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EDWARD LAMONTE
February 22, 2005

WILLOUGHBY ANDERSON: Today is Tuesday, February 22. I am here at Birmingham Southern College interviewing Dr. Edward LaMonte for the Southern Oral History Program's Birmingham project for the Long Civil Rights Movement Project. And if you'll please say your name we'll see how you're picking up.

EDWARD LAMONTE: Sure. My name is Ed LaMonte and I teach here at Birmingham Southern College.

WA: So let's start. We were talking about the creation of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute and we had ended and you were talking about business support for the Institute and how important that had been to get these business leaders on board and in particular Herb Sklenar and his—

EL: Sklenar, S-K-L-E-N-A-R.

WA: Sklenar, okay, thank you, and his involvement and fund raising. So I guess my first question is what about Birmingham citizens at large? How did they respond to this proposed Institute?

EL: I don't know that there was any official polling done that would indicate that. I think there was basically a racial cleavage among the citizens. I think that there was absolutely overwhelming support for this project from within the black community because it seemed and was a long overdue recognition of the occasion when this community really changed the course not only of Birmingham but arguably of national events and to some extent made a great international impact. I think by and large that white citizens regarded it as an unwanted and unnecessary dredging up of a past that would better be forgotten. There were a few exceptions to that. I think

that many of the people, many of the whites who had supported Arrington when he ran in 1979 probably listened when he spoke about the meaning of the Institute and what it could come to represent in our community, not only as a place for education but as a place for healing and as a place for acknowledging that Birmingham had had this experience sort of offering it up to a later generation to learn from. So I think there were clearly individuals in the white community who saw this as important but the overwhelming response of white citizens and white business leaders was it's a mistake; we shouldn't do it.

WA: And so as the project went forward and when the Institute was opened had that opinion in the white community changed or was it constant?

EL: I think that the opinion has changed gradually over time. My guess is that probably people in the business community have changed more quickly and more dramatically, certainly some of the major businessmen and women in the community. Because the Institute from the day of its opening has received absolutely excellent reviews from those who have come, who have commented on the building, who have commented on the quality of the exhibits, who have commented on some of its programs. And I think this is the kind of praise from outside the community that business leaders are perhaps more attuned to and more sensitive to. And one of the things that I always regarded as a mark of the Institute's acceptance was the increasing number of occasions when business organizations in Birmingham would use the Institute as a site for one of their own activities. I would also say, in my own opinion, that one white business leader in addition to Herb Sklenar really helped redefine the business community's thinking and that is Frank Young, a local attorney with the

Haschal, Slaughter, & Young firm, who was as I recall, the president of the Chamber of Commerce during the year when ground was broken for the Institute. And I remember that he came to that occasion and gave a very, very strong speech of endorsement and clearly indicated a vision on his part of how this Institute should not be resisted but embraced and celebrated by the business community. And I think that the symbolism and the reality of the leader of the Chamber making that kind of commentary was very, very important and I think he saw to it that the Chamber really looked at the Civil Rights Institute in a fair and objective and even very supportive way.

WA: You mentioned that with Herb Sklenar that he even looked at exhibit designs and, you know, that the mission statement that he was so involved in.

EL: Absolutely.

WA: With the project, what about historians, sort of input on the content of the museum itself, did you have an input and others?

EL: Right, there was a committee and I would have to go back. I'm sure you're talking to Odessa.

WA: I have interviewed her.

EL: Odessa would have the records of who served on committees.

WA: Okay.

EL: But I know, for example, that Horace Huntley, Bob Corley, Marvin Whiting, and I all were on the planning team that worked on the building design and the exhibit program. And I guess we would all qualify as historians in one way or another. So I would say yes, that there was a real effort to tap both local talent and

national. I believe one of our prime content consultants was I believe it was called the National History Workshop. But in any event, I would say two things about the planning of the Institute in terms of efforts to achieve excellence from the beginning. One was that we wanted the building to be an absolutely outstanding building. We didn't want it to be ostentatious. We didn't want it to be inconsequential. We wanted it to be dignified and to be an appropriate space in which this very, very serious business of interpretation and education would go on. And I think if you look at the building it by intention connects to the neighborhood in which it's a part, the green roof of the Institute tying into the green roof of the federal courthouse, the brick being a brick that was complimentary to the area. So the building hopefully doesn't shout here I am, a stand-alone monument of grandeur, but here I am respectfully located in a very important area with good connections with the environment. The other thing we did was to invest heavily in consultants and exhibit designers. The video, much of the audio-visual work, was done by the group that did Eyes On The Prize with the exhibit design group Wetzel & Associates, at the top nationally. So we really tried not only to put forward the best foot of Birmingham, but really to tap into national expertise.

WA: So what would you say is the statement of the Institute in terms of Birmingham's civil rights history?

EL: I think the intent of the Institute is, number one, to document what in fact happened in this region, not only during the civil rights period, but to document what life was like particularly for African Americans under the period of segregation in Birmingham. Kids today, as you well know, cannot imagine that people ever lived like that and simply ask how can people treat one another that way. I think it's also a

story of how a community did not come together to address its problems, was forced to do so against the will of its dominant leadership group, went through a painful, painful period of accommodation and I think has emerged with a greater strength, a greater understanding of how difficult it is to live harmoniously in complex communities; that we have learned some lessons and that we can both convey those lessons to others and be a place where issues of the contemporary world are made known, explored, and studied. From the very beginning, those of us connected with the Institute wanted to be sure that the Birmingham civil rights experience and the American civil rights experience was seen as directly tied to international human rights concerns. And so in the mission statement of the Institute from the very beginning has been the dual emphasis of interpreting our domestic, or particularly our local experience, and bridging that into a much broader worldwide movement.

WA: And why that emphasis on a worldwide, versus say a national civil rights struggle?

EL: Well, I think part of it was realizing that what happened in Birmingham did have impact around the world. One of the interesting themes that a number of people have been exploring are the impacts and relationships of the South African and American experiences on one another. When the Berlin wall came down and people saying we shall overcome. I think that there was an awareness that what happened in Birmingham should not be understood only in local or national context, but really as an important event in the world and that our vision in undertaking programs and exhibits should be what is happening in the world and not just what is happening in our community. And so we really did choose not to be a local, state, regional, or

national but really intentionally international from the beginning. Now that latter part's been harder to pull off. I mean I think that we would be I hope at the top of anyone's list of places in the United States that you would have to go to if you wished to fully understand or begin to understand the American civil rights experience. I don't think the Institute has quite reached that level of recognition or importance in the international arena. But the mission is not accomplished and it remains a very, very important part of what it's about.

WA: I went today and I was just there and there were Japanese tourists there and school groups there and many, many people are I think coming to Birmingham to visit the Institute.

EL: Right.

WA: Which is wonderful.

EL: Let me interrupt and tell a story that I've told before and if I told this before please stop me. We had a distinguished American diplomat who taught here at the college on several occasions. His name was Alfred Leroy Atherton, Jr. He had been in the state department during the Carter presidency and participated in the Camp David peace discussions, was then appointed ambassador to Egypt after Camp David. Upon completing his tour of duty in Egypt he returned to the U.S. and became director of the entire foreign service officer program. We were very fortunate that on, I think five or six years, he and his wife Betty came to Birmingham and he with some of us on the faculty offered a seminar called conflict and diplomacy in the Middle East. And one evening my wife Ruth and I had dinner with him and his wife and as soon as we sat down at the table he said, "Ed, I've got to tell you what Betty and I did today."

And we said, "well, what was that." He did not know of my involvement with the Institute. He said, "we went to the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute." He said, "when we completed the exhibit Betty simply burst into tears, that it evoked in her such strong memories of that important part of our life and our nation's life." And he said, "I'm often consulted about establishing the itineraries for foreign visitors." He said, "I would say with conviction that any foreign visitor who truly wishes to understand the United States would have to come to the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute as one of ten must see places in the U.S." And that is, when he said that I just thought I wish all of my colleagues could have heard this because that was the kind of goal that we had in mind at the outset.

WA: So finally on the Institute, what role does the Institute play in this city today?

EL: I think it plays multiple roles. It is a physical reminder of our past and of the challenges that we continue to face. It's always there. It doesn't ever go away. It is a tourist attraction. It has made Birmingham into a destination site for many tourists. We have others that attract people from great distances, Sloss Furnaces, to some extent, the Museum of Art. But I think the Institute has had the broadest appeal nationally and internationally because of the urgency of its theme. And so there's been an economic impact. Thirdly, it has had I think an extraordinary educational impact from lower grade levels up through college and universities. We in the teaching profession build the Institute and its programs into our work. And I say that with confidence because I've just done a little survey of my colleagues to see how many of us either go with classes, require classes to go, or draw on the Institute. It's a

significant number. So it's an educational resource. And then I think it is a safe haven. It is the place where people who do not normally have the opportunity to come together can come together and discuss some of the most difficult and raw issues that our society faces or that our world faces, and know that they are in a place where this is exactly the kind of discussion that is intended to take place. And so I think it's emerged as a safe haven for the exploration of some of these issues. So I think it's made multiple contributions to the Birmingham community.

WA: Thank you. So let's skip ahead to, or skip backwards maybe to when you served as an interim superintendent of Birmingham city?

EL: City schools.

WA: Okay, and that was how did you come to serve in that role?

EL: Well, it is a long and complicated story and let me just kind of boil it down to the ( ). First of all, I think that I had in both my public work when I worked in the mayor's office and my teaching, made it very clear that I personally regard the topic of public education as probably the primary domestic policy issue that this country faces. And was very much aware that the Birmingham city schools were in distress, had been for an extended period of time. And I think Mayor Arrington in an interview that I did with him that's at the Institute acknowledged that one of the great disappointments of his twenty-year tenure as mayor from 1979 to 1999 is the fairly continuous erosion of the quality of public education in Birmingham during that time. And how ironic because here's a man that has a Ph.D., has as deep an understanding of what education can mean, and has benefited as much as anyone could, and yet schools during his watch, as they say, slipped.

Specifically the board had reached an impasse with the current superintendent and had determined that they were going to fire him, that they were going to break the contract if all of this could be orchestrated and accomplished legally; essentially buy out the contract, bring in an interim and begin a search for a permanent superintendent. And I was unaware that there was this discontent brewing between the board and the superintendent until the fall of 1995 when it became sort of front-page news. And then quite out of the blue I received a phone call from one of the board members who asked if we could meet and we did and the proposition, the question was would I consider becoming the interim superintendent of schools for the city of Birmingham. My initial reaction was, of course not because I'd had absolutely no training or experience and having a concern for a subject doesn't necessarily qualify one as a leader in that very subject area. But they were persistent and others including Dr. Arrington, for whom I have tremendous respect, thought that indeed I might be able in a limited period of time to provide adequate leadership and perhaps create an environment which would allow more attention to be paid to issues of education. And so ultimately I agreed that I would take on the position beginning January of 1996, with the understanding that I would be able to meet a couple of classes here that I was teaching and that was the first mistake. You don't attempt to lead or run or manage a complex divided urban school system while doing anything else. I mean it is a totally consuming position, totally consuming. But in any event I did agree that I would serve for a limited period of time. I had frankly thought that I would serve longer than I did but it was really not feasible in terms of my being able to remain in higher education.

And also there were some true disappointments in terms of the school board and some agreements that I thought we had absolutely clearly reached, which turned out to be quickly breached, so that I was looking at a leadership team that was not behaving as they had promised and as I said, I can really try to do the best I can with however many schools there were, seventy-nine or something. I can try to deal with seventy-nine schools but I can't with a divided five-member board. And so, we either do this and do it on the same page or it doesn't work and we didn't do it on the same page and it didn't work.

WA: Okay, what were some of the issues that you were dealing with?

EL: Well, I'll tell you some of the issues we were dealing with and then I'll tell you some of the issues we should have been dealing with, and they were not always the same. When I went on the board a very, very fine woman named Hazel Germany was the board president and I said two things to all board members. I met with all of them individually and I said that I would work through the board only through the board president, that I really couldn't have multiple relationships; that I didn't want to get involved in that kind of situation. And secondly, that we needed to have some stability and continuity and if there were any board terms that were expiring, and I had no idea whose board terms were expiring, I said if there are any board terms that are expiring and the person is eligible for reappointment that we would go ahead and stand together and try to serve as a leadership team, with the superintendent dealing directly and only with the board president. And three weeks into my time there I received a call from an individual in the community who said you need to know that there is a division on the board and that some board members are

attempting not only to remove the board president from office but make sure she doesn't get appointed to the board again. So board appointments became big issues.

Who would be the attorneys for the board became a big issue. Lot of money involved in it, a lot of litigation. And one of the things that I understood at the time was that the board chose attorneys, that the superintendent did not make those recommendations and so I said to them, you know, do what you want. If that's not an issue that I need to deal with, fine. But it became a very, very time consuming thing and the amount of litigation. I had no idea how much litigation there was and when the attorneys called and said, a group of attorneys who were ultimately dismissed, had been attorneys for many years, when they called and said they needed to review litigation with me, I thought I'd go over for an hour or two and I spent like ten or twelve hours going through these unbelievable cases, many of which needed to be resolved and resolved quickly. So I found myself as superintendent spending a great deal of time, and the board members, several of them insisted on meeting with me separately and sort of indicating their bottom line for continuing to support me.

And it really just turned out to be a physically exhausting experience and on top of that a kind of heartbreaking experience because those who had sought me out and who presumably were concerned with the well being of the kids in the city, really once I was on board, quickly got largely diverted into questions that are very peripheral to what goes on in the classroom. And I would keep saying to them, the only question that I think we need to ask over and over and over is what is the impact of this decision on the teachers in the system and the young people whom they are responsible for. And food service contracts, all of this contracting stuff just really

became a kind of hopeless diversion. So at the end of the term I really just absolutely needed to leave. I would not have been able to be a healthy person and remain there.

WA: Very quickly, was race an issue that you were dealing with in the schools? I mean was school desegregation something that was still at issue?

EL: That was sort of a past issue. I don't know the exact percentage but the school system was in the upper nineties percent black. And so there was no real possibility of having a desegregated system. You could hope for pockets of bi-racial student population and there were pockets but they were absolutely isolated pockets. So no, the issues did not, focusing on the educational issues now and not the distracting issues of who got appointed to do this consulting work or legal work and so on, the issues were issues of deteriorating reading scores, of discipline problems.

When I began as interim superintendent in January, on the day I began, Birmingham police officers began in the high schools of the city and with the exception of Ramsey High School, every high school of the city of Birmingham had an officer assigned fulltime during the school day to the school as his or her duty assignment. It had gotten to a point that the schools needed to have a police, at the high school level, needed to have a police presence in the buildings in order to attempt to have a level of orderliness and physical security that would allow teaching and learning to occur. So I would say the deterioration in performance on test scores, the rising problems of violence and misconduct, and the flight of people who had options from the system, and that wasn't just white flight. That was everybody's flight.

I mean one of the things that I think would be very telling would be to look at the percentage of school kids from one year, the percentage decline from one year to

the next. I think the system now has in the thirties and it used to be twice that. So unhappily what I saw was a very demoralized teaching faculty, very concerned parents. A lot of parents were utterly indifferent and I would never attempt to portray a setting in which every parent was vitally concerned and engaged in his or her child's education. But there were a lot of very, very concerned parents. And just a whole variety of issues that needed to be dealt with. The one that I was particularly wanting to deal with was the question of how reading instruction took place at the lower grade levels. That question has now been examined and I think pretty well addressed by a program called the Alabama Reading Initiative, which is I think widely recognized as offering a sound and flexible way of educating kids who have very different needs in terms of how they're taught. But there had been a kind of culture war within the system over how to teach reading between those who favored the traditional phonetic approach and those who were advocates of the whole language approach. And my sense was that the teachers in the lower grade levels were sort of confused, didn't know what they were supposed to do, often wanted to teach one way but being told another but not properly trained. So there were a lot of very serious educational issues.

I would not say that the primary issue was per pupil expenditures. More money would have helpful but the issues I think were issues of management, including financial management. I mean there was as I recall a sixteen million dollar building reserve fund that was kept in place and this had been for decades. This isn't black leadership mismanaging a system after the whites did a great job. It's a kind of continuous sad story in many ways. Money had not been spent to do basic physical

improvements in schools. And I will never forget going over here to Center Street Middle School and the principal asked me to come into a classroom and the young teacher there pointed to a hole in the roof and she said, "do you see that" and I said, "yes." And they said, "well, this was a leak in the roof that had begun as a small leak five years ago and now it was a gaping hole." And what the teacher had done was to plant a tropical rainforest on the floor. And I said, "is the lesson to this then that we'll be the school system with the most rainforests in our classrooms?" But just inexcusable mismanagement across the board, no one escaping, in my view, blame for not keeping the well being of the kids at the center of their every day professional work.

WA: Okay. Before I ask you about Operation New Birmingham and Leadership Birmingham, some of your other experiences, is there anything about this schools?

EL: One thing, I'm not an authority on school desegregation at all. I think different communities had very, very different histories as they experienced school desegregation. And I think a limited number of communities did it successfully and well and it seems to me that the critical factor that was present wherever it took place relatively peacefully and successfully was real community leadership in preparing the community for a profound change in the way it lived. There was none of that in Birmingham. I would love to stand corrected but I have talked with people who were here at the time, who were in school at the time, and said who prepared the schools for desegregation. What was said that would make this a difficult step on the way to a bright future and I think the community absolutely fell down at the point of failing to

have any preparation for faculty, staff, students, or the community at large. There was failure locally and that coupled with the George Wallace phenomenon made desegregation the enemy to be combated. And I think the school systems continued to pay for the tragic consequences of that, a terrible, terrible chapter of failure of leadership I think in the city's history.

WA: So that failure of leadership during desegregation, is that what you see going through the '80s and the '90s?

EL: I think the consequences of it, sure. I mean I think that many people set as a goal getting their children out of the Birmingham system and that that has contributed to the movement of people out. I think that from the beginning in urban America we've had a tendency over the centuries to move out to the edge, the suburban edge, and I'm confident that the '54 decision did stimulate "white flight" but it didn't absolutely mandate white flight nor did it certainly mandate the flight of people with options. And I think to have what is now in place, which is essentially an all black school system, made up with kids whose families are least advantaged in the community, is just kind of the worst possible alternative for these youngsters and the impetus has been to get out of town, to get into a system and so we've had a proliferation of systems. I think we now have about eleven systems in the area. And I don't think for many of them race is the primary issue, I think it's quality of education.

WA: Okay. So, tell me a little bit about your work with Operation New Birmingham and what that group was designed to do and what it does. It's a continuing ongoing group, right?

EL: Okay, now there is Operation New Birmingham, the sort of downtown development group, and then there is the organization that it has been sponsoring from the beginning, the Community Affairs Committee, the bi-racial group.

WA: Okay.

EL: And I think you're interested in the bi-racial group particularly?

WA: Yes, I am.

EL: So that's the Community Affairs Committee of Operation New Birmingham, which I believe was established in 1969 and continues to meet weekly I think, every Monday morning. I actually have written about this and would love to sort of refresh my memory about it.

WA: Well, I can look it up.

EL: Well, I do deal with the creation of the Community Affairs Committee in the book. But what had happened basically was that in 1963 the settlement called for a series of actions on the part of particularly white leadership in the community, including the employment of more blacks in public agencies, in the private sector, and the creation of an ongoing dialogue between members of the black and white community. And I don't know what other respondents have done. I use the terms black and white, using both terms in a respectful sense. I think some people insist on African American but I think black and white is appropriate and I use that. So in I believe it was about 1967 a group of black leaders issued a set of demands to the white leadership essentially saying you all have fallen down in fulfilling the promises of 1963. There must be response to this failure or else this community stands at risk of repeating a cycle that it went through and hopefully learned from. And actually the

person who crafted the document was Dick Arrington. He was then I believe the academic dean at Miles College. Lucius Pitts, the president, was one of the recognized black leaders in the community. So this petition came and I don't know who delivered it or to whom physically but it resulted in the agreement that there had to be a response and that that response should come from a newly created bi-racial organization. I associate that decision very much with the extremely influential assistant publisher. I think he was at the *Birmingham News*, Vincent Townsend. But the decision was made to bring together a group that would be comprised as I recall, one third government officials, one third black, one third white. And it began I think with a group of about twenty-seven. Now there was an intense sense of crisis at the time that this group was formed because 1963 was not all that far in the background. The petition was very specific. The failures were clear. And from the beginning the Community Affairs Committee was able to bring together the sort of heavy hitters, the elite of the community, to try to really make some decisions that would bring about some immediate changes that would be responsive to the commitments made in 1963 and that would be responsive to the petition. And so there is a long and distinguished history of the Community Affairs Committee being a vehicle by which individuals can come together, discuss issues of community importance, and try to fashion responses.

I think frankly the organization now has a harder time now figuring out what its role should be as there have been so many changes in the community. When I first came to Birmingham CAC was quite new and I think that I may have been on it during the time I was at UAB [University of Alabama at Birmingham] for a period, that I was off it when I was in Arrington's office then back on it and I'm no longer on it simply

because it is a time consuming activity and I kind of felt that I had put in my share of time into that work.

But I think what's important is to again be honest and acknowledge that after 1963, which to me represented a huge failure of leadership in the community, within four or five years there was another failure of leadership. The community seemed to be sort of slow learners in terms of how seriously do you have to take this business of communicating openly, candidly identifying problems, and responding to them. No black police officer had been hired, for example. That had been an issue for decades. We were the last city by decades I think to not have a black police officer. So I think that CAC was a creative response to a true crisis and that it reflected another failure of leadership on the part of particularly the public sector, but the private sector as well. I think that now it is less easy for the group to sort of readily identify what its role ought to be and certainly, among other things, it's grown considerably larger and no longer do many people who would be considered from the elite of the leadership of the community attend regularly. And I don't think it's because CAC is doing something wrong. I think that they played a very important role at a critical moment and that things have happily evolved beyond that now.

WA: What were some of the issues that you were facing when you were on the CAC? I have you as beginning in 1987, but that may not include your going off.

EL: I frankly don't, I know that I visited it. The kinds of issues, by 1987 the visibility of blacks in public office—

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EL: One of the things that I marveled at was that by the time I had left City Hall in 1987, there were situations in which black female police officers were commanding white male police officers and the sense that the world was about to end had evaporated. And now the city has a black female police chief who was I believe enthusiastically supported, or at least supported, by the Fraternal Order of Police because she had come up through the ranks, they knew her. And so that's a small indication of the kind of advance that had been made. Issues that kept recurring and keep recurring involve issues of housing, issues of safety in neighborhoods, to some extent issues of education. They are much more common issues of people who are less advantaged living in a community. Plus I think with the emergence of a large group of Spanish speakers in the community, a kind of reoccurrence of issues of are we going to be able to reach across these boundaries and are we going to be able to minimize the tensions that may develop. I frankly don't know how effective CAC is in terms of black/white/Hispanic relations.

WA: So moving on to the recent bombing trials, I'd like to hear your opinion of those trials, citizen reaction to the trials and what those have meant for Birmingham.

EL: I think I agree with many, many people and I don't think I have an original comment to make on it. But I think it was absolutely critical that those trials be pursued. There was I believe and still is a keen sense, particularly in the black community, that law enforcement just never really did the job that could easily be done. When I first came to Birmingham in 1969 one of the very first things I heard from a guy who had been a stringer for *Time Magazine* was they knew who the

bombers were, and he gave me the names, the same ones who ultimately came into court. So I think that for many people in the community there was a sense that how is it that we live in a society where there is such widespread knowledge that people in our midst did this horrible deed and yet nothing happens to them. So I think part of it was a bringing to closure of the fact that there were people in the community who had done this damage to the community and had never had to pay a price for doing it. I think it also was an indication of the changed orientation of law enforcement and government that even though this was in a way old history and no great accomplishment was going to take place in terms of the lives of many, many citizens, it did represent a long overdue acknowledgment that this community had unfinished business. And it was a way of finishing part of the community's unfinished business.

Then I think also it had a kind of symbolic effect nationally and internationally that here was Birmingham not sweeping the issue under the rug. We had the Institute. We had made that step. Here was yet another step in another part of the community that indicated that we don't wish to wallow in the past and always be going back to the past, but we have got to acknowledge both the past and the problems that it has created and attempt to deal with them honestly, openly, and with integrity. And I think that it was that sense of honesty, openness, and integrity that really kind of helped transform the climate in Birmingham. And I think that when the trials were over there was much more of a sense of community relief rather than blacks feeling one way and whites feeling another. I think this was the sense that some unfinished business had been largely finished.

WA: Do you remember the Chambliss trial in 1977, the first trial? What was the public's reaction to that and what was your reaction to that first trial?

EL: That was a long time ago. First of all, I'd say I don't remember what the public reaction was. I guess I was disappointed and puzzled as to why with all of the information that I had been told existed they weren't able to get a conviction. But that's so long ago. But my own personal, I do recall being both puzzled and disappointed. I don't recall how the community reacted. I think 1977 was a whole lot closer to the period when the community was divided and so my guess is that if you could reconstruct or somehow measure community response it would be a quite divided response in '77, but I think it was a much less divided response. There always will be those in the white community who just reflect that era and, you know, they can go to sensitivity training and all the rest. It's just the passage of time and the end of some lives will ultimately deal with that. But I think in terms of the community as a whole, there was a much more unified community response of relief and accomplishment. It's sort of as though you could take that embarrassing sign off from around your neck saying, "I'm from Birmingham." You know, that you could say, "I'm from Birmingham," and convey in that sense that here's a community that has faced its darkest moments and its toughest issues, even now, and we've done ourselves proud.

WA: Well, we're almost at an hour and I'm feeling bad for your voice. So let me just close with, is there anything that I haven't asked you about that you think you'd like to talk about?

EL: The only other thing that I would say as an important perspective from my point of view, we don't cooperate as a region very well. I think that's the next step that we need to take. I remember when Dick Arrington was elected there were shockwaves in the white business community and people really thought that the foundations of the city had been rocked. And there were some who thought that this was a mark of doom on the future of the city. I have a much greater sense now that people live and work in Birmingham and fully expect that there will be black political leadership for the foreseeable future and that what you do is accept that as the political leadership in the community, aim at quality, and don't aim at racial composition. I really do believe that in the city of Birmingham there is a much more mature acceptance of the fact that black political leadership is going to be spread along the same range of ability or lack of as white political leadership and that our community is served by getting quality leadership rather than looking at matters of race.

The issue I don't think we have crossed, as a broader community, is Birmingham being regarded as the heart of the metropolitan area and accepted as a critical part of the broader metropolitan area. I think there's still a sense that Birmingham is sort of there doing its thing and we read about it and we follow it with amusement perhaps or whatever, but it's not our business if we're not in the city. I think one of the groups, you mentioned Leadership Birmingham; I would also mention Region 20-20. I think they're really trying to establish a way of thinking regionally and getting us. I think that Birmingham has not moved beyond black and white but it has moved well down the road of resolving that or managing that as an issue. I don't

think we've made similar progress in Birmingham and its surrounding jurisdictions working as in common together. So that would be it.

WA: Okay, thank you very much.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

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