TRANSCRIPT—ALBERT ROHLING

Interviewee: Albert Rohling

Interviewer: Kimberly Hill

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Location: Birmingham, Alabama

Length: Two CDs, approximately 130 minutes

START OF CD 1

KH: This is Kimberly Hill, and I am talking with Mr. Albert Rohling at Blue Cross/Blue Shield in Birmingham, Alabama, on July 7, 2006.

AR: And my name is Al Rohling, and I verify all that you just said.

KH: [Laughter] And we are about to do an interview about economic justice and the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement in Birmingham.

AR: I grew up in the west end of Birmingham, which has now completed its transition as a neighborhood. It was a white, middle-class neighborhood initially, with a lot of the families living in that neighborhood employed in the steel mills in the western part of the city. My father owned his own business. He owned a service station and a garage on the south side. We were, and we are, a Catholic family, and my mother and father wanted us to go to Catholic schools. So we moved to West End when I was like three years old. I have two older sisters, and they began schooling in Blessed Sacrament School, which was in walking distance from where we lived, where my parents bought this home. So we lived there until . . . I was in high school at the time we moved away from there, so we were there for about twelve years.

The timing and the community's history that really saw the Civil Rights issues begin to take a more visible kind of format—. I was away in school through college; I graduated and went through seminary in Baltimore, and had the equivalent of college graduation in 1961. And then through seminary, completing that in 1965. I was ordained a priest and worked in the priesthood and was sent back to work in my home parish, Blessed Sacrament Parish, which was a great experience in my younger days. But in the course of growing up in West End, it was a segregated society. My father's business was located on the fringe of a neighborhood which was a minority residential area. A lot of his customers, whom I got to know by hanging out at the soda station and in the garage on Saturdays and during the summers, a lot of his customers and a lot of his acquaintances were African-Americans. That was interesting to me.

In fact, I remember like on Saturday afternoons, I'd be sitting over there at the service station and not much would be going on, and the kids in the neighborhood—. There was a dirt road beside this place of business, and a railroad track going down the dirt road. But they would get out and play some form of baseball, and I remember with sticks for bats and torn-up rubber balls for baseballs. And I would to out and join them in this little game that they played, which was fun. So I got to know a few African-American children, and then I'd see their parents or others in their community who'd stop by to buy gasoline, or get a soft drink, or get kerosene for their stoves or whatever. That was kind of interesting to me, so I did have a chance to interact with some African-Americans.

KH: What difference would you say that made in your childhood, having that interaction with African-Americans?

AR: Well, our schools were segregated, our public facilities were all segregated, which, as a child, I accepted that as a fact of life and really didn't know much, other than the fact that this is the way things were.

KH: Um-hm.

AR: But being able to undertake that interaction was probably pretty special in my formation and my understanding of how people need to inter-relate and understand one another. I was in Baltimore, in the seminary, in the early 1960s -- '60 to '65 -- and I would just read about all the stuff that was going on in my home community. I was in the school with young men who were in my age group who were from all over the eastern seaboard, from Maine to Florida, but most of them were from the northeast. I would be queried very often about what was happening in my home community, and it was embarrassing to relate the fact that I was from here.

KH: Oh.

AR: But I had no explanation other than what I could read, and I didn't know the parties that were involved other than becoming familiar with their names through the press.

KH: Did you feel that people who were asking you these questions kind of held you responsible in a way?

AR: I don't think so. I mean, they were friends. They would make fun of my southern accent, and there were a few others of us from the southeastern—in the student body. But these were fairly serious young men, and they generally were looking for understanding what was happening, and why it was happening, and what kind of conditions gave rise to what was going on here. So it gave me a chance to look into my own community from outside, and from viewpoints that others would express about it, people whom I trusted

and were friendly with. That was kind of another advantage that I personally had, I think, because I just wasn't here to be swayed by the antagonism that was pretty obvious in this community.

KH: Was your family still living here at the time?

AR: Yes. My family had moved out of the original community of the west end after we'd all graduated from elementary school, and we moved into east Birmingham. Their relationship with what was going on was here, and I don't recall much conversation about it. I'd be home for Christmas holidays and during summers, and occasionally we'd have calls every week or so. But I don't recall much conversation about what was going on. During the summers, I don't know. I mean, I was home, and then—. I don't have much recollection of—. You know, here's this middle class white family just kind of not relating to what was going on, except through the news media to see what was happening and being interested in the community. But that was about the— . My recollection is not very clear that we had serious conversations about what was going on. We clearly knew it was happening—you know, maybe in comments here and there passed—but I don't recall any serious conversations in those days.

KH: Well, let's jump forward a little bit. When you moved back here, did you think the Civil Rights movement was over here in Birmingham?

AR: No. I knew it was not over. I came back in 1965, and I remember as a young priest in West End, where I had grown up, I remember this very clearly. I had been there starting in like June of '65, and maybe by August I had a phone call from an African-American gentleman who was inquiring about putting his children into Blessed Sacrament School, which had no African-American students. That was kind of a pivotal moment,

because here it was, the problem was—. Not only was I not reading about it anymore, but here it was right in front of me. How do we respond to that request as a church, as a community, as a parish, as a Catholic community? So that was interesting. I think we were being tested. The person who made the inquiry chose not to place his children there. I'm not certain about this. This person was not a known member to the parish, but we would have welcomed his children in the school. I think it would have been a really neat thing to do, to really help all of our people understand that children are children and—

KH: So you did offer to accept—

AR: Yes, but I very clearly remember that, and I said that with all these things I'd been reading about, all these things that had happened here, wow. Here's a facet of the issue that was now in my court. And that was the first time.

KH: And if they had come, that would have been one of the first integrated schools in Birmingham.

AR: Yes. Right, it would have been. This was 1965, summer of '65.

KH: What other ways did you see civil rights issues coming up in your work at that time?

AR: We were the Diocese of Mobile, which included all of Alabama and a portion of northwest Florida. I have counterparts in Mobile, and after one year at this assignment at Blessed Sacrament Parish, I went to Catholic Charities in Mobile, which is a social organization. It's a change agent; it's a justice-seeking group. There was a very active involvement of the church in the civil rights quest in Mobile. I remember that very clearly. I worked for Catholic Charities, and we had been very out front in leadership, trying to promote civil rights. There were marches that we participated in. I was greatly honored; I

was invited, and accepted the invitation, to go make a Sunday sermon at a church in Pritchard, Alabama, which is just outside Mobile. Now I was not a very good preacher for that congregation, but I went and did the best I could, and it was a wonderful experience. I became a reasonably good friend of the minister who had invited me.

But at any rate, I could see more and more the struggle, and really got to understand the struggle, that African-American people were having. Beyond that, I could also see the shortcomings of our church, and what we needed to do but didn't have the courage to do. What individuals, my counterparts, would try to do and were less than successful in moving the institution along with it. And that was discouraging, but it was also eye-opening for me. That was one of the main reasons that led me to a career in social work.

I still consider myself a priest, but I don't dress like one; I don't act like one. I'm married and have a family, but I still have a ministerial approach. If you look at the things that I've done in my life, they all have overtones of ministry in them. I have never worked for a for-profit institution or company or whatever, and I really set out not to do that, because I wanted to try to be true to who I really was, or who I thought I was anyway. But I went off to the School of Social Work at Boston College, and again went through some of this same thing I'd gone through in Baltimore with the southern accent. But by this time, I was pretty well filtered out. I could speak plainly.

KH: What year was that?

AR: I went there in '67.

KH: OK.

AR: Of course, our studies there led to all kinds of community things. I was privileged to have a number of African-American classmates. We had like eighty-five

people in my class in the graduate school, and a number of them were very closely allied to the track of studies that I chose. So we had a lot of interaction, and my being from Alabama and Boston was an interesting kind of phenomenon. We were all very idealistic in school, and were really all looking at grass roots organizing and participating in the things that were most meaningful to the disadvantaged citizens of the country, and staying along those lines for a good while.

Then in the second year, and we were always told this by people who had gone before us and our faculty, that the first year idealism sort of changes into second-year realism. You get out of the graduate school in two years, and people would be looking for jobs. So they had to go where the jobs were, and of course at that point I was just making a decision to terminate my affiliation with the formal priesthood. So I chose to take a job in Springfield, Massachusetts, which was available at the community council there. There were very few African-Americans in that community, but there were a lot of Hispanics.

KH: In Springfield, Massachusetts?

AR: Yes.

KH: I'm just surprised.

AR: Well, there was the reason why, so I learned, was that there were direct flights from San Juan to Hartford. And Hartford is just like twenty miles south of Springfield. So there was a large colony of Hispanic-Americans in Springfield. So that was interesting. I ended up having the responsibility of working with the Hispanic groups, and they were fledgling at the time. They had not been that long in the community, and they were trying to figure out where they were, and who they were, and what they needed to do. They worked in tobacco. There were tobacco farms in northern Connecticut and southern Massachusetts in

those days. Whether they're still there or not, I don't know. But that's where they worked, and they lived in awful conditions in Springfield. The man whom I replaced became the director of the Springfield Housing Authority, which was interesting.

In social work, you do field assignments, so half of your training is in the classroom, and the other half is in the community. In the first year I was in Worchester, Massachusetts, which was like halfway between Boston and Springfield, and the field assignment was there. I did a housing survey, which was a really good place to do a housing survey, because the housing in that community was pretty bad, I mean real bad. So I interviewed lots and lots of families and wrote the report, and was invited to present it to the city council of Worchester, which I did. It was amazing. The whole thing got written up in the local newspaper the next day, and the city became very defensive about its very poor housing program. But at any rate, it really got the conversation going about what they should do in housing, and—.

KH: Were you the first person to do a housing survey there?

AR: Well, it was the first time, I think, that it had splashed like that.

KH: OK.

AR: So that was kind of an interesting time. Public housing was part of the problem, but it was just housing stock generally. And private sector was miserable, particularly the inner city area, and the residents were—. It was a mixed community, and it was not so much a civil rights issue there. It was just poor housing for everybody.

KH: What specific skills did you hope to learn in social work school and then take back to your community?

AR: Well, I wanted to come back to Alabama; I really did. That was my home. But I wanted also to have some skills, and I needed to figure out what skills I needed to have.

And so I did learn, and probably the thing that I really learned and that was really driven home to me, was that decision-making at the community level really needs to be a participated kind of process. In many cases, process is more important that the decision. Here I am, I'm a type-A personality, German by ethnicity, with parents who are very self-sufficient types, and who inculcated that. Having to learn that decision is a matter of participation of those affected by the decisions -- that was a pretty strong kind of change in not so much my thinking, but at least in my understanding of decision-making.

Having been in the history that I was, decision-making was pretty much personal. I mean, like a physician, you decide; you do your own decision-making. Well, I learned that policy-making and decision-making at the community level is really not the province of an intellect, but it's the province of a lot of intellects, and a lot of emotions, and lot of different views. So that was important and helpful. So that was one skill that I really felt I picked up on, and that may be the dominant skill. I don't know.

Having been in Springfield for a year, I was in a two-man agency – or a two-person agency, it happened to be two men at the time -- and my boss was not well. I ended up with the responsibility pretty much of the program of the agency. I was asked by the United Way in that community to study that community and make recommendations as to what were the priorities for the private sectors' social services system. Now this was in the mid-sixties again. Of all the things—it wasn't so much which agency were more important than the others, but what services performed by various agencies should have priority. What are the most important things in this community at this time? So I got a chance to study how to get that done. I ended up getting a community process going to understand that. So I was able to put in practice almost for the first time that skill of community decision-making. And that

was very good, because the things we came up with were new and fresh, and important to the community.

This was like the mid-1960s, and the most important we discovered for that community was treatment for drugs, for drug abuse. The community really had done. So we'd just gone through that process, and having people express themselves, and conducting the inquiry, and getting that public feedback, and then having the committees mull over that and go through that process—that was very helpful, and professionally that was very helpful. It was also very good for the community. Then we lined up a few other things, too, but that—this was like thirty-five years ago.

KH: So it sounds like the cooperation in that case was between local business people and people who actually lived in the community?

AR: Yes. It was, and one of the problems was that this United Way, the so-called Pioneer Valley United Way, had gone for years without meeting their goal. Their sense was that people thought they were not relevant, or as relevant as they needed to be. So this was an effort to try to, from their point of view, to accelerate their constituency to the point that it would understand its relevance, and therefore be able to attract more contributions to do the right things in the community.

So that's what that was all about. But just the process was kind of a test of the skills that I had tried to learn in graduate school. I stayed there for a year and had a chance to come back to Alabama. I went to work for the comparable agency in Birmingham, the so-called Community Service Council. Instead of the two-man agency of Springfield, there were eighteen professional people in this organization. I was the last person on the totem pole, which is fine.

KH: How did that work compare?

AR: Well, it was—. I had a few little responsibility items. There was a study that had just been done in the Birmingham area of families and children, and my job was to go through and guide the implementation of that after it had already been studied and then completed. And that was interesting. I mean, there were four daycare centers in the community at the time.

KH: In the whole city?

AR: In the whole city. This was like 1970.

KH: I didn't realize there had been such an increase in daycare.

AR: Oh, gosh. Oh, yeah. Well, at any rate, a year and a half later—. I came in the middle of 1970—. In January of '72—I was like thirty-one years old at the time—the executive decided to take a job in Miami. So the board considered his replacement, and they asked me if I would be their director. There I was thirty years old. I was two and a half years out of school, and I had these other professional people—I mean, there were hospital administrators, there were environmental health people, there were several other social workers. But the board judged that I had the kind of discipline and skills that they needed for the organization. Part of the reason that the executive left was that he had alienated the United Way, which funded the organization.

It was also an agency that had a federal grant to do health planning, and it almost looked like the health and the federal dollars that supported the health planning portion sort of dwarfed the original purpose of the organization, which was to do social planning for the community. The health planning thing became so dominant because of the way it was, the dollars that were coming through the organization. So at any rate, the board needed to shore

up that deficit and also continue to do the health planning, so I had the level of skills they were looking for, apparently.

So at any rate, I became director of this community service council, and we became the first United Way agency in Birmingham to have an African-American president. That was a magnificent experience. That gentleman, Louis Willie, he's still alive, but he's a victim of Alzheimer's disease. He was the executive vice-president of the Booker T. Washington Insurance Company. He's from Dallas initially. Wonderful man, just a really nice man, and I got to know him very well. I worked with him closely, and we were able to recover organizationally what had been lost in earlier days.

But the whole thing of this organization, all these eighteen staff people, these professional people, all had two or three committees that they were staffing. Process was just constant. Process, process, and in the health planning arena, we had a committee on health care for the poor, we had a committee on hospital construction and health facilities, we had committees on environmental health, and then on this families and children program. All of this. We had just hundreds of people involved. It was sort of at the—. I mean, the crescendo of civil rights had come, and was a little bit behind the community then, and was receding some. In our committees structure, we had quite a number of African-Americans. I remember one gentleman, Henry Jackson, was the publisher of the *Birmingham World* newspaper, which is—generally, I think it still exists in some form.

KH: I've seen it before, the black newspaper.

AR: Right. Well, he was editor, and he was a very outspoken and colorful character. He would be relentless in the board meetings and the committees that he was on. He was relentless in making sure everybody understood where the black community was on whatever

issue. He'd even chide some of his fellow black members as being, as he would call them, "the super negroes." It was a wonderful display of how the black community was beginning to adjust to the early days in the post-civil rights zenith. But everybody got sensitized, and everybody is processing that sensitizing.

Not only did we have issues about health care for the poor, but the rural people. You can go, at least in those days, ten miles in any direction and run into a rural area. There was lack of access to medical care, there was no immunization programs, just all kind of stuff that needed to be corrected. So being sensitized to the needs of the black community in the urban area really helped the people to understand and to be sensitive to the needs of the rural people in the outer-lying areas, whether they be black or white. That was helpful to see Louis Willie on one hand, who's an executive in a business, and Henry Jackson, who was the newspaper editor and a very humble kind of man from a financial point view, but a very outspoken and erudite and articulate person.

KH: I didn't understand. Was he criticizing the other people?

AR: Yes, he would chide people. Whatever issue came up, whether it be the expansion of the university medical center, or the creation of Brookwood Hospital, which was a community issues in those days, he would ask the question about what's happening with the African-American population in relationship to this proposed change in what was going to happen in the community. And it got everybody to thinking, "We're going to hear this question from him—."

KH: So we might as well—

AR: We might as well deal with it now rather than have to go back through it again. He chided people to the point where they could understand this needed to happen. Well, I

was there from 1969 to 1978, and we had all these committees. We developed a health planning commission and a board of directors, so we had all these meetings and these two major things every month would meet. And I was the executive of both of them. With all these good people I had working with me, we were able to generate a lot of stuff that was helpful, hopefully.

One of the members of the facilities committee was African-American, someone who lived in north Birmingham, and he was a very humble, good man. He was also a member of the board of commissioners of the housing authority. The Housing Authority at that time—the director of it was like eighty-five years old. He had been very good in urban renewal stuff in the '50s. He'd been there twenty-five years, and he was eighty-five years old. He was a former realtor, and his interest historically had been urban renewal, and there was a good bit of urban renewal here, which we can get into if you'd like. But there were five commissioners on this housing authority, and this gentleman was one of the five. Three of them were allied together, he being one of the three.

They were sort of recently appointed by the city council, and the way this housing authority operated, it was altogether different from the way he saw the committees operating in the health planning agency and in the community service council. He saw process going on, he saw everybody having their say, he saw this community dialogue taking place at this health planning agency and this community service council. He was a board member and he'd also come to the board meetings, and he'd see all that work and all that presented. Then he'd go back to the housing authority for their meetings, and I don't know what they were like, except for what he had to tell me. He said, "Oh, we don't have any say. We don't have

any discussion. We don't do anything but look at one another and are kind of told what to vote. And frankly, we're kind of sick of that."

KH: The director was basically in charge of everything, then.

AR: Yeah, That's right. And the lawyer.

KH: Oh, they made all the decisions.

AR: They made all the decisions, and the board just sort of sat around. So he says, "Those days have got to come to a close." He says, "This man's eighty-five years old and we need to have him gone. And he says, "Would you entertain the idea of applying to the Housing Authority?" Well, I had done this housing stuff down in Worchester and studied a lot about it, and had spent the next eight years primarily in the housing and the social planning. So I pondered that a while, and finally the opportunity came. Greater Birmingham Ministries—. One of the previous directors, George Quiggle. He's the second director removed from George, but Greater Birmingham Ministries was very much behind trying to get the Housing Authority up to snuff. They were very encouraging of me to participate with the Housing Authority, so I went ahead and applied and they hired me.

I was a white man, coming to this Housing Authority, and I replaced a white man, whom the community of residents—and we'll talk about them in a minute—they had not much use for this previous director, the one who was just -- the eighty-five year old man. Well, there was a board of commissioners, and there were like—I'm trying to think now who the original board was. There were at least three African-American board members; three of the five were African-Americans. And they hired another white guy. So here I come in—.

KH: Because they knew about your credentials?

AR: Well, the residents didn't know. Of course the board did. So at any rate, we endured some picketing for a few days.

KH: Oh.

AR: That all passed, but I guess the bottom line was, over the next ten years, from '78 to '88, I was at the Housing Authority, and a lot of those people who did the picketing became very good friends of mine. And we worked very well together, so that was—. A lot of things about the housing—.

KH: Sorry, just a minute.

AR: Sure.

KH: Testing, testing. OK, we're good.

AR: We're good, OK. As I was saying, there were a lot of interesting things about this Housing Authority. It was very large, first of all. Birmingham was like the fiftieth largest city in the country at that time, and this was like the twelfth largest Housing Authority. The reason for that was that one of our senators was John Spartan, who was the chairman of the senate—I think it was the banking committee, which had responsibility for public housing. Part of his service to Alabama was to really help this Housing Authority develop into what it was.

There were almost seven thousand public housing units, and another twenty-five hundred Section Eight units. So it's almost ten thousand housing units, and we served over thirty thousand people, which was ten percent of the population of the city, or more. There was probably about two hundred and eighty thousand people in the city, and our tenant base was about thirty to thirty-two thousand people. And the other things about it was, though much of this public housing was built in 1940, '42, and '43, and it lacked some of the

amenities that you'd like to see in housing, yet it had a greater degree of stability and it met standards much better than much of the private sector housing.

So we had this huge problem of substandard housing in Birmingham, and public housing was full, and a long waiting list to get in. Even this old stock of public housing, and we were at a time when it was difficult to build new public housing. Nor were there very many—in a traditional sense, there just weren't places to put it because of the other developments in the city, that there just was not. So we had a—.

KH: Was it a problem of zoning?

AR: Well, it was more a problem of space. Then, too, there were perceptions that had to be overcome. There were just a lot of negative perceptions, so we never really endeavored in my time to build a large new public housing community. We would have never been able to do it. But we did build several small places, and we renovated and renovated and renovated. We renovated a lot of housing stock in my time. A lot of this housing now, today, is sixty-five, seventy years old. Some that we renovated in 1980 to 1985 needs to be renovated again or replaced. Some of it's being replaced.

But I remember this very clearly. With all these housing units we had, if we ever had a vacancy rate of more than thirty units at any one time, that was a major catastrophe. We just had to work like crazy to get those units back in service, because we had such great demand for them. Today, there's an altogether different situation, and you can talk to Ralph [Reed] about that. But back in those days, the alternatives for people in the community were not very good, and they still aren't, although they're better than they were twenty-five years ago.

There are several other things about this Housing Authority that were very interesting. There were a lot of good people working there, and I really got to admire many of them. But there was kind of nobody in the organization that really knew how to write a report. They could do their jobs, and I'd talk to them when I first got there. There were like four or five department heads, and I'd call them in to try to get an update on what was going on in their departments. I'd ask them kind of in group, "Can you all write me up a report of where you stand, so I don't have to come back to you every five minutes and get you to clarify points? Can you write me up something?" They looked at one another like I'd asked them to go to China and speak Chinese. It just was not part of that system to be able to file a report or to really kind of do some of the things that would be kind of normal procedure that you would expect in a normal organization. So, that was interesting how we had to work with that, and then work with the board. The board had to learn how it was going to start making decisions now. So that was a fun process to get them to the point where they felt they were truly commissioners. And that was kind of the major goal that I had, to let them get to the point where they could make decisions and they could be responsive to the communities that the Housing Authority served, and that required just a tremendous amount of input from every corner of this community. We had fifteen housing communities, and they were scattered around all over the city.

KH: What were the main things that people in the community requested?

AR: Well, there'd been so much negative history associated with displacement of families and urban renewal. Where the University of Alabama in Birmingham is now used to be a whole bunch of shotgun houses. If you don't know about shotgun houses, they're those small, narrow--.

KH: I've seen pictures.

AR: There was just block after block of those. The man who I replaced was in urban renewal who got all of that moved.

KH: He probably wasn't very popular for that.

AR: He probably was not. It was something that no doubt needed to be done, but the manner in which it was done was probably not very good. It was done in the '50s where, you know, you made the decision in the upper office to do it, and the poor people got railroaded. They didn't get a chance to--. So there was a lot of that to have to overcome. All of these fifteen housing communities each had a residence council and we encouraged them and helped them, helped them get organized, let them have elections, and gave as much status as we possibly could to those leaders to have them inform the commissioners and to let them know that what was on their mind was as important as anything we could learn. So we went through a lot of that. And that was a very good thing for them. I remember when I first got there – and I had of course been in the community for all this time before. The Red Mountain Expressway, as it was called, stopped at the edge of the Central City Housing Development. And a lot of the business community and highway department all had worked together to have that freeway go right through downtown housing community. And the tenants were all uptight. The tenants' rights organization got involved as they should have and sued the highway department and the city and everybody else. And it stopped. It just stopped. And there was just an impasse. The big joke in the community was, "Where's this freeway going to? Nowhere." I mean it just flat stopped. On the bridge. There was a bridge post going up and the road there, and it just stopped.

Well, when I came in 1978 to the job as director of the Housing Authority, there was—Richard Arrington was elected mayor that same year, and I had known him because he was a board member of the Community Service Council. There was also a new director of the Highway Department for this area. So one of the first things I did at the Housing Authority was to ask the mayor if he would host a meeting of the three of us about this expressway. Well, we had one meeting and here were these three people that had just gotten into their jobs, all of us replacing people that had been entrenched for a long time. We talked about, why could we not route this expressway a little bit to the east? Instead of going through the community, why don't we just kind of go over here? Well, that land was vacant. And it had been vacated about two years earlier through the demolition of the terminal railway station which was there. So nobody raised that issue until we sat down there, the three of us sat down there and talked about 'why can't we do that?' The highway department guy says, "Well, we just have to do the redrawings and have the environmental impact and have a public hearing." So we said, "Well, will you please do it?" So he said, "Yeah."

So in one meeting, we solved the expressway problem. [Laughs.] And it was really kind of remarkable, because we knew what the residents were saying, we knew what the business community was saying, we knew what the wider community was saying, you know, "How foolish does Birmingham look? Can't even finish the expressway." So here we was, "Man, wow, this little simple solution." The lawsuits vanished--I don't think we even had to talk to the attorneys. They just went away. And the expressway was ultimately built and--.

KH: I was wondering if you were involved in that process.

AR: In fact, at the meeting—I guess it was the second meeting I had with the commissioners—I said to them, "I want to tell you about a meeting I had with the mayor and

Mr. Roberts of the highway department." I wanted to explain to them. And of course the news media was there. And it was the first announcement that the expressway was going to be completed, and it came out of the Housing Authority board member, which was really, really good. So that was kind of fun to get through that.

KH: During your time with the Housing Authority, did you ever work with the Titusville Development Corporation or BEAT?

AR: Yes. And I worked with BEAT subsequently to my time at the Housing Authority, but I'll tell you about that, too. Are you familiar, do you know where the location is of the Birmingham City Jail? It's in Titusville.

KH: I kind of know. Is it downtown?

AR: It's on Sixth Avenue South and about Eighth Street. But there's property adjacent to where the Birmingham City Jail is located, and there's some municipal garages there and some other stuff. But there was about, I'm going to say sixty or seventy acres of vacant land there, and it's right at the edge of the Titusville community. And we were able to work with the forces in Titusville, and we did a bond issue through the Housing Authority, to build single-family homes in that community. And it was, and I think it still it, a very nice neighborhood. I go through there every now and then and think about the history of that thing. I was just real proud of what all of us were able to work on together and achieve. And it was really kind of the first--. We did a couple of other of those at about the same time. We did some right by near West End High School and one other place, I think it was out near Pratt City, which was further west. But we had the opportunity to do bond issues through the Housing Authority to generate some single-family housing for home ownership. And just getting folks into the home ownership mode was kind of fun, too. That was a whole new

process for the Housing Authority. And it's still going on, in different ways, and that's been a happy circumstance. And it's probably the future of public housing authorities for the most part, for development purposes. It's going to be a home ownership--. How do you create opportunity for home ownership for people who've always been renters?

Now the health question, and this is really, the health question in public housing. If you understand how the financing of housing authorities comes about, there is an allotment from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, but the Housing Authority must also raise money from rents of the tenants in order for its budget to be whole. And the rent that the residents would pay would be based on their income, which at the time was twenty-five percent of their income, and subsequently went up to thirty percent. But we had to raise this money, so when people came into residency, we knew what their rent was established and what it was supposed to be based on their income. And I'd get reports from our housing managers as to the income that would be generated, we needed to have to see if our budget was going to survive. Well, in the detail of those reports, I noticed that here's family X that came in residency two months ago, they're supposed to pay thirty-five dollars a month for rent. Well, in the second month, their rent went to zero. Now see, that happened a lot. And I began to try to find out why that was happening.

KH: Is that an indication that their income went down?

AR: Yeah. And why their income went down? What was happening? And I found out that one of the dominant reasons, in my inquiry into this, was that--. Well, you have to understand one other thing. At the time in Alabama, the only service, health care services available for low-income families was through Alabama Medicaid. And Alabama Medicaid was available only to families that had incomes at the public assistance level or less. And the

public assistance level was about twenty percent of the poverty level. So at that time, if you had an income of two thousand dollars or more, the children could not qualify for Medicaid. So what was happening was that a lot of these families had ill children, children with chronic diseases or with major problems. They had no way to finance their care. So they quit their jobs to reduce their income to get on to Medicaid to be able to have medical care for their children. Wow. You know, here I was a social worker, I understood that this could happen theoretically, but to see it happen so much and so graphically and to be in kind of a situation where it just affected the budget immediately and that caused the question to be asked--. So that got me real interested into the health care aspects of this housing situation.

KH: Now I can see the connection very clearly.

AR: So in the health planning process that I had been in before the Housing Authority, a lot of these executives from Blue Cross were on these committees. So I knew them, and I knew them pretty well. And I'd see them from time to time in the community at different events, and we'd always say hello. In 1987, this Blue Cross organization here decided that it needed to do something about the uninsured in Alabama. It had a dominant place in the market for health care insurance for Alabamans. But there were still a large number of uninsured, so they did a study and found out that what they really wanted to do was get involved with trying to deal with medical coverage for uninsured children, low-income uninsured children. They knew what the Medicaid situation was, and at the time, it was still 1987. It was still--. You, in fact, had to be on public assistance to get Medicaid. So they went to form this Alabama Child Caring Foundation. The CEO here was Bill Mandy, and I had known him for years. We began to talk about this position and this job. And so much like what happened with the chairman of the Housing Authority, or with the board of

commissioner member of the Housing Authority, a very similar thing happened when I was at the Housing Authority for this Alabama Child Caring Foundation. I understood the problem, and they knew that I understood the problem, and I could explain to them not only was it just something they could discuss from reading statistics. I said, "Let me tell you graphically how it works out in the lives of people." And so they asked me if I would do this job.

I had been at the Housing Authority for ten years, and it was time to recommit or to move on. So I decided this was probably a good time to move on. I came here nineteen years ago now. So that's the health and the housing connection really coming home to roost now. Since this Alabama Child Caring Foundation was established, the private sector program—Alabama Child Caring Foundation—had initial early successes. I think that sort of became a catalyst to the state to say, "Hm. We better shape up our programs a little bit." And they had opportunities, as there were some Medicaid amendments passed in 1990, '91, which helped them do that, and then the Children's Health Insurance Program came along in 1997. And all of that--. There's just some strands that come out of the Alabama Child Caring Foundation and things that happen in other parts of the country that gave rise to the Children's Health Insurance Program, which now is a very wonderful program for children's health care.

KH: Is that a state-wide program?

AR: It's a national program, and each state participates in it. And Alabama was the first state, and the reason it was the first state was we'd been doing it in the private sector, and we were able to coach the state into how to do it. And the state has done a really nice job on it.

KH: So now people don't have to choose between their jobs or their children's health anymore?

AR: That's right, we don't have that problem anymore. But we still have a lot of uninsured kids. So Medicaid does its share, the Children's Health Insurance Program—known as ALL Kids in Alabama--does its share, and then the Alabama Child Caring Foundation does what's left. We fill the remaining part of the gap. And there's still plenty of a gap.

KH: And during the time that you were getting involved in the Child Caring Foundation, you also got involved with Alabama Poverty?

AR: Oh, yes. Alabama Poverty Project. It started in Alabama in about 1990. The Poverty Project is the brainchild of three people, one of whom is still living. Two of them, Dr. Wayne Flynt, who is just retiring as a history professor at Auburn--.

KH: I know Dr. Wayne Flynt. I didn't know he was retiring.

AR: Yeah, he's retiring. He's in retirement mode as we speak. He and Dr. Will Bailey and a social worker by the name of Eulene Hawkins--Dr Bailey and Ms. Hawkins, they're deceased now—linked up with some of the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, who had formulated the North Carolina Poverty Project. And began to understand what was going on in North Carolina, and they decided that we needed to do this in Alabama. So they formed the Alabama Poverty Project to educate the masses of Alabama about what people go through who are in poverty, about our need to be sensitive to the needs of people in poverty, and that we need to be in a position to respond and to help alleviate poverty and to eliminate it. And a lot of that is associated with, historically, with racism and the residue of racism is still there.

But I became a member of the Poverty Project in 1999, I believe. It primarily is associated with the colleges and universities, and all the major institutions are represented on the board. And then a few community people—Scott Douglas, whom you've talked to, is a participant. I've been on the board for a few years, and some folks from Montgomery, community and statewide programs are also board members. But the strength of it is the university consortium opportunity. We're now, we just got a grant, thanks be to God, from the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation in North Carolina. Interestingly enough, two members of the board of that foundation are also members of the board of the Poverty Project in Alabama. And of course, they had to recluse themselves, but we worked very hard to get an application they couldn't refuse. [Laughs.]

And if you understand what the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation does, it really helps organizations get to the stage where they can do their job. Now this Poverty Project has been around for fifteen years, and it never effectively has had a staff. I mean, it's worked with the goodwill of a lot of people, and a lot has been done, and some documents have been published and some data on poverty in Alabama. But we really haven't had a chance to do any follow-through because everybody else—all the board members have responsibilities they got to take care of, that they primarily are engaged in. So we haven't had a staff until we've had an interim director in the last six months looking forward to the possibility of this grant.

So we now have a fifty thousand dollar grant coming in this year, and it's going to allow us to hire somebody and set up an office and get in position to do--. We're going to do a lot of youth stuff, we're going to do curriculums for colleges. They're going to participate in them and they're going to help college students understand. Everybody in college needs to

understand this, and if they don't understand it there, they never will, so the idea is to train the leaders of tomorrow.

KH: You mean understanding the history of poverty?

AR: Understanding that there is poverty and what it means and how it got there and what we're going to do to eliminate it. In the meantime, when you become a head of a corporation or a public official, you'll have this in your background to be able to relate to what it means to deal with the issues of poverty. So there's going to be a lot of youth involvement from high school to college. We do a lot of op-ed stuff to try to inform the public. We've got some really good op-ed writers on the board. And generally, we're also trying to get the religious community more organized, get in position to provide the leadership that they can provide to faith-based people, of which there are a lot in Alabama. Many of them are not very good at understanding what poverty is. And poverty is oftentimes associated with race, and it gets dismissed a lot of times because of that, so we're trying to keep that from happening.

KH: Why would you say that poverty in this state has been related to racism?

AR: Well, it's just opportunities for African-Americans, historically in this state, has been minimal. It's of course much better in recent years, but if you look at the black belt of Alabama, which involves like twelve counties, and we've recently done a pretty substantial study on that for health reasons out in this company. We know that the poverty rate is twenty to thirty percent of the households in the black belt, and the rest of the state is like fifteen percent on the average. But it ranges in the black belt from twenty percent to thirty percent. The unemployment rate in the state is about three and a half percent right now, it's the highest employment level we've ever had in the state. But still, the black belt is about eight

percent unemployment rate for everybody else. So that takes care of about ten thousand people in the black belt are [uninsured] because of unemployment. And the surprising thing was, we were doing the health care thing, that eighty percent of the working group, of the working-age people have medical coverage. That was a real surprise. Eighty percent of the working people. But twenty percent do not. And in the rest of the state, it's about fourteen percent that don't. And it's because of the high unemployment rate--people don't have an income, they can't procure health insurance if they're working-age. The children can get on one of the programs, or the seniors can get on Medicare, but if you're working-age, you don't have any options if you can't buy insurance. Unless you're disabled.

So there's like ten thousand of those people that are just uninsured—able-bodied but no job. Not because they don't want to work, because they just don't have any jobs. There's no economic development in those communities. There's just not much of an infrastructure economically once you get past schools and municipal governments and county governments and utilities and things like that. There's just not much private sector development. Now there are a number of things that are there, but not enough to employ everybody.

KH: Nothing really replaced the role that the steel mills held in employment?

AR: Well, the steel mills did not really engage people from the black belt. Those were primarily farming communities. The residents there were—the residents now are—primarily descendants from--. Well, they were farmers, and they worked for plantations, and so those families stayed there. And many of them have done farming, but it's on such a small scale that there's really not much economic relationship to what they do anymore. Family farms, even really well-done ones, are not in high demand anymore. Food production is so much more massive and automated and conducted in such a way that the family farmer is kind of

obsolete. And that's what's there primarily. The land is rich and fertile, but there's nothing to support the farmer really. So these families are there, and they're poorly educated and the schools are not good, and the health care is not good, and the transportation is miserable, and the poverty is rampant. Poverty Projects ( ) and a lot of others have gotten interested in the black belt in recent years, and there's just a tremendous amount of folks going in and leaving. Just hitting and missing down there in the black belt.

And the poor residents, poor not in the sense of economics, but I mean, they become like laboratories for universities and that kind of stuff, and it's a shame. There's so much money going into different things, but it's all controlled by outside groups like these, primarily universities. And we need to get this economic development churning in the community. And the governor has set up a black belt community action task force and commission, which has really done a pretty good job of trying to instigate a few things that will be meaningful. And we've had some help like the Hyundai plant was built in Montgomery, which was just one county removed from the black belt, and a lot of the people that live in Lowndes County now have employment at that Hyundai plant. Several hundred, which is a lot more than were employed there two years ago. But things like that need to happen. Meanwhile, if we can help people understand that those things need to happen to the Poverty Project and others, we'll be hopefully in position to see some change there.

END OF CD 1

START OF CD 2

KH: I'd like to ask you about the people you worked with in these various organizations. At the time, did you know that any of them had also been involved heavily in local civil rights projects?

AR: My suitemate at the first job I had became the director of the Urban League, and so I know him quite well. He had a really good career there. But we started out together, in the same room, the two of us, and I remember we talked a lot about Monday Night Football and stuff like that. You know, that was just beginning. I knew his family and his wife and two daughters. I was recently married, so he knew my wife, and so we had a chance to interact there a little bit. Then, I'm trying to think, what other kind of relationships I had that might be germane to this whole general thing.

One of the things that we wanted to do in the health planning program was to create a community health center. Now, community health centers are pretty widespread now. In fact, there are two in this community, and there are a hundred, literally one hundred locations where community centers operate in Alabama now. But in those days there weren't any. So we wanted to create one, and on our staff was one gentleman who had worked with a committee in Roosevelt City, which is a totally African-American community, a poor community, between Birmingham and Bessemer. Bessemer is about ten miles southwest of Birmingham, and they're both in Jefferson County. Everything that happens in Birmingham is reproduced in Bessemer on the county government side. There's a courthouse in Bessemer, although there's a courthouse in Birmingham. Then there's a jail in Bessemer, and there's a jail in Birmingham. And public safety's there, so there's a lot of duplication,

and it's politically—. The county fathers had agreed it's what they had to do for whatever reasons historically.

So this was in between these two communities, and it was a little enclave. Several thousand people lived there, but it was a place that we had the people working together. We had the opportunity and were able to get the funding to create a community health center there. So the gentleman who worked on that actually became director of the community health center there. He was well-known in the community, and it was good to see. We were able to promote one of our African-American staff members into an administration position, and so he conducted that for a number of years.

Then another young African-American came out of the hospital administration sequence at the university here, with a master's degree in health administration. His first job was with us, and after a couple of years of training him, he was able to take the job of community health center director of a network of community health centers in Mobile County. He's still there, and he's done a great job. Let me think of some others. [Pause] I won't tell you about the bad ones. [Laughter]

KH: There were bad ones? How were they bad?

AR: I'm just teasing. [Laughter] But most of the people that were in leadership positions, like one of them who was at the Housing Authority—. Now I was like thirty years old when I started there, thirty-eight maybe, and most of the people who were my department heads were like in their sixties. They'd been entrenched in those positions for quite a while, and they had a lot of good qualities, like I said, but they just couldn't write a report. But that wasn't their style. They had come up in a different style, so I had to learn how to provide leadership in the manner in which they could follow and do well.

KH: Were there any individuals or groups of people that were obstacles in the work that you were doing?

AR: Well, we had like fourteen labor unions in the Housing Authority—painters, and the engineers, and the machinists, and the laborers—so we had to deal with all those unions. That was interesting in itself, but by and large, we worked very well together. There'd be a few questions occasionally that somebody would fuss about, but—. There would be individuals from time to time and some of these union people who would—and they'd be primarily white—who were working in a program that was primarily dealing with African-Americans. They'd raise their ugly side from time to time.

I don't know you'd count them as obstacles. It gave me opportunity, and I spent a lot of time, and with the black staff members, too, reminding them and trying to train them to understand that they had jobs because they were providing service to poor people. And that was a whole new idea. [Laughter] You don't go into somebody's house without knocking; you don't go in and start throwing tools around. You knock on the door; you say, "I'm John so-and-so. I'm here to respond to your work order to repair your toilet" or whatever.

KH: The way you treat them.

AR: They were just simple things. And then my own sensitivity, I had to really work hard at. I remember one lady, she kept calling me. "I've called and called and called to get this repaired," so the maintenance supervisor would send somebody out to repair it. I said, "Well, Ms. So-and-So, I've got the work order right here, which the superintendent said had been repaired." "Nobody been to my house." So I come to find out when checking, the man that was sent out could not read. He had an idea—you know, "I'm going over to 1020 Ninth

Court to fix this"—he had an idea where that was, but he could not read the numbers on the doors. He could not read. And he never got to the right place.

KH: He'd just go fix other people's places.

AR: Yeah, and I'm saying to myself, "Wow, I never had that before." [Laughter] And the man was as good as gold. You just loved the guy. But he couldn't read. So you had to develop sensitivity for that. And then you've heard that "how many city employees does it take to change a light bulb?" Well, we had some of that hanging around. We'd have to repair a broken water main or something, and we'd send a crew out there. It'd be about a three-man job, and we'd have seven people there. Four would be standing around the whole time cracking jokes, while the other three did the work. It's that kind of stuff that we had to try to work at, and to make it a place where people enjoyed working and they did a good job and they provided good service. That was really one of the major things that I tried to do at the Housing Authority.

The other thing was to bring Social Services. I told you there were like four daycare centers in 1972.

KH: Yes.

AR: Well, the Housing Authority had physical facilities and daycare centers in eight places. And we developed a program to put daycare centers in eight places. We hired local people, we hired a good director, we hired people from the communities to work in them as much as possible. We tried to do a good quality program, and ultimately, we ended up with a contractor to help us, and that contractor became, and today still is, the leading childcare provider in the community, and just has got fingers everywhere. They don't run daycare centers anymore, but they have the contract to do the state's daycare program for this

community. They provide training for all the daycare centers—church-related, nonprofits, all of them. They're just thousands of them now.

KH: That's an astronomical group.

AR: And this group has done such a nice job, but it got its start at the Housing Authority. The other thing, UAB has a basketball program, and of course all the kids in public housing follow UAB basketball, because there were people from the neighborhoods they knew, and they were playing for UAB. Well, I remember very clearly, we'd have a little awards night for athletic programs at the housing communities. We were out at Elyton Village, which is out by Legion Field, and we invited the UAB basketball team to come out. A pretty good number of them came, and one of them that came was Oliver Robinson. Now Oliver became an All-American basketball player, and he played for San Antonio Spurs. He came in there; he had his glasses on, he brought his books, and he was sitting up on the platform. He was studying while he could, and so I noticed that, and I got to know him a little bit through that.

When he graduated, he applied for a job at the Housing Authority, and I quickly grabbed him up. His job was to be sort of a—he was a marvelous person, what a great man, still is—but his job was through basketball to train kids in character. He did a really nice job. He worked for a couple of years, and then he went into business for himself and has done really well. He's now a state legislator and he runs the black caucus, and he invited me to speak to them last summer. I was glad to do it. He always introduces me as the one who gave him his first job. And I have a real soft spot in my heart for him.

When my sons were growing up, I'd coach their basketball team, so I was able to get him to do a basketball camp for my little team. They were so excited. It was like for two

hours, from eight to ten, for five mornings in one week. These kids, they were like ten, eleven years old; they were all white, you know. [Laughter] He had them at UAB, and all the parents were delighted to pay him. [Laughter] He had a good time, and he still talks about them. He'll ask me, "How's Matthew doing?" But Oliver was a fine young man, and he was able to bring his own persona to a lot of children in public housing, and that was very special.

And we had a lot of others, too, who had credentials, maybe not like him, but credentials that children would recognize and be attracted to and we still—. I have it here, too. It's still here. Just today—. One of my jobs here is, I participate in the company's charitable contributions. I have a lot to do with that. There's a football camp being put on by about six or seven former Alabama players, and everybody knows them, and they're good young men. So just today, we provided a contribution to an effort they're doing on the part of the community. We've done that a good bit to try to help them spread their goodness. It's a small thing, but it's very impressionable for children.

KH: Maybe you inspire the children to go to college as well.

AR: Oh, yeah. We do. This company does a lot for children. The children's programs for the educational systems, for their health, for arts education—. We finance the Children's Theatre to take productions to the Black Belt for children who have never been to a play or a production of stage, and it's a wonderful experience. We also take them to the Shakespeare Theatre in Montgomery—.

KH: That's nice.

AR: Bus them in, and they do contemporary stuff. A lot of it's children-oriented, and it's called the Shakespeare Festival because they do some Shakespeare stuff, but they

also do a lot of contemporary stuff, and a lot of it's children-oriented. We try to arrange for children to go there. I guess one of the things that Blue Cross tries to do is -- . We've got about two million subscribers in the state or more, and they need to live in communities that have a high quality of life, and that contributes to the overall wellbeing. So we try to help that process through whatever little grants we can make. We give out about three and a half million dollars a year to community groups, nonprofit organizations, health programs, and support of education and community and arts and other things, generating quality of life.

So that's fun to do, and based on all this experience that I've had through charities and with the state and the health planning program and the housing program, and through the statewide chapter and foundation, I've worked in such a way that it's been important to know what's happening in most of the places around the state. So if I don't know how to respond to a particular request, I know somebody who I can call to find out about it. So it's an asset to the company to be able to have somebody who has a little bit more of a sense of that than most people here would know.

KH: Looking back on the work that you've done, where do you think you've seen the most progress?

AR: I've seen the most progress in the last fifteen years here [with the Alabama Child Caring Foundation]. When we started, there were two hundred and thirty thousand uninsured children in the state. Today, there are about sixty thousand. That is tremendous progress in this state. That is just unbelievable. I mean, I can hardly imagine. We're really not responsible by any means for all of it, but we are responsible for a lot of it, and for helping others to get positioned where they can do what they're supposed to do in state

government. We're directly responsible for about thirty percent of that reduction, but indirectly, probably a lot more.

We got lots and lots of uninsured children that we've been able to funnel into the state program that never would have gotten there without us. We take those who don't qualify for government programs, but if we find they don't quality, we'll take them here. But we also find a lot that can qualify, and we make sure the state does its job for them. The state's done a really, really nice job, and that was progress. In Alabama government, which has been awful historically—. But in recent years it has improved dramatically, and it's been happy to see. You asked me where most progress has occurred.

KH: Um-hm.

AR: It's because the times have changed. Everything in the first, say, twenty-five years of my career was hard and incremental and slow. But in the last twelve, fifteen years, it's rapid, and it's much more massive. That roughly will correspond to the impact of civil rights, to community understanding of all its citizens, and through the willingness to be open-minded about what people need and what people have to have.

KH: Do you think that Richard Arrington's term as mayor had some specific role in making that social change increase?

AR: Oh, yeah. Arrington was—. He had—I'm trying to think—five terms, I guess.

KH: He had twenty years, basically.

AR: Really five terms. The first eight years were wonderful, wonderful, wonderful. He had the goodwill of the business community, who really didn't quite know how to relate to him, but they did not to get on the wrong side of him. He handled it so well. He's so smart. Even back in his much younger days when I first knew him as a board member of the

community service council, and before I became director—I think the first eighteen months I was there—one of the assignments I had was to staff a committee of four people, and he was one of the four. He was there with one stately white woman from Mountain Brook, which is the elite spot, and two other gentlemen who were sort of the normal people, and he was by far the smartest one of the four. [Laughter] And so I really did enjoy getting to know him there. Then when he was married, we ended up at the same places a lot of times, and speaking to the same groups and talking about the same things, visiting fairly often. So I saw him up close, and he was so funny.

The residents in housing communities—. This I guess was like in maybe for his third term. He was running against a councilman who was white and very vocal kind of guy, also a nice man, and they got along well. The two of them got along well, but he'd go into the community centers. The community centers wanted to have him, and we had a community center in the middle of each of these housing developments. He'd make the rounds, and I'd go with him on several occasions and it was funny. The two candidates would show up. when the mayor was introduced, everyone stood up for him. "Yeah! Yeah!" The other guy was introduced; nobody stood up, politely clapped. [Laughter] It was hilarious.

KH: He could tell how things were for him.

AR: Oh, yeah. He was in an African-American context, and that didn't hurt him. But he was wonderful, especially in his first two terms, which correspond to my time at the Housing Authority. He was very, very good. He was a great leader, and when we did the major renovation of that housing community where—this was in the early 1980s, and this would have been in his, maybe ending his first term or the beginning the second—we formed

a committee of community leaders to talk about changing the name of the Central City Housing Project to something else, to kind of fit into its new context and its renovations.

We had Mr. Patton, W. C. Patton, who was the president of the N.A.A.C.P. who was sitting on this committee. He was elderly, and he loved Richard Arrington. We had a recommendation, why don't we name this place "Richard Arrington Gardens." He was so funny. He said, "I'd love for us to name this place Richard Arrington Gardens. But here's the point. You just don't name anything for a living person. You never know what kind of scoundrel they might turn out to be." [Laughter] We had a really good example of that in Richard Scrushy. You know who he is.

KH: I don't know who Richard Scrushy is.

AR: Rich was the owner and president of HealthSouth. It was one of the big scandals, corporate scandals.

KH: Oh, yes. I have heard of them.

AR: We had a lot of things named "Scrushy" around here, so they're having to change the names of that because he's now a convicted felon. But Mr. Patton was so funny, and everybody just dies laughing, because we knew where his heart was, but his mind said, "It's just not good for this. Wait until he dies."

KH: When he can't cause any trouble.

AR: That's right, when he can't cause any trouble. But it would have been a suitable name, and Richard Arrington, he deserves the merit that anybody can give him. He had—.

KH: He has a street.

AR: Yeah, the main street, Richard Arrington, Jr. Boulevard. I knew his brother, too. His brother taught biology at Miles College, but his brother James was also on one of our

committees. It seems like he was an architectural type, but I did not know him nearly as well as I know Richard. But Richard Arrington deserves all the commendation that anybody can give him, because he went through a difficult—. And he paved the way for much transition that we still enjoy. I don't think our local government now has leaders nearly as good as in his time. But he was an excellent city councilman, and he was a fine mayor.

He governed in a time when much of the city was going through transition in many ways, and racially it was going through transition. There was just a lot of apprehension on the part of the business community, and he was able to handle that so well. To this day, if you talk to business leaders, they'll tell you that they have great respect for Richard Arrington, and they enjoyed working with him, and he did a great, great job for this community. Haven't seen him lately. Don't know what he's doing. It's been several years since I've seen him, but I'd love to see him again.

KH: I've never met him, but one of my colleagues did interview him for this project.

AR: How nice. Well, I'm sure that was very illuminating. He controlled government. His leadership was highly regarded. He never had any trouble with city council. He might get a little bit—one or two dissidents, like the guy who ran for mayor—but his leadership was well-established, and it was honest. He did a really nice job for a long time.

KH: I'll just ask you one more question—.

AR: Ask me one more.

KH: Yes, and thank you for your time. It's been a very good interview. What lessons from your career would you hope to pass down to future generations? For instance, if you were talking to a historian.

AR: Oh, boy. Well, there are several lessons. One is, from a career standpoint, you never burn the bridges with the people you work with, because you'll work with them again and again and again in different settings. Like the Blue Cross people I knew through my first job, I saw them in the course of my second job, just casually, now I work with them every day. Louis Willie, the first African-American president of the United Way agency, was president of my agency. Of course, I worked with him in the health planning and social service planning agency. I also worked with him in housing. I have to tell you this. A.G. Gaston was his president, and Mr. Willie was vice-president. Has anybody ever told you about Dr. Gaston?

KH: Just some.

AR: He died at age ninety-six a few years ago. Oh, an interesting man. I must tell you this. This is just wonderful. I would go to see Louis Willie regularly about things we have to do and planning agendas for next meeting and whatever, bring him up to date on what seemed to be going on. Well, I'd always see Dr. Gaston. He was in a wheelchair and had diabetes, and he was elderly. But he called me up one day, and he said, "Rohling." I said, "Yes, sir." "You go to lunch with me?" I said, "Yes, sir, I'll be glad to." "So I'll come by to pick you up at 11:30."

So he comes by, he had a chauffeur-driven vehicle, and we go to a place that's now closed. It was a penthouse in one of the buildings downtown. I was just so honored that he said to me, "Rohling, I need a white salesman for Booker T. Washington Insurance, and you the man." [Laughter] "I want you to do in South Jefferson County"—where all the white people live—"I want you to be a representative of Booker T. Washington Insurance." I said,

"Dr. Gaston, I love you dearly, but I ain't worth a toot selling anything." [Laughter] But I said, "Goodness gracious, I'm honored that you'd ask me." [Laughter]

KH: That was very thoughtful.

AR: That was wonderful. I had a chance to work with him and Mr. Willie again in housing. We took the Gaston Motel, which was a very famous place—. Martin Luther King stayed there and the civil rights demonstrations sort of started there and moved out. Dr. Gaston took a lot of guff, not only from the white community, but from the blacks, too, because he was not personally visible like they thought he ought to be. But he did a lot of stuff behind the scenes, like he furnished residences for all these people to stay in.

Well, that motel was the only place where African-Americans could stay for many, many years. It was a great service to them. But that was no longer the case, and in 1978 or '80 or whenever it was, we were able to work with them. We needed places to put what's called the Section Eight program. With their cooperation, we were able to renovate that motel into apartment units for low income families to live. Having known them from the health planning days, it was really helpful to work with them again.

So there's this forty-year career that's about to be forty years, and it's sort of in three segments. But there are a number of people that have been partners to my effort, and that I could call on or rely on because of the things that we did early on, and because of the friendships we have and the relationships we were to build, that those things endure. And they've endured for three different types of jobs for me, and they still endure. And not only do I have good friends, but I have good allies to do things that need to be done. There's just quite a few of those that have been with me from time to time or during this entire history of whatever I've done in this community.

KH: I'd say that's a mark of success.

AR: Well, it's a mark of not having burned any bridges. [Laughter] That's the first lesson: don't burn any bridges because you may have to cross some of those bridges again. So you just cooperate and be pleasant, and don't be afraid to develop a friendship and keep it alive and nurture it from time to time.

KH: Is there anything else that you would like to add?

AR: I bet I've answered each one of those questions at least twice. Well, Birmingham is a wonderful place to raise a family. It's not a destination or a place to visit. It's increasingly a better place for African-Americans, and I think that we've had just a lot of African-American people go to Detroit from this community to take jobs in the automotive industry and elsewhere. But I've talked to a lot of them, and they're so anxious to come back home, and it's kind of good. There's still separation of races in many ways. There are lots of integrated neighborhoods, but there are a lot of separate places, too. But you don't see antagonism, and that has been so nice. All that stuff I used to read about in the 1960s, when I was in Baltimore reading about my community—. I mean, that stuff does not endure on a large scale or even a small scale.

The other thing that's been so good—. Arthur Shores, he's deceased now, but he was an African-American lawyer, and his home was bombed because of the work that he did in the civil rights back in those days. Well, I'd gotten to know him primarily when I worked at the city and the Housing Authority. His office was in the Booker T. Washington Building where I had to go often times, so I'd see him there and we'd visit. He is an icon in the black community on the civil rights issues. His daughter is a board member here at Blue Cross,

and she's a judge. Really neat woman. So these wonderful opportunities I had in these jobs to know these people because we were inclusive.

But now, looking back, I can see the generations of what's happened, and having been here as long as I've been, and just having known her father and to be able to talk about him. There are books now that are written about the Civil Rights Movement here, and all the actors that were involved. I'd read about her father, and I'd tell her, "I've been reading about your father again." [Laughter] And tell her what I'd read, and she'd [say], "Well, I don't think that's true." [Laughter] She would help me fill in the blanks. One thing we talked about was that Catholic housing thing.

KH: Yes.

AR: I was of course director of the Housing Authority for those ten years or so. The Diocese of Birmingham had been split, so Mobile was south Alabama and Birmingham was north Alabama. I knew the bishop of Birmingham very well. In fact, we were in Mobile together. His dream was to have an assisted living facility for our senior citizens, so he formed this county housing board. He went to Saint Vincent's Hospital, which is—. The Daughters of Charity run that hospital; it's a Catholic hospital here. A great place, wonderful hospital. And asked for their technical assistance and got it, and then he formed a board and asked me to serve on the board. The administrator at Saint Vincent's Hospital was a nun, and she was designated the chairman to begin with. After a year, she was moved; she was transferred someplace else by her order.

So I was elected chairman of the board and was for ten years. We built a place called Belle Maria out in the eastern part of town. It's an assisted living facility for about sixty-five apartments, and it's a six-story high-rise. So we went through the process of getting that

done with H.U.D. I knew the people at H.U.D., which helped, and the opportunity to get that going was going to be sponsored by this little old bitty diocese. It was pretty neat. They've done a very nice job there. We've had good administrators. And now they're going to open a second facility next door. They got another H.U.D. grant, which is unheard of anymore. But they got another grant to build a second facility. I had a minor heart attack in the year 2000, so I tried to cut back a little bit on what I was doing. That was one of the things I needed to kind of let somebody else do. And they've done a much better job since I've left. [Laughter] So I'm happy to let them do it.

KH: You seem to have kept busy regardless.

AR: Yeah. I don't want I'm going to do. I'm going to retire in a year or two. But I'm kind of dreading that because I'm not used to sitting around. I don't know what I'm going to do.

KH: I'm sure you won't be sitting around.

AR: No, I'll find something. Well, you're good to sit here and listen to all this, for heaven's sake. You're probably bored stiff.

KH: No, it's been my pleasure, and I really enjoyed learning about your life.

AR: Well, you're kind to come.

END OF TRANSCRIPT

Transcribed by Carrie Blackstock, July, 2006

Track 5 transcribed by Katherine Smith, December 2006