

Interview

with

MAC LEGERTON

May 5, 2004

by Malinda Maynor

Transcribed by Cathy Mann

The Southern Oral History Program
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

MAC LEGERTON
May 5, 2004

MALINDA MAYNOR: Interview with Mac Legerton in Lumberton, North Carolina. The interviewer is Malinda Maynor and it's May 5, 2004. So tell us to begin with I guess about your growing up years and the things that brought you to Laurinburg to go to college and that part of your life.

MAC LEGERTON: Well, I was born in Atlanta, Georgia in 1951 on April 20th. I'm the middle of three children. My dad was a young ordained Presbyterian minister serving in his first congregation or church out of school. My mom worked in the home at that point. She later became a schoolteacher. They met in Virginia when he was, well, they actually met here in North Carolina when they were younger and then they actually lived after they were married in Richmond, Virginia and he went to Union Seminary there and she went to the Presbyterian School of Christian Education, PSCE. So her background was education and she later became a public schoolteacher when I was in high school. She went back and got her master's degree. So my parents were, you know, formally educated. The community that I grew up in was a mixed economic community. Racially it was a European-American community. So we had both working class and lower middle class folks living there and I went to a neighborhood elementary school. So my life was--this was in North Atlanta--I call it a sub-rural environment because it wasn't rural but it wasn't suburban and I really think there is a sub-rural experience that's not really identified because of the urban biases, how we define things. We have these two terms for urban environments but only one for rural. And so we had a lot of land, by sub-rural meaning there was a lot of land in our neighborhood that was sort of public land. It

was all private but the woods were, there weren't any 'no trespassing' signs. This area of the neighborhood that we grew up in, this area was actually small brick homes, most that were built after World War II in training grounds of the old Fort Gordon in North Atlanta. So the woods had all these trenches and all these wonderful places for us to play as kid's creek. So I really think I had sort of the best of both worlds in terms of my relationship with the land and then with educational opportunities that are more available in urban areas than in rural areas. So consequently my relationships growing up were with both working class white folk and lower middle class white folk. Our church, Oglethorpe Presbyterian Church, where my dad pastored was behind Oglethorpe University but it adjoined an African American community that was very poor. It was like basically developed as a place for domestic labor in North Atlanta for homes. So ever since I was little I became very conscious of the divisions between the two neighborhoods or communities. We had to drive to the church but it was like a half a mile and when we were in high school we moved from that neighborhood to a neighborhood on the other side of the church, which was an upper middle class neighborhood, which meant that our route to the church took us through the African American community. And we actually rode on the bus to school, this was after integration, with African American kids. My grandparents also had rural homes as well as my dad's parents had an urban home. So my childhood was just wonderful in terms of rural experiences, particularly just with land and water and animals and plants and rural people. And so I think I share some of that to say that that sort of is part of my rural bias and my commitment and interest in living all my adult life in the rural south. And then I mention the African American community because at a fairly early age I became conscious of not only racial divisions but racial

inequities and clear indicators of what poverty did in a negative way to families and communities. And another part of my early identity was my challenge with my physical health. I was born with congenital heart disease or it's not really a disease, it was, you know, just basically a congenital heart condition that became very challenging and would have killed me if I hadn't of had surgery when I was ten. And that challenge for me, conscious challenge from the age of six to ten, also significantly impacted my perspective on life and my value toward life and my interest in living life to the fullest, which includes living really basically not for myself but in service to others. My religious background also had a strong impact on that same perspective. For me in Christianity it's the cross that really stands as the symbol of love. And it's certainly not a symbol of mutual love. It's a symbol of sacrificial love. I think that's something that culture just has no comprehension about what that means. Culture is so, mainstream culture is so caught up in self-interested stuff and even the church, institutional church, really doesn't have much understanding of, you know, sacrificial love, particularly in relation to social justice. And so my dad was very much involved in the integration work in Atlanta. Since Martin King was in Atlanta, we were very much aware of that and he signed some of the early proclamations supporting integration. You know, he lost some church members over that and stuff. And I wasn't as aware of his stand until later actually on some of those issues. I was aware he was concerned because he preached about it a lot. So another strong influence in my life besides actually both my parents, the church work, and my physical challenges and near death experience, and the community, the diversity in the communities in which I lived and my relationship with the land in those communities, was the social movements of the '50s and '60s and particular the '60s and

early '70s that impacted me. I was engaged in most of those including the civil rights movement, the peace movement, the women's movement, later the human potential movement, and the environmental movement, and all the rest of the social movements that come and go. So all of those experiences had a strong impact on me. But as a kid I never really stood out in a crowd. I was well liked and likable and had lots of friends and was a leader in some of our church groups and Boy Scouts and things. But I wasn't real, didn't exert a lot of leadership until I got to college. And when I was a freshman at Presbyterian College in Clinton, South Carolina, this was 1969, the Vietnam War was going on and I didn't realize this when I looked at P.C. as a school. I liked it because it was small. It was in a rural place. It wasn't too far from home, about three hours, just far enough, not too far. But there was no P.E. program for the men. There was for the women. And so they didn't have it because they had ROTC and it was required at the time. So I didn't think much about it. I'd had a BB gun, you know, in our woods growing up but, you know, being in a military uniform and you couldn't call your gun a gun. You had to call it a weapon to kill. You know, I had some real challenges, particularly moral and religious challenges to being in ROTC. And that's a whole other interview and story. But that I exerted leadership and opposition to my participation in that program and publicly had to make a stand and received a lot of criticism for it from, harassment for it, from people within ROTC but was actually eventually excused from the program and was the first student to do that and be excused on the basis of conscience. And after I was excused from the program, most of the folk didn't like it because this was '69. And so after I got out everybody started resisting it and growing their hair long and disobeying orders and that was the last year it was mandated.

MM: Was P.C. an all white school pretty much?

ML: Oh, yeah, ninety nine point nine percent was white. [Brief telephone interruption.]

MM: Could we just back up a second to high school because you said you went to a neighborhood elementary school, which I sort of assume to mean all white for the most part.

ML: Yes, it was. It was diverse economically or class wise.

MM: Yes, but not so much racially?

ML: But not racially.

MM: Was high school different?

ML: Yeah, and actually if I had stayed in Ashford Park was the area, I would have gone to the same high school. Actually I think, I can't even remember exactly. I may have been in high school when we moved but it was in the same high school district. We didn't move very far. But since we moved near the African American community I rode on the bus with the students from, it was my new neighborhood and Linwood Park is the name of the community, the African American community. We rode the bus together.

MM: So that was an integrated situation?

ML: My high school was integrated. The problem was I went from a small neighborhood elementary school of maybe, I don't know, four hundred to a high school of two thousand. We didn't have middle school. So we had eighth, I had five years of high school and that was pretty traumatic for me. And actually my relationship with education was always good. I mean I made fairly good grades but I didn't really enjoy it.

It was mostly boring to me and I never felt that most of the time that the teachers were talking to me. So my early views of education were it was fairly, you know, impractical if you will in terms of what you were being taught and, we never were asked our opinion and I was a very inquisitive child but never really asked many questions unless I felt very free to do so. So I got along with most of the teachers but I didn't really get excited about learning or education 'til college, 'til I could sort of really choose what I wanted to study, which was religion and get deep into that. And I just felt growing up there was a lot of me that wasn't identified or acknowledged or addressed in school. And so the best part about school was being with friends and going outside. We had an hour of organized play everyday which was unusual I think, particularly after being in schools here in North Carolina where the teachers actually had to play with us. We just didn't go out and run around on our own and teachers relax and chill out under the tree. We had organized sports and it was great so I enjoyed school but I didn't really relate to the learning that much.

MM: What about racial tensions in the high school, did you see any of that?

ML: There were some but the racial tensions were more between the lower income white kids and the black community, black kids. So those who got into fights or physical violence or things, back then the leather jacket crew was called the 'hoods' and so it was usually the 'hoods' who go to their cars and get their chains and tell folk they'll meet them outside. We didn't have a lot of use of weapons that we have here in Robeson County in North Atlanta. It was more, you know, fist fighting and stuff that would break out and girls never fought publicly.

MM: [Laughter] Different area.

ML: Very unlike here so it was left up to the guys to show their machismo, you know. So I was, you know, aware of some hall fights every now and then. We never really even had any major, major riots or anything, that sort of thing. So it wasn't, certainly I had my own challenges adjusting to diversity but you know that was more just based on my lack of experience.

MM: With African Americans?

ML: Yeah.

MM: Yeah, like what kinds of things do you remember thinking?

ML: Well, just different in the way my parents raised me. They were raised in a wealthy environment and then basically decided, you know, voluntarily chose downward mobility really. I mean the ministry back then was not what it is today, was not seen as a way to become financially secure. It wasn't as professionalized as it is today so the salaries were not competitive and much lower. But my parents raised me in a pretty formal way so emotional expression was not, negative emotional expression was not a common part of our family dialogue, to say the least. Just being on the bus where the African American kids were much more verbal and physical and acted out more negative thoughts and feelings was a new experience for me. I experienced some of that growing up with my working class white friends where there was alcoholism and other challenges in the homes. Particularly, one of my friends particularly came from a very poor environment but he was also the first guy in our school to have a car because he'd worked on cars ever since he was eight years old.

MM: Right and ().

ML: Yeah so there were challenges like that. So I really developed some leadership throughout college and actually came to St. Andrews after three years at P.C. because P.C. was much more conservative and I was sort of in line to become president of the student body there. But I was so sickened by the policies of the school that didn't change with the times and one of my friends from Atlanta that I grew up with was kicked out because she was caught, she was caught with a boy in her room. You know this was 1972 or '70. No, it was 1971 and you know that just seemed a ridiculous issue for me so I left there after three years and was accepted in the seminary a year early and P.C. agreed to give me my bachelor's after my first year seminary. But then I decided to come to St. Andrews just for a year to get another college experience. So that's how I came to southeastern North Carolina. And I really enjoyed my year at St. Andrews. I went to seminary for a year. Really was ready to take a break from formal schooling so I took an internship in Pennsylvania at a retreat center, Kirkridge Retreat Center whose theme was picket and pray. And did a lot of internal processing and work that year because the human potential movement used the facilities a lot. And then I moved here in 1975 to Robeson County and had an internship with the old Fayetteville Presbytery. I later switched denomination to the United Church of Christ and was ordained in UCC, largely because very few Presbyterian ministers in North Carolina are not in a congregation. In Atlanta we had many ministers that did community ministry work or counseling work or other things. But here in the more rural, less diverse community in terms of perspectives, the UCC church was more progressive in its national work as well as integrated. When I moved here the northern and southern Presbyterian churches were still divided. And I really, by the time I moved here, I decided that I wanted to do some, I wanted to be in

ministry outside of a local church structure. Which I had worked in a church in Hickory, North Carolina one summer, which was in a mill area that was also integrated and dealt with some racial issues there. And I just felt that most church congregational settings had not moved as far as I wanted them to move in terms of support for community ministry work and work that addressed some of the social issues in the community and knew that I probably wouldn't last very long if I stayed in a local church. So I really wanted to do something different and so the UCCs became a home, a church home where I would sort of be nurtured or neglected on my own terms, rather than having to fight the institutional church at the same time I was, you know, involved in many community issues and struggles. I didn't really want to have to take on too much at one time.

MM: Yeah. So what did you find the community issues and struggles to be when you first started? Or, when you were making that decision, what were some of the things that were happening?

ML: When I moved here?

MM: Uh-huh.

ML: Well, education, economic issues and not just economic development but economic justice issues, the wages, benefits, the low wage and under employment, and the working conditions and the lack of organized labor. You know people just didn't have a voice and would be fired for anything. The racial exclusion that was here, systematic racial exclusion in government and not just the lack of Native and African American elected officials but also people that were hired for the public jobs as well as there was a very strong oppressive court and legal system when I moved here. And you know we basically sort of fit that image of a rural south where you had a couple of tyrants

running the place and at that time Robeson County sort of fit that mold where both the sheriff and the district attorney wielded, you know, brutal power over people. And then issues of land ownership and environment and agri business and the loss of small farms and those things were also critical issues and the poverty and the violence, not just the institutional violence but the family violence, the violence among the young people.

MM: Are there one or two or certain particular stories that you remember that sort of stuck with you from that time or made an impression?

ML: Yeah, it's a couple of them. One of them, I lived in Pembroke and did community work and campus work. So I got involved with the students at the college and I was invited to be interviewed by the social work staff at public housing in Pembroke to start an after school program. The staff had heard that I had done a lot of youth work. And so I got a call from Donna Chavis to, she had heard, my name had been referred to her because she was director or head of the social work team. That was back when our government put social workers in public housing. That team was later removed not long after I went back to seminary and we moved away for a few years. But so I met with the team of social workers including Donna and I started working with them and helped develop this after school program. Of course, my relationship with Donna progressed on many levels. It was really great that we'd worked together and found out we had a lot of the same visions and values before we started dating. So when we started our meetings and met with the parents of the kids and the kids, my first question from being in the meeting for about five minutes to myself was, 'where are the fathers?' I think there was maybe one disabled father in the room and most of the fathers weren't even in the homes. So that was, I had seen some of that in, you know, the single parent

family conditions in college but it just really struck me. So that was one of the early indicators of the poverty and of the dislocation of the family structure.

MM: Were these mostly Indian families?

ML: Yeah, all Native American and there were I think a couple of African American families in public housing at that time, yeah. So that was one story. Another story is I was really there, the white Presbyterian Church in Pembroke had closed basically because it had stayed segregated. So I was there partly to explore what opportunities for ministry were there in a more just way and to be in a ministry of presence in the community and be of support and to make recommendations back to this Presbytery committee. And so one thing I did was an interview with The Robesonian and I thought I was doing, you know, a good PR piece by describing the history of the Presbyterian Church there and its closure and why I was there. And I literally was cursed out on the streets of Pembroke by one of the former members of that church who was upset that I actually stated publicly that it had closed because it had stayed segregated. And whereas most Native American folk were really glad to see me to say that and I later became close friends with this person who was elderly then and later passed. But that was again a conflict that occurred that I didn't anticipate.

MM: Did you find a lot of resistance from any particular community here to some of the things you were saying and doing?

ML: Yeah, I mean I was a zealot at I should do what was right regardless of what anybody else thought. I didn't really understand institutional behavior very well back then and I didn't really understand individual behavior that much either. But yeah, the final blow for me and one of my reasons I decided, it was a signal for me, spiritual signal

like, you know, but they didn't tell me I couldn't let them use my house. So I continued to provide a place for them on the Main Street of Pembroke.

MM: That's kind of curious that nobody from the Pembroke Presbyterian Church was on the committee. Is that right or? I'm just curious because the...

ML: Former because the church had been...

MM: Had been closed.

ML: Dissolved.

MM: Right, I'm just curious about the power dynamics, kind of that that story represents.

ML: Yeah, well, they were mostly elderly. There was only two or three left. No I don't think they were actually on that committee.

MM: But they were clearly responding to some kind of outcry that was coming from upper class people in the Robeson County area.

ML: Yeah, about that issue, yeah.

MM: Yeah so that's sort of the case you think?

ML: Yeah, I mean in oral history you can't say everything. I had actually, the way I got that job is the Presbytery could not find a seminary student from Union in Richmond or Columbia in Atlanta, which are the two major southern seminaries, who had any multi-racial experience. And I had. I went to Louisville Presbyterian Seminary, which was perceived as the liberal seminary in the south at the time. The president had stood up against the war in Vietnam and prayed on the courthouse steps in Louisville and made a stand on that and that impressed me a lot. That's just one of the main reasons I went there. And then I became involved a lot actually with the United Farm Workers

work. Went to California during that one year I was at Louisville Seminary and stayed at the home of Cesar Chavez and got to know Cesar real well that year and he came out to Kentucky and Ohio a lot. And I worked to educate congregational members ecumenically about the grape and lettuce boycott and how we could help support the struggles of migrant workers. So the farm worker movement was my introduction into the labor movement. And its religious roots were very deep, of course. So I actually still have slides and tapes from the first national convention, probably some of the few of the UFW. It was in Fresno in 1973, my first trip across the country. So anyway, so education here, the institution of public education here even before the schools were merged, we merged the school systems, the public jobs in the county were really about the only way out of poverty for Native and African American people because the private jobs didn't pay and if you wanted to have you...

MM: Meaning plants or you know, farm work or...?

ML: Yeah, the manufacturing jobs and if you were sharecropping, you know. So a lot, of course, as you know, Malinda, the teachers were both teachers and farmers and so the public job meant you could get a fairly decent salary for nine or ten months out of the year at least and also farm. And so it was really, it really helped establish the middle class here and so did the formation of the university in the Indian community and the African American community, even when those school systems were segregated. But what that meant is that the school boards were always very political and the people that ran for office and got on the school board got there to get access to the power and control of the jobs, not to support the education really of the children. And I now know that it's not policy that you have to have an elected school board. There's places in North

Carolina that don't have elected school boards. There's other ways to do it. [Brief interruption when someone knocks at the door] So the whole system of education here and employment situation within the schools I think and the role of those jobs in the community made, education takes on a much different role in this community than in other communities where there are more, where the economy is more diverse. The public jobs are the majority jobs even today in this county, you know, and that's interesting that it's still the case today and more the case with the loss of jobs we've had. But it has always been the case that this is one of the counties in the state where the public sector is larger, public sector employment is larger than private sector employment. And the schools, of course, are the largest employer within the public sector. They're part of the county but the county is the largest employer but the schools within the county system within public employment is the largest single employer.

MM: How do you think that influenced how, well, let's take Native Americans. I guess I'd like to ask you how you think it influences all three of the racial groups in county in that '75, '76 time leading up to the early 1980s maybe, that kind of time period? But maybe start with Native Americans. How do you feel like that employment political reality influenced either how they felt about the schools or how they felt about integration?

ML: Well, back then you know schools were also more community based. I don't know how much research you've done on them but you had the community based councils that really were involved in even the hiring of the principals and, you know, so they were much more community based systems back then and the community was more politically engaged in choosing school leadership. So the schools were really in many

ways the mainstay of the daily life of the communities and then the church was sort of the mainstay of the religious life or the Sunday life. And fortunately even today those two are pretty separate, the daily life and the Sunday life. But, you know, so and I think they were even more powerful and central then when they were more community based. They've lost that community base and, you know, and that's both positive and negative.

MM: Because of the centralization of the system...?

ML: Yeah, and in the size of the schools. It's hard to have an identity with the school when they're so large, particularly the middle and high schools. It's still possible to have a community based elementary school but the middle and high schools here are not community based.

MM: How do you think that dependence on school teaching for Indians and public employment in general, do you think that influenced Indians' acceptance of integration in any way or resistance to it?

ML: I really don't know. I mean I think one of the things I've learned in this work, whether it's history or opinions about different things, if you don't know, you just don't know. I really don't know.

MM: Yeah, yeah. Well, what were your impressions when you first got here of the Native American community?

ML: Well, you know, I was struck by the middle class nature of the Pembroke area. I now, you know, know that Pembroke is only one of fifteen or twenty Native communities in the county. And unfortunately a lot of the people in Pembroke think that's the center of it.

MM: They're the only one. [Laughter]

ML: You don't have to go too far to ask folk in other communities to know there's differences of opinion about that. But, you know, so the first story I really ever heard about, out of Pembroke, when I was at St. Andrews, was the Save Old Main campaign. So I came here knowing that there were women that were leaders because our friend that led that who's passed on...

MM: Janie.

ML: Janie, yeah, and her story has never been told and it needs to be told.

MM: A lot of people have talked about her in interviews.

ML: Yeah and so I was, you know, I mean I moved here at a pretty good time when there'd been some social action work related to that, you know, in the earlier '70s and the Church and Community Center had done voter registration work. The Quakers were in here with them and the Methodist church particularly it supported social justice work through Church and Community Center and Bob Mangum's work and folk had joined together. And you know Bob was a facilitator for a lot of multi-racial work in this area around employment and other things. By the time I had moved here some of the social justice edge of the community center was waning and that's why we later formed our center here as sort of a sister organization that would take up the advocacy and social justice work because that board no longer really would after it, you know, and many institutions over time become more moderate and more, you know, the boards change and attitudes change. But I was real inspired by the work that had been done in this community and I was real excited about Legal Aid being formed, which the discussions were during that same time. Even when we left in '77 we came back every summer while I was finishing seminary and transferred to Union in New York. We'd come back

for holiday and every summer so I kept in touch with what was happening in the community and over that period was when Donna and I really discussed with folks about starting another non-profit that would focus more on the systemic change work and not get too caught up in a broader approach that would then, you know, where that work might be watered down a little bit. So I was also struck though of how the other worldly nature of the religion, which is typical of the rural south and the fundamentalist nature of the religion. Because fundamentalism is so contrary, you know, to indigenous philosophy and understanding and religion. And I don't mean just Native American indigenous religion but African as well as European indigenous religion and particularly this judgementalism because in indigenous religions worldwide there is this similarity with Christianity of a one God but that God was not judgmental either in relation to earth or to heaven. You know, it was truly unconditional love and relationship between the Creator and the created. But particularly with fundamentalist Christian, the school fundamentalism in Christianity, and you have that real strong other worldly individualistic part and the native churches were very much assimilated...

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START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

ML: Christian education, you know, fundamentalist because of the nature of it doesn't acknowledge that it's only one school of Christianity. It's the way, the only way.

MM: Not the only way. How did you rationalize that, those two? I mean seeing that this was an indigenous community that clearly developed a religious philosophy that...?

ML: I mean I had to let go of some of my romanticization of the poor and of Native Americans when I moved here. I begun to do some of that through my experience with African American and Latino communities, prior but this was the first Native community that I'd lived in. But I saw some young ministers who, you know, Michael Cummings and Donna were in school together so Michael was actually one of the two ministers that performed our wedding ceremony. The other one was Malcolm Calhoun who was actually my mentor. He was from Laurinburg, white Presbyterian minister who was actually probably the single most influential white Presbyterian to move the southern Presbyterian Church into the civil rights work. [He] was from Laurel Hill, North Carolina. And so Malcolm became a good friend of mine and he was on the committee. And Bob Gustafson who taught at Pembroke University was my supervisor and he was on the committee. So there were two folks on my committee. I related to them the most. So that answers some of your question about early impressions. But about the young Native ministers, I really had hoped that, you know, you had some formally trained seminary graduated Lumbee ministers that had more of a larger exposure to diverse theological perspectives that they would become leaders in the church and the Lumbee community would broaden it's perspective. And unfortunately, you know, thirty years later that leadership still isn't there for various reasons. But the churches are explicitly not theologically any different. There are some implicit changes in church behavior and some more engagement in formation of the Lumbee tribal system through grants from the churches and involvement of the churches. But unfortunately that engagement from my perspective actually displayed the worst of Christian behavior and the worst of church efforts to become engaged in social action because of the hostile way in which that

development occurred in relationship to the other development, Lumbee development organization. It was not a real compassionate and holistic approach.

MM: Meaning the church wasn't so much cooperating with LRDA as they might have or...?

ML: Well, you know, the whole formation of the tribe was over against LRDA. It was not something that was developed from a positive perspective. It was developed in a negative reaction.

MM: To what LRDA was doing?

ML: Yeah, to their critique of the negative aspects of the large Indian development organization.

MM: And so you feel like the church kind of negatively reinforced that rather than exerting more positive influence?

ML: Yeah because I think because fundamentalism because of its judgmental nature doesn't really move you towards compassion very easily. Because its perspective of God is the compassionate side of God and the compassionate side of Jesus' life is not what's emphasized. In fact, the earthly life of Jesus is not emphasized. It's the resurrected life that's emphasized. So the cross conflicts in the sacrificial love of Jesus, actually the love that Jesus had of enemies and hypocrites and women and all this stuff is contrary to the fundamentalist perspective. And unfortunately then the negative aspects of fundamentalism don't help the Lumbee church move forward in a real compassionate way in terms of engagement in social issues.

MM: Okay. What did you think about or what do you think or what have you thought I guess about the development of the African American church in the county? What are some of the similarities and differences?

ML: Well, in terms of social responsibility and participation because of the civil rights movement and Martin King's involvement there, you know, the church, the African American church back then, it's no longer the case now because the civil rights movement no longer has much impact on seminary students and seminary graduates in the African American community. But it did until about ten years ago. But the, I'll say a large impact, I'm sure it has an impact but you don't have in our African American community today you don't have a lot of ministers who see social justice as a vital part of the gospel any more than our Native American ministers do. There is still more of an understanding of some social responsibility so there's more ministers in the African American community that run for office. But it doesn't mean that their churches are engaged or have a traditional social justice or social action, even though they individually may get involved. But the African American church because of the civil rights movement was the center of political life in the black community, whereas, the secular community in the Lumbee community is the center of political life and the church. So the disadvantage in the Lumbee community is there's no moral context for politics because they're divorced from each other. And, in fact, many people feel you can't be involved in politics because you will somehow become more of a sinner, as if you're not sinner enough already. Somehow your sins will be worsened if you get your hands dirty quoting politics. My sense about that is if somehow your judgment is skewed by engaging in more conflicting situations, then you didn't have much of a moral base to

begin with because it's only in crisis that we really come to understand people's nature anyway. Their true nature, you don't really see it til there's some crisis. So there are those differences. Those differences unfortunately are lessening because the ministry is more professionalized now in both the black and Indian communities and it's more of a thing you can do to become financially secure and stable. And so it's...

MM: More of a job, less a calling.

ML: Yeah, and we don't have a single church. You know we can analyze the European church experience the same way. We don't have a single church in Robeson County that has a tradition of social action. A church, there's ministers that do. There's not a single church. Unlike if you go to an urban environment you can shop around and ask, well, what church does a lot of social ministries or community ministries?

MM: Why do you think that is?

ML: It's because the ministers who have gotten involved individually have never taken on the challenge to change the culture of the churches. That's another social action effort of its own, which means dealing more with the internal conflicts within the institutional church. It's difficult to do that when they can fire you. I mean unfortunately--and we're way off the subject here from public education--but you know in biblical times the priest and prophet were never the same person. But we've created a professionalized ministry that basically says to the minister you're supposed to be a pastor, a good pastor, a good preacher, and a good prophet. It's all lumped into one person and the prophet, the prophetic voice and ministry is the one gets dropped, you know, first. If it's ever dropped it never gets picked back up.

MM: Well, I think it all relates to public education because what we're trying to do is get a sense...

ML: It does.

MM: ...you know, of the social environment of the county.

ML: Well, and too, look who was picked as our first chair of the merged school board, it was Dr. Dalton Brooks who, you know, in my perspective Dalton Brooks and Michael Cummings are the spiritual leaders, the spiritual male leaders of the Lumbee community. But neither one are recognized, nor is there, nor are they sought out when political decisions are to be made, you know. If we were living in a more traditional cultural environment we would all go to Michael and Dalton and ask them what should we do, as well as our matriarchs. My mother's spirituality asks the same questions.

MM: You know coming from Atlanta and probably I assume a more bi-racial environment, you know, than here, have you, let's see, what exactly am I trying to ask here? Have you observed meaningful differences or exchanges or even not so much differences but levels of cooperation between the Indian and African American communities here, you know, as opposed to sort of the white power structure as it were? Have you seen a lot of examples of cooperation or less, you know, fewer examples? Is there more of that?

ML: Well, I think two responses. One is I've seen good examples of tri-racial cooperation. In the history of this county any, [pause] you know, with the divide and conquer issues and efforts to divide the Indian and black community, Indian and black relations are almost more challenging, are more challenging than white-Indian and white-black relations. So I've seen some very good tri-racial work more than Indian-black bi-

racial work. And I think the symbol for me in the '70s and '60s in terms of education and social change in this county is the work that Bob Mangum, Charles McDowell, and Harbert Moore did together, the three of them. And this is off the subject but I'm willing actually to pay our videographer that we use out of Wilmington to come and video tape the three of them together because Charles particularly and Harbert second has health challenges. And if we don't get those three together in the next two or three months we may not do it, may not be able to do it because of Charles' condition. But the three of those folk, men, were leaders together and then you had other people like Dr. Joy Johnson who was in Raleigh and moved back here, not only as a legislator but then worked fulltime there. He was working fulltime I think when I was here in Raleigh and then came back. So you had, you know, some tri racial leadership in the '60s and '70s.

MM: What kinds of things were they doing? You know, I've talked to both Mr. Moore and Mr. Mangum and, you know, I sort of know about that in general.

ML: Well, it was through the Church and Community Center where they were very much involved in some education issues as well as employment issues and the work of the Church and Community Center, the three of them.

MM: Voter registration, yeah.

ML: Voter registration, Charles was deeply involved in that and really was on the forefront of the work. And unfortunately, as you know, people's names and histories get dropped real easy. You don't recognize the contributions that folks made and all three of them made some very strong contributions. And so, you know, a lot of my work, they laid the foundation for what we've done. I feel like we should move to more specifics like the development of Legal Aid and what happened with education. But you know the

issue that those three folk and the social justice work addressed in the '60s and '70s was the double voting issue. And what year was that changed?

MM: I think it was '74.

ML: Yeah, it was right before I moved here. So the challenge to double voting, which I won't, I guess you have all that.

MM: Yeah, we have a lot of people that talked about that.

ML: Documented, I don't need to tell that story. But you know so when I came here there were, my goodness, six school systems when I think came here. I can't remember the year when Maxton joined the county system.

MM: I think it was after that, after '75.

ML: Yeah, yeah. But there were five when we started our work to change those systems and we knew we had to merge. To actually ever have equitable education in this county, we had to have one system for the entire county, one public school system.

MM: And talk about, talk a little bit about why the five school systems wouldn't, you know, wouldn't work.

ML: Well, you know, I've learned a lot. You've got to go to the root of the problem. Well, the root of this whole problem is the state and the root of the problem is the constitution of North Carolina that does not guarantee equal education. That's the real root of the problem. So even today you have our Attorney General defending the state against litigation to move toward a state financed school system because they interpret that the constitution does not justify, does not say that we have to have it. I mean we all know we should have it but since we don't, since we live in a legalistic system unfortunately, their position is we don't have to have it. It'll cost too much so

we're not going to do it kind of mentality. So I mean there's a strong urban bias in the state that's becoming stronger and stronger as the population shifts occur. There's fewer rural legislators and it's really becoming a major issue in North Carolina, the gap between urban and rural life, and in the nation. But given that the real cause is the lack of a state financed school system, what that means is you have to rely a lot on local taxation to develop your system to provide some level of quality education. You have to use local money. So the cities, four of those five systems were in municipal areas that were majority white at the time and had kept their municipal areas to keep the African American populations that were brought from the plantations in the 1800s to the edge of the municipalities to do domestic labor, the black communities around the outside were kept outside the city limits. So they couldn't vote and didn't add to the population base of the municipal areas so those school systems were white controlled, even though they were all bi-racial and multi-racial. But the Native students were the smallest within all of those systems because the Native American community lives in more of the rural areas and wasn't dislocated from those rural areas like a lot of the black population was and moved near the cities and the municipalities. So you had four systems in 1980 that were white controlled, that used the taxes from those municipalities to support their schools. Then you had one rural system that didn't have a separate distinct tax base and all it had was the county tax base to operate on. So that system, you know, the challenges to get books and the same course loads and everything were so great that there was no equitable education and even among the four municipalities it was different levels. So we knew we had to move towards one system and there would be a lot of resistance particularly from the white controlled municipalities.

MM: And that was because in terms of the county population as a whole, it's not a white dominated county population in 1980?

ML: Right but in terms of voting patterns, a larger percentage of the white population has always voted. And we knew, you know, that this would be a hard political issue. So our first strategy, which is not my favorite, it's to me the last resort, but was to litigate and that process had already started. It wasn't part of our center's strategy. We really thought we could eventually make that merger happen without litigation, which in the end is the way it happened. But Legal Aid decided, you know, raised the issue of litigation.

MM: And this is Julian Pierce and just tell us kind of who all was involved. Who were you working with at that time?

ML: Well, Julian with the assistance of his board and Dexter Brooks and others and with the support of Joy Johnson and others, so there was tri-racial support, meaning those of us in the white community of more of a liberal or progressive perspective that supported it, we all worked together. So when the idea of litigation came up Legal Aid by law could not go out and recruit clients. So we, our center went out and recruited many of the clients and then found folk who cared enough about this issue who were low income and met the guidelines for Legal Aid assistance, legal services assistance. It was called legal services at the time. And then Julian himself actually came out to do many of those interviews. And I went with him at least to two of them. And so there were litigants from each of the school systems involved in that case. Since the constitution didn't support equitable education, the lawsuit was lost in court; sort of humorous situation that the state would defend any inequity.

MM: But they did.

ML: They did and they won.

MM: And they got the voting, yeah.

ML: So after that strategy didn't work, which, you know, again it wasn't our strategy of choice, we then knew we had to get our officials to either make the decision or give the people the opportunity to make the decision. And this is where another state policy comes into effect, which is sort of humorous. It's state policy in North Carolina that you cannot have citizen referendums without a vote of the legislature. The North Carolina legislature has to approve any local referendum. Well, when we really started pushing the school merger our hope was that the county commissioners would maybe request that the legislative delegation support a bill to just merge the systems. Well, we couldn't get the elected, elected officials were afraid and there was historical precedent for this. If they took that position they might get voted out of office. So they did agree through a lot of pressure to give permission to the citizens to vote. So we had a vote in 1988, which was very close, so we almost lost it. But it won by what, three hundred and fifty votes or something?

MM: What kind of reaction were you getting for your promotion of merger from, you know, the less progressive whites in the county?

ML: Well, you know there were people, the central, you know, white professional in that effort was Eric Prevatte. I don't know if you've interviewed Eric but...

MM: I've heard of him. Mr. Henry Ward told me.

ML: He's very ill now.

MM: Is he?

ML: I could probably arrange for you to interview him but Eric...

MM: I didn't know how to get in touch with him.

ML: Lives in Clyburne Pines and Clyburne Pines was, I think because it's a mixed neighborhood and has low income whites in it, it was annexed out of the Lumberton city school system. I think for again, class and race issues. And that just really ticked Eric off. He was not, you know, that civically engaged prior to this but he put his whole life and liberty and finances on the line. So he single-handedly supported the merger effort with full-page ads in the newspaper, bought up all the radio time so even the opposition couldn't put announcement on, advertisements on the radio close to the election. He just made, he was a zealot. He joined me and some others as zealots back then. He was more single issue focused in that perspective but he was, you know, without Eric's level of passion and zeal it wouldn't have been successful in spite of everything else we were doing, the vote was so close.

MM: You think he did that because of his connection to Clyburne Pines and what Clyburne Pines' interest was?

ML: Oh, yeah, and what had happened and the unjust way his family was treated, his community was treated, yeah. So they made a big mistake.

MM: Right, pissing him off.

ML: [Laughter] Yeah.

MM: Parnell Sweat told me, you know, talked about Terry Schmidt, a man named Terry Schmidt, who was his arch enemy over merger. Do you remember him or remember...?

ML: I didn't get to know Terry til after merger. You know, when I was younger I, you know, our first office was in our home and our first office for the center was across the street that opened in '83. But it's only been in the last fifteen years that we've done more collaborative work in the white community. Our work early on was very adversarial because of the conflictual nature of many of the issues plus my own perspective. I had to work through a lot of my own anger and pain and frustration at the values and systemic way in which, you know, the white communities, not just in the south but throughout the nation and the sort of empire building that was such a part of the recent history of Europe. So I wasn't real interested in befriending too many decision makers in the white community in those years. I have now changed my perspective and particularly with the successes that we've had. There are many other systemic changes that are needed in the schools and in every system in the county. But because we now have social inclusions, we now at least have the three major races at the table. We still don't have our new neighbors, the Latinos, at the table but now that there is social inclusion and inclusion within decision-making bodies, you know, our work is very collaborative now with everyone. But in those early years it wasn't. So even Terry, I didn't get to know him until later.

MM: Yeah, what was his position? Did he have some kind of position as a decision maker or was he just...?

ML: I think Terry was on the former board of Lumberton city schools and is on the board in the merged system as well.

MM: Okay.

ML: Yeah, I think he may have been involved in education before the merger.

MM: What, looking back on it, were the greatest successes and failures of merger? It's not a finished story, right?

ML: I don't think there are any failures of merger.

MM: Yeah, challenges maybe.

ML: There's a lot of challenges but you know the, you know the school merger it's hard to discuss it in isolation from the other social, it was a part of a larger social movement of the time and that's a whole other story. It's beyond the scope of this interview. But the school merger vote was about a month after the hostage taking situation at the Robesonian, two months after the death of...

MM: Was it Jimmy Earl's killing? [Laughter]

ML: No, no, no, no, not Jimmy. That was two years earlier. Two months before Billy McKellar was asphyxiated because on the jail steps in January of that year or was that the year before? I mean it all sort of gets boggled in there. No, I think Billy's death was that January or the January before? Anyway, my emotional recollection is it was that January. And then you had the Julian Pierce election and Julian Pierce vs. Joe Freeman Britt election in the middle of this. And then in that November prior to that you had the Zabatosky killing. And the November prior to that you had the Jimmy Earl killing. The April prior to that you had the largest civil right march in the county. It was April 20 of '87 and education was one of our themes for that march. And then the November before that, in '86 you had Joyce Sinclair's murder in St. Pauls. So you know, and before that you had the whole toxic waste effort campaign again GSX and U.S. Ecology. So you had a social movement that was at its height at that time. And then you had the hostage taking that empowered people for a brief moment. An empowerment that happened from

that didn't last very long because it was impossible to get behind Eddie as any sort of leader. But the mere fact that the system had been challenged in that way, even though it was a violent way and destructive way and wasn't really helpful, it did energize some folk and sparked, you know, surfaced a lot of anger. And from my perspective, if it had any positive impact at all it aroused people's anger enough short term to get some people to vote for merger. I think its negative aspects were much more significant than its positive ones and unfortunately it broke, you know, it broke the non-violent nature of the social movement, which from a moral perspective then made our moral position diffuse, which in many ways made it easier to not address Julian Pierce's murder with the same level of, you know, forthrightness and righteous indignation because there had already been violence to the level of murder. But the moral high ground of the social movement even though none of us strategized or planned what Eddie did and recruited Tim to be with him, it made it very difficult. And it particularly made it impossible then to address the drug issue in the county. We couldn't say anything more about the drug issue after that because if someone would go to the extreme that they did over, you know, opposing what they named as professional and institutional corruption and couldn't prove it, then we couldn't say anymore about it. Before we could say whatever we wanted about institutional corruption but after that it made it impossible to address that issue because we didn't have the proof anyway. But before then we didn't have to prove it.

MM: All you had to do was criticize it.

ML: Yeah, and we had the moral high ground. But I think it did generate people's anger and fury and it did have some limited effect. I don't think it had any effect on the vote for Julian that was successful even though he had been killed. And it

didn't have any effect on getting the public defender system. A lot of people said it had a lot of effect on a lot of things. Those things, we started working for a public defender system in 1982 and it was going to happen. It was already happening with or without the social movement that was going on. That was going to happen because we'd done the research, the data, the organizing, that was a campaign all in it's own. You know, so all that history and things that happened sort of get skewed if the realities don't get well documented.

MM: Because of those flash point moments people tend to think that it's all because, driven by that.

ML: And now the media focus is still on the seizure of the newspaper office rather than on Julian's murder, for example, which to me is a much broader unresolved issue. So the merger happened and what was great about it is then, and we had already planned, some of us wanted to redistrict the county commissioner districts in 1980. I mean in 1990. I mean in 1980, I'm sorry. But we didn't and I'm not going to name names in this interview because it's sort of unrelated. But there was some opposition to that in the community with color by certain leaders who felt that they had to be accountable to the white folk that kept the discussions from going very far about redistricting the county commissioner districts in 1980 to get equitable representation. And actually those discussions began a couple of years later and our center was started in '80. So those discussions were at their height in '82 and we just couldn't get the support. So, you know, we knew 1992 we'd have it by then. So what we had is then we were able to redistrict the county commission district and the new school districts about the same time and the legislative districts. And by then we had a strong tri-racial force. The

resisters that were resistant to it in 1982 didn't have the political clout that they, didn't have the same political clout in '92 in our multi-racial leadership and there were six of us that were very public on most of these issues.

MM: You say who they were?

ML: You know, well, in the Native American community it was Julian and John Godwin. In the African American community it was Joy Johnson and Sidney Locks. In the white community it was Bob Mangum and myself. I mean white community meaning loosely. Since we both lived in Pembroke we weren't part of the Lumberton crowd, white racial group. So [pause] you know, so the six of us were very upfront about all of these issues. Then there were people like Eric Prevatte and in all of the families of the people who were victims of violence got involved, the McKellars, Jimmy Earl's family, Joyce Sinclair's family. They were very much involved in all of this. And we had many groups involved in the coalition as well.

MM: So what do you think, what was the one main or two main factors that you feel like led to, you know, achieving the goal?

ML: I think that one of the major factors was a long time perspective. I really, when we started the center I knew it would take fifty years to really do a major reform of the major systems and really create systematic change in multiple areas of the county. And so next year will be twenty-five years and we're basically about half way home, you know, half way finished with those goals. So I feel very positive about that. I think the long-term perspective. I mean when you're talking about fundamental systemic change it does not happen quickly. And it can be either postponed or enhanced by, it is always postponed or enhanced by unanticipated events that happen that either you take

advantage of or set you back further. And we were able to take advantage of most of the unanticipated events that happened. And I think, so we now have, we restructured and redistricted all three of those major bodies, the school board, the commission board, and the legislative delegation. So not only is Robeson County the most ethnically diverse rural county in the nation, we have probably the most ethnically diverse governments. Doesn't mean we know how to relate to each other very well or that the values and vision that we need is present to make decisions and be accountable and move toward a just community. [Brief phone interruption.] So let me, I'd like to, you know I really see this issue of getting folks to the table as the first step, you know. And so we now have folks at the table on the school board. We have a fairly diverse administrative unit. I'm not as pleased with the, we still don't have equitable African American participation at the board level and at the teaching level. I think that challenge, unfortunately, is not being creatively addressed by many folk except what we're trying to do here at the center and a few other places in the county. And so that's a major challenge but because of the political clout and the numbers in the African American community is less than the political clout and numbers in the Native and European American communities, without a real commitment to equitable inclusion, we just won't ever have it.

MM: On the part of the majority of population.

ML: We have it in number on the school board but that hasn't been transferred to administrative. And some of it is cultural issues. To really get quality folk, you know, of any race sometimes you have to go outside of your own community to get them and everybody has a problem with that. Just think if a Native American was hired for a job that wasn't from this county and wasn't maybe of the same tribal base. You know, it'd

be the same thing as an African American from outside the county being hired. But I really think that one of the things in the history of social change in rural America and particularly I can speak in this county, is that insider-outsider connection has always been present and you have strong inside leadership. At least in most of these changes, [and] processes, many of them that have been the bigger ones you've had folks who were either from here who've lived away for a while and come back with a broader perspective or people who have moved in and have a broader perspective. So I really see that as a real theme inside rural communities. Because many of our strongest leaders in our organization, Native American and African American leaders, are people who moved away for a while and came back. They just have seen greater picture and come back with different values too.

MM: And another perspective.

ML: And they're not people in the business community who've come home to make money. We have a lot of folks like that come back to really take advantage of the community in ways similar to the way Europeans have done. [Brief phone interruption.] So we've changed the [pause] you know we've changed the perspectives in some ways and one of the unanticipated events that came is that the white people that have been hired like our present superintendent have been better [Interruption when someone knocks on the door.] So I think one of the unanticipated events of all of the social change work in the county has been that and the good ole' boy system has not been broken. It's just now more diverse. Our leaders are still mostly men. They still believe that they're in that position to take advantage of it and access people, jobs, and influence and use their influence to serve whoever they identify as their people. And there's major cultural

challenges to that sort of institutional framework. But some of the white folk that have been hired by the majority boards of color, have been much better white folk who aren't good ole' boys. So, for example, now in the county you have a superintendent, a president of the community college, and a president of the university, none of which are from the county, none of which are really good ole' boys, you know, and they've moved the county forward. In fact, you know, Dr. Metters at the college is a less good ole' boy than any other president that's ever been there from Robeson County or otherwise. But I really think we've got major challenges in education ahead of us because the whole system of education needs to be reformed in this country and it's largely due to the fact that it was created by a market economy early on. To somehow have some standard of education overlooking the very reality...

END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

TRANSCRIBED JULY, 2004 BY CATHY MANN