P.1. Southern Journalism: Media and the Movement

Interview P-0018
Kenneth Edmonds
15 July 2013

ABSTRACT – Kenneth Edmonds

Interviewee: Kenneth Edmonds

Interviewer: Jerry Gershenhorn

Interview Date: July 15, 2013

Location: Durham, North Carolina

Kenneth Edmonds is the current publisher of his family's Durham newspaper *The Carolina Times*. In the interview Kenneth talks of the intergenerational shifts in managing the paper, his family's history, and race relations in Durham. His grandfather Louis Austin bought the paper in 1927 and hired his brother Lodius Austin to run printing. Vivian Edmonds, Kenneth's mother and Louis' daughter, took over *Times* after Louis died. Vivian was a graduate of North Carolina Central University and was a teacher and guidance counselor before running the *Times*. She discovered her talent for typing at the University and later used it in her newspaper career. Kenneth talks of the influence an educated mother had on his life. Kenneth talks about the devastation of urban renewal on the affluent African-American neighborhood of Hayti in Durham. This interview is part of Media and the Movement, an oral history and broadcast collection project housed in the Southern Oral History Program and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

TRANSCRIPT: Kenneth Edmonds

Interviewee:	Kenneth Edmonds
Interviewer:	Jerry Gershenhorn
Interview Date:	July 15, 2013
Location:	Durham, North Carolina
Length:	136 minutes and 6 seconds

START OF INTERVIEW

[Throughout much of the interview, there are sounds of a radio or TV playing in the background.]

Jerry Gershenhorn: Okay, today—I'm Jerry Gershenhorn, interviewing Kenneth Edmonds of the *Carolina Times*. It's about quarter after two in the afternoon, and we're at the *Carolina Times* offices on July fifteenth, 2013.

Kenneth Edmonds: Alright.

Jerry Gershenhorn: Okay. So, well, first of all, thanks again for allowing us to interview you today.

Kenneth Edmonds: Sure. Thank you for taking the time and interest.

Jerry Gershenhorn: Yeah. So, the thing I want to talk about is the background of the *Carolina Times*, but particularly the era of the 1960s and 1970s, so I guess the last years that your grandfather, Louis Austin, was running the paper, and then as your mother, Vivian Edmonds, took over the paper.

Kenneth Edmonds: Uh-huh.

Jerry Gershenhorn: So, first of all, maybe just start with yourself, if you could just give us some background on your own kind of life, just first of all, your full name and where you were born.

Kenneth Edmonds: Okay, Kenneth William Edmonds. I was born in Lincoln Hospital here in Durham, North Carolina, December fifth, 1953. I grew up primarily, in my very early years, in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, because that's where my parents were teaching at the time. And so, we were down there, I guess, a little after I was born until about five years old.

Of course, we were back and forth in Durham, from what I can remember, seemingly all the time. But I was never too far away from Durham and its influence. We moved back to Durham, and my mother went back and worked at the newspaper for a few years. And my father was still teaching in Elizabeth City, and so he was commuting. And then—

JG: What years would those have been?

KE: Between six years old and probably eight or nine.

JG: And so, your mother was working for the *Carolina Times*?

KE: Back again.

JG: What kind of work was she doing then?

KE: Ah, whatever my grandfather needed. When she was coming up, and as a teenager, as an early teen, she learned how to type on the campus of North Carolina College during a summer session down there. And at that time, a lot of kids in the neighborhood would go down to the campus and play around, because it was somewhere else to go and it was also safe. Well, Dr. Shepard, who was president of the school at that

time, rounded up neighborhood children and put them in classroom-like settings during the summer. And so, while not formal classes, they got a chance to experiment in history, the sciences, and that kind of thing, on a strictly informal basis.

But she was among some girls that got a chance to take almost a formal class in typing. And because that would have provided a young black woman a vocation going forward, something that she could really make her mark in [0:05:00] if she didn't do anything else. Well, for whatever reason, she took to that. And I forgot the woman that was teaching the class, but she was the head of the Commercial Department, I think it was known as at the time. I don't think it was "commerce;" I think it was "commercial."

JG: Yeah, I think you're right, yeah.

KE: And she was taught that typing class just like first-year students were taught. And she used to laugh that after they were given something to type, when they would take the paper up and turn it in, the first thing the teacher would do is hold it up to the light, and if there were any erasures, hand it back and say, "Go back and do it again," so that she learned to do it right from the beginning.

Well, she took to it, and I think Mama said, at her height, she was doing between eighty and eighty-five words per minute correct. And at the time, everybody was talking about Cortez Peters, who was the reigning black champion nationally, but this was something that she just took to, and it was also something that she could use at the newspaper.

So, she ended up teaching—she ended up typing a lot of [phone rings] secretarial stuff for my grandfather [phone rings] and the newspaper. She became a good enough

typist [phone rings] that she was also able [phone rings] to have side jobs. And one of the people was with Dr. Helen Edmonds, a history professor down at North Carolina College.

JG: Now, was she any relationship?

KE: No relation. Quite a good friend of the family. Bought stock in the company in the 1950s. Invited my grandfather and grandmother to go with her to Washington, I think it was in 1956, when she gave the second speech for Dwight Eisenhower.

JG: So, did your parents—your parents went?

KE: Grandparents.

JG: Oh, your grandparents went? And did they go to the convention?

KE: They didn't go to the—they went to the convention, and as I recall, I think my grandfather only went [up for] that. But at the inauguration, they ended up going back, and he ended up taking my grandmother as a guest of Dr. Edmonds. Because he and Dr. Edmonds, like most black folks at the time, were Republicans—and certainly not to be confused with today's Republicans. And I will say that I don't think that Dr. Edmonds would be a Republican today, but I can assure you Louis Austin would not be!

JG: Right.

KE: Because there'd be no room in the party for him.

JG: Right.

KE: But—

JG: He was a Republican, according to my reading of the paper, he became a Republican—it seemed like he moved toward the Republicans during that era, in the fifties, because for a while, he had supported, at least the registration of African

Americans in the Democratic Party to try to have an influence in the Democratic primaries, because the Republicans were so weak in North Carolina.

KE: Yeah! I don't think a lot of people realize the shift in political thought went from Democratic to Republican, [0:10:00] and really Southern Democrats. I try to correct, or at least let young folks know, "Wait a minute! There's a difference between a Democrat and a *Southern* Democrat."

JG: Right.

KE: And, but he ended up becoming a Republican. And like everyone else, they were looking for people that they could form coalitions with. And that was especially important because he was in alliance with the thinking that especially Dr. Helen Edmonds had, and how she talked about "fusion politics" in the state of North Carolina. Well, because she was a family friend and knew how to type—at that time, black parents tried to expose their children to everybody who had some type of talent or would provide more education to their children, which is why people flocked to Dr. Shepard. Because my mother used to say that Dr. Shepard would invite speakers and nationally-known artists to come to campus, and sometimes he would go to churches and announce that these people would be down on the campus and that he would invite black folks to come down there and see and hear them.

JG: Right.

KE: And so, between my grandfather running here, there and yon, and getting involved with people, those folks that were interested in fighting for integration, those folks came together. And Dr. Helen Edmonds was one, John Hope Franklin, and there were many others. But Dr. Edmonds also could be counted on as a chaperone for my

mother. If there was something going down on campus, “Well, we’ll just leave you with Helen Edmonds, and everything will be alright.” And she did that, not only for my mother, but for other kids.

But the typing came in because once it became known that my mother was a good typist, she started getting jobs. And she really started while people always want part-time jobs or after-school jobs. This was something she enjoyed doing. She turned out to be very good at it. And she really got good enough at it that by high school, even at Hillside, a lot of times she would be called out of class and taken down to the principal’s office and do some typing for him.

JG: Typing for the principal?

KE: Typing for the principal.

JG: Okay.

KE: And, because she took to it, she said, “Kenneth,” that what would happen is the principal would come down or send somebody down and give her the message that she needs to go to the principal’s office. But she doesn’t need to go in the front door; she needs to knock on the principal’s door, so as not to embarrass the secretary that they had. [0:15:00]

JG: Oh, because she was a better typist than the secretary?

KE: She was a better typist.

JG: [Laughs]

KE: And so, she really started making her mark there. And she ended up typing, she said, “Kenneth,” Dr. Edmonds had her typing theses for her and all types of things she needed to have typed for lectures and that kind of thing. And during the summer, she

was also doing typing in the Law School down there. And she said, “Kenneth, I had a good thing going! I always had some money in my pocket, you know, to go to the canteen. I could go buy some small things here and there,” until I think she said it was second semester her junior year. She had been doing typing all around campus, and evidently some of the newer professors thought this was work-study.

JG: This was while she was going to North Carolina College?

KE: While she was going to North Carolina College. And instead of paying her, they ended up putting the money in a student work account on the campus. And she said, well, that didn’t bother her too much, because it was safe. It would be there. She said it went alright until, she said, “Daddy came down there to pay my tuition, and they said, ‘Well, Mr. Austin, we already took Vivian’s tuition out of her work-study.’ He said, ‘Is that right? I’ll take my money back!’”

JG: [Laughs]

KE: She said, “Kenneth, I went down there to get some money, and they said I didn’t have any.” She said, “What do you mean?” Said, “I’m supposed to have x amount of dollars.” “Well, we credited that to your tuition. We told your father.” She said, “Kenneth, my heart sunk,” because, all of a sudden, going from having money to, all of a sudden, now paying her way.

But she enjoyed typing. Her freshman year, I think she won the typing prize in the Commercial Department, even though I think she was only in that department half a year. But the next year, when it came up, she was still the best typist, but the people running the department knew my grandfather and grandmother. And so, they called her in and said, “Vivian, look, you’re the best typist still. But we really don’t want to give you the

prize because you aren't even a Commercial student, and that just makes the Commercial students look bad."

JG: What was her major?

KE: English. "And so, if you would, you know, we'll give you recognition, but if you can not accept that." She said, "Sure," because that didn't bother her. But I say that to say this is how well she just took to it.

JG: Right. So, did she—I wonder if we could go back a little bit so maybe get some background on your mother. What year was she born then?

KE: August twenty-first, 1927.

JG: Okay, and she was born here in Durham?

KE: Here in Durham.

JG: Also at Lincoln Hospital?

KE: Yeah. I don't think she was born at home. I think it was at Lincoln Hospital.

JG: Okay.

KE: Yeah, because Lincoln had—Mom said by the time I came along, they had added on to Lincoln two or three times, I think.

JG: And so, she—[0:20:00] you said she worked, I guess, on and off at the *Carolina Times*. So, she went to Hillside High School and then, North Carolina College?

KE: Went to Hillside High School, graduated from Hillside in 1944.

JG: And she graduated from North Carolina College with an English degree?

KE: English degree in 1948.

JG: Okay. And after graduation, did she work for the *Carolina Times*? Or then—?

KE: She worked for the—well, let me say this. Mama worked for the *Carolina Times* from the time she was very young, coming up, and always off and on.

JG: Right.

KE: Because at that time, when your parents said, "This is what you're going to do," there was no discussion about, "Well, I want to do something else." That was just okay.

JG: Right.

KE: And so, during that time, I mean, she learned how to do everything there, other than the production area, which was—which was that hot type, which was really strictly men because it was—I mean, it was hard, heavy work. You probably won't find many people now still alive that dealt with hot type.

JG: Hot type?

KE: Hot type. That's where you have to, uh, melt lead, and then put it in a pot that is kept warm on the linotype machine. And if you go down there on Chapel Hill Street where the *Herald* used to be, they've got a couple of linotype machines in there. But it was really a labor-intensive business then. And I've told people anytime I know enough about hot type to be grateful that I came along when cold type, what was called cold type, came in, because it was an entirely different production method. You didn't need as many people. And, I mean, I remember there was always—a part of the reason for staying down on Pettigrew Street was that you were also near the coal companies. Because not only did you need coal for heating your home and many times the business, but you needed that coal to heat that lead, even in the winter.

JG: So, when you—how long did they use the hot type here? Do you know when they ended that?

KE: They ended that—it must have been ’63, ’64, somewhere in there.

JG: So, did you—I guess you must have seen it?

KE: Oh, I saw it!

JG: Did you have to work in there as a young boy?

KE: No. At my age, I was selling newspapers sometimes. But other than walking by and going through it—now, once that type came out, and you put those slugs in a form, and then, there was a—what’s known as a proof press, which was a large round cylinder that—you would put a tray of type, and that tray might be four or five inches wide, but the type was usually about an inch and a half to maybe three inches wide, and you’d form that, hand-roll ink over it, put a plain sheet of paper over it, [0:25:00] and then, roll the bigger roll over it, and you’d have an impression. And then, you could use that to check for typographical errors and make changes.

And then, once you made that, you would send it back to the linotype operator, who would usually just type just that one line, run that out, and then you give those lines back to the proof person, who would take those individual slugs out, replace those, and then do the same process over again.

JG: How many people would you say were working, I guess, when the business was on Pettigrew in, say, the late fifties or early sixties?

KE: Fourteen or fifteen people, easily.

JG: And how many would be production, the printing part?

KE: Six or seven. [Sound of train whistle]

JG: And was it racially integrated? Were there white workers? Mostly black?

KE: Well, it was always mostly black. Now, we have had whites work there, [sound of train whistle] off and on, plenty of times that I can remember. Now, sometimes there would be linotype operators that would come if—my uncle, Lodius Austin, was the linotype operator. And we had two linotype machines, but I've forgot the other gentleman's now that used to run it. But if one of them was out, you could call up to the *Herald* and get somebody.

JG: Someone to fill in?

KE: Fill in.

JG: Another person that knew how to do that?

KE: Yeah. And during that time, if you were in the printing business, because it was so labor-intensive, racial boundaries really came down. Now, if somebody black went to work for somebody else white part-time, seeing that they were probably going to be in the back, and none of the customers would see them, or if they did, they would think, "Well, probably he's the janitor."

JG: So, were there some black workers who were doing linotype at, say, the *Herald*, the *Morning Herald*? Or just temporarily sometimes? Or you don't know?

KE: I think my uncle helped up there sometimes on the weekend.

JG: Okay. You say Lodius.

KE: L-O—

JG: Was that Louis Austin's brother?

KE: Brother, yeah.

JG: L-O-D—?

KE: I-U-S.

JG: He was a younger brother?

KE: Younger brother. My grandfather was the oldest. The next one was Maude N. Austin.

JG: She was a teacher, right?

KE: She was a teacher and taught almost all of her career up in Roanoke Rapids. And then, Lodius, and the baby of the family was Jesse.

JG: What kind of work did he do?

KE: He used to work at the Jack Tar Hotel for many years. And then, after he got married, he and his wife moved to Titusville, Florida.

JG: So, Louis Austin had three siblings?

KE: Uh-huh.

JG: Okay. And so, let's see, so back to your mother. So, she graduated college. She became a guidance counselor at some point?

KE: She became a teacher first.

JG: A teacher.

KE: Yeah, and she taught elementary school. The first teaching jobs they got was in Beaufort, South Carolina.

JG: Your mother, after college, went to Beaufort?

KE: Went to Beaufort.

JG: That's before she was married?

KE: After she was married.

JG: And just for the record, your father's full name?

KE: Woodrow Wilson Edmonds. [0:30:00]

JG: And what year was he born?

KE: He was born in 1922, June ninth, I think it was 1922.

JG: So, they were both teachers and went to Beaufort?

KE: Yeah, yeah. He was a teacher, and he had played football in high school and at North Carolina College. And so, he was down there, teaching high school biology and helping to coach the football team. And I think they were down there three years. And the school—I forgot the name of the school, but it was on one of the outer islands near St. Helena Island. I remember they used to talk about that all the time. But my mother talked about how, when they first got down there, it was a two-room school, and they were out in what was then the country.

JG: This was the late 1940s, I guess?

KE: Fifties, early fifties.

JG: It was before you came along?

KE: Yeah. And she said she found out later that—she had been teaching for almost a year when she found out that the men in the area had come to the school, and came up through the woods in the back, and would go up under the school and listen to see how she was treating the children, because they didn't know—you know, here was somebody from, not only out of town, but out of state. And once they were satisfied that the children weren't being mistreated, she said, "Kenneth, they started volunteering for some of everything." And so, she had an enjoyable time down there.

And [laughs] she said, "Kenneth, I learned about that island, like," she said, "I pulled up one morning, and all of the kids were up on the porch." And said she got out

and said, “What’s going on?” Because usually the children were playing in the front yard before school started. And said one little boy, who was the leader, his name was Stanley Lawton, L-A-W-T-O-N, he came out and pointed to the ground and said, “Better hurry up, Mrs. Edmonds! Better hurry up! Gator tail! Gator tail!” And Mama said she looked, and saw this little sliver in the sand, and said, “Kenneth, I hurried up and got up on that porch!” Because she found out, you know, those kids *understood* what was going on!

And one time, there was a—there started to be a forest fire back in the woods, and they got this smoke, you know, coming toward the school. So, for fear that if this turned out to be a major fire and it burned the school, she knew that, because of segregation, I mean, they weren’t going to just come out and rebuild this school immediately.

JG: Right.

KE: So, she put Stanley Lawton in charge of helping to move everything out of the school building into the middle of the yard, so that if the building burned, at least everything else would be saved, and then you could figure out something from there. She gets in the car, goes down to the ranger station, [0:35:00] to the ranger tower, and calls up and says, “Listen, there’s a fire, and I’m calling to let you know.”

And she said there was a woman up at the top, and she looked and said, “Yeah, I see it.” And she told her where the school was. She said, “Yeah.” She said, “Well, I’ll send somebody out there.” She gets back in the car, drives back to the school, and by now, they get everything out but the stove for heating. Well, if there’s a fire for that, you know, that’s going to be there.

She said, “Kenneth, I got hot.” Said looked up, and a ranger comes out, and it’s one man. And she went out there to tell him and wanted to know, “Well, where’s

everybody else?" And she said he said, "Well, it's just me." And my mother said, you know, "It made me [hot]. I said, "Now here it is segregation again."

Because prior to that, she decided that, well, maybe she needs to go back and investigate this fire, so they can, you know, be able to tell the person what's going on. And Mama said she got started back there, and said Stanley Lawton said, "I wouldn't go back there, Mrs. Etmonds, if I was you!" And he was a young boy, used to call her "Etmonds." But she said she turned around and looked at him and said, "You don't think so?" He said, "No," and she said about that time, she turned around and looked, and this huge green tree just said, "Whoooo," and just went up in a ball of fire! And she said it would have been one thing if it had been a dead tree, but this was a *live* tree!

She goes back. The fireman comes out, and he says, "Well, I'll take care of it." And she didn't believe him. And said the man went out there, and he went to chopping here and chopping there, and squirting fire retardant here and fire retardant there. Said, "Kenneth, after about three hours, the fire was out." And—

JG: The school was saved? The school was not—?

KE: School was saved. Didn't have a forest fire. But she began to find out, you know, that she was having to battle with, you know, segregation and whether or not this is just, you know, "We aren't going to do for these black kids, no matter what."

But she talked about how, because she and Dad and another of couple of teachers had, two other teachers had come from Howard University, that they stuck out in the community and they were treated differently by whites in the community, because they knew these were some folks that had an education. And she said she was amazed to find the number of whites that would help her out.

They were teaching something in biology and talking about flowers, and how flowers get their nutrients from the water, and that's why you cut them and the water goes [up]. And she wanted to do an experiment with the kids by putting some food coloring in. Then, the flowers kind of get a little dry, then you cut the bottoms off and put them in, and then, you can see the food coloring go up. And so, she stopped and asked a white florist in Beaufort if she could get some older flowers and told her what she wanted to do.

And the woman said, "You can have older flowers, but that's not going to really do what you want." Said, "If you come by here first thing in the morning on your way to school, I'll have some fresh ones out that you can just have for free." And stopped by and got the flowers, and they were able to run that experiment the way that it was really designed to be.

But she said she was—she [0:40:00] found it interesting how much differently those whites treated what they considered to be educated blacks. Now, it wouldn't be quite equal, but it was different. And my mother had gotten a reputation. Well, she was more like Louis Austin, that a pound of your flesh is worth just as much as a pound of mine.

And so, she said she drove up to the school one day after—I think one of the major farmers down there was a G.W. Trask, and he had these huge farms, and they would farm some of everything and send the vegetables north almost year-round because of the climate. And said she pulled up her first year, and none of the kids were in school. And she said, "Well, where is everybody?" They said, "Well, they're down there helping

with the harvest." And she said, "Well, they're supposed to be in school. But where are they?" So, they told her.

Mama gets back in the car, goes down to the field. She had passed it, but saw people out there harvesting, but didn't think too much of it. And as she started out there, she asked, you know, where was the supervisor. And they pointed to him. And being Mama and Louis Austin's daughter, she strides down the road and she said, you know, people are stooped over picking, and everybody is kind of looking to see, well, what's going to happen here.

And my mother went and introduced herself, looked the man in the eye, told him who she was and that state law says that these children are supposed to be in school. And said, so the supervisor said, "Well, wait a minute," and got on his walkie-talkie kind of phone and called back and said, "The teacher is down here and said the children are supposed to be in school." And she surmised that the discussion was, "Is it one of those new teachers, you know, from up North?" "Well, yeah." "Well, okay, go ahead."

And so, she piled everybody in the car, and she said they couldn't get everybody in the car, but put some of the kid on the hood and some on the trunk, and drove slowly back to school. But that helped to endear her to the black parents down there, because not only did they know that the kids were being treated nice, and you can always tell if a kid's being treated nice if they want to keep going back somewhere. You know, they are going to spill the beans totally.

But, after being down there, and she said she worked to get them ready for the placement test the next year, after being down there three years, and found out that after she left, and those kids took the test, they placed almost as high as many of the white

students. And so, she took all of that battle for integration and equality that was constant in the Austin household down there.

And so, they went from there to Elizabeth City, and she taught elementary school there. And Dad became a teacher and then a principal, I think it was at Banks Street School.

JG: They taught at the same school?

KE: No. I forgot the school she taught at, but he was principal of Banks Street School, I believe.

JG: Okay.

KE: And we stayed down there [0:45:00] and came back to Durham, so that when I started first grade, I started at St. Joseph's AME School, because they had a first grade program right down the street here, what is now Hayti Heritage Center. But in between that—

JG: You were born in Elizabeth City?

KE: Born in Durham.

JG: Oh, you were born in Durham, but your parents were teaching in Elizabeth City?

KE: They were teaching—

JG: And your mom came back here to give birth?

KE: Yeah. Yeah. [Coughs] Well, I mean, at that time, she was coming up here to—because there were black doctors here.

JG: Right.

KE: And so—

JG: Teachers usually—my understanding is teachers were not permitted to teach while they were pregnant, either. Was that the case?

KE: I don't recall that.

JG: Of course, if they didn't know—

KE: Yeah. I just don't recall that. I would have thought that, if they had been married, then there just wouldn't have been any problem, but they weren't going to have single—

JG: Yeah, I talked—I interviewed—actually, this was—you know [Early Thorpe]?

KE: Yeah.

JG: His wife. And she taught in the Durham schools, probably in the fifties, maybe. And when she was pregnant, I think with her first child, she said she wasn't permitted to teach. Now, maybe it was different in Elizabeth City.

KE: Yeah. I just would not be surprised, but I just never heard my mother talk about it.

JG: Right. So, they were in Elizabeth City for, what, a few years?

KE: I think three years.

JG: And back to Durham?

KE: And then, back to Durham. And my father worked at a couple of restaurants, but he was also doing graduate level work at Ohio State. And so, during the summer, he was almost always gone.

JG: So, he would take his classes in the summer?

KE: Yeah.

JG: So, he didn't go up there during the fall or spring?

KE: He would go back maybe once or twice during the year for thesis updates and that kind of thing, but not to stay for an extended period.

JG: This would have been while you were a child, I guess.

KE: Yeah, seven or eight. And—

JG: Your mother was teaching in Durham?

KE: No, she had come back to the newspaper and was helping my grandfather. And so, when I was getting ready to go into the fifth grade, my father became principal at Frank Porter Graham School over in Chapel Hill. And my mother had gone back to school to get her masters in guidance counseling from North Carolina College. And so, she got a job at Lincoln High School as their guidance counselor.

JG: And Frank Porter Graham—is that an elementary school?

KE: Elementary school, one through six.

JG: That would have been a black school then?

KE: It would have been a black school. It was brand new.

JG: And so, you lived in Chapel Hill, or you still lived in Durham?

KE: Well, we were living in Durham, right here on Umstead Street, 510 East Umstead. And we ended up building a house and moving to Chapel Hill. We got over there in 1963—no, '64, [0:50:00] because it was the—it was in later '64, because I remember we were—my mother was sewing dresses when we were watching TV, and Lee Harvey Oswald got shot.

But she stayed in Chapel Hill until she ended up leaving. I think it was in '73 or early '74. Trying to be an absentee owner just wasn't working. And so, she had to make a

decision whether to either let the paper go, or either come over here full-time. And so, that's what she decided.

JG: So, after Louis Austin died in 1971, your mother was the absentee owner. And who was running the paper at that point?

KE: Well, in essence, she was. Clarence [Bonnette] was the business manager.

JG: Is that B-O-N-N-E-T?

KE: E-T, yeah.

JG: So, he was the business manager. Who would write the editorials?

KE: Ah, I'm going to have to go back and check, because after Grandpa died, that just would have been split up among whatever writers we had, and those editorials would have had to have been given to my mother first.

JG: Oh, so she would review them before they'd go out?

KE: Yeah.

JG: So, do you know who else was working there besides Clarence [Bonnette]?

KE: Lodius Austin, Willie Allen, Janice [Bright], Robin [Doakes]—

JG: And are these—like, your uncle, Lodius Austin, he was running the printing, right?

KE: Yeah.

JG: And the others, were they printing, or were they in reporting?

KE: They were in production, they were in secretarial. We had several different people writing at that time, and I'll have to go back and check.

JG: One story I read, I think your mother told one interviewer that she felt a couple of things, that they weren't running the paper the way that Louis Austin would

have liked or that she liked, and also that she felt she was also getting cheated, that they weren't—there were some financial issues.

KE: There was that, yes. And this is one of the things about—if you're working in a business, especially from a child up, and you've done pretty much every job there, then you know how much it costs and you know when things aren't going well. And so, she was wrestling with the choice of knowing that somebody was going to need to be there, that she was going to need to be there full-time, or it just wasn't going to work. And so, she took early retirement and left during the spring, I think, of '73, because she had accumulated a lot of sick days that she hadn't used. So, she was able to leave kind of toward the end of it, end of the school year. [Sighs] But—

JG: Um-hmm. Now, was there someone named—I came across the name Malvin Moore?

KE: Yeah.

JG: Who may have been the editor for a while?

KE: He was, Malvin Moore.

JG: In that period '73, '74? [0:55:00]

KE: Malvin Moore was there. They ended up bringing him in from the Midwest, and I forgot where he was from. But I remember Mama had him there, and after he had been there two weeks, he ended up meeting with her and said, "Vivian, what you need to do is fire everybody." And she wasn't that hard-nosed kind of businessperson and thought, "Well, I don't want to put people out."

JG: So, he was the one who kind of told her—well, she probably knew something, but he told her specifically the problems that needed to be addressed.

KE: Yeah, and needed to get rid of some of the people. And so, she went back and forth with that. And that was not an easy decision for her, because it had almost always operated on a shoestring. But when my grandfather was in full strength, he was really able to ride herd over it. But she made the decision to, first, try to be an absentee owner, and that didn't work. And then, she retired.

And I came in 1976. I was out of school from East Carolina, and ended up not finishing at ECU, and ended up coming back full time. And then, I was going to—my plan was to help out a year or two, help everything, you know, get going. But [laughs] here I am. Plans change.

JG: So, you were involved—you've been involved from 1956 all the way to the present?

KE: No.

JG: 1976, I mean.

KE: '76, yeah.

JG: And I guess—what kind of stuff—you did all sorts of things?

KD: Well, it was different for me, because other than selling the paper and brief times during the summer when I was out of school—of course, I was in and out of the place, but I didn't really have a job there. I did learn to write obituaries, I did learn to write editorials, learned what it took. But I always hated English, always hated it. And my real consideration was that the main function of a newspaper is going to be writing. And so, if I really wasn't interested in writing, then it probably isn't going to be but so much for me to do.

And I really did not consider the business end. I liked business more than anything else. So, when I first got back, it was help out, catch can, you know, wherever something needs some help. And so, as time went on, started out recording subscriptions and advertising payments and that kind of thing. And then, I really started helping out with laying out the paper, because that was with cold type.

And because my mother liked [1:00:00] jigsaw puzzles, and I liked, I became a fan of jigsaw puzzles. When I was in junior high school and especially in high school at Laurinburg, when I would come home, whether it was Christmas or Easter or one of the extended vacations, Mama would always have a couple of puzzles ready, and we'd sit up at night and put these puzzles together. Well, the other thing is, you know, with children, what you want is a pastime you can do where it seems as if you are concentrating on that, but we can find out how you're really doing, you know, overall. And, you know, if something comes up, it's not in a pressure setting. And so, this is what we just enjoyed doing, and it gave us a chance to talk, and we'd talk and laugh about first one thing and then another.

But when it came to laying out the paper, well, this was just another jigsaw paper, really. And so, I kind of took to that. And as time went on, well, I was helping with that, and then, you also help with the mailing. And you help with inserting papers, then you help with mailing papers, because that involves the address-o-graph and putting the name and address on the paper. I learned how to do that. And so, I learned to do everything, kind of step by step. And as time went on, Mama ended up doing a lot more typesetting. We were able to let one other person go.

And I remember they had gone from hot type to cold type. And then, we got in IBM Selectric—[sighs] I want to say Selectric, but I don't know. They had a machine called a Composer that allows you to use a different kind of ribbon and you were able to justify type, so you were able to come up with different sized columns and that kind of thing. And so, being a typist, she was able to take to that again. And so, we were able to pare down the number of people that we had.

JG: Was this in the seventies or eighties?

KE: In the seventies and into the eighties. And once you moved from hot type to cold type, you just didn't need as many people.

JG: Was your uncle still working here then?

KE: Yeah. We kept Lodius on until he retired.

JG: When did he retire?

KE: It would have been in the late seventies, early eighties.

JG: I wonder if I could ask a little about some of the issues in the sixties and seventies, the transition from your grandfather's later years and then, as your mother took over. So, in terms of like urban renewal, I wonder what you recall about, you know, what was going on, in terms of the newspaper and in terms of maybe what—I know that Louis Austin supported the urban renewal funding initially, because he felt it would help the black community and bring in better housing, and maybe there was a plan, I think, to build a shopping mall.

And then, over time, things didn't work out the way it had been hoped, and I think there might have been some tensions over that. So, how was the relationship of, I guess,

the *Carolina Times* and Louis Austin, and your mother, and maybe others in the community, among whites, but also some black businesses and black businesspeople?

KE: [Sighs] Urban renewal, [1:05:00] and I remember the discussions about it. The plan that the black community was given and had talked about, Grandpa supported it, and there were many black folks in this town that supported it, because there was a discussion at first about what we'll do is we'll buy your property, then we'll tear this down, and then we'll rebuild it.

Now, I remember there was a long discussion that one of the businesses that was in the urban renewal area was Rigsbee Tire. I think they used to be down there where, used to be Bell's Amoco, where that BP station is down on the corner, University, right down from the ballpark, called Blackwell Street that comes down to University Drive.

JG: Right.

KE: Rigsbee Tire was one of the first ones that filed a claim, and they got a huge chunk of money, but they had a legitimate claim. Now, to let you know, this wasn't—there was no animus in the black community toward Rigsbee Tire.

JG: Was Rigsbee a black-owned business?

KE: White.

JG: White-owned business.

KE: Rigsbee became Merchants Tire. Merchants Tire bought them out. But Rigsbee Tire had several locations, and they sold tires to black folks right and left. And Old Man Charlie Rigsbee was a good friend of Grandpa's. Oh, they were buddies! But Rigsbee Tire filed a legitimate claim, and they got a huge amount of money. And when they looked up then, all of a sudden, there was only so much money left, and they began

to look forward and see that there wasn't going to be enough money for everybody else. And the ones that filed immediately got more money than everybody else coming later.

JG: Now, are you talking about businesses, or businesses and homeowners?

KE: Businesses and homeowners, especially businesses.

JG: Now, so, do you think that was a lack of planning on the part of the Urban Renewal people?

KE: I think—I think it was two things. I think it was a plan to get rid of black businesses, period, to begin with, because if you listen to the urban renewal story, nationwide—I've heard the same thing out of people in Philadelphia, in some other towns in the South, but it's always the same thing: "Well, we're going to buy you out, and then we're going to give you money to rebuild, and then it'll be better." And in almost every place, it wiped out black businesses and black homes.

JG: Right.

JG: Now, when they had this forum down here at Hayti Heritage Center, and Willis Whichard spoke, and I talked about that. After that, I spoke to [ ] Barry. [1:10:00] And he was saying, you know, people were talking about Hayti being thriving, but he said, "I went down there to Peter Pan's grocery store, and everything was falling down." Well, yeah, everything *was* falling down *then*. But urban renewal and integration, together, really helped to destroy that business district.

Because when we used to live over here on Umstead Street, if I wanted to go down to the *Carolina Times* office down on Pettigrew, right where Rick Hendrick Collision Center is, and where that rail spur that they covered over used to go back next to that building, well, if you went back there, John Avery Boys Club used to be back

there. And I was a member of the Boys Club, and so, I could go to the Boys Club anytime, because Mr. Lee Smith was in charge back there, and nobody had to be concerned about what was happening with their children, because he was going to make sure everything was alright.

But once they started saying that there wasn't going to be enough money left, then the process slowed down almost to a crawl. And they told people, and I remember hearing this talked about, all those businesses down on Pettigrew Street, "Don't spend money trying to keep it up, because we're going to destroy it, and it's coming soon." Well, from the mid-sixties on, it kept being "soon." And as time went on, with fewer customers coming in, people weren't able to keep what upkeep they had been doing. Businesses started to close. People lost—and so, we're not an attractive place to come. People lost businesses.

But I remember Attorney W.A. Marsh, Jr., I used to take affidavits back and forth to his office for legal advertising he used to run. And Attorney Marsh was in my mother's high school class, so they were classmates. But his mother, Mrs. Alston, Mrs. Christine Alston, had married again after Attorney Marsh's father died, and that's why she became an Alston. But she used to ask me sometimes when I'd stop by there and it was quiet, how things were going with trying to finish off urban renewal, and I'd tell her. And she told me, pointblank, urban renewal killed her second husband. She said, "I know it, because he tossed and turned and worried."

And people used to talk all the time about the number of people in Beechwood that died because they lost everything. And people who had been told they were going to

get, you know, twenty, thirty, forty thousand dollars, they were getting, you know, three or four thousand dollars, which is not enough to barely move and find someplace else.

JG: So, she was, this woman who said she lost her second husband, she was Attorney W.A. Marsh's mother?

KE: Mother, yeah. And her first husband died, and then she married Mr. Alston.

JG: He was not related to you?

KE: No.

JG: He was a different Austin?

KE: No, A-L-S-T-O-N.

JG: Oh, okay.

KE: But, and she used to talk about how it just hurt him. And [1:15:00] urban renewal, I mean, it did. And I remember people talking about how the real problem was, was that if black folks wanted to shop, well, yeah, they could go and shop downtown. For many years, you couldn't try on clothes; you had to kind of eyeball it. But, for everything else, you could stay in Hayti.

JG: Right.

KE: And that was really the transition into the sixties and early seventies where the Civil Rights Movement was changing. And while my grandfather still wrote editorials about it, and he was able to, for the most part, change with the times, because the word was always, "If you are trying to better the race and better opportunities for [us], we are going to be behind it." Now, he was against violence, but—

JG: How did he get along with some of the younger leaders like, say, Benjamin Ruffin or Howard Fuller, in the late sixties or mid-sixties?

KE: Ben Ruffin—I met Ben Ruffin *in* the *Carolina Times*. Ben Ruffin, John [Edwards], then Howard Fuller—Ben Ruffin was in and out of the *Carolina Times* every time the wind blew, because he had grown up knowing what kind of person Grandpa was. And so, just because—and he even told me, he said, "Well, you know, just because Mr. Austin was slowing down because of age, you know, you always listened to what he had to say because he had been in the fight for so long." But that meant that his rapport with what were then considered to be younger folks—he had already established a reputation, a long-held reputation of really being a fighter to the end, that he really didn't have any problems with them.

JG: Right. So, he got along well with the younger leaders?

KE: Yeah. And the other thing, when they honored Ms. Ann Atwater down there, on the play about her relationship with C.P. Ellis, Osha Davidson, who wrote the book, had heard the story of Ann Atwater and C.P. Ellis and came down to interview her and finding out about whether or not, you know, what kind of person she was in the Civil Rights Movement. Well, Osha Davidson showed up at the door one day and told us who he was and said, "Well, I was told that if I wanted to find out who was really out front, I needed to come find out about Louis Austin," because Ms. Atwater told him straight out that he had talked about people in other walks of life, [1:20:00] but made it clear.

And because he had that reputation, see, when younger folks—and even somebody like Howard Fuller that came from out of town—if he said, "Well, you know, I don't know about this old man, Mr. Austin," there were plenty of people who said, "Oh, no! Oh, no! He's *been* out there!" And so, you know, it's one thing to go to somebody and have them tell it. It's something else when everybody who doesn't seem to have a

dog in the fight says, “Oh, we *know* who this person is.” And so, that was how he was able to maintain some kind of relationship going forward.

But even until his later years, you know, once you get to the late sixties, now doors are really opening up. And so, now you have to make the transition between not being able to get a job in, say, City Hall to, well, wait a minute, once you have this job in City Hall, you need to be a decision maker. You know, we don’t want, you know, somebody sitting there and, you know, you’re collecting a good salary, but you’re not opening doors for everybody else coming behind. And this doesn’t mean giving them something for nothing, but giving them an opportunity.

JG: Right.

KE: And that’s why when I listen to Reverend Barber here in this state, and you talk to people who were either in the Civil Rights Movement or who were my age or older, that’s why this Voter ID is so transparent. “Oh, no! We want to make sure everybody who comes to vote is who they are!” Well, first of all, you know, I don’t think you’ve got to worry about illegal aliens, who are here illegally, have to fear being deported, much less put in jail, going to show up at a voting booth and say, “Well, I want to vote.” These are the last people who are going to do anything!

JG: Right, right.

KE: The next thing is I blame all these so-called “black conservative” leaders that these white folks *made* leaders—[clears throat] I ran across an editorial. I think it was in 1950, my grandfather wrote about white folks trying to get C.C. Spaulding to join—I think, somebody was on some board here in Durham, and the next person that the Durham Committee wanted to put forward was going to be what they considered to be

more hostile to what the whites wanted. And they were thinking, “Well, if we get C.C. Spaulding, then we can have him go our way.” And my grandfather wrote about how glad he was C.C. Spaulding [1:25:00] turned it down and that it was the right thing to do, because this is nothing but divide and conquer.

JG: Right.

KE: Well, this is a case of we want to see who we can co-opt, and then make you leaders, and turn around and say, “Black community, we’ve decided *this* is your leader.”

JG: Right.

KE: So, now, when—back in the eighties, when the Republicans, in their own words, were “getting sick of Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton,” and I remember after some election, Orrin Hatch standing there, saying, “Well, you know, we’re just tired of Jesse Jackson. We don’t think he’s really for the black community. And we’re going to get the black community some more black leaders. *We* are going to get them for them.”

JG: Right, white-picked black leaders.

KE: Yeah! And he stood there, as if, “Well, you know, I don’t see what’s wrong with this.” And—

JG: Right, and so, Louis Austin was fighting against that thirty or forty years before?

KE: Before! Same thing! And it’s always been going on: “Who can we get that will—that is not going to be, uh, as strong, as willing to fight and say, ‘We want equality now.’ We want somebody that, well, we’ll give you a salary and we’re still going to treat you second class.”

JG: Right.

KE: But that's what angers me about what's going on today. But anyhow, when you get to the end of the sixties, and right there toward the end of his life, it's now about trying to make a difference now that you're on the inside. We've been on the outside, but this is the next fight. And so, that's where his time came to an end.

JG: I wonder, in terms of that transition, there were a number of other kind of black media outlets that were emerging at that point. You were starting to see some black radio stations. And so, I wonder how his relationship was to some of these—I guess it was mostly younger people, as well. I know you talked about his relationship with people like Ben Ruffin and Howard Fuller. So, did he—or even later on when your mother took over, or even when you first started to come to the paper, I guess, again in 1976—was there a strong connection between the *Carolina Times* and, say, some of the black radio stations?

KE: There was not, [sighs] because we were still in the middle of urban renewal. But there was not what you would call some kind of formal alliance between black newspapers and some of these other outlets. [Sighs] What you have is, with so many other doors opening, people are having to fight a new set of issues. Yes, we have to worry about getting our foot in the door, and now, we have to worry about having some influence.

But now, we've got all of this huge number of opportunities. So that, where black women could really only aspire to be teachers to be a top profession, and then, the very few that might go on to a masters and a Ph.D. level and then teach at a teachers' college, now, all of a sudden, they not only have opportunities in education, they've got opportunities from city/county government to corporations out in the Research Triangle

Park. Once integration [1:30:00] really opened up, there was this rush to—well, first, to have the spook by the door. “Yeah, we’ve got somebody black. See, there he is, as soon as you come in.” Then, you have this transition to where, “Wait a minute, some of these people are really qualified. And, you know, we can make some money on them *because* of what they are doing in our business.” And that door opened up out there in the Research Triangle Park.

But I say all that to say this: While there was not a lot of getting together so that we have a single issue to fight, there is sympathy across these media outlets, because we’re all fighting for the same thing, except now it’s so many other places we’ve got to go. But if an issue comes up, there was no problem with somebody from, say, WAFR coming in and saying, “Listen, we’ve got this going on. Can you put this in the paper?” Yeah! “Well, we’ve got this on. Can you put this on the radio station?” Yeah!

There is a different kind of fight when you move from segregation into integration. And when you have people, I mean, as we sit here now, you know, you don’t think—people don’t think anything, especially in Durham, of having black policemen and then black all the way up to captains, and then, a black police chief. The same thing in the fire department. The same thing in city and county government. Well, yeah, you have the mayor, but yet there have been white mayors in between. Yeah, but you’ve got black people on the city council. You’ve got black people heading departments in city and county government.

Well, the fight then moves from what is a very easy thing to see to something that is more nuanced. “Well, we’ve got somebody here, but we aren’t going to promote them. You know, if we’ve got five spots open, and we’ve got three blacks that are really

qualified, and we've got five or six more whites that either equally or a shade less qualified, we'll move up one black, and then we'll move up the other four whites." Now, black people have been in jobs where they have done more work and haven't been paid for it, or didn't have the title, didn't go up.

JG: Right.

KE: But, as it came to the end of Grandpa's life, it really becomes nuanced, and so—

JG: With that, I wonder if I could interrupt for a second. So, when you're—in the early seventies, and then when your mother came on, I guess, you know, full-time, in I guess '73, '74, and then, a little later, you come on—so, do you think that the focus of the paper, or the challenges, I guess, there's two things: Was the editorial direction similar under your mother as your grandfather? And then, was the, you know, the challenges with integration, did that present a lot of challenges for, I guess, the business of the *Carolina Times*?

KE: Yeah! [1:35:00] Well, yes, yes, and yes. Editorially, it has remained the same, and I try to keep it to this day, and that is we need to be on the lookout and fight discrimination everywhere we see it. [Sighs] But like the other businesses down in Hayti, all of a sudden, white papers decided, "We are ready for black writers." And, like in everything else, they're going to take the very best ones. And so, if you aren't able to compete on the salary, you just have to let them go. And you don't get angry because they've got another opportunity.

Milton Jordan, who was an executive editor here, wrote here, started out here, moved around here and there, but later moved down to the *Charlotte Observer*. But you

had John Myers, who was white, wrote for four or five years. And Myers was running around Durham, some of every place.

JG: And that was—Myers was here in the early seventies or late sixties?

KE: Late sixties. And came back and did a real nice piece on Grandpa and sold it to the *New York Times*.

JG: Right, he wrote an obituary.

KE: Yeah.

JG: Yeah. And Milton Jordan was here around the same time, or later?

KE: Milton was here in the early sixties as a teenager. And then, Milton—

JG: He had a column, I think, didn't he?

KE: Yeah

JG: He wrote a column.

KE: Yeah. And Milton was moving around. He was here and there, and then he came back. But Milton was an excellent writer from right here in Durham.

JG: Right.

KE: But we have, yeah, we have faced the challenge of integration with—you end up getting a writer, and if you get somebody new, all of a sudden, if they were here six or eight weeks, next thing you know they get an offer to write by the *Herald-Sun*. And there is one young man right now that had been at the *Herald-Sun* on a freelance basis, writing maybe one piece every couple or three weeks. [Sighs] Wanted to do more writing, came down and—great young writer—and wrote some sports and a couple of features, and came down. And so, he said, "Mrs. Edmonds, I'd really like to do more." She said, "Well, I doubt you're going be here. Folks at the *Herald* are going to hire you." He said,

“Well, I had been trying to get hired, but they wouldn’t hire me.” She said, “Won’t be long.”

And so, he was trying to be diplomatic about it, but I was passing through [laughs] over there. And Mama says, “Kenneth, I’m telling him he isn’t going to be here long.” I said, “You’ve got that right!” And we were laughing about it, because we knew five or six more weeks, if we keep putting his stuff in, they’re going to make the call. And they did, and he’s still there now.

JG: Who’s that?

KE: John McCann.

JG: Oh, okay. So, he was writing for you in the seventies or eighties?

KE: Seventies—no, eighties. But he got there and called back [1:40:00] and thanked us for the opportunity and wanted to let Mama know, you know, he had gotten his job. And she wished him well. And he said, “Mrs. Edmonds, they really do consider you competition.” And we had a good laugh about that, “Yeah, yeah, okay.” He said, “No, I mean it! They just look at the paper every week!” And the *Herald*, for many years, kept a subscription, I mean, *kept* it. And we’d put something in the paper, and the next thing you know, the same kind of thing is showing up up there.

But that just happened nationally. But, while the fight goes on, you know, it just becomes a slightly different one. And so, that’s what it is going on forward. And where we are now, [coughs] well, I mean, after—first it was desktop publishing. And all of the industry magazines said, you know, “Newspapers get ready for a lot more competition,” because people can produce it easier. And, you know, that’s when you had, here in the

Triangle, *Spectator* break out, and then everybody and his brother seemed to have a free giveaway.

JG: Oh, yeah, yeah.

KE: And then, now, all of a sudden, the digital revolution, and now, all of a sudden, it's a whole different deal. And so, you have to marry print and online. But—

JG: So, have you planned to—?

KE: Yeah.

JG: Move into, you know, I guess, websites and Facebook. *The Carolinian* seems to have done some of that.

KE: Yeah. It's just for me just a time process, because since we're using and have been using [InDesign], it's not going to be that difficult to just turn the pages into PDFs and then go from there. But I just haven't had a chance to get it done. But I just intend to do it. But it's just now new business challenges.

But, you know, we sit here today, having had the Trayvon Martin verdict over the weekend. Well, those that are old enough to remember Emmett Till, or it being fresh in the minds of parents and now grandparents, this is so striking. Because what nobody, until here almost after the verdict, people didn't say, "Well, shouldn't Trayvon Martin have a right to stand *his* ground?" I mean, after all, George Zimmerman admitted Trayvon Martin was walking along!

JG: Walking *away* from him.

KE: And walking away from him.

JG: Right.

KE: His—he calls the police for the ninetieth time. The police tell him, “Leave him alone. *We’ll* send the cops.” He chooses not to listen to the cops. And I’ve seen some email discussions where black folks my age are laughing, talking about, “Well, what do you mean? When the cops say you better do something, and you don’t do it, [coughs] you know, you don’t have that choice!”

JG: Right.

KE: I spent years before my son got to anywhere near close to driving age about how you’re going to have to handle yourself as you get older, as your interactions with the police. But, now, Zimmerman gets out of his car, confronts him—with a gun! [1:45:00] And I don’t know about you, but even if it was somebody else black, in the middle of the night, stopping me in the street with a gun, yeah, I’m going be scared!

But, now, what you have now is—we’re just right on the brink of anarchy here, because now this is OK Corral. So, now, what should I do as a black man? Should I go out, get a handgun, get a conceal permit, so if I happen to walk up on what I consider to be a segregationist, somebody who used to be a supporter of former Southern Democrat, Dixiecrat segregationist, white supremacist turned Conservative Republican, Jesse Helms—well, now, if that’s what I see, am I supposed to say, “This is somebody I need to fear. Should I pull my gun out and shoot first?” Now, if I do that—

JG: Because that’s what Zimmerman did, on the other side.

KE: That’s what Zimmerman did!

JG: Yeah.

KE: Now, do I say, “Hey, I was standing my ground!”

JG: Right, “I felt *threatened*.”

KE: “I felt threatened!” He said he was a Conservative Republican. [Phone rings] That’s all I need, because I know Jesse Helms was a Conservative Republican. [Phone rings] But now, all of a sudden, [phone rings] this now becomes open season, [phone rings] not only just young black men, like Trayvon Martin, this becomes open season on *me* and every man of color in this country! Because all you have to do is walk in someplace, and if you aren’t going to kowtow, they’ll say, [speaking in a panicky voice] “Oh, I was scared! I felt threatened!”

Well, I know my grandmother used to say, “A guilty conscience needs no accuser.” Now, I have been in plenty of places here in Durham, and you can find black politicians who are in the middle of black churches, and everybody that’s comfortable, oh, they’re running around in the middle of black churches as if they’re having a field day. They know everybody. They’re trying to get votes. They’re talking to everybody. Life is fine, and they have no problem. Those who have this background of racial hate, you can see them always standing to the side, not knowing how to interact.

Now, if you don’t—now, when Bill Clinton was president, and I remember it well, there was this discussion, “He seems to be so comfortable among black folks,” and he was. And I remember seeing several different times where he’s going down the line, the Secret Service is around him, and an older black woman would grab him by the hand and point her finger at him, and she’s telling him something. And he’s standing there, just as deferential, “Yes, ma’am, yes ma’am,” but there was no fear in his heart, because he understood, “I don’t have to be concerned about this.”

And you’ve got Republicans standing there, looking as if, “Oh, my God!” You know, “This older black woman wants to hug me! What do I do? I don’t know!” And

they even talk about it, “Well, you know, sometimes we just aren’t as comfortable.” Well, that’s a guilty conscience, that’s all! They know the legislation that they are coming up with.

JG: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

KE: And so, the fight that my grandfather was in continues to this day. [1:50:00]

JG: I wonder if I could bring you back just for a second to, in terms of 1979, when the fire was set at the *Carolina Times* building on Pettigrew.

KE: Yeah!

JG: And what your memory of that is. I remember talking to your mother about that one time, and she talked about it, and I wonder what your memories are.

KE: Ah, we got the phone call, came over. It was still smoldering. And it had really stopped midway into what had been the production and press area back there. We just still had linotype machines, but we had gotten rid of the press, that old—[cellphone ringtone plays]. But [pause] it had stopped, so everything [ringtone plays], so everything that we had, pretty much from the business part of the area, other than some water damage here and there. But we had a storage closet and we had some stuff in there, and Mama and I had a flashlight, and we were looking in that.

And two firemen had come from the outside and came back into that room [message ringtone plays] where the closet was. But they just didn’t see us, because we were both half-in the closet. And so, one guy said, “Well, I guess this will stop them from writing about the police.” And Mama turned around, and they just heard some movement and looked and saw us. And she said, “Uh-huh.” And they just turned and they just walked away.

But we had been doing stories at that time about police beating up black folks. And it was kind of on a regular basis. Now, it wasn't happening to those that were in upper classes, but we were getting calls almost weekly of people with confrontations, and not just people who had had a criminal past, but people who seemed to be doing nothing. And there was this strong-arm kind of tactic. And so, [sighs]—

JG: So, do you think that fire was more related to that? You know, also, there was the issue of, you know, I think they wanted you to move out, right, to vacate the building?

KE: [Laughs] They wanted us to move out, yeah. [Coughs]

JG: You were one of the last businesses holding out.

KE: There were three of us that were still down in that building. There was Service Printing Company, us, and E.N. Toole. And by that time, [coughs] I was going down meeting with the City of Durham Real Estate and Urban Renewal departments, because Mama just emotionally couldn't take it. And so, I was going down there, getting information and doing what I told them was preliminary negotiating, [1:55:00] so that I didn't have to make a decision sitting there in the front of them. I could always go back and smoke it over with Mama. But there was really no question in our mind that, while it might have been police brutality, that getting us out and urban renewal was probably the primary thing. Now, when I say that, I'm not saying that we know that it was the city doing that.

JG: Nobody was ever charged.

KE: Nobody was ever charged. Nobody was ever fined.

JG: It was pretty clear it was arson, though, right?

KE: Yeah.

JG: Because I know in the case of the, I guess, the Wilmington paper, where somebody was convicted—

KE: Yeah. But, see, by that time, let's see, between—there was no space between us and E.N. Toole. E.N. Toole was next to us, facing out of the building, on our left. And there was, used to be Elvira's—

JG: Café, or—?

KE: It used to be Elvira's, [pause] a Beauty Supply, Pee Wee's Shoe Shop, and then Service Printing Company. And all of those in-between us and Service Printing Company were empty. So, and then the cops had chased out folks, you know, trying to come in and out of those empty buildings. And they tried to—they broke into our building one time, broke into Service Printing Company. They didn't break into—well, they broke into us once. They didn't break into to E.N. Toole. And after that once, they didn't break into us anymore, either.

[Laughs] Mr. Toole was an electrician. And he had gotten a fence charger like you use for cattle and cows and that kind of thing. Well, Mr. Toole tinkered with that thing, and he got more juice out of it than it was set to give. And so, they didn't—he had just posted a warning sign. After we got broken into, Mr. Toole said, "I can fix that!" [Laughs] Brought one over for us. Well, at the time, there had been wooden doors at the back of the building, but I forgot when it was done, but somebody had put sheet metal over it to strengthen it up. And so, Mr. Toole said, "Just plug this in every night. You aren't going to have any problems."

Well, after a month or so, it had rained one night. And next day, it had dried off, cleared up. But at the back of that building had been loading docks. And so, they had built these steps and this brick platform—I guess it was about fourteen by fourteen wide, and bricks coming up next to the building—[2:00:00] that we used to bring supplies in and out of the back. Well, on the —when it rained, you know, plenty of places, it just leaves a puddle. Well, it had rained so much that there was this big puddle back there, and nobody thought anything of it, because it's going to dry out in a little bit.

But we came in the next day, the second day after it rained. And, you know, when you come in, you come in and look toward the back as you're turning on lights and see that you've got a little more light coming in in-between the doors. Well, somebody had taken a metal pipe, and they were going to push it in. They got it pushed in-between the doors, and then, they were going to leverage it open. Well, evidently, they got the pipe in with a hard hit, and then came back and grabbed the pipe as they're standing in that puddle of water. And the fence charger pulsed about every fifteen or twenty seconds, came on. And we turned it off and said, "Good grief! Somebody was trying to come in!"

And so, I had to go next door to tell Mr. Toole, because, you know, we didn't know whether or not it had worked. Well, after he came over, and we had opened the door, and there was the pole, Mr. Toole said "Yeah! It worked! It worked!" And we happened to look out off this loading dock. There was about—it was almost ten feet off the ground. Well, there was a gravel driveway in the back, and when you looked out there, you could see where evidently somebody had landed on their back.

JG: Oh, my God!

KE: Out there in the gravel.

JG: So, the charge threw them?

KE: [Laughs] Threw them off that [edge].

JG: Wow!

KE: And we had it posted: Electricity. Do not come in.

JG: I guess [they didn't come in].

KE: Did not come in. But after that, they were going in and out of those open buildings. And then, I think, even then, on the other side of Mr. Toole used to be a theater. I forgot the theater's name, because I used to go to the Regal that was in the next block down on Pettigrew Street, that was down near the Biltmore Hotel. But they had tried to make this a movie theater, and then, when that went out of business, they wanted to make it a performance hall.

JG: Oh, yeah, I've seen ads for that. I can't remember the name of it.

KE: Yeah. But then, that had just closed, and so there was nothing in there. But it got everybody out of that building, and so, they were able to go ahead and finish off, at least dealing with the land down there.

But that was in January of '79, and then, we spent I think about six or eight weeks over on North Mangum Street in Mr. Alex Rivera's photo place over there. He had an office area, office, and where sometimes he would do photographs, and then [2:05:00] in the back was his darkroom area. And so, Mr. Rivera came up while we were out there, trying to figure out what to do with the fire. He said, "Vivian, where are you going to go?" She said, "Well, I don't know." He said, "Well, are you still going to try to keep it going?" He said, "Yeah!" He took the key off his keyring and said, "Here. You can use my place. By the time you get over there, I'll just move everything into the back."

JG: Wow.

KE: And, I mean, that was it.

JG: So, the printing [ ] was not damaged?

KE: Well, we weren't printing then on the location. We had been printed by Hinton Press up in Mebane at the time. So, everything that we were doing was just preparation down there. But we stayed over there about six weeks.

And this had been the Urban Renewal building. And so, [sighs] I think they built it first for Scarborough and Hargett, and Scarborough and Hargett stayed here, I think, a couple of years while they were getting their new place down on, where it used to be on South Roxboro, up and done. And then, when they moved out, Urban Renewal came in, or moved back in. And they stayed in here until they were just about finished with everybody. And so, it was just vacant. And so, since we were still operating, they just put us and E.N. Toole in here.

JG: Okay!

KE: Alright.

JG: Do you have any final—well, I guess, just to conclude, what would you say is, I guess, the legacy of the *Carolina Times*, from the time your grandfather ran the paper to your mother, and now to yourself?

KE: The legacy is in the motto, "The truth unbridled." And I'll give you a copy of the creed for the newspaper. But what it talks about in that creed is we're going to keep our skirts clean, we're not going to bow to the gods of gold and silver, we're not going to be bought and sell our soul to anybody, and we're going to keep our face toward the enemy and we're going to fight as long as this paper is open. And it says in the creed if

you—*you* have to do that, because even the most unlearned man will know when you have sold out. You can try to say that you haven't and all that, but they will know.

And that—I think it was in 1992 when one of the last older subscribers called to ask, "Who do we need to vote for?" Because voting was always precious. And he came up with the saying, [2:10:00] "A voteless people is a hopeless people." And—

JG: Was that your grandfather that came up with that expression?

KE:Yeah. And the NAACP got ahold of it, which was fine, because he was a NAACP man. But when the Durham Committee, after they'd have Get Out the Vote efforts, they used to come down and meet upstairs at the *Carolina Times* down on Pettigrew Street. And the workers would be served hot dogs and an evening meal while everybody was waiting for the returns to come in. Because a lot of times people would call the paper, and we'd make a list of people who called and their address and their precinct, and cars—many used to be provided by funeral directors; they would, in essence, rent them out to the Durham Committee—and cabs and that kind of thing, and people would go and get people and take them to the polls to vote.

JG: So, this was the headquarters for that?

KE: This was the headquarters, because, well, Grandpa was a founder of the Durham Committee.

JG: Right.

KE: And getting out the vote was paramount.

JG: What period of time did that continue into? Did that continue into the seventies?

KE: People would still—I think the last time the Durham Committee came down here, it was—might have been ’79, ’80.

JG: In terms of getting people rides and stuff like that?

KE: Well, that kind of—we didn’t become the only place. That started being taken over by the Durham Committee, and they had their own office, and the NAACP. But people also knew that if they called the *Carolina Times*, we would relay that to one of them. But that the workers were still gathering after the polls closed down at the *Carolina Times*, I think it was 1980.

But I think the legacy is that we try to keep the columns open for different views. If you don’t like something that we have done, we’ll be glad to put it in the paper. If you want to say something about somebody else, as long as we don’t consider it slander or libelous, and it stays on the issue and it stays on the high level, then we will publish it. And that’s what the columns are for.

And the thing that I’m proud and really glad about is that I’ve stayed healthy enough and been able to continue it long enough, so that a different generation gets to know something about who he was, and—who he was, but what he stood for, and that the fight goes on and that this is what we need to do. And if it’s anything I can do to keep the columns open until, you know, that comes to an end, well, then I think I can feel satisfied that I gave it everything I could. [2:15:00] I tried to make it better. I tried to do as many things as possible to stay to that creed, because, I mean, I got it drilled into me from a child: “Whatever you do, you don’t sell your soul, because that’s the only thing you’ve got! You come into this world with nothing, and it is certain you will *leave* with nothing.

And the only thing you've got is your soul, and once you sell it, you ain't got nothing else!"

And he used to talk about how, not only do some people sell their soul, but they sell it cheap! And so, that's that.

Let me see if I can find this creed, and I'll print it out for you.

JG: Okay. Well, thanks very much. I appreciate it, the interview.

KE: Alright. Thank you.

JG: I'll turn that off.

KE: Alright.

[Recording ends at 2:16:06]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Sally C. Council