

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

ROGER A. WHITE
May 3, 2006

KIMBERLY HILL: This is May 3rd, 2006.

ROGER WHITE: That wasn't on the tape?

KH: No, that was me getting your biographical information. This is May 3rd, 2006. This Kimberly Hill interviewing Mr. Roger White in Birmingham, Alabama. Thank you for having me, sir.

RW: I've enjoyed you. How do you want me to respond?

KH: If you'd like to finish what you were saying when I turned the tape on that would be fine.

RW: All right. I was giving my relationship now as a senior citizen, going back to the '60s when I was a young revolutionary with a big afro and all those things, up until today. I see many pros and cons that took place in that revolution. I saw social freedoms. Well, yeah, we could ride on the bus, and we could go to the movies, and we could eat in the restaurants, and we could stay in the hotels, but the economic movement never took place. And while blacks were enjoying the new experience of having these social freedoms the economic well being of the black business community suffered tremendously, the result of which we witness today. But we look back on the per capita income expenditures that we were blessed with and it's a little sad that we were not able to capitalize more in the economic market. We were consumers, but we never were quite able to become producers. I think that's the difference that we see today from yesteryear when we look at social and economic privileges. But also, I've seen a lessening of the effect of punishment, rules, standards, and it amazes me when I see things I call negative.

To them, they may call it positive, but the pants, some of the language that is being spoken, the pathetic plight of public education. It's very depressing to realize how far we've fallen, and I go back to the segregated public school system. I was telling a guy just the other day, we had memory work. We had to memorize. We had to go to the blackboard. We had to dissect sentences, and reduce the fractions, and somehow public education got away from these basics.

The other thing that I would list is that many of the successful, more impacting and affluent blacks have moved away from the inner city so the relationships that were in place when I came along where we would have somebody from maybe very high income, with moderate income, and with low income being buddies and schoolmates, it seems that the economic strata shifted.

KH: Hum.

RW: To reflect only the lower income, less fortunate minorities who remain. This, of course, has an impact. Drugs. Yes, and we can go on and on with the influences, but the things that were in place in the '60s, standards, principles, family, I think have been weakened if we would make a comparison to today.

KH: Okay. Let me just get a little clearer on the dates. Did you move to this neighborhood about '73?

RW: I came back.

KH: Okay.

RW: About '74. Um-hum. So late '73.

KH: How would you describe the neighborhood back in that time?

RW: Back in that time there were still remnants of the old neighborhood as we described it in its social context. Many of the people that I looked up to, old moms, had become the elderly seniors. Some of those have passed on. People that I saw coming into the neighborhood didn't necessarily have the neighborhood pride that I grew up in and that existed in inner city neighborhoods during my time. I attempted by organizing a neighborhood day that we named Titusville Day to -- number one through dancing -- be able to generate a fund-raising, non-profit effort, but also to generate those funds to have a pride breakfast which we would pay for. And, we would relate stories. We honored Titusville successes. We brought in prominent speakers who grew up in the neighborhood, and we were able to show and to enhance neighborhood pride. That meant quite a bit in the neighborly Titusville development to accomplish a number of things.

Neighborhood pride is essential, but without resources, without persons who are caring and capable donating services and volunteering for. . .

[Sound of doorbell. Tape is turned off and then back on.]

KH: We were talking about neighborhood pride.

RW: Yeah, neighborhood pride. I started keeping my lawn. The neighbor across the street started inquiring, you know, what do you do? And it just caught on. And we saw a return coming back. However, we also saw what appeared to be negligence, and I'm very critical of this at my age because I don't have to depend on the system now, but we reported the activity, the development of gang activity early on. We appealed to the fraternities to get involved. We appealed to the police to eradicate known magnets, drug magnets, that we saw destroying futures, younger kids, our baseball players, the whole

community of youth becoming affected by gangs. Nobody witnessed it. I use this as an example, and I don't mean to smear my fraternity, but there was a little youth group, little gang early on they called themselves the Alphas. They were located right in this community. One of the guys didn't really want to pursue gang-like activities. He wanted to look upward where they could talk about college opportunities, job opportunities, training opportunities, those kind of things.

KH: Um-hum.

RW: So we got involved. First of all I tried to explain to them what Alpha was, Alpha Phi Alpha, the pride. And amazingly we had these young guys practicing parliamentary procedures and doing talks. One of them was involved musically, had been selected to receive a scholarship at Florida A&M. I mean just tremendous things were happening. Then suddenly kids of the same order became drawn in, forced in to drug relationships and gang relationships that we were not strong enough in numbers to attack. We also could not get other groups to see the need for that participating to support these efforts in inner city neighborhoods where many of the people of substance who would know how to deal with these kinds of things were no longer present in the communities.

KH: What other groups did you try to get involved?

W: We met with UAB, University of Alabama, Birmingham, and were successful in developing a partnership where the then president Scotty McCallum agreed and provided the top department heads assembled there to talk about problems and solutions that could affect an inner city neighborhood, particularly this neighborhood that was right at their doorstep.

KH: Um-hum.

RW: This partnership was very supportive. We were able to get medical treatments, eye examinations in the school system. We were able to get nurses from the nurse training classes to come in and do simple examinations. We were able to get people from the school of social work to come out and do different studies and so forth and so on. So numbers of things happened. Programs were able to be developed. We had a skilled trade training program where we introduced to youth from this neighborhood training opportunities in the home building industry, carpentry, plumbing, electrical, and part of the program in the partnership was that for the students to be able to access existing dwellings within the community that needed rehabilitation, and that was not only the source for their training but also was a source for improving the neighborhood.

KH: And for their income, too.

RW: Right.

KH: Excellent.

RW: Yeah. We were not able to sustain these, especially after the grant ran out, but they provided us the tools to understand that much of this we could accomplish ourselves. The grant was being requested by Titusville, in the name of Titusville. We were implementing in the name of Titusville so I think the demonstration that they provided us in a number of areas enabled us to look forward ourselves.

KH: How did you find about the funds that were available to start the Titusville Development Corporation?

RW: I had witnessed a program that had begun in the Pratt City area which is just west, it's called Western Birmingham, that had developed in the mid-'70s. It was a neighborhood corporation. They had acquired federal funds and local funds to do housing rehabilitation. The program failed, however, because of some administrative weaknesses. But I was able to understand from that exposure that that program, that same program, could work in Titusville and anywhere else. So we, what we were able to do was to get the guy who had been the administrator of the program—we couldn't pay him any money. Certainly the sight of him to city officials was bad news so we would hide him out where he couldn't be seen on the projects, and we were able to get started. And that's how we started, and right now I think we're in our twenty-second year. Older than you. Right? But it's been a wonderful experience. Numbers of things that we had hoped would have happened didn't happen. I think there are disproportionate allocations of funds disseminated to inner city neighborhoods to eradicate many of the problems that they suffer that perhaps they could make changes themselves. The resources are just not there. What we are witnessing currently today, that if strong efforts are not present to reverse the crimes, then they are rapidly escalating, and you will see the black inner city communities eliminated for progress.

KH: Um-hum. Because they're considered blight?

RW: Yes.

KH: What were your goals for this neighborhood when you started the corporation?

RW: When I started the corporation I saw it as an opportunity to do these improvements, but also to enhance the cultural appreciation, also by supporting the

education system and the recreation system. When I came back programs that had existed at the park when I came along were not prevalent. There were no programs. I could not understand it. The baseball team—can you cut that off a minute?

KH: Sure.

[RW was coughing throughout the paragraph in which he was speaking. Tape is turned off and then back on.]

RW: Yeah. Numbers of programs that existed when I came along were no long existing. We had a church here in the community, a Lutheran church. The minister was Reverend John Rice. That's his daughter, Condoleezza, Secretary of state. Reverend Rice opened up that church for youth group meetings. He formed the group, and pulled everybody together, and also set the agenda. We would talk and discuss editorial features from the newspaper. We would look at current event topics. We would talk about health related youth interests, numbers of things. This was stimulating. It also permitted people from different background, income levels to mix. There were persons from the housing project that we called the Brick Yard. There were persons from the other side of Sixth Avenue where they had good homes and manicured lawns. It was a mixture of all of this. It helped lower income persons to raise their standards to want to be not embarrassed. I heard a person today speak where he came from, a rough section of the south side, saying that in school he just did not want the teachers and the others to look at him negatively, and how he would practice his speeches on the back porch at night to make certain that he wouldn't go in there and be embarrassed. That kind of challenge I think does not exist today. I know it does not exist in public schools because I understand there's even harassment directed towards those who would be achievers.

KH: Yeah. I'd say that's a wide spread problem

RW: Yeah. What else?

KH: How many people in the community would you say have been involved in the development corporation?

RW: Fortunately, we have a very broad sector of the community participate. We've utilized them on forums. We've had citizen participation programs that involved the neighbors discussing their interest in home improvements and projects they would support. Our board of directors is made up of a cross section of residents, and believe it or not, all of whom are lifetime residents of Titusville so the commitment and concern is there. We have not been able to reach out to the degree that we would like. That's because we depend primarily on volunteer direction. It's expensive to hire the kind of personnel that's needed to run programs and projects of this nature on the level that we are discussing. I thought it would be an excellent opportunity where some young MBA would come in and be able to exercise business skills to develop some economic project, either community based or business based. But what we see as a shortcoming is that we have not been able to generate the kinds of moneys that would pay salaries for those types of individuals. We think we may get there in the very near future, but certainly there would be obstacles to overcome in getting to that level. Somebody with a master's degree level coming into a neighborhood project director's position would want, what would you think?

KH: Forty [thousand dollars]?

RW: In our budget that's what we're giving. So that's been a shortcoming. Yes, we pay rent—we don't pay rent, but we pay all the utilities, water, telephone, power, and two salaries out of forty. That's—.

KH: Stretched tight.

RW: That's stretched tight. So that's the shortcoming of our project that I speak of that we want to apply across the board. It has to be supported, it has to be a volunteer commitment, and there has to be cooperation and support for ideas to go in and reverse some of what we witness in decline.

KH: Could you describe the just basic process of what it takes for you to start one of your projects?

RW: Number one we have to look at feasibility. Is it a project worth undertaking? We have to also look at cost. Will the cost exceed value? We also have to know that there's somebody definitely interested in that project. In this case what I'm describing is a home. We work with applicants to get them approved by mortgage companies. So we get commitment letters, and we generate funds from banks for construction loans, or we apply directly from the city with these mortgage commitment letters, and we generate a flow of funds and activities. What I saw in a project like that, and this comes from my Urban League background, but I saw this as a tremendous opportunity to involve minority businesses.

KH: Um-hum.

RW: We utilize attorneys, we utilize accountants, all kinds of contractor business persons. Plus we were also able to develop joint ventures where if one company was not strong enough to take the whole project we were able to put in partnership joint ventures

that exercised these projects. So our level of minority participation in the course of our twenty-eight year existence has always been right at about seventy per cent. This includes jobs for neighborhood residents. We may need a watchman. We have lawns to be cut. We need cleanup. We've utilized those with skills to go in on small repair projects, so it's been a total involvement, and it has attempted to support pride. It's tough though. It's tough, yeah.

KH: Why? What makes it especially tough?

RW: Well, we're so disintegrated. Some of the ones who are beneficiaries don't necessarily live in the city, in the neighborhoods. Nor is there maybe a level of appreciation for the project and its production that you have. Many are interested in, you know, what's in it for me? How much are you going to pay? It's going to cost. So not having witnessed that level of sensitivity from many of those who have been rewarded through contracts is disappointing.

KH: I haven't asked you much about employment so far, but where did you work after you moved back to Titusville?

RW: As I said, I was part of the Urban League movement in Akron, Ohio, and upon returning I went to work at Citizen's Federal Bank.

KH: Okay.

RW: It was then the Minority Savings and Loan owned by A. G. Gaston. My accounting background enabled me to be employed as the association's accountant. This gave me an opportunity to get back into the numbers from the social work experiences and to focus on business applications. Subsequently I enrolled at the Samford School of Business in the master's program and was supported by Citizen's Federal with tuition

refunds to complete the MBA program there. Some of these skills from banking I also attempted to utilize because of my experience and exposure with loans in the development of loans, so it was a many faceted program concept. But I saw, yes, we could build a house. We could make available the home, but also we could make available jobs and training opportunities and contract opportunities for specialists that would be needed for this type economic development. It's been pretty tough to sell, believe it or not.

KH: People don't like the idea?

RW: Most people don't understand economics, and many people harbor a 'what's in it for you and what's in it for me?' [attitude]. Yeah. So we battle those attitudes, but there are, I think, a greater number of those who would support a program and project like this rather than those who would be against it.

KH: Did the project ever get a lot of media attention?

RW: It got media attention. The Titusville Development Corporation set the tone for others. I mentioned earlier the Pratt project. After the Pratt project failed there was no other neighborhood nonprofit that existed, and that's when Titusville Development was formed. But since Titusville Development, and many of them came to us to get advice on, how can we do it in our neighborhood? I would say there are maybe fifteen or twenty strong nonprofits.

KH: Good.

RW: Also, we activated interest in the churches to develop nonprofits. [RW is coughing.]

KH: Would you like to stop this and get some water?

RW: Yes, please.

KH: Okay.

[Tape is turned off and then back on.]

KH: So the churches got active too?

RW: We got churches together. Churches wanted to pursue nonprofit interests. Some were interested in development in areas right near their church, and one of those projects, Sandy Bottom, in the Ensley area, BEAT [Bethel Ensley Action Task]. You may have that on your list.

KH: I just talked to Angie Wright about BEAT.

RW: Well BEAT developed from the example Titusville has set. In fact, Reverend Norrad would come to Titusville Development Corporation and would take notes of how a project like Titusville could be implemented in many areas. We were able to set the example for others. I'm not claiming any. . .

KH: *[Laughs.]*

RW: But that's what the project was intended to be, to be an example for others.

KH: It seemed to work very well.

RW: Oh yeah.

KH: I heard BEAT was highly successful.

RW: Yeah. But BEAT came off from Titusville [Development Corporation]. However, one thing too they were able to do, that BEAT and a number of others were able to do, and that was to develop assets. Titusville had \$1.4 million assets, and I think liabilities, the net worth is about \$700,000 or \$800,000. Those other projects did not develop assets. They did services, but—so, we were real proud of that.

KH: Why didn't they develop assets? They chose not to, or?

RW: I don't know. They didn't do it, but we accessed rental opportunities because we realized that not everybody could buy a house. We developed some assets from there, and we also had a donor who gave us properties that were far beyond their usefulness but were still being occupied. We were able to take those projects and make some repairs, and we used those for an asset development income approach. So those things helped us even though there was a shortage of grants or funds from the city or HUD federal agencies. Those kind of innovative approaches I think set Titusville apart from the others. There was a lot of volunteer participation into BEAT that for some reason we elected not to have because the purpose, again, was to show that there could be an economic base developed for minorities. Okay? And that minorities could execute such a venture themselves. It was purposely done. Whether there was any advantage or a disadvantage, I may question that.

KH: So it wasn't particularly a matter of not having white volunteers?

RW: Well, we had white volunteers. We were not able to sustain it, okay, to the degree, and our effort purposely was to enhance the economic opportunities for minorities. [*Sound of telephone ringing.*] Cut that off.

[*Tape is turned off and then back on.*]

KH: I thought I'd ask you about zoning laws. Are there any issues in this neighborhood that have come up precisely because of the way it was zoned?

RW: Yeah. And in all neighborhoods. For a long time, well, we still don't get the values that would be equitable for this city. The inner city property values are much less than what the affluent areas are. However, when the taxation evaluation comes out,

the value is 'psheh!' —you know—it has to be enough to provide a tax return for the municipality, or for the county, or whatever.

KH: Right.

RW: But that's been real sad in that a 2,000 square foot house in a lower income area would be one price using the same material and labor, and in another be appreciably more in value. We've had to struggle with that in that we've had to keep ourselves at a level that will accommodate lower, marginal income persons. So, that's one of the challenges.

KH: What kind of jobs do most residents in this area have?

RW: Now we have – we're older []. Most of them now have service based jobs. We still have a number who are employed at university hospital and at Baptist Princeton [hospital], but most of them are service based, self-employed.

KH: When you came back here were people working for the steel mills?

RW: Yeah, but they had greatly reduced their numbers. Automation had come in, and I understood that they had a computer out there that used to take thirty men per shift. It took two men for a whole twenty-four hour period so jobs were greatly reduced. Subsequently those smaller industries that were dependent upon the larger steel industries, they closed also. That really hurt the inner city economy in terms of job opportunities in manufacturing and industrial occupations where many inner city minorities had gained a foothold. This lack of employment lead to social programs that did not work, that were designed to train them in the areas where in my estimation they never would have been employed. But we were left with numbers of young persons under forty who had not sought job opportunities in years, and as a result are not counted

in employment statistics. You see a five percent unemployment rate because it's not including Johnny and Winnie and Ralph who haven't been to register or to seek in a formal way a job opportunity in years. They just gave up.

KH: Hum. So let's talk about politics for a minute, especially Mayor Arrington getting elected. What were your feelings when he got elected and when the number of black political officials went up?

RW: That was a happy day to see a black take control of a major city. I was a part of the transition in that I had been a member of David Vann's staff who was the mayor prior to Richard Arrington taking office, and let me tell you, for a one-term mayor accomplished a number of significant things that Arrington was able to continue and advance. It lifted the morale. It made black folk think that we've got some control now. We can do for each other. Unfortunately the system as it is does not function that way.

KH: Um-hum.

RW: I think I said that politely enough, didn't I?

KH: Yeah.

RW: So what many perceived and had looked for, it didn't come. Yeah, we had majority control politically, at the council, the mayor, the library board, the parks and recreation board, the fire chief -- you name it. But the impact of that presence if you looked at benefits being able to be disseminated to that constituency, it didn't happen. It was no better than before.

KH: No better at all?

RW: I would say in a number of ways, yes. When I think about the employment of minorities in City Hall, when I was there, there was a representative number, but

during the black administration jobs that had previously been not accessible to non-whites became accessible to minorities, and it was good to see department heads and some of the other elected officials become significant power sources. We had the commissioner, the mayor, the councilman, the senator, the representatives, so yes.

KH: What was your role with Mayor Vann?

KH: I went in with Mayor Vann, I was really looking for a return to more people related job experiences. Accounting was, you know, solitary. You do the books. You look for the shortage. You come up with the balance, but you're not involved with people, and I think I was attracted because of that Urban League relationship. I wanted to get back into people directed programs and projects. So I went there to show him my background in community programs, projects, neighborhood organizations, community organizations, minority business development, and Mayor Vann hired me based on those qualifications. And also he wanted somebody to help with the court ordered plan. The federal government had ordered many municipal cities to increase minority participation. That was in the contract, and I think my experience led me to be the one considered.

KH: Um-hum.

RW: Um-hum.

KH: That was the Community Participation Program?

RW: No, this was in minority business development.

KH: Okay.

RW: And under Mayor Arrington I continued those services, even expanded that effort, and became in a civil service described position the contract compliance officer for the city of Birmingham.

KH: Was that just for business contracts?

RW: No.

END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE A

BEGINNING OF TAPE ONE, SIDE B

KH: Okay.

RW: Yes. Mayor Arrington said this is going to involve minorities in all levels of opportunities. So primarily my position was to go out and find persons who could successfully execute projects of the sort that were being provided. We were able to get engineers into projects, attorneys, all levels of skilled, trade skilled position persons into opportunities for employment or contracts with the city. We especially worked to involve minorities in the construction opportunities. For instance, prior to 1976, which was two years before—no, 197—excuse me, which was one year prior to me coming, only three hundred and sixty-five dollars had been expended with minority companies.

KH: Wow.

RW: And we're talking about a budget, I don't know, a budget that at that time was 70 million.

KH: Wow.

RW: Yeah.

KH: That's terrible.

RW: Um-hum. From there I remained compliance officer for twenty-seven years until my retirement last year. I am continuing my relationship with Titusville Development with the same purpose, to provide job opportunities, training opportunities

and an asset base for a nonprofit community based institution that would enable it to sustain some program efforts on its own.

KH: Um-hum. In the process of serving the community in all these years did you ever think of yourself as an activist?

RW: Yes. Yes. Some of it wasn't by choice. But defending things that you know are right, that you can verify in an activist way, truth. Anybody who stands up for the truth is an activist whether they believe it or not. So, yes, I took on some activism causes. Had to. How else could you increase opportunities?

KH: I guess other people wait around for somebody else to do it.

RW: Yeah.

[Both laugh.]

KH: How would you describe the course of the civil rights movement in Birmingham?

RW: I think Birmingham was the centerpiece. I had been involved in Atlanta in demonstrations prior to the activities beginning in Birmingham. Birmingham was hard core, hard core in the fact that there were many blacks who did not participate with Martin Luther King, who also saw Martin Luther King as a trouble maker. There were others who were uncertain of if they did get involved what would happen if [Boss Charley?] found out? Okay, so those with families they had reservations. I mean, do you gamble for a cause like that at the risk of your whole family? But I think that is why Dr. King had to go to the schools and really get the children because he could not get significant numbers of adults who could take positions like that openly.

KH: Mostly it was the self-employed that took the big risks like the law suits and things?

KH: Well, and activists, again. But anybody that had to go to work, they were very skeptical about becoming involved because if it got back that you took a sick day and they found out that you were out there marching, at a lot of employment institutions they would terminate you. You'd have protective equal employment kinds of protection in a number of jobs that had been opened up to black folks or just jobs period.

KH: What risks did you face because of your work?

RW: I faced risk. Urban League was a new venture. We started job creation as a program, job development, taken on by the national Urban League and all affiliates that were designated for funding implemented that program. It was jobs and OJT, on the job training opportunities. This was in the '70s, and the government would pay for jobs that were created, would pay a portion of the salaries, the whole bit. So my employment as a job developer would be to go to the white companies and see if I could develop jobs.

There were still numbers of southern whites who were not fully acceptable of enterprising and helping, going—during that period—permitted me to buy—.

TAPE STARTS SKIPPING AND ENDS ABRUPTLY IN MID-SENTENCE. END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B.

END OF INTERVIEW

TRANSCRIBED BY SHARON CAUGHILL, JUNE 19 AND 20, 2006.