

Interview
with
TAWANA BELINDA WILSON-ALLEN

May 11, 2006

by Elizabeth Gritter

Transcribed by Laura Altizer

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

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Southern Oral History Program Series:
Long Civil Rights Movement Project

Transcript – Tawana Belinda Wilson-Allen

Interviewee: Tawana B. Wilson-Allen
Interviewer: Elizabeth Gritter
Interview Date: May 11, 2006
Location: Charlotte NC, at her office (Congressman Mel Watt's office)
Interviewer note: See also the interview I did of Ms. Wilson-Allen on May 10, 2006; the interview is referred to in this interview. In the folder for archival deposit are materials that she discusses in this interview as well as some materials does not discuss per se but relates to what she talks about in the interview; these materials particularly deal with her Mecklenburg Voter Coalition work.

ELIZABETH GRITTER: [This] is Elizabeth Gritter with the Southern Oral History Program interviewing Tawana Wilson-Allen at her office in Charlotte North Carolina on May 11, 2006 for the Southern Oral History Program's Long Civil Rights Movement Project. [break in taping] Turn this on again and again I will be just checking from time to time to make sure [the tape recorder] is picking up.

TAWANA WILSON-ALLEN: Do you want to kind of, do you want to hear, want me to let you know about some of the other--. At least just list some of the other things that I've done, and then you can decide what you want to cover or not?

EG: Yeah, in fact—

TW: I mean I don't have a—

EG: Yeah, so why don't we first [go over the life history form] here. You said well, so your last name is Wilson hyphenated Allen. Do you have a middle name?

TW: You don't want to use all that do you?

EG: Well, it's just for archival [purposes].

TW: Belinda is my middle name. Nivens is actually my maiden name.

EG: Okay. M-E-L-I-N-D-A.

TW: Belinda.

EG: Oh Belinda. B-E—okay—I-N-D-A. Then you said your maiden name was—

TW: Nivens.

EG: N-I-V-E-N-S.

TW: I kept the Wilson from my first marriage. I told you my husband was killed in the line of duty. I had a two-year-old son, and he didn't have anyone to identify with. So when I remarried I made it Wilson-Allen.

EG: Okay. Yeah, that makes sense.

TW: A lot of other people at that time were doing it to continue identity with their maiden names since a lot of people might have, might be all sisters or whatever and they couldn't carry their name or for various reasons. They choose to do hyphenated names. But that was my reason.

EG: Okay, great. You were born in you said, 1949.

TW: Uh huh.

EG: When in 1949?

TW: December 16th.

EG: In Charlotte or Huntersville?

TW: Well, it was, neither.

EG: Oh. [laughter]

TW: Now that's an interesting little tidbit. My mother was living in Huntersville at the time. The hospitals were segregated. The only available hospital in Charlotte was Good Samaritan Hospital for African Americans. It was located over here where the stadium is located. It was the only place that African Americans could go and yet it had its nickname, and a lot of people did not like to go there. On the other hand of equal distance almost was Mooresville, which was really more of a conservative town. Lowrance Hospital. So it was Iredell County that I was actually born in. It had a brand new hospital. So the buildings weren't completely segregated. They had wings in the hospital.

EG: They were segregated.

TW: As opposed to—

EG: As opposed to—

TW: It was brand new, and people were nice and brand new hospital. So that was where my mother went to have me.

EG: Okay, that sounds like a good choice. What's your spouse's name?

TW: Emmanuel, E-M-M-A-N-U-E-L Allen.

EG: What was your first spouse's name?

TW: Bruce Wilson, Sr.

EG: You mentioned you have a son.

TW: Yes.

EG: What's his name?

TW: Bruce Wilson, Jr.

EG: Okay. Carrying on a good thing. He was born in—

TW: He was born in Chevrolet, Maryland. Well, I don't know if you need to know all that but—

EG: The year of birth.

TW: Oh, he was born in 19—wait a minute—74. I have a daughter that was born in 1980. My daughter is Tamia.

EG: How do you spell that?

TW: T-A-M-I-A Allen. Born in 1980. Here's what we've got. Here's what we've got. Second marriage for me; second marriage for my husband. He had a daughter also, Nicky Allen so he had one. I had one. Then we had one together. Yours, mine and ours.

EG: [Referring to the movie *Yours, Mine, and Ours*.] Yeah, the Lucille Ball movie. But not that.

TW: Exact, no, it was--

EG: Sorry. A simplistic version. You went to North Carolina Central in '68.

TW: Yes.

EG: And graduated in '72.

TW: Two.

EG: What did you get [your] bachelors [degree in]?

TW: Sociology, a bachelor's in sociology.

EG: You said you got, did you get a degree in Urban Administration from--. A masters?

TW: I got thirty-six hours. I only had six hours to go before [obtaining the master's degree]-- that's before I discovered Carolina Community Project.

EG: Oh that happens a lot.

TW: So I made it up in terms of the certifications for organizing, advanced organizing and that campaign school at Kent State.

EG: That's right.

TW: So I have an, so it's like an equivalent.

EG: Okay.

TW: But I switched gears there.

EG: So the Kent State--

TW: What did I do with that? You got that one. You don't have a copy of that. So that's one documentation and (). I have a certification also from Midwest Academy for their advanced organizing program. I could not find it. I was just hurriedly looking for it and I didn't have a chance to look anymore last night. It's in the same box [referring to a box of materials she gathered for the oral history; a copy of the Kent State certificate is in the archival materials folder.]

EG: Right. Do you know when that was, the advanced organizing certificate?

TW: That was, it was 1983, '84, 1984 for Midwest Academy. '83 for Carolina Community Projects. That was the basic organizing school that I went to.

EG: And in terms of, I know you've had wide-ranging occupational experience. You said you worked for the Department of Labor when you got out of—

TW: Just very briefly, yeah, a couple of months.

EG: Okay. In '72.

TW: Yeah, over the summer of '72.

EG: What did you do for them?

TW: Like an administrative assistant. I don't know what you call the job.

EG: Right, and then did you work somewhere else before being at the Carolina Community Project?

TW: Um hmm. I worked for the Department of Community Resources, Prince George County, Maryland.

EG: Is that from '72 to '74?

TW: Yeah.

EG: Okay, and then you said, Carolina Community Project.

TW: Um hmm.

EG: What was your title with them?

TW: Well, organizing and then I became associate director after a couple of, around '85, '86 I became associate director.

EG: '85, '86. Then so from like '75 to '85 you were organizer.

TW: Um hmm. Oh no, no, no, sweetheart. I was in grad school, I didn't start with Carolina Community Project until 1983.

EG: Oh until 1983.

TW: I was in graduate school like part-time '78-'79. I had my youngest child, and I went back in 1981. So it went from say '78 to '81.

EG: '78 to '81.

TW: For the graduate work at UNCC [UNC-Charlotte].

EG: And then '81 with Carolina Community Project.

TW: '83.

EG: '83. Okay.

TW: I became severely ill in between that time. So I was just recuperating.

EG: So and then from the Carolina Community Project you moved to the North Carolinians for Effective Citizenship. You were--

TW: Executive director.

EG: So that was in '87.

TW: No, that was simultaneously. I was working for Carolina Community Project. You remember I told you they created in addition to working with existing organizations, we created I know at least five [organizations], and you may be familiar with some of them. I don't know. So I had North Carolinians for Effective Citizenship, Piedmont Peace Project was going over in Concord, Charlotte Organizing Project, CHOP that was the local. So we had Grassroots regional, Carolina Community Project statewide, CHOP was the local organizing group. We had a lot of other organizations in that house I was

telling you about like this was during the days of apartheid. So we had Shaw Students for a Free South Africa in there. I know I'm forgetting something. There were at least five organizations housed in that house.

EG: With the Grassroots Leadership as well.

TW: Yeah.

EG: So you were working for all these organizations or helped create—

TW: No, yeah. As an organizing [project] for Carolina Community Project we helped to create NCEC, and I led that one but a woman by the name of Linda Stout did Piedmont Peace Project. All of our organizers had a project.

EG: Okay.

TW: In other words, the organizer became the director or whatever. Actually when the funding started phasing out on voter work, that's when I became associate director of Carolina Community Project. Did I do that right? That's not right on your paper I don't think.

EG: Well, I have—

TW: I started out as an organizer.

EG: Yeah.

TW: And I did—yeah, Mecklenburg Council of Senior Citizens. That was my first organizing job.

EG: Oh right.

TW: Remember I told you that. Then as the funding started waning with that, that's when I got into the electoral organizing.

EG: With the community organizing funding was running out. () because you were saying though—well, at first you said it was—

TW: Two or three phases here.

EG: Okay.

TW: Started out as an organizer with the Mecklenburg Council of Senior Citizens. My title was just organizer or seniors organizer. Then that's when a lot of the private foundations thought that it was

imperative to do voter participation, and so that's when NCEC started. That was 1984. There was only one year doing the other work. Eighty-three was only that one year.

EG: You mean the senior citizen work.

TW: Right. Then that lasted for a few years, and we got the counties, the thirty-five counties organized, and then when that funding started waning, I was brought back into Carolina Community Project as the associate director because there was a change in leadership there. Cathy Howell was originally, when I came on, Cathy Howell was the executive director, and John Wancheck was the associate director. Then Cathy left to do something else and that means John became the executive director and they pulled me in as associate director.

EG: So then I see here. So in '83 you were organizer for the Carolina Community Project doing the—

TW: Seniors work.

EG: Then '83, '84 and then '84 to '85 you were the—

TW: NCEC.

EG: NCEC.

TW: But it was more than, now hold on. That's where the overlap comes because NCEC went for several years. It went through to about '88.

EG: Were you the executive director [of NCEC] that whole time?

TW: [Indicates agreement.]

EG: Okay. So then you were concurrently doing that and then—

TW: Associate director with—

EG: The Carolina Community—

TW: Community Project.

EG: Project. So like, but you did that two years.

TW: And that went until—

EG: '85 to '86.

TW: If my memory is right. Yeah, it was at least two years.

EG: Yeah. Then what—

TW: Might have been more. Anyway, yeah. I did Operation '88 that I showed you. That was a statewide thing.

EG: So from '88 forward.

TW: '89 forward.

EG: Or '89 forward—

TW: '89 I went to work for Rural Advancement Fund.

EG: Rural Advancement Fund.

TW: As development director.

EG: Again, I'm just amazed at all the different organizational connections you have.

TW: We were all wound up. I mean we were all, we were all working in this area but everyone knew what the other one was doing.

EG: Right. So you did development.

TW: Development director.

EG: For the Rural Advancement.

TW: Rural Advancement Fund.

EG: Okay.

TW: Under Rural Advancement Fund, there were another good five organizations.

EG: It's interesting too how, like with these five [organizations being] all in the same house. ()

TW: Now let me tell you, yeah, that was real interesting, and then the Rural Advancement Fund, they were all outside. They had this one administrative type, and then they had all these projects in different places. One was the sustainability project for food over in () did a lot of work in Africa.

EG: So how long were you, wow. I want to quick get this before we delve into the details. So how long were you development director for the Fund.

TW: That was before Ron Charity died. That was—

EG: From '91. He died in '91. Then what about after that?

TW: After that, what did I do? '91. Get up for Mel's campaign, he ran in '92.

EG: Okay, so—

TW: Actually in '91, that's for six months I laid out from anything, and I took care of my father in law who was dying of cancer. Like six months to the day. When that was over with, Mel was gearing up, and I went back, I went full-time into his campaign.

EG: Okay. () to you or you gave me the proposals for the Institute for Community Resources and Public Policy.

TW: That's right. That was going on ().

EG: Okay, so that—

TW: Ron and I did that too. That was about, you know what that was about—the Institute work went on maybe eight months to a year prior to his death. That was between '90 and '91.

EG: Did that organization continue?

TW: After he passed away. He intended for me to be the executive director. But instead I went in, worked Mel's campaign, and it was sort of hard because you saw the people's names on, the other organizer's names on that list. We all care about him. He was so much a part of our lives. It was just, I mean we could've gone one way or the other. [We?] could've blown it out of the water and really worked it and kept it up or do nothing. All of us had other jobs, and it was hard for us to get moving with his death and all. It was just really hard. He was trying to plan--. He knew something ahead of time, but never told us, never told us. He was still playing tennis right before his—as a matter of fact, I was taking my daughter and Don Baker's who was director here, I was taking his children over to get tennis lessons, and we discovered him in his bed.

EG: You discovered him.

TW: Yeah, in his bed.

EG: Oh how sad.

TW: It was. I had to be the one to call his wife.

EG: Oh that's sad.

TW: She was in Virginia. But he never once complained. He always had that same smile on his face. When I would say "can't," he said organizers don't have that word as a part of vocabulary.

EG: What do you mean? Oh can't.

TW: There's no such thing as can't. There is always a way. There is always the way, and every time I do a leadership development workshop or whatever, he sits on my shoulder and guides me through. A lot of times I like to give the students or whoever () a suggestion. He says don't tell them everything. This is part of the process. You give them the main parts, and then let them do some creative thinking on their own.

EG: Figure it out.

TW: He was a big part of our life. He was the main mentor I had especially for political organizing and leadership development kind of work.

EG: How did you, well let me get this set and then—

TW: I'm sorry.

EG: No, that's all right. So this was a volunteer thing, the Institute for Community Resources.

TW: [Referring to information on this Institute, a copy of which is located in archival material.] Yeah, it was, if you saw [it] there was a proposal there for funding, but we hadn't gotten off the ground. We had our articles of incorporation and all that done. Our board selected, but we hadn't gotten, we did some work voluntarily beforehand, but we hadn't gotten, we weren't in full mode until we got some funding in. So those proposals went out, but we cut it off before.

EG: Right, before it could be fully implemented. So have you been working for Watt, Mel Watt, Congressman Watt since 1992?

TW: His office opened in January 1993.

EG: Oh 1993.

TW: As a congressional liaison that's how long I've been working. But I did campaign in 1992.

EG: Okay, '91, '92 full-time campaign.

TW: Can we back up a little bit?

EG: Yeah, actually I think that's, I think we put—

TW: Harvey Gantt in 1990 campaign and '92.

EG: Full-time or volunteer.

TW: Volunteer.

EG: Yeah. Yeah. Then the Mecklenburg Voter Coalition you said '84 to present.

TW: Um hmm.

EG: Okay. Are you still executive director at that?

TW: Well, we just had a meeting on Saturday. I think I told you about. I am now in more of an advisory role. I do the strategy and tactics and training on an as needed basis for any other organization that would like it on those five points, voter participation—

EG: How long [were] you director of it?

TW: Until last Saturday.

EG: Oh until last Saturday.

TW: We called [the position] MVC coordinator. We didn't call it an executive director. I was the coordinator.

EG: So now you're advisor.

TW: Now I'm [in] an advisory role. Now Jim Pierce, do you want [me to tell you about him] now or do you want that later? Let me put that down, MVC.

EG: Okay, a challenge of interviewing you is you have such wide-ranging experiences. It's tough to know exactly what to focus on.

TW: Do you want to know about Jim Pierce now or do you want—

EG: Yeah, why don't you talk about him a little bit and—

TW: He was hilarious. I consider him another mentor. But he came, well, actually there were some questions about Rural Advancement Fund. The executive director in 1996 sort of, they ended with that project, and there were still some questions.

EG: The South Africa Project.

TW: No, no, no. Rural Advancement.

EG: Oh they ended—

TW: The Rural Advancement Fund, the whole thing ended some time, but they were still doing the final paperwork in 1996. You hear what I'm saying. They were trying to finish up. There was some equipment and furniture that was housed in this building. Jim Pierce owned the building. He was primarily doing real estate at the time when I met him. But he was an organizer in his own right, labor organizer. He had not done the voter participation in this area anyway prior to that. He was a labor

organizer. When I met him, he was doing real estate. The building where Rural Advancement Fund was located--. [There] was still some old equipment. There were still some questions about paperwork and everything. So I was called in to see if I knew anything because they couldn't get their hands on anyone else. That was the first time that I had met Jim Pierce. I had heard a lot about him. He was almost like a legend before. Where I went to get my initial organizing training was called the Graham Center in South Carolina, and Cathy Howell and they rented the Graham Center to do our organizing training. It was a full complex where we could stay overnight. It used to be like a farm area. Jim Pierce owned it, and then he set it up for organizers to come in and do workshops and different things. So I had heard about him before, and I had heard that he was this huge man in labor and all. So I finally had a chance to meet him, and we talked and went from one thing to another. By him doing labor organizing, a lot of that, a lot of the skills overlap into voter participation, and we each saw how we could complement each other. We had a good labor component in MVC prior to him coming along with Jim Lawrence with A. Philip Randolph Institute and James Andrews of AFL-CIO. There was the Central Labor Council with Kyle Spencer and () Marvin Wilson, Bill Brawley representing the firefighters union. So we had those contacts prior to Jim Pierce, but what I think he brought to the table was his experience in labor organizing and expanding the unions that actually participated with us to some I'd never heard of including the pilots union and the attendants, flight attendants. They were all doing voter registration there as a part of our coalition. The food workers, so we had quite a few people I think at that point. We were rather quiet in our operation. We just wanted to simply help people get to the polls that needed to. We wanted to make sure that they knew what they were doing when they voted. We were all about doing the trainings with other organizations if they wanted to do voter participation. We did the canvassing, every facet, every facet of get out to vote just about. So when Jim came along, he says, we may as well let some other people know what we're doing. We used to work in the offices that you say too much then you'll have people working against you too. He says, what the heck. What the heck. He says it's just going to be a battle down to the wire anyway. So we may as well, if you keep it like it is, the electorate won't know that your services are available. So that's when we just sort of opened it up to the whole community.

EG: But he had a huge influence.

TW: He had a huge influence and he was super. He was just a hilarious man to be around because he always had stories to tell. So I don't know if you want me to get into one or not but—

EG: Yeah, I think we're ()

TW: But that's basically—

EG: If too, I wanted to get back to what you were saying about Ron Charity. Talk about how he was a mentor and when you first talked to him at () and so forth.

TW: Well, Ron [had been] doing organizing since the civil rights movement. He was doing community and political organizing. His wife was an attorney, and she was also an organizer in her own right. They worked in rural Virginia helping people who would not have had access to the courts and whatnot. She did [things?] a little differently from Ron. He would actually run () campaign, and he really helped to organize Virginia and some of the other groups around the southeast. He was Governor Wilder's first campaign manager also. He also worked with a lot of farmer's groups. One of the things I could appreciate is before actually working on a candidate's campaign, a () candidate running for office, do you remember, I don't know. You probably don't remember, the old, [there] were agricultural groups in--. A lot of them in this area and South Carolina and Georgia. Farmer's Home Administration was one of them. He would run for those offices, these farmers and different people in the various locales would actually run for offices. The Farmer's Home Administration in particular was lily white. But yet its policies impacted all farmers.

EG: So these were governmental—

TW: Governmental and local groups that had gotten together to try to influence farm issues.

EG: Okay.

TW: So what we did was we worked with farmers who wanted to become officers, wanted to become elected officers, but we taught them to actually run campaigns. So it ended up being a lot more integrated--both African Americans and Native Americans onto those boards.

EG: Right.

TW: So that was from--. My initial training in work down in Robeson County, North Carolina was where--. And over in what's the name of the place over in northeast North Carolina as well ().

EG: Because I know that the rural farmers that with an idea to () elevating their class status. Yeah.

TW: That was part of that land loss too with the development. That was another whole project.

EG: Land loss.

TW: There is a land loss project, and Carolina Community Project actually offered assistance to those folks in developing that issue and working. I didn't do a lot with that, but as a part of the farm work, that was one component that they talked about too.

EG: Did you feel that you were able to make like an impact on elevating their economic status at all?

TW: I would say as organizers what we do, as direct action organizers we are actually given the tools working with them to give them the tools to work through the system as opposed to an advocacy group. You know what I mean. Just get all () service group that's actually giving them—

EG: Right, because you were saying the technical assistance is what you can ().

TW: So if they can run their own issues, issue campaigns and work through the system, knowing who makes the decisions, who holds the power, that kind of thing.

EG: Did you see that—

TW: That was more, yes, that was definitely [where we saw the impact of our work] () a long way because they wouldn't see any other outlet or for resources or whatever.

EG: Why don't you show me what other materials that you said you gathered from--?

TW: Let me finish this about Ron Charity. Okay, so Ron Charity came to work for Si Kahn at Grassroots Leadership. So that's [when I] really got to work with him, and he became like a mentor, and that's when I started learning the political organizing, which is a good bit different from community organizing. And then Kent State after that. Everything else is () now.

EG: Sure. If you could talk just a little bit about the differences between the community and the political organizing.

TW: The basic difference that I see: most of the community organizing issues are long term, long term. The political, if you're doing nonpartisan political organizing, you have a finite time frame to work from: say, [the] primary through that election to do your voter education issues. Working with those

targeted areas constantly until time to get out the vote. You don't go any further and voter education you can't--. You can tell them who all the candidates are, but you can't say vote for a specific candidate or anything like that. But it was, it made a huge difference, people were a lot more informed. When they went to the polls, they could choose for themselves if they knew how to get information. So with the community organizing, I mean the only thing I can think of that's really, really short term, for instance if there was a neighborhood that had a very, very busy intersection. A lot of times it was hard for people to get stop signs and stop lights in particular because in this area there had to be at least five fatalities before they would put a light up in some areas. So that was critical and to teach people--. That was like teaching them to work through the system. Thus it's kind of, it could be a short-term kind of thing. But when you're talking about landlord/tenant issues, [you] are also with trying to figure out who the allies are and who are the targets, who are you actually going after. Sometimes it takes a lot more behind the scenes work, and it's like the issue is, it doesn't have a finite time. There may be more appropriate times than others to really quicken the pace to get something done about it. But it's not like doing voter participation at all. It's over and done. Actually [voter registration?] is a good short [activity?] to start with when you're building a new group because they can see success almost immediately, and that will give them the strength and courage to go on and do something more long term.

EG: What are some of the major issues with community organizing?

TW: Around here it was like well, this strictly in terms of a lot of () groups but primarily seniors. CHOP took on the utility increases. We were () for a while with Duke Power. () still goes on today, but [there is] not a lot of mention of [it] is the redlining by banks, servicing in some areas and not in others. We had what we call the Community Reinvestment Alliance going on. As a matter of fact my husband was chair of that when he was on the board of CHOP, and they worked on those issues, and then the last set of issues were around landlord tenant rights that CHOP did here. So those were the community organizing pieces primarily.

EG: Over the late '70s, early '80s.

TW: '80s.

EG: '80s for that.

TW: Landlord tenant was in the '90s. That was in the '90s.

EG: So if you want to, is there anything else you wanted to say.

TW: There were several other groups that we worked with including some local government organizations, [I] was on the community relations committee.

EG: Okay and—

TW: I was on for Charlotte-Mecklenburg.

EG: During the '80s.

TW: This was during the '80s, yes.

EG: Okay. Because I've heard about those organizations but more in the '60s but—

TW: We have one that operates now and they help to mediate problems in the workplace and different--. Or if there's a, something going on say with a school matter or whatever that's not being addressed or I mean it can take any form from groups that want to protest. In Charlotte you have to get a license to protest now. If a group's feeling disenfranchised or whatever, they can go through the community relations committee.

EG: So it's like a mediation sort of—

TW: There's that component. So I was on that committee for a while. There might be injustices that different individuals may have felt in dealing with the police department and what not. It's been a long time, but that's a lot of the things that—

EG: This is in the '80s.

TW: '80s. Then I was on the sister cities committee.

EG: Yeah, you mentioned that.

TW: I was actually on the committee, but prior to that what happened was as a congressional liaison Congressman Watt commissioned me to help Charlotte get an active sister city. Charlotte has one of the longest running, largest sister cities programs in the nation. But yet it, this is like 1985-1987 that we did this work. I'm sorry '95 to '97. So Charlotte had four European cities, one Asia, one South America and not one African at all. So Mel said he would like to make sure that at least every major city in the district had an African sister city.

EG: Well, that's big.

TW: It was, but it also started with Charlotte, and at that time the district ran from Gaston County to Durham. Durham had had a sister city. That was the original configuration.

EG: Interesting. It seems so widespread.

TW: I can tell you more about that later too. Like I have the current map, and I can tell you how it's done. So anyway, the primary work was done with Charlotte. Did some with Greensboro and Winston-Salem, some work with them. I'm not sure. Some of the cities sort of came together to do it because they didn't have the resources to pull it off and do by themselves. So they came together for a while. I'm not really sure how they're set up now. But we still have the one here in Charlotte.

EG: So you set up sister cities in Africa with the other cities, Charlotte but also Winston-Salem.

TW: Okay, we were trying to help them get—there's a national sister cities program. Charlotte has been a part of that network for a very long time. So has Durham. Winston-Salem got into it a little bit and Greensboro. I don't know if they officially have sister cities now or not. That's the reason why I'm saying it. But going based on the Charlotte experience.

EG: Yeah.

TW: Okay, we helped the local Charlotte sister cities pull together a steering committee from all walks of life, from academic, business, educ--high school, and since high school and college and churches and every facet of life, teachers, nurses. We pulled together a steering committee and said that we wanted to have this type of relationship with a city in Africa. Under the guidelines you could only have one sister city in one country. So when we started, there are seven criteria. We looked at Accra, Ghana first, but Chicago had Accra. The seven criteria actually matches up the cities that they have a lot of things in common. We looked at Kumasei, Ghana, which was the old capital of Ghana, and still had a king. It had a king and simultaneously a president of a republic, which is, the king is sort of like Queen Elizabeth in that she didn't have any, he didn't have any official power but wielded a lot of influence. So it was the same way in Ghana too. So we got to meet with him. We celebrated the consummation of the sister city agreement during his twenty-fifth anniversary.

EG: Oh that's perfect.

TW: Oh it was tremendous.

EG: It must've been amazing.

TW: It was because royalty from all over Africa and a lot of Europe came to pay homage to him. Then Mayor Vinroot went along with us with Congressman Mel Watt for this celebration. It was a huge thing, and Steve Crump from WBTV, he's the newscaster over there. He and several crew members went with us and documented it. There is a whole piece on it, and we got to visit with the president. Matter of fact he was responsible for our whole host () there in terms of getting us from Accra to Kumasei and whatever we did there. We had, we went to visit the U.S. embassy there, had a real good meeting with them. But I don't know how much we need to go in depth there, but that's a whole story unto itself. One of these days I'd like to go back purely as a visitor and not working because we took forty people over there. While yes, I was having fun and doing things, we were still responsible for forty people, and we had to do our job. So that was better and then after that was over, I became a member of a sister cities board, and we worked with other countries, the other countries as well.

EG: So there is one follow up question with that. What was the significance of that to you? Why did that, of all the things you've done, why did this in particular seem to hold a really special meaning?

TW: Because for so many African Americans, we don't have a full connected history that we know of, and that did it for us. I used to stand on the shores of Myrtle Beach and look as far as I could possibly see and wonder what it was like on the other side. When I got over there and I got to go and we went to the slave castles, and there was the door of no return and how our forefathers were forced out into these waters. I'll show you some of the pictures in the hallway when we go out. It was just amazing. So I stood on the shores there and looked back here, and that completed the picture for me. They do a reenactment there at the slave castles at Cape Coast. They do a reenactment. It meant, it provided a lot of healing that we didn't even know we needed going through that experience and trying to understand (). We still don't really understand, but we know how it happened and all that. So there were pieces of a story, of the puzzle that were being put together for us.

EG: So this was what was being felt by other African Americans on the trip.

TW: And I think that, I mean, to know that you have such a full history is just, it's amazing. Just like okay, I was saying here in North Carolina we're textiles. We do textile manufacturing. Over there in one of the communities out from Kumasei, they have () just like we do. In one of the, in one of

the communities () where they originally made the Kente cloth, where it came from. So they're like, they do textiles too.

EG: Make the, oh the—

TW: The Kente cloth.

EG: Okay.

TW: You may have seen, you saw in my office one type. What the king and the president wore on special occasions is quadruply woven Kente. It's fantastic. I mean it's thick. It's brilliant, brilliant colors. That along with they have some unique woods from the forests. We do a lot of forestry around here and furniture making (). Okay in Charlotte we have the mint museum. This was where the first gold rush occurred before California. Ghana's called the Gold Coast. We saw in the *National Geographic* and how they would use the gold in ceremonies even until today. It's amazing.

EG: That's fascinating--different connections.

TW: So we work directly with the sister cities committee there, and we brought them here and then it was our chamber of commerce and the Bank of America and all to see the individuals that wanted to go into business, import-exporting. From then they have to kind of take it upon themselves. But we could make the connections. Make the connections with the school, with teachers, we took thousands of dollars worth of medical supplies over. We made three trips total between 1985 and '87.

EG: '95 and '97.

TW: I keep saying that. We did an exploratory [trip] at the end of '84 I mean '94, and then the agreement was cancelled in 1997.

EG: Well, this reminds me of one of my interview subjects in Memphis who works with the NAACP branch there and in the () was African American, and he too had an opportunity to go to Africa to I think Seychelles or some place like on the coast and [had] similar reactions to you. He was like when you go back there, you just realize how things happened and how it all started, and you have to go there to understand that.

TW: And the other, one of the other amazing things, I'm seeing things all along the way. We went to New York again on Ghana Airways. We wanted to support their airline. We got on there, and it was like an all-black crew. The seats were made out of—it was a lime color, and it had all these African

designs in it. I mean for an African American to see this was astonishing because we're used to seeing more mixed settings. When we [were] flying, it [was] not all white.

EG: To see blacks in positions of power.

TW: Position of power, speaking multiple languages. Then when we get there, when we first landed in Senegal. We were in Senegal, Ivory Coast, Ghana. Those were the stops that we had—

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

EG: Okay.

TW: To see people that look like us, and I don't mean just, I'm saying actual relatives that look like relatives. It was amazing. We could pick out aunts and uncles and cousins. That's how close it was. You'd think, African Americans having such mixed heritage. We have a lot of European, some Native American. We have a lot. Whereas you think Africans, you wouldn't see those kinds of mixtures. You see every color of the rainbow. Ghana in particular is mixed because it was a travel route. It has one of the biggest markets in the world, outdoor markets. I mean it's like a maze trying to go--. It was also the land of Timbuktu where all the educators came to be trained. That's, that goes into ancient history. To see this stuff was just phenomenal. So you had people from all over the world at this crossroads. They even go back as far in archeology as far as the land masses being together for the Indian Ocean and all. So you're talking about migration from Africa over into Asia and then into Europe. It goes back that far. I mean you had people, archeologists and anthropologists come in to make talks to us while we were there.

EG: Wow. I know we have to move on for this project. Later I'll have to mention something else. Well, I will right now. I hope my supervisors don't get mad. I think this is very relevant actually. But I interviewed Julian Bond. I had met him as a professor at American University, and one thing that we didn't go in depth about but he told me about how, I think it was the capital of Ghana.

TW: Accra.

EG: Accra, well, it was—

TW: That's spelled, A-C-C-R-A.

EG: Maybe it wasn't Ghana, but anyway, he went to Africa in the '60s with Harry Belafonte, Fannie Lou Hamer and so forth and just talked about how they went there during the civil rights movement. They met with the rulers of wherever they went and how it was just so—saying some of the similar things.

TW: They will roll out the red carpet for you.

EG: Yeah. Yeah. So did you feel when you went there that you have this, well, I mean obviously here it's still this Eurocentric white kind of dominated culture, and that you felt a validation there that you don't, haven't received here.

TW: I mean things are better, much better now. But still, yes. The fact that there's always been a history for the slaves that were taken away. There was no knowledge because they went on oral histories and slaves were not allowed to talk openly about what happened before. Some of it seeped through like of course Mr. Alex Haley's stories.

EG: Yeah, ().

TW: Then there's another component, another one, like on my grandfather's side, the side I told you about that was--.

EG: Yeah.

TW: Plaster contractor, I mean skilled laborers, artisans, plastering is an art form. On that side of the family, they were not slaves, and they came up by way of Louisiana. They passed that trait from one generation to the other, and we have pictures of his, my grandfather's grandfather, and he was a very proud man dressed for the times if you could have seen it. I mean it was just--. But that was a trait, and it was considered, he was considered an artisan just like the men who did the ironworks like out of South Carolina and Georgia. You know the wrought iron work that Charleston is known for. That () was originally started in West Africa.

EG: Isn't that something.

TW: A lot of European, there were a couple of European men that were given credit for it, but they learned it from African artisans.

EG: Right. Did you, when you went to school growing up, did you get African American history in your classes?

TW: You mean at the segregated schools.

EG: Yeah, I'm sure not in the white place.

TW: To some degree, not in the white schools, but to some degree. To some degree. I mean I really feel that our teachers, well, they had to--. It was sort of makeshift kind of resources that they had to put together to teach the classes because we didn't have the best of textbooks. They were handed down, and then of course they didn't have the whole story in them. Either the American Indian side or from the African American contributions or the Hispanic contributions that helped, how we all had roles in building this country. So but yeah, I wouldn't have taken anything for my teachers because they did try to fill in the gaps to a degree, and that's what I missed when I went to the integrated schools.

EG: Part of our project too is looking at school desegregation issues. So—

TW: So in a sense even though we didn't have everything, I felt like I was getting a fuller education when I was at the black school.

EG: Because in part because you were able to get this perspective on history. So yeah.

TW: So teachers went beyond their call too. They didn't just teach the subject matter required for that year, I mean, what the guidelines required for that year. They didn't just teach that. They went outside of that to bring in relevant topics [that?] we went through [as a?] people.

EG: Yeah, definitely. If you have some things jotted down, other topics you wanted to—

TW: Well, as far as the local government boards and commissions, I mentioned to you community relations, sister cities, and the last one I worked on was planning commission. Some people see that as a very highly political committee to be on because you're talking about the current and future development of the town.

EG: Okay. When were you on that?

TW: I just came off a year ago, two years ago.

EG: When did you start with that?

TW: I may have it here somewhere. What is this? 2000—

EG: Six.

TW: I was still on in 2004. 2000 to 2004. I think that's right.

EG: I saw that—

TW: If not, we can look it up. I can't believe a whole ten-year span has, is making a difference now for things you never think you'd ever forget.

EG: I saw that one of the talks [you gave] because I see, you must do a lot of different speaking engagements, [be given a lot of] invitations. One [of your talks] was on being a woman in local politics.

TW: Yeah, [my talk] with B'nai Brith. [see related documents in archival material.]

EG: Yeah, I wondered what your perspective is on that--being a woman who's in politics. It's still a field I think is dominated by—

TW: It is still a field dominated by men and even (), and I couldn't be more clear about that than when I was doing my graduate work out at UNCC. It was only two women in that whole class, that was including me. From there on the work that, look at the campaigns. Who would run for office the most? Women, it's only been in recent years that women have become more active and even running for office. I'm glad to see that's picking up. Women are registered at a higher level than men. Usually I don't really [know] what that means other than the fact that they're more women than men in the general population. It may just be that, but I know as you rise on the economic scale, when you become homeowners you become more invested, and you have a tendency to want to register and vote. So it's different sides of this coin. That eighteen to thirty-five group, whether it's men or women have a tendency not to vote as much as those who've become more settled and mature. For women I think, women () very seriously to. You tell a woman that she can't have something, she can't do something, what do they do?

EG: They fight against that. Yeah.

TW: Basically that's it. But knowing the various resources and avenues that they have. I mean, with B'nai Brith I think it was mostly older women that came. They were () anything, but I think they wanted to know how to talk to their younger ones, to be able to pass it on.

EG: The importance of voting and being in politics.

TW: How politics impacts their lives. That was a big question.

EG: So what did you say to them?

TW: Well, just like I would say to anybody else. Everything, everything you do is impacted by politics. Somebody who makes a decision for you. With them as well as with the young folks that I work

with, I'll add a little humor into it and I'll say, "Well, you know even going to the bathroom is political." Why do I say that? Can you imagine why on earth I would make a statement like that?

EG: To illustrate how something you wouldn't normally think of is linked to politics is—like with the water systems.

TW: Exactly. The water and sewer. You do not believe all the different answers that I get to that question. But you've got neighborhoods in Charlotte that don't get the trash pick up that some of the other communities, other neighborhoods get.

EG: Is that broken down by class or race?

TW: Class and race. But more how they voted or whether they voted. The squeaky wheel gets the grease. Candidates, whether they say it or not, will look to see what precincts that are really coming at them, and they will work on those first. If they're not participating and they're quiet and just going on, existing barely, then they get less services. Yet all of us are paying taxes.

EG: So these are ongoing things with politics, and that will likely continue to be ongoing.

TW: Yes. So it's those kinds of things that we try to be able to put in front of people. This is why it's so important to keep it out there, and at the very least vote yourself and take one other person. All politics is local. The closer, you have everybody voting just about or more people voting in a presidential [election] than you have in a local [one]. The more local it is, the less participation. Do you believe in Charlotte in the primary we only had twenty-six percent of the voting population voting? That's worse than it has ever been that I know of. We would rarely go below ten percent in the least likely primary.

EG: So are you seeing like a decline in voter participation and education since you began working?

TW: Yeah, I've seen it go up and down, but I've seen it. I think everybody is waiting around for 2008 and this election. That's another thing. It needs to be an ongoing year round kind of thing because it's too much to chew on in a very short timeframe. People have to, people have to understand what it is and be ready for it. They have to practice it. When you're not familiar with something, you don't do it.

EG: Right. Right. Because I see like with this flyer, I was wondering—

TW: That "how to vote" flyer [see copy in archival material].

EG: Yeah, when this was done.

TW: Okay, that was prior to League of Women Voters. Let's see that was probably done '85, '86. It's a step by step instruction on how to vote. The actual machines have been changed since that time.

EG: Yeah, that's what Miss Worthy was telling me. Do you still put out flyers?

TW: What I was going to say is we did that before. Mecklenburg is the largest and wealthiest county in North Carolina but even they didn't have very much in the way of voter education materials back then. They do a lot more now, but with, after we did this, then the League of Women Voters took it up, and they provided any number of materials for the board of elections, and then the board of elections started making their own budgets for more voter education. The board of elections will actually call us during the elections for rides, for people who call in and need rides to polls. This flyer as I said, different things have been tried over the course of time in the '80s to get more people out to vote. What we did was, we collaborated with the literacy project that I was telling you that. What we did was we wanted to make sure that everyone that could, could actually read and understand this brochure. So what we found was that we had to make this brochure appeal to people who had an average eighth grade education because that was the average North Carolinian at that time.

EG: For North Carolina as a whole.

TW: As a whole.

EG: Oh, okay. Then this too, so I see this must've been done in—

TW: [Referring to proposal in archival material] That was the Institute for Community Resources.

EG: Yeah, the one with Ron Charity. So—

TW: That was put together in 1990, '91.

EG: Yeah.

TW: I did a lot of work with the different groups that you see on there on the back. COSBY, Coalition of Southern Black Youth. We organized thirteen southern states and bring youth together to work on their issues and to become invested in voter participation as well.

EG: I saw that part of this was a goal and also in this pamphlet here or the thing which, I wonder too if you wrote the proposal. Was it you and Ron [who wrote it?]

TW: Ron and I.

EG: Charity who wrote it. Okay. The common goal was to fight racism, sexism, classism and how you saw those issues as interrelated and just kind of what your ideas were for attacking [them].

TW: We used to do, used to do sessions, actual sessions on racism and classism and what we called the, I'm trying to think of the name of it now. It's out the window right now. But they were similar to the leadership development pieces in terms of trying to work with all different types of people and bringing the people together on their own issues. I think Pat Callair was the primary one I think that did, that did those pieces. Ron did them too.

EG: So you weren't—

TW: I wasn't directly involved in that part. Getting people to do some self reflecting and understanding their own views, their own background and what they came from and what brought them to where they are today. That was part of it and then trying to understand other cultures. We call it cultural diversity, racial diversity workshops. That was the word I was looking for. The diversity type workshops was what it was. Ahmed Daniels is another one. He's not on, he wasn't a part of this. He did a lot of the diversity workshops. I don't know if you--. He worked along with us for a while as well at Carolina Community Projects.

EG: Do you, I was curious () looking at this information if you identify yourself as a feminist, consider yourself having been part of the feminist movement.

TW: I don't consider myself being a part of the feminist movement. I certainly know that I have reaped the benefits of it, and I am a feminist in terms of my own philosophies and the way I operate, but not directly in the feminist movement. As a matter of fact, I probably operated on the fringe of women's issues for a long time. I've done a lot of different issue work as you've seen, just now getting in a lot of children's issues and women's issues at this point. () in terms of health care and neglect and abuse and those kinds of issues. I'm on the board of directors for Grandfather Home for Children, severely abused children. I'm doing this through the Charlotte Presbytery. I'm a Presbyterian, and I've done the leadership development workshops with them. I'm an elder, and I got appointed to Grandfather Home for Children.

EG: Oh great. Oh okay.

TW: () this manual I wanted to show, at least show you where I am here. Here I am. This is one of the trustees here.

EG: Oh that's great. Yeah.

TW: This is a huge organization, and it works North Carolina and is looking at the possibility of going into South Carolina and Tennessee as well as a level three clinical—

EG: For abused and neglected children. When did you start working with them?

TW: I'm in my second term with them. I think it was about, I think it was 1999 when I started with them.

EG: [Referring to information on Dr. Tim Mead's class, which is in the archival material] I wonder too about this document.

TW: () taught the class out of—

EG: At—

TW: UNCC.

EG: UNCC. Okay.

TW: Dr. Tim Mead who created actually head of the department. He's now retired.

EG: Because I saw he had you come speak to one of his classes too. What class did you—you taught a class on African American in politics or was that a part of it?

TW: [Referring to "African American & Regime Politics" document, which is in archival material.] That was the subject matter that I chose based on the curriculum, the curriculum that he had, the topic for--. I mean he gave me several different things that I could use.

EG: Oh this is what you used when you spoke to the class.

TW: Exactly.

EG: Um, something that I wondered about here too was you say how Charlotte, I think it was in here. Yeah, has the sort of polite moderate image but still has a lot to learn. If you could kind of comment some more on that, how you see it still as problematic.

TW: Well, I mentioned that during the civil rights movement it was like that. We weren't as forthright with our protesting I think as some of the other areas were. People were arrested, but not, I mean in all terms I think that people who come to visit Charlotte, they ask where are the slums? Where are the

slums? And they're all around us. We've done a lot to () HOPE 6 programs which comes from () very instrumental in helping to sort of make people from various economic backgrounds so that they're it's an incentive kind of thing. Over here, First Ward is a prime example. So you have people from all the different backgrounds in one area, and what happened with HOPE 6 was that each of these public housing projects were torn down. But unlike in the '70s where it was just torn down and places were torn down and they didn't have any place to go.

EG: It was like urban renewal.

TW: Urban renewal. We had that problem with First Ward years ago. People were scattered out in adjoining neighborhoods, and some not really having any place to go at all. So when HOPE 6 came along, the idea was to get rid of substandard housing, but when you rebuild, you don't gentrify and put all medium and upper income people in the place of. So what Congressman Watt was trying to do is one to one replacement for the people who lived there before—to be able to live there again along with others of higher income. That would in turn help to improve the quality of everyone's life.

EG: This was in the '90s.

TW: Up to now.

EG: Up to now.

TW: They just finished the one over off of ().

EG: Had that been a successful effort?

TW: It had been in Charlotte but not everywhere. Now the funds are being cut back. So a lot of cities are scrambling and scrounging for, to get on the list for whatever. HOPE 6 project is not going to last.

EG: The Bush administration is (), I saw too in one of your clippings about the convention that you put you saw Charlotte emerging as a major player in the New South, and you wanted to be part of that growth and could you just be a little more specific.

TW: I told you before I moved back home from Maryland because my husband was a policeman in Washington, and he was killed in the line of duty. I really wanted to raise my two year old son in a safer place, or what I felt was a safer place. Charlotte was emerging at that time from a medium to, medium-sized city to a larger city. I like to call it a world class city. I still think we have a ways to go, but we're

definitely getting there. So with that amount of time passing, I think that it really has grown. Do you know there probably if you include all of Mecklenburg County and people who come in from the other surrounding towns, whether it be in the border towns of South Carolina or Gaston County and Union County, we probably have about three million people coming in to here?

EG: Too if you could comment on—or did you have something more to say?

TW: Well, just to say that I think you don't have just one side of town is just segregated. It used to be Northwest Charlotte primarily. Where do the African Americans live? West Charlotte. Well, that's not the case so much anymore. They still, there are still a lot of people in West Charlotte and Southwest Charlotte. But for the most part after doing the voter participation work, we see that African Americans are all over Mecklenburg County.

EG: Do you think that's, do you think that's directly connected to African Americans getting more political power, electoral power?

TW: That and education more than that. Maybe it's both. But I see education being the prime factor.

EG: Increased education at some level of—

TW: Increased education, yeah. Then we have people migrating back south, and you have all different fields. Charlotte is a commerce town, and we have banks and insurance companies and computer technology companies, and so you've got a different economic set of folks coming in regardless of race.

EG: How has this growth of Charlotte in terms of, you know you're a good person to ask with having been here and seeing these changes over time. Do you think that's been good for alleviating maybe issues of economic and equality or racial inequality or has that not been so good or has it been a combination of both? What's your assessment?

TW: In some ways I think it has been very good. In others you have the working poor and underemployed, and some of the biggest travesties are still with the people who are working and falling through the cracks. You can get social service aid up to a certain point. Then there's still this quiet aura I think. You look at the homeless population. This is the place where homeless can come with the moderate temperatures and what not. This is a good place, good state to come to. But not all their needs are being addressed. So you've got homeless, and even a lot of them are working. A lot of them are working. So the

working poor plight is still something that I think Charlotte (). We're more, we're on a middle and upper income kind of train of thought, and that's it primarily I think. We look at social problems in the way of a service organization. I don't mean to put them down at all because I think what they do is very important. They provide a one-time service for someone who might need a little boost, and then it's over. I think that is appropriate for that type of person who just needs a little bit of help. But I think that's the mode around here. I think when you volunteer, you volunteer for a service organization rather than a direct action organization that will actually give people the tools to work through the system.

EG: So () change then.

TW: Right. That's the differences that I see now.

EG: When do you think like the kind of high point of your activism was where you felt you could make, you were making the most difference or () or things of—

TW: I don't know if I can pick a time actually. I'm going now into more of an advisory role and I'll do leadership workshops and things. So I'm not out there like I have been. But I would say between from the mid '80s, early '90s maybe. That was, I mean I was wide open during that time. But even in the early 2000s too. We, right on up until this year actually.

EG: Why was the mid '90s kind of to end?

TW: () '90s.

EG: I mean in terms of what ()

TW: I had more contact with different organizations.

EG: Because it's just interesting how the times you said were, well, '80s were Republican administrations and kind of—

TW: There was still a lot of organizing was going on too. A lot of organizing still. You have to look at state and local politics as well during that time, more than anything else.

EG: Oh, okay. I saw that Grassroots Leadership was started in 1980 right when Reagan went in office as well.

TW: Right. Right. And now that you mentioned it, it's gone from regional to national. They did a lot of national work.

EG: Because they were in, based in San Francisco or something like that.

TW: Well, different places. I mean Texas, just recently out to Memphis. It's based on the issue that they're currently working on, and privatization of prisons has been their last one for the last several years.

EG: Okay, yeah. Just a follow up question from when we talked yesterday. You said you were vice chair of the Mecklenburg County Democratic Party.

TW: Yeah, that was a, before I hadn't played a specific role with the party like that. I was just a member or whatever. But yeah, during that timeframe—

EG: When was that?

TW: That was in 2000 timeframe too. Yeah. That's when it was.

EG: What was your—

TW: About two years term.

EG: You mentioned your mom. What was her name?

TW: My mom, Ruby Alexander—

EG: Did you grow up, well, what did your parents do?

TW: They both were in photography, and my mother did light oil portraits. She was a coloring artist. My father did everything to do with the camera from building it to taking the pictures and painting ().

EG: So you grew up, would you say you grew up middle class back then?

TW: Well, and then my grandfather was around. My grandfather a lot of influence then. With him being in his own business, we didn't consider ourselves poor. But I don't know that it was middle class according to the definition of white middle class. I'm not sure.

EG: Right. Yeah.

TW: I mean I don't know where the lines would've been drawn enough to tell you.

EG: Right, sure.

TW: My grandmother never let anyone come to the house without giving them something. She was known as the matriarch in that whole neighborhood. She's 102.

EG: You mentioned she was taking care of your mother.

TW: (). Right.

EG: How did you become, you talked about how you were awakened to civil rights issues really when you in these, how volatile things were when you were in college because your mother had protected you from that. What about class issues? When would you say you were awakened to issues of poverty?

TW: That's a good question.

EG: It's a tough question.

TW: It's a very tough question. I never felt like that there was anything that I needed that I couldn't get. Needed, not saying want, but needed I couldn't get. My mother protected me in a lot of different ways. When I was in college, I only worked one summer on another job. She would work nights to midnight sometimes coloring painting, doing the light oil painting for businesses and whatnot. She worked really late to make sure I had everything I needed. It wasn't until I actually got out on my own that I realized how much she had actually sacrificed and when I had my own children. So that when I first got married I said, you don't have to do anything. Even if it's a very, very small way I would do it myself.

EG: These paintings, did she sell them to people or—

TW: She worked for studios. She worked for Kinderfoto and—

EG: So people would come and get their portraits done by her. Yeah,

TW: That's what she went to school for and she was in Washington too. I sort of followed that path.

EG: Of course Washington too—

TW: Washington was like a second home for us because we had a lot of family there, and I guess during the migration, a lot landed in Washington.

EG: Were you in the U Street area or the, like around Howard University?

TW: I had an aunt that was near that area.

EG: Yeah, I saw recently a documentary on, I don't know if you've seen it—*Duke Ellington's Washington*.

TW: Oh wow. No, I haven't.

EG: I should send to you the information about it. It's all about the black community and DC.

TW: Just about everybody is originally from North or South Carolina.

EG: Isn't that interesting?

TW: A few went to New York, but most of them are in—

EG: They interviewed a photographer on there who had taken photographs of everyone in the DC area. I'll remember that. I know you have a lunch engagement.

TW: Yeah, ()

EG: I need to leave a little time too to go over some of the spellings of some of these words. But is there, I mean I know there's lots and lots of—

TW: There's one other work I'm still working with. It's called Focus on Leadership. It was put together by Ron Leeper who used to be on city council here. It was a city council, he was city councilman and we pulled together a steering committee of African American leaders because there was no pool of leadership to draw from to run for political office or to become officers in the local organization, civic organizations. So that was a primary purpose—to develop a pool of leadership and to do the training. It was actually almost like classroom training. We provided people [with expertise?] on various issues based on the African American experience. So I was on that steering committee. I was in, I taught the political savvy piece in the first class, and I was actually in the second class. It has now been, so when did that start, 1987. It's been going on since then, and I taught every, I taught the organizational development classes ever since that time. I have been, I was vice president of that and program chair for two terms, and for both those terms, both the presidents were on, they were on leave, medical leave because they had serious operations. So I had to kind of take, had to do their part too. Now that's split up between four people, three or four people. But it was, we redid the curriculum and everything, and it goes. It really prepares a person to become active in this community. So new people coming in to Charlotte, new African Americans or whomever, it's open. We've had several others. We've had several Hispanics, a couple Caucasians to come and then take the course, courses as well. But I do that every year. So I'm not an officer. I don't participate otherwise. But my commitment is to teach that very first class because they become a microcosm. Their own class is an organization of which they become a microcosm of Charlotte organizations in a way, and they have to have a special project that they work on while they're, while they're taking these classes. They do a project every year.

EG: So it's just continual () work you've done like technical assistance training and empowering people to empower themselves.

TW: Exactly. So I guess that's the last part.

EG: Was there anything else you wanted to—

TW: I'm on the Grassroots Leadership board too.

EG: Are you? Okay.

TW: I'll get that information to you.

EG: Yeah. That would be great.

TW: Yeah, I think that's it.

EG: So if we could go over just a few of these spellings to have them right. You said before the Mecklenburg Voter Coalition there was a Voters Taskforce that was--.

TW: It was, yeah.

EG: Is that a proper—

TW: Vote Task Force.

EG: Vote Task Force is what it was called.

TW: Ella Talley was the leader of that, and she passed on to me what the politics of Charlotte was like during that time. So she gave me a heads up.

EG: How do you spell her name?

TW: Ella.

EG: E-L-L-A.

TW: Talley.

EG: What's her, how do you spell?

TW: T-A-L-L-E-Y.

EG: When—

TW: ()

EG: How long had she been involved in Charlotte politics? Do you know?

TW: I really can't tell you because she started, let's see. She had been into it for a while. She was actually going on the board of elections and couldn't do the work anymore. But she worked along with me. I know her picture is in here. I wanted to show it to you. Black Women's Caucus, I was a member of that too.

EG: Oh, okay.

TW: That was an office of my sorority, Delta Sigma Theta. They helped to create the Black Woman's Political Caucus. I was also an officer of the Charlotte Mecklenburg Black Political Caucus for two terms.

EG: You said now, Mel Watt had congressional black—

TW: He had congressional black caucus. That was totally different.

EG: Did you ever meet Shirley Chisholm?

TW: No. I did not get to meet Shirley Chisholm, but I was in and around her all the time. My aunt used to do her hair in New York.

EG: Really. Isn't that something? Was she someone who was an inspirational figure to you?

TW: Oh yes. Oh yes. She certainly was. She really had I mean () someone for us to look up to. At that time I didn't know I was going into politics though. Just—

EG: You said too Alexander Edwards Henderson.

TW: Yeah, that was my grandfather.

EG: Okay.

TW: Ruby's dad.

EG: Henderson, is that with an O or an E at the end?

TW: O.

EG: And then Alexander I wrote just as a normal spelling for his name.

TW: Right.

EG: You said too—oh okay.

TW: That's (). She was on the board of elections.

EG: Then you said your mom is Marie Alexander.

TW: Yes.

EG: M-A-R-I-E for Marie.

TW: No, Ruby. Ruby, R-U-B-Y.

EG: Oh. Ruby.

TW: She was Ruby Henderson Alexander.

EG: Oh, I wonder where I got Marie from. Ruby Henderson Alexander. And then you said Torrence Little.

TW: Lytle.

EG: Lytle.

TW: Torrence Lytle was the school I went to, the segregated school I went to. It was a union school. It was T-O-R-R-E-N-C-E, Torrence.

EG: Just a minute. T.

TW: O-R-R-E-N-C-E.

EG: Okay. Then—

TW: Lytle, L-Y-T-L-E. There's a whole story behind that too.

EG: L-Y-T—

TW: L-E.

EG: L-E. Okay.

TW: Mr. Lytle was an African American. Mr. Torrence was white I believe. Mr. Lytle was a landowner up in North Mecklenburg. You see these stories of cowboys riding their horses over their land.

Mr. () used to do that. He was probably a statesman more than he wasn't just a ().

EG: People they have like portraits of him.

TW: Um hmm, yeah.

EG: Capitol building.

TW: They said he was like that.

EG: Carrousel Princess, that was the title.

TW: That was the--

EG: That was just like normal spelling I suppose.

TW: Um hmm.

EG: You said there was like North Mecklenburg High School, East Mecklenburg High School.

Okay.

TW: Carrousel Princess I participated in that pageant in 1967.

EG: Then Mecklenburg Council of Senior Citizens, that was—

TW: That was the very first professional organizing experience in 1983.

EG: 1983.

TW: That was all under—

EG: Yeah, that's amazing. That was all part of—

TW: Carolina Community Project.

EG: () seniors getting more power. So yeah. Then you said Congressman McMillan.

TW: Was here in the ninth district. That was the only congressional district we had for Mecklenburg County back then.

EG: Is that M-C and then capital M-I-L-L-A-N, the spelling of the last name.

TW: Oh yes. M-C, capital M-I-L-L-A-N. Yeah.

EG: Was he related to Judge McMillan?

TW: I don't know. That's a good question too. I don't think so.

EG: I'm just curious. The Good Samaritan Hospital, that's just how like it is spelled.

TW: Um hmm.

EG: Okay, but and you said you went to the Mooresville—

TW: Went to Mooresville, which was Iredell County and the hospital was Lowrance L-O-W—
like Lawrence, no, that's L-O-W-R-A-N-C-E.

EG: L-O-W

TW: R.

EG: R.

TW: A-N-C-E.

EG: N-C-E. Oh Lowrance Hospital. Let's see. You, Don someone.

TW: Baker.

EG: District director.

TW: For Congressman Watt. That was Mel's right hand for years. He died all of a sudden.

EG: Like—

TW: Just like within couple of months.

EG: My dad's cousin, it recently happened to him too. Very sad. Pat, I can't read my own—

TW: Calliar, she was one of the organizers that did diversity training. She did, let me see that.

EG: Is it C-A-L—

TW: L-I-A-R. She's in here.

EG: Oh, (). Good. And Graham Center you mentioned.

TW: The Graham Center, that's where we got our basic organizer training. Cathy Howell did. It was owned by Jim Pierce, and that was before I got a chance to meet Jim. He just became this legendary organizer that I never met until 1996.

EG: James Andrews was the AFL-CIO.

TW: Yeah. At that time he was the secretary. He is now the president—

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

START OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

TW: [Referring to "prescription drug" hand out; copy is in archival material.] () these are kind of, that's prescription drugs. Just do a little, it's just a little blurb about it, and then when the election is, encouragement to vote. Getting a ride. It was all on one sheet.

EG: Right. Yeah, that's very efficient. So this says, yeah, the Y—

TW: ()

EG: That's a 2004 handout.

TW: [Referring to Supreme Court Judges' hand out; copy is in archival material.] This one we did on Supreme Court.

EG: [Referring to Mecklenburg Voter Coalition flyers; copies are in the archival material.] Yeah, and that's just as you say, these are good still for people with eighth grade education and very easy to understand. Yeah.

TW: So that was an example of how we did. Some of them we did posters and put them in storefronts, barbershops, beauty shops and there's a thing in here. I talk about where to go and how to do it, the whole little—

EG: Where do you distribute these flyers?

TW: Senior high rises, depends upon, daycare center, beauty shops, barbershops. You'll see, churches, we're doing site registrations like that. So you have a copy of it. () we're doing voter

registration, but we're also doing voter education, get out to vote, at the same time. We used to try to look at it separately but we started, it meant more for us (), and a lot of times we wouldn't get back to that voter depending upon how targeted his or her particular precinct was. So we tried to make it count when we did touch base with them.

EG: Right. Targeted in the black community or all over.

TW: All over.

EG: All over, yeah, good.

TW: We targeted precincts where they were least likely to vote.

EG: Okay and was that with a --

TW: A list where we had very little turnout.

EG: What were the, were there common characteristics of those precincts?

TW: Some they were not, like I said, if you are a homeowner or a senior, you're more likely to vote. But if you're a tenant—

EG: These were working class areas.

TW: Working class, rentals, some of them were homeowners too. But they still might be one of those neighborhoods where they're not getting all of the services yet they're paying taxes.

EG: Were there were more black people or—

TW: I think economically, yeah. It's--

EG: Predominantly black.

TW: And Hispanic. There are some, there were some whites. There are a lot of whites in West Charlotte as well. Always been a sort of a struggle to be able to identify with whites who've had the same struggle, the same issues.

EG: Yeah, is it something that you've tried to do?

TW: Carolina Community Project () in a different sort of way. It's tough. We've tried it. But we've tried it. I think that's an ongoing kind of thing too, to be able to show people where—

EG: The common economic—

TW: If it hits them in the pocketbook, pocketbook actually, if it hits them in the pocketbook, then they're more apt to listen. There are still some old, old thoughts, old—

EG: You mean racist.

TW: Race issues. I mean that was true with Harvey Gantt's race. The first, well both times. The first time in particular because—

EG: His mayoral races or the senatorial.

TW: No, senatorial against Jesse Helms and were you around during that time or have you heard?

EG: I've heard about it a little bit, not very much but just—

TW: He was gaining momentum like crazy. He was the lead, in the lead there. For the first time a lot of the young people that we were working with said that their parents would never have voted for a Democrat let alone a black were ready to vote for Harvey. It was because we were really strong on the moderate issues. So in politics, yeah, sometimes it gets very dirty. Two weeks before the election, that's when the Willie Horton ads came out from the Helms side and just suggestions, just the pictorials were enough to turn it.

EG: That's how, now did you try to in your efforts to play the media or get media attention?

TW: It was like a big voter registration drive. We were piggybacking on some other big neighborhood concert or like the community fest. Something like that going on. Yeah. When we were doing early vote, we contacted them. We would talk about why it's important to vote, what are the issues in this particular campaign, who all's running. We'll do that on radio programs, on 92.7 I've been a guest of, I mean not 92.7. It's 101.9; Bea Thompson has had us on.

EG: Who's that?

TW: Bea Thompson with Radio 101.9. The radio station is right down [in the Dilworth neighborhood.]

EG: Oh. I am an outsider.

TW: But she can tell you a lot about work that we've done and the times we've come in to try to do voter education on the radio.

EG: Bea, B-E-A.

TW: Yeah. Her name is, yeah, Beatrice Thompson call her Bea Thompson.

EG: T-H-O-M-P-S-O-N.

TW: She'd be an excellent person to talk to. She's with 101.9 radio station. That's all under, they're all under one big umbrella now. Several, it's a lot of different smaller radio stations under one big-- I see something broadcast, I can't think of what it's called.

EG: What is 101.9, what programming do they have?

TW: It has like, they play, they might have a small, very small jazz component, but it's mostly R and B, mostly R and B, some old school.

EG: Yeah, I like that music.

TW: [Referring to "prescription drug flyer" and "training tips" document; copies of both and other Mecklenburg Voter Coalition material are in the archival material.] Okay, I'm trying to see. I did the one on prescription drugs. Okay, you don't have these two. I'll make copies of that. Got training tips. I think did I give, I gave you one like this didn't I where you have the two.

EG: I don't think I ended up getting one of those.

TW: Okay it was in that other—

EG: This is on, well, like I was saying yesterday. I might end up writing a dissertation looking at (). I might just personally contact you again ().

TW: Oh that'll be fine.

EG: For my research. Yeah, so. It's great with all my research assistantship I can do their research but a little bit of my own too.

TW: It was the last sheet with training tips.

EG: Is this an extra copy, this one?

TW: That went along with--. I think that's the backside. There was one that had a backside. Okay it went, okay, thanks for telling that. Let me do this side and then this page was afterwards.

EG: Okay, great. Oh you wanted a copy of the release form. Oh let me put the date on it. I have for the one yesterday and today. Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by L. Altizer, June 5, 2006