

Interview

with

VASCO ALBERT SMITH

October 9, 10, and 12, 2000

by Elizabeth Gritter

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

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**For Related Documents, See the Interview
of Vasco A. Smith by Elizabeth Gritter on
July 12, 2004. (Interview No. U-71)**

U-70

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

ELIZABETH GRITTER: [This is Elizabeth Gritter interviewing Vasco Smith on October 9,] 2000 at his home in Memphis, Tennessee. Alright.

I'm just going to begin with, I had a few questions too about--[telephone ringing].

Alright. I saw you went to LeMoyne College.

VASCO SMITH: Yes.

EG: What was your degree program there?

VS: I majored in chemistry—.

EG: Oh chemistry. Okay.

VS: Basically pre-med.

EG: Okay. Then, you went to the Tennessee Baptist School of Religion?

VS: No, I went to Meharry Medical College, studied dentistry. I have some honorary degrees. That's one. That's one of the honorary degrees.

EG: Oh, that's an honorary degree. Okay.

VS: I have a number of those.

EG: Because I saw that on your "Who's Who" [profile] and thought—.

VS: Is that right?

MAXINE SMITH: I didn't know if you wanted ice, if it was cold enough.

EG: Oh sure. Great.

MS: You can't hurt that.

VS: I never did much of a job trying to fill in those things. They (), they try to condense you down on a "Who's Who" [profile] and they put what they think's important. Not important at all. Of course, an honorary degree is important. But

no--my professional degree was in dentistry at Meharry Medical College in Nashville.

EG: Alright. Why don't we--what you were saying before--.

VS: Okay, speaking about Meharry. Let me just say this. This may not be a question at all. But at Meharry, this was 19--I went there in 1942, this was just the beginning of World War II, the beginning of the heating up of World War II. There were guys from all over the country, blacks. This was historically a black school. Things were segregated. Fellows from New York, New Jersey, Boston. They couldn't understand how we, down here in the South, stood for what we did. "How do you accept this sort of thing?" And do you know I kind of wondered about that for a while until it finally hit me, "Why in the hell is he here in the first place?" The reason he was there is because he couldn't go to school where he came from. He was not accepted. There were two medical schools predominately. That's Howard University in Washington and Meharry in Nashville. That's where 98 percent of your black physicians and dentists came from then. And that's the thing that--the whole history of this thing is when did you first discover that you were black or that you were discriminated against? I have seen so many outstanding black people say, well, you know, Sammy Davis Jr., for example, "The time we went to Miami to perform, and I found that though I could perform there I had to go in the back door, and I realized what segregation was." Well, why the hell was he living in Harlem in the first place? He had been segregated all his life and just didn't know it. [Laughter.] Now let me get off of that and get on to what you want. But that has been the situation of blacks in America. Wherever they have been, they have been discriminated against. In many cases they just weren't quite able to admit to themselves or the feeling and degree of anger about it. I don't know.

EG: When was your first awareness of racial consciousness?

VS: Almost from the day I was born. When I was two years old, I was in a grocery store, and my father was getting some things further down. This was one of those neighborhood grocery stores owned by some white person. And he picked up a cleaver, a big knife cleaver, and sort of just shook it at me, not going to hurt me in any way, but just to frighten me a little bit. And my daddy saw what he was doing. I yelled and cried. He came up to the man and asked him, "Look, fellow why you doing that?" He said, "I just wanted to see if he had any rabbit in him." He said, "Hell, no, he doesn't have any rabbit in him. He's all human. And if you do it another time, I will choke you to death with my bare hands." That was in the South in 1922. I knew I was black when I was two years old, honey, and I've known it ever since. [Laughter.]

EG: Also I wanted to ask you in particular about your role with the Memphis Committee on Community Relations [VS sighs] and what you thought of it. I know you were vice president of that.

VS: Yeah, but let me just show you something. Was I a vice president of it? Hold just a minute. I'll be right back. [break in tape] Just as though blacks were being used possibly whenever they could by whites, whites didn't know it, but blacks were using them too. We were using them. Now, however, my story on the Memphis Committee on Community Relations is going to be entirely different from what you have heard. I want to give you proof. It's on page 134 in this book. I know exactly where it is. This is called *Metropolis of the American Nile*. If you want to cut that out for a little while it'll be perfectly alright. It doesn't make any difference to me. This takes just a little bit of--. [Interruption]. I was among the 500 who went to jail. I can't tell you the

humiliations that we suffered. Maxine didn't go into all that. But this [page?] blacks hit the mainstream. This page here and that there supposedly tells about the whole movement that you are talking about. That's what, that's all that that and the credit for that is given to this community of white people. This committee, with some blacks on it, was responsible for the voluntary—and what?—peaceful and voluntary desegregation of the city of Memphis. [He's reading from the book. On page 141, the exact quote is: "The MCCR was largely responsible for the peaceful and successful desegregation of Memphis in the early 1960s.] A bigger lie never has been told. This man who wrote it is in the history department at Memphis State [now known as the University of Memphis]. His name is Harkins, H-A-R-K-I-N-S. Baby [laughing] and as I've said, you apparently have heard some of this because you are asking about that committee.

EG: Yeah.

VS: Okay, let me tell you a little about that committee.

EG: Yeah, tell me the truth.

VS: Now what this picture is, I don't know. I don't ever even remember a picture like that. But it is of Henry Loeb, some of the white citizens, and some of the blacks.

EG: Let me get the name of it.

VS: I might even be on it, I don't know.

EG: *Metropolis of the American Nile: An Illustrated History [of Memphis and Shelby County]* by John E. Harkins. [Publishing information: Woodland Hills, CA: Windsor Publications, Inc.: 1982.]

VS: Yeah. My first contact with that committee came about, let's see, when I first came back to Memphis from the service. I was in the Korean War. I was at Scott

Air Force, as you probably know, had a rank of captain. When I came back to Memphis, we got involved almost right away. Just not much was going on. Well, let me go back a little back further than that. You asked Maxine [Smith] something about the reasons for the type of results that were obtained here without violence to the extent that you had in other areas.

EG: Right

VS: It was due to the fact that the May 17, 1954 decision had just been reached. The year before we started coming back. Jesse [H.] Turner [Sr.] had served as a captain in the artillery in the Army division in World War II, and then he came back to study, to do his post-grad studies. He was just coming back at that time. Russell Sugarmon, this is a name that you know. A.W. Willis [Jr.], [H. T.] Lockard had come a little bit earlier. Ben Jones had come a little bit earlier, Ben Hooks. In other words, this group of intelligent, well-prepared blacks who were concerned about the progress of their people just happened to be coming back as a group at the same time to the same place with the same ideas, and that's the beauty of it. That's where it really started.

I can remember--and we'll get around to all of this in a minute--I can remember when the first thing that happened toward actual movement toward desegregation was the arrest of O.Z. Evers and Mr. Miles, I think it was, on an aborted attempt to desegregate the streetcars and buses. That must have been in '57 or '58 maybe, it could be very easily. They did not get arrested. They were told they would be arrested if they continued to sit on the bus. They just got off the bus. H. T. Lockard at that time was president of the NAACP. Lockard had been here before most of the others of us got back. He was one of the early young lawyers to come in. He was president of NAACP--you need to talk to

him too.

EG: Yeah, I have an appointment with him tomorrow.

VS: Yeah, try to. Great guy. He was state president; he was local president; he was legal counsel. He was everything because the help hadn't come to town yet. As I said, we hadn't been here very long. We didn't live too far from him. The Klan had burned a cross in Evers' yard. That was out on Lipford Street and () Hampton. The word got out that the Klan intended to burn a cross in Lockard's yard the next night.

EG: This was with the Evers'--.

VS: That was in Evers' yard, the guy who was attempting to desegregate the buses at that time.

EG: Yeah, okay.

VS: Since Lockard was representing him and was president of the NAACP, the Klan supposedly was going to burn a cross in his yard the next night. So I was talking to Maxine and said, "Baby, you know, Lockard ought not to be around there by himself. The Klan plans on burning a cross." And she said, "No, let's go around there." I don't know what we were going to do. He only lived about three or four blocks from us. So, we got up to go. Now, you'd be surprised because, yes, things were nonviolent. But when we got to Lockard's house, he was sitting out on the front porch in a rocking chair. And there was this little brick banister around the porch, and his feet were up on that. We said, "Hey Lockard. We came around, man, to make sure the Klan didn't bother you." And we looked a little bit more closely. There was a shotgun here, and there was a pistol there. And there was a half pint of liquor here. He doesn't tell this very often. He said, "Vasco, ain't no damn Klan going to burn no cross on my yard." And they didn't. I

thought that was a beautiful thing. [Laughter.]

EG: That is lovely.

VS: Tell him you know about it.

EG: I will.

VS: Anyway, this group I'm told, this predecessor who was first the Community Relations Committee or something [he's referring to the Greater Memphis Race Relations Committee]. Anyway, the Community Relations Committee didn't meet together. They met separately. The blacks met here. The whites—they didn't even (). That is right. Then a representative from this group met with a representative of that group, and they talked about what had happened. That was about the strength of the Community Relations Committee. Then, later on-- Now I was not a part of that. Later on they wanted to organize MCRC. That was the final group. There was a group before that. It was the, I don't--

EG: Was there a Human Relations group?

VS: Human Relations, something like that. Yeah, that's the first group.

EG: () They were separate then?

VS: Right. They were separate. [He is still referring to the Greater Memphis Race Relations Committee.]

EG: There was that one and then it kind of formed into this one?

VS: That's right. Then they kind of formed into this other which is the MCRC, Community Relations Committee. I think. I'm not sure. But anyway, I think the first was Human Relations. Then this was Community Relations. That was it I think. Well, they always, for some reason, pushed me, and said, "Vasco, you need to represent the

NAACP." Why I don't know.

EG: Who pushed you?

VS: The fellows in there. Russell and Jesse and Maxine and all that bunch—.

EG: Oh they wanted to—.

VS: The NAACP bunch. Anyway, they knew that I was just a little bit different from some of the others, but somehow they felt that that was okay anyway. We used--.

Well, let's get back a little bit further. The first time I was invited to attend a meeting of the Community Relations group, it was just forming. They were to meet out somewhere beyond Midtown at a police training center or police precinct station or something like that. I don't remember just exactly which. It was a training center. And about, I guess maybe, two car loads of blacks, about eight or ten, met at Universal Life Insurance Company downtown to drive together to this meeting. And I went along with them. And then the whites assembled out there too. [background whispering]

EG: Oh, right here.

MS: Yeah, I had two pair and they ().

VS: And I forgot who was conducting the meeting. I am not sure, some white person. Of course, he talked about the purpose of the group to let the town--. This was during the period when the town was already beginning to boil a little bit. The sit-in movement had started.

EG: Okay. So this meeting took place about 1960?

VS: Let's say about '60 or '61 or something like that. Anyway, the movement had started. I'm not good on dates. But we were sitting in, marching, going to jail, or whatever. So, the person who convened the meeting obviously was addressing the group,

talked about the purposes. The purpose was to try to take steps to solve some of the problems that the community was facing. Well, the problem was the hell that the black folk was raising. [Laughter.] We felt that bringing a group like this together that we could maybe sort of quiet things down a little bit and work this thing out peacefully. It was suggested, and this actually happened. It was suggested that we all take an oath that we would not repeat to anybody anything that was said or being done by this group. Now here are outstanding citizens: black ministers and white ministers; black businessmen, white businessmen; black professionals, white professionals. They started on that end around yonder and raising their hand, "I swear I will not tell it." They came on around. And when they got to me, I had a light top coat like that folded over there. I picked mine up and said, "I don't intend to swear to anything because as soon as I get home, Maxine is going to ask me, 'What happened?' and I'm going to tell every damn thing that was said." I started out the door. Claude Armour, I remember it all too well. He was chief of police. Claude said, "Doc, come on back." He said, "You are the one truthful person that we have here so far. And I think we all have learned a little bit from you because I am going to tell my wife too, and there ain't no need of you going nowhere." He said, "Please come back." I came back. I went a little bit further to tell them, since I was back, that if there purpose was to attempt to find ways to settle the disturbance in town, then they needed to find out what caused it and what they needed to do to stop it. Because I said, "None of you here had anything to do with it, starting it, and none of you can stop it." So that's the way we got off, on a fairly nice note. [Laughter.] It at least set the tone for the group to have some respect for black leadership in town.

EG: Definitely.

VS: That group from then on was used the way the black leadership wanted to use it.

EG: Like in what ways?

VS: Okay. They had nothing to do with anything until--[background conversation/interruption] This is the way it was used. It was not effective at all until--. You see we were on Main Street eighteen months. I don't know if Maxine mentioned that to you. I think she did. We were not just picketing for lunch counters, rest rooms, and so forth. We included the whole bit, employment and so forth. We had an argument about that later on, but anyway. Bry's Department Store, which was the biggest one in town, closed down and never re-opened.

EG: How do you spell Bry's?

VS: B-R-Y-S.

EG: B-R-Y-S.

VS: Gerber's Department Store, a huge department store. All of this is happening about the same time. Their business was off so much that they were ready, all of these people, were ready to sit down and talk. But we recognized the fact that, in some cases, we had been--the relationship between our group and the heads of these businesses and so forth were not the best in the world. There were some of them who were ready to give in, but they'd rather do it through an intermediary than to do it directly with us. I think that that's the best description that I can give you of the role that the Memphis Committee on Community Relations played.

For example, we would recognize that Loewenstein's Department Store--. There we had a number of arrests. It might be better if, let's say, Lucius Burch, and I remember

him because he did go to Loewenstein's--. We would then tell the Community Relations Committee, "Look, how about us having somebody from your group, Lucius Burch, to go along with us to talk with this group?" Now, just to describe it, the meeting: Burch was just a fine man, one of the best human beings to ever live, black or white, and we knew that Burch would hue to a line. However, Jesse Turner, the president of the organization, went in with Mr. Burch, and I went in with my picket sign still on. [Laughter.] So, you can see that the man wasn't too happy to talk to us. But then with Burch there, we did get a dialogue going. Finally, I saw that I had played my role too. Jesse and Burch were supposed to soften him up a little bit. I was supposed to be evil and mean, and I wasn't going to listen to anything. [laughter] We planned it that way. I used the term--. We were discussing employment. We had everything settled except employment. They were just saying--and incidentally, this is something we faced over and over again: "Well, it is true that we do not have any blacks above the level of custodian. But right now we don't have any openings. Then, of course, there aren't many blacks who can handle these positions," and so forth. Well, Burch's position and Jesse's position was to be: "Well, how soon will you start?" My position was to be that you already got custodians who can be salesman if you just put them in that position. You don't know what they can do. I used the term "compensatory employment"--I made it up on the spot--because I was saying that we don't need to wait on you to have openings. Hire some that you don't even need. Well Burch and Jesse disagreed with that, "Now Vasco, that's being too hard." I said, "Well, you're going to have some sick; you're going to have some that die; you're going to have some employees that leave and go to other places. Openings will come about every week in an organization this big. So, if you hire three or four here you don't

need, you've got a pool to pull from when the openings do come. So let's say this that you're compensating for what you have not done for the last 200 years. So, let's call this compensatory employment." [Laughter.]

So, actually the role of the Memphis Committee on Community Relations was not a role that put pressure on anybody to do anything. The pressure came from eighteen months of marching and picketing and boycotting and asking the--. People were crossing the community every night. It wasn't just a matter of having folk there. This was an organization. Wherever two or three would assemble to hear the message of what we were doing, we would send a speaker to, and the whole town knew what we were doing and why we were doing it. You saw these things visible downtown, but there were hundreds of people behind them also who were organizing and working on the community level and so forth. I can't give all the descriptions. As a matter of fact, I could talk about that one thing for hours.

EG: Oh I'm sure.

VS: Anyway, that's what brought the people to the point where they wanted to talk. They wanted to settle it. We were intelligent enough, if I might say, to understand that he also had to have some dignity left. Because if we totally and completely took away all of his dignity, then he might really start fighting.

EG: You mean the white people?

VS: The white people—.

EG: With the dignity.

VS: That we were opposing. Sure. Yeah. The heads of the businesses.

EG: So you mean one of the ways was to have this intermediary—.

VS: So one of the ways was to have the intermediary go with us, and that made him feel that, yes, he was able to enter into some form of negotiation and then conversation with us. Let me point out another way of doing that.

EG: Oh before you do that. I would like before she leaves to get a picture of you two if that's alright.

VS: Oh sure. Burch example, I don't mind using that because it's such a good one. Let us say that we didn't on this first negotiating session, that we did not get everything that we wanted.

EG: What negotiating session are you talking about?

VS: Loewenstein, I'm sorry.

EG: The Loewenstein one with Lucius Burch, Jesse Turner, and myself.

EG: What, do you know the date of that at all?

VS: Beg your pardon?

EG: What year was that, the Loewenstein ?

VS: The thing was, we pulled in the troops in 1961, I think. I'm not too good on dates. But after the boycott itself stopped, and we were in the negotiating state.

EG: Oh okay. Alright.

VS: Here's why, you see, we had to negotiate with not one entity but with a number. These are stores from Beale Street all the way down to Poplar on Main Street. We boycotted all of Main Street. That had not been done anywhere before. We had pickets who had regular schedules year-round at certain hours. We would have pickets from nine in the morning until they closed at night, and sometimes on Mondays, or whatever it was, they were open until nine o'clock. Pickets were there. On my shift, for

example, in front of the Black and White Department Store, Shainberg's Black and White--.

EG: Where was that located?

VS: That was across the street from Goldsmith's on South Main. On my shift, there was Lorene Thomas who was the wife of the famous Rufus Thomas, every ()

EG: Rufus Thomas.

VS: Rufus Thomas, he's a well known entertainer. I thought you would know him.

EG: Oh, okay.

VS: But she is the wife of Rufus Thomas, internationally-known entertainer. What I'm trying to give you is a picture of--. Not all the groups were like this, but this was an unusual group. Another person on my group--this was every Wednesday, I think, from nine until twelve--was Mrs. A. M. Walker who was the wife of the president of Tri-State Bank. We had people all the way from the lowest economic level to the highest, all the way from the highest educational level to those who had no education. The whole town of black people were involved in the movement. That's why, number one, it was so successful because it was very well organized. The community was educated to what was going on.

But then, when we decided, okay, they're asking for a settlement. Some in around-about ways, saying "We are ready to talk." Others maybe not saying it, but they--. Everybody wanted it. Sales had gotten off to the point that they were off 41 forty-one percent. Ten percent is enough to drive you out of business. That's true. Sales off 10 percent, six months, a year, you're gone. So, recognizing that, that's when we decided

now's the time. The Community Relations Committee's been saying, "Why don't you stop?" This I can say, and I don't mind you printing it. Not one white person on the Memphis--and I was vice president as you said. I'd forgotten about that--Committee on Community Relations ever said, "It's time for those folks to give in down there. We're going down to talk to them." They never said that. What they said to us was, "Why don't you folks stop and let the community settle down a little bit?" Even your most highly-thought-of ministers from the white community on this group never said, "It's wrong what they're doing and we're going to demand that they stop." They merely said to us, "Our congregation is suffering because so many of our businesspeople have businesses that are hurting, and we wish you'd stop." Well that ain't no damn reason to ask us to stop. What I'm saying is their participation was not in bringing about the pressure on the business community that it took to cause them to give in. Their role, as they saw it, was to ask us to call in the troops. As I said I'll debate that to the bitter end. It doesn't make any difference. Any of those who are living today, I'll look them right in the face and tell them.

EG: Because you said the one person still believes that they were responsible. You said Lewis Donelson?

VS: Lewis Donelson, for example, is living. Lewis Donelson will tell you today that the Community Relations Committee--. I'm sure he'd tell you. He wouldn't tell you in front of me. [Laughter.]

EG: I'm sure he wouldn't.

VS: He's not the only one. There are some others who are living. But Lord, they're so damned old. Carl Carlson is one. He's a nice guy. Some of them are still

around, whoever they were. I don't know. I just happened to mention him. Their role, once the pressure had been applied, then we actually asked them in some cases, help us to negotiate this or that. Sometimes we needed them. Sometimes we didn't. For example, we had theater chains to deal with.

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

VS: We had so many things. We couldn't deal with all of them at the same time. So, we would have this team who would maybe take over the theater. You have to remember this. All of these people knew that we had the clout to continue if necessary and to bring them to their knees. So, they were willing to talk. But as I said we weren't trying to humiliate anybody. All we wanted was results. And then if it helped to have a white person go along with us, that was perfectly okay. But if he thought that he was the one who won this thing, then he was crazy. [Laughter.] I mean what did he do to bring this man to the point where he's willing to say that he is going to change customs that he's had for 200 years?

EG: I read about that there was this religious rally and that five, the students sat in. It was like in August. Paul Tudor Jones--who was a member of the Memphis Committee [on Community Relations]--he had like, or he had turned them away from his church. There was the one, the religious--.

VS: And yet when Paul Tudor Jones died, honey, and I want you to find this. It's been less than six months ago. The newspapers will have it because his picture was there, and an article about him was there. You'll never believe what the caption was. The caption was "Civil Rights Leader Dies." I'm so damned glad you mentioned Paul Tudor Jones, I don't know what to do. That's true. That's the caption. Please find it. (

)

EG: I will. I'm going to write that down.

VS: They had been turned away from his church, honey. This is the whole story of the white community in Memphis, 99 percent right now. It has been turned around so that that group desegregated Memphis.

EG: That's unbelievable.

VS: Tell me, how did you know about Paul Tudor Jones?

EG: Well, yeah I had read that, and that was--. Like I read the one by David Tucker *Memphis since Crump*. There was a whole chapter basically on the Memphis Community Relations [Committee]. I found that out somewhere that they had said that he had turned them away from the church.

VS: That's exactly right.

EG: I thought, "Hmm. I thought I wonder what the other side of the story is." I couldn't believe [it].

VS: Yet when he died, this year, the caption is "Civil Rights Leader Dies."

EG: That's just unbelievable.

VS: Okay. We're getting ready for the movies. Well—.

EG: Yeah, the theaters.

VS: Yeah. Oh no. I wanted to finish with Loewenstein's, which was my example on department stores. When we went back to the second negotiating session, believe it or not, Lucius Burch who was without a doubt just one of the finest people who ever lived and one of the greatest lawyers who ever lived--. Burch found it convenient, and I thought I'd die laughing at Lucius, really, because he was serious. Burch had looked over

this matter of compensatory employment. He found that was a pretty good term to use, and he won the man over with the argument. [Laughter.] I'm not criticizing him. I'm praising him because he was a great man, and he was honest and sincere in what he was doing. The one thing I could say about him also is this: that if it had been necessary to have a person of his magnitude and his race and so forth to participate in the picket line, he would have done it. He's probably the only one. [Laughter.] He was a very great man. But I only wanted to use that example to say that when it became necessary and we felt that it would be beneficial all around to have somebody from the Community Relations Committee come with us to negotiate a settlement, that was done. But that was not Community Relations Committee () by any means.

EG: I read that you had James Lawson come to speak to the Community Relations [Committee].

VS: James Lawson was pastoring a church here in Memphis all during that time. I don't remember any of that. I don't remember if he came to speak to the group.

EG: Yeah, I read that he said something really things that they disagreed with or his rhetoric was too militant for them.

VS: It's probably true, yeah. I just don't remember. The one thing I do remember is this and I'm getting far afield now but then I'll come back to that is that Lawson and some of the members of the Memphis Community Relations Committee did organize a thing called Memphis Cares after King was killed. It was organized to be just a big day of attempting to bring the community back together again because things had really exploded. Again the NAACP sent me [laughter] and they made a mistake again. I just got angry about halfway during the thing when they were planning a program.

Memphis Cares for Dr. King and all the many things that he stood for and so forth. I, all the time they were saying it, I'm thinking that just a week before he died he was Martin Luther Coon instead of King. He was a man [who] was hated as much as any black person in the United States was. He didn't become a hero until he died. No white person marched with him or attempted to march with him in the city of Memphis. But when he died you couldn't get in the front row for a white fellow. He became a hero when he died. So I got so angry that halfway through a thing I stood up and said that I was in the wrong damned group that I just believe that it was hypocritical and I was leaving. I walked out of the meeting. Anyway—.

EG: So that's when you quit. You quit the group and never came back.

VS: Yes, I think I said something to the effect that they were fire fighters, put out the fire, and I was accustomed to building fires and I was in the wrong group or something like that. I've seen that printed somewhere.

EG: Yeah, I think I read that.

VS But anyway, no. The Committee on Community Relations served a purpose for our good. There were some, Donelson, I think, for example, participated in the negotiations of the motion picture theaters. I think. Now I'm not sure. Whatever it was he was to do, he did well. But that had nothing to do with the pressure that brought the movement to the point where you could sit down and talk about settling it. Am I making sense?

EG: Yeah. You are. I'm glad to have this cleared up. Yeah, definitely.

VS: None of them ever went to jail. None of them ever marched. None of them ever was on a picket line. That's alright. They did serve a purpose, and they served it

well. But they didn't have a damned thing to do with applying the pressure that brought the man to his knees, where he was willing to talk.

EG: Because I'd read that they met in separate committees but I didn't, they didn't mention that it was separate white/black [committees]. They had said that their emphasis was quiet, behind-the-scenes work. [Interviewer note: The Greater Memphis Race Relations Committee (GMRRC) met in separate committees. During the interview, I got the GMRRC confused with the Memphis Committee on Community Relations.]

VS: Shit.

EG: The literature that I read just praised them, like, oh, that's why it was so peaceful in Memphis because the MCCR did this behind the scenes work.

VS: Incidentally if you really--.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

VS: Relatively peaceful movement in the city of Memphis. Now it wasn't *that* peaceful. I mean for example (). I do say that the type of intelligent leadership that we've talked about all along helped tremendously. But also the fact that Claude Armour, who was chief of police, knew that Bull Connor with his troops did more to inflame the community and to eventually bring about a forced and successful conclusion due to the national outrage. Armour knew that the same thing would happen in Memphis. We were on very good personal terms. Because Armour would say, "Vasco." No, he called me "Dr. Vasco." I'd tell him "don't call me that," but he always would.

EG: Dr. Vasco, not Dr. Smith.

VS: No, Dr. Vasco. Everybody would call me Vasco. We are first-name people,

Maxine and me too. He'd say, "Dr. Vasco, as long as your people are orderly, I'm going to do everything in my power to protect [them], and if they get disorderly, I'm also going to perform my duties and I'm going to put them in jail." That's just the way it was. I could sit down and talk with him and say, "Look Chief, you can stop this damn thing anytime you want to. All you got to do is tell the folks downtown some common-sense statements like 'You're losing it. Why don't you give in?'" He'd say, "Oh, Dr. Vasco, I don't have that much power." I'd say, "Yes, you do." [Laughter.] But he was the person in the white community more responsible for the type of atmosphere that existed. The white thugs knew that they were going to be arrested. The black thugs knew they were going to be arrested. There were times that I wished that somebody would start a fight because I was tired of marching. [Laughter.] Eighteen months is a long time. And the only reason, the only reason that it lasted as long as it did was because nothing ever happened to cause an explosion which would bring the television cameras to Memphis. We couldn't get the publicity that it took to bring about a quick and honorable settlement. Am I making sense?

EG: Yes, you are. That's just so interesting.

VS: This is honestly my point of view only. Eighteen long months was hard. And the mere fact that instead of us wearing down, we wore the others down.

EG: Did you have mass meetings?

VS: Oh Lord, yes. Had to have all of that concurrently. You're exactly right. You're catching onto it. That's the spirit of it. We would have--. For example, let me give you an example of a mass meeting that we had. That was the mass meeting that beat all mass meetings.

EG: How often were the mass meetings?

VS: Well, the big mass meetings would be maybe one every three or four weeks or so like that. But sometimes there were three and four, not *big* mass meetings, but community meetings. Let's say one in North Memphis, one in South Memphis, one in East Memphis all in one week. It was organized. If I can get you to understand, the leadership of the NAACP was also the leadership of the Shelby County Democratic Club and was also the leadership of the Shelby County and Bluff City Council of Civic Clubs.

EG: What was that last name?

VS: Bluff City Council, Bluff City and Shelby County Council of Civic Clubs. Maxine mentioned that earlier in her remarks. But the three groups came all from the same root.

EG: Because I've read about all these different groups and wondered what the connections were.

VS: We were all members. However, when the movement started, when we got back in the '50s, this other, the Council of Civic Clubs, had been working here since the '40s. They had been getting some things done on the community level, maybe like improvements on a playground. They were working. They did not have the type of backing that we had because we had the backing of the Supreme Court decision of May 17, 1954, and that didn't make a difference. Then the [Shelby County] Democratic Club had been working since mid-40s.

EG: The Shelby County Democratic Club.

VS: Excuse me. () The NAACP was actually the backbone of the movement. You had the cooperation of all these other groups too. As I said there were

people whose names will never go down in the books who worked just as hard as Maxine did or just as hard as I did. As I said, they were just community people who believed in what we did. You're right. We had what we call Coke parties, where a person would just invite people to come on over to his house to a Coke party. He'd have some—

EG: A Coke party? [Interviewer note: I looked confused because I thought of cocaine, and he picked that up.]

VS: Have some Coca Colas. [Laughter] That's the generational gap.

EG: Yep.

VS: Be careful about that. Just get a case of Coca Cola, put them on ice, and say, "Come on over, we're going to have a Coke party at my house tonight." Wherever they said we could have six or seven people, we'd have a speaker.

EG: At the different community—.

VS: At the community meetings to let them know what was going on.

EG: Like the town hall meetings.

VS: That's right—.

EG: And that sort of stuff.

VS: That's exactly right. It made us no difference if they could get thirty or they could get ten [or] five. We'd get a speaker there. Sometimes one guy would maybe take two or three of those little meetings in one night. But it took that kind of organization to not only get it started but to keep it going. You've got to keep enthusiasm up.

EG: How else did you keep enthusiasm up over those eighteen months?

VS: It was hard to do. It was hard to do. We used innovative and creative tactics. For example, at the Goldsmith's Department Store, the main restaurant was on

the second floor, and they had escalators to go up to it or you went up by the elevator. Well the students did-- Okay, let's say if it's just Walgreen's, where you just walked in the door and sat down at the in the lunch counter, but to walk through the store and maybe have to go up the escalator or get an elevator. Goldsmith's had these big goons who would catch the kids coming up the escalator and bump them up and rough them up a little bit, and they just couldn't get into the restaurant. They'd physically keep them out. Of course, that was violence too. But they don't talk about that. But the kids were courteous enough to, they were trained well enough to not actually fight. The guys would fight them and push them around but they wouldn't fight back.

So let me tell you what we did to them, and this was our creative thinking that these guys did. We found out that at the main restaurant in Goldsmith's on the second floor at the rear of the restaurant off the little library on that same floor, there was a door where the cotton men--these were the wealthy men in cotton business on Front Street just a half a block away--were permitted to enter into a private dining room, so that they wouldn't have to wait in the line like the other people did. We were told where the door was and that the door would open at a certain time, but the men didn't start coming in until twelve o'clock. But the door was open as early as eleven-thirty.

So we assembled again a group of ministers, a group of professional men. We had two presidents of insurance companies there. One was Lieutenant George W. Lee. One was Dr. A. Maceo Walker, the Universal Life Company [president who] was also bank president, [president of] Tri-State Bank. We had about eight or ten people of this caliber who had just drifted into the store one by one and who were looking at books in the library and, at a given signal, they would all then move in. We went in through the

back door, and there was not a soul in there. They were just no waiters, no nothing. Just set up because [it] wasn't time for the men to come in. So we all went in and sat down. Nice linen table clothes and so forth.

EG: All of you were black?

VS: Oh yeah. All of us were black.

EG: Okay. Okay.

VS: Yeah, all of us were black. We were just having a nice time chatting and going on before anyone ever realized we were there. Then suddenly the waitress came through the door and looked at us--. [Laughter.] She ran to get somebody else and that one ran to get somebody else, and finally they got the manager and he came in. He said, "You can't do this." But we said, "We are doing it though. Bring us the menus." Well, one of the preachers had started drinking water and eating crackers and so, but he said, "I want some food to go with this." Anyway, this was a long drawn-out thing where the man was sweating and we were having a good time. [Laughter.]

So finally Maceo Walker who was the bank president -- president of Tri-State Bank -- and the president of Universal Life Insurance Company, huge business--. This man is a financial magnate in the community. So he told the manager, "Look sir, I'm tired of listening to you." He says, "You go get your boss and bring him in here, and I want to tell him why we're here." And this man--he followed his orders. He went and got the general manager and I can't remember the man's name. He came in and he said, "You fellas can't do this." Walker said, "Listen to me a minute. I want you to go with us and we're going to look at your books. I'm going to show you that on your books right now you've got an account for me of \$25,000, and it started out thirty-five and I paid

\$10,000 down and I got a balance of twenty-five, and you telling me I can't eat a sandwich in this store?" Well, the man didn't believe him. We go to his office. He [Walker] had just had his whole house redecorated by Goldsmiths. This is true. This is factual. You can use it in the book.

EG: I will.

VS: This man was so crushed that he had no answer. The only answer they had was to close the room down--the entire restaurant--and it never re-opened again.

EG: Really. That's an incredible story.

VS: But that's what they did. () What I'm saying is darling: though there were no widespread acts of violence and fire hoses and what have you as you had in other places, we had pressure tactics too and we used them and they were very successful. Let me go to the—. Then I'm going to quit talking for a while and let you ask what you want. What time is that?

EG: It's like five to four.

VS: Okay we're going to quit in a minute. I've got to tell you this one and then you can ask me your questions. I'll try to give you a one-sentence answer and let you go on. The streetcars, the transportation system. The kids were bankrupting us. They would arrest them one day, and bless their hearts they'd go back the next day. Take them to jail. [laughing] The lawyers had to go get them. We said, "Look this is fine, but we got to find another way to do it." They were really disrupting things, but it really wasn't bringing it to a head. So, we said, "Let's do this. We're going to have four or five, I can't remember specifically now, four or five or maybe six--I don't think it was more than five--groups of well-known individuals, well known to the extent that if they are

arrested, the publishing of those names in the papers and on the radio and on television will upset this town. We're going to bring the bus company to its knees." It was already operating on just a thin margin of profit. So we arranged groups. I think my group had five in it, five or four. There were these different groups [that] would assemble at one of the major transfer points where people gathered to get on the buses. At different places around town and at a given hour, we were all to board the first bus that came and to sit on the driver if necessary, as close to the front as possible. My group, and I'll talk about mine I guess because it draws in all of what happened on the others too. I wish I could remember those names. But later on I'll get the names for as many people as I can. I knew it was me, Reverend Netters an outstanding Baptist minister was with us. Mr. [Dodson?] who was a very outstanding labor leader. He worked at International Harvester. I wish I could remember the rest of them. But I'll find them out. But then of course Attorney Sugarmon's wife was at one of the stops. These were very well-known people, adults. My group—I think we were at what's called crosstown, which is the major one. It was Madison and Cleveland, and it was twelve o'clock when we boarded the bus. We sat down. Fortunately, the seats were empty, and we just sat down immediately behind the driver. He was getting ready to pull off when it dawned on him. [Laughter.] It looked like a double take. He looked around and he stopped the bus. He said, "You fellows can't do that." We said, "Well we're pretty comfortable here. What's wrong with it?" Incidentally there also was an observer on every bus who also—.

EG: Oh who sat in the back.

VS: The observer went to the back. Yes indeed. All of it was planned--every last bit of it. The observer on my bus was one of the famous Lee girls who got into so much trouble. Elaine Lee I think it was [who] was on our bus [who] was the observer.

EG: Of the George Lee--.

VS: No, no. This is the family I mentioned where so many sisters.

EG: Oh Elaine Lee.

VS: Elaine Lee, right. Yeah, they're the ones that--. Elaine, is she the one who has the touring company now?

EG: I'm not sure.

VS: Yeah, but anyway they were all involved in everything that happened. Anyway, it was Elaine I think. The driver said, "Well, don't you guys know I'm going to call the police and you're going to be arrested?" We said, "Well, that's what we came here for." "Well, I've got to do it." So finally he was begging, "Please don't y'all--." He calls the police. The policeman gets there. He said, "You fellows, I'll explain the law to you but I'm going to have to arrest you if you don't get up. I'll give you a chance." By that time his police radio was on and he was communicating downtown and downtown was listening to him and so forth and so on. Every now and then he'd say, "Well you know they're not moving. Must I arrest them?" or whatever. Then a lieutenant comes and his radio was blaring: "There's a group of them out on Front Street on the corner of so and so that got on such and such a bus." Then, "there's a group so and so. They're all over town." [Laughter.] They're thinking, "What?" That's all there was on the police radio. They were describing it for them. So, I will admit we were a little bit apprehensive they did not arrest us.

EG: They didn't.

VS: There were three or four cars there, but they continued out beyond the inner-city area. This was right downtown. They drove us out to I think it was, Breedlove, Breedlove and Jackson, I think. It was out beyond the inner-city.

EG: Who drove you out?

VS: The bus driver, toward the end of his line. Then, we suddenly looked ahead, and I guess there must've been five or six police cars that we could see ahead of us. We said, "Well I guess this is it." Sure enough they were there to meet us. Again they seeing the group, I'm pretty sure they had been instructed if at all possible to not arrest a group like that. Somebody knew that this was not exactly a group that could be arrested without causing difficulty. Okay, then you asked about the mass meetings. We were carried to jail. As we were being booked, others were coming in. [Laughter.] It was not nice being arrested, however. It never was. I never got accustomed to it. You were finger-printed. They took mug shots. In some instances we were strip searched. That's a demeaning sort of thing. Who's going to strip search a preacher? Good gosh. This was again the humiliation. I'm not sure if any of us were strip searched at that particular time but for other things. Anyway, we immediately--. Our lawyers came to get us. We assembled, I think, down at the NAACP office and made immediate plans for a mass meeting that night. That was all that was on the radio, the arrest and so forth.

The mass meeting wasn't too far from here at Mount Pisgah Church, which is only about seven or eight blocks from where I live here. It's a large CME church. You couldn't get within a block of that church. That's right. They had to [have the] windows up so that at least the people could get some idea of what was going on inside. That very

night plans were made in the church in the mass meeting to boycott the city buses. Nobody would ride the city buses. In less than forty-eight hours, the buses were desegregated.

EG: Wow, that quickly. That's amazing.

VS: That was one of the beautiful, creative sort of things that we did.

EG: Wow. Do you remember the dates of when?

VS: I don't remember the date. You're going to have to go to the newspaper to get--. There again, it's unfortunate that so many of us let so many things get away that I kept. For example, in the *Memphis World*, there was a picture of us up against the wall with our hands stretched out and being patted down and searched. I had that paper and the articles that went along with it for a long time. But I think one day--I had papers in my attic stacked like that--somebody cleaned out the attic for us. We just didn't keep the stuff that we were doing but for two or three reasons. I think at that time we didn't think of it as historical at all; this was just a job that you were doing. Secondly, we didn't have time. We were doing so many different things simultaneously. We didn't have time to sit around and rejoice about this one because we had half a dozen other things that we were doing at the same time. Again, that's a point that makes it different in Memphis and I'm going to stop talking. It was a multi-pronged effort. We were doing lots of different things at the same time. There wasn't enough time to sit around talk about, you know, "Well, we've got 'em now." We'd drink a little cheap wine maybe for about thirty minutes and then say, "Okay, what's next?"

EG: How did you find time to be a dentist?

VS: Well, honey, if anybody was going to jail, I'd leave the patient in the chair.

[Laughter.] Somehow, we found time to do it though. I could do these things because there were so many other people who were offering leadership and offering their services and so forth that it just didn't depend on any one particular person. It was lot of folk.

Let me just say one more thing and as I said. This happened on the picket line when we were doing the downtown section. I would say that this was beyond the midway point of the eighteen months. I don't remember the date at all, but you could also find this in the records somewhere. It was a beautiful late spring or early summer day. It was hot. Mrs. Thomas—I called her name just a while ago. Mrs. Thomas was with me and so was Mrs. Walker. We were in front of the Shainberg's Black and White store, just across the street from the Goldsmith's Department Store.

EG: Shainberg's.

VS: Shainberg's.

EG: How do you spell that?

VS: S-H-A-I-N-B-E-R-G-S, Shainberg's. It was sort of quiet. We had gotten to a place that there just weren't many people downtown. We noticed--. Somebody pointed out to me this white street person who was across the street from us. On this hot day he had on an overcoat, and it was pulled up around him. His hat was pulled down, but he was gazing at me. They said, "Vasco, you better keep your eyes on him." I did kind of watch him. Every time I'd look up, he'd be looking directly at me. Then finally he went in his pocket and pulled out a knife and opened it up with a blade about that long, and he pointed [it] at me like that. I said, "Oh, this is somebody we better watch." I said, "Y'all see the knife?" They said, "Yeah."

So slowly he began to walk toward us from across the street. Of course, I

strongly believed in nonviolence. But my picket sign was carried on a stick, and I took the sign off of the stick. [Laughter.] Was going to knock the hell out of him. We were on a wide sidewalk, and we walked along the outer edge next to the street. He did cross over, but he stayed close to the store. We were on the outer part of the walk. I guess the sidewalk was fairly wide. He kept his hand in his pocket with the knife and continued to look me dead in the eye. Of course, I just kept my stick handy. He didn't come toward me other than the fact he was walking in the direction of us, but not exactly toward me, on that other side of the sidewalk. So as he stayed closer to the building, I just sort of followed him with my eyes and as he passed us. When he got a little bit further down, however, he stopped, but he didn't show a knife anymore. He kept his hand in his pocket. There was a theater next to the store. I think it was the Strand, S-T-R-A-N-D, I think there was a Strand. We had a Loew's Strand. When he got to the theater, which was about forty, fifty feet from where we were, he stopped and just decided he'd stay there at that point. So I just sort of kept looking in that direction or turned in that direction. I didn't want to turn my back to him.

Fortunately, a motorcycle police officer, well the police, that's one Claude Armour--. They, patrol cars or motorcycle policeman or so forth, would pretty often come through just to see if everything was okay. I was glad to see that guy. He was coming toward us. I just stepped out of the street and in front of him and got him to stop. I said, "Hey, that man over there got knife in his pocket. He's been threatening me with it." Well, he didn't believe any such a thing. I said, "Well, you talk to the ladies there." They said, "Oh yes, it's in his right pocket." He didn't want to do anything about it. He called the lieutenant. The lieutenant came up, and he didn't want to do much about it. So

finally I told him, "Man, look in his pocket." So he did. He went over and made the guy take his hand out. Sure enough there was this big knife. The two of them started talking. They're holding him here, just five or ten feet from where we were. They made him come and stand. Then they put their heads together. I said, "Wait a minute. It's me you're talking about. Let me in." [Laughter.] So they called the captain. The captain comes. Again, they go into this huddle, and I said, "Let me in. Let me in on this." They moved away and they talked. Finally, believe it or not, the captain says, "They are both disturbing the peace. Throw them in the back of the car." That's the nonviolent thing they're talking about.

EG: They arrested you?

VS: Yes, ma'am. We were both arrested. I mean the women were just hollering and going on, "You can't arrest Vasco." They threw us both in the back of the seat of the car.

EG: Together?

VS: Yes, together and took us to the police station. This must've been about eleven-thirty.

EG: In the morning.

VS: In the morning. About eleven-thirty when we got downtown. We were on the edge of downtown anyhow, on Main Street, just a few blocks. Oh, they booked me and everything. Booked him. Both of us. Disorderly conduct and disturbing the peace. I've been disorderly and disturbing the peace because I didn't want this man to carve me up. [Laughter.] Anyway, the captain in my presence, now after they booked us, says, "Lock them up, put them on the one o'clock docket." That's the trial case at one o'clock.

Moving us up fast--before anybody else. "I'm going to have them both on the penal farm by two o'clock."

EG: On the what?

VS: The penal farm. That's the prison. I said, "Wait a minute here, all of you. Number one, I'm free to make a phone call, one phone call, and nobody has offered me a phone. I want a telephone. Number two, what's the forfeit on this dog-gone thing so I can be free and come to court at one? I'm going home." He said, "Well, it's fifty dollar." I said, "Well, hell, can you change this hundred dollar bill?" [Laughter.] And that is the thing I always did. Every time that I felt there was any possibility of being arrested, I'd carry a hundred dollars or so just so I could (). Anyway, that cut out. Then I said, "When I get through with this phone, I want you all to take me right back to the place where you picked me up. You're supposed to do that too." They didn't know what to do with me. [Laughter.] I wasn't making it any easier on them. So I made the phone call, and fortunately, Maxine was there at the office. And, do you know what? They took me back to where they picked me up.

I told Maxine, "You get the lawyers and everything together." () docket. I've got be at one. I went home and got sharp.

EG: Got what?

VS: Sharp. Honey, I dressed up. I mean I was good looking when I walked in there with my black suit, white shirt, black tie on. And here's old buddy over here with that overcoat and that hat on. [Laughter.] Maxine had gotten me five lawyers. It was funny. Every time I went to jail they always had four or five lawyers because they knew I'd been wrong a little bit somewhere. [Laughter.] I had Ben Hooks, Russell Sugarmon,

A.W. Willis, Lockard was one of them. The fifth one might have been Ben Jones. I'm not sure. I had five lawyers waiting on me at one o'clock.

So, the judge calls this case up first. The arresting officer had to [give] a testimony. He said, "Now, this boy here." That's me. "This boy here." The judge knew me; everybody in the courtroom knew me. "This boy here says that that gentleman over yonder." That's the white gentleman in the overcoat. [Laughter.]

EG: Boy, gentleman.

VS: "That that gentleman over there had a knife." He went on to talk about "this boy" and "that gentleman." Finally, even the judge himself said, "Officer, enough is enough. That's Dr. Vasco Smith. Now don't call him boy anymore." Now that's unusual in a Southern court at that time. But it was so ridiculous, honestly. Even the judge got tired of it. After everybody else had talked who wanted to talk to the lieutenant and the captain, the judge said, "Well, I'll tell you what." Now this is where justice comes in. He turned to the white fellow. "Now, you know you were wrong. Here's the knife right here. They took it out of your pocket. You were threatening Dr. Smith. Now, if you ever do that anymore, I'm going to put you under the jail. Case dismissed. Both of ya'll can go." How about that? [Laughter.] So, he did his little thing to pretend to be chastising him and then dismissed charges against him at the same time. Now what else do you want to know so I can let you go?

EG: I'm wondering if there's any possibility I could come back and talk to you some more. [laughter] () You have so much to say.

VS: I might not be in a talking mood. What you want to ().

EG: Let's see here. Well, seriously would that work out? I mean ().

VS: How long are you going to be here?

EG: I'm going to be here all week. I live nearby. I stay nearby.

VS: I don't have that much to talk about.

EG: Yes, you do.

VS: I've taken all your time.

EG: I have to go soon. I have to () so.

VS: I can take you home. I can ().

EG: Well, actually he was going to pick me up.

VS: He's going to come pick you up.

EG: Yeah and my stuff is in the car.

VS: Let me look at my book.

EG: Okay. You could--.

VS: Let me just say this and I'll let you go. You want to call him to come pick you up or what.

EG: Yeah.

VS: Our group was a very close-knit group. Most of the plans as Maxine said earlier, were really made--we weren't living here then. We were at another place--with most of us sitting around on the floor in the living room. There was a feeling of camaraderie and mission and all of it combined. It wasn't one of these mournful things where everybody is sitting around with a long face. There were some things that just had to be done, and we made our own plans of doing them. We didn't try to find out whether we ought to do it like they did in Birmingham or here or yonder because we felt that each situation had to have an action tailored for that particular thing.

Now write down for me just a thing that I can tell you about later. Write down the Bellevue, B-E-L-L-E-V-U-E, and McLemore shopping centers and the reason that that's important is that after we had done the things downtown, downtown was dead.

EG: Downtown was what?

VS: Downtown was dead. The stores closed and never re-opened. The shopping centers were just beginning to take over. They had not become these mammoth shopping centers. They were relatively small shopping centers with maybe five or six stores or something like that, that kind. We had a long discussion. We discussed it a long time before we decided whether we would go into shopping centers. I always said we couldn't do them. There were others who felt that they were more difficult to do because there were many entrances. There were many driveways coming in from off that street and off this street and what have you. If you want to know anything else, we'll talk about that too. So we're start right there next time. When do you want to come back?

EG: Umm. I'm not sure where () downtown.

VS: Let me tell you about the school thing. I can't give you the year. Maxine, what year was the school suit filed? [Maxine talking from distance] '61. [Maxine talking from distance.] Okay. She thinks the school suit was filed in about '60.

Anyway, the school suit, incidentally, is still in court. This has never been dismissed.

EG: It hasn't?

VS: It has not been dismissed yet.

EG: Because I found this thing from 1965 and it said at the time of the () the school suit was still going on and I thought wow. It's got to be after that. It hasn't.

VS: I could talk to you about half the day on the school suit alone. Matter of

fact, Judge MacRae has written a book on nothing but the Memphis city school system. He's the federal judge who heard the case.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

START OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

VS: I mentioned Russell Sugarmon to you and you know who he is. Russell's training--there was Morehouse, Rutgers, Harvard, and Boston College. Well, you can't do much better than that. Russell was, let's say, on one hand though he was very young, he was actually one of the senior advisers in the movement. But on the other hand--and this is what I wanted to say about community involvement--here's Frank Kilpatrick in the Forty-Eighth Ward, not too far from here. Frank Kilpatrick had organized the civic club. He was active with the Democratic club. He was active with the NAACP. Frank Kilpatrick did not have a sixth-grade education. But he had the same sort of desires that the rest of us had. He had the same ideas. Frank actually taught me some things that stayed with me for a lifetime. Other people had not--. They just hadn't put it in the same language that Frank did. We were very close because the two of us traveled together at night. Now, you say, "Well, why didn't you travel with Maxine?" Well, with me and Maxine both, that's like having two that are fairly heavy going together. You want somebody else with you. But she can perform one function over there, and I can do one over here. Frank was my buddy most of the time at night. We talked going from one meeting to the other. One thing Frank would emphasize to me is this in his own way of saying it, whenever you go to talk to the white power structure, don't ever go by yourself. There were two reasons for it. One is you can't trust him, because he might lie on you. Secondly, you can't trust yourself [Laughter] because you might fall in a trap (). You

need somebody along there to make sure you going to be alright. Now, that sounds crazy, but do you know what. That's damn good logic.

CALVIN TURLEY: Who would you go talk to? What do you mean by the white power structure?

VS: It might be most anybody. Anybody from the mayor, chief of police, businessman, whatever--whoever the power was in that particular situation.

CT: So you would go in and just talk to them about specific things for the civil rights?

VS: Actually, let me tell you another part of it that we haven't even discussed. Before we ever went into any of this stuff as we were planning on doing, we did surveys. We could tell you that there was only one black person on Main Street that was a salesman, and his name was a Reverend [Mack?].

CT: You mean like at a store?

VS: At a store, the only one. A store of any kind—ten-cent store, department store. Don't make no difference. Reverend [Mack Ray?] sold shoes at the Sample Shoe Store on Main near Beale, but he sold to black customers. He took them in the back. It's where they, the back row of seats rather--.

CT: Black customers could go into what, I mean like Oak Hall or anything like that.

VS: You could there but—.

CT: Always you could do that.

VS: Yeah, you could go there, but there were certain restrictions [in stores]. They didn't hurt men as much as they--. The only thing was they bothered man, let's say,

Oak Hall, was that if you wanted shoes, you had to sit on the end of the seats where they fit shoes. You didn't sit up front. But women had to buy hats without trying the damn hats on. If you tried them on, you got to pay for it whether you like it or not. Women bought dresses without trying them on. If a black woman tried on a dress, she polluted it in some way. So she had to buy a dress just looking at it. Back to this salesman.

CT: Those are the kind of things that are interesting to me. That's like just interesting to me.

VS: Well, that's true.

EG: Yeah, it's fascinating.

VS: But back to this salesman. This was the only man in any retail store above the level of janitor. Can you imagine that? Now, you go into Walgreens, all you see is black people punching cash registers. Nothing like that. Nothing. Nowhere. We had all of our facts ready before we started anything. In some cases--.

CT: Where did black people work?

VS: Hell—.

CT: It's hard to remember where they worked--.

VS: They worked—.

CT: You know, every service job in the Southeast is black. I mean all McDonald's. It'd be rare to go in and see a white person working one of those kind of jobs and if in 1960 there were none of them working in these service-type places, you just wonder.

VS: I agree with you there. I'm going to tell you where they worked.

CT: ().

VS: My daddy only had a seventh-grade education, but he was an unusual person for [just having] a seventh-grade [education]. Now I'm not going into all the other stuff. I'm going to talk about employment. But I need to just touch on the other thing a little bit. Momma did not have one year of formal education. Her mother died in childbirth. Her father didn't want her. She had to be passed from one relative who might take care of her for a few months to another relative. She never had one year of formal education. But they somehow or other knew the value of education. I was born beside a railroad track in Harvard, Arkansas. It was no city. They called it Harvard because there was a Harvard Yards for the Frisco trains. The Frisco trains used to come to Memphis, but they had to go across the river to be serviced at Harvard Yards. That's where I was born.

CT: Where is it, right over across the river?

VS: Right by Marion. Yes, just across the river. Now they have resurrected Harvard Yards. It's an upper-class housing area now in that area of homes. They call them Harvard Yards. Alright. Most people, I guess, don't know where the name came from. But in riding the locomotives into Memphis and then riding back with them to the shops where they were serviced, Daddy passed the old Virginia Avenue Grammar School, which was right in there. There used to be a lot of railroads coming across the Frisco Bridge down there and the [Harry?] Bridge. There were two railroad bridges down on this end. You would be surprised the number of railroads coming into Memphis. There was the Frisco, the Southern, [telephone ringing] the L and N, the (), Rock Island, [telephone ringing] () [Interruption].

Daddy said that my father's daddy, my grand-daddy, was whiter than you. His father, which would be my great grandfather, was white. He was a plantation owner. A

plantation owner had a family here and a family there. Neither one of the women worried about it too much. The black woman was glad that her children were being taken care of, because--. The white woman was afraid to say something about it up there where she was. That was the custom throughout the South. It just wasn't in one case.

But they were doing well until my daddy--. Now they're still on the farm, and the white master's up there who is also his granddaddy. When he got in the fifth grade, [my daddy] had heard about a school that a man named Booker T. Washington had founded down in Alabama--not too far from Union Springs, Alabama, where my daddy was--. The school was called Tuskegee. The word was that if you could found find someway to get there, if you had to walk, they would take you in and give you an education and let you work for them. That was on his mind all the time that one of these days I'm going. But when he got to the fifth grade, the man in the big house--his granddaddy--told his daddy, "You got to take the boys out of school. They've been there long enough. They [have] to go to the fields." There was no arguing about it. So he said that as he passed these schoolhouses, even though he was in Arkansas--. He said that when these boys got big enough to go to school, he was going to take them to Memphis. Wasn't no white son of a bitch was going to tell him you got to take your boys out of school. Can you imagine that?

CT: It's just fascinating to me just to--.

VS: Let me tell you what they would do. Wasn't making much money. We lived in three-room shotgun houses most of my life. Toilet out in the back, didn't have any damned hot water. Hell, when I grew up I thought folks in Dixie homes were rich. Shit, they had hot water, bathtubs, all that stuff. Anyway, from the time--. Well, he brought

us to Memphis when I was two years old. My brother was four. We walked everywhere we went. They were active in church. Go to church at night; go to church Sunday morning, church Sunday night. Me and my brother would be behind them and we'd be, "If we ever get out of this house, we're never going to church no more, nowhere."

[Laughter.] But as we would be walking, they would compare neighborhoods. They'd say, "Now you see where we live, they don't have any sidewalks, and the street's not paved. You see, this street here is paved. Now these folks got more education than I got, and they make more money than I do. They can live in a better house. Now we want you to get an education so you can live in better houses." Then we'd get to a street with sidewalks. They'd compare the same thing again. Then when we'd get to a street where a car (). "These folks went to what's called a college, and that's after you finish your grammar schools and stuff here." But say, "When you go there, they teach you everything that is to be known. You boys are going to college."

Fortunately for us, when I was in the fourth grade, my brother was in the sixth grade, we moved to 825 Saxon Street, which is right behind LeMoyne College. It was a very small school then, and it was an American Missionary Association school. That was the only place in Memphis where whites and blacks lived together on the campus. That's right, faculty members. [New England?] white folks along with blacks. They would have handbills that they circulated throughout the neighborhood whenever, let's say, a missionary to Samoa, Africa or whatever was going to come and make an address. They'd pass these handbills out. Mama and Daddy would scrub us up, put on some clean clothes. We'd go down, sit up there and listen to this lecture. But he'd bring his program home. He'd say, "Now, let me tell you about it. In the first place, I've been telling you

about college. Now this is a college. Now this one here, if you noticed, he got two letters behind his name. Now that means that he finished college, and he's pretty smart. Now this one here has got about four letters behind his name. Now, he went to two colleges, and he knows twice as much as that one does. That one's already smarter. Now, look at this one here. He got five or six letters and his last one got a D in it. Now when you see that, ain't nothing in the world he doesn't know." He said, "I want you boys to go to college. If you stay in there if you want to long enough to get a D behind your name, we will work our arms to the bones. All you got to do is stay out of trouble and keep your nose clean." That's right. Can you imagine that? No education at all, really.

EG: How amazing.

VS: So while I was in grammar school, it was a foregone conclusion that I was going to college. I just knew it. Hell, I just--. When I registered at LeMoyne, I just figured that's what I was always going to do.

EG: Wow.

CT: You tell a good--. I like the way you tell them. Very relaxing. I could sit here for hours listening to—.

VS: But it's true really. That's how come I can do it so relaxed.

EG: Yeah.

CT: You know I've lived here all my life and I'm kind of observant, thinking about things I guess. I just don't know so many issues from the black perspective.

VS: Can we fix () [whispering]

CT: Y'all can have a big time tomorrow.

EG: Okay.

VS: But really that's what made the difference. Do you know that most kids who were in grammar school with me been dead a long time ago? Shot, killed, cut up, in jail, every damned thing. I can name them off to you. I can call the role but that is the thing that made the damned difference. Parents who valued education. That's right. There are white people in town right now that my mama washed their clothes. When I tell them, "Mama used to work for you." "You mean Florence?" "Yeah." "Vasco, that ain't your mama." "Well, yes it is." They don't believe it. But I have never hidden the fact that my beginnings were like that because I think it's inspirational to a lot of black kids.

CT: I would think so.

EG: Absolutely. Absolutely.

CT: Well, I was talking to her about the fact that in the South we grew up with more interaction, whites and blacks, even given the fact that it wasn't an equal relation by and large. But they just didn't have that up North and—.

VS: That's true. You're right.

CT: I don't know how it has () us.

VS: You're right. You're right.

CT: Versus in the North where—.

VS: Do you know what? Right now I have friends that it's no way possible that I could've cultivated these relationships in a big northern city. I mean (). You name them. We've been with them. Hell, I know the biggest in downtown Memphis. No really. That's something. I mean they're good friends of ours.

CT: People think of those relationships in a cynical way. Oh yeah you say you had interaction with blacks but it was on this basis and so on and so forth and that's true.

It is a little something weird about it but I mean, I was telling her that all my life it's like me getting on that bus when I was a kid. I was going back to the back because I just, shit, I saw people on the—.

VS: But you know what thought—.

CT: () they might have been working somewhere and so forth and so on. I didn't think about that. I just went back there.

VS: Sure.

CT: It was just natural for me.

VS: You know what though. There are some folk like () that why you happen to be that way. You really don't know. You know that. I think the major thing is that you were not taught to be the opposite. See you weren't taught hatred in your home. I think that, I think—. There's a family now that we just after all these years became acquainted with them. It's amazing to sit down and hear them talk but they've been reading about Maxine and occasionally maybe something about me about thirty or forty years and had wanted to meet us. We just for some reason were never thrown in situations where we'd meet each other. But we've gotten to be just bosom buddies just like that. But it doesn't usually happen to a person that's been taught at home to hate.

Now another thing about Daddy and Mama. This was one of the worst things that they ever had to do. There were two newspapers that we used to get in the black community. One was the *Chicago Defender*. The *Chicago Defender* went all over the United States. Sometimes the Pullman porter had to carry them under his coat and drop them off in Ripley, Tennessee, and drop a few off in Covington. That's right. The other was the *Pittsburgh Courier*. You know all of this stuff. She is on to it, man. [laughter]

You know that. The *Pittsburgh Courier* was a national black paper. Got it almost down to Mississippi. I mean you're liable to get your damn head beaten for even reading one. But they've got it, and they'd read it under lamplights. Call in the neighbors. Here's a black hanging up from the tree with fire underneath him burning his body. My daddy called in me and my brother. I was in about the fourth grade. My brother was about the sixth grade. Poor black folks and white folks in the South lived together. Maxine talks now about old Pete (). Pete lives down on the parkway across the street from where his folk had a grocery store, used to run around together.

CT: () grocery store.

VS: Uh huh, yeah.

CT: () too a little bit. ()

VS: That's right. That's right. Sure. But Daddy called us in one day. We played together; we fought together; we did every darn thing except go to school together. Blacks and whites, I mean. Finally, Dad called us in. Daddy was very religious, so was Mama. He had tears in his eyes when he did this. But he pulled out a paper, the *Chicago Defender*, and it had a picture of a black being lynched. And he said--it's against all his principles, against everything he ever believed in, but he had to do it for our own protection--he said, "You're getting to the age now, where you going to stop doing what you're doing."

CT: You mean hanging out with white kids. I had the same experience kind of.

VS: He said, "Actually, you can fight together; you can wrestle together." But he said, "A year or two from now if you wrestling with a white girl, you can be accused of rape. I just got to stop you from doing it." He says, "She's human. You're human."

You're all the same. But other folk don't see it that way." He said, "Somebody could be passing by, who doesn't even know you or her, but he just doesn't like the fact you are playing together. He can get you killed." He cried while he was [telling me this].

CT: I can imagine. But that hatred things is, it's more or less. It's a little bit different [than the white class predominant to me?]. I mean that's a little bit of a cynical remark I guess too because the four whites you would kind of know the ones that would be attractive to the Ku Klux Klan or whatever (). A little bit different group from the crowd that I grew up with. I'm sure both of them would present their special set of problems in dealing with. I mean the four whites you knew they didn't like it. Or at least a lot of them, wouldn't you think. I mean, in my mind, I always felt there was more hatred there than in the country club set.

VS: Yeah, there's no doubt about that.

CT: But the country club set wants to be more patronizing. Like my mother was, you know, a total segregationist, not by philosophy just in culture. That's just the way it was. We had a bathroom in the basement. It is still there. You can go down there () [Laughter] toilet. That's what it's down there for. It wasn't for any other reason. It was part of the *system*. But my mother would never think of herself as being mean-spirited in that way. She's ninety years old. That's the culture. It would be unusual for her to be any more enlightened really than she is. Do you agree or not? I don't know. Who would you rather deal with a patronizing type or the hateful crowd?

VS: Nah. I'll tell you. The patronizing sort of person can be brought around. But when it's based on pure hatred, it isn't much you can do about it.

CT: I mean for instance my mother I believe knew [Elizabeth] was coming down

here. Well Maxine Smith in the '60s--. [If] somebody said they were visiting you down in the '60s, my mother would think they were crazy. So in a sense I mean my mother for ninety years old has really softened. They're like non-issues now. Whereas these race issues would've certainly been right on the front burner at one time. I don't think she's () in those terms now. I mean it would be odd for her to--. I mean if she had to create or espouse a philosophy on race I don't think it would be anything that would be very progressive.

VS: I agree. Sure.

CT: But she doesn't have a mean-spirited bone in her body. You know what I mean.

VS: Where did she attend church?

CT: Saint John's Methodist.

VS: Oh well, hell.

CT: I mean that's an example. She stayed—.

VS: That was MacRae wasn't it?

CT: Yeah. She stayed [laughter] when most of them ().

VS: Yeah, she's got to be alright.

CT: Yeah, that's kind of a good point actually. I mean that she stayed there says something about her.

VS: That's right.

CT: A little bit weird. I mean she is the ultimate Junior Leaguer and all that stuff. But I don't know. She'll still say [referring to the black domestic]: "Is the girl coming today?" I go, "Mama who is that?" I still pick at her about that. She's probably saying

that to pick at me a little bit. [Laughter.] But when I was a teenager I would go to the movies at the Malco and because I was a cheapskate you know where I went.

VS: Did you go in the side entrance?

CT: Seventy-five cents versus a dollar and a half. Simple as that. The last movie I saw it was *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and that was—.

VS: Is that right?

CT: That was pretty late. They still had a colored entrance if I'm not mistaken even at that time.

VS: Probably so.

CT: Do you think I'm confusing that? They had one up into the '60s I know.

VS: Sure they did.

CT: Seventy-five cents, it was half price.

VS: What are you talking about, I used to go up into the () is what you're talking about.

CT: You'd go upstairs, I mean the balcony had just like a plywood divider.

VS: That's right.

CT: So white people that wanted to sit in the balcony could. Blacks had to sit in the balcony and on one side of it. Right?

VS: Yeah.

CT: I don't know about like concessions. Could you go buy popcorn or—.

VS: You could get some on the way up. They had it down there where you came in.

CT: I don't remember all the different particulars of that. We just didn't think

about it. Like there were segregated schools. I never even thought about it. The only thing you would think about was where there was a sign. I mean like on the bus, I just remember looking up there. I would ask Martha () wait a second. "Coloreds in the rear." It said that, a little sign right up in the front. That's what it said. I'm sure I asked what that meant.

I'll tell you why I might have sat at the back is if our maid would take us downtown, then what are we going to do?

VS: Sit back there with her.

CT: That's it. I bet that's where I started doing that.

VS: That's about it. You wouldn't believe I worked at the country club for four years. I worked at the country club from the fall that I entered college until I finished college.

CT: I bet that was an interesting experience.

VS: It was. Matter of fact, [Tonky Saunders?]. You remember Tonky. Tonky was one of the first guys that I met that I had waited on. Oh I waited at the country club three or four years out there. Tonky was just a year or two older than I was, wasn't it? So he was still in school. When Tonky found out that, who I was and remembered me and some of the other waiters he took great pleasure out of telling folks that me and Vasco been buddies for years. You know him didn't you?

CT: Yeah.

VS: Nobody liked—.

CT: ()

VS: Nobody liked Tonky.

CT: Didn't he get shot in the rear end?

VS: Sure did.

CT: I can't remember whose window he was coming out of—.

VS: I'd forgotten about that but he sure did. Yeah. The Memphis Country Club meant a lot to me. I'm not sure that I could have made it through school as easily as I did. I tried waiting tables as soon as I finished high school. I decided I'd go down to the Peabody [Hotel] and get a job. Now that's a long story. I'm going to leave Peabody alone. I'm going to tell you that another time. I found out real quick that I wasn't ready for the Peabody at all. So when I entered LeMoyne, in the freshman class with me was a guy whose mother at that time was the head waitress at the country club, Louise Woodward. Damn, I haven't heard her name in forty years. He said, "Man, you can make some money out there. Mama runs the joint. Shit, you ain't got to even do no work, man." So, Louise arranged so that whenever I felt like working on a weekend--didn't want to interfere with studies--I'd have a little work I could do. Then during the summer, I worked on the swimming pool, all the summer with John (). That was my job.

EG: Wow.

CT: Well, come on.

VS: I've enjoyed this.

EG: So have I.

VS: You're alright, child. *Pittsburgh Courier*, good God almighty. [laughter]

CT: Ask her what her—.

END OF INTERVIEW

TAPE 2 OF 3, OCTOBER 10, 2000 INTERVIEW

EG: This is Elizabeth Gritter interviewing Vasco Smith, October 10, 2000, Memphis, Tennessee. Let's start.

VS: As I was saying () and then I'll be ready.

EG: Sure.

VS: Successfully doing what we wanted to do downtown. After [the 18-month protest movement] was accomplished, we were doing a lot of different things at the same times. But, I said, "Look--." In our bull sessions—.

EG: In your board sessions?

VS: Bull sessions.

EG: Bull sessions, okay.

VS: Where is your home?

EG: Michigan is where I'm from originally.

VS: Michigan, really, okay.

EG: [I go to] school in Washington, D.C.

VS: Now where actually our plans were made in this, as I said, in these little bull sessions where five or six of us—.

EG: In the living room?

VS: Uh huh, yeah, wherever, like that. That's where we made our plans to carry

them to the board. So I kept insisting it was time to do something about the shopping centers because the eighteen-month boycott had broken the habit of shopping downtown, and people just didn't go anymore. That's what killed downtown. They started going to shopping centers.

EG: The white people didn't go and the black people?

VS: That's right. That's true. The habit was stopped. In other words, they had cultivated new places to shop. That's what we told them all the time--the city fathers, the people who owned the shops, and so forth. The longer you put this off, the less likelihood you will have of these people coming back again once it's over. That's really what happened. Anyway, we argued about the possibility of the difficulties of these shopping centers--the multiple entrances and so forth. Where I was trying to get them to go was McLemore and Bellevue. On the four corners—.

EG: McLemore, can you spell that?

VS: Capital M-C-Capital L-E-M-O-R-E. There were four corners with shops and so forth. They said, "Well, you going to take one corner?" I said, "We don't have to take one corner, we're going to take all four corners." [Laughter.] That complicates () Anyway, we said we were going to do it. The people by that time--and this was a 98 percent black community--had become accustomed to expecting to cooperate with the movements by the NAACP because the successes had been proven. It turned out to be much easier than anybody ever thought.

EG: Was this after the whole eighteen months?

VS: This was after the downtown. That's right. As a matter of fact, we'd even done a couple other things and then finally decided let's go into here and do this. Well,

nobody wanted to fail, but a lot of them didn't believe in it. So, we fussed and argued about that thing until finally we got it going. The results were amazing. At the end of one week--. The best example I can give for success, when the armored car came on Saturday afternoon to get the receipts from a large grocery store--a member of a large chain of grocery stores--instead of coming out with bundles of money, they had a little paper sack in their hand with about not enough money to fill my fist. That's true.

EG: Why did they do that?

VS: The people just didn't go in there. They had no customers. [laughter] For that day, they had had not over two or three customers. That was accomplished in one week. Now that was such a strong, powerful blow that the merchants were angry. They didn't believe it was going to happen. That was one of the major arrests that I had. The MCRC says that everything was peaceful. The kids after school, the school kids, would come up to join in the protests.

EG: The high schoolers?

VS: High schoolers, yeah, and even some few grammar school kids. They wanted to be a part of it. These two police officers came up--. I just happened to be with the kids that day. They said, "These kids are singing too loud."

EG: What were they singing?

VS: Oh, freedom songs, like, "Before I Be a Slave I'll be Buried in my Grave."
All that sort of thing.

EG: That's a good lyric.

VS: Yeah. [Interruption.] Then the guy started arguing with me. One word to another.

EG: Who started arguing?

VS: The police officer. Before I realized it, I had been thrown to the ground; my hands were handcuffed behind me; my legs were shackled; and the kids were hollering and screaming, "Turn him a loose." My son was there. My son had kicked one of the officers. He was only nine or ten years old. Anyway, they decided they were going to arrest me. I asked what the charges were. They said, "You don't need to know no damn charges. We're arresting you and taking you downtown." Now a remarkable thing happened. There was a guy in town that participated in most things. You didn't have to call him. Just when something started and he heard about it, he'd show up.

EG: What was his name?

VS: His name was Crittenden, what was Crittenden, C-R-I-T-T-E-N-D-E-N. I'm trying to think. I'll get his first name. J, it wasn't James Crittenden. What was Crittenden's name. Joe Crittenden, I think. I'm not sure. I'll get it for you.

EG: Was he white or black?

VS: Black. As a matter of fact, just, well, I won't get into that. But anyway, he always shows up. As I was put in the car and they were getting ready to pull off, he told them, "Wait a minute." I had seen him take his dark shades off and throw them on the ground by the car. I wondered why he was doing that. He told the officers, "Stop, you can't go now. This guy doesn't have his glasses. He can't see without his glasses." They said, "We don't give a damn." He said, "Hell, I give a damn. He's going to get--." He started a big argument with them, and they arrested him too.

EG: How did he come to show up? Did they call him?

VS: No, no, no. He was just passing [through] as I said just [said]. No, no, no.

Wherever the NAACP was involved in anything and he heard about it, he came. So, he had been there two or three days. This wasn't his first day. Joe Crittenden was his name. I thought that he was arguing mighty vigorously, and I really didn't see the point. They just decided, "Well, you're talking so damn much. We're going to arrest you too." They threw him in the back of the car. I later realized that he actually saved my life that day. One of the two officers that arrested me was the most vicious officer on the force and the most racist officer on the force and had been known to maim any number of individuals. In the car, he called me name every vicious name that you can think of. You black this and you black that, but the difference was every time he called me one, I called him a white one. [Laughter.] He reached over and took his shotgun off the rack. He said, "I hope you realize that if I didn't have this witness here, I'd be blowing your brains out." I only put that in to say this, when these guys say there was no violence, there was all kinds of violence.

The sanitation workers on that march when they left the auditorium downtown to march down Main Street. That was the first time that the officers with the cars attempted to push the guys back up on the sidewalk and caused a riot. They just beat the hell out of people, right and left, using mace, sticks and so forth and guns. But that was the first real group act of violence, and then on the march that Dr. King attempted to have, that first one, that was planned violence to it. Joe Crittenden again, this same guy. It's odd. I told you he'll pop up. Crittenden was with me. He said, "Look, Doc. These folk are crowding around." Well, there were thousands of people there to march. But so many people were juggling to get up front where King was that he said to me, "Look, let's go ahead of the march," because we knew the march was going up Beale to Main. "Let's go

past where they're going, and by the time they get to the corner of Beale and Main, we'll already be on Main Street." So we went ahead of them and around the other way. Joe said to me, said, "You know,"--they hadn't gotten to the corner. They were still on Beale Street.

EG: The-- Dr. King?

VS: The marchers. We were two blocks away. He said, "Something's going on down here." It sounded like a battlefield. Well, we later found out that was these guys breaking these huge windows. But the police did not bother them at that point. They went two blocks up Beale Street to Main. The police didn't bother them. Maxine was marching along on the front row. She wondered why they didn't stop this. But then when they got to Main Street with Dr. King in front, that's when the police attacked them. Dr. King's life was in danger. We were a half a block ahead of them looking back at them and saw everything that happened. I ran up to the cops and to the leaders of the march and told them that it's out of hand. You've got to turn around. Well, they forced Dr. King to get into a car and took him away. But officers that day took off their badges, took off their nameplates so that you couldn't identify them. Some even took off their shirts, and they beat the hell out of them (). Maxine saw it. This whole business of voluntary and nonviolent in Memphis--everything was soft and easy. None of it was like that. None of it was. Now where did you want to go?

EG: Well, actually I did want if I had time [to] ask you about Martin Luther King, Jr.'s death. I had read you were on your way to a dinner with him?

VS: Okay.

EG: If you could talk about that a little bit.

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 2, SIDE B

VS: Maxine remembered him from school days. He was a quiet sort of guy--very, very quiet, very studious. In his coming in and out of Memphis, now he had not participated in any of this at all. Different groups maybe from time to time would have him come to church to preach or whatever. We would usually be invited wherever he was to be part of the guest, to have dinner or whatever. We knew him, but we weren't buddies by any means. But we knew him, and he knew us. So on this particular occasion, Billy Kyles--. He's the guy that you see on the picture with Jesse Jackson, I think, pointing up to where they thought the bullet came from that killed Dr. King. They were on the balcony with him. Well, Billy Kyles had come to pick him up and to take him to dinner at his house. We were also invited to be there. I was finishing my last patient, and Maxine was driving down toward the Lorraine Motel to just sort of join maybe a couple of cars, leave her car there maybe even and just get in the other car and just go on out to the place, and I'd meet them out there. When news came to me that he had been shot, and then, I guess, ten minutes later the call came to say that he was dead, I knew that things were going to happen. I quickly finished my work and tried to find Maxine, but she was not near a phone. She was--as I said--on the way down to the motel, and I also wanted to try locate my son because I felt that there would really be some rioting in this town. Within an hour, hour and a half, buildings started burning. By nightfall there was a curfew getting everybody off the street by a certain time. But where I lived--oh here's where I live--. [Laughter.] At that time this neighborhood other than just two or three of us--the rest of the people hadn't had a chance to get away to sell their

homes. This area was not tightly curfewed. We actually got in our car and went to be [with] some friends who were white, incidentally, the Hornbergs. They were one of the few white families that was close to the movement.

EG: Hornberg, how do you spell that?

VS: Hornberg, H-O-R-N-B-E-R-G, Hornberg. Somebody else called--another white couple that was friendly with us--and said they were going over there. Then the Hornbergs called us and said, "Why don't you come over here?" because everybody was just upset, and nobody was resting that night. So we went over there, but the point is we were able to freely move around the neighborhoods that were either white or mixed, but in the black neighborhoods it was tight, tight curfew. Guys were being arrested right and left. The town was burning. People were very upset. A lot of people very seriously upset about what had happened. Then some opportunists who just wanted to raise hell anyhow. That was probably--. We've had some fairly bad times.

You mentioned James Meredith a while ago. Maxine danced with him. Well, A.W. Willis, one of the group NAACP lawyers--. A.W. Willis was one of the NAA's [lawyers] who was helping to handle his case to get in down there at Ole Miss. Of course, Thurgood Marshall, out of Washington, the Washington office of the NAACP, was the chief lawyer on the case. It was decided that there would be--. It was pretty much understood that getting him on the campus would be very difficult. The U.S. marshals wanted him to come to Memphis and to remain hidden here [Laughter] until the hour came to take him. They were going to take him to Ole Miss that afternoon late and get him on the campus and in the dormitory. It was a Sunday.

EG: So he came the night before?

VS: Oh, three or four nights.

EG: Three or four nights before.

VS: He was around town here, I guess, about a weekend. Maxine was taking him to lunch. At that time, we socialized a whole lot. He went to parties with us and everything. [Laughter.] Then we went out to dinner about three or four o'clock that afternoon, and about five maybe, the marshals found out where we were. Somebody at home or in the neighborhood that we'd left word with told them where we would be. The two U.S. marshals came to get him. They had a plane out of the airport to take him to Ole Miss. He was as calm a person as you have ever seen. He prefaced most of his remarks with the term "Well." W-E-L-L. You'd say, "Hey, what about so and so and so?" "Well, uh, it's this way or that way or whatever." But it was just calm and so forth. So when they came for him, he looked up. They said, "We're ready to go Mr. Meredith." He said, "Well, I'm ready." [Laughter.] I can guarantee you within two hours after that—. I don't know if you can recall those years. You were—no, that was a long time ago. The television was covered with news. That campus was just like a battlefield. Gun shots. The National Guard was called out. In the midst of it all, he was sleeping in his room. They put FBI agents with him to accompany him at all times. The only thing he wanted them to do was for them to get out of his room so he could rest. [Laughter.] He was a very unusual guy.

Then after his Ole Miss experience, after he finished college a few years later, he came back and said he wanted to have his second march, which was going to be his March Against Fear. We didn't know anything about it until that Sunday morning we read in the paper [that] he was supposed to start that march at eight or eight-thirty from

the lobby of the Peabody Hotel. So, we got in our car and ran down there and said, "Man, what are you doing?" He had already started. He had on his helmet and a walking stick. And I think by himself and one other person. He was heading down toward the highway. [Laughter.]

EG: Just him and one other person?

VS: We said, "What you doing man?" He said, "Well, I'm starting my march." "We're going to march with you." He really didn't seem too anxious to have too many people with him. But we insisted, and more people joined as the thing went through town. Plus the radio was talking about it, the TV, and everything. He walked to about, to the Mississippi state line. We brought him back to town. I think he stayed at the Peabody. Then the next morning, we took him to the point where he had stopped the march, so he could pick it up again. That's the way he had planned on doing it. He would march or walk until sundown, and then somebody would pick him up. Then the next day he'd take him back to that point. He'd continue on from there.

EG: So you picked him up when? When did you pick him up?

VS: We picked him up the next morning to take him down there.

EG: After the first day?

VS: After the first day and then had intended to go back and get him that afternoon, but he was shot the second day on the highway. He wasn't killed. He was shot. Well, there are so many things that--. We're getting away from Memphis here now. But I never saw anything like this when we went out. We didn't go to the hospital that night. We went to the hospital the next day. By that time--.

EG: Where was the hospital?

VS: This is--. Here in town. Here in Memphis.

EG: What was the name?

VS: This was--. He was at--. It looks to me like he was at the Bowld Hospital. I'm not sure. B-O-W-L-D. I think that's where he was. I'm almost certain he was at Bowld. This is twenty-four hours after he was shot. Every major civil rights leader in the United States was in the hallway or in his room. Roy Wilkins from the NAACP. Whitney Young from the Urban League. Stokeley Carmichael, Rap Brown—what's the guy's name—().

EG: John Lewis.

VS: Cleveland Sellers was a sidekick. Cleveland Sellers. Of course, Stokeley was the chairman of SNCC at that time. The police department in this city was really upset because there were all these guys here. If anything would happen, it would really cause a major riot. A schedule was made out very quickly and then once I get past this I'm going to stop and get back to Memphis.

EG: That's fine.

VS: A schedule was made out very quickly where each one of them was assigned to speak at a mass meeting that night because mass meetings were being held all over town. I mean [there were] huge groups of people everywhere you looked, and some people were assigned--. Well, for example, at one of the large Baptist churches, I was emcee that night. Maybe Maxine would be at another one. Russell Sugarmon at another one and so forth. These guys would just rotate going from church to church to speak, those leaders. Afterwards they were to hold a strategy session at the Lorraine Motel. Dr. King was there incidentally, and also Floyd McKissick from CORE was there.

Everybody was there. Everybody was there. I mean this was strictly it.

So after all the meetings, these guys with a few other people--. I think Jesse Jackson was here, I believe. I'm not sure. Because at that time, he was Dr. King's sidekick. They all assembled up in the office at the Lorraine Motel. That little office is no longer there now. It was where the entrance is to the building, but this was on the second story. I went down and this guy [Ernest] Withers, who was a photographer, who now has a book of pictures on the movement, went with me. We just sort of sat around with the guys and listened to the discussion and so forth. This one wanted to do this, and this one wanted to do that. They argued and they fussed, and they argued and fussed. Most of it had to do with strategy and whether to move ahead with the march now because Meredith did not want them to move ahead with it. He wanted them to wait until he got out of the hospital. This was *his* thing. [Laughter.] If they wanted to do it, they could follow him. But anyway, that's the sort of thing it was.

But it was hot in there, and I told Withers, "Hey man, I'm going downstairs to get some air." ()

EG: You said to who?

VS: Hmm?

EG: Who did you say that to?

VS: To Withers, the photographer.

EG: Alright.

VS: So the two of us went downstairs. There were a few people downstairs, not many. But there were police officers around the place just like this. They were nervous, itchy. A strange looking car pulled up. It was a coupe, just a two-seater. There were two

black guys in there. The cops all came to attention right quickly. These guys pulled in near the door and parked. They got out of their car and went around to the trunk, opened up the trunk, and instead of taking out suitcases, they took out guns. When they did that, the cops jumped. I mean they were--. These were the boldest guys you'd ever seen. They asked them, "What the hell you doing?"

EG: These guys asked the cops?

VS: These guys. The cops said, "You can't have these." The guys said, "The law says you can't carry concealed weapons." They said, "We ain't concealing a damn thing." [Laughter.] "Here's the gun."

EG: Oh my God.

VS: Suddenly, the cops didn't know what to say. They said, "Well, let's see. Are they loaded? You can't carry a loaded one?" They said, "They aren't loaded. Look in them, fool." They looked in them, and they weren't. They said, "If you want to see the bullets, here they are." They pulled out a handful of bullets, and these cops just didn't know how to handle these two men. They didn't know. The guys [said], "Take your damn hands off. We are not breaking the law." They looked strange. We knew they weren't from around here. The cops called for the superior officer to come. He came, and the guys [said], "You're the boss, huh? What you going to do to us?" They gave him hell too. Finally, they called an inspector who was about the highest officer on duty that night. I remember his name well. It was an Inspector Houston. White guy. Houston parked his big, long Lincoln out in the center of the street, walked over to see what was going on. I think they're probably giving him some idea of what was happening.

EG: You were watching this?

VS: Yeah, we were watching—

EG: The whole time.

VS: All of it--the whole thing. We stood right there. Houston did a strange thing. He walked over to the officers and said, "What you guys so upset about?" They said, "Well, they've got guns and so forth." Blah blah blah blah blah. These two fellows looked at him and said, "So you're the big guy. What the hell are you going to do?" He surprised them. He said, "Gentlemen, do you mind if I ask you a question or two?" They said, "Nah, go ahead." He said, "I understand that the guns are not loaded." They said, "They're not." "What are you planning on doing?" They said, "It's none of your business." He said, "Well, you're not breaking any laws. You seem like fine citizens." He said, "Welcome to Memphis." Then the guys didn't seem to hardly know what to do. They were expecting a confrontation. Finally they got their bags and went on in to register with their rifles. I told Withers, "Let's go look at the car license and see where they're from." The license said Bogalusa, Louisiana, and that was the home seat for the Deacons for Defense and Justice. You may not have ever heard of them. These were guys down in Bogalusa, Louisiana, who openly carried guns to defy the law in order to keep them from beating up their women and children. Their organization was well known, but this was our first experience of seeing the Deacons for Defense and Justice. Though they did not tell anybody what their mission was, they came here with the purpose in mind--we only found out later--to make sure that nothing happened to Meredith.

EG: Wow.

VS: But anyway, now let's get back to Memphis.

EG: That's incredible. But they let them register at the hotel?

VS: Yes ma'am. They registered and went on up to their room with their guns.

EG: The police didn't follow them or anything?

VS: Of course, everybody was watching them. [Laughter.] But they were not arrested. We'd never seen anything like it. But they knew what their rights were, and they pushed it right to the very edge.

EG: And it was Lieutenant, what was his name again, Horton?

VS: Houston.

EG: Houston, just like the town.

VS: No, Inspector Houston.

EG: Inspector Houston. Wow. That's just incredible.

VS: But the Deacons for Defense and Justice were known all over the country. Everybody knew about them. It was just sort of like a tale about these very brave men who defied the law, and the law was on their side.

EG: How close were you to them? Where were you watching from?

VS: I guess, maybe, six, seven feet away.

EG: Really. Wow.

VS: They never smiled the whole time. They were just sour-looking, mean-looking. But that was the last organization that had sent representatives to Memphis, so that completed the civil rights circle.

VS: Now what were we talking about, about Memphis. Did we talk, oh yeah. I want you to just check on this when you get to Washington. Marion Barry. Marion Barry is from Memphis. You knew that.

EG: Yeah, ()'s mom told me that.

VS: He went to LeMoyne College. He graduated from LeMoyne. His senior year he was editor of the yearbook. The library case was being heard in court -- the NAACP lawsuit against the libraries where the first sit-in was. They had sued the city in order to get the libraries desegregated. The chief defense counsel for the city of Memphis was also a member of the board of LeMoyne College. He was a white, very prominent lawyer.

EG: What was his name?

VS: I'm going to let you find that out. [Laughter.] He said in court that the reason blacks should not be permitted to use books in the library is that they were unsanitary and diseased, and they were a health hazard. It would not be proper to have them in the room with the white people using the library. They might catch the diseases from the blacks. Barry, recognizing the fact that this man who was using this terminology was also on the board of LeMoyne, wrote an editorial for his school newspaper saying that this man needed to be taken off the board--that he had no business being on the board of a black college.

It seemed as though on a Sunday the administration at LeMoyne had called a meeting to discuss Mr. Barry and his bold actions on writing this editorial and to determine what should be done about it. At that same time a trustee from out of town was passing through and changing planes at the airport and decided that he would go out and just look at the school since he was a trustee and just see what the campus looked like and so forth. Very outstanding businessman. When he got there, he saw all these cars and said, "Well, I'll just go inside the building and see what's going on." Lo and behold,

when he introduced himself, they immediately asked him if he wanted to join in the meeting. They were glad to have him there. When he found out what they were discussing, he said, "Do you mean that you're trying to decide what action you should take against this student." They said, "Well, yes, it's proper that we do this." He explained to them that if a school existed with any purpose at all, it was for free speech and that this young man was standing on hallowed ground and instead of being persecuted he should be praised for carrying out the spirit that the school was founded in. That pretty much ended the matter of Barry being kicked out of school.

That same day, or maybe the next day, I'm not sure because my memory gets dim on these things. But at some point shortly after this, Roy Wilkins was here, and there was a huge mass meeting down at Mason Temple church, and Barry was introduced as the hero of the day--the same Marion Barry. When you get back to Washington, if you want to call him, you can tell him that Vasco told you this story. If you want to interview him, I'm sure he'd be glad to talk to you about it. [Laughter.]

EG: Yeah, I definitely--.

VS: He's quite a guy behind all of that stuff that he's been involved in and Lord knows he's been involved. But Barry was one of the early--. He left LeMoyne and went to Fisk University to major in chemistry. He was getting a master's in chemistry. He was one of the early organizers of the freedom movement on Fisk University campus. He left school to go and work with Student Non--SNCC--Student Non-Violent Committee, Non-Violation Committee or whatever. That's where it was organized, on Fisk campus. He left school at that time and went with them throughout Mississippi on voter registration projects and such as that. So you see you've got a hero there in the

Washington ()

VS: Did we talk about the Black Mondays at all?

EG: No, we didn't.

VS: We didn't.

EG: No.

VS: Well again, the suit to desegregate the city schools had been in court just forever. Some of the most prominent people in this town sat on the witness bench, witness chair, and said with their hands upraised and their hands on the Bible that it was purely coincidental that black students attended schools where only blacks went and that white students just incidentally all went to the white schools with white students.

EG: All throughout when they had the lawsuits?

VS: That's right. It was just a coincidence that at the schools for white students, there were only white teachers. It was coincidence that there were only black teachers at these schools with black students. And that it was not designed and there was no intent whatsoever to segregate. [laughing] So, the suit was--. Finally when the decree was handed down, after going up and down the courts and all that sort of thing, they settled on a gradual desegregation thing where I think it was only thirteen black students that first year were assigned to schools. It was a vicious sort of thing with two first graders at this school and then two over yonder and two over there and whatever.

EG: How did that go at first?

VS: It was awful. The kids were mistreated.

EG: Again I read the picture of it as being peaceful and everything. But no.

Yeah.

VS: The lights were kept on in the schools twenty-four hours a day because they were afraid the schools were going to be bombed at night. There were police guards at the schools day and night. The NAACP had [done] just a tremendous job, first of all, in canvassing neighborhoods to even get students that the parents would permit to attend because, you know, who wants to let their child--.

Our child was in the second year of desegregation in the first grade. He was a first grader the second year. When he went to [the] school that he went to I think there were two others were with him, or three of them maybe. It was not nice. One day, I went to pick him up. His mother was doing something else. He was looking for her car. He wasn't even thinking about my car. He just didn't see it, but I could see him. I'm going to tell you I had some feelings that I remember to this very day. He had been schooled very thoroughly in being able to ignore things that really didn't hurt him--little remarks or whatever that were not kind. Just say that they didn't know any better and forget about it. But I came face to face with it when I picked him up that day. He was across the street diagonally from me, and there were the kids with the little safety patrol who would stop the traffic and let them across the street and so forth. As he was standing there near one of these kids, there was a safety patrol fellow. The fellow kicked Smitty. He was a larger boy. Smitty just moved away from him and [the fellow] finally kicked him again. Smitty moved a good distance away from him, and he didn't bother him anymore. Then the time came, he finally saw me over there and waved. He was so glad to see me. When he came across the street, he ran to get in the car. We chatted. I said I was glad to see him. Then as we were driving home, I said, "Smitty, tell me something. When the fellow kicked you, how did you feel?" He said, "What fellow?" I said, "Smitty, I know

that the boy kicked you." He said, "Yeah, Daddy, he did." I said, "How did you feel?" He said, "Well, you told me that they don't know any better, and it's just ignorance for me to just overlook it." I wondered to myself, "Well, what am I doing here?"

So the Kang Ree Academy of— What's this martial arts thing? It's not judo. There [was] a wave of things twenty or thirty years ago. I don't know. Karate.

EG: Oh karate.

VS: Yeah, the Kang Ree Academy of Karate had opened, and there were television ads on. So, I guess, a month or two after that, Smitty noticed it. He said, "Daddy, the Kang Ree Academy there. Can I go?" "No, who in the world are you going to"—and then it hit me—hmmm. [Laughter.] So, I pretended, "No, you can't go." Then, we made a bargain a few weeks later when an ad came on. Still [Smitty said], "I want to go." I said, "Well, Smitty, I tell you what. If you bring me good grades this year, at the end of the term, we'll let you spend the summer going to Kang Ree." There were all kinds of things that he'd come home and talk about, this boy who would snatch him up, bump up against him in the hall. He'd report these things to the teachers and so forth, and nobody would do anything about it. "Oh Smitty, don't be a crybaby," or whatever. He'd come home and tell me about it.

Anyway, when the school was out, he said, "Now, Daddy, look at my report card. I got a good one. I got a good one. You said you were going to let me go." I said, "Yeah, Smitty. I believe you have." So, the Kang Ree Academy was on the streetcar line that passed very close to our house. We weren't living here then. We were in another place not far from here. That first week I took him over to meet Kang Ree, nice Korean sort of guy. He said, yeah, he'd like to have Smitty in his class. He said that he thought

that he would do well. He was to go two days a week and spend four hours each day. The second or third day, instead of staying four hours, he spent the whole day, eight hours, there. He carried his lunch with him. Then he just told me, "You don't have to take me over there anymore." He'd just catch the bus and go over there. He didn't have to transfer or anything and carry his lunch and stay all day.

EG: How old was he?

VS: Six or seven. Anyway, one day I was downtown, and I stopped at the traffic light. The cop came over to my car and said "You're Dr. Smith, aren't you?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Well, you're Smitty's daddy?" I said, "I have a son named Smitty." He said, "Well, he's my instructor in karate." [Laughter.] What!? He had been going all day. This was toward the end of the summer. He went from yellow belt to green belt to something. So, along with the martial arts part of it, they also taught courtesy, that it's not a thing that you just go out and throw around, but it's really for self defense.

Anyway, after about two weeks of school, he came home one day and said, "Daddy, I think you ought to go to school and talk to the principal." I said, "Well, why?" Well, he said, "This guy that bumped me around all last year. The principal wouldn't do anything about it." The guy was bigger than he was. He said, "He started doing that same thing this year. I went to the principal and told him about it. He said, 'Oh, Smitty you're just a crybaby.'" He said, "Daddy, finally I got tired of it one day, and I split his lip."

[chuckling] I said, "What did he do?" He said, "Well, he just sort of figured that I got lucky and he really attacked me. Daddy, I split his lip again." He said, "Then the boy decided he couldn't handle me anymore. He went to the principal, and the principal called me in." He said that the principal lectured to him. He told the principal, "Why

isn't it that you didn't lecture him all of last year? And now that I know how to take care of myself." [Laughter.] So I got to admit I believe I felt kind of good. [Laughter.]

The Black Mondays, that's where we started really. Maxine and Laurie, that's the same Sugarmon that went to Memphis State [with Maxine] together to attempt to [register]. They were just thinking about, talking about how slowly desegregation was going and how slow the school board was to move to elevate teachers to administrative positions and so forth. They decided that they would make certain demands to the school board to see what the school board would do about it. Of course, they had been making demands all the time and nothing would happen. The same thing was this time--nothing would happen. There were no blacks above the level of principal, none on the intervening levels on up to superintendent, no black superintendent. I'm trying to think. I believe that there were no blacks on the school board at that time. I think that's so, and to get them on would require a change in the method by which they were elected. School board members, I think, at that time were all elected at large and from certain slots, and a black just couldn't win one of those positions. They were citywide positions. Being a minority you couldn't--. Anyway, they decided after many discussions of different ways that they could make an impression that they would really take a long risk. The schools are funded on the basis of average daily attendance. That's ADA. That if there were somehow that they could legally reduce the figures on average daily attendance without any difficulties occurring. That was when they decided that if they could ask the kids to stay out of school one day each week.

EG: All kids?

VS: All the black kids.

EG: All the black kids, okay. Alright.

VS: All the black kids. If they could ask the parents to cooperate—[leaves room], that it would really bring about dramatic changes, but they also realized that this was risky. If you are asking kids to stay out of school, they can get in trouble, all kinds of trouble. You could be accused of contributing to delinquency of minors, all sorts of [things]. Of course, this was again an NAACP project. It was carried to the board. The board agreed to it. They began workshops for kids in the different schools, from the different schools not in the schools. Some of the school leaders--telling them what they wanted to do and why they wanted to do it. Amazingly enough, the kids got the message. Then they went to the male principals and asked them if they would stay out of school on this particular day.

EG: The principals of the schools. Okay.

VS: Of course, they got great resistance there. You ought to hear Dr. [Willie] Herenton, who was a principal at that time, talk about this and how these two little bitty women had these men just trembling because they were afraid to even think about risking their positions to do something like this. They had all kinds of excuses. The only principal who agreed to participate in the Black Mondays is a fellow who's now the mayor of the city.

EG: Oh, Herenton.

VS: Herenton. So they decided that on a certain Monday they would start their movement, and that they would call it Black Monday. Surprisingly enough, on the first Monday, I think they had something like maybe 20 to 25,000 kids who stayed out of school, and then Tuesday morning right back again. To make a long story short--because

you can read about Black Mondays in some of the publications I know--the number got up to 67,000 kids.

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE B

START OF TAPE 3, SIDE A

EG: Alright.

VS: At that time the administration decided that they'd better have some talks with these leaders of this movement.

EG: How long did this last?

VS: I think it was about the fourth or fifth Monday when it reached 67,000.

EG: It started right away when they got into school and the preparations were made in the summer?

VS: The preparations were made, yeah. I don't remember whether this started at the beginning of the school year or what. I don't really remember. I'd really have to research that a little bit myself. Of course you can.

EG: Yeah, I will too.

VS: Anyway, they were prepared for it, as prepared as you can get, because really they were lucky too. Anything could have happened. But fortunately there was no incident of any kind whatsoever that was reported. Out of this came the setting up of the mechanism for electing black school board members, for promoting black school teachers into administrative positions and so forth and eventually electing a black superintendent. That again was an NAACP movement, and there was no mention whatsoever about the Memphis Committee on Community Relations. [Laughter.]

EG: Absolutely.

VS: I don't know of anything else I have in mind to talk about. Let me see.

Barry, Bellevue and McLemore, Black Monday, yeah. That's about it. Except. I think this is important. After the Bellevue and McLemore shopping center agreed to-- And, of course you have to remember this. When we started the economic sanctions movement downtown, we had thoroughly surveyed the city. I think I mentioned this to you. I did. I talked about Rev. [Mack Ray?]. There was, if you remember, the one salesman that we had, that we could find. Not in any business in Memphis at all could we find one black secretary, not in any business that was owned by a white. There was no black cashier in any business. So you see it was totally and completely segregated. After the success downtown and then after the success-- Oh, I forgot, I ended Bellevue and McLemore with my arrest. My arrest caused unrest in the community, to the extent that the storeowners readily agreed the very next day or so to meet with us and bring about a settlement. The settlement was total and complete. Every business in the community with nobody laying out at all agreed to our terms.

Now, the good thing about it is this, when we got ready to go to the next shopping center, which was right down over here, Lamar Airways Shopping Center, which is only two blocks from here. It's a huge, it's a large shopping center. Matter of fact you can get him [Calvin Turley] to drive you by Lamar Airways Shopping Center if you want to.

When we got ready to go to them, we decided to go a different way. We got the names of every store in the area, and there must've been--including those in the shopping center and the adjacent areas and so forth--oh, fifteen or twenty stores at least. We just wrote them a letter saying that we were going to meet at a certain church on a certain date at a

certain time to discuss with them their hiring policies and that we are requesting their presence there. They came. They were mad as hell. They didn't like--.

EG: The storeowners?

VS: Yes, ma'am. They did not like blacks ordering them to be there, which is basically what we did. We never had to picket or do anything. When they left that meeting, they knew what we were going to do next. All of them were in moves to cooperate with our demands. From that point on, it was never necessary in a shopping center to do any marching or picketing or anything else of that kind. It was just to let them know that their businesses had been surveyed or whether they were not in shopping centers. It didn't make any difference. We'd surveyed their businesses and checked on it, and there were no blacks employed in any positions and so on and so on and so on. We'd like for them to meet with us, and they met. [Laughter.]

EG: You didn't have any trouble?

VS: No. The only--. We had trouble at one spot. There was, out at Hollywood and Chelsea.

EG: Hollywood and where?

VS: Chelsea, C-H-E-L-S-E-A, I think it is. Or C-H-E-L-S-A maybe. There was a different attitude out there. They were in a very low-income black neighborhood, just a cluster of stores around them. [interruption]

EG: Just about some particulars. Now in terms of office with the NAACP, were you the vice president of the NAACP?

VS: I'm the perpetual vice president.

EG: Hmm. When did you start?

VS: That's just a joke. [Laughter.] I started back I don't know when, and I still am. I think I ought to quit this year. I guess I've been—. See I've refused always to become president because Maxine has always—. We both became active at the same time. I think that it just cuts out opportunities for other people to develop if the both of us are at the top. I think that it also impedes the growth of the organization because it gives the impression that it's *our* project rather than the public's project. Yeah, so I've been vice president forever. I don't remember when. It certainly went back to fifties anyway.

EG: The Shelby County Democratic Club. Were you president of that?

VS: Yeah, I was president of that at some point. That must've been in the sixties.

EG: The name, how do you spell the name--?

VS: What's the name of that?

EG: The name of the karate place.

VS: Oh Kang Rhee, K-A-N-G R-H-E-E. Kang Rhee, yeah.

EG: Yeah, just if there was anything else, I think, that you wanted to add at all.

VS: Nothing in particular really. Did you have pretty much an outline of what you're wanting to cover?

EG: Yeah, I did and let me see if there's anything else here a second. Were you a board member of the NAACP too?

VS: We both became board members about the same time.

EG: Okay, like 1955 and until now?

VS: Yeah, until now. I'm still a board member. Yeah.

EG: Let me see if there's anything. Did you do much work with the Urban League at all in Memphis?

VS: Almost never. My reason for it is that [is] as far as community work--civil rights and so forth--is concerned, I just had my hands full with the one organization. Not that I have any opposition to the Urban League, not by any means.

EG: In terms of your activism, did you coordinate some of your activism with the Urban League or was that not so influential here?

VS: Let's put it like this, when I came here, Reverend J. A. McDaniels was the director or whatever you call it of the Urban League. With the exception of just a few years when there was another man whose name I can't remember was here. Then Herman. What's Herman's name who's here now? If he knew that I couldn't think of his name, but you wait until he gets to be my age. [Laughter.] In other words, there have only been three, and two of them have had very long terms. They're all very personal friends of ours. But our programs are not the same. They're different. The NAACP's program is more directed toward activism in some various forms or another. The Urban League in this area is concerned primarily with education. When I say education, for example, I understand they've got a tremendous project on teaching computer science, computer skills to community people, and that they get employment for them and so forth, which I think is a tremendous job, a tremendous project. But it's just different from what we do. So no, we don't coordinate, but wherever we can help each other we do.

EG: Right. I wanted to ask you about the movie theater desegregation if you could talk about that?

VS: Okay, at some point during the movie theater desegregation, I can vaguely remember--It doesn't come back clear at all to me--that some person from the Memphis Community Relations Commission committee or whatever did help in the discussions

with the theater owners. See actually, there were so many different segments of what happened downtown, and this was in connection with the downtown boycott because the theaters were boycotted too. There were so many different facets to it so that you couldn't do it all at one time anyway in bringing about settlements and the terms of the settlements and so forth. But, as I recall, there was no difficulty in getting cooperation from them. It was a matter of trying to remove their fears of what might happen in these dark rooms. Let's say that blacks go in for the first time, and there's a group of whites who might want to beat them up, or just whatever. It was just a situation that it lent itself to some degree of concern as to whether--. Not whether they *ought* to do it, but how *could* they do it without having great difficulties. I imagine they were concerned about their businesses. If there was some unfortunate incident to happen in this theater, then people might stop going there or whatever.

The best example I can give, and this is a good one because I remember this one better than anything else. I do know, for example, with some theater owners, or at least one in particular I know, it was agreed that, for this fellow, that maybe just two black couples, if they would, before announcing to the public at all, "Would you go along with maybe just sending a couple this time, we'll have policemen stationed. Nobody will know that they're there." I mean that sort of thing. It was really a spirit of cooperation more than forcing, but the forcing had already been done. It was now a matter of--. So the fellow that I worked with was Lightman. Now that's the Malco Theaters, and they have the largest chain of theaters in the South. They've got just dozens and dozens of them. They will now build these theaters where they have fourteen or fifteen screens. Big ones, you know. It's funny. Mr. Lightman is still living, and he's a nice man. He's

just as nice, Dick Lightman.

EG: How do you spell the last name?

VS: L-I-G-H-T-M-A-N. Two brothers, Richard Lightman, and I think the other is M. A. Lightman. Yeah, it is.

But Dick was the one that I talked with. His major concern was the large drive-in that's on the edge of, well, there's a black community nearby. He knew that once it was announced that particular drive-in was desegregated as of a certain date, there would be just, there could be any type of mixtures of black and whites all over the thing. They could be mixed from one end to the other. How should he handle it? I told him I didn't know anything about drive-ins. I haven't ever been to one in my life. [Laughter.] He said, well, he wasn't afraid so much of any conflicts between blacks and whites because they were in their automobiles. They really didn't have much business knowing whether the person around them was black or white, but he said the thing that he was concerned about was the conduct of the individuals in the cars. [Laughter.] Well, I didn't know what he was talking about. But it seems that that's where the lovers go sometimes. I said, "Oh, man, that's ain't no problem." He said, "Well, it can be a problem." I said, "Well, I don't--." He said, "Well, would you do one thing for me?" I said, "Yeah, I'd be glad to." He said, "On this first night that we do it, would you be available where I can call you if I need you." I said, "Mr. Lightman, I'd be glad to do anything on earth that you want me to do. We want to see this thing be a success just like you want to see it." He said, "Well, that's all I need to know." He said, "You just be at home, and I'll call you if I need you." And sure enough--. I don't know how I remember some of these things, and I can't remember some things that happened yesterday. That's true. [Laughter.]

Sure enough. We had company that night. The phone rang. I guess it was not late, not over nine, nine-thirty, ten o'clock something like that, and it was Mr. Lightman. He's a gentle sort of person. He said, "Dr. Smith, this is Dick Lightman." I said, "Mr. Lightman, I ought not to put this on you. Mr. Lightman, what is your problem? I'm glad to help." He said, "Well, Dr. Smith, I don't know how to tell you this." [Laughter]. "Go ahead, tell me Mr. Lightman." He said, "Well, there is this Negro couple. Dr. Smith, the car is right down front, and it's not too far from the screen. Right in the center of things." He said, "Dr. Smith, they going all the way and folk can see them." I said, "What do you mean all the way?" [Laughter.] I still didn't understand. When it hit me, I could visualize. [Laughter]. I said, "Mr. Lightman, have you ever had a problem to resemble this one at all?" He said, "Well, not quite, but yeah, maybe not on that location, but yeah." He said, "We have that problem. That's one of the things you have with outdoor [theaters]." I said, "Mr. Lightman, let me tell you exactly what to do. Do whatever you would do if that couple was white. I don't know what it is you do. *Whatever* you do, don't discriminate. Do the same thing." [Laughter.] Do you know what? He was happy to hear it. I said, "Whatever it is, there'll be no discussion of discrimination or anything else. Just handle it the same way you always do." [Laughter.] He thanked me, and we talk about that now when I see him. [Laughter.] I never found out what he did. What do they do in cases like that?

EG: I don't know.

VS: Oh Lord. But no, the theaters—.

EG: He was the owner of the theater?

VS: Yeah, he's the owner of the whole chain. One of the brothers—.

EG: The whole chain.

VS: They own the whole chain. They own just all over the South. They own theaters. But he's a very nice man. That was the only call I had, our only discussion of it. As far [as] I know everything went well in the theaters. I don't remember anything. I know there wasn't anything reported to us.

EG: Okay sure.

VS: Now, there were a lot of peculiar things that happened in different situations. For example, we had a lawsuit on the parks and playgrounds. The judge wanted to have-- Well, the swimming pools closed before they would have to [allow] blacks [to] swim. They just closed them down.

EG: Did they ever re-open them?

VS: Oh yeah, they finally got some sense in them and re-opened them. [Laughter.] There was a schedule given for opening. You see, for example, the zoo. There was one day a week that blacks went to the zoo. There was a sign saying that this was the colored day, and whites didn't come in. [Laughter.] Of course, some of the parks were large, like the fairgrounds, amusement parks over here. But the first three parks to be [desegregated]--. Here again I'm remembering things that I haven't remembered before but I think this was mentioned to me some time ago. I recall it. The three parks that were--. Now there was a schedule certain--. These three would open and then later, these, more and more and more, until finally you get them all. The three parks to be opened at first were the Spanish American War Veterans, the Army Park, and the Navy Park. Now, we'd never heard of them. [Laughter.] So we decided to get in our cars and go see these parks that they had opened. You're not going to believe this. Down

Parkway here, it's not far from here at all. It would be good for you to get—. What's his first name? [pause] My buddy who's driving you.

EG: Calvin?

VS: Calvin. Get Calvin to drive you by the—. This would be instructive. I'm not kidding. Get him to drive you past Central and Parkway. Now that's only about three or four blocks from here. Down to—. I'll tell him when he comes exactly where it is. It's across the street from the fairgrounds. It's about fifty feet wide and at that time it was about fifty feet long, and there was a statue of a Spanish American War veteran and that was it. That was the park. [Laughter]. Now since that time, it may be just a little bit bigger, not much, not much. It isn't a park. [Laughter.] Then at the corner, let me draw it for you because you won't believe this. [paper rustling to draw] This is a one-way street. That's Second Street one way in that direction, and it comes to an end right here. This is Calhoun, C-A-L-H-O-U-N. Right where these two streets come together, there's again there's a little thing here about fifty by fifty, and there's a little thing here about fifty by fifty. [Interruption].

The parks and playgrounds, that was done by a lawsuit. The judge gave us a gradual program for desegregation. See the zoo you could go to one day a week. The fairgrounds, you could go to it three days a year. That's when they had the Tri-State Fair.

CT: What was that?

VS: That was for black folks.

CT: ()

VS: It was over at the fairgrounds.

CT: It was?

VS: Oh yeah.

CT: I don't remember that.

VS: It was Dr. Vinson, R. Q. Vinson was the head of the Cottonmaker's Jubilee and something else that was segregated. They started the Tri-State Fair so that the black farmers could bring their stuff and—.

CT: ()

VS: And the black kids could go over there and have a little recreation or whatever.

CT: I just remember the thing down--. I guess has it always been down there between Vance and Beale or Lyndon and Beale rather?

VS: Oh that's the Cottonmaker's Jubilee.

CT: That's the only amusement thing I remember.

VS: Well, that's the Cottonmaker's Jubilee. That's different from the Tri-State Fair. The Tri-State Fair was actually held over in the fairground. In other words, the fairgrounds were just [for] blacks three days a year. So with that sort of pattern that you had in town, the judge ordered a gradual plan of desegregation. Now the pools had all closed.

CT: So they just closed.

VS: Yeah.

CT: That's like drugstore lunch counters that closed.

VS: So rather than let them all swim together, they just closed them, even [the] fairground, all of them. But the judge ordered a gradual desegregation of parks which would begin with these parks now. I want to see if you know where any of them are.

The Spanish American Veteran's Park.

CT: Parkway and Second.

VS: Well, I'll be damned. [laughter]

CT: That's not much. That wasn't a big achievement.

VS: You know where that is?

CT: No. That's a statue and one bench.

VS: That's there. That's what I told her.

CT: What's the next one?

VS: The next one I know you don't know these. The Army Park and the Navy Park.

CT: Third and Calhoun.

EG: Well.

CT: What?

VS: You're lying.

CT: I know all about this place.

VS: You don't—.

CT: That's () my car driving around here.

VS: Well, you know what? We had to get in our cars and try to find them. None of us had ever heard of them.

CT: Yeah, that wasn't much. Y'all weren't working hard enough if that was--.

VS: Actually it's really Second and Calhoun but I can understand you getting it mixed up. But you remember—.

CT: Yeah, Third's the—.

VS: One way going yonder way and one going one way this way. Remember the post office was right there. We got—.

CT: Preceded by a train station.

VS: Uh huh. That's right. Man, you are something else.

CT: I kind of know a little bit about the geography. I don't have a good sense of direction but I know, like you know when the [Memphis] *Flyer* had that thing. You had to identify the whereabouts of certain—. [interruption]

VS: None of us had ever heard of them. So we got in our cars to go see these parks we could go to now, and that's what we found.

CT: You couldn't go to a park before that?

VS: No.

CT: Really. Okay. Now on what basis could they ask you to leave the park or the water fountain or the bathroom or the lunch counter or the whatever. What was the law? When the guy came in with the billy club swinging it around, what did they say? You're under arrest for—.

VS: Well, now actually we didn't even know anything about those parks. The only parks we really had any sort of protest on was the Overton Park Zoo, and then we built a lawsuit on that.

CT: But what was the offense if you did go to—.

VS: Well, the offense was that it was Tuesday afternoon or Thursday afternoon—

CT: What was that law? What was the name of the law?

VS: () if I know.

CT: You need to figure that out. I mean they had to arrest you on the basis of--
If you went into the zoo on Monday, you were arrested for what?

VS: Fred Davis was one of the guys—. [simultaneous talking] Help yourself
baby, I'm trying to get rid of that stuff. Take all of that you want.

CT: You've got to ask somebody. But really, I was trying to figure that.

VS: But I don't know.

CT: There was, in other words segregation wasn't a law. There wasn't a law
saying—.

VS: Yes there was a law. Let me tell you the legal aspects of it. From the Dred
Scott decision which was—[interruption].

END OF INTERVIEW

TAPE 3 OF 3, START OF SIDE A, OCTOBER 12, 2000

EG: This is Elizabeth Gritter interviewing Vasco Smith October 12th, 2000 in
Memphis, Tennessee. Alright. Yeah. I wanted to know particularly about -- you
mentioned that there was a small group of you that spent your time planning it out [civil
rights activities]. If you could talk about each of those people and what they individually
brought to it.

VS: I think that the remarkable thing about this group that formed the core of the
leadership of the movement in Memphis is that there were social connections, there were
family connections, college connections. Some had been schoolmates with others. Even
though there was a range of difference in ages. I'd say that maybe Jesse Turner [Sr.] was
probably the oldest, and I would be maybe the next oldest. Probably [H. T.] Lockard is
my same age. Then we'd drop down about eight or ten years and pick up [Russell B.

Sugarmon, Jr.], [A. W.] Willis [Jr.], [Benjamin L.] Hooks, and Maxine. That's basically the inner core unless I can think of somebody else. For example, I went to school with Jesse Turner. We were classmates. Turner was certainly one of the most outstanding leaders in the movement, president of the NAACP for many, many years and during this particular era he was. Maxine and Sugarmon's--Maxine's parents and Sugarmon's parents and Willis' parents were all about-- [telephone ringing]. Turn it off and let me catch that. [break in tape] There were church connections, social connections, just so many different things that we just knew each other.

So let's start with Willis. Willis was a lawyer, but he was actually more inclined toward business than the law. And in politics, he loved politics. He had served—. Let's see. Did Willis serve in the legislature? I'm not sure. I don't know. He was the guy who was an organizational genius when it comes to putting together neighborhood organizations, political organizations, voter registration, all that sort of thing. That was a specialty of his and he just loved [it]. He excelled in that. When we needed to know about how to approach things from a political point of view, A.W. always had the ideas on how to do that. He liked to deal with figures and projections and so forth, politically, because our organization was political. It was legal. It was, what? Political, legal and then protest, direct action and so forth. He was small of stature, medium build, and he made a lot of noise. On the other hand, Sugarmon--

EG: () Willis, I talked to Henry Turley, and he was saying that he kind of talked in a country way of speaking, A. W. Willis?

VS: He talked in not a country sort of way. He talked like a street person who had never gone to the fine schools that he went to. In other words, he talked the language

of the people, so that anybody from any social strata could understand what he was talking about.

EG: Those were his motivations for talking that way?

VS: I think he did it because he enjoyed doing it. With a crowd of intellectual people, he could also talk with them too. But I think that just this ordinary, everyday of communicating was a thing that he developed.

EG: So he changed () his way of talking?

VS: If necessary. [Laughter.]

EG: If necessary.

VS: If necessary. He could blend--. He had a sort of talent. This is a comparison that's not exactly correct because--. But anyway. Vernon Jordan is a name that you know of around Washington. The only Vernon Jordan that you know is the one who speaks with a cultured Ivy League accent when you hear him on television. Distinctly, diction, proper. When he sits down and talks with us he uses backwoods Georgia dialect because he came from Georgia. Even though he came from Atlanta, he also had friends and relatives who talked with the backwoods [dialect]. Instead of saying for example, "forward," in the backwoods of Georgia in the country they say "fahwahd." So he knew he could communicate with the man who says fahwahd and he could communicate with the man who says forward. That's Vern. I think by the same token A. W. just fit in wherever it took to fit in.

EG: Sure. He was a banker by trade?

VS: He was a banker. He was a real estate man. He was a lawyer. He was a politician. So he did a lot of things. His father was one of the founders of Universal Life

Insurance Company, which was one of the largest black businesses in the United States at that time. So he came from a background of money too. That was a little bit unusual in our group because most of us didn't have any money. I think that pretty much describes him.

EG: Great. Moving on to—.

VS: Now Sugarmon. Sugarmon's father was a real estate man. He certainly had an upper-middle-class background. Sugarmon attended Morehouse College. Willis and Sugarmon both attended Booker T. Washington High School here in Memphis, and so did Maxine and so did I. Jesse Turner was from Mississippi, and that's another story. But Russell attended Morehouse College. He attended Rutgers. He attended Harvard University, and he attended Boston University. He was very well educated. Russell does not speak the vernacular that we're talking about. Russell is awfully, very cultured in his way of speaking. It just comes naturally with him. He's just that sort of guy. As I think I mentioned to you, you'll enjoy interviewing him because just of the way that he expresses things. Law is his main forte. He's now a judge and has been for a number of years. But Russell was interested in the planning also of political activities. There was this political wing of the organization. He was very good at statistics.

EG: Do you mean political wing of the NAACP?

VS: Yup.

EG: Okay. As separate ().

VS: It's so important that you realize that *all* of these things were involved in the NAACP. Maybe not as an official part of the organization, but we were all involved in those various things which came together to create and to carry out the NAACP's

program. I'll stop just a minute to answer one of your questions. You wanted to know something about the effect of other groups--what happened in other cities and so forth, how did that affect us. It didn't have anything at all to do with us. We didn't bother to try to study what happened here or yonder and there and so forth. We were always creative enough to determine what would work best for us. That's what we were really concerned about. Now, we knew about everything that was going on everywhere, and we knew those people who were involved in those movements. You name them all the way from Fannie Lou Hamer and Medger Evers, whoever. Rosa Parks, not Rosa Parks. We didn't know her personally until after she became famous. Daisy Bates over in Arkansas. Just whoever. We knew all of them. But what worked in Arkansas wouldn't necessarily work in Memphis. That was I think the key to what was happening here. There were people involved at the top who understood that. For example, Martin Luther King believed, and this is no criticism of him by any means, but Martin Luther King actually was a disciple of nonviolence. He believed that the way to do the civil rights movement was through nonviolence. He actually went to India and studied. No, that's Jim Lawson. I get them mixed up. We knew Jim Lawson. I mean we knew all of them. But King believed in non-violence. To us nonviolence was just another tactic.

END OF TAPE 3, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 3, SIDE B

VS: We can prove to you that the legal arm was just as important as the nonviolent arm was. As a matter of fact, it was the legal arm that finally won the Birmingham movement. The Montgomery boycott it was where Rosa Parks was and so forth, actually--and I'm not going to get all in to that--it was court action that finally

brought that to a conclusion. So you had to have all these things going on at that same time. That's what we attempted to do.

So Russell was a theoretician. He was one of the fellows who did the legal and political planning. That's about as much I can say about him unless you have some questions to ask.

EG: In terms of political, you mean in terms of voter registration drives?

VS: Voter registration, voter participation, and even, yes, the attempt to elect people to the office. All that, just the whole bit.

EG: He brought a lot obviously from his education.

VS: Sure. Correct. Yet, all the guys were educated, but they were educated in different fashions and so forth. But that's what he liked to do. That's what he added.

EG: You mean his education with the Ivy League?

VS: Yeah. Right. Now, [H. T.] Lockard. Lockard was a country boy from the hills of West Tennessee. He never lost a little bit of that touch. Lockard was--. I guess, tenacity would be the best characteristic I could think of for him. Very tenacious. Actually when Lockard began working for the N-Double-A-C-P in Memphis, most of this cadre of individuals had not come back to Memphis from their various studies and so forth and so on. For a while, he was here by himself. Not generally speaking, there were other people but not this particular group. It just hadn't assembled yet. He only knows about some parts of it that were going on before we got back here. We knew generally about them, but Lockard, as I said, was pretty much the whole show. He was president of the local chapter. He was state president. He was legal counsel. He was everything. He did an outstanding job, and he probably laid the foundation for a lot of things that

happened later on.

EG: How about Jesse Turner?

VS: Now Jesse Turner. He was tall, slender, dark-brown-skinned person from Mississippi, a very small town in Mississippi. The odd thing about Jesse was that though he was from Mississippi, he never went to public schools a day in his life. He was educated in private schools. Where he came from, private schools were about the only thing he could go to, because they didn't have public schools. So actually, at that time, you had these little small church schools. They called them academies that went through grammar school and high school. They may or may not have been good schools. I don't know. They probably didn't teach much other than arithmetic and English and writing and reading. But, whatever. There was even a college there. These were religious schools. These were schools that were financed by the various churches, because they just didn't have educational opportunities other than that for blacks. So it's an odd thing. You say you attended private schools that meant that you were on a certain level. But he said he attended private schools because that is all he had to go to. Then, after leaving there, he came here to LeMoyne College. We entered LeMoyne College at the same time. LeMoyne's a small, black, historically black private school. Then, he went to the University of Chicago and what have you. Jesse was an accountant. He was also a veteran of the World War II. He served in the Army divisions. Had a very, very outstanding record.

Jesse, through his accounting and so forth, was naturally interested in the mathematical part of the thing, again, in organizational figures, analysis of situations from an--. An analytical mind is basically what I'm trying to say. He was very good [at]

the planning of activities. He was also very good at determining political actions based on voter registration, voter participation, and so forth. He was also one of the outstanding planners of the various parts of the movement--when protests would do good and what type of protest would be good, or whether you should do it legally and then carry on the direct action along with that. He was just generally a good leader.

He was the exception to a part of thing that I don't think I've mentioned and that is that we all enjoyed socializing together. We didn't just sit around and plan on how to take advantage of any situation or how to get the white man off our backs. But we enjoyed ourselves too. However, the one thing that Jesse did was, strangely enough, he was an unusually good bridge player. That's odd, because he really didn't care for social life much at all. I think that came about because of his mathematics, because bridge is mathematical. He loved to play bridge. He was just all business. While some of us were eating and drinking and having fun together, he wanted to talk business. If we weren't talking business, he'd just as soon get up and go home. I would say that he was one of the stalwarts in the movement. But I can't point out just one, because I think all of those people contributed something one way or another.

EG: How long was he president of the N-Double-A-C-P branch?

VS: Long time. I was even thinking about it, because I was looking through my yearbook at LeMoyne College. Jesse was active in the N-Double-A-C-P then. So was I. I'd forgotten all about that until I saw it just the other day. He was president for a little while. I don't know just how long. There were times during the movement when--. I know he must have been president for some five or six years.

EG: Like the early '60s?

VS: Yes, something like that. Of course, you know he was involved in some of the lawsuits, the libraries. He was the plaintiff. He brought some stability to the organization.

EG: He was a banker too?

VS: He was a banker. He was president of Tri-State Bank. That's our black bank here.

EG: He was the president. Did he make the decisions? How did the decisions come about?

VS: Actually, they came about from just sitting around a table or whatever and talking. The group really made decisions.

EG: You had to present them to the board?

VS: Yeah, but also the board was, more or less, our group and others.

[Laughter.] Then of course there was Maxine. Maxine naturally was so involved that-- Maxine could very easily have gone ahead and worked on her doctorate and been head of the department of languages in most any college if she wanted to. That probably would've been what she would've done had it not been for the fact that this came along. Now when the movement came along, it was the thing that she felt compelled to do. She just--as history has shown--dedicated her life to it. That almost describes her.

EG: What did she bring to the inner circle?

VS: She put all of our bull into action. [Laughter.] She organized. She recruited people, young and old. She did the public relations. She did the day-to-day work. All of us also had jobs to do. But she just put it all together.

EG: What would you say you brought to the inner circle?

VS: I pushed the organization to the brink. [Laughter]. I think that's about-- [Laughter.] I just always felt that I was impatient. I felt that--. I just always felt that we could go a little bit further and a little bit faster. As a result, there was nothing that I was not willing to do. As a result, I think I was jailed either five or six times. I don't know which it was right now.

EG: Were the others of this inner group jailed?

VS: I think everybody. Well, of course, the lawyers. We tried to keep them out of jail, so that they could get us out of jail. [Laughter.] Maxine was jailed. Jesse was jailed too. Then, the others were lawyers.

EG: Was Benjamin Hooks part of the inner circle?

VS: Hooks, yeah. Hooks was. I'm trying to think of the thing that separated Hooks just a little bit. I believe that, number one, Hooks was later coming out of law school than some of the others. But yes, he was involved. Early on, Hooks was appointed--. I'm trying to think. [Pause.] I'm trying to think. Hooks was very active in the events and the planning in the early stages, but early on, somehow, Ben was appointed--. Something, somewhere along the end separated Ben. He went on the national level. For example, he became national president of the N-Double-A-C-P. So, Hooks was active very much so but somehow, and I can't remember it all now, but somehow his advancement politically--. Maybe it was public defender. I don't know.

EG: Yeah, because I know in 1961 he was appointed assistant public defender.

VS: Okay, right there. That's it. I knew that somewhere along the way. For example, in '61, we were raising hell. [Laughter.] But I know that Ben had been there. So yeah, up until that point, Ben was very much an active part of everything that was

going on. He was also a stabilizing influence.

EG: What do you mean by stabilizing?

VS: Well, you know, Ben was a minister. He became a minister very early. While we were in the midst of the movement, he was called to preach. I think that that caused him to be a person who thought things out just a little more carefully than some of us did.

EG: Some of you were maybe a little more impulsive?

VS: Yeah, uh huh, yeah. He was a person who thought things out a just a little bit more clearly than some of us. Though he might have--. All of us wanted the same thing, but frequently we had different methods to suggest of obtaining that particular thing. So it all had to come together at some point. Ben's influence was: He was more legal minded, and he was just the leveling influence in the group.

EG: What sorts of conflicts did you have? How did you work them out?

VS: Just argue it out. [Laughter.] Yeah, that's right. Arguments sometimes became pretty loud. But we all worked it out. There was never any real conflicts as such. There were differences of opinion.

EG: How often did you meet?

VS: There was no particular [time]. Of the course, the board met once a month. The organization branch meeting itself, the public meetings, were once a month. We just met whenever it was necessary. We saw each other all the time. For example, I was always on the board of the bank.

EG: The Tri-State Bank?

VS: Yeah. I'd see Jesse, and we'd talk down there. Maybe Russell would stop

by, whatever. We all lived generally in the same neighborhoods too. We socialized together. We belonged to the same clubs. Some of us [belonged to] the same fraternities or what have you. It was just a matter of seeing each other very often.

EG: So they were like impromptu meetings?

VS: Yeah, uh-huh.

EG: Who else was on the board?

VS: Oh, let's see [who] you'd be interested in. Reverend Kyles was on the board for a while, I do believe, I'm not sure--. Billy Kyles. I'm trying to think. Incidentally, Billy was involved with the N-Double-A-C-P. You hear his name mentioned but not so prominently with the N-Double-A-C-P. Part of it is because he was not a native Memphian. He came here from Chicago. He came *after* things had gotten started. Then, he had tuberculosis and was in the hospital for a year or two. Even though he was interested and involved as much as he could be, he was just not able during the hype of things--he was also a minister and pastor of a church--to do things himself. He sent officers from his church, members from his church, to participate where they were meeting and various activities, and so forth. Of course, Sugarmon's wife was on the board, Laurie. Maxine, being executive secretary, she ran the board.

EG: How many people were on the board?

VS: About 30, a whole lot of people.

EG: Dr. [Hollis] Price, was he on the board?

VS: No, Dr. Price was [with the] Urban League. There weren't too many individuals who, say, worked on the board of the N-Double-A-C-P and the board of the Urban League, because both were--. They were interested in the end result, but they went

about getting there in different ways. They used different methods. I think some were better suited to work for the N-Double-A-C-P, and some fit in more with the Urban League.

EG: If you could give me an example of how it worked out in terms of your decision-making process.

VS: I wish I could. We talked about the strategy that finally broke the back of the bus. That just came about [from] a bull session. Many of the things that came about that way--. Just sitting around, talking, drinking, whatever. Jesse didn't drink. Jesse drank a Coca Cola. Jesse wanted a Coca Cola and some peanuts. That's all he ever wanted. I don't think there was no specified manner of doing these things. Of course, there was the board, and you discussed things at the board meeting. Then there were committees of the organization. There were standing committees. Political action, for example, was a standing committee.

EG: These committees were made up of the board members?

VS: Yeah, that's right. The committees were always made up of board members. In some rare cases, a member of the organization who was not on the board was added to a committee. Yes, the committee structure had a lot to do with the planning [of] it, no doubt about that.

EG: Political action. What were some of your other committees? Legal Redress?

VS: Yeah, legal redress committee. I forget the committees now.

EG: How connected were you with the national N-Double-A-C-P?

VS: Jesse was national treasurer of it. Maxine has always been on the national

board. The Memphis branch has always been one of the most active branches in the United States, regardless of what you are talking about, membership, programs, court cases, regardless. There is an award given for the most outstanding different branch in this category. There are about three or four categories of branches. You wouldn't expect the same thing from a branch in Memphis, Tennessee, than you would expect from a branch in Sunflower, Mississippi. But there are two or three categories of branches. The most outstanding award for a branch in a certain category is called the Thalheimer Award, and that's given at the convention each year. While Maxine was secretary of the branch, this branch won the Thalheimer Award, I think, 26 out of 27 years or something like that. I think that year they just didn't get their report in on time or they would've won it again. It has always been outstanding--[Interruption].

EG: I know that SNCC, CORE, SCLC weren't as represented here. Did they try to get representation here?

VS: Well, SCLC has always had a chapter here. I don't think that--. I'm almost certain SNCC never tried to organize. As far as () activities are concerned, it's been the N-Double-A-C-P and the Urban League. The Urban League has always been active.

EG: What about CORE?

VS: There's a guy who attempted to use the name of CORE, but he was doing nothing but using the name. CORE was never really here. Representatives of CORE came to town from time to time, but I [don't] think they even attempted much to organize.

EG: What about the presence of the White Citizen's Council?

VS: It was nothing to be considered at all. We just ignored them.

EG: They didn't have much influence in the community. Or the Ku Klux Klan?

VS: Well, the only activity I can remember from the Klan was burning that cross in Ever's yard.

EG: Why do you think these white opposition groups didn't develop in Memphis? I know in other cities that they did.

VS: Probably, to the best of my ability, I can say, early on, you did have a Klan here, way back. But I think that the powers that be in the white community were interested in the economic development of this city. I think that economic development just did not go hand in hand with racial difficulties. I think that's the way they looked at it. I'm not sure. But I certainly feel that that's it. Matter of fact, I just don't think they would have tolerated it. This was a cotton town. Money was made off of cotton. This was industrial development and so forth. I just don't think they wanted anybody to mess that up.

EG: You had mentioned [Claude] Armour as the police chief. You had said that he tried to keep the peace but also that he had talked to Bull Connor?

VS: No, I compared him to show just what the difference that you would have in a city by having a Bull Connor who just pulled out the fire hoses and the dogs and beat heads and all that sort of stuff, and a man who tried to--. Even though he himself was certainly not an integrationist, but at least he tried to keep the peace.

EG: You think his motivations were just that--keeping the peace? Because I know Laurie Pritchett in Albany, he thwarted the nonviolent tactics, and he was trying to keep things status quo.

VS: I really think, though, that Armour didn't know much about the philosophy

of nonviolence or race relations or anything else. I just think that he was a good lawman who felt that it was good for the city to keep the peace. That's about it.

EG: Was that the black community's view of Armour?

VS: I think so, generally.

EG: You had mentioned the arms of the movement being the Shelby County Democratic Club, N-Double-A-C-P, and also the Bluff City and Shelby County Council of Civic Clubs. If you could talk about civic clubs?

VS: It was really just what it was. There was a civic club in each section of town. I don't know how many clubs they had, because it was waning when I got back here. Actually, many of them sort of melded into the N-Double-A-C-P. But it was a group that had worked toward improving the community long before-- Well, along with the N-Double-A-C-P. The N-Double-A-C-P was also present and had accomplished some worthwhile things such as park improvements, school improvements, and so forth. But out of that we were able to pick leaders who had been leaders in and were leaders in the Council of Civic Clubs. We converted them to also being leaders in the N-Double-A-C-P. That's about it.

EG: You had mentioned Daisy Bates and how you knew practically all the leaders. If you could talk about how you got to know those leaders in other cities and communicated with them.

VS: Well, the N-Double-A-C-P organization almost forces you to do that. You have state organizations first and then the states form districts. There are some seven or eight districts in the N-Double-A-C-P. Maybe Arkansas and Tennessee and Mississippi, or whatever, happen to be in the same district, and [you] get to know each other. Then,

[the] districts come together to the national organization and you get in touch with each other through the national organization.

EG: So when things were happening in Memphis, did you communicate about that to other--.

VS: Individuals might be interested, want to know what you're doing. It was a two-way street. I'd been asked to come to Jackson, Mississippi, to speak on the night that Medgar was killed. Kyles was with me and Maxine. We had known each other through the district organization and the national organization. So we did keep in touch. One would advise the other whenever possible or whenever needed.

EG: Mrs. Smith had talked about the death of Medgar Evers spurring her to greater activism. How did it affect you?

VS: Same way. It just made it perfectly clear that that could happen anywhere, and it did. It happened here later on. There was work to do.

EG: What sort of feelings did you have throughout the movement with these threats of violence--people making threatening phone calls to your house and so on? Did you have fear at all?

VS: Never had any fear at all. I never close these drapes. At night, you can see from where you're sitting to the traffic light on the next corner. I didn't have any fear then, and I don't have any fear now because of one common-sense thing. If a person wants to kill you, there ain't no way that you can get away from them. You don't know when he's going to try.

EG: Did you have death threats?

VS: We had all kinds of them. Maxine, it was her duty as an official of the N-

Double-A-C-P to turn over to governmental agencies all evidences of threats and so forth. The F-B-I got them. The local police department got them, and so forth. But that's about the extent of it. I mean, not that we expected them to do anything about it. We never felt that the government was on our side anyhow. J. Edgar Hoover, I figure, was one of the worst enemies of the movement. If you couldn't depend on him, who were you going to depend on?

EG: What was your view of the Kennedys?

VS: They were great. If they had lived on, I think things would have moved much more at a rapid pace.

EG: I know some leaders complained about the slowness of the Kennedys and that they didn't take as strong a stance as they would have liked.

VS: You know, I really hadn't thought of it like that.

EG: What made you like the Kennedys?

VS: I think that basically they espoused hope in the black community, because their views were certainly more liberal. The Kennedys were just--. You may remember the remarks, on some occasion, he was talking about the things that needed to be done, the changes that needed to be made. He said, "If not now, when?" and so forth. That sort of thing. There was also a feeling in the black community that Bobby would have gone even further toward helping us achieve our goals even than Jack did if Bobby had lived. Bobby--he was pretty direct.

END OF INTERVIEW