmative action plan for the United States courts in its history. That report, which I wrote and which we sent out to the local print shop and stapled together one night, counting the amount of salary time must have cost us \$5,000 to do. That was about the kind of expense we could afford, but it again signaled two things. It signaled that we were trying to find ways of using information that in fact shaked a change of practice, and secondly that these were still historic issues in the South. I did papers for the council and for the executive committee talking about my before all of this happened, about what should be the mission and what about the historical role and such, but those were not terribly important except to solidify the council. The work of it was far more important showing what people in foundations were really up to. **That** we were carrying out, and then we did some others on judges in segregated clubs and also prompted a judicial conference of the United States to adopt a resolution holding that membership in a segregated club was a violation of the judicial canons of ethics, which we pressed hard for. At the same time [of] the judicial conference meeting shortly after the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 revoked that resolution. So that wasn=t sustained all that long. Then we did a couple of case studies on the judicial process and how essentially the good ole boys system was continuing even under the Carter administration=s **newest** rules to exclude a lot of Blacks and women from serious consideration for federal judgeships. It clearly was an effort to try... we didn=t focus on the judiciary because of any independent reason, but we did so because it gave us an opportunity to take what little resources we had to perhaps have an influence on the important

branch of government across the region or nation, and to keep our issues focused and alive. While all of that was going on, I was working hard with the help of **Gwen Cherry** and Julius and **Raymond** in trying to develop some of these newer approaches that we had to enforcing the Voting Rights Act and to creating what became in the late 1970s our Southern Legislative Research Council. They developed it in different ways. **Bernie Charles** who was the program officer at the Carnegie Corporation who I saw just a few weeks ago and [is] now doing other things, gave the council it=s first large grant under my term. It did not come until I think 1979. I don=t remember the amount, but it was somewhere in the neighborhood of \$400,000 to create the Southern Legislative Research Council, which would help provide the kind of research and analysis that legislators at that time were not getting unless they were part of the leadership. It was not only to the Black members of the legislature, but to both Blacks and Whites. The way we framed it conceptually was those who represented or supported the interests of Black and poor voters. We actually were trying to empower those representing that constituency of voters in the legislative process and carefully crafted it so that it would be within the tax laws of that time. That was a time when only Florida and South Carolina and very recently afterwards, North Carolina, had provided in the South any office space. Most of the state legislators at that particular time in the late 1970s didn=t have office space, didn=t have secretaries. They could put in a request for a research service, but it would generally be way down on the line. It was providing some pretty basic stuff. Part of what we moved on to do was to in fact help create Black caucuses. We actually paid for it. I was up visiting members of the South Carolina legislative Black caucus about education recently and none of the original members were there, but we actually paid the check for the incorporation of the Black caucus in South Carolina. We helped to get legal papers drawn up for other Black caucuses so that they could begin to not only... they could begin producing fund-raising on their

own on the 5013 side, which is the reference in the tax codes provision for taxing **certain** groups. That began to move. What we wanted to do in the voting rights area was essentially to begin to make section five, which was the provision for **preclearance**, a real administration process that community groups could use effectively. We began to make progress on it getting a few small grants, as I recall, in late 1978, early 1979, and then into 1980. The Voting Rights Act that had provided for this administrative **preclearance**, it had been going on but regulations for it had not been adopted until I think 1971, and the procedure was very informal to the Carter administration. **Drew Days**, at that time, was in the justice department actually and my colleague Lynn Huntley was in the justice department in another division. But **Drew Days** was the head of the civil rights division of justice and they were good people, honest people, and they understood was section five was supposed to be. Our role was to begin to support community groups in preparing submissions to the justice department in a timely way, being able to figure out how to monitor what changes were being proposed. The old technique then was, of course, to submit things and never let anybody locally know about it so that there would be no public comment and no objection. [End of Tape A, side 1]

G: You were talking about **preclearance** and some of the ways you responded to that.

S: That project also fit my whole concept of what the council ought to be doing because the notion of being able to provide information and expertise to community leaders who were activist and concerned about things, the justice of their own communities, and to do that in a way that they could have some influence on what in fact, at least it was not **done**, it was **mischievous**, we couldn't affirmatively do anything, but you could stop a lot of stuff. In the late 1970s, that was still a very important strategy. We began doing that with the support of a group of small foundations and it was not until the early 1980s when people like my colleague here at SEF, Lynn Huntley, got

to the Ford Foundation that the Ford Foundation began to see the virtue of this work. It was not until the early 1980s that the Ford Foundation returned to be a major supporter, but it did. It supported the full growth of our voting rights program to begin to not only provide this assistance to community groups, but to begin to provide expertise in examining voting changes and ultimately preparing redistricting plans, and eventually beginning a national training fellowship program for training fellows to do this kind of expertise across the country. What it also did at the time was put us back in touch with activist and local leaders who had been or were continuing the struggle across the South to change that balance of power. If not change the balance of power, at least move a representative amount of political power and political influence and clout to people who hadn't really had representation in southern governments since the disfranchisement.

G: Just to sort of summarize in my head, you started with some inexpensive projects that both cemented your commitment to particular issues and yielded some impact in the way of providing information to parties in order to make some policy changes. That did two things, it began to reintroduce you to some of the foundations that had perhaps lost faith and to some of the activist communities that you had also lost touch with.

S: That's right.

G: That's a pretty nifty trick.

S: It was what seemed to be the occasion. It wasn't a one man band by any measure. We had some people at the council who helped greatly and _____ fondly. The challenge, of course, came in the 1980s when Jimmy Carter lost his reelection and Reagan came on and we had a

whole different set of people in Washington, a whole different climate in the country. We didn't see that there was going to be any change in two of our major programs which was the Voting Rights Project and the Southern Legislative Research Council. In the early 1980s, as our funding at least became more reliable and more substantial, we began an internal review of now that we are out of the proverbial woods, where do we want to be going **as far as we could**. That internal process led us to the same places and a few more. Our head notes, as **Mary Francis Derfner** who's another great woman on the council who died prematurely, **Mary Francis** used to call these sort of our case notes and as we were looking at the court house, the state house, the school house, and... oh my, I've forgotten our **great** head notes, she would be ashamed of me. Economic... the marketplace. We went to the marketplace. Probably storefront would be better, who knows. Economic issues, political process, the education. The council had a long and honorable history in education. It wasn't first on the list because I didn't think at that particular moment that it had presented the greatest opportunity. What we did realize was that with the emergence of a growing concern about educational achievement at that time with the nation at risk and stuff, we too realized even before that report that there was still a strong pattern of segregation in the schools, that the achievement levels were unusually low, suspension rates and drop rates were skyrocketing for the poor and Black kids. So we needed something in that. In that kind of development, it didn't take the rocket science there. It was not a process of rocket science to realize how important that was. Having realized the importance, the real question was what are the strategies there? In education what we decided to do was to focus first on the Black belt. The education broadly speaking in the Black belt from the majority Black rural counties. From **Lor**, from the coast of North Carolina sweeping through to the delta, and to try to find ways in which, we didn't believe that we were going to get any federal assistance in those fields because of the

Reagan administration=s position, but felt that we could begin to affect some changes by first reporting on just how unrepresentative were the school boards and the people making the decisions, and then to push our voting rights program into those areas to try to push to that the people making decisions in those areas about what scarce resources would be spent or what policies would be adopted would at least be school boards that were representative of the population. At that point, we sort of merged two of our programs in a **way**. We actually merged another one which was in the economic field. We again decided to focus on primarily rural communities. The reason for the rural area was that there was a growing sense on our part that this was a forgotten part of the South, that Atlanta and even by that time Birmingham and Memphis, they were the New South and people were forgetting that there was still a reality that wasn=t quite measured by **Andy Young** getting elected by **Willie Herndon** leading the school board in Mississippi and such, and that it was a much more primitive problem and a problem which could be solved. It was a sense of need and a sense of being able to have a useful impact with folks there. In the economic development field, what we also did as I said concentrating in rural areas and trying to make real the promise of democracy in shifting the control of rural electric cooperatives which were in the South and still are, generally exempt from regulation by the regulatory committees, the public service commissions, on the theory that they were Democratically controlled. Analysis showed pretty clearly that they were in fact the largest economic units in the rural South as a region, as a subregion. Bringing those to Democratic control again merged our belief in democracy and that the whole notion of helping that Democratic process promote the direction of an economic institution that really should be serving in a better way the people who were their constituencies. Those strategies trying to make the electric coops more Democratic, trying to recreate the Democratic control of school boards in the rural South became

for three or four years the driving strategies. This whole notion, as **Jeff Norell** said in his paper looking back over that period sort of promoting democracy was in... you see our annual reports where that was **then** our theme time and time again. Thomas Jefferson must have certainly moved in his grave hearing him quoted so much in democracy and maybe Sally I think so too, but anyway, somebody moved I'm sure in their grave listening to all our rhetoric about the South and its Democratic heritage and its Democratic promise and its Democratic needs. It all boiled down to a simple notion which was B it didn't take a great deal of analysis to understand, just a lot of good experience B that in the South the Democratic control offered more power, more opportunities of influence for people who had been historically dispossessed than anything else, it generally **wasn't** that folks don't have that much money, it was that that=s what the Democratic process was all about. It=s a simple notion of saying this is where you=re most likely to get some changes. We made a lot more progress in the school boards than we did on the electric coops. We never could get the rural electrification administration in the U.S. Department of agriculture to really get tough on these coops to mischief with the Democratic process. We kept after them for years and years and it=s one of my disappointments that we did make so little progress. I had hoped when the Clinton administration came in 1992 that we had a little window there. I suppose if **Bob Nash** who I mentioned earlier had stayed at agriculture as an associate secretary and if I had stayed at the council, we might have finally been able to get something more than the piecemeal progress we got on that. In education, once we had pretty well spent that strategy or at least got as far as we could with it, we then began trying to do things with the schools and school leaders and set up a principal=s institute in the delta and help **Bob Moses** get into the South...

G: With the Algebra Project.

S: Yeah.

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G: I didn't know that.

S: Yeah. Started the Algebra Project and get it rooted in the South. So our education program got more to the whole notion of dealing with the problems of achievement in the schools and leadership and teacher preparation and such, all of which was needed. But we began on our strength and again on what we thought was... if you didn't change the people making the decisions to be at least somewhat representative of the people who were sending their kids to school, then you could do all the teacher preparation you wanted to and it wouldn't **do it**.

G: Did you all have a position on bussing?

S: Yes we did. Julius Chambers was our president when I came and Julius was the lawyer in the Charlotte case, the last case in which the supreme court approved bussing as a remedy to desegregation. So we didn't have... I had my **line** about it which was that there were only fifty-six Black folks in my county, in **Winston** County, but in that fifty-six, there were apparently according to the census in those years about ten or twelve who were kids of school age and I never saw them. The reason I never saw them was because in the 1950s they were bussed, they were bussed to some place else. So bussing wasn't anything new, it was just who was going to have to do the bussing. We all fought over that issue. Bussing, as we all know, wasn't the fight, it was just how much people cared about the issue of desegregation and whether bussing was the most effective remedy. It didn't take us long on that issue.

G: I just have some concluding questions just to sum up from your experience on the SRC what would you list as its strengths and its weaknesses?

S: During my term?

G: In your term, and more broadly if you want to address that.

S: I'll stick to my term, the better part of discretion. I think that our strengths were that we designed and tried to carry out programs with whatever resources we had that answered the question that we would ask ourselves at almost every staff meeting that wasn't about the routine business and that is, but for what we did, how is this really making a difference in the lives of people? We didn't demand that every day that somebody came back from the trip that they would somehow show the difference, but what strategies do we have? Are they realistic? Can they really make a difference if we succeed? And when we came to the conclusion that they would, then the strength of what we were is that we knew that the only thing that separated us from making a real difference and helping people in some kind of enduring change would improve the South was our ability to make that happen, our ability to succeed. I think there was a very strong programmatic drive that we had and that people like **Jenny Montez** who came to head the Southern Legislative Research Council, that my old friend **Jerry Wilson** who we had better disputes over who inspired a staff rebellion against **him**. So when Carter and **Ken Johnson** and other people who headed up the major programs in the **Washington** board, they came to accept or brought with in the same philosophy I had which was we must be our own harshest critics and really understanding if we succeed, can we really make a difference? Not just in one school, but a difference that sets a ripple effect as a regional organization, that is our challenge. I think we had, for lack of a better way, strong emotional and intellectual commitment that drove always an analysis of what we're doing and why we're doing it. I'd say the second strength we had was a strong appreciation for the council's history and the history of the South. In some ways, the Lillian Smith Awards was nothing but a celebration not only of writing and the power of the word, which we were in the business of, but also a celebration of our ability to admit that we weren't always right. Lillian Smith was right and the council was often wrong, probably not as much as some historians would portray the issue of

segregation. That sense of history said you're not always going to be right, but if you've got a commitment and you have a sense of good will and a strategy, then ultimately it's more important for this organization to be in there doing something than it is for it to fold in and give someone else the day. I think those were our two major strengths. I think the weaknesses were that we never were able to establish an economy of scale that let us get our staff outside of Atlanta. To have people in different parts of the region who would be working as council members. We never could quite manage that level of resources nor that scale of economy to work. Being in Atlanta has great advantages in the South, but it had the disadvantage of not really having presence like our human relation councils did in the 1950s. I think it was disappointing that we were stuck with being an Atlanta based organization that was entirely Atlanta based. I think the second weakness was that we were unable to keep well attached to the new succeeding generations of southerners. We couldn't find a way to really speak to them and to engage them except in a very minimalist way as the new southerners, as the new constituency, as the real New South. I don't know the Southern Regional Council ever could be what the college campuses now routinely refer to as being post-modern, but I think we were not able to keep the kind of edge that I would have like us to have had with younger people. We became a fairly older lot. On a personal note, I think the saddest part was not really the staff rebellion which was painful, emotionally painful, but was really seeing there were three women in the council who died prematurely and I miss them, **even today**. When **Mary Francis** and **Jenny Montez**, great people, great people. Even today I can shed a tear over them. That I think, once when Lottie Shackelford who was a great woman, Lottie became president of the council and the first Black women to actually lead, and the second woman after **Pat Darig**. I talked to Pat afterwards and said did you know Lottie was president? She had been a little out of touch with the council. She said yes, she said it's about time which is traditional, standard for Pat. Pat

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had gotten so disconnected with the council at that time that she hadn't even known that **Gwen Cherry** and **Mary Francis Dearthner**, both of whom oddly enough died two months before they were supposed to become president of the council. The great thing about remembering people is a sense of sorrow of their passing, the premature passing, is that there's a sense of joy about, what you're missing is the joy you had in **their** lives and relationships. They were women who were very influential in life, my life.

G: How do you think historians should incorporate the SRC in the civil rights movement story?

S: That's a good question. I've got a chart at home which I did before I left SRC and had my colleagues do, which sort of was that measurement of what have done in these seventeen or eighteen years for the South? The few thousand jurisdictions had been redistrict _____ for the election of candidate of choice for Black voters and the school district. I tried to measure it as much as possible to sort of see what had really been the role. I came away with a sense not of satisfaction, but it was enough of a sense in the broader world of what was going on in the South and the change from a huge portion of our population being powerless in this democracy to having some stake in the powers and decisions. I did not leave the council dissatisfied, which is about as good as I get. I think the SRC should always be remembered, and I considered this then and still look back at that time, as being part of the infrastructure of social change. That we helped create the mechanisms of empowerment, helped support the process of empowerment, helped create capacity, and that is not the same as being on the front line whether you're a state legislator or a community activist or a teacher. It is I think the best role the council has ever played, not necessarily the role that the institutions... I'm not saying that, let me qualify, clarify that. The council over its entire history has played its best role when it has been a part of that infrastructure,

when it has been the support mechanism not just for good people to feel a sense of good will, but for people to really be more able to change the South, to improve the South. To make good James McBride Dabbs remarks about Lillian Smith, that she cared enough about the South that she wanted to change it. What the council=s best role over the many decades is helping giving people tools and abilities and opportunities to make those changes that they would not have had had the council=s strategies and programs not been in place. I think that=s an important role, but it=s not the primary role. Both are essential. But if you were to look back over the people who we recognized as our life fellows during my term B I tried to mend a few old fences and make right some errors the council may have participated in, or at least I thought they did, over the years; when we honored Anne Braden that was an emotional moment for me and for others B what we were trying to do is honor people who had given their life to being on the front line, and those are the people both we honored and for whom we worked. I think that was our role and I think that=s how history will rightly remember it.

G: Why do you suppose that role has been relatively unacknowledged?

S: I think it=s two reasons. One is, we=re just now getting around to acknowledging the role of many of the people who were in fact in the front lines. The sad fact of the matter is, in the eighteen years it took to make the circle being broken did break new ground in recognizing local people who should have been recognized years and years ago, decades ago. Despite a lot of growth in the scholarship, we=ve been late in recognizing the importance of people in this field wherever they had been and certainly the people in the front lines. The second is, the council is not... how can I say this without being offensive to historians?

G: Don=t worry about that.

S: I know, but I do. I don't think John Hope Franklin has ever had any problems understanding the important role of the Southern Regional Council. I don't think **Stephen Woodward** had any trouble understanding the role of the Southern Regional Council. Certainly Paul Gaston didn't. In the coverage of southern history in the civil rights era, it takes experience or a sense of understanding the South or how change really occurs to come to the conclusion that the Southern Regional Council was, over the decades, an essential institution. I think historians are coming to that level of sophistication about social change. Sometimes I'm discouraged at the Southern Historical Association meetings, but other times I'm quite encouraged by them. I think both because when time allows for everyone else to have gotten their due, the council I think will have its due as an institution. In the story telling of events, George Wallace understood that both popular culture and history would find it much more interesting to talk about the **Standees Willhouse store** than trying to figure out how to make electric coops more Democratic, or taking a computer program and developing a way in which community activists can draw their own plans in being able to develop a way in which Black voters for the first time could elect candidates of their choice. The election of that candidate, that candidate's campaign, the difficulties of the White community accepting it, that's a much more evocative story, a much better story for story telling than is the story of how that district got created. I'm not sure that given how late it's been to recognizing the drum majors of the different communities that the council should have had recognition any time earlier than the twenty-first century. Whether it's with the **Osgood** project or with someone else, the council will be given its due and historians will understand ultimately, people will understand for sure that in this process of change, it did matter how early you came out against segregation when the council was not one of the first to come out against segregation. That wasn't the decisive matter as to what organization truly helped to change the region. Who

stayed on, who tried to make a difference? And why, actually, they did. I think it will come. I=ve never been worried about the fact that we haven=t had book written about the SRC or even that it hasn=t been given it=s due. There=s a Chinese proverb I quoted when I made my last speeches at the council annual meeting about the true definition of leadership is whenever you=ve convinced people that they not only can help people to a certain point that they can not only do it for themselves, but they think they=ve done it on their own and they have the confidence to continue to do it on their own, then you=ve done what you should do. That=s really what the council should have done in my time, did before my time, and it=s truly its real mission.

G: Is there anything that I should have asked you that I did not?

S: You probably should have asked me about the council being sued for sex discrimination, race discrimination, and age discrimination during 1992, 1993.

G: What happened?

S: There was a trial.

G: Who brought the suit?

S: Former employees.

G: Under your leadership?

S: They were **privates of rec** and I was the director. You all can decide whether you want to put it in or not. It=s all a matter of public record and I think I discovered that my old friend **Jerry Wilson** who was the director of the voting rights project had been regrowing plans and had been working with litigation groups to do so as was his job, and that the litigation groups had filed in cases they had won for reimbursement of cost and fees and that **Jerry** had been receiving money personally

rather than that money coming back to the Southern Regional Council. SRC later had an out of court settlement with **Jerry** about this, but we sued him and we settled after I... Unfortunately one of the terms of the settlement is that I not be informed of the terms of the settlement, so I don't know exactly what happened in terms of the settlement, but I don't mind, the facts were absolutely clear. From that point on as that began to unravel, it became clear that there were other similar problems that had begun to occur. The short-long is that several people got fired for cause and several people sued the council and me. The **EOC** complaints were filed and all were disposed of in favor of the council. We were sued in federal court and went to trial in early 1995 and the jury I think was out for about forty minutes and came in with a verdict for the council. I was bothered by the experience. It wasn't so much being accused. In my years of working I had been accused of every violation of federal law for which civil rights covers because when you're in this business, people generally think the one Achilles heel that you have is that you don't live by the same rules that you promote and that that's your weak spot, and it is if you don't. I never had any administrative or other judgement. It's interesting because **Delores Pringle** who you have on your list to interview, **Delores** did not sue the council although she testified on behalf of the plaintiffs who did sue. The irony of that was that when we hired **Delores** I was sued by a White woman who alleged racial discrimination. It comes and goes in life. There were some people there, **Jerry** included, who I truly considered friends and who I trusted with not only the council's money but with the council's good will who decided to misuse that trust and that's always a painful experience. It was not a celebratory conclusion. From 1992 to 1994 that was going on, my wife and I had our second child and I had pneumonia, so it was not a particularly easy period of time by any means. I wanted to make sure that that matter was settled. By the time I became in early 1995 a consultant, the lawsuit was tried in January of 1995, it was concluded. There was a

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search committee, a search process going on. There was a triumvirate of people, **Ken Johnson**, Ellen Spears, and **Marsha Pinboard** who were responsible for the administration so it was in good hands. The council had \$900,000 in the bank, it had commitments of a little over \$1 million from grants to be paid, so I felt that all was in good hands and that I did what I said I was going to do when I promised myself in 1979 that I would leave the council only in an orderly fashion with adequate resources to continue. I felt that I had done that so I felt I could leave. Nobody really should note my tenure without my bringing to their attention that towards the end, there was a period of time in which the council was accused of every violation of employment law except a violation on religious grounds, and that we prevailed in all instances.

G: I appreciate your honesty about that.

S: Sure.

G: Thank you.

S: Well thank you. It brought back a lot of old memories that I hadn't even thought about in a long time.

G: I didn't mean to upset you.

S: No, no. I'm glad. My ability is to say a tear of remembrance is a tear of joy, and I'm glad to remember those people **always**.

G: Good. We will conclude. This is Susan Glisson with Steve Suitts.

S: Thank you.

[End of interview]