

TRANSCRIPT—SCOTT DOUGLAS

Interviewee: SCOTT DOUGLAS
Interviewer: Kimberly Hill
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START OF CD 1

KH: This is Tuesday, August 8, 2006. I'm Kimberly Hill from the Southern Oral History Program talking with Mr. Scott Douglas of Greater Birmingham Ministries. How are you doing sir?

SD: Good morning. How you doing?

KH: Great. Thank you for meeting with me.

SD: Glad to. Glad you're doing this work.

KH: Before we get started on the questions about the work that you are doing with GBM, just wanted to ask you some about your childhood and what got you interested in working on behalf of the poor.

SD: Actually, we grew up in--. I lived in Nashville, Tennessee not very far from Fisk University. My family was quite poor but not desperately poor. My father was a delivery man, well a "everything man" for a hardware store. This was back in the '40s and '50s where hardware stores were called feed stores. People, even in the cities, had things like rabbits and chickens in their back yard near downtown Nashville. It was a feed store, rabbit feed, chicken feed. I used to love to go down there and run my hands

through the rabbit food pellets. My father delivered hay to urban people, coal and ice, kindling. He was the sole employee of this business man. As a matter of fact, this business man moved three times, I remember, each time to a bigger house in the suburbs off the labor of my father. My father stayed in a house that he rented from his boss. When my father died many years later the business man put my mother out of the house and sold it. I grew up very conscious of racism. I went to Pearl High School. I would see John Louis and the Fisk students go by our high school, Pearl High School, on the way downtown for demonstrations. I only went to one. The police beat our -- not beat, yeah, actually beat but she got away -- our head cheerleader with a baton right in front of the police station.

KH: So there were a lot of--. There were a whole group of high school students there then?

SD: Yes. This was during the marches in the city, in the '60s we were in like tenth grade. Tenth, eleventh grade. That's what made me aware because in black Nashville, as a child, we were kind of protected from racism. My neighborhood was so thoroughly African American that we never came in contact with whites on a regular basis unless we went downtown. Right across the street from Fisk University is Hubbard Hospital, Meharry Medical School. I never saw a white doctor until I went to college. You could buy all your food, get all your medical care, go to school and never have any interactions with people who weren't black. I kind of learned an idea about justice and fairness from my family. I also learned fear. When Dr. King was starting to come to town I was in the barber one time getting my hair cut, and I never heard grown black men in the neighborhood you respected sound so fearful. They were discussing the fact that if

King kept messing around he's going to make the good white people mad. They were afraid of King upsetting the applecart. There was something I found later to be quite untrue, that I was learning to fear people I had never met. I would learn to fear poor whites and learning to love rich whites. It was the poor people that were out to get you, that kind of stuff.

KH: Do you mean you didn't have much experience with poor whites but you were still afraid of them anyway?

SD: Yeah, just because of the conversations that would happen. I had had some experiences with poor whites because on the edge of my neighborhood, especially when I was very young like first or second grade, there were poor whites we used to play with. By the time I got to sixth, seventh grade they had moved out. Nashville was like Birmingham. There was on the edges of black communities there'd be a white neighborhood but they weren't interspersed within, that kind of a thing. In Murfreesboro, Tennessee where my grandfather's farm was located, there was a white farm family next door to us, next farm over. We played together but it's around eleven or twelve white kids disappeared.

KH: As in moving away?

SD: No, no. They wouldn't come play over.

KH: Right, right.

SD: I learned later it was a Southern phenomenon that as white kids approached adolescence, boys and girls and all that, people disappeared. Anyway, then I graduated from high school. My best experience about being poor in Nashville was even as early as third or fourth grade you began to notice serious economic differences. Even

though we were racially segregated we were economically integrated. Poor blacks did not live very far from well-to-do blacks. Negro professors at Fisk, the doctors at Meharry were like blocks away from me or houses away from me. The good news is I was able to go to the home of Arna Bontemps. Personally I didn't recognize who it was until I took literature in college. I played with his son, played at his pool table, read his books, his book collection and stuff. At then I go to college and learn he was the chronicler of the Harlem Renaissance. Mr. Bontemps! He was teaching at Fisk at that time. I had access to resources that my family didn't own because the economic integration of the African American community. I read a lot as a child. I read anything I can get my hands on. It was important that I did that. We organized--us poor kids were put down by some of the middle class and higher income African Americans so we decided (probably unconsciously) to what we call now an academic gang of poor kids organized to excel, not for the purpose of succeeding in life, but for the purpose of embarrassing the middle class kids. We even developed this little trick. When teachers would give tests and one of us made the highest score and they would write the score on the board but they wouldn't say who made them. The accidental drop with the score up while exiting the door just so somebody would know who made that score. Then we helped each other with homework, visit each others' houses. Those who were stronger in math would help those who were weaker in math, those who were stronger in language and English helped those who were weaker and stuff. It worked because by the time I got to high school we were able to take over the student government. The key things like the--I was president of the senior class. One of my folks was editor of the school year book. Kennedy had been elected president by the time I got to high school. We kind of thought his

leadership--he had some tax cuts. We reduced the price of the school year book and the class rings. We took them from fifteen dollars down to eleven. This old school day. Then I found out that the president of the senior class got a free ring if he chose one person to choose which ring to get him, not the whole senior class. The senior class president negotiated with the ring vendor and stuff. So, I got a cheaper ring. Because of that I didn't get a free one. We also reduced the school year book price, the class yearbook by doing most, except the graduation photos, all the other photos--it was the first time it happened in school--all the other photos were made by students. That reduced the price of school yearbook.

KH: So, you really were thinking of the greater good?

SD: Yeah, yeah. We had built a press. We didn't have the money for all that class stuff. We had build up some enmities, childish enmities but going back to fifth and sixth grade with some of these people. They went to one set of parties, we went to another. They could date certain people. We could only date certain people. We got dates on stuff like that, you know. Class was a big thing. [Interruption of vibrating phone] What was that?

KH: It's mine.

SD: Oh.

KH: You think in your high school most of the students were poor?

SD: Looking back, most of them were. We were poorer than most. On our street they used to say we were the second poorest family on my street. Thank God for the Townsends because they were poorer than we were. We had four kids in my family. They had eight. A lot of the imbalances was when families had similar incomes the

number of children to provide for was an indicator of how much disposable income you had. I was born in '46. By the time I left high school in '64 we had never owned a car. But Nashville's got a pretty good public transportation system. My father did have access to his company's, his business's pick up truck.

KH: Because he was the only worker.

SD: He was the only worker, right. There were things back then people don't, except in rural areas, experience now. We didn't have an indoor toilet, the house had an outdoor toilet until probably I was in the tenth grade. All the things you do like inviting kids over to your house to study, "I come to your house." Those kinds of things, maybe ninth grade we got an indoor toilet. Most were poor but Nashville had a strong middle class mostly supported by the addition to your regular teachers in public schools, but supported by the Meharry Hospital, Tennessee State University, and Fisk University. Also, was a crossroads town because people came there from all across the country. The alumni of Fisk sent their children back to Fisk from Detroit, from California, from New York or wherever. It was a good place to mix it up with black folks from around the country.

KH: It sounds like it was the kind of place where you could get a good education without even really knowing it at the time.

SD: Oh yes,

KH: All that geographic diversity.

SD: Yes. We always had the latest dances as well as latest information. There were cab drivers. I knew several cab drivers who had advanced degrees who were between jobs in their profession.

KH: You did your first protest when you were in tenth grade?

SD: Yes.

KH: Did you do more protests when you got to college?

SD: It took a while. Even though I got a scholarship to the University, a smaller scholarship to Iowa State University, and a full scholarship to Fisk University my dream was to become an aerospace engineer. UT[ennessee] in Knoxville had this new program called Engineering and Physics. There was a combination of liberal arts physics and the hard core engineering pieces, primarily mechanical. It was when I was researching the field I found out that the reason the space program was burgeoning, was booming was that to make a long story short, the scientists couldn't build anything and engineers couldn't envision anything. They needed this intermediary to combine the science work with the engineering work to advance the space program in particular. It was a five year program. We took a lot of engineering courses and a lot of languages. Not a lot a languages, but you could choose from Russian, German, in particular and French, but mostly Russian and German. That was because English, Russian, and German were the languages of the quote sciences back in those days. I took out a loan to go there not knowing that I could go to Fisk for free and then get a Masters degree in something else, do the same thing, which some of my friends did. I took a loan to go to UT. We were staying in this brand new dormitory. I was tutoring this guy across the hall from me in physics. We were in the same physics class. We were in advance physics class, the same advanced physics class. He was at, just started chatting, you know. He was from the South so we got along pretty well. But the other white kids kind of shunned me. They walked down there with your towel on going to the shower and they walked,

they get over the other side of the hallway. He asked me what scholarship did I have. I said, "Scholarship? I applied. I didn't get one. I'm here on a loan." He said, "I got a full scholarship in physics." I said, "You do." He was from out of state, had a full scholarship and white. I'm black. I'm from Tennessee with a loan and I'm tutoring him.

KH: They didn't even offer you the scholarship.

SD: Then we compared scores and my tests scores were higher than his. Then we compared extra curricular activities. I had more engagement in high school than he did. Then he got mad. I was too stupid to get mad. I was glad to be there. That's when I began to think about something that our teachers had told us before. Their solution -- these were some middle class African Americans -- if you get an education, people will respect you regardless of what color you are. There I was getting an education. I'm taking out a loan; it took me years to pay off. This guy, who was a friend of mine, was actually there on scholarship. That was the beginning of my saying, beginning to see that racism was not the results of my individual behavior or conduct but was systemic. It was far bigger than I ever thought. It wasn't about bad white people that acted out as individuals against bad black people. It was about a structural dysfunction in our society that affected my folks as a people and polluted white folks as a people, toxic racism. That's how we got into, kind of come into the light of systemic stuff. Started reading different literature, you know, James Baldwin. Then I began hearing about the Black Panther party and start reading things about that. Then by '66, two years later, me and a guy named Jimmy Baxter co-founded, and a woman from Memphis (I can't remember her name), co-founded the first black student union at UT. I drafted a constitution. We were mostly about countering racist incidents, investigating and countering, racial

incidents directed toward African American students on campus. Things like some students being racially oppressed in class by the professors, like one guy told a friend of ours 'you'll never get more than a D in my class.' We did a little cheating. Being a writer, I started writing his essays. I was saying the same essay to him. He would rewrite it. Then I would submit. I had this wonderful English instructor from Hoosier, Illinois who just really encouraged me. I was the first--. They had a book called the Theme Vault which is a collection of freshman writings. I was the first African American to be in the Theme Vault but I didn't use that thing. Anyway, so one of the things my professor gave me an A, my friend's professor gave him a D. At our own risk, we took that to the dean. The dean, of course, said we were cheating. We said, "No, we weren't cheating. We were conducting an investigation." That was the only way we could prove it. The dean did discipline, seriously discipline the professor and told us if y'all do it again then--.

KH: Then you get in trouble.

SD: Actually, we told them if they threatened us with expulsion we would call a press conference about the racism at UT. We didn't even know the phone number of the local newspaper but we were going to call a press conference. After that we got treated in small token ways, a little better by the professors. Even the president, Andy Hope at the time, would see me walking around campus, offering me a ride to where I was going. They were really afraid of us even though we really didn't know what we were doing in a structural way. Those kinds of things we did, incidents of racism affecting, particularly around grading and stuff like that.

KH: Were many black students looking at racist incidents on campus and really getting interested in getting involved?

SD: Early on we grew pretty fast. When I first went there, I don't know how many in town students. In '64 we had fifteen blacks on campus out of a campus of ten thousand, more than that who lived in the city, who are from Knoxville themselves. Three years later we had more than three hundred African Americans. Then it just expounded, it grew after that. By the time we got to three hundred, less than a year or two because we came in the summer time. Before '68 that's for sure, there were hundreds of black students on campus and the black student union really started declining. Then we started having fraternities and sororities and other kinds of things. We asked for a black counselor and we finally got one. It turned out he was a spy, Ralph Boston.

KH: He was a spy?

SD: He told me. Ralph Boston, the Olympic athlete way back in the '60s. He was a long jumper, very famous back then, was hired to be the first African American, black counselor then they called them in our student council. He never did much. We would take our issues to him but nothing ever got resolved. Years later, in the early '70s I had dropped out of school, gone back to Nashville, Tennessee, and I was on stage with Angela Davis at Fisk University and I saw him come up out of the audience. He says, "Scott, I haven't seen you in years." I said, "Hey, Ralph, how you doing?" "I'm sorry, man." "Sorry for what?" "Man, I was hired to spy on you all. They thought you all were going to do some violence." I ain't teasing.

KH: So he was just supposed to let them know--.

SD: The plans we had. Some of us were suspicious of him but I had so much respect for him as an athlete I said of course he wouldn't do that. But some people were suspicious of him. We had people who would say anything in the meeting. "Man, we ought to blow this damn place up." That was just utterances. Nobody never acted on any of that stuff. There were never even plans. Get honky and all that kind of stuff, nah. I said, "Well you ever report anything?" He said, "No." I said, "Okay then." But the--.

KH: It's good he didn't take it too seriously.

SD: He knew black students. Black students at UT talk the same way as black students at Tennessee State except maybe the conditions they talk about were somewhat different.

KH: It reminds me of what happened with the Muslim group in California. A spy was listening in on them and he turned them into the FBI.

SD: We can talk about it later but the spies did most of the damage. In New York State back whenever there were student bombings of things like ROTC places and draft headquarters and stuff. The spy was the one who did it. The sheriff said "well make them do something." And his only defense was my way of make them do something was have them help me do it. It was the agent. You the one who did it. Time of deep paranoia.

KH: So you dropped out of the University of Tennessee?

SD: Oh yeah.

KH: What year was that?

SD: I dropped out in 1969. By that time I had changed my majors. My wife got away from Tennessee also. I never graduated. I've got more hours than she has but

that's what happens when you change your major from engineering/physics to economics to urban planning to political science. You have more minors than everybody but no major. Also, in spring of '68 King was assassinated. That was a big blow because to me it meant there was no hope. 'If you can kill a King, give me a break, what they going to do to you?' the way my childish mind said. I mean love can't kill you. But some people felt threatened by it. Non-violence can't kill you. It might kill the non-violent person but it won't kill you. Just to say life took a bad turn because what motivated me still was hope. Hope means that if you persevere things do improve but I gave up hope. I stopped persevering and became homeless for a while, hanging around the streets, sleeping in abandoned houses. That's when my interest in housing got started, sleeping in abandoned houses. I had a family I could go to. The family that you left on a journey to become an engineering physicist, didn't want to return as a homeless person. It wasn't like I got rejected. I was ashamed. I was unforgiving of myself, into my misery. I finally kind of sobered up and got enough guts to go home. Then I got a job, a good job after having several bad jobs including one job I worked a half day and quit at lunch, beating an iron plate with an iron pole. It was a ship building company, a barge building company in Tennessee. Boom, boom, boom. I had a headache by twelve noon. I asked the supervisor, "How long do I do this before I learn how to do welding, which is a real job?" He said, "Six months." So, I left.

KH: You quit.

SD: I quit, went down the street, got hired that day as a draftsman at a furniture company. I learned how to draft in my engineering classes. That was a pretty good job designing chairs like this, not designing but laying out chairs like this and beds and

cabinets. But finally I got a job at a aircraft plant, Afco Aero Structures. It's owned by Timco now. Made airplane wings. I liked that job. It was the second highest desk job in Nashville. Today it would be equivalent to twenty-five/thirty dollars an hour, manufacturing job. Kind of built my life back from there and became more politically active in the community. Then got involved in anti-war demonstrations, free Angela Davis demonstrations. We noticed that the black people in Nashville were marching the free Angela Davis. The white kids were marching to end the war. Me and some friends handed out a leaflet, different leaflet different campuses; 'come downtown to the federal building twelve noon on Tuesday, whatever, free Angela Davis.' That's Tennessee State and Fisk. Vanderbilt: 'Come downtown at the federal building at twelve noon, end the war.' That was the first multi-issue demonstration we ever had in Nashville. Then out of that we built a Nashville Committee for Peace and Justice based on people in the community and students from Fisk University, Tennessee State University and Vanderbilt, stayed around for quite a while. We had to--.

KH: I would guess that would be one of the first multi-racial demonstrations you had too.

SD: It was certainly the first one of any size because it was pretty big. That got me more involved in politics. We started meeting regularly with students from Vanderbilt and students from Tennessee State, students from Fisk. Did a lot of things together, cultural things as well as other peace things. Got Julian Bond invited to Vanderbilt. They got black folks on Vanderbilt campus around South Africa. This in the '70s, you know apartheid stuff in South Africa. Ran for congress, got what about 740 votes.

KH: You ran for congress?

SD: I ran as independent in 1972. By that time I had been laid off from the aircraft plant, working small jobs. Ran on the platform of "Free Angela Davis and end the war." After all the campaigning that we had done, we looked at the results where I got votes from. They weren't where I campaigned. They were like Aunt Mabel's neighborhood. That's Uncle Henry's neighborhood. After all that work I said, "Aha, now I'm learning about politics." I got interviewed by Al Gore. He was a freshmen writer for the Nashville Tennessean. He was so low on the totem pole he got assigned my campaign. I did get a chance to go to a lot of speaking engagements even though they weren't debates, be on the same platform as the candidates who were likely to win. As a matter of fact, the successful winner, Richard Fulton, my mother had been a maid most of her life. She had been a maid and my uncles had catered his house, his parties and stuff. He knew my mom, knew my uncles. We spoke and when I spoke on the issues I always got more applause than he got, especially on college campuses. One time he put his arm around and said, "Scott, if you were a Democrat I would vote for you." I said, "If I were a Democrat I wouldn't have these positions." That was a good experience too.

KH: I was wondering something about the hopelessness you experienced after King's assassination. It would seem to make more sense if you felt hopeless about the movement but it seems like you felt personal hopelessness and then over time you still had hope that society could change.

SD: It took an epiphany. I wasn't hopeless because King was quote "my leader" and I was leaderless. I was hopeless because the barriers seemed insurmountable.

Any system that would kill a King would kill a baby, would kill any innocent, would kill hope. There were probably some other things that were going on at the time the King got killed. I was still in school but I had already begun my slide down. I had a good job at TBA and I quit that as an intern. That happened before King got killed. When King got killed it was kind of like culminated everything. King was my last hope. I didn't organize everything around whether King was alive or not but I realized he was my bottom last hope that even if I didn't make it things would be transformed for other people. I think it was a culmination. In Nashville, after I got this job in aircraft plant and got some other more decent jobs I went to see--boy, '72 was a big year. It was '70, '72, must've been early '70, '71 and '70 that's right. I began to turn around. This was even before I ran. You don't run for Congress as an Independent unless you got hope. Hope had been regenerated, maybe overly regenerated. Hope came back with a passion. It was 1970 because I went to--yeah, I was still working the aircraft plant. Angela Davis had just been arrested. There was a campaign for bail for Angela. I hadn't really gotten involved yet in 1970. It took '72 to do that. I went to this community center and saw a big crowd of folks, black community. There was this gray haired woman with her fist up in the air saying, "Free my daughter. Free Angela Davis." It was Angela's mom, Sally Davis. She was a school teacher who had taken off around the country to support her daughter. That to me was my single hope moment. I'm in my early twenties; I don't trust anybody over thirty. I was kind of messing around with my life and got job from job. I got a good one at the time. Then I said, "If a school teacher can raise her hand and her fist and say to this government, "Free my daughter." I said, "Yeah, there's reason to hope." I got involved with free Angela Davis Campaign. They had some sign up sheet

there. Started circulating petitions and going on campuses. Eventually that's how Angela got to Fisk University. Later, about the time Ralph Boston came. After she had been freed she did like a tour, went around the country and spoke. That was kind of rebuilding, rebuilding hope around the basis that we have to be producers of hope not just consumers of hope. You have a role to play in making hope manifest among people. That was a signal event, just as much as King. The assassination kind of took the bottom out of the pit. The new foundation, for me, was being there for Angela Davis. It wasn't even Angela Davis. It was her mom. I was mad about Angela Davis being messed up over stuff. That was just angry. Her mother gave me hope and said you have some work to do. You have a lot of stuff to learn, certainly. That was the beginning of this trajectory.

KH: You lost the congressional race. Did you stay active politically?

SD: Yeah, yeah very much so. Got involved in the first woman to run for mayor of Nashville campaign. Everything I got involved with lost but the hope kept building. What's his name? I don't know if you ever seen the gospel on TV but Bobby Jones. Bobby Jones was on that campaign with me. This was back before he got to Opryland and all the big shots. Bobby Jones was in that campaign with us. At that time he was like an up and coming local, very local gospel entrepreneur couldn't sing a lick.

KH: He's alright now.

SD: But he could put the people who could sing together very well. He was very important to that. A lot of folks like that like leaders of different sectors, not the leaders of black Nashville but the next tier of people who are actually doing the work came behind. I forgot her name now. She's been dead for many years. It was a good

campaign, met a lot of people. I learned how to do some things. We did some boycotts. We boycotted "Superfly," the movie.

KH: Why?

SD: As being deleterious to the interests of black people and black culture. As a matter of fact we put a picket line in front of the theater that was showing, Paramount Theater that was showing the movie. "Superfly" stayed. We did some newsletters, not newsletter editorials in the black newspapers explaining it. We weren't just being reactionary. The drug culture is real and this is pushing it. So we had a picket line in front of Paramount Theater. Some of our friends said, "Man, I can spend my own money to see what I want to see." I said, "No, but you hurting your people. You spending money and hurt your own people." People actually left the line and the movie stayed just three days. It came back later to a big run.

KH: That first time was good, though.

SD: Those kind of things, do us a progressive art stuff. Getting progressive artists on the campus of Tennessee State, black artists and stuff like that, just trying to mix things up a little bit. Was pretty much what we did that period. Around '73 we got married, my wife Lynn. '74 my son was born, the name of Frederick Amilcar Douglas after Amilcar Cabral of the Guinea South Revolution. We were either going to name him that or going to name him Leydwan after the Vietnamese General who defeated US armies in Vietnam. We said, "Naw, all his friends will call him Dwayne." We named him-- [Laughter] Leydwan.

START OF CD 2

SD: Yeah, my wife was working at Sears. She had graduated from UT. We had dated at UT and had been apart for several years. Then we got reconnected and got married. She was working a cash register at Sears for several years even though she had a Bachelors degree in retail. She should be buying at that time, you know management. As a matter of fact, she had trained her management. They had come unto her as a little cashier and she had trained her supervisors. She was applying for a scholarship in another field. She was interested in public health or early childhood education. There was a new program here at the University of Alabama Birmingham in early childhood education that offered her a scholarship. At that time I was unemployed again. That's a transferable skill. We packed up and came down here. I made a little money doing some writing and what do you call those people, it's been so long, not fillers. Anyway you write for pay and somebody prints it. Mostly civil rights stuff.

KH: Freelance Writing.

SD: Yeah, freelance. Thank you. That was in '76. We came here and found an apartment. We found GBM because--it had been formed in '69--because we needed some clothes for our two-year-old. She had got some additional scholarships. I got some money from freelance writing and photographs of the demonstrations at that time around the South. I would ride around the South and take pictures of the stuff and use those.

KH: Was it your idea to do freelance writing and photography of the protests or did somebody ask you?

SD: No, that was my idea. It was my idea. I had been doing it anyway. I hadn't gotten paid for it.

KH: Getting paid for it was good.

SD: I might actually get paid for it. I invested in a camera. I said the only people who had pictures of these movements were the--. All these demonstrations nobody had pictures afterward.

KH: Did you hear about the huge vault of pictures they found over at Birmingham News here recently?

SD: Yes. I've got to get to those. Yes. Yes, I did.

KH: That was exciting stuff. They kept them, just boxes and boxes of them. They kept hidden because they were like, "Well, if we just don't let people see the pictures maybe it will just blow over."

SD: An intern found it. If they hadn't been moving their building to a new building it probably would never still be found. It took an intern. I wonder when they going to display them. They said they were going to do but it's been hush hush ever since. They probably going to sanitize them now.

KH: I hope they don't destroy them.

SD: Yeah.

KH: They are online.

SD: They are? I didn't know that.

KH: I'll show you later.

SD: Good. I didn't notice that. They didn't say that.

KH: How much did you know about the protests that were going on in Birmingham before you moved down here?

SD: Before I moved down here because of my regional kind of connection with people I have been coming to Birmingham since '74. We met with people like

Black Panthers who were here, other folks, people who were active in the Labor Movement who were here, doing some stuff. Once again, I was taking some pictures. The people I was working with were primarily Anne Braden and Fred Shuttlesworth and the Southern Organizing Committee of Economic and Social Justice. I need to show you. I'll show the book in a minute. That was the major group. Nope, wrong issue. Mt. Cary Mission Baptist Church. The south was bubbling then come to think of it in terms of protests to main things like police brutality was a really big thing. The peace movement hadn't taken off until the '80s. Police brutality, police brutality, police brutality. Klan violence and police brutality were the main things the people demonstrated around. There were some strikes in the South. Like in Mississippi the chicken workers. That's the main one I can remember. S.C.L.C had just begun to new resurgence maybe late '70s, early '80s. The Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice was kind of the milieu, the network that gave me access to different people, different places, what was going on along with S.C.L.C. That's a fuzzy period. I think a lot was going on

In '79, police brutality speaking, a young African American woman, Benita Carter was shot in the back of the head by a police officer who was called to the scene of what was said was a robbery. He just shot through the back of the car and killed her. That happened after a serious of police killings of black people in Birmingham. Black people were fed up. It was almost a riot. This neighborhood was called Kingston. Black people armed themselves. Ku Klux Klan came by in pick up trucks firing. Next several days--.

KH: In '79 too.

SD: The current mayor, then David Vann, organized a blue ribbon commission to investigate. People felt like that was tossing it off. Their investigation led to no serious action being taken against the policeman who did it. Even though they were good friends, David Vann and Mayor Arrington, then city councilman Arrington, Arrington decided to run against David Vann to run for mayor. He said 'I'm not running against David Vann I'm running for mayor' and won. Became the first African American mayor in Birmingham history. I played a very minor role in that, just being a gopher and the phone person at the campaign headquarters. Then, they kicked me out because one of the campaign workers said I was a communist and therefore I shouldn't be in the campaign so they kicked me out. I came back.

KH: They thought that people would think less of Mayor Arrington?

SD: Arrington. Yes.

KH: Did they think GBM was a communist organization?

SD: GBM got its share of stuff even before I got here. I didn't get here until probably 1982 as a volunteer. Even though I knew of GBM, we saw GBM as, you know, we doing campaigns around different things, police brutality, as a church base ally. I already knew GBM in that kind of role. By '84 I had gotten on the board of GBM. I'll get back to GBM's role later on [regarding] brutality stuff. Those kinds of things I was doing then. It was still hard to find work and make a living. My wife by the time had graduated the Masters program and had become a teacher by '78. She really subsidized my movement work. That was at least a living wage for three of us and supplemented by what I could get with part time jobs. The thing that did not break my spirit was during that period between '76 and say '80 was when I went to apply for a job as a carpet

cleaner. You supply your own transportation. You supply your own--. You pretty much lease their equipment. You find your own contacts. I didn't get hired for that. Now, this is a no lose situation because the fee I pay has insurance on the cleaning equipment.

KH: What reasons did they give?

SD: They didn't give me any reasons.

KH: Considering your educational background.

SD: Probably over qualified. It would be a waste of time for them. I can't even get a job carpet cleaning using a carpet cleaner I'm renting. The fact that that didn't knock me back to a deep depression is what was important. By '84 working with SOC and doing those pictures and stuff. I was hired by SOC then. I stayed with them until--.

KH: SOC?

SD: I'm sorry, Southern Organizing Committee. I'm using my jargon. I became executive director of the Southern Organizing Committee in 1984. That was my first full time job in years.

KH: How long did you stay in that position?

SD: I stayed with SOC from 1984 until 1989. Then I became a field officer, program officer for the Partnership for Democracy Foundation which is based in Washington D.C. I stayed with them from '89 to '92. Then in '92 I went to work for Sierra Club as the first grassroots environmental justice organizer in the Southeast. I stayed there six months and this job became available. I became director of GBM in '93. Actually I didn't want to leave Sierra Club but I actually said this is the kind of work I want to do, kind of faith and social justice based. That's what my life has kind of been about. Sierra Club, I was traveling all the time. I said, "Oooh, I can work in one place.

Just imagine what [I] can do." I've traveled more since I came here since I have with Sierra Club. Here the travel is different. There you are going there to--. Sierra Club you are going to places where there are big environmental justice fights, trying to help to bring resources of the Sierra Club to the local communities without Sierra Club or pairing the leadership of other local communities. I was kind of an environmental justice broker in terms of bringing the resources. Sierra Club had many resources today. They could do independent testing of water, air, soil and put that in the hands of the local communities, mostly the communities of color. In previous attempts to relate some of the folks from groups like Sierra Club wanted to control the strategy of the grassroots groups. When I was hired it was part of my job to bring the resources of the Sierra Club without dominating the direction of strategy. One thing I did do was help identify strategy and some strategy options. I didn't say this is what you do or this is how you do it. We ran across the weirdest group, the most distinctive group that I ran across was the Jesus People Against Pollution. J-PAP.

KH: I like that.

SD: Actually they--I don't know if they still exist or not--but they did a real good job in terms of taking ordinary citizens from Mississippi --Columbia, Mississippi -- and just through their passion, quite frankly, just peeling back the onions of who do you protest to, what kind of claims do you make, where do you go, how do you document it and those kinds of pieces. Like many groups of the era EPA was slick. EPA could co-opt people in a minute. They would give you recognition. They would put you on stage in front of important people. They would give you a free trip to Atlanta.

KH: But if you're in Mississippi or Birmingham, a free trip to Atlanta doesn't really mean that much.

SD: Actually, [with] the right hotel it could mean something. I've never been to a four star Sheraton. Also, EPA had a very, very savvy leadership in how to split the environmental justice groups from the traditional green groups, the Sierra Clubs, the Audubon Society, and those kinds of groups. They really saw the environmental justice groups as being pawns they could use against the groups who issues they--. They thought they were powerful and had a much bigger public policy which was true. They tried that. We were able to unite against the EPA by Ben Chavis being one of those who discovered a memo that essentially gave EPA, internal memo, that gave EPA strategy for dividing the environmental movement.

KH: How did he find that?

SD: Probably through a whistleblower type person inside EPA. There are some good people inside EPA but they weren't in leadership. Why would you go coming out of college to fill out the Environmental Protection Administration? To protect the environment. The top people are political appointees. They serve the will of the president. [Whatever that will is that's the direction is.] We had a copy of that. That was a key piece because it helped unite the green groups and environmental justice groups saying EPA is none of our friend. We had to deal with them as a strategic target, not as a strategic partner. That was very important piece. They even had terminology that said, instead of using "environmental justice" let's use "environmental equity." What do you mean "the equal distribution of pollution?" No family should be forced to live in that kind of stuff, with those kinds of things going on.

KH: I hadn't thought about asking you about environmental factors but I would like to talk with you about how environmental considerations have played a role here in Birmingham.

SD: That's a big one. When I used to come through Birmingham I used to say 'drive though, wash your car when you get out' because the most notable environmental factor in Birmingham was the pollution of the steel industry. The steel and iron industry. It was dense. People were used to it but come in from out of town, people noticed it. There never was a big fight against it at that time. As a matter of fact, today the biggest polluter has gone from being US Steel and other steel industries with the smoke stack industries to Alabama Power Company and automobiles parked on our interstates during rush hour just sending out pollutants. It never played much of a role, the environmental justice factor. I'll show you a t-shirt when we get through but for years Birmingham has -- well, two things. GBM played a real big role in developing a group called the Citizens Lead Education Project. That was a thing done to help, primarily because this was where the focus, children were being found to be exposed to lead at very high levels, particularly in low income communities in houses built before the 1970s. Who tends to live in houses before the 1970s and also low income communities? African Americans. Because, as a matter of fact, we have two trends, 20% of Alabamians live in mobile housing. 20%. North Carolina may have the second highest. Alabama leads, 20%. So, not much lead paint in mobile housing. Who lives there mostly? Mostly low income white folks, not low income black people. In some rural areas there are some black families certainly living in mobile homes, manufactured housing. If it's got wheels on it it's a mobile home. They built CLEP. GBM was very important in launching that. We

were able to get children first diagnosed and then start winning grants to get housing rehabilitated in ways it didn't spread the lead dust. I can't think of any other environmental issue that GBM played a real big role in except for the stopping the "Super Sewer" which--.

KH: What was the "Super Sewer"?

SD: The super sewer. Funny you should ask. Around 1993, in a very quiet thing environmental groups in Birmingham had sued this county, Jefferson County, for not maintaining the storm sewers and sanitary sewers, both. The county had not done that so they entered into a consent decree that over the next few years the county would invest in repairing storm and sanitary sewers where it needed repairing and installing new ones where new ones were needed or more capacity was needed, they were wider diameter types. That was it. Then several years later, GBM starts noticing--one of the things that we do is help people pay their water bill--is that the people's sewer bill which used to be half or third of your water bill, was now twice as high as your water bill. What we didn't know--. We went to the environmental and say 'what's going on here? You all got the lawsuit.' He said what they are doing is--. Well, they already started a campaign but it wasn't very reported in the paper. These environmental groups, particularly Carter River Society, had started campaigning against Jefferson County for taking that Consent Decree mandate and instead of fixing the old broken sewers they had started construction on a new sewer system for the suburbs in undeveloped lands so developers could turn those into gated communities, malls, condos, that kind of stuff. I said "What?" Say, yeah we've already been down to county commission but nobody listened to us. We decided to join hands. The environmental groups were the technical expertise. GBM,

because our constituency base, was--. Anyways this was our argument: You mean to tell me you going to raise sewer fees on low income grandmoms living on social security to support the development of urban sprawl and gated communities and malls that they'll never benefit from. They can't even get there because public transportation doesn't go that far. The idea is wrong to subsidize these people for those folks' riches and profits and development. We started doing things together, come up with joint strategies, joint messages and framing stuff. We would have low income people with their sewer bills show up at the county commission meeting saying, "I can't afford to pay this. Sewer bills went up but Social Security didn't go up." Then we collected stories of people who like a woman who is some ninety years old who wasn't flushing her toilet because she was afraid that she couldn't [afford to] flush her toilet. The water/sewer bill combined was never a big issue around here at GBM. It was always like rent or gas bill or electric bill. Oh, I can handle my water bill but now your water bill starts approaching your gas bill in the summer or your electric bill in the winter. Well, electric bills lower in the winter and gas bill lower in the summer. Actually what happened out of that was two, we have a five member county commission. At least two of the challengers made that their main campaign issue to reverse the decision to build the "Super Sewer."

The environmental issue was that the "Super Sewer" would consist of crossing under the Cahaba River fourteen times and they were afraid of the technology going under that nationally recognized sister river. They were scared the technology wasn't proven. It threatened to--. That's our source of water supply. It threatened to one endanger the wildlife in the river while threatening the life of--. It threatened the water supply of Birmingham. What we added to it. [Interruption to drink water] I needed that.

I've been talking too much. Why don't you do so much talking? This is a one way conversation.

KH: Oh, I'll ask you some more questions but I am interested in the "Super Sewer."

SD: The environmental issue was one of crossing under the Cahaba River some fourteen times with untested technology which would threaten the natural wildlife as well as the water supply for Birmingham plus the issue of it's unfair to charge people who will never benefit to subsidize the urban sprawl and the development of malls and gated communities they never benefit from. Combining all those together we got a lot of public attention through rallies downtown, bought some t-shirts. The two candidates won and actually reversed that decision. The "Super Sewer" was stopped in its tracks. The first tunnel that had begun to be driven was filled up. They were telling us they couldn't afford to pull out the toning machine. I said if you can afford to get it in you can afford to get it out. So they charged us, the people, for pulling it up, the developers.

Now, there have been over seven indictments of contractors and former county commissioners for taking bribes to build "Super Sewer." Not only have you proven us correct, we never said they were crooked. We said they were wrong. It's been three convictions. A couple people plead guilty and some more yet to happen. It's still current. One county commissioner has been indicted and convicted. There are more investigations going on. Really it happened vastly. We thought that some of the contractors plead guilty and then went, to go easy on themselves, gave corroborating evidence, like receipts, like work done for free on a county commissioner's house. Everything is not about giving me--. "See, I'll vote for you if you give me a thousand

dollars. No, I'll vote for you, by the way I'm building an addition to my home." That ways there's not ever a paper trail.

KH: It's interesting how these environmental and political connections they all fit together.

SD: Well, the environment touches everything. That was a good victory. Now, a specific case of low income--one of the few examples in latter years of low income communities and predominantly the middle class, highly educated environment, environmentalist working together in a common cause. We had to demonstrate the connection. Before GBM came along--. We formed a coalition, GBM and the environmentalists invited other groups into it and it was called CUSS. It was Communities United to Stop the "Super Sewer." The CUSS award, plaque is hanging in our thing forever. Customers say why you call it CUSS? Well, why (when I think about the super) sewer I just cuss. Well, take some action about it then.

KH: While you have been director of GBM did you ever work closely with the Arrington administration on projects?

SD: Yes and no. A matter of fact, we worked closely with the Arrington administration on the Center for Affordable Housing which is a new entity here in Birmingham to increase home ownership in the city of Birmingham. That was a long monthly, year struggle maybe thirteen years long. Two things, we got this building. It's not a new building. We rehabbed this building back in '95. After months of work I was able to get the Arrington administration to have the city give us \$50,000 to complete this building which is good, a little less than 10% of cost of the building. We serve the citizens of Birmingham. More importantly we worked with the Arrington

administration--we worked with three administrations, it began with the Arrington administration--in building a Center for Affordable Housing to increase the affordable housing in the city of Birmingham. The first of our major program has been launched. In the implementation of Affordable Housing, the whole ownership program, to increase the balance of renters/homeowners by making them where its homeowners to increase the asset base in the African American community.

There are other programs that are not implemented yet such as the Research and Planning programs of the Center which will be a one stop shop for communities, not just available but for communities looking for all of the angles it takes to rebuild communities. They have a connection there to not just grants to do construction with but also a green home building. That is a home building that is economical and environmentally friendly, economic to operate in terms of the utilities, heating and cooling, those kinds of things. Also, housing that is sensitive to the environment, even construction processes that are sensitive to the environment. A one stop shop in terms of community organizations on what technical assistance they can get, especially pro bono or low paid, but high quality technical assistance they can get before they decide on a neighborhood evaluation plan. We think that's very important that neighborhoods have their independent advisors. We lost a big fight with the--back to the city-- over here there's a public housing community now known as Park Place. Before they rebuilt it it was Metropolitan Gardens. It's a Hope VI funded operation. It used to have 910 units. Now it has like 264 units. Our issue was--. Oh, their issue was, our main issue was they were trying to build a place that has mixed incomes. I said look, like I told you I came from mixed income community. It was race. I know the benefit of that creative friction

that comes by when people of different incomes meet each other. So that's not my issue. My issue is what happens to the other four or five hundred families. That's my issue: where the bottom's going to be buried. We lost that fight. In that case the city was against us, the Arrington [administration had] been in office there. The Housing Authority was against us and several residents were against us saying that we were just churchly do gooders. They knew what was best for them. Well, now some of them are being displaced because their hope was they would be relocated back into the newly built places. But they are not there.

Oh, the Arrington administration. The primary thing we worked on with them was the, was the Center for Affordable Housing through several resolutions. The main thing that Arrington made us do was say you all, us and our committee, say we need this center. Go out in neighborhoods and show me you got support. We said okay. There are about twenty-three of Birmingham's ninety-nine neighborhoods that are the poorest neighborhoods in the city. We went to twenty-three of those neighborhoods and asked them, explained the Center for Affordable Housing and what it could mean to them. We said that look; we know that when the Center starts off can't help every neighborhood equally at the same time. It may be years before it can come back but the main part about it that is going to be its commitment to work with you, improving your neighborhood but we cannot commit that the year after it starts. Your neighborhood is going to be first because it's going to be based on a number of factors, the interest level inside the neighborhood, the reasonableness of the plan the neighborhood comes up with, the resources that it's going to need. All these things come into play but we are going to be fair. Sixteen of those twenty-three neighborhoods voted from \$500 to \$1000 to launch

the Center for Affordable Housing. That's pretty good because at that time each neighborhood only had about \$10,000 to spend. Some of them gave us 5%; some of them gave us 10% of their annual budget to start with. We took that back to the mayor. Then he got on board. Now it's operating and it has created over two hundred homeowners since October. That's pretty fast. We have built a board that is composed of bankers, community leaders, people in public housing, as well as social service groups like ours, or organized groups like ours. The board has to reflect the equitable partnership that must exist to move this thing forward. It can't just be bankers and poor folks. It can't be just poor folks and church folks. It has to be people who have credibility in all the sectors that we need to work together in it. So far it's making its way. We are really pushing because the major funding we got from the banks and from the city was for home ownership. That was a piece we could bite off first. We got to develop additional funding streams for the other program. The city is not interested in research planning information quite frankly. We tried to do information in such a way that is user friendly and useful, not just a whole bunch of data. We say there's a lot of difference between data and information. Information is data that is organized for use.

KH: It sounds like it would be mostly the people in the neighborhoods who are finding ways to use it for their own benefit.

SD: Yes. That's exactly it -- to kind of cut the technology and archaeness gap out of doing housing development. Some neighborhoods say 'well maybe we should build our own 501c3.' I said no. Once you figure out what your goal is then you build the forms and infrastructure to achieve that goal. Some of these forms you build can get in the way of achieving that goal. What you really need is a way to -- how do you assure

that the neighborhood itself, how do you assure that the authentic voice of the neighborhood guides the direction of the plan and the implementation? That happens several different ways, but which best does that? I say 'authentic voice of the neighborhood' because there are neighborhood leaders and there's the neighborhood leader. Quest is the authentic voice. The informed authentic voice of the neighborhood is where you are trying to get to and what form best represents that.

KH: Let's step back some to when you first started volunteering for GBM. How did you know that this was the type of organization that you'd want to get really involved in?

SD: Well, I knew of GBM but I didn't know if I would get involved in it day to day. I told you earlier that when my wife was in college and we first got here we came by here and got some clothes for our two year old. When did I--? I was involved in a--. During the early '80s there was a campaign that GBM had launched to get reduced electric rates and on utility rates, that's for sure gas and electric, utility rates for low income and people on fixed incomes. That was the year when they had taken a real big spike. US Steel had a real big lay off so a lot of people who never been laid off for a long time anyway without work. The first responders to family crisis is a family member. Really. The people that poor people depended on for help in emergencies were also in emergencies. There was deepening of poverty in Alabama at that time. I think George Wallace came up with a term for it. He called it a new poor. He even came out with this desperate unemployment payments. If you are part of the old poor you got one level of unemployment check. If you are part of the new poor, these are largely, majority white people like US Steel [workers] then you got a high unemployment check. We thought

that was one of the earlier attempts of Reagan and others to--George did it first in this era--to split up the poor between the-- Now we are seeing it again, quite frankly, in terms of how institutions handle--it's been revealed in big discussions--Katrina evacuees and the existing poor. This is not to blame the evacuees. Just like George Wallace, we weren't blaming the steel workers. We were blaming the policies and institutions as they affect folks and they try to divide folks and pit them against one another.

I got a little bit involved with that and started with GBM as a volunteer, that's the unemployment side. Then GBM launched this campaign back where I started from on lowering utility rates. It was called the PIP based on a model in Ohio. PIP was P-I-P, Percentage of Income Plan. The Percentage of Income Plan was that for a limited amount, say three hundred kilowatt hours a month, would be available for very low income people, people on low fixed incomes at a percentage of their income. For instance, you bill would be 20% of your income. Now that would mean there would be a balance up to three hundred. Over three hundred those are called like life line amounts, one iron, two light bulbs, one toaster--no not toaster that would be high electricity--but things you can provide with that. Over three hundred kilowatt hours you pay market rates for. For the first three hundred would be at the Percentage of Income Plan. The power company complained back to us that wouldn't be fair to other consumers. I said, "Well it could come out of your profits." No, that wouldn't be fair because of the stock holders. I said Ohio did it and they are surviving. I got part organized around that and we would take people, particularly senior citizens down to public service commission, hire people to give testimony in support of PIP. Eventually, Alabama Power told us, not these people, you all can't keep coming to the public service commission. This isn't the

law. You got to get the legislature to change it. Us being naïve went to the legislature, didn't know Alabama Power was one of the biggest donors to legislature, lobbyist and donors for the legislature. We lost that. Coming out of losing, we lost that in about '87.

Coming out of that we decided that we would build a state wide Alabama Utilities coalition. In mentioning to people across the state, we said that you know instead of us building ad hoc pieces on issue after issue, year after year, we needed a viable, permanent state platform to lobby on behalf of the poor. Out of that we built a group Alabama Arise which is in existence to this day as a multi-issue, low income focused lobbying organization and educational organization. The best benefit that came out of the utilities campaign was Alabama Arise. That was the insipient cause of that, producing that. I got involved. I was chair of the Birmingham Utilities Campaign. Then I went from that to be on the board. I'm a founder of Alabama Arise. I'm one of the three incorporators of it. Then I was on the [GBM] board by then.

KH: How do you compare your statewide activism with your local activism?

SD: Difficult, how you compare it. You seen our constitution?

KH: No, I haven't.

SD: You haven't seen the Alabama constitution. Golly. Everybody ought to have their own copy of the Alabama constitution. This document makes the different color things in there that's the color of other state constitutions. That's the size of them. Just to give you a representation, seven--and that's old. It don't have 640 amendments to it. That's about four years old, maybe six years old.

KH: Yeah, 2000.

SD: It got so expensive they stopped printing them. Seven hundred and seventy-seven amendments. I'm glad you asked that question. Every local issue is a state issue in Alabama because our constitution concentrates power in the legislature stemming from its 1901 roots of disenfranchising poor whites and all blacks and concentrating power away from the counties and cities into the state legislature. A lot of things the other states would be laws, just statutory laws are our constitutions. Our constitutions tell you how deep you can bury dead farm animals. Our constitutions, we just had one recently, several years ago, allows the shrimp industry to charge dues to its members to advertise shrimp in our constitution. That shouldn't even be in state legislature. If you an incorporated organization you can collect dues from your members. No need to go through legislation to do that. Shrimp industry wanted it because the cow industry had it. The goat industry had it. The catfish industry had it. Seafood industry had it. Shrimp is different from seafood. They got a different organization.

The most heinous things you see are things like--there's a city called Trussville. It's across two counties. County line splits the city. Jefferson and neighboring St. Clair County, the people, they live on low taxes right. The good people of Trussville decided they wanted to have a vote on raising their own taxes to support a better education for their children. They already got one of the better education school systems in the state. Because they straddle two counties, instead of having those two counties vote on a tax increase, the entire state gets to vote on it. Now, under our constitution those two counties could have voted themselves but if one member of the legislature objects from that delegation, if one member objects then it must be a statewide election. That's in our

constitution. The entire state of Alabama got a chance to vote on whether Trussville could raise their own taxes. We had the vote. Trussville voted 68% to 32% to raise their own taxes. In our wisdom and ignorance, Alabama voted 55% to 45% said they couldn't do it. That way the wishes and the will of Trussville was outvoted by the citizens of Alabama. That means people in Mobile, Huntsville, here in Birmingham, most of the anti vote, we figured, was just not just groups that came to Trussville, not 32% of the vote was state wide. Mostly by anti tax lobbying by the Christian Coalition and other big corporate groups, big timber groups who lobby against any tax increase whatsoever.

START OF CD 3

SD: They got stomped on. You mean to tell me. That's like the state getting to vote, every house in the neighborhood getting to vote on whether your children can have oatmeal or pancakes for breakfast. You feed your children what you want to feed them but I'm going to feed my children well. I'm not asking everybody else pancakes. We having oatmeal.

KH: If they are willing to pay more for their own local education then it doesn't make much sense why everybody else should tell them no.

SD: That's nonsensical document. That's why one of our big--. Working state and working local, the major framework for our working state is our current work on constitution reform in which we are trying to educate citizens rural and urban, black, white, and brown across the state to identify those issues they care about most and then identify how the constitution of Alabama affects those issues. People in Trussville, we got good support in Trussville now. They really understand how the tax piece affects them embedded in the constitution. Black people were not allowed to participate in the

constitution in 1901. It's a fraudulent document because you would have to believe at least black men who could vote in 1901 voted 80% in Dallas County, Alabama where (the constitutional convention) was located, 80% for a document that would not allow them to vote again. You have to know that the constitution was advertised before it was voted on. It said what it wants to do, well a newspaper said honestly and openly is what we want to do is establish white supremacy of our law. As one organizer said around counting the ballots, what we want is a high vote and a low count. That was pre-Florida back eighty years, ninety-nine years. It was fraudulently enacted, racist and anti poor in its content. Fortunately there were a few heroes spread around here and there. We are trying to go through the transcript of the day to day, fifty five days it took and lift those people up so that a whole bunch of folks, you stepping on grandfather's grave. I said no there were some heroes there. There were people there that fought for equal education for blacks and whites, who fought for increase funds for blacks and whites, who fought for stuff like rope for a farm to market roads so a farmer could their produce to market to be sold, basic infrastructure like that. There were those, the majority, who fought against infrastructure because except for a minimal amount of stuff they didn't want public education or needed it because they had private education. They didn't need too many roads and stuff like that. They mostly didn't need local communities to have any power because what they had thought was excesses like these poor whites and blacks were paying left and right to fund education. You know public education for everybody. We even had demonstrations in Alabama in Talladega County and Montgomery County where people, black and white populace period, brief populace period we had, where blacks and whites were shot down in the street by sheriffs as they marched from county

courthouses. The demand: public education. Alabama is the state gives testimony why don't more poor people, why don't more white people show up in the struggle for justice. The answer: you get killed doing that. Somebody, "Oh you might get embarrassed." No, you get killed. For the populist movement of the 1870s, 80s, and 90s, up until about the 1960s, up until the Jonathan Daniels, the Episcopal Seminarian who saved the life of Ruby Sales in Selma. Then they start killing you politically.

KH: I would guess there were a pretty good number if not killed then hurt pretty badly in the 50s and 60s?

SD: Oh yeah, the poll that has not been taken. We know about expatriate black Alabamians. They went to New York for the jobs. We know stories of blacks who ran afoul, not of law but of custom. I met a guy on an airplane. He had moved to Canada and was in construction business. His wife was there. She was white. I started to chat with her, where you from. He said Canada. You sound like you from the south. He said actually I'm from Bessemer. I said how you from Bessemer to Canada. He said, "Well, he was twelve years old and something, these was playing kids." Like I said, white kids and black kids played together. A thirteen year old white girl kissed him in public. His mother put him on the bus that night to go to Cleveland. She was afraid of his life. He's about as old as me so he's about in his sixties so that probably happened in the 50s. We had a bunch of black expatriates. Those are some of the reasons, jobs and life and health, life and limb. But what about white expatriates. Where is the book on white expatriates? I met environmental leader for Oregon who's leader of a group from Argo, Alabama. Not Argo, AL, Ahab, AL. Other people, I know attorneys in Washington, DC who are from Alabama. There are whites who can't be who they are in this state. The largest out

migration, other than black folks who for life and limb and economic reasons, have been white folks who say I can't do what I want to do here. I can't be who I want to be here. The atmosphere is stifling. It's probably more liberals have left than conservatives have left. Both have left. Some people leave just for the money or professional pursuits. There are people, in addition to blacks, there are people who have left because either their lives or their possibilities were threatened by remaining in Alabama. They are not coming back except to visit.

KH: I've heard that from some of my other interviewees as well. At least one is an attorney named Glennon Threatt. He told me when he left for college he was sure he would never come back. He still had family here.

SD: I just met him the first time this past Saturday. I knew his wife because she worked for HUD, Margo.

KH: If you had to summarize it what would you say were the highlights and most disappointing experiences that you've had as director here?

SD: Okay, the highlights and most disappointing. I'll do the highlights first. There are two highlights that's just summary. Other than getting the job in the first place which I didn't think would happen, the highlight was in 1999 when I found out that one of GBM founders who died shortly before that had left a bequest to GBM of 1.5 million dollars. She named me and two other people who happen to be white, as a committee to guide the distribution of that money. I think what surprised people was that she was Alabama's first female OB-GYN. She was trained at Johns Hopkins University Medical School. She's been progressive in church and community life for decades. That was a complete surprise to me. I was director at that time but she didn't do it because I was the

director. She did it because she wanted some diversity in control of the money which surprised some people.

The other highlight-- Highlights to me are not events so much as they are demonstrations of possibilities. I said the other highlight was the victory we had in the "Super Sewer" in which it was demonstrated that it is possible for people to work in their own interest and in community interest at the same time. That to me is one because victories of that scale are rare. Big in dollar victories are rare. That's what we save the county. We didn't save the county no money because they going to pass it on the people. We save people potential extra billion and already spent almost a billion and another billion is ready to be spent to complete the job. A billion dollars worth of victory is a big victory to me.

KH: And you saved people from some corrupt politicians as well.

SD: And from corrupt politicians. It's still not appreciated though. We ought to get a book out on that one. Disappointments. [Pause] Disappointments last longer than victories for some reason. The half life of a disappointment is much longer than the half life of victory. Victories can evaporate. Disappointments will come at you all the time. I guess my remaining disappointment is not from this place, at this place, but no, the view from this place because I live at this place is the continuing toxic and corrosive effect of racism and how it delimits possibilities. If only people would know how much could be achieved by just reining in racism. I'm not talking about eliminating nothing. Elimination's great, in particular of how whites could be conscious of it. How tired blacks are. How blacks have to budget their charges of racism so that it will always be in their account. You got to almost check your balances like they do at the bank. "Can't

spend that today got to wait until tomorrow." The reason the blacks budget that is because they know through experience it's--well, I know--I know thorough my experience that what is needed to be sustainable is for people in majority, in this case white, to be able to listen more deeply and longer and not substitute the discomfort of exhibiting racism to the pain of experiencing it. Quite frankly, it is really terrible for people being challenged with the exhibiting racism; it's discomforting. It's not equal to the pain of experiencing it. I think if we could stop trading closer to one courtesy or agree on exchange rate it would be very helpful. I'm in the process now of trying to help a young white male who thinks himself as both anti-racist and a feminist to be much more aware of the damage he's causing. He thinks he's being normal.

KH: Even in his efforts to seem that he's against prejudice and that he's a feminist he's still causing damage?

SD: Yes. There was a case where a--we're using names--where a African American colleague woman who's a volunteer of us went to a city to talk to religious leadership about getting involved in constitution reform. The chair person of that committee delegated it to a particular African American minister, she's African American herself, to work things out. They scheduled a lunch. This woman had lunch with this minister and during the process of having lunch the minister made openly serious verbal sexual harassment statements towards her. She complained and left the room. She told my white colleague about this. He called me. I called her to see what happened. I talked to her. I asked her what went on. I said, "What would make you feel whole?" She said, "I want an apology from the minister who offended me." The white guy calls me the next morning--I'm headed to work--and says to me, "Do you mind if I get you a three

way conference call with this woman?" He didn't say this woman; I'm just not using her name. I said, "I can't talk and drive well so let me pull over." I pulled over. I said okay. He got her on the telephone. Then he called her by name and just said to her. Apparently he had talked that morning too. He said, "Why do you tell Scott more than you told me?" She said, "Well, he asked me some questions." He said, "Well, I thought just getting the chair person to apologize to you would be enough." She said, "Well, I didn't think about it until Scott asked me what would make me feel whole." Because he had offered to her to get the chair person to apologize. He had created a solution for her. I had talked to her longer and got some stuff out. Then he said, "I'm the abused party on this phone call."

KH: Because he didn't get as much input.

SD: I could assume a lot of things. I could assume that he thought the black folks had a code language. More data is transmitted per bit then data that is transmitted to white people. I ain't got time to figure all this stuff out. The simple answer was I asked her more questions. I didn't challenge her. I asked her more questions. That's kind of exceptional. Physically it is nonviolent but emotionally, spiritually it's corrosive and toxic especially when it comes to somebody who is inside the struggle. I can deal with that from the Klan and a few corporate people I know. But on this side of the line, no I can't deal with that. The continuing--I'm not singling this place out either, matter of fact this place is far better in places because people here, particularly people of color, feel free to pronounce acts of racism or prejudice or supremacy or privilege. We practice that and we have to. We have some strong white allies. It's not just coming people of color. I guess that's my-- I don't have any historical events that's most dissatisfying. We learn from our defeats and we've had so many we highly educated. Like the "Super Sewer"

was good because we had learned from some earlier defeats of how to frame the messages and how to do language. We didn't have the white middle class environmentalist going into the low income black communities doing our campaign. We did that ourselves because we got black and white volunteers. Too often in racist societies the messenger precedes the message. Therefore by the time you get the message it's already been tainted by the messenger, not by the messengers own fault but by people's previous experiences and their own prejudices. I tell people that [until the racial things] that a white person who's been robbed by a black person is afraid of all black people. A black person who's been abused by every white person he ever encountered either slightly or greatly is slightly distrustful. Now which one is more attractive? Like I tell people, they said, "Well, they don't trust me." I say, "Look, remember, you are the first one they probably met who meant it when they said I hear you when you say. I'm listening to you, not what I think you are, but what you are saying. I do think in the South the area of the country where I think, particularly the blacks and the whites, and now we got to figure out the trio here--black, white, and Latino here, but particularly blacks and whites--history is so interwoven that they are the most intimate strangers. They know each other so well. They know each other not at all. That kind of tension and friction has a high potential for resolution and also has a high potential for danger.

KH: How has integration affected that scenario in Birmingham?

SD: Two different ways. Integration process has provided more access of African Americans of some wealth, middle class and above, than it has for low income African Americans and low income whites. Most integrated land I know about for low

income people is the county jail on visitors day because the visitors are organized by alphabet. Like the Andrews to the Callaways come on Monday, well the Andrews and Callaways may be black, white, or brown. They come on the same Mondays. I was surprised when I went to visit the jail the other day. I paid more attention than I usually do. I see these low income African Americans, low income whites having these deep conversations, laughing, smiling. I'd be eavesdropping. They are not talking about the person who's behind bars. "Oh, Andrea she's grown since the last time I seen her." They talking about each other's families. "Have you been okay? You don't look so well." We have the integration of alphabets at the Jefferson County jail. Ain't no rich people in the Jefferson County jail, believe me. These poor people come on the same visiting days so the Andrews and Callaways will know each other but unfortunately the Andrews will never know the Ziglars. Maybe the Yeildings will know the Ziglars. It would be good for trained sociologist to go to Jefferson County line and figure out some kind of way to do something like that. What would a visiting day mean? You could stay there for two years given our prison wait list. Over a two year period, alphabetically people have built up some voluntary relationships. I don't know if they go to each other's house for dinner. They probably don't live in the same part of town because it's countywide. These are people who have either been convicted of county crimes or state crimes and waiting for an opening in our overcrowded prisons. Over a period of a year or two these folks get to know each other on visiting day or having at least a basic conversation about how are you doing which is the fundamental conversation of all humanity. How are you doing? That's what makes us human. I was embarrassing myself because black and white (these are mostly women) so black and white folks were

getting kind of suspicious of me because I was paying too much attention to their conversation. I thought that was amazing. While middle class African Americans and whites can find ways to socially and occasionally economically congregate there's--with the decline in manufacturing in the south and around the nation there's less chance now of middle to low income African Americans and whites because the spatial segregation of low income blacks and whites is greater now than it was in the '60s. Birmingham in the 1960s was segregated like --I could find something--was segregated--. The pictures ain't in here. Anyway this is just the words.

KH: The racial segregation that we're--. I've seen this at the museum.

SD: Institute. Yeah. At the institute! Don't you say 'm' word no more.

KH: Sorry, the institute.

SD: It's the living institute on human relations across the lines of race. I get mad at those folks because they want it to be a museum. I said museum's probably going to study dinosaurs or art from a certain period. What period has finished here? What epoch has concluded? This ain't Jurassic Park. This is everybody's institute, ongoing, continuous. We should be having stuff in the Middle East there right now.

KH: So you wouldn't agree with the people saying the Civil Rights Movement in Birmingham is over now?

SD: Oh no, no, no. I think it's probably--. The Civil Rights Movement of Birmingham is looking for its footing, trying to gain a foothold on the consciousness of people, in the hearts of people, in the minds of people that lost that foothold. It is not over. Just because you lost don't mean it's over. You are missing you're not dead. MIA not KIA. Just like the barbers in Nashville who were afraid of King coming to town.

Some of the middle class blacks and whites are afraid of justice coming to town. They end it for them. It would upset--for the same reason the guys at the barber shop say it--it would upset the apple cart. The movement for human dignity and justice always had peaks and valleys. Now people ask me what day is it I say it's the day before. It's the day before something happens. What do you do the day before something happens? You prepare. If you expect something to happen you better prepare so you can take best advantage of that happening. How do we prepare for the next phase of the human rights movement which it was in the 1960s and 50s? The Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, not civil rights that can be delimited and constrained, but human rights which are--even though they have a perfectly implemented are always moving toward the next flowering, the next opening up, the next ability to see. You can't see certain things from certain places. You got to go from B to see C because C is not visible from A, historically. I think the next step is time preparation. What will that look like? I think it looks like the conversion of the economic and democratic impotence of people. I don't know what that looks like but I think that everybody saw a conversion. As a matter of fact it's kind of like what was King's major plate when he was assassinated, "We're the poor people's campaign." It won't come back just exactly as a poor people's campaign. It will come back as poor people's campaign in the context of globalization because history shapes history. Though King had already turned against the Vietnam War in 1968, no he was just beginning to foresee the other aspects of globalization. He had already taken sides up with the immigrants mostly in California and Southwest, Selah Chavez. He had some close friends. Presaging a day when black people see their interests not being constrained by the interest of their former masters. It's a day before

and I'm not smart enough to know the day before what. I think I can precede what some of the elements going to be. So I think we should prepare along those lines in terms of being ready to be a black/white round alliances, being ready to fight jingoism inside the African American community, being able to reject the slave talk that coming from some African Americans who are mostly uninformed at the base. That is we must make English the national language. I said, "look we came here as slaves and they wouldn't even let you--they wouldn't even let you read a book. Teach yourself how to read." I believe is that if you do English only admit that it's four hundred years late. But there are some similarities and that is Tennessee not letting immigrants speak their native language in certain places. That's the same thing that happened in slavery. You're not allowed to speak your mother tongue. If you pull that what company are you in?

KH: They are trying to force one American culture.

SD: Yeah. One sick puppy. The highest crime rate of any developed country in the world. Yeah, you can win the lottery. You have more chances of being shot than winning the lottery. [Laughter]

KH: Do you consider yourself a civil rights activist?

SD: I consider myself a human rights activist. Not that I'm opposed to the term civil rights activist. I just think it's limiting. I understand human rights more than I understand civil rights. I think civil rights is a question of law. Human rights is a question of practice. It can be backed up by law. It certainly should be backed up by law. Yeah, a human rights activist. A person who--I feel better when respect for human rights guides my conduct and the conduct of others. I just feel more comfortable in that zone. I feel more threatened when respect for the human rights is not the guiding

principle, very uncomfortable there. Under conditions in respect to human rights doesn't mean we are going to be in agreement about most things not just everything. It allows us to at least have those conversations to find a place where we can have some kind of consensus or working agreement. Not the perfect that we would desire for our own selves, self interest but the self interest that is livable.

KH: In general do you see more respect for human rights locally and in society in general than you did in the '60s and '70s?

SD: [Pause] Yes and no. In the '60s and '70s, the African American community, well both, I felt more comfortable in the '60s and '70s talking to white working class and black working class people in ways that didn't condemn them of trying to show them something or have them see something differently. It was a challenge. I think it's more challenging now in terms of people's ability to move. What you have to understand that no matter what else what happened in the '60s moved people. People moved from violent opposition to I can live with it. I may move but I can live with it. I may live next door to a rich one but I can live with it. Now, I found it's a little bit more intriguing and not difficult of people moving, actually moving. At the same time is I think that--. I see a lot moving in the Iraq war. Some of that's because people have lost people for a war that seems like for what? There's a movement there for sure. Things can also go backwards. I've noticed a heightened vocalization to homophobic, anti-gay, anti-lesbian stuff on mostly talk radio, but also public meetings. We had a revival against crime and murders in Birmingham several months ago. A revival, five pastors.

KH: Kind of like a mass meeting?

SD: Yes. Three pastors came out against homosexuals. We were against shooting people down in the street. None of those people were gay, neither perpetrators nor the people who were caught. I guess they are trying to say there's a break down in morals. Well, that was a break down in morals when he chose that subject over the subject they was asked to come there. What do you say that Bush says now, "I want to exhibit moral clarity." Somebody said you have no moral authority. I say you can't be clear about something you don't possess. Moral clarity is the enemy of moral authority. To have perfect moral clarity is to be God. God has moral clarity. You working on it.

KH: In this world we will never have true moral clarity.

SD: No.

KH: Just try to have more understanding, cooperation.

SD: Since moral authority is your track record where have you been morally? The sin of Sodom was that they ignored and oppressed the poor. That's the part that never gets mentioned. Ignored and oppressed. I said that's like the Bush administration because we keep looking for people who oppress the poor, but to ignore the poor is equal to oppressing the poor. For the poor to be invisible in your policies. If you don't ask the question 'how does it affect the poor?' you can mask question. We going to the moon. How does it affect the poor? We're going to Mars. How does it affect the poor? Stem cells. How does it affect the poor? That's the question. Fashion show. How does it affect the poor?

KH: So you don't even know if it's hurting them.

SD: That's right, to not even know.

KH: In that case ignorance is bliss for you.

SD: Bliss for you and pain for me. Your ignorance is painful. That's what the poor have to say to the rest of us. It's killing us. Your ignorance is killing us. I think it's true about crime too. I know in Birmingham I was really concerned. I have never seen the city this visionless, so absent of vision. There are a lot of people with ideas, with absolutely no vision. I don't know exactly what the cause of it is. The poor people know that. The people who don't have networks that can keep them prosperous. Somebody once said, working on homeless issues, "I want the homeless to be independent." I said, "Why would you wish that on them? You are not." The most successful people are interdependent. They survive on nurture and networks of family, community, professionals, the business, the neighborhood, whatever. Networks, they catch them when they fall, prop them up, sing they praises sometimes. Truly independent people have lost nurturing networks. They have to depend on themselves alone and their wits. That's independence. Don't wish independence on someone else unless you willing to do it yourself. Give up your networks. No, give up your healthy networks and pick up some unhealthy networks and try that for awhile. That's what homeless people who've really lost those connections have. Even networks aren't nurturing networks. Okey, dokey, hand me your last question.

KH: Okay, yes sir. What lessons from your career would you want others to remember?

SD: Which one? The draftsman, the pre-welder?

KH: I guess I shouldn't say your career. Your life.

SD: Lessons. I know one that stands out is humility matters. In all things be humble, except when you are dropping your tests scores down in front so people could

see it because it was a social role. [laughter] Humility is important. Not to try to take credit or seek praise. At least my faith tells me that it's very important. I tell you every time I try to take credit for something something terrible happens to me. Terrible, terrible. Sometimes I don't think it's appropriate terrible but proportionate terrible. Humility is very important.

The other lesson is like life time learning from people. Every one has something they can give you, you never had before. Even if it's just a new look or something, you've known them for a long time. It keeps coming back to the humility piece. Life is constant learning and hope. That is finding the leadership potential in people and helping them to nurture it is probably the most important work that can be done. I say that because we need leadership. We need democratically accountable leadership that can replicate itself, that can grow other leaders and not leadership that drains the pool, so that nobody else can drink. Humility, hope, and democratically accountable leadership, the power of those things is what I've learned. Because leadership without hope, hope without leadership, leadership without humility. That'll be my three legged stool of learning.

KH: That's good. Is there anything else you wanted me to ask?

SD: Let me see. Talked about minimum wage. There goes hope right there. I know I found hope on the wall. We've worked a lot on systemic issues, constitution reform, tax reform not just street lights and sidewalks. They are important too. I wrote this to myself. Changing systemic things means that systemic good can happen when there's an abundance of hope. That's what we had in the Civil Right movement, an abundance of hope. Hope that overflowed. In a book, *Parting Waters* by Taylor Branch,

there's a story about these two little girls coming out of the Sixtieth Street Baptist church. One girl turns around and tells to the other, "Hurry up Elizabeth, if you don't hurry up you won't be able to get o jail with the rest of us." That movement transformed a destination of disdained into a place you wanted to go with your best friend, to jail. That's transformation. That's hope. Hope transforms the destination of disdain to a destination of wow, I wouldn't miss out on that. A systemic evil is sustained when there's an abundance of fear. That's what I think; I should say fear, greed, and a couple of other things, because that's what happens in our community. People are afraid of losing their job, losing their insurance, losing their--. These are good people, losing their job, losing their insurance, maybe losing a relationship in addition to that; people above them have no vision, no expression of hope for the city. How are the people who are afraid of losing their job, how are they afraid of losing their insurance, how are they raising their children? What are they teaching their children? I don't know.

KH: In fear.

SD: Inward fear. That's right. You might not have it. What you do have will be taken. You don't have much. What you do have will be taken from you. How you get your respect? You shoot people. You don't shoot people so that people in the community respect you what you hang out in. Okay, you take pride in the fact that nobody going to tell the cop that you did the shooting but you also should be proud of the fact that people in your circle know you did it. Otherwise there's no respect and that courtesy of respect. That's it. I need to put my bundles back on the wall.

That's all I can think of. I do think housing is related to all this because of the fact the home a child comes home to, a home a child leaves going to school has a lot to

do with self evaluation. I don't want to say self esteem, that's self evaluation.

Everything else being considered, a decent, clean house, that's neat. That you can bring your friends into matters. I know that. Love has to abound in it and nurturing has to happen with in it. Part of that nurturing is being able to provide for your family, not just a big house or something like that but a basic, decent, safe house in which you don't expect any harm from the house. I think it's very important. I think it's part of even building better schools is to build better houses. That's what the Center is supposed to do too.

Instead of the Center for Affordable Housing being a social services provider that for people that we help obtain housing, how do you help them at the same time (not the same person though, the same institution) help them identify their educational or health or emotional health needs and be able to make the linkages with those agencies or providers that can help them with that. At the same time you're doing credit counseling you may have to do some domestic violence counseling and some emotional counseling or how do you help tutor your kids. That was my idea. The idea that I had at least for the Center for Affordable Housing. That it wouldn't provide all this stuff but it would be a broker for people because people know what they need but they don't know how to access what they need in whatever from it comes in. Is it a pill or is it a conversation?

KH: It about addressing the whole person when you are addressing their housing issue. So that it really can be a home where good values can be fostered.

SD: Exactly. It means reorienting the service systems to prioritize the family as opposed to prioritizing the family to seek out the service systems. That's pretty hard

for people who spent a lifetime in a career. They say 'hey you need me I don't need you.' That's probably a culture shift that has to happen in that.

KH: It's been very good talking to you.

SD: Well, I'll tell you what I haven't talked that much in my life now that I'm stopping.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Karen Meier, September 2006