

Interviewee: Alton Yates
Interviewer: Kristin Dodek
Date: February 16, 2005

D: I'm Kristin Dodek. It is Wednesday, February 16, 2005, and I'm in Jacksonville with Alton Yates. Could you state where you were born and tell me a little bit about your background?

Y: I'm a Jacksonville native, fourth-generation Jacksonvillian, born and raised here. [I] lived in an area of town called La Villa, grew up there, went to schools there. Most of the schools were pretty much in that area. Old La Villa School was my elementary school, A.L. Lewis, which is in the heart of La Villa, was my middle school, and [I attended] Stanton High School, the building is still standing in La Villa. Pretty normal childhood.

[I was the] second of seven children, [we had a] fairly large family. Both parents worked outside the home, so my grandmother lived with us. We never came home to "the empty house," she was always there. [She was a] very strict disciplinarian. I grew up with a father who told his four boys that all of them had to at least have some experience in one branch of the military, they could choose any branch they wanted, but they all had to serve. And of course, we did that and did it quite willingly. In fact, it was a large part of our lives, all of us. [I had a] pretty normal childhood. [I] grew up in a neighborhood where people knew each other [and] were friendly with each other. We really depended on people who lived in the neighborhood; it was like one big family.

Interestingly enough about neighborhoods in La Villa, and in fact neighborhoods throughout the black community, there were white people, people who were not of color, who lived in some of these neighborhoods. Many of them were grocery store owners, and the grocery store was in the bottom of a two-story building, and some of these families lived upstairs. So it wasn't as if we were totally and completely cut off from the white world. Most of the folk who lived in these stores were either Syrians, or Jews, or people of Arab descent. There were at that point very few indigenous grocery stores in the black community that were owned by black folk, and that comes from an era where at the turn of the century, there were more black-owned businesses in Jacksonville, Florida, than there were in any other part of the country. So it was sort of unusual that we didn't have more merchants in the black community at that time, but after the Black Codes [laws passed by southern state legislatures instituting segregation] and some of the activities of the Klan, then of course there was a decline in business in the black community.

D: You spent some time in the Air Force in Alamogordo, New Mexico.

Y: Sure did.

D: You come back to Jacksonville and you immediately seek to participate in the fight for civil rights.

Y: That is correct.

D: What happened in New Mexico that induced your activism?

Y: In New Mexico, I was—I guess there's no better way to describe it than to say that I was a human guinea pig for the Air Force, [and it was] something that I did quite voluntarily. These were the early days of the space program, this was prior to NASA. I went into the Air Force in June, 1955. At that time, Russia had launched the *Sputnik* missile. [*Sputnik* was the first man-made satellite to orbit the earth; launched October 4, 1957] The United States knew that it just had a long way to go to catch up with [the U.S.S.R.] if we were going to be engaged in the space race, and it had already been determined that we were going to be engaged—I mean deeply engaged. The Air Force called for volunteers, men who wanted to be involved in this whole process in the exploration of space, and at the Aerodynamics Laboratory of Aeromedical Field Laboratory, I happened to work for Colonel John Paul Stapp, [USAF doctor who served as “human decelerator” in dozens of 1950s Air Force deceleration experiments that produced better helmets and safety harnesses for aircraft pilots] who was instrumental in starting that laboratory and who was the principal in this series of research programs that were going on.

So I volunteered to risk my life, and in fact I did it more than sixty-five times, riding high-speed rocket sleds, flying high-altitude balloons, jumping distances unheard of before. [We engaged in all kinds of experiments] to determine the effects of space travel on the human body. As a result of having participated in those kind of experiences—once you leave Jacksonville, Florida, and you go into that kind of world where you're only looked upon as a result of your contributions, and you're judged by what you are able to contribute rather than the color of your skin—in fact, you almost forget about skin color and racial differences and that sort of thing because you're tied together into [it]. It's hard to describe the kind of bond, the kind of fraternity, that takes place among men and women who are doing these kinds of things. You're just oblivious to anything outside your realm.

Well, I did that for four and a half years, and then I got word that my dad was really critically ill, near death, and that I needed to come home. I cut short that career, and on October 19, 1959, I drove from Alamogordo, New Mexico, to Jacksonville, Florida, in full-dress blue Air Force uniform. [I was] proud—I mean, absolutely proud. I'd gotten all kinds of awards, international acclaim for what I'd done, so you're talking about the proud American citizen. I was the epitome of that. I got into my car with all of my possessions, and I started to drive from Alamogordo, New Mexico, to Jacksonville, Florida. I got ninety miles from my base, exactly ninety miles from Alamogordo to El Paso, Texas. [I] went into a restaurant in El Paso, Texas, and I sat down—I only wanted to have a cup of coffee before I got back on the road. I sat down to have a cup of coffee and a young waitress walks up to me and says, we don't serve niggers in here. I said, I beg your pardon? She said, you heard me, and she immediately walked away

and went and got the manager and he came over and said, we don't serve you, you're not welcome, I don't know what made you come through that front door, but you've got to go. And so I left. I drove on for awhile. Interestingly enough, I didn't get angry when that happened. To say that I wasn't shocked and stunned [isn't accurate], I mean I was, it's just this was El Paso, Texas. Half the population of El Paso, Texas, was Hispanic-Mexican. But I noticed that there were no Hispanics, no Mexicans, in that restaurant, the only people in that restaurant were white folk. But there were no signs, and being from the South, you're accustomed to seeing signs that say "whites only" or "coloreds." You were accustomed to seeing those; I hadn't seen them in a number of years, but I would have recognized one had I saw it, and probably wouldn't have gone into the place.

So I drove on and got into another little place in Texas, my car was just about out of gas then, and I pulled up to the gas pump, gassed my car up, was able to fill my car up with gas, and then I moved the car over to the front of the service station away from the gas pump because I wanted to use the restroom and I wanted to go into the little diner there and eat. Well, when I asked for the key to the restroom, the guy—I mean he really was very belligerent—he cursed me up one end and down the other. He said, we don't serve niggers here. I said, can I get a sandwich? He said, did you hear what I said? He said, the best thing for you to do is get your black so-and-so into that car and get away from here. [I] didn't get angry. There's a difference between angry and mad; I got mad. I got dog mad. But, you know, I knew where I was, I knew that I was in Texas. In my mind, Texas was no different than Mississippi, which was notorious, and I decided that if I wanted to get home, and that was my objective, then I needed to kind of put my temper in wraps, and I did.

I drove to the next little town and there was a grocery store. I went to the grocery store and I bought a loaf of bread, a jar of peanut butter, a plastic knife, and a little jar of jelly. For the trip from New Mexico to Jacksonville, I survived on the peanut butter and jelly. There were no restrooms available for me, so you go to the woods, you do what you're trained to do. I determined along that journey that, as soon as I got home, I was going to have to do something to change those conditions. There's no way I could do all of the kinds of crazy stuff that I had done with the Air Force and then allow conditions like that to continue to exist. So I came home, got my dad taken care of, and then I immediately sought out the NAACP. The adult branch of the NAACP was somewhat docile; I mean, they weren't doing anything. They were just there listening to what was happening in other parts of the country. Already, in Greensboro, North Carolina, students had started sit-in demonstrations and that sort of thing.

I ran into someone who told me about Rutledge Pearson [adult advisor to the NAACP Youth Council], who was a young teacher who had gotten a group of kids together, and they had formed the NAACP Youth Council. I immediately asked Rutledge if I could be involved with the Youth Council; he said, yes, we're in the process of getting it organized now, and we'd love to have you participate. There I met Rodney Hurst, who was elected president of the NAACP Youth

Council. I was the vice president. We started a series of sit-in demonstrations at businesses around the Jacksonville area, namely lunch counters at May Cohen's—it was Cohen Brothers at that time, it hadn't become May Cohen's—at Sears, and W.T. Grant [Co.] and places like that. We started our demonstrations, I want to think late 1959 or early 1960. [My] memory is just fading back.

D: Most of the things I've seen stated it was around March, 1960.

Y: Yeah, but we did some things before 1960. I think that's where Rutledge Pearson and a group of us would get in a car and we'd go to places like Orlando and Tampa, attending meetings and learning and that sort of thing. So that's probably what that was all about. But when we started the demonstrations in Jacksonville, we demonstrated, say, from March, April, May, June, July—I mean, every weekend we were demonstrating. Anytime we could get kids to—even after school sometimes—we would demonstrate, and we never had any serious confrontations, none whatsoever. I mean, people would stare at us as if we were some animals in a cage or something, people would make all kinds of nasty comments or remarks and that sort of thing, but there was no hint of any violence at all. The most violent thing that happened to us during those early demonstrations were waitresses who would take the top off of a salt shaker and pour the entire salt shaker on a sandwich or something that they had served us and expected us to pay for. Those were the kinds of things that happened to us, but there was no hint of violence, no large gathering of white men who were intent on attacking us.

Until that August morning, Saturday morning. When we got ready for the demonstration on August 27, Ax Handle Day, the day of the demonstration, the early morning—and I need to tell you this—that, prior to any demonstration, we always met at churches. We had Laura Street Presbyterian Church as one of the churches where we gathered. We gathered at a number of other churches in town. St. Stephens was another one of the big ones where we had a lot of our meetings. We always prayed, we always sang songs of freedom and that sort of thing. We were a happy group of young people seeking to do what most other Americans took for granted, and that was simply to enjoy the fruits of freedom, the labors. It didn't appear to us as though we were asking for anything out of the ordinary, although we knew that we weren't going to be able to achieve our objective without a struggle—we were prepared for that. But the one thing that I think set us apart from others who had participated in these kinds of demonstrations was we were taught that we could not under any circumstances raise our hands to fight back if we were attacked. They taught us how to cover ourselves, but [these were] peaceful, non-violent protests, and we at all costs had to *always* adhere to that, and we did. We absolutely did. On this morning . . .

D: Let me ask you something first. Were there any other civil rights agencies

involved in the training of the non-violence, or was it all under the auspices of the NAACP and the Youth Council?

Y: All of ours was under the auspices of the NAACP and the Youth Council, I believe. Let me think about that for a minute. Yes, to the best of my knowledge it was all NAACP. In fact, I'm sure it was. The woman who . . . actually there were two people. There was a lady whose name was Ruby Hurley, and she was the regional director of the NAACP, I believe. Then there was a guy whose name was Bob Saunders.

D: Ruby Hurley was out of Atlanta, I believe.

Y: Yeah, she was out of Atlanta. Bob Saunders was out of Tampa. He was an NAACP executive. But at any rate, they taught us how to cover ourselves, to protect ourselves. Bob Saunders was a field secretary for the NAACP. On this Saturday morning, I got into a car with Mr. Pearson and another man, I think the man who was driving the car—[Mr. Dix]—and we drove down there. All the kids had gathered at Laura Street Presbyterian Church, which was not too far from where we were going to be marching. We drove down through the area around Hemming Plaza and we saw a large group of white men gathered at the park, and there was a truck. There was a truck from a local hardware company parked in the park, and they were handing out baseball bats and ax handles to these men. [They were passing out] ax handles. You could see the big burlap bundles with the ax handles [sticking out], and the boxes with the baseball bats in them too.

We went back to the church and Mr. Pearson told the group what we had seen, and he said to the youth who were gathered there, anyone who does not want to participate in the march this morning doesn't have to. [He said], you can go home, you can wait here for your parents to come and pick you up or you can wait here until we get back and we'll take you home. *No one* stayed back; all of these kids, every one of them, decided, we're going to march. A group of marchers took off, and this group was led by Rodney Hurst, I believe, and they marched down to the W.T. Grant store, which was on the corner of Main and Monroe, I believe. And after they left, I took a group and I marched my group down to the F.W. Woolworth's Store, which was on the corner of Monroe and Hogan Street, across from Hemming Plaza. The group who went into the Main Street store, and Rodney will have to tell you about that, they came under attack. He can give you the details of that attack because he was there. My group went into the Woolworth's Store, and these guys were standing around in the park, a small group of them then, not the large group that we had seen. What I didn't know was that a large group of them had gone to the W.T. Grant store to attack the kids there. But there was a group in Hemming Plaza and they acted as if they weren't paying any attention to us.

There were police officers around, so we really didn't think we had anything to fear. They allowed us to get seated at the counters in Woolworth, and

the minute the last of those kids were seated, they proceeded to come into that store through both doors. There were three doors they could come in through, [and] they came through two. You could come in through the Monroe Street Side or the Hogan Street side, but there was a J.C. Penney store next door, and you could also come through the Penney's store and into the Woolworth's store. They had interconnecting doors. Well, they came in and they immediately started beating the living daylights out of the kids with these darn ax handles. Somehow we were able to get out through the Monroe Street door, that's the way I went out, and directly across the street is the Snyder Memorial Church. The doors to that church are usually open at noon, but this was in the morning. I tried the side door and it was open, it was unlocked for some reason—I don't know why, still to this day I can't figure that out—and I herded a group of kids into that church, and that saved our lives. The police officers witnessed the attack and they did absolutely nothing. In fact, they were standing there laughing as kids were being beaten.

D: It's my understanding that you called early that morning when you saw the group of men gathering, and you asked for protection but they turned you down. Is that true?

Y: What was their response? God, I wish I could remember exactly what it was. I don't remember the exact response, but I want to think that they said, if police officers are on the scene, nothing is going to happen—or something like that—and [they] simply hung up the phone, just hung up the phone. We had no idea, none whatsoever, that they would allow that kind of thing to happen and do *nothing*, but unfortunately, they did. Fortunately for us, somebody, and I don't know who it was, got word to a group of young tough guys who called themselves the Boomerangs. The Boomerangs were led by a kid whose name was Bobby Rivers. They came tearing in, they weren't that far away. They would gather every Saturday morning at a place called Bubba's Coffee Shop, and Bubba's Coffee Shop was located on Ashley and Broad [Streets], which was about four, five, or six blocks from where all this action was [taking place]. But they came, and when they came, they engaged these men with the ax handles, and that's what saved our lives. The police did not get involved until the Boomerangs started beating these guys with the ax handles; *then* the police officers decided that they would get involved. I've never seen anything like it before or since. I have a scene that will probably help you to understand how [it played out]. This is what it was like, where we were sitting [showing photograph]. This is Rodney Hurst, and that's me right there. That's not really what I want to show, but [there is] one that is so graphic, you can see the guys with the ax handles here in the picture. This is the result of being hit in the head with an ax handle. This is the one that I really wanted to show. You can see men with ax handles, and you can also probably see police officers in that picture.

D: I see one, a couple standing on the corner here looking on at the mob in the

middle of the street.

Y: We learned, later on, in fact, there was one white kid who was involved with us—that's him—and Rodney Hurst will probably talk to you a little bit about Richard. His name was Richard Parker, an absolute honest-to-goodness super young human being, I mean, just really a sweetheart. I don't know what happened to Richard, but Rodney will probably be able to tell you. This was a meeting that we were having at Rutledge Pearson's home. When we couldn't meet at the church for some reason, we met at his home, which was a very dangerous thing to do because they could target him. He was a schoolteacher, he was a public employee—they could target him or his family. He and his family were threatened all the time, but he still wasn't afraid to allow us to meet in his home. We conducted various meetings there.

This is the side door coming out of Woolworth where we were able to escape. [Shows a photograph.] These are people who were watching while the guys were in there probably doing carnage with their ax handles. At any rate, we learned a little bit later on from a good friend of mine and someone whom I would really hope that you'd get a chance to talk to. His name is Stetson Kennedy. Have you heard that name before?

D: Yes.

Y: Okay. Stetson is the guy who infiltrated the Ku Klux Klan, so he was the one who informed us that the attackers were members of the Klan, and some of them were police officers. There were a number of police officers who were members of the Klan. Stetson talked to us about it and he told us who some of these people were. The FBI had been notified that such an attack would take place hours before, long before, but for some reason nobody showed up. The police had been notified that the attack was going to take place, and for some reason they allowed it to happen. I think we're very fortunate that things really didn't get too far out of control, because there's no telling what might have happened. We are very fortunate in that none of our youngsters were killed. Some of them were severely beaten, as you see from this, but we survived it, and as a result of those demonstrations, *then* the Chamber of Commerce and folk decided that they would appoint a bi-racial [committee] to look at the kinds of conditions that we had been describing for a long time, and work finally began upon trying to eliminate some of the barriers that existed.

It didn't happen overnight. It still took a lot of demonstrations, a lot of work, a lot of effort on the part of people across racial lines to make Jacksonville a good and decent place for all people to live. There's a very interesting commentary to all of this. There are those of us who've always felt that Jacksonville had so much potential, and I'm among them; I've always been a champion [of Jacksonville]. You could see it, you could sense it. Deep down inside, the people of Jacksonville were decent, law-abiding, loving, caring human beings. There was a small group, namely the Klan, a White Citizens' Council and that sort of thing, who for some reason felt that they were doing God's will in

trying to keep the races separated. You could often hear them use all kinds of quotes from the Bible. Some of the biggest segregationists in Jacksonville were preachers, ministers, and you would hear them attempt to use the Bible to quote a justification for segregation. [They would say things like], if God had wanted us all to live together, he would have made us all alike, and all that. The mind of God? We didn't believe it, and thank goodness we didn't. We saw different, and we decided that we would work to make things different and better for all people. I think as a result of the early civil rights movement, Jacksonville learned that it could be exactly what we had in mind, and that's a nice and safe and decent place for all people, regardless of color, regardless of race, regardless of religion, [or] sexual orientation. I'm not so naive as to say we're there yet, we're still working on all kinds of problems, but we're much closer than we would have been had it not been for these kinds of things.

D: Let me go back a little bit. In 1959, Frank Hampton [former police officer and African American Jacksonvillian] sues the city in an attempt to desegregate the city's golf courses. But as you said, the NAACP at this time is a bit docile. I found in the NAACP papers that membership was somewhat low at this time. When you came back, what was your opinion of the black community's overall response to civil rights. Were they ready to really initiate change, or was that something you had to prod?

Y: There was a small group who was ready to initiate change, but these were youngsters. These were young people. This was Rutledge Pearson and a very small group. I don't want to mis-characterize this, but there was a pervasive attitude in the black community of, leave things alone, don't disrupt things, don't stir up trouble. I couldn't understand that. Sure, these were older people, these were people whose livelihoods [depended on whites]. Nearly everybody in the black community, average citizen, if they had a job, they worked for a white person, and these people were afraid they would lose their jobs. You had black women who worked in some of these exclusive white neighborhoods as domestics. Places where they would get on the bus in the morning and go to that neighborhood, but before dark they had to be out of that neighborhood. They couldn't be seen in some of these neighborhoods after dark. Some of these very same people were the people who were saying, don't disturb things, just leave it alone, time will take care of these kinds of things. There wasn't enough time, the time was now.

D: So, in a sense, you were attempting to change the mind-set of both the black and white communities.

Y: Tell me about it. I read about the veterans of World War I. In fact, I lived next door to a man, his name was Percy Jeffcoat. He was a veteran of World War I, and he was a war hero. He was an old man when he used to talk to us. He drug three white soldiers out of foxholes who had been shot by the Germans.

He was considered a war hero, and he would tell us stories about how when they came home from the war, they thought things were going to be better, things were going to be different, because they'd actually gone off and defended democracy. They came back and conditions were worse than when they left. You would hear the same story from veterans from World War II. I had friends who were veterans of Korea—they thought their lives were going to be better as a result of having gone off and defended democracy, and they came back and things weren't getting better, they were getting worse. You hear the story of the Tuskegee Airmen [a group of African American Army Air Corps pilots flying during World War II] and the battles they fought in order to be recognized. How could you sit by and say, I can wait, I'm going to give it time? Oh no, no, no, no, no, no. When this country decided it was going to launch the space program, they didn't say, well, let's sit back and wait and see what happens. It will eventually evolve. Hell, no. We went out there and we took all kinds of chances. We stood on the brink of disaster every day. I figured if I could do it for that cause, we could do it for this cause. Things don't just happen, somebody has to make them happen. The adult branch of the NAACP were not interested in it at that time, for the most part.

There were some members of the adult branch who were interested, and in fact I can almost name them. Led by Wendell Holmes and Sally Mathis, I mean, these were people who were ready to do something. But the mass of the people [were not]. And the NAACP at that point was led by a minister. The bravest people in the black community should have been the ministers because they didn't have to depend on the white community for [any]thing. They depended upon their membership for their livelihoods; most of them their pastorate was their job. But for some reason they didn't want to disturb the status quo. As I thought back over that over time, I could understand. For example, if you are working as a domestic and you're making \$25 or \$30 a week, and your family really needs that \$25 or \$30, I can very easily understand how you could think that a group of activist young blacks could cause that white family that you're working for to become upset with black folk and run you away from your job. Then you're unemployed, and those black kids who are out there demonstrating, they don't have any means of helping you get some income to support your family. So I understood that, and I understood why people who worked in these all-white companies, I understood, I fully understood, why they would not come out and participate with us. I understood it. I tried to understand it.

D: The more conservative members of the NAACP, did they at this time have any type of communication with the white leadership structure at all?

Y: I don't know. I don't know about the conservative members of the NAACP, but I can tell you that activist members of the NAACP [did]; Sally Mathis did, Wendell Holmes did. They did everything they could to try to get the mayor and members of the city commission and the white business community to get

involved. They pushed and they cajoled and they talked and they did everything that [they could]. Dr. W.W. Schell was another one of those activist kind of guys. There were a group of professionals, and I remember one night, Rutledge Pearson and three or four of us went out to talk to them. They used to meet at Lincoln Golf and Country Club, which was the only black golf course in town, which was on U.S. 1. We went out to talk with them one night, to tell them that we were getting ready for these demonstrations, to ask them if they would at least give us some financial support. We knew that a lot of us were going to be going to jail, we didn't have money for bail and that sort of thing, so we really wanted them to stand behind us and be prepared to bail us out of jail when we went in. They invited Mr. Pearson out of the meeting after he made his appeal, and, I can remember, it was Dr. Schell who came out and he said to Mr. Pearson, I'll find a way to help you, do what you have to do. That's one individual—was it one or two—Dr. Jimmy Henderson, I think, was the other one, but they said, we'll find a way to help you, and they did. But, for the most part, [none of them were willing]. I guess you just have to try to take on the mindset of those people who had a very comfortable surrounding and they didn't want anybody to disturb it. They thought that what we were doing was going to really create major problems for them and they would be cut off from whatever it was they had. My position was, how on earth can you be satisfied with what you've got when you don't have anything? I couldn't understand that.

D: You speak with Haydon Burns [Mayor of Jacksonville, 1949-1964; Governor of Florida, 1964-1966] yourself, a group of you go down to speak with him, what were some of your concerns that you voiced to him, grievances, and how did he respond?

Y: First of all, when we asked for a meeting with Mayor Burns—we had been asking for a meeting with him for a long, long time—when he finally granted the meeting though, we had to go in through the back door of City Hall, and that meeting was not held in his office, it was held in an anteroom next to his office. He was unconcerned about the issues that we were discussing. He denied any of the conditions that we specified existed, and, according to him, all the colored folk in Jacksonville were happy with their lot. [He said] we were just a bunch of rabble-rousers, a bunch of outsiders [that] had come in to create trouble in his city. I can almost assure you that everybody that was in that meeting with him was born right here in Jacksonville. I don't think Ruby was there. I don't think any of the NAACP officials from outside of town were in that meeting. It was just a bunch of local people who wanted to meet with their mayor.

The response he gave us was so downright nasty that, when we walked out of there, we knew what we had to do, and we knew that we would get absolutely no help from him. We knew that once we started, he was going to sic his police on us, we knew that. He had his police captain/chief, I think his name was Raines, he had him sitting right next to him, as if they needed to guard him from us. No, I've never had a conversation with Mayor Burns. In fact, I never

had a one-on-one with him where he would just talk directly to me. I don't think... I shouldn't go that far. I started to say, I don't think he ever talked directly with a black person at all. You would ask him a question and then he answers to the group, he never responded individually. He was not very impressed with me, and I absolutely was unimpressed with him.

D: You say there were discussions with the Chamber of Commerce, so you did go to other people, but the response was the same as the Mayor's.

Y: Yeah, the attitude was like, yeah, don't start things up, leave things alone, it will work out. There were a few white men, J.J. Daniel, Nate Wilson—I wish I could name some of the others—who were much more progressive and who thought that there needed to be some kind of effort started to bring this thing together. I wish I could remember the guy who was with the Jacksonville Urban League at the time, he was a big help.

[End Tape A, Side 1.]

Y: I can't recall his name. The Urban League had done some great things in bringing together biracial groups of people to discuss issues and that sort of thing, but unfortunately, nothing positive resulted from it until after we had gone through the series of [sit-ins].

D: So, during the sit-ins themselves, there was basically no communication back and forth between black leadership and white leadership about the situation. Was there anything?

Y: Yeah, there was. There was communication. The demonstrations caused white people to want to seek out somebody to talk, to try to kill it, to try to cut it off, but unfortunately the people they talked to were people like Mary Singleton and Sally Mathis and Wendell Holmes, and they said, you can't stop these kids, they see the wrong and the only way we're going to be able to do anything is by finding a way. . . So it was like we were supporting each other. The demonstrations gave them the ammunition they needed to be able to gain an audience, to be able to get somebody to talk to, otherwise they probably wouldn't have had anybody to talk to.

D: There are rumors that the business owners went to speak to Mayor Burns and asked him to desegregate the lunch counters and he said no. Do you know anything about that? There are a couple of reports in the newspapers that say that.

Y: There is, and that did happen. The Chamber of Commerce, a group of members from the Chamber of Commerce, did do that. They went and communicated with him and he said, absolutely no way. In fact, Dr. Jim Crooks [professor of

history at the University of North Florida; author of *Jacksonville: The Consolidation Story, from Civil Rights to the Jaguars*, 2004] has, I believe, a passage on that in his book concerning the effort on the part of the business community to try to move Burns from his position to one of more acceptance, open tolerance, and that sort of thing. It really didn't happen until Nate Wilson, who was an official at Southern Bell, was appointed to head the Community Relations Commission here in Jacksonville, and then things began to start happening.

D: Now, most of the sit-inners were high school students, right?

Y: Oh yes, the vast majority of them were . . . well, no. I think the majority of them were middle school students.

D: Oh, really? That young?

Y: The majority of them were middle school students. They were Rutledge Pearson's students, and Rutledge Pearson taught at a middle school.

D: That's interesting.

Y: So the vast majority of them were middle-schoolers, but we had high school students and we had one or two college students. Arnett Girardeau at that time was in college, Helen Britt, who was very prominent in the movement, was in college. So there were a few college students, but the majority, the largest number, were Rutledge Pearson's students from Davis Street School.

D: Because Rutledge Pearson himself was a teacher, did most of the teachers and principals have a favorable opinion of what the children were getting themselves into?

Y: No. Believe me, Rutledge was a loner, pretty much, in that movement, and I suspect that there's a reason for that. There was a schoolteacher whose name was [Mary Blocker], a black schoolteacher, and she advocated for the rights of black school personnel, and as a result of her advocacy, she lost her job. These people were awful, the people in power, they had life-or-death power over you. When she lost her job, the other school teachers and people in the black business community simply donated money to her so that she could continue her effort.

Now, you can imagine what that kind of activity said to other teachers. The two highest-paid professions in the black community at that time were schoolteachers and people who worked for the post office. Of course, there were a few doctors and that sort of thing, but in the working occupations, these were two of the most prized, so you didn't want to lose your job. As a result of that, some of these people tended to be cautious. So they looked at Rutledge

Pearson as a kind of strange fruit, kind of [an] outsider. What he was doing was nothing short of one of the most dangerous things you could do as a public employee, but Rutledge Pearson was a man who knew no fear, so it didn't bother him at all. They could threaten him all they wanted and it just didn't bother him. He knew what he had to do and he went about doing it. So no, we didn't get widespread support there unfortunately, and a lot of people thought that students should not be used in this way, that many of them were being used against their will. Nothing could have been farther from the truth; all of these kids were volunteers, and of course, their parents allowed them to do it.

D: You mentioned that you didn't face any direct violence by the onlookers or the lunch counter workers leading up to the sit-ins. The police chief said that the police would do nothing unless the businesses themselves specifically called and asked them to come and intervene and make arrests. Were there many arrests of sit-inners leading up to that Saturday, August 27, or did they just let you be.?

Y: No, they just pretty much let us . . . what they would do was simply close the lunch counter down when we arrived, and of course we'd sit there, sit there, and then we'd finally leave and give them a chance to open it back up, and then, of course, we'd come back and sit down again. But no, we weren't attacked by the business owners. There were some employees who kind of went out of their way to make it uncomfortable for us, but [there was no violence]. I'm looking for a picture. [Shows photo] See, this is a customer, this lady, she's a customer in that store, and she's having a friendly conversation with some of the kids and saying that she appreciates what they're doing, she knows what they're doing, and knows why they're doing it. Let me tell you something that you don't hear very much anymore, you don't hear it acknowledged anymore, but perhaps the greatest benefactor of the civil rights movement of the 1960s was white women—not blacks, not black men, not black women, but white women. If you have doubts about it, look at where they were prior to the 1960s, prior to the sit-in demonstrations. Look at how white females got involved in the movement, and then look at what happened as a result of that. White males – Richard was unusual in a sense. We had white males who came from other places, like Schwerner and Chaney [civil rights activists murdered in Mississippi in 1964] but for the most part, white women could do just about anything they wanted to do, and they helped us do a lot of things, and, as a result of that, they have made tremendous progress since the 1960s, and will probably continue to do so.

What I find ironic is that, in this day and age, there are white female business-owners who are almost as bad as some of those white segregationists of the 1960s when it comes to equal access and equal opportunity for black people, and I don't understand that. I have a lot of difficulty understanding that. There are white-owned businesses, owned by white females, doing exceptionally well and wouldn't hire a black person if they were the last people on earth. I don't understand that. There are white female executives in banks who make it extremely difficult for black business-owners, for young blacks who are trying to

get a start—they make it extremely difficult. It's almost as if the oppressed has now become the oppressor. I don't understand that, I just don't understand it. Of course, these are not people who were directly involved. These are people who are the recipients of those who were directly involved, and they don't understand from whence all their great freedom and all of their great reward comes. They don't know whose shoulders they were standing on in order to get it, and as a result of that, they [take it for granted]. I don't know, that will change.

- D: Well, speaking of that, I think I read an account describing how some white women who were wives of Navy men came in and held seats for the demonstrators.
- Y: They did, they were super. They were absolutely wonderful. If you wanted to go to the restroom, you had to leave the store. There were colored restrooms in the store, but who wanted to use a restroom . . . The way the restrooms were in the store, there was a sign that said, "White women", "White men", and then "Colored." Water fountain, "white only." We used to play games. We wanted to see if white water tasted different from black water, the water coming out of the black water fountain. Well, it wasn't different, only in the sense that, if it came from the white water fountain, it was cold water, if it came from the fountain for blacks, it was just plain water.
- D: News coverage of the sit-ins leading up to Ax Handle Saturday were almost non-existent. Do you think there was a concerted effort on the part of the newspaper to ignore it? Because the *Florida Times Union* was a fairly conservative newspaper.
- Y: [They were] a fairly conservative newspaper, but we had a conservative mayor. I'm one who believes that the collusion was between the mayor and the *Florida Times Union*, and the mayor did not want this image of his city to be out there for the world and all to see.
- D: Especially when he was running for governor at the time, I believe, or in the primaries.
- Y: He ran for governor afterwards, yes, and was elected. You don't want my opinion on that. The worst mayors don't make the best governors, but that's all right.
- D: Because news coverage was thin, did the Youth Council make any efforts to try to get out information to the black community, even the white community, about what your goals were, what you were trying to achieve by what you were doing?
- Y: We did that through our mass meetings. We would have mass meetings at churches in the community and we would talk to the congregations of these

churches about what we were doing and how we were doing it. But I mentioned Stetson Kennedy, and let me just mention him again. Not only was Stetson just a tremendous civil rights enthusiast, he was what was called a striker for *The Pittsburgh Courier*. *The Pittsburgh Courier* was a black newspaper that had a nationwide circulation, and Stetson wrote for *The Courier*. So everything we were doing here in Jacksonville got out because Stetson would write about it. Mrs. I.E. Williams was also a writer for a newspaper, and she would get information out of Jacksonville through newspapers. After awhile, the *Times Union* couldn't avoid it any longer, but for the most part, all of the demonstrating that we did from March up to Ax Handle Day, you show me a story in the *Times Union*, or in the *Jacksonville Journal*.

D: Well, even the morning after Ax Handle Saturday itself, it's buried on page eighteen, I believe.

Y: That's right, you've got it.

D: Leading up to August 27, I've read some accounts that say rumors were building up about Klan violence. Maybe it was because of Stetson Kennedy and others who were embedded in the Klan, so there was some knowledge of what was going to happen. Ax handles were being sold at a record rate in stores around Jacksonville . . .

Y: No, they weren't being sold. They were being handed out. They were not being sold. There's a hardware company here in Jacksonville, it was located downtown, and [that was] the primary location where you would pick up your ax handles and your baseball bats, but that morning, they had a truck down at Hemming Plaza with the name of the hardware company on the doors of the truck, and they were handing those ax handles out.

D: The reason I ask this is because I'm wondering if the kids who were in those gangs or if the wider community itself knew of those rumors and knew that violence could be happening, and, in some sense, there was a preparation for it. With the gang activity that day, do you feel it was completely spontaneous?

Y: It was absolutely spontaneous. We didn't [hear] any rumors that ax handles were being passed out. We saw them being passed out on the morning of the march. Prior to the morning of the march, we had no inkling, no idea, that that was being done. Oh, we knew that the Klan was watching us. How can the Klan not be watching you if there's a white police officer watching you; [many] of them were associated with the Klan in some way or another, so they knew what we were doing. Plus, one of the Klansmen himself, what was his name . . . We did a celebration of Ax Handle Saturday a couple of years ago, and one of the former Klansmen came and he talked to the group. He told us how sorry he was for what he had done and his participation and that sort of thing, but he admitted

that they were going to make every possible attempt to end the sit-in demonstration thing right here in Jacksonville. So these Klansmen came from parts of south Georgia, they came out of Callahan, Hilliard, I think from as far as Green Cove Springs.

D: Do you get the sense that Haydon Burns tacitly allowed this Klan activity to take place because he thought the Klan could possibly end the sit-ins quietly? Do you think that he thought that if the Klan was able to brutalize these kids, you would stop and the whole thing would go away quietly?

Y: I don't know, I wish I could answer that. There was a lot of Klan activity in and around Jacksonville, and Haydon Burns was mayor and he knew about it. There were cross burnings, there were tent meetings, all over Jacksonville; he was aware of it. But this was a guy who was heavily supported by Klansmen in his various bids for election and reelection. He's the one person who could have said no, and it would not have happened, but he failed to do that.

D: Let me ask you about the kids in the Boomerangs, the Knights of the Roundtable I believe is another one, the Cowboys, the Untouchables. They were in the same cohort as the sit-inners were. What do you think was the difference between these kids who, for all intents and purposes, could have participated in the sit-ins had they wanted to . . .

Y: No, they couldn't have.

D: They couldn't have?

Y: No, no, they could not.

D: Explain that to me.

Y: Well, in order to participate in the sit-ins, you had to take an oath of non-violence.

D: And they were just unwilling to do that?

Y: Oh, they're not going to do that. I am more familiar with the Boomerangs than with any of the others. They were mainly kids who had dropped out of school and just kind of hung around on corners and that sort of thing. These weren't gangs in the sense that we know gangs today, like the Reds and the Blues and whatever, all those Los Angeles and New York type street gangs. They weren't nearly anything like that. These were just a bunch of young toughs, and I think probably some of the worse things they would do is hang around schoolyards and beat kids up and take their lunch money from them or something like that. I'm just not really familiar with any really horrible things that they did, they were just tough rival groups. They could have participated with us—you know, Bobby

did come. Bobby Rivers was the leader of the Boomerangs, he did come around, but his philosophy changed a lot. He actually, during the final ten years of his life, he actually turned his life around. He became a remarkable young man. He believed in the NAACP, he believed in what we were doing, but he never could understand how we could allow ourselves to be hit and not to hit back. That's something that just couldn't compute with him, and it couldn't compute with a lot of the members of the Boomerangs. They thought, if you hit me, I'll hit you back, I'm not going to hit you first, but if you hit me, I'm going to hit you back. Could they have participated with us, some of them probably could have, but they would have had to swear to that condition of non-violence, and they were simply not willing to do that. You know what, thank God they didn't, because there was somebody who would defend us, because our police officers wouldn't.

D: Do you believe that the outbreak of violence that day was necessary to bring about any changes that did occur afterward?

Y: No. I don't think violence is necessary in any kind of incident to bring about change. You don't need to have violence in order to bring about meaningful change. In fact, some of the greatest change the world has ever known has come about as the result of the absence of violence. In nearly all instances where there has been violent confrontation, even if a change occurred, it wasn't lasting and it hasn't been all that meaningful. I believe there are wars that we probably could have won without violence had both sides been able to reconcile their differences and problems. But it's not necessary for there to be violence, in my opinion, for change to occur, meaningful change.

D: Do you think that Jacksonville leadership underestimated your resolve to bring about change?

Y: Yes.

D: What do you believe the overall significance was of Ax Handle Saturday and the narrative of civil rights movement in Jacksonville?

Y: Ax Handle Day moved a lot of decision-makers back to the table, which started the talks about forming bi-racial committees and ending the vestiges of segregation. We would not have made the progress that we made had it not been for that day, I don't believe, and the reason is because I don't think anybody in the white leadership ever thought that something like that would happen here in Jacksonville. I don't think anybody in the black leadership at that time ever thought that it would come to pass. But when the ugliness of that day was finally revealed to good people on both sides, then they knew that something had to be done in order to resolve the grievance, or it was going to continue. They had an opportunity with the golf course incident to do something positive, and they didn't

take advantage of that. What they met on Ax Handle Saturday was a group of determined young people who simply would not take no for an answer, and they were not satisfied with the status quo and they were not going to allow the city to rest until something was done to make those changes. We had pretty much decided that we would die in order to bring about those changes.

D: Well, every day you sat at that counter, that's exactly what you faced. So obviously the good people on each side coming together was central to any change that occurred.

Y: It couldn't have happened had it not been for that.

D: Well, do you have any other issues that you think we left out here that you'd want to discuss?

Y: No I don't, but if you do, call me.

D: Okay, I will. That concludes the interview for right now. Thank you very much.

[End of Interview.]