TRANSCRIPT: MARTHA JANE PATTON

Interviewee:	Martha Jane Patton
Interviewer:	Kimberly Hill
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KH: This is August 9th, 2006, and I'm Kimberly Hill, talking with Martha Jane Patton in the Legal Aid Society Birmingham office. How are you doing?

MP: I'm doing fine, thanks.

KH: Thank you for having me today.

MP: Oh, thank you for coming on such a hot day.

KH: My pleasure. So you were just telling me about Ruby Sales and an Episcopal priest name Jonathan Daniels, and you were about to tell me about the activism you did in high school.

MP: Yes, the Summer Inter-Religious Project, which was the group that came after Jonathan's martyrdom, was not my first involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, although it had come mostly through the church. As a young person, I had been involved in my church's youth group, which we called at that time EYC, Episcopal Young Churchmen. I grew up going to Camp McDowell, which is the Episcopal church camp here in Alabama. I met a lot of interesting people, including the two youth leaders Bill Young and Peggy Root. She was called Peggy Horn at the time. Anyway, Peggy

introduced me to the United Christian Youth Movement, which was the first interracial group that I ever belonged to.

I remember going to a camp in Tennessee, which was the first time that most of us, in fact all of us in Decatur who were on the trip, had ever been around black people our own age. There we were sharing dorm space together, and it was such an eye-opener. If you can imagine growing up in the South where the only black people that were ever referred to or you ever personally knew were servants of your friends or, you know. It was just incredible to be able to meet each other and get to know each other on a personal basis. Of course we were there to do Bible study, but the interesting part was the dorm at night, when people were looking at how the others fixed their hair and all that sort of thing. It was very interesting. Being young people, there were a lot of open and honest questions and things said, and so it was such—.

KH: What kind of questions did you ask each other?

MP: Oh, gosh, like "why do you put that on your hair?" And "you put your hair in those rollers every night?" they would ask us, and we did back then. So it was fascinating, just those kinds of things that only young girls would be concerned about. But there was a deeper aspect to it in that we were doing Bible study, and we were specifically thinking about racial reconciliation, even in the early 1960s when this was happening. So I started growing a different attitude from my family and friends, and then of course there were some very precipitous events, in particular President Kennedy's assassination in 1963. At the time, I was the editor of the school newspaper, and I printed an editorial. I think the head line was "How Can Any Cheer at Death," because there were people that were cheering in my high school when they heard that President

Kennedy had been killed, if you can believe it.

KH: Did you know why they were?

MP: Well, they saw him as a liberal and somebody that was promoting "race mixing." When you look back at history, he certainly wasn't any radical in that respect, but he was seen that way. At the time, I think Goldwater was a popular senator and was making a challenge for the presidency. So yes, then you also had to consider that north Alabama was the birthplace of the KKK. And while I never personally saw a Klan rally, I was certainly aware that they were happening. It was no secret in Decatur. So with this different attitude, and I was not the only one—. I had other friends in different denominations and youth activities. We decided we were from the Decatur chapter of the United Christian Youth Movement, and we would have interracial meetings at each others' churches. Well, my church wasn't too keen on that, but the Methodists were OK. They let us have meetings in their church basement.

Well, that was scandalous enough, but the crowning blow was when several of us decided, kind of on the spur of the moment, that we were going to go picket George Wallace at Pryor Field, which is a little airstrip north of Decatur. At the time, there was no airport. That was the closest thing to an airport we had. We went out there in the evening and were present when he landed. We made our hand-made posters to stand there and hold, and we formed our little picket lines so he could come down and read all of our posters.

KH: How many of you were doing this?

MP: I think there were seven or eight of us. I remember what my pastor said: "George Wallace doesn't hate Negroes. He thinks everyone should own one."

KH: Ooh.

MP: Right. They were not nice signs. They were in your face messages, OK? Well, he walked down and stood right in front of me and looked me up and down, and had that kind of sneering look that he used to wear back then. He turned around and remarked to one of the state troopers, "See, I told you they were beatniks. She's wearing tennis shoes." Wearing tennis shoes was kind of a sign that you were a liberal or something, I guess, to him.

KH: Or that you liked comfortable feet. [Laughter]

MP: Yeah. So anyway, a little item about this period in *TheDecatur Daily* the next morning. Barrett Shelton was the editor of the paper up there, and he's been a fearless publisher for a long time. So he put it in the newspaper, not a big article, just a little one. Suddenly, all of us, who were the honor students at our high school, and this is just weeks before our graduation, were called down to the principal's office. I don't recall everything that was said, but it was clear that we had embarrassed our city and our high school by being the first people who had ever picketed George Wallace in his home state. OK.

KH: That's actually rather special, being the first people in Alabama.

MP: Right. Now I take great pride in that, that I was one of several people who picketed him, the first people to picket him in his home state. Somebody had to be the first. So that was kind of where I was in high school. At the time, of course, you know what was happening in Birmingham in 1963, the Sixteenth Street church bombing. On occasion I would come down here with people, and we would meet other young people in church basements. They were planning sit-ins, but those were mostly during the week.

We had to be back at Decatur and be in school, so we weren't really able to participate in the sit-ins. But we were aware of them and in on some planning meetings. My parents never knew any of this. They would not have approved. Of course, they did find out about the picket line, because that was pretty public knowledge.

KH: How did you find a way to do all this planning and travel without letting them find out?

MP: Well, I traveled with the young people, and that's when we would do it. We'd come down for a church conference that would last over the weekend, and then several of us would get in somebody's car and we'd go to a movie. We'd just cut out on the church meeting for a little while. I think our youth leaders knew what we were up to. They didn't encourage it or condone it, but they didn't stop it. I think they probably in their own mind were very glad that we were doing it. And of course they were doing what they could as adults, despite the fact that at the time, our Episcopal bishop was pretty recalcitrant on race issues.

He was one of the ones that was sent Martin Luther King's letter from the Birmingham jail. He was one of the ones that had asked Dr. King not to continue his demonstrations in Birmingham, and so he was one of the recipients of the letter. Peggy Horn worked in the diocese in the same office with that bishop, so there's only so out front you could be. But there was a lot of clandestine things like that going on with young people, and it was young people. It was young people in Birmingham that were the movement. It was young people everywhere. We're now the baby boomers who are in our sixties now.

KH: Well, of the Episcopal people who were involved, did they ever give any

theological or spiritual reasons why they felt compelled to join in?

MP: No, they just thought—. I think by the time Dr. King was writing all these local ministers and bishops, the theological aspects of the movement were clear. But there was the "let's take it slow, let's take baby steps, let's not take this to the streets, let's have calm and reasoned meetings with the powers that be." And, of course, those kinds of meetings had never resulted in any change. It was only the power of the press that really brought change to bear in the movement, and the outrage of people in other parts of the country and internationally. In 1963, I remember going on a trip with young people to Coventry, England. I don't know if you know about Coventry, but—.

KH: No, I don't

MP: There's a large English cathedral there that was destroyed by German bombings in the early forties, so there was just a skeletal remains of the cathedral. But someone had taken charred beams and placed them and made a rudimentary cross and written with ashes below, "Father forgive". Those words and that whole attitude became the impetus for building a modern cathedral right next to the ruins in ashes which still stands. So there was instituted—. And again, Peggy Horn, another person who was instrumental in getting a group of young people together to go in the summer time for service and study. We served as guides and tour guides in the cathedral and worked in the bookstore and different things. We met with other young people from all over the world who came to do summer work, and discussed Gandhi and reconciliation issues, and it was very powerful learning for somebody who was only—. I think I was seventeen at the time. And why did I bring this up? Oh, because of the international aspect. For the first time, I saw my own country and my own state and city as an international person

would see it. They were outraged, and it was just a totally different reaction than what I got daily from the people I lived with, my family and friends and classmates. So that was a tremendous influence.

KH: What were your perceptions of poverty as you were growing up in Decatur?

MP: I'm ashamed to even talk about it, but then again, I think each of us carries our own attitudes into adulthood from our childhood. I'm afraid it was "well, these are people who have brought this on themselves."

KH: Did you know many poor people?

MP: No. My parents were not wealthy, but it was at the time considered a measure of middle class success to have a housekeeper. My mother never worked outside the home, but we had a housekeeper, a lady came and did washing and ironing and cleaning. I knew her, and when we drove her home, I saw her children. I wasn't allowed to get out and play, but I saw where she lived and I saw her children playing. That's about as far as it went. Never anybody—. That weekend at Tennessee at the ECYM was my first exposure ever aside from—. And that was very typical. That exposure came earlier for me than it did for the vast majority of people in Alabama.

KH: We don't have to skip to college yet if you don't want to, but you were in college here from sixty-four to sixty-eight?

MP: I was. And boy, I just thought that would be so exciting to be in Birmingham. But another part of me was a little concerned because here I was, I'd already gotten in trouble in high school, and boy, if I went down to Birmingham, I was going to get in some big trouble. My parents had signed this—. Well, actually it was what they didn't sign. The college was very protective of its young women at the time.

In 1964, Birmingham Southern did not have the giant fence around it that it has now. That only happened after a young student was killed somewhat later that they built the whole -- walled it in, and created the gated campus that it is now. At the time, it was fairly wide open. But the rules were you weren't supposed to go off campus unless you had your parents' permission in writing, and my parents would not give that. So I was virtually a prisoner on the campus. I think by then they knew what I would be doing, and there was a lot of interaction between the students at Southern and the students at Miles, because the Miles was close by. I was aware of that, and talking to those students, the guys mostly who were allowed to go off campus, there were no such rules for them.

But I will never forget in '65, sitting in the dorm room with my good friend Sandra and watching the Selma Montgomery march on my dorm mother's TV and saying, "Oh, I wish I was there. Oh, I'd give anything to be there." And my dorm mother saying, "What in the world would you want to be down there in all that for?" And I'd say, "Oh, why wouldn't my mother let me go. I would be there in a New York second". So they pretty much curbed my activities, and really Birmingham Southern was hardly integrated at that time. I did know, I think, the first two or three black students that were on campus, and I talked to them because they were interested. But it was a hard school, and you had to spend most of your time studying, truth be known. So I did immerse myself in that and then campus life end. I ended up writing things for the newspaper and going on to be editor of the yearbook.

Somehow journalism was calling me, I thought at the time, and I had gone there on a scholarship because of a short story I had written, which was really about the race issue. At the time in high school, a high school English teacher had submitted it to the

National Council of Teachers of English, and I had ended up getting this full scholarship to Birmingham Southern because of it. It was a dinky little story at the time, but it seemed way out there. I guess the subject matter was appealing to the judges. I ended up getting an English major and not going on into journalism, and when I look back, I think, "OK, well, there was the second movement had not hit me yet." The women's movement had—. Despite all my civil rights interest, I still had very traditional notions about what was going to happen in my life, and it was pretty much what was happening with all the women around me. We were going to have our degrees and maybe work a few years, and then we'd get married and have children. [Laughter] So I was not career-minded, really, with my English degree, and I didn't feel called to teach. So I graduated with, as they would think of it now, this useless degree.

Fortunately, it occurred to me in my senior year that I needed some marketable skills, so I'd taken typing and shorthand. I went to work in a law office downtown and worked there for years before—. It was fascinating to be around lawyers and all that, but I didn't think of myself going to law school at the time at all. This was just a job until I could find somebody and get married. [Laughter] So I'm afraid I was very un-emancipated myself and enjoying my independence, too, because here I was, big girl in Birmingham, in my own apartment, away from my little provincial life in Decatur. You're talking 1968 to seventy-one here. There was a lot going on. It was a fun time to be a young person and especially living in an apartment on the south side. It was all peace and love, and I spent my spare time doing things like listening to music with friends and going to concerts and hanging out in the park and throwing Frisbee. But I still had that thing that my friends didn't have inside, and I wanted to make a difference.

I just thought—. I dated a black medical student for a while, and he and I would talk about what was going on, but we couldn't really go out anywhere in Birmingham, even then. We'd have to go to Atlanta, and then people would look at us like "ohhhhhh." That was still very unusual even in '69 and '70.

KH: Is that because you knew that there were still segregation laws that would get you in like legal trouble for going out, or you're worried about people saying things?

MP: Oh, he was more concerned about people saying things than I was. I was this young hippie chick, free spirit. I was going to do my own thing, so it didn't bother me at all. But his family lived here, and they were very nice people. I'm sure if they'd known about me, they would not have approved. We finally decided that the way things were, it just wasn't possible for us to have a relationship. Then of course he immersed himself in med school as he should have. But the whole time I felt restless and read political things. There was a lot of politics going around, too. Then of course the war in Vietnam became a big issue at that time, too.

Finally, I thought, "I've got to make a difference." So I applied for a job with the literacy council, but somebody over there knew that the Selma project was looking for somebody who could run an office. Well, here I was with all this typing and shorthand and office administrative skill, so I went to them and worked and joined the Selma project. That was '71 to '74. Our office, despite the name, was not in Selma. It was in Tuscaloosa. But our area of work was basically the black belt area, which of course is not named 'black belt' for racial reasons, but because of the soil. I spent three or four years traveling in that area, working with community groups that had names like the Lowndes County Civic Improvement Association. Every county had its own

improvement association, and mostly they were about economic justice. We helped people get SBA grants, which provided what we called technical assistance. But of course we were part of the movement and what people were doing in those counties. We helped with the technical aspects of setting up the Freedom Quilting Bee in Wilcox County, and we were very close to people in Wilcox County and Gee's Bend. I used to go down and spend weekends there and stay there in their houses.

KH: That's where they made those world famous quilts.

MP: That's right.

KH: Frances Walter probably doesn't get enough credit, but he discovered them when he was driving around in there in that area and meeting people. He saw these incredible quilts hanging on the line. These were women just working out of their homes. There was no jobs. There was no way to get across the river at Camden. You had to drive all the way around about forty miles or so to even get over to Camden, which was the county seat, just a little country town. But that was where all the commerce and stores were. Just for survival, these women had been making these quilts for, I guess, several decades, and I don't know if you've ever seen them.

KH: Just pictures.

MP: Well, the pictures cannot do justice. Right now the exhibit is in San Francisco, but if it ever comes your way, if you ever have a chance to go, you need to go see that. Those women were just incredibly powerful influences on me. They were living in poverty, but it was the kind of exuberant happiness that Jonathan Daniels had picked up from them. That's where it came from in him, because he had been living among these people. I'm not talking about "oh the happy black people living in the—."

I'm not talking about that stereotype. I'm talking about a real joy of living that deeply affected me in realizing that material things don't really have anything to do with happiness. It's your relationships and your spiritual self that makes a difference.

KH: Well, if somebody had asked you to describe what kind of city Birmingham was in that time when you were in college, and even when you were in Tuscaloosa, what would you have said?

MP: Dirty. It was physically dirty to live in the western part of Birmingham. Somebody said it was to brave the equivalent of smoking three packs of cigarettes a day, just to breathe the air. There was so much particular matter in the air, the streets, the curbs, the sidewalks. Everything just had a layer of dirt. Downtown was physically dirty. And of course that was the iron and steel industry, which was key then. All the people who had left rural Alabama and come to work at the turn of the century were all a part of that, of that movement of coming to the city and being a part of that industry. But it was dirty.

KH: I guess it didn't take very long after the plants closing for that to go away.

MP: Well, it's improved. We don't have the best air, but that has to do with geography more than anything else. We're in a ridge and valley area. So Birmingham, being in the bottom, here where we're sitting today, of Jones Valley, forms kind of a bowl effect. So any kind of air pollutants, especially in the summer, just gather and hover, so that we don't have the best air here. But it's not the dirty particular matter that you breathed every day. When you blew your nose, it was black.

KH: You could see it.

MP: Yeah. Oh, yeah, it was dirty.

KH: What accomplishments would you say that the local civil rights caused by the end of the sixties?

MP: Well, I think the Jim Crow laws were gone. The public accommodations, transportation, all those barriers were down. School desegregation had happened. The *de jure* part, the segregation, was gone.

KH: Were there specific things that you hoped you could change if you started getting more involved?

MP: Oh, I longed for more interaction, more sense of community. It troubled me that people were moving out to the suburbs so that they could still maintain those segregated lifestyles. It troubled me that city government was no longer able or willing to support public facilities like our parks and transportation and all the things that worked so well before. When they declared that the public parks were desegregated, Birmingham shut them down rather than integrate them. That was really the last money that they spent on parks until the last decade or so. So most of our beautiful parks went crumbling, and unnoticed and unused.

KH: I noticed that when I went to this one downtown. I was looking at the statues, how they're really in disrepair.

MP: Yeah. It's sad. There is some change in the air, and there are people who have stayed in the city and have been very committed to being here and being a part of change in Birmingham. I would count myself among those, because I still live in the city limits with my family, and very intentionally so. There are many other people like myself, but it's not been easy for us. I know we had a group of white families that went through the school system, K-12, and by the time we hit middle school, our kids were the

only ones there. So they were in the vast minority, and it was difficult. The girls didn't feel like there were people they could date. There was still a lot of hostility, but of course they were on the minority side then. My son and his friends would get beat up. Here I named my oldest son Jonathan, you can guess why, and he's a sixth and seventh grader and I'm trying to give him lessons in nonviolent action and he's getting beat up. [Laughter] It hasn't been easy, but we graduated from Ramsey High School. I say we; I feel like I was very involved in PTA and everything all the way through. But there are fewer and fewer people who are willing to do as our group did. Now, unfortunately, Birmingham schools have gotten so bad, even the black families are moving out of Birmingham. There was a big article in Sunday's paper about that. You've kind of worry what's going to happen in the vacuum.

KH: The tax base decreased?

MP: Oh, it has. It absolutely has.

KH: The schools won't get any better.

MP: Oh, no. It's all literally falling in. It's imploding, except that there are people like my son and kids his age who grew up in our households who don't want to leave. They're moving into lofts downtown. I have a lot of faith and hope in that generation.

KH: How do your children feel about their school experience now?

MP: They never liked school. I'll be honest with you. Neither of my sons, and they were anxious to get out of school and away from school. I think as young adults now, they have some regrets that probably a lot of kids that didn't do all that well in school would have, like "wow, I wish I could have studied a little harder." One of

Jonathan's best friends made a perfect score on her SAT, so he realizes a good education was there and that he didn't avail himself of it. The school was a battleground for him. I had friends that "why are you doing this to your child? Isn't his education important to you?" So I think, "Well, should I have done that?"

Sometimes I have doubts myself, but my kids don't have those prejudices that we had. They just don't. They freely interact with people of all races. They just have no problems. Their tastes in music and fashion and everything are all so eclectic, and it's a source of joy for me, even though they're not going to the best colleges and things. They're in college; they get their grades. It's the local schools; that's all right. That's all right. I feel like they're better equipped to deal with life in some ways than some of their friends whose parents decided, "no, I'm putting you in private school" or "we're moving to west Davie" or whatever. So overall, while I can get a little defensive about it, I'm still glad we did what we did.

KH: Let's turn to a little more about your legal work.

MP: OK.

KH: So what led to you eventually deciding to go to law school?

MP: It was the women's movement.

KH: OK.

MP: While I was working with the Selma project, the women who worked there and the wives of the men who worked there were all part of a community. It all hit us about the same time. I think we were the first conscious-raising group in Tuscaloosa. And it was like, wait a minute here. How come we're doing all this dead end stuff and we're in supportive roles in our relationships, etc, etc. It was there. Well, I'm going to

tell some stuff now. [Laughter] But I had a crush on one of the lawyers at the Selma project, and we went out a couple of times. Then one of the foundation people came down for her annual visit. A beautiful woman named Marjorie worked for the foundation in New York, and she was a Harvard-educated lawyer. She came down for her annual visit to see what we were doing with their money and travel around the black belt with us and meet people. Then we had a dinner at somebody's house at night. Marjorie just held court. She was so interesting, she was so articulate, and the men were just at her feet, these lawyers that worked with the Selma project. Ralph was one of them. So he ended up after this dinner going out to have a beer or something with her. I was so jealous. Anyway, I thought, "I have nothing to say. She is gorgeous and smart, and here I am; I feel so inferior to her."

So along about that time, we're in this conscious-raising group, and we're all talking about how there's no need for us to be inferior. We can do these things, too. Then I got to know Marjorie a little bit better, and I took her course in women's studies. This is not for college credit or anything, just to take it, and what an eye-opener. All these principles that I'd been applying to my civil rights racial thinking, it was like the light bulb came on, and especially one day when she said, "You know, you're smart. Have you considered going to law school?" And here I am, I've worked in a law office before, there are male lawyers in my extended family. Had it ever occurred to me to go to law school? No. Until that moment when she said, "Have you ever thought about going to law school?" Wow.

Kh: Then you said, "Now that you mention it . . ."

MP: My friends are helping me think through this. So I take the LSAT and I did

pretty well. Not as well as I thought I should, but then I'd been out of school for seven years. So I thought, "I'm going to study for a little bit. I'm going to take this again. I think I can improve my score." So I did and I improved my score greatly, and I applied and I got in Cumberland here in Birmingham. That's how I ended up in law school. Plus the notion that I could do the things for other people like the lawyers for the Selma project were doing for people. That was just incredible that I didn't have to be in a support role. *I* could do that. Marjorie just became a dear friend, no longer the object of my envy. I could be her equal. [Laughter]

KH: You could make other people her equal.

MP: That was an incredible time in my life, kind of putting all this together. So I ended up in law school. Right before I'd gone to law school, though, I'd had this kind of interim job. Frances Walter had finally after all these years left the Selma project, and they had passed me over for the directorship and hired this guy from out of state, which was unthinkable to me at the time. It was one of the things we took pride in, that we were not outside agitators. We were all Alabamians, so they couldn't say that about us. Now they were bringing in this Northeasterner, so I just couldn't take that. I got myself a new job, knowing that I was on my way to law school. It was just for a year, working under a grant writing a study of the juvenile justice systems of ten west Alabama counties. So I wrote that study up.

In the process, I had met Professor Annette Dodd, who taught juvenile justice courses at Cumberland. She had kind of recruited me for Cumberland, said, "When you get ready to send in your application, don't send it to the admissions office. Send it to me". Then after I had sent it in, about two days later I got my admissions letter. So I

know she hand-walked that down to the dean and said, "I want her here." So she helped me, and I appreciated that. Then kind of because of her, I developed an interest in juvenile justice, and ended up working out at the state girls' detention facility out at Chalkville here as an ombudsman. So I really developed that interest before law school and kept it during law school. And now of course the Legal Aid Society, most of what we do is represent kids.

KH: I didn't know that. I was going to ask.

MP: Yeah. The Legal Aid movement is an old one in the country. We're not connected to each other, though, the way Legal Services is. In many cities—for example, Atlanta—the Legal Aid Society applies for and administers through a Legal Services grant. But here in Alabama, those are bifurcated. So our Legal Aid Society is sponsored by the Birmingham bar, and we're local, whereas Legal Services is the federally funded group that operates statewide.

KH: What are the special legal needs of youth, especially in this area?

MP: Well, we do two kinds of cases. We do delinquency defense. Those are of course the children that are arrested for what would be a crime if they were an adult. Although that line is getting so blurred now, kids younger and younger are being treated like criminals. It is not the juvenile court that was envisioned at the turn of the century, where the idea was to pick young people up and help them turn their lives around and become a success. Unfortunately, those principles have been lost, in my opinion, and they're treated like young criminals. Then, of course, an even larger part of our work is being guardians ad litem for abused and neglected children, and unfortunately that's growing. We have thirteen lawyers on the staff who just represent children, four who

represent adults.

KH: Wow.

MP: The adults are—. That's actual criminal defense, where they're serving as their lawyers.

KH: Is it usual for a Legal Aid Society to have to concentrate on youth issues?

MP: It is unusual, and it's peculiar to Birmingham. It's sort of tied into the reasons that the Legal Aid Society and Legal Services were bifurcated. The Legal Services corporation was, I think, the last stroke of Nixon's pen before he left office, and it was designed to provide representation for people in civil matters. The law already required appointed attorneys in criminal cases up to a certain level, but there was nobody helping people with landlord-tenant problems, consumer debt, all kinds of people problems that poor folks can't afford to pay lawyers to help them with. But they obviously are in dire circumstances and need this kind of help. So Legal Services was formed, and in most instances the Legal Aid Societies all over the country rose up and said, "Oh, yes, we'll apply for administrative federal grants. We'll start doing—." Well, actually, they already were doing the civil work. We were in Birmingham, supported by the bar.

Anyway, with federal money comes federal strings, and I've never gotten anything in writing about any of this. This all hearsay, but I've talked to enough people who were around in 1975 and the latter part of the seventies to know that it was a controversial issue in Birmingham, especially when at the beginning, the Legal Services group started filing law suits, class actions, that sort of things. Well, you're talking about the people that give to a United Way. You're talking about your big philanthropy folks in Birmingham, and now their companies are being sued by this group. So there was a

separation, and the Birmingham bar decided Legal Aid is going to do this. Y'all are going to administer the federal money, and we'll help incorporate you. Then Legal Services money was cut nationally at some point, and there were some pretty tough restrictions placed on the kinds of cases that they could handle. They could no longer do these false class action cases and bring in any fee-producing work. And now, probably if the issue were on the table today, we would not be bifurcated. But at this point, it's so historically ingrained that we'll probably always be two groups here.

KH: OK. Have you had much interaction with local politics in your work?

MP: Yes, collaterally mostly. I've only been a candidate two or three times. I ran for a judicial position in 1988, and most years where there's a presidential election going on, I run as a delegate to the convention. But I am on the Democratic executive committee for the county, and I'm a member of what they call the Downtown Democrats.

KH: Downtown Democrats, I like that. Did you ever work with the Arrington administration?

MP: Not directly. I supported him. I was very excited that he was elected, and I think I was one of only a few white people that were standing in the parliament house for his celebration party. That was very exciting, yeah. I supported him all through his term in office. Toward the end was right after I had come on with Legal Aid, and I had been in private practice for twenty years. When I came on with Legal Aid, the organization was struggling to redo its contract with the city of Birmingham to represent people in the municipal court. I thought, "Well, I know Dick Arrington. If y'all hire me, I can straighten this out.". Unfortunately, he went out of office without our straightening it out. I never really quite understood that, because I felt like I'd been a loyal supporter. But I

think his loyalties were stronger in another direction, regrettably. So that was sad.

KH: What would be the other option to not pay or represent people in municipal court?

MP: Well, I'm going to be talking again now. I don't know what you're going to do with all this. [Laughter]

KH: It'll go in the library, but if you mention a name or something that you don't want on there, we can work it out.

MP: Well, we're all still licking our wounds from this, because it was not that long ago. At the time, the presiding municipal judge, who's the daughter of his best friend, and she was appointing Congressman Hilliard's daughter to do defense work in her personal courtroom, while our lawyers sat there and did nothing all day. She would not respond to me, answer my letters or phone calls or anything like that, to try to discuss the contract renewal. So I appealed to Mayor Arrington, and then I got the cold shoulder there, too. It was only when he went out of office that we were able to resolve things.

KH: Sounds like it's just a manner of cronyism then?

MP: I'm afraid so.

KH: Let's talk some about your solo practice and especially the civil litigation and employment discrimination. I've talked with Bob Wiggins before about the employment discrimination cases that he's handled. How did most of the cases you handled originate?

MP: OK. There were only a handful of us, three or four of us in Birmingham that we would take those cases on.

KH: I didn't know that.

MP: This was before the laws were changed. Now you have right to a jury trial. You have a right to collect attorneys' fees if you win. There are all these changes in the law that have made them more attractive to lawyers, but at the time, you didn't get paid. [Laughter] First of all, you were trying your case in front of a judge only, and if you prevailed you might or might not get paid, depending on what kind of contract you had with your client. If it was all back wages, then you felt bad about taking a percentage of somebody's pay. But I rushed in where angels feared to tread. [Laughter] I handled a few of those, got burned probably more than I won, but I had some success on appeals.

KH: What companies were you going against?

MP: Well, boy. The biggest and longest one was Revere Copper and Brass Company. I represented—. I think there were eleven plaintiffs who were the first women who had ever worked in their plant up in Scottsboro. This case went on forever and ever and ever. In the end, we did manage to get a fairly decent settlement, but they were a fearsome group of women. They were the first women that ever worked in that plant, and they put up with a lot. I sued Health South. Let's see. I sued a local tire company that I think has gone out of business, UAB.

KH: On behalf of the employees' union?

MP: No, these were all individual plaintiffs, except for the Scottboro group. Boy, it's hard to remember all this because it was a long time ago. I've been practicing law for thirty years now. I've got old files in the file boxes in the basement here, but it's really been a while since I thought about some of those cases. Then as I said, once the law change, there were firms who concentrated in those areas, and they developed quite a reputation. At the time, I was so low, or there was a period of time that I was in a very

small firm, and it's difficult to finance these cases as they go along. The defense on the other side has a lot of money. They schedule every deposition in the world. You could easily drop fifteen or twenty thousand of your own money into a case, with no guarantee that you were going to prevail or get that back. Your plaintiffs are out of work; they can't pay for it. I became a lot more careful about the cases I took. Then of course because I wasn't taking as many and not concentrating only in that field—. Eventually that's the way law practice has gone now. It's highly specialized.

KH: I was asking because I remember Mr. Wiggins saying how legally savvy his plaintiffs were, that they did all the research. They would have regular meetings, even meetings inside Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, and discuss every different aspect of the case, even though they weren't college-educated people.

MP: That's true, I think even of the individuals. Now he has represented more groups in class action kinds of cases than I have, but even individuals would be very well prepared.

KH: Yeah.

MP: Except for this one lady. This was a sad case. [Laughter] Oh, she was claiming that her employer had put her into a hostile work environment, and she was very convincing. I didn't actually take on the case. At the time, I was in a small firm, and one of the partners had taken on the case. He ended up getting me to prepare it. I'll never forget, one of her claims was that she had gone to a business holiday gathering, and that that there were people there in black face. It was a Halloween thing, but she was so offended by this. Throughout the litigation, the other side was saying, "No, no, she's mistaken about that." I thought, "How could anybody be mistaken about that?" Then in

trial, we were ambushed with their photograph of these two people in their costumes for the party, and they're dogs. They were dressed as dogs. They had dog ears and everything. Yes, they had painted their skin dark, but they were dogs. [Laughter] And so we did not prevail in that case. You have faith in your clients sometimes when it's misplaced. [Laughter]

KH: I guess what concerned her most was that they had painted their face.

MP: Yeah, but she didn't check it out enough to go over and actually confront them and ask, which maybe that's too much to ask of somebody. If you see somebody across the room and it looks offensive, I might hang over on my side of the room, too. But unfortunately, that was not the only hole in their stories. We went down on that one.

KH: What have been the highlights of your law practice over the years?

MP: Wow. So many, so many. I don't think they have come particularly in the civil rights arena. I've had more high points in my work representing people in juvenile court, because there really have been opportunities to turn children's lives around. It's been a great privilege to be a part of that, and it happens every day with our lawyers. People have no idea how important this work is. When I think about somebody like Ruby Sales, for example, and how just some event and some associations of people have changed her life, I realize that power of a suggestion that "you're smart, why don't you go to law school?" People just don't even appreciate how much something like that, some little thing, can mean to a young person. You probably have your stories, too, though.

KH: People encouraging me?

MP: Yes.

KH: I have many.

MP: Well, I certainly have, too, and it's great to be able to pass it on.

KH: Yeah.

MP: Yeah.

KH: Can you tell me about the Foundation for Women's Health?

MP: Well, that was an interesting chapter. Looking back on it, it was more corporately driven that I could see at the time. Brookwood Hospital was competing against other local hospitals for the maternal and child health business, and so it funded the initial operations and creation of the Foundation for Women's Health. It was a wonderful group of women that I admire and respect, but sometimes I look back on it and think, "Well, we kind of allowed ourselves to be used."

KH: What did you hope to accomplish?

MP: Well, we hoped to bring a lot of focus and change in the women's health movement. I can't say that we were totally unsuccessful, because as a part of that, I did get on the governor's task force on infant mortality. I was the only consumer member. Everybody else was in the health care profession. There were many examples of things like that that I and the other women in the foundation did. Plus we learned a lot of self-help things, one of which has saved my life later. Breast self-exam. Back in 2003, I found a lump in my breast, and it was breast cancer. I did have surgery and am being treated for this kind of long-term. So I can't say that I got nothing out of the Foundation for Women's Health. I got my life from it. But I do think that it died a natural death after Brookwood got its certificate of need. Of course Brookwood does now probably enjoy one of the most prominent roles in maternal health care in the city now as a result

of that.

KH: Let's talk about how you got involved with Alabama Arise.

MP: Alabama Arise?

KH: Yes.

MP: What a great organization. I cannot remember how I first heard about it, but I was very excited that my own church wanted to participate. I'm the liaison for our church with the group overall, and it just fits right into every advocacy organization I've ever been involved with. It's out there on the front lines, working in the legislature, and educating people about what's happening in government. Wonderful organization.

KH: I talked with Angie Wright and Scott Douglas about it.

MP: Oh, yes. We had some big victories this year in the legislature. Got some changes in the landlord-tenant laws for the first time, and got the floor of the tax obligation level raised from four thousand something to twelve thousand, so that people in that income bracket don't have to pay taxes till they get up to the twelve thousand mark now—state income taxes, that is. Very significant group, great warriors.

KH: Has working on poverty at a state level had any impact on how you view local poverty?

MP: Oh, it's all enmeshed. These are our clients. They're the adults that we represent. Unlike my childhood attitude about poverty, I no longer blame these people for their own poverty. I see how economic circumstances and their own backgrounds have created this for them, and want to do everything I possibly can to encourage people and groups to come up out of it. If I can turn that light bulb on for anybody the way it has been turned on for me, I certainly intend to continue doing that.

KH: Your church helped you get involved with Alabama Arise.

MP: Yes.

KH: Have you noticed a drastic change in church people's attitudes toward civil rights, poverty issues?

MP: Over the years, it's like night and day. Oh, yes. In my denomination, it's been a huge change. I think the Episcopal Church, both nationally and locally, is very focused on issues around poverty, from a personal way to a global way. I know our denomination is supporting the millennium development goals. We also have a soup kitchen that feeds a hot meal every single day and holidays. I would not say that we have arrived at true community, but it's now not uncommon for the people who are there to get a meal to be mixing and mingling with church members at coffee hour afterwards, helping themselves to the goodies, having a cup of coffee, conversing. We have people just come in off the street, and they're welcomed. Some who become members who look to the community to help them move or get a job, or if they've been in the hospital, take food to them. I'm very privileged to have a wonderful church community.

KH: Which church is it?

MP: Saint Andrews Episcopal. It's on the south side here. One of the major denominations that did not move to the suburbs in the sixties, although it was tempting, I'm sure. But it was real intentional; they were going to stay and be a part of the community and the neighborhood, and we have. So here we are. I'm sure there are people who self-eliminate themselves once they realize where we are and what they're up to over there. They go, "Oh, I don't think I want to drink from the same communion cup with that person." But they leave. [Laughter] And that's OK.

KH: Yeah, I've met with the head mistress at Church of the Advocate.

MP: No, no.

KH: Church of the Advent, and with the teacher over at the Catholic church, the Catholics' high school now. I forgot its name.

MP: Holy Family. Our Lady, Our Lady of Sorrow.

KH: It's a shame I don't remember what it is, but they've also told me how staying within the city limits has kind of changed the vision of their church or school. But they have reason to challenge themselves to become a better place, they believe. Definitely a more integrated place.

MP: Yes.

KH: Of all the organizations that you've been involved in, do you feel that you've made more progress in some than in others?

MP: [Laughter]

KH: I know it's a big question.

MP: Yes, yes. Sometimes it's more of a qualitative issue than quantitative. I think about Friends of Avondale Park, for example. Avondale Park had been neglected, as all the other parks had been, since the 1960s. Most of the structures there were WPA, fields, stone buildings, and that sort of thing, and just crumbling and fell out of use in the 1970s. That particular park kind of became a drug haven. It was beautiful, thirty-seven acres, fish pond in the middle of it, a nice hill with a gorgeous building at the top that we called The Villa. But it was vandalized terribly, all the windows broken and stuff written all over the walls. If you look down, you might not like what you saw on the ground. So one year, our PTA over at Avondale School was talking about Spring in the Park. It was

an annual event for the school children, and the neighborhood participated in it. I said, "Well, how did it ever get the name 'Spring in the Park' if it happens here at school?" They said, "Oh, it used to be over at the park."

KH: Until people stopped using it.

MP: I said, "Why did they stop doing that?" "Well, it's because nobody wants to go there anymore." I said, "So yeah, I think I kind of understand why, but that's a shame, because it's beautiful over there. We need to do something." So there was a brand new park board director here, Melvin Miller, moved here from Houston. So I got together a couple of other people from our PTA committee school group. We over and met with him, and we said, "We want that park cleaned up, and we're here to help." He said, "Well, you can form your own group. Out in Houston, there were groups of what they call friends of some park that were forming. You'd have to incorporate and all this kind of stuff, and I know that's it's expensive. I thought, "No, not too expensive. I'm a lawyer; I can do that."

So I incorporated us and served as the first president for about seven or eight years. We managed to get a lot of focus in the park and helped to pass a bond issue that Mayor Arrington was proposing that would go toward park improvements. We got some of that money and did a master plan and completely cleaned it up and got them to put in a new playground and new landscaping and start tending the rose garden again and growing the roses. Oh, it's just beautiful. We're so proud. Then it's taken another ten years to get them to renovate The Villa, but it just opened a couple months ago. It's now available for rental and use by the community, and it's just a gem. The crown of Birmingham, it's so beautiful up there. People haven't quite yet discovered it, but it's

kind of hidden in the trees.

KH: I'll go look for it.

MP: But I think, there it is; it's bordered by a racially mixed neighborhood, and now these people are coming together there. My kids played Little League there with their school friends, and there's concerts and things and family reunions. People are using that park again, where they go take walks around the pond and look at the ducks or sit there and look at the stars at night. And that is just—. I can't tell you how much satisfaction that gives me. It's like the phoenix rising, because that place was just absolutely horrible, and now it's a well-used park again. The city has an investment in it, because it's so nice they're actually taking care of it again. So that's an organization that I felt I got a lot of personal satisfaction from. I'm sure there are others.

I loved little things like the radio reading thing. I did that for a number of years, reading to blind people. They have a little side band over on our public radio station. One day I went, "I read the paper every day. I'm a newspaper junkie, and I like reading aloud." I'd always loved reading stories to my children, so I thought they were too big to be read to anymore. So I thought, "Well, I'll just go there and read the newspaper on the air." I did that for several years. That gave me a lot of satisfaction.

KH: It's a good project.

MP: Yeah. I don't know; I'm the kind of person, if I join an organization, somehow or another, I end up being the president. I don't know how that happens, but it's difficult for me to go into something that I'm not gung-ho about. I guess people see my energy and enthusiasm, and they like to jump on that. [Laughter] I tend to end up heading things up, and so I have to be kind of careful what I join these days. I really end

up doing a lot of work, and it takes up a lot of my time.

KH: Do you ever feel like you over-extend yourself?

MP: [Laughter] I just have to laugh. Most of the time, I feel like I'm doing really well to get from here to there with the right piece of paper in my hand. My secretary Marilyn is just a big help for helping me stay organized. It's not that I'm so disorganized; I just don't have time to get organized. You see my desk and my surroundings here. It's bedlam. I do real well to keep a lid on all that, and some days when something breaks down unexpectedly, it all comes tumbling down. [Laughter] I know when my children were little and I was trying to practice law, it was such a struggle. If somebody got sick, I had to be at home. I couldn't go to school, and I had a trial going. Fortunately, I'm married to a wonderful man who had enough seniority at Bell South that he could take days off. He's been a great dad and a great husband for me, for somebody like me. He's as grounded as I am flighty. [Laughter]

KH: Looking back, would you describe yourself as a civil rights activist?

MP: Sure. Absolutely. You bet, and proud of it.

KH: Then how would you define one?

MP: How would I define one? Oh, somebody who understands the issues and wants to do something about it and does something, within his or her power.

KH: That's a good definition. I like that. Would you say many of your colleagues here in Birmingham would describe themselves that way?

MP: Quite a few. We tend to group ourselves together. We like each other. [Laughter]

KH: That's good. When you get the people who are willing to do things

together, that's when you know you're in a good environment.

MP: Right. It feeds your own energies to be around positive people.

KH: Well, compared to how this city was back in the sixties, how would you describe it now?

MP: It's a lot cleaner.

KH: It looks cleaner.

MP: A lot friendlier and diversified, economically and in the population. We haven't caught up with the rest of the world, and we still have a little bit of an inferiority complex when we compare ourselves with Atlanta, for example, or maybe even Nashville. We still have that gated mentality. That is, these are your problems, and these are my problems, and never the twain shall meet, rather than focusing on our common problems and attaching them with some energy.

KH: Do you think that that gated mentality comes from all the suburban sprawl, or is it—?

MP: Absolutely. That and, unfortunately, technology. I grew up in the South before there was air conditioning, and while we enjoy it on a hot day like today, in another sense it's kept us from being neighborly the way we used to. People used to sit on their porches and talk to each other, walk down the street. Now people seem so focused on getting to and from work and coming home and closing themselves up and watching their televisions or sitting in front of their computers. The things that have helped us communicate and become one big world have also isolated us.

KH: I see what you mean. Would you say that there are more options for poor residents of Birmingham as far as adequate employment and health care and housing than

there were back in the seventies?

MP: Unfortunately, I think so many entry-level jobs pay an unsurvivable wage. Alabama Arise has exposed me some to some of the figures on what it really takes to live, and there are fewer and fewer jobs available that provide a livable lifestyle.

KH: Um-hmm. Well, last question. What lessons from your career and your life in general would you want others to remember?

MP: That regardless of how far you make it in life or how far up the food chain you are, you're not disconnected from anybody else. And that you can't really gate yourself off from the world, because you're in it and you're of it.

KH: That's nice. Well, thank you for your time.

MP: You're so welcome. I wish I could sit here and ask you a lot of questions now. [Laughter] Find out all about you.

KH: We can talk a little off tape.

MP: OK.

END OF TRANSCRIPT

Transcribed by Carrie Blackstock, September 2006