

SRC 12

Interviewer: Susan Glisson

Interviewee: Julius Chambers

Date: August 6, 2002

G: It is Tuesday, August 6, [2002]. I am in Charlotte, North Carolina, with Julius Chambers. This is Susan Glisson. Thank you so much for your time, Mr. Chambers.

C: You're welcome.

G: I wanted to know if you could tell me a little bit about how you came to know about the Southern Regional Council and what your role was with them?

C: Through a friend who practiced medicine here in Charlotte named Raymond Wheeler, who had been an active member of the Council for years, and through Fred Alexander, who was an active politician here in Charlotte.

G: You came to work with them, you said, in the mid-1960s?

C: I decided to become a member and was fortunately elected as a member somewhere in the mid-1960s.

G: Did you serve on the board?

C: Yes.

G: How did you see the role of the Southern Regional Council at that time?

C: It was a catalyst for change to bring about improved race relations, in the South primarily. They worked with black and white citizens in the various states in the South, helping them appreciate that they could improve their lot if they would work together to make sure that everybody had an equal chance. We focused initially in education. That was a major issue for the southern region at that time. We also had a lot of activities with public accommodations, sit-ins, for example. But primarily, it was an organization designed to bring black and white citizens together to improve relations.

G: Did you have a sense that the SRC. was threatened by, or did it encourage, the kind of activism that you mentioned, challenging public accommodations or some of the other things that, say, a group like SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference] or SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] might have been known for? Were they concerned about those kinds of things or worried about that kind of tactic?

- C: They were concerned about discrimination against black people in practically all walks of life. They highlighted blatant practices of discrimination and sought to sway public opinion about it. They were not a politically activist group, as such, seeking legislation, etc. The thing I found extremely valuable with them, or one of the things, was the ability to bring black and white people together to just talk, and, second, the accumulation of valuable resources that assisted others, like myself, who were involved with advocacy. I was, at the time, involved in a lot of litigation, and it was always helpful to turn to the SRC to ask about what data they had about the schools, what data about public accommodation or [other relevant data]. They were always there.
- G: Were they supportive of the other kinds of more grassroots activism?
- C: They were supportive primarily in providing the resource material, rather than advocating themselves. The organization was not an advocacy group, but it did provide valuable information to those groups that were doing the advocacy.
- G: So, it was definitely supportive of those kinds of things.
- C: Yes.
- G: I know that a lot of the funding came from places like the Field Foundation and the Ford Foundation, places outside of the South. Did you have any sense that the foundations that were supporting some of that work would try to determine the kind of work that would get done?
- C: No, I think its policy started, and it continued, at least while I was an active member, with its own agenda. It made its own decisions on how to prioritize whatever it was going to do. There was enough going on to engage the SRC, more than it had resources to become involved in. You had to make a decision that you were going to do education or you were going to do this aspect of education, you were going to look at public accommodation or this aspect of it, and I know the group did that itself and it wasn't directed by anyone on high.
- G: Did you have a sense that, say, the role of women or the role of African-Americans within the SRC changed as the civil rights movement gained momentum?
- C: The role of women changed. I think this was a much more open organization. I am thinking about some of the women in the group who made sure that women were given an equal role.
- G: How did they make sure?

- C: Well, the young lady from Florida, the young lady from Arkansas, the young lady from Virginia, who demanded that women be treated fairly. We hadn't had a woman president, and they demanded that we elect a woman president. They demanded that women be allowed to stay on equal planes with men, and they were. And you had men who were receptive to the demands of women's advances. It was a pretty open, liberal group.
- G: It was able to evolve as the social landscape kind of changed.
- C: Right.
- G: Did you have the same sense that it worked the same way for African-Americans within the organization?
- C: Yes. I think African-Americans more so than women in the beginning, because the organization started with the purpose of improving race relations between blacks and whites, and it engaged blacks and whites in the process. Blacks felt pretty open with it and felt that the organization was really committed to improving their opportunities. So they were very supportive.
- G: You mentioned that there were so many things that could have been done and the resources were limited, that the SRC had the ability to determine which programs it was going to spend money on. Do you know how it made the determinations, how it prioritized?
- C: It had some good directors, and they looked at the resources and they looked at where they felt – he felt, [name?] – they could be most effective. I think its most effective role was in getting stuff to the media about the horrible problems that blacks had to endure. That was extremely effective. The SRC made sure that its information was accurate, was fair, and people felt confident in relying on what the SRC had reported. I really think, although others may differ, that was the most effective role that [the SRC] played over the years. But it was also extremely important bringing black and white citizens together. You would be surprised seeing some of the most antagonistic advocates on both sides being able to sit down and talk, and that was the role the SRC was playing.
- G: They could create a kind of neutral ground or common ground for people to come together.
- C: Right.
- G: What media did it use to try to disseminate its message?
- C: Primarily the news media. It published a number of different pamphlets and

publications that were pretty widely distributed, and it published a monthly newspaper and the magazine, among other things. It was able to get the *Atlanta Constitution*, the *Arkansas Gazette*, or whatever it is, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post* frequently, to carry stories that they wanted published.

G: Did you have any sense if it ever used radio?

C: [Yes]. It [also] used television [to the extent possible].

G: Did they have public service announcements?

C: No. Well, they did a very limited amount. But they would get information to reporters, who in turn would incorporate...

G: That into the news.

C: Yes.

G: Do you remember, by chance, a broadcast called, *The Friendly World*, or some variation on that theme. Edwin Randall would do spots for radio.

C: I can't remember.

G: I wonder if we could talk for just a minute about the V.E.P., the voter education project. It was revived in 1966, which would have been sort of around the time you were on the board. Do you have a sense of what the discussions were about reviving V.E.P., the need for doing that and what should be its job?

C: I was saying the SRC. decided what its priorities would be. Registering people to vote and encouraging people to vote were extremely important issues. They had begun the VEP years before with a grant from [the] Ford [Foundation], I guess, with Wiley Branton and Vernon Jordan. The people across the South really began to engage VEP and SRC, because it was helping with efforts to register people to vote. It became a major player in the increased minority enrollment [of voter] registrations. I didn't see it that involved in actually getting people out to vote, as such. We had discussions and all that, but getting people registered was a major objective, and they organized it. There was a lot of talk back in the mid-1960s about registration as a major issue, and there was collaboration with some of the advocacy groups, particularly the lawyers, and trying to get more legislation, more litigation, to challenge barriers that prevented people from registering to vote. We brought cases talking about the test requirements for registering and the location of the registration offices, and we worked a lot with the Department of Justice to point out additional barriers. Invariably, people all across the South began to turn to SRC and to VEP for assistance in getting

some organized effort going to get the public to register to vote. It was extremely important.

G: Do you think there was a sense among the SRC that, say, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 signaled an increasing support for those kinds of activities on the part of the [LBJ] Administration?

C: Oh, sure. I think SRC and VEP and others looked at all of those things as major achievements and a need for getting more involved to advance. I don't think they stopped with the voting rights legislation in 1965; they continued to point out shortcomings of that legislation, the Voting Right Act of, what was it, 1957, among others. It was helpful to have SRC there continually documenting the problems that people were experiencing in trying to register to vote. SRC felt that the VEP was extremely important for it, the

SRC, to carry on its role.

G: You mentioned a couple of some of the impressive folks who worked with that project, Vernon Jordan and Wiley Branton, and there were others, John Lewis and Julian Bond. Could you talk a little bit about the strengths that those folks might have brought to the project?

C: Wiley and Vernon were extremely important in helping map strategies about how to do things. Vernon was really a great personality to attract others into the effort. John Lewis was always out there pressing to make sure that people stepped forward and challenged discrimination wherever it existed. Julian Bond was very active and equally involved. There were others, and there were some women. I am trying to think of the woman's name in Florida who was a legislator who was killed in an automobile accident [Gwen is all that I can remember]. There was Shackelford from Arkansas and Brownlee from Arkansas, and there was Cashin from Louisiana and Alabama. There were women and men, black and white, who were actively pressing for voter registration. The belief was that blacks could take care of themselves if they could get registered to vote, so there was a major push by SRC to get the VEP funded and operational, and we had some good people working with it.

G: This is about the period of time that the Black Power movement begins to emerge. Do you have a sense of how SRC responded to that initiative?

C: I think probably like everybody. I think there was concern about the Black Power advocacy, but also an appreciation of why people were advocating Black Power. There was a need to really help people appreciate that they had things they could do to make contributions. I viewed the Black Power movement as a kind of psychological warfare to just get people charged up to do some things, to believe

in themselves, and I never viewed it as an exclusionary effort of black people. I knew, as I am sure most of the advocates knew, that we had to do things with others [interracially], but you really had a lot to deal with, a history of segregation and slavery, so you had to bring people out of that mentality.

- G: I interviewed a guy named Warren Pritchard, whom you might know. He worked on one of the publications, and he talked about sometimes the feelings on the part of some of the whites, feeling a little bit out of place. He said he went from being righteous to being self-righteous in terms of the charges that were made against SRC. Did you have any sense that there were some whites who sort of felt a little out of water?
- C: Not the ones I knew. I remember Paul Gaston from Virginia. I don't think he ever felt out of place. I remember Joe Hass from Georgia, and he didn't feel out of place. I mean, Joe and Paul would speak their piece no matter who was present. I think they felt as part of a group of black and white people, and I think they were received that way. Now, there may have been others who might have felt out of place; in fact, I'm sure there were some, but on the whole, I think those who were really active with the SRC, and had been involved with the SRC, felt right at home.
- G: I wonder, as southern politics began to change in the late 1960s and early 1970s and the George Wallaces began to have some appeal and the Democrats began to lose sway and the Republican party began to hold sway, how did SRC respond to those kinds of changes?
- C: I think they felt a need to continue with the [programs] that they had been pursuing, and they, at some point, modified the way they were approaching things. I think you saw some of that with school desegregation. They went through the same kind of change that other advocates went through. They started off talking about freedom-of-choice and getting black kids transferred to a white school to complete desegregation, to where you were demanding that school systems move and buss kids where they needed to be in order to integrate the schools and then to advocacy of just improving schools, which is about where I think we are right now. With the jobs, it was the same change or evolution. We talk about moving from a period when there was token solutions, breaking the ice with one person or two people, no quota, no whatever, and we got into the affirmative action issue with that, and I guess we still are arguing about affirmative action. The objective was to make sure you got more than just a token number of people, and that is still going on. The SRC changed as these efforts were changing legally through the courts and through the legislature. Same thing with housing and [the] same thing with health care, among other things. I think it's a good example of how an organization like that really represents the people.

G: What was the SRC's position on bussing?

C: They were very supportive. I was the lawyer for the Swann plaintiffs in Charlotte [the *Swann v. Mecklenburg County* case that used large-scale bussing to achieve racial balance]. I was very active with SRC, and the SRC endorsed the opinion, and we turned to SRC for a lot of the information we needed to press the case.

G: Do you remember, at the height of the Charlotte bussing crisis there was a really flattering editorial on you by WBT [Television station in Charlotte, NC]? It was a pretty conservative outfit, but they appreciated your ability to be able to talk to lots of different folks.

C: Oh, well, you train [well] with SRC.

G: Did radio come into play at the time when you working on the Charlotte...?

C: I am sure it did. Did we utilize it? Not directly. We knew there would be certain reports, and we knew that it was helpful to time some of things that we did or said [to maximize media coverage]. Those reports we would tape, but our thought was it was more important to use TV. We thought then, and now, it reached a lot more people.

G: Did SRC help you all get information to the media during that effort?

C: Yes. When we were doing the Charlotte School case, we were part of a kind of national effort. We had a similar effort in Alabama and in Virginia and in Arkansas, among others, and what we were trying to do was to develop a record that we could carry to the [U.S.] Supreme Court. Swann was the first one to get there. We got there [later] with Mobile and Virginia. We picked news developments in the various states, to point out inequities, that were distributed in various places, including Charlotte, and felt that helped with what we were doing to improve education in Charlotte.

G: Did you have any sense about the black-owned radio station in Charlotte, WGIB and its support for desegregation?

C: It wasn't the strongest advocate. We wanted to appeal to a media that reached a broader audience than just African-Americans, and to do that, you had to go to WBT or WBTW or WSOC-TV or whatever. Our approach was to a media that had kind of a diverse listening audience.

G: Larger appeal. And the black radio station wasn't as supportive?

C: Well, the individuals were. I think there was some concern that being too out

there would jeopardize some of [its appeal]. We didn't press them, because we were proud to have a radio station. But that was a problem that we had to deal with throughout this struggle.

- G: It is interesting because the SRC, I think, sometimes among historians it has this label against it that it was more gradualist. Reading back into history, it is always easier to say you should have been more radical or you should have advocated total, complete integration, maybe more like the Quakers, say, or SNCC or pick a group that was more radical. How do you respond to that kind of charge?
- C: I think you had to do what you could do in the environment in which you operated. I know in the 1960s and 1970s, we had a Justice Department that wasn't supportive of more rapid change. Burke Marshall with the Kennedy administration made it clear that he thought things had to evolve and it would be too disruptive to go and press the law to be changed overnight. I don't know if you had advocated more rapid change whether you would have gotten the kind of reception that we got in many places. I think we did it the best way that we could do it.
- G: And then in some cases, it sounds like in Charlotte you were definitely more progressive than, say, a black-owned business.
- C: We were, and I think you really had to sort of pick and choose where you demanded more rapid change.
- G: How would you characterize the SRC's major achievements and contributions in the South in the 1970s and maybe early 1980s?
- C: One, again, I will go back, I think it was extremely important to have an organ that would collect the data and report the data fairly, and SRC did a fantastic job of that. It was the only institution we had out there, I think, that black and white people could rely on to report what was happening and the effects of what was happening, and it did a good job with it and it helped tremendously, I think, in making it possible to change the practices that we were challenging. Second, I think it did a good job in bringing black and white people together. Somebody had to do that. It was the most effective organization I've seen in doing that. People felt proud that a southern organization was doing it. It had its roots in the South, and it had some good people from the South who worked on this problem, and I think it was very effective with that. I put that as another highly successful achievement of the SRC I think it did a lot in developing grassroots groups. I never will forget how we had all these little organizations in Virginia and North Carolina and South Carolina. They were advocacy groups out in the field in the various states that made it possible for SRC to do its work, but also to further publicize the kinds of problems that we were trying to bring to the

attention of the public, and I think that is a major achievement of SRC. I think it did a great job in producing leaders. I don't know who would have thought that Vernon Jordan would be where he is today or that Wiley Branton would have been able to accomplish what he accomplished or that Julian Bond or John Lewis would have done what they did. SRC provided a venue for them to train and to grow, and they became great leaders. I think that was a major achievement. I don't know if you know Steve Suitts.

G: Yes. I just interviewed him a few weeks ago in Atlanta.

C: Oh, you did. Well, I don't know what Steve was doing there, but he came to the SRC from Alabama.

G: Right, from the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union]. He had started there.

C: And nobody knew Steve or had heard of him, but the SRC provided an opportunity for him to really develop, and he did a great job at the SRC.

G: He came at a difficult time, financially, for the organization, and he seemed to be able to really turn it around. He also mentioned, I asked him if there was something at the end that I should have asked him that I didn't, and he said that I should have asked him about the lawsuit against SRC under his directorship about discrimination. I said, well, tell me about it.

C: Well, in response to your question, it did provide some opportunity for some great people to go through and train to become great leaders.

G: May I ask you one more question?

C: Hm-mm [yes].

G: How do you think that historians should incorporate the SRC in the story of the African-American freedom struggle and in the history of the postwar South generally?

C: I was arguing with Dave Garrow [Emory University scholar of the civil rights movement], who had this theory...

G: It's easy to do, I understand.

C: Yes, it is. He's all right.

G: Yes, he is. He is a good historian.

C: ...about, what came first, the chicken or the egg. He advocates that Martin Luther King sort of made his own way and that the legal developments followed and that things would have happened without some of the lawsuits. I think in looking at the history of the South, historians will need to look at the players who helped to make changes and some of the things that went into those changes. I think that lesson would be extremely important even for today, when we are talking about the kinds of problems we are experiencing. We had to have, whether in the courtroom or in the legislature or in the executive branch or wherever, a receptive public. I don't care what these judges say, they move and listen to what the media says. You had to have someone helping the media appreciate the need for something. We had to have someone out educating black and white people about the problems and what people can do working together. Some organizations, like SRC, were extremely important. I think historians would need to look at that. We had some individuals who played some major roles, including Dr. [Martin Luther] King [Jr.], but I don't think anybody could have made the great strides that they made without support from other people and of organizations. A historian fairly looking at history would have to report on a number of different factors that helped to evolve.

G: The word that Charles Fraisian – I don't know if you know him – used was “organic,” the idea that there are lots of different efforts ongoing and that they interact and support each other. Even David Garrow has the great [quotation] by Ella Baker [SCLC leader] at the end of his book on King, that Martin Luther King did not make a movement, the movement made Martin Luther King, which I think is a pretty accurate assessment, not taking anything away from his contributions.

C: I am not sure whether Dave agrees with that.

G: He put it in there. That is kind of funny that he did, to me. Mr. Chambers, I appreciate your time. Thank you so much.

C: All right. I would like to see what you come up with.

[End of Interview.]