

Interview

with

ROBERT M. CUNNINGHAM

August 5, 2005

by Elizabeth Gritter

Transcribed by Emily Baran

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

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**Southern Oral History Program Series:
Long Civil Rights Movement Project**

Transcript – Robert Morris Cunningham

Interviewee: Robert Morris "Bob" Cunningham
Interviewer: Elizabeth Gritter
Interview Date: August 5, 2005
Location: Louisville, Kentucky
Length: 2 cassettes, approximately 110 minutes

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

EG: Gritter interviewing Bob Cunningham on August 5, 2005 in Louisville, Kentucky.

[tape interruption]

BC: Really is, yeah.

EG: Really?

BC: [referring to Jane Ramsey] I mean a little lady, a little lady who was no taller than that.

EG: Wow. That's amazing.

BC: But anyway, I'm sure she'll, I hope she'll tell you all of this. I just hope that she remembers it, because there was so much that she did during that particular period.

EG: Wow, that's really great.

BC: Yeah, we were so proud of her because she was so strong to be such a small person in stature, you know?

EG: Right.

EG: It was very good and it's exactly as you would expect. The poor people suffered and couldn't get the treatment and the rich people did really well. [They] all [had] kind of the same medical condition.

BC: Right. There's one more person that I wish you guys—
[tape interruption]

EG: Okay, there [the tape recorder] goes. And I'm just going to monitor it too a little bit to make sure it's going. I had questions this time. Last time, I thought we did a really good job of talking about what you saw as the strengths and weaknesses of busing, and then looking at interconnections between the different social movements, and [talking about your] childhood, and then talking a little bit about Parents for Quality Education. And this time I had questions more specifically about busing in the '70s and about some of these organizations back then, as well as some follow-up questions from the first time that we talked. And I was wondering if first you could just sketch out for me your involvement with the school desegregation issue back when it first started in the '70s. I know, obviously, you were involved with Parents for Quality Education and you mentioned PIE [Progress in Education]. Were you involved with that as well?

BC: Mmm hmm. Yeah, I guess my initial involvement, before then I had been somewhat involved in social justice, civil rights issues here with a group that was called the Black Workers Coalition, a group that was monitoring jobs and particularly jobs in Black communities that Black folk couldn't get, although there were plants in their communities. Okay, so when the school desegregation issue rang out, I think people were anxious because nobody knew what was going to happen, what it was going to do. I was quite concerned at that time, my greatest concern was that the fact that Black children was taken out of their communities and going into a foreign place that I knew at that time that

everything like that. So that was for, I'm almost sure about that, somebody else can maybe tell you, maybe Jane Ramsey can tell you a bit more about that than myself.

EG: Okay, so were you head of Parents for Quality Education or associated with it?

BC: Well I would say I was one of the initiators of that group.

EG: Okay.

BC: And as I said again, most of the time they'd call me in to speak for and with these groups, but I wasn't the person who founded or put it together, let me say it that way.

EG: For Parents for Quality Education or the Progress in Education?

BC: Progress in Education.

EG: Okay, and then Parents for Quality Education, you were one of the leaders of that.

BC: Yeah, one of the founders.

EG: One of the founders, okay. Who else was involved in Parents for Quality Education?

BC: At that particular time, there was a group called Black Parents, I can't think—

EG: Black Protective Parents?

BC: Black Protective Parents, okay.

EG: Is that the one?

BC: Black Protective Parents, right.

EG: Okay.

BC: Black Protective Parents, right. And most of those people that I remember are maybe not around now, but there was a Mattie Mathis who was a part of that.

EG: One of my colleagues talked to Benetha Ellis.

EG: So these different groups, they had, well the same common purpose, but they had different sorts of angles that they were pursuing. Like the Parents for Quality Education was to make sure that Blacks weren't psychologically damaged when they into the White environment.

BC: Yeah.

EG: That they don't lose their culture.

BC: Right, and at the same time wanting to make sure that Black parents had an input.

EG: Okay.

BC: In the education of their children, had a voice there, and trying to make sure that when they could, that Black parents would, for instance, go to the School Board meetings and different other things, making sure that the Black parents were involved.

EG: Okay, sure.

BC: You know, too often parents had to send their kid to school and go to work, so they were never, never there at the school. So that was one of the reasons for that too. That was one of the things that—

EG: So encouraging parental involvement and being a support group for parents.

BC: Parental involvement, right. And having parents to come together to, with ideas and strategies, as to what they could do as a parent group to help the process, whatever it was. Whether we can get together and whatever. Making the parents more, as I say again, involved as a group, more involved in the children's education, and in their own process of education.

EG: What sort of impact did this group have?

BC: At that time?

BC: And some of these people, excuse me, probably felt as though they were members of every group.

EG: Yeah.

BC: You know, you understand what I am trying—

EG: Yeah, so it's hard to determine membership.

BC: Right. They never formally joined the group. They were just there. Whenever they called a meeting, they were there. Some of the groups weren't that finely organized. They were just groups of people who came together and talked about what we can do to make the education better.

EG: So how often did you meet at first and then later on?

BC: Well there was a time when, see, you must understand, earlier on there were ongoing—and I'm sure when you, well it was too early for you but I mean, read about it—there was people in the streets. There was burning of buses. There were marches. So it wasn't like you could meet every month. Sometimes you have to be somewhere everyday. So it was so, there was sporadic-- What I guess I'm saying is meeting people practically every other day or so, meeting, talking about something around the issue, because the issue, it, well I'm going to say it this way, eclipsed everything else. Busing at that time or school desegregation eclipsed everything else. So that was what everybody was talking about whether you had kids in school or not. Because everyday there was another bus burned or there was another bus turned over or there was another school bombed or there was, you know. So I'm saying that to say that you couldn't say, "We'll [be] meeting again on the third Thursday of next month," you see.

EG: Yeah, I understand.

BC: Yeah, right.

who wasn't too much against the busing and the mixing of the children, but we didn't know that those anti-busing forces, would come out as they did. And I don't think the powers that be, I don't think even the police or the mayor, or even the school board, didn't realize that would happen, but it did. And the media may have helped that to happen. I'm not saying they instigated it, but it became a thing where there were bonfires somewhere in the county every night. Or people, it was almost, excuse the expression, but like a Klan meeting really. And it was, you know, "The niggers go home," and all that. This is what was going on. I don't think that we expected, that was expected. Again, I think that there were people who felt like, that there were anxious people and people who felt like, "Oh God, we won't go through this," but they didn't feel like that it would be out in the street as it was. So now we're talking about protection. Now we're talking about maybe, you know, keeping Johnny home because these people are talking--. So I think it changed then, when we found out, when most people found out that hey, this is not something that's going to go away quietly. These people are talking about violence. So that made a change there, because that wasn't, I don't think, expected.

EG: Initially it was preparing Black students or preparing Black parents, making sure desegregation goes smoothly?

BC: Yeah, and reaching across racial lines, and meeting with White and Black parents. This is what we thought. I think most people thought that. Excuse me, this is a good thing. Let's get to know each other. Let's sit down and have tea together. Let's visit each other's schools. We thought and I'm sure there were people on both sides who felt like that is the course we should take. But there were those who, for whatever reasons, built a big name of being an anti-busing leader and frightening people as to what will happen from this: The schools will go down. The educational quality will go down, and

worked with in the movement, were White folk. But I knew what this could do to Black children and that was, I guess, my thoughts earlier on.

EG: Did you see that happening over time or initially?

BC: Well yeah, in a sense, I guess so. What I mean by that is, here's what you have to understand too, once the Black school system was torn down, was demolished and made into the White school system for everybody, the Black teachers were gone.

EG: Yeah, I was going to ask you about that.

BC: Okay. Black teachers were gone. Now I'm not saying that White teachers don't make good teachers. They do. There's some very good White teachers, and some of them are friends of mine. But I do know that due to the racial estrangement that we have in this society, it's a little difficult for White teachers to teach Black kids on both sides. What I guess I'm saying is it's very easy to have a, I don't say racist but a feeling about Black children, when you live in a society that has taught you all of that. So it's hard for you to accept whatever cultural policy that this kid brings, because you don't understand it, first of all. This is like a kid walking in here talking Spanish. He may be telling us how much we love him but we think he's talking about robbing us. We don't understand his culture. We don't understand his language, so that was my problem when they erased all of the Black teachers, which they did. If they'd have felt like that Black teachers was worth keeping too if all of this would have been done in a way where we felt like we are going to come together and bring the equality of cultures together, that would have been fine. But I didn't see that happening. And as you say, "Did it happen?" I think it did. Well I know it did, because I don't know scholastically if you would have tracked the kids, you would have found Black kids doing worse in White schools than they did in Black schools. I'm not saying that. But I am saying that I found that, well first of all, before long there was no

meshing it and bringing it together, and learning from one another, and knowing that it's okay for me to be different than you, but we bring something (). We haven't done a very good job with that.

EG: Communication.

BC: Right. So for that reason, I think that's one of the reasons why we're still today, as we speak, why race continues to be on the front burner. It's because we have never--and when I say "we" I mean those people who set policy--really tried to get over the racial division that we have in our society. And I can understand why. I think—and I don't want to get off on a tangent or something, but—I think that we must understand through racial division, racial division was part of this nation's founding, it was part of this nation's building, I mean what I guess I'm saying is the wealth of this nation came from that, from dividing the races and from keeping them divided. So I think that being so key into the building of our nation is one of the reasons why that is still around, and the people who feel that they still profit from that don't want that ever to go away. So I guess what I'm saying is I think that we haven't ever tried very hard as a nation—I don't mean individuals. I know many individuals tried very hard. It's an asset to all of us, I don't think we realize it. The fear has kept us from seeing how important it is, it would be, if we would make use of all of the various cultures that we have in our society.

EG: That's very true.

BC: It's sad that we don't. We don't know what we're missing. I don't think we do. I'm talking about lay people like myself. I know what we're missing, but what I guess I'm saying is I think those people who want to continue to control, want to continue with the authority, are really afraid that I'll lose my little this, if I allow those people, whoever those people are, you know.

county government, who got there due to their stand against busing. Now let me refine that by saying: When I say anti-busers it may sound like that everybody that was against busing was a rabid racist; I don't mean that at all. There were many Black folks who were against busing. We felt as though it was, and I think we still feel that way, that it's expensive. Is it worth it when you get to the school, when the bus gets to the school and see--I don't know if you've been in Louisville during school time--you can't get down the street. There are buses everywhere. What I guess I'm saying is I think all of us had a problem with the transportation part of that. Is it worth it for all of these kids to be bused out of their neighborhoods across town, risking a car accident or anything everyday, you know? I think we all had that but it wasn't about race. And most of the rabid anti-busers let you know what they were about, you know going to school with Black people. If they would have talked about the transportation—there was a cliché that came out of that that says it's not about the busing, it's about us. You probably heard that, I'm sure. Well that's what Black folks would say, "It's not about the busing, it's about us." If it had been about the bus, then most White folks who were against busing would still have said that it's transportation, it's the pollution, the car accidents, the kids being bused across, and I think most Black folks would say, "Yay! I'll march with you on that." But they weren't saying that. They made it a race issue by talking about Blacks going to school with Whites, and that is what I think really made a fight out of it. I don't think it would have been otherwise.

EG: What do you remember about these anti-busing organizations? I know that there was like Concerned Parents—or something—Association with Susan Connor, and there was Labor Against Busing, and a number of them rose up and wondering what your sense of them, what the major ones were and the major players for anti-busing?

BC: Now I must say that same thing with parochial schools at that period. Parochial schools were definitely profiting, if you will, on that particular issue. In other words, come to our school, you don't worry about going to school with them. So this was kind of undercover and not too many people talked about it but there were again that undercurrent of educational schools, of schools, religious schools, who profited around the issue of the busing. So busing got to be really a fiery word when it shouldn't have been. But busing gotten to be almost a profanity? When really as I say, if most of the anti-busing factions would have talked to Black folks, they would've found that Black folks were against busing too, not for racial reasons, but for, as I told you, all of the other inconveniences that it brought. So it's a shame that we didn't come together and I think I said last time, I'm sure, is because we were really people of the same economic standing, poor Whites and poor Black folks who were not promised a good education anyway, regardless of whether we went to school with one another or not. Those in power weren't going to see that we got a good education anyway, so what I guess I'm saying is if we had had the smarts to come together and talked about a valuable and quality education for all of us, we probably would have gotten that.

EG: Were there any attempts made to have a dialogue between the pro-busing and anti-busing groups?

BC: Few, yeah there were, there were. But that was something you didn't see in the media. But yeah, there was those who felt there was, a few Black ministers for instance, who wanted to calm the community by sitting down and talking about it, but it was so fired up until those people who probably thought that was a good idea, anti-busers, wouldn't take that risk of going and talking to--. During that time for instance, myself and another

EG: Oh well and we can go to him too.

BC: But now he's a real good guy to talk to, a real good guy to talk to.

EG: Yeah.

BC: Because he was here around that time. He's about my age, I guess, maybe two or three years younger.

EG: Were you going into the churches in the South End of Louisville?

BC: South End.

EG: Wow.

BC: Right.

EG: Right in the heart of the resistance.

BC: Lower South End we went into. Oh I don't mean we made a--. We got into about two or three, I do know. But it was at that time, you must know, it was a miracle for a Black and White guy to walk into a White church and get a chance to talk to the people. And I don't think we ever went during church service but we evidently got somebody who was out of the church to get us to meet with a delegation of people from the church. But so I'm answering your question, but there were those, yeah, who felt like all we need to do is sit down. But if you understood how fiery it was at that time, and how conversation across the line was so difficult because there were those who was keeping these people really fired up. I'm trying to think of a leader of the anti-busing faction. If I'm not mistaken, he's the same guy who now has a jewelry shop out off of Preston Street, which is the area. Bittersweet Shopping Center was a place out on Preston Street Road. Preston Street as it goes further out of town becomes Preston Street Road. That was the meeting place for that area, right across from Valley High School, that's where the bonfires were almost every night. That's where cars were turned over and buses were. This is in the area of, as I said,

BC: Okay. Well now there's a lady by the name of, I don't know if I've told you about her too, Suzy Post?

EG: Yeah, and in fact one of our colleagues interviewed her the last time.

BC: Okay, well now she's good and she can get those names.

EG: Okay.

BC: She was at that time, if I'm not mistaken, with the Louisville and Jefferson County Human Relations Commission. So for that reason, she was very close to what was going on. You said they have interviewed her already?

EG: Yeah, we have talked with her.

BC: Okay.

EG: Yeah, good experience—

BC: Right, oh yeah. Oh good, yeah.

EG: That my colleague had talking with her and became good friends with her.

BC: Is that right? A good person.

EG: Yeah. Well I have several questions out of what you've said. One is did these anti-busing organizations stay around for awhile? I mean I know they were all there during these first few months, and then it sounds like some of the people went into politics. But do you remember any of them being—

BC: I would have to say no. I don't think they-- Now there were again, I think, people who probably, you know sometimes five people can get together fifty people in the street and make it look like they got a large mass organization when they don't-- I think this was true with them. I don't think they had people on paper. I don't think they had that many people on paper but they had a few firebrands that were able to mobilize hundreds of

about what's going on. So there never was, that I recall. Now there was and there is, you can put this lady's name down—

EG: Okay.

BC: She was the head of, and this hasn't been too long ago, of a Black Caucus within the Teachers Association. Nancy Dematra, Nancy Dematra, I think it's D-E-M-A-T-R-A, something like that.

EG: Okay.

BC: I can get her phone number.

EG: Okay.

BC: But put this phone number down. 778-8130.

EG: Okay.

BC: Now that's the Kentucky Alliance and she's in and out of there all the time and if she's not there, they can give you her--. And she was a teacher, okay. And I'm not sure she was that involved during the '70s but she can give you a whole lot of lowdown on the flack that Black teachers went through right after that period, particularly during the '80s.

EG: Okay.

BC: Okay. And why now you see no Black teachers almost. Although they say that they're trying to get Black teachers and that could be right. But it's always been common knowledge here that we don't have a sufficient number of Black educators. Now whether there are intents to get them into teaching, most kids go to school to take it they don't want to be a teacher and () but I guess what I'm saying is when they say it's hard to get them, they're probably partly right.

EG: Okay. Yeah that would be, she'd be a perfect person to talk to because we really interested in seeing what happened in the '80s.

problem is in getting them. I think first of all, I don't think the powers that be has ever thought that that would be that important. We know how important it is but I don't think they have ever seen how important it is to have Black teachers in schools, for the sake of White kids as well as Black kids or other kids, the schools should have Black teachers. So but again, having that impression myself, I don't think that impression was very widely, I don't think that (). It could not be racist, it could have been, hey, well, a teacher is a teacher is a teacher. But we know a little better than that. So I think that's one of the reasons and I do feel like that there has been a void in the aspirations of Black children in not seeing other Black people in authority, if I should use that word.

EG: Well in the first interview that I did on this trip, it was [an interview with], I don't know if you know him, Phil Mahin, and he was the only Black teacher at Butler High School from like 1989 forward. And [he] talked about that, how the Black students would come to him and talk with him and I even brought up in the interview your point about the psychological implications or damage that Black students could feel being in an all-White environment, and he could totally relate to that. And it was evident that they really saw him as a role model and that that was very important for them. I wanted to get back to the pro-busing organizations that you were part of and you said that the purpose became protection, was kind of the main thing when all this violence took place and these anti-busing demonstrations and so forth. What about after that when the violence died down and busing became more accepted? What were the goals then of the organizations or what were the main activities that you engaged in or issues you addressed?

BC: Okay, I think once busing settled in—and you know, school desegregation, busing, transportation, however you want to call it—the pro-busing organizations somewhat felt like that what needs to be done now is to make sure that the curriculum, for

EG: Yeah, yeah.

BC: Okay. But they say it's because there are more Whites than there are Blacks, which makes some sense. But anyway, she would be able to really talk to you about all of that because they got a lawyer and then, as I say again, they sued recently, and I'm talking like in the last few years.

EG: Like 2000 or so?

BC: I'm sorry?

EG: Like 2000, I think it was.

BC: Right.

EG: Something like that, yeah.

BC: Right, okay. So she would be able, because she was a part of that suit, because she has followed that closely, and I just picked up bits and pieces in the paper, but she would very well be able to sit with you and talk to you all about that, and she could come up until today.

EG: Yeah.

BC: Because she's still quite active herself.

EG: So was she active in the '70s as well, the '80s?

BC: I don't think so; she's relatively young, I would, I'll have to say no. I doubt if she's forty years old.

EG: Oh, okay.

BC: She's relatively young.

EG: So it would be a recent—

BC: Yeah.

EG: What about—

better with it. But if you're trying to make Johnny just like that suburban Susie, you're not going to do that.

EG: Yeah.

BC: They're two different people who come from different-- And who has an emotional chemistry about the society that is much different. And they're not going to behave the same. So if you know that, then I think, sometimes I think—I'm not an educator—but sometimes I think we're trying to make all kids just alike. We'll line them all up in the seats and all of them, you'll leave here just alike. Well no, they're not going to. So I think that's one of the problems. I guess I'm saying there would be less suspensions if we understood that going in, that there may be some needs that this kid has, there may be some needs that little Tonto has, that we need to fit their needs.

EG: Right. Now I saw [that] one of your kids was born in 1964 or so, and another one was born in 1971, and so was the one going through the school system during the time of busing?

BC: Yeah, yeah.

EG: And then the other one was a little later. What was their experience like?

BC: Well personal experience was, I think, pretty good. And I guess I don't know really why, to tell you the truth. Well one of the reasons, I guess, was because we kind of kept tabs on them, for one thing. And I found that once the kids got to school, and I think all of us found that, the kids could work things out pretty well.

EG: So your kids were bused?

BC: No. Say again? Yeah, yeah.

EG: Okay.

EG: What schools were they bused to?

BC: Western, but my kids lived about--I live out in Shively--about six blocks from their school. So they weren't really bused across county. Although they were bused, they were on buses going to school everyday, but they weren't really bused across the county into another area.

EG: Okay. What school were they going to go to if they hadn't been bused?

BC: Well they were bused but again, what I'm saying, because they lived in an area that has a ratio of Whites, they hadn't have to be bused to where White folks were. They were right there where many Whites lived. Blue-collar Whites live in Shively.

EG: Oh, okay.

BC: So they lived in Shively. So they went to school on the bus. They were bused to school but they weren't bused out of their neighborhood across town to a--.

EG: Yeah, oh so they went a short distance.

BC: Yeah.

EG: So Shively at that time, you lived in Shively, that was a predominately White area?

BC: Shively, it had a very terrible reputation.

EG: How did you--

BC: And Shively is where--.

EG: Yeah.

BC: Well first of all it has changed drastically in those--. The first Black person who lived in Shively's house was bombed. Anne Braden, Anne and Carl Braden. They were very (), bought a house and she has a book, I meant to bring it to you, but I can still get it to you.

almost had to fall in line. So Shively, that bust that I was telling you about that they dedicated about six months ago, the people on that street now are still all White, where that the Wades, who were Black, tried to buy a house in Shively, they wouldn't sell it to them. So Anne and Carl Braden bought the house and sold it to them. So the people who now live on that block, many of them are young in that particular block, got together, so I understand, with their own money and bought that bust and put it on corner there. You have to see it, and matter of fact, I took pictures of it. I should have brought them. But what I guess I'm saying [that] shows you that difference from the '60s through today. Here are people, and they had the press conference. The young White folks who live on that block, were at the press conference talking about how wonderful this is.

EG: Oh, that's so rewarding.

BC: Yeah, it is. So it shows you that there's been quite a change and it was a lot of young people and different mindsets that brought about that change. And they had Anne out there, as a matter of fact. Anne is in her eighties, mid-eighties. And so I guess what I'm saying is all of these things you can see a change since what we're talking about.

EG: So were you living in the Shively, you were living in the Shively area when busing happened?

BC: No.

EG: Oh you weren't?

BC: No.

EG: Where were you living then?

BC: I was more sort of in western Louisville.

EG: Oh, the West End area?

BC: Yeah. ()

BC: School desegregation has always been a part of the agendas of all of these social justice groups.

EG: Yeah.

BC: I mean the issue actively had quieted down. But it's always been, again, there, as to what are we doing around the schools.

EG: Yeah, so it's been part of like the Kentucky Alliance's work as well?

BC: Yeah.

EG: Some of the other groups around. So the actions—

BC: Excuse me, that's one the reasons I want you to talk to Debra Stallworth. She also at one time was a member of the Kentucky Alliance Board. And she was, if I'm not mistaken, head of the Educational Committee.

EG: Okay.

BC: So she's one of the people that can tell you some of the things later that was done and where it is right now, what people are, what about education are we concerned about right now.

EG: So the five years that you, six years you were really active in it, was from like '74 to '79? Like right before busing until and then a few years after that?

BC: In that particular—

EG: Am I right with that time?

BC: Yeah, that time frame is about right.

EG: Yeah.

BC: On that particular issue. As I've told you earlier on, I was more concerned about Black employment.

EG: Yeah, with the Black Workers Coalition.

Louisville] that I gave you—oh I don't know. No, that probably wasn't. I was thinking that it could have been in there but it maybe, maybe not.

EG: Yeah.

BC: I don't know whether you want to use any other resources but the library right down here at Tenth and Chestnut there's a Black library. Western Branch library. They are very, very, very good at steering you to anything that you want to know, particularly about Black history in Louisville.

EG: Oh great. You said it was at—

BC: Tenth and Chestnut. Right on the corner. As a matter of fact, it's billed as--and I guess this is true, it may even have a cornerstone that says it--the first library in the country exclusively for Black use.

EG: Wow.

BC: Yeah, you may want to take a picture of it.

EG: Yeah.

BC: Tenth and Chestnut. Right on the corner. And this is Sixth Street. It's not fifteen minutes from here. You would really want to go there because in the area of that period of school desegregation, they will have a lot of stuff. I mean pictures, I mean some of everything.

EG: Oh excellent. Yeah I don't think we've run across that.

BC: Yeah, there's another one right over here. The main library is at Fourth Street, Fourth and York. It's larger as you would know, but I think from what you are gathering, you would be better at Tenth Street. Western Branch Library.

EG: Oh yeah. I bet that's a gold mine of information.

BC: Oh God it is.

frightened, who the system frightened them. So I can see their fear, but again I felt, I think there were those people here who really was embarrassed. And there were people, I think, because of that embarrassment who tried to make this work. Because we've always, many people in Kentucky are not () too much, but many people in Kentucky have always had a problem with how the outside world looked at Kentucky. And there were people who were really, really concerned about that. What I mean is that we looked like a bunch of hillbillies with no shoes on and marrying our sisters and I mean really, you'd be surprised at how some people really take that seriously. And they can't look at the Dukes of Hazzard or something like that without, "Oh my God!" [laughter] So I think that the busing issue kind of blew up across the nation and then we look like a bunch of bigots?

EG: Yeah.

BC: So we have to do something, so I think there were those, as I say again, people who felt like we have to make this look better if not to us here, to other people. But I think for that reason there were many people who said we can show the positives of this and make this work.

EG: So what were some of the things that, in those years immediately after, where people did try to make desegregation go smoothly and make the city's image look better? What were these groups that, where it was the forefront of their work at that time, what were they doing?

BC: Well I think there were those that were going into schools and monitoring. And there were, I want to say, it's a few teachers (), I'm not sure. There were those who again was keeping a little--. There were parents who went to schools, who were invited into the schools out in the county where they had never been before. There were county delegations who were coming into the city and just visiting. So this was kind of a breaking

EG: Right, sure. Let me consult my list a second.

BC: Yeah, sure. Okay.

EG: I think we've--. Oh, I noticed from your--I see we have time for a few more questions--Civil Rights Commission testimony, that you were working at Central High School—

BC: That I was?

EG: Were you working at Central High School?

BC: Oh no, no.

EG: No?

BC: At that time?

EG: Yeah.

BC: No.

EG: Oh, maybe I misread it or something, but I thought you had said something about noticing that when the White students came into some of these—

BC: Trees ()

EG: Yeah, right.

BC: Yeah, no what I was meaning was that just before, the year before the schools was to bring in White students, all at once. No, the reason I said that was because I had gone to that school—

EG: Oh, okay.

BC: What I meant was that it was so visible that they were preparing for somebody that wasn't already there.

EG: Yeah.

EG: Yeah.

BC: [pause] I don't, I can't, no I don't--. I could have been surprised by the, not an individual, but I could have been surprised by the behavior of the anti-busing faction. And I say that because I don't think I expected the uproar that I heard. And I understood the concern because I was as concerned as anybody, but I don't think I expected some of the behavior, let me say it that way, that I saw. I mean I didn't put that past Louisville, I don't mean that, but it just, something that I didn't quite--. Although once it happened, I saw the reasons and rationale behind it. I saw that these were people like myself who were poor and who were afraid and who were confused and was reacting to all of that. But the things that were said, the mobs, if you will, I think that surprised me a little bit.

EG: Yeah

BC: I hadn't. And they began to, as you would know, attract the Klan and other people, so that was showing that it was about race. As I said before, if it would have been about quality education more than race, I think they would have gotten a lot of support from the Black community.

EG: Right.

BC: For the majority of them it was about race. But I think there were those out there that it wasn't about race to them. I mean it wasn't about education, the quality of education, it was about race. That we could be that frightened and react that way, I hadn't really seen that up close. I mean I'd read about it all my life, you know the night riders, from the night riders to the—

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

START OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

BC: I'm almost thinking, I'm trying to think of there's a couple of people's

EG: What sort of impact did these pro-busing groups have, Progress in Education—

BC: What, pro-busing?

EG: Sorry, the pro-busing groups, what sort of impact did they have on the process?

BC: I think they had a great impact of assuring people that everything can be okay, that we can make it through this, that the world's not going to come to an end. And not only that, that we do need to educate all of our children, that we're suffering because of lack of education of our children. It's going to fall back on all of us. I think that was one of the things that-- I think it allowed some people who wouldn't have stepped out by themselves, I think it allowed a few of these people to stand up and support the pro-busing issue that wouldn't have done it by themselves. A few ministers in White communities, say for instance, who came out and said, "We must stand with our brothers and sisters," I don't think they would have done that if it hadn't have been for that group out there saying that. I guess what I'm saying is it gave them the backbone, if you will, to stand up. Some of the agencies at that time—Dennis Bricken for instance, he was with Legal Aid, okay—some of those groups would have been somewhat silent if it hadn't have been for those pro-busing groups who were standing up for what they felt as though was right, and they were challenging the hearts and souls of people. You maybe put a sticker on your car that said that, a sign in your yard that said that. That's not easy to do if you're afraid, but you're not that afraid when you see other people around doing the same thing. So I think it brought out a lot of people that wouldn't have stood up, who would have been silent, who would have remained silent. So I think for that reason, I think it helped a lot. Just their presence, I mean.

EG: Both.

BC: Both?

EG: Yeah, if it's possible to just briefly touch on that.

BC: Well this may be aside from what we're talking about but when I look around today and I see that we have more people incarcerated than we've ever had in this country, than we had during the period that we're talking about. We have more people probably unemployed now than was unemployed then. We have jobs going out of the country. The unemployment percentage in the Black community is much higher than it was then. We may have had menial jobs but we had jobs. When I see the homicides that are happening in my community and I have to tie it to things such as joblessness, such as property, such as lack of will and I see that as being worse. I'm sorry to say, but some of the things that I think are better came on the backs of those people who are doing worse. I may be doing better but now I'm paying my people less. So I guess what I'm saying is it's hard for me to sometimes celebrate the successes, because are they really successes? I think we often measure successes in this society by how many millionaires we have, rather than the total absence of poverty. I'd rather see the total absence of poverty than to count the millionaires, and I think that's what we sometimes do.

EG: Yeah.

BC: I can recall a time when personally, this is not personal at all, but Donald Trump wouldn't have been a hero in the time I came up. Now you're a hero if you're a millionaire or billionaire. So I'm seeing things, as I say, are getting better for some but getting worse for too many more. I think we're more in a "me" society than a "we" society, and I saw a "we" society on my way up, because I think people depended on one another. We understood how important it was to, as I say again, have that compassion for those

when you wake up in the morning and have your breakfast, you're probably dependent on people that you have never seen in your life, before you come out of the house. Because your coffee bean may have been picked by some poor peasant in Central America. Your orange juice may have come from a migrant worker in California. So we don't realize that. We think really about ourselves. And I think that I hated that I had to get this age before I realized all of that. I guess I realized it earlier but I didn't see it as clear as I do now. So I'm able to explain a little better than I would have a few years ago. But I wish we could drive that into our children. I think that's where it's going to come from, is what we--. The world, as they say, is not, we don't inherit the world from our ancestors. We borrow the world from our children. And if we think that way, we'll pass it on to them in better shape than it was when we got it. So if we think like that, I think things will get better. I think that things like you're doing, letting people see the mistakes and the good things that we've done and I think that they say the best, a real democracy is an informed citizenry. So informing people and what you're doing, I think, helps a hell of a lot.

EG: Well I think that's a beautiful answer and a beautiful way to wrap up.

END OF INTERVIEW

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