

Transcript – Robert Morris Cunningham

Interviewee: Robert Morris Cunningham

Interviewer: Elizabeth Gritter

Interview Date: October 16, 2004

Location: Louisville, Kentucky

Length: 2 cassettes, approx. 1 hour and 45 min.

Notes on Transcript: Future researchers should review parts of this transcript against the tape. The transcript also could use some additional editing. I was not able to do so because of time constraints. – Elizabeth Gritter, editor of this transcript.

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

ELIZABETH GRITTER: Elizabeth Gritter interviewing Bob Cunningham in Louisville, Kentucky on October 16, 2004. And your educational experience?

BOB CUNNINGHAM: High school.

EG: High school. What high school did you go to?

BC: Central High School here.

EG: Oh, okay. Yeah, I've heard quite a bit about Central doing this research.

BC: Yeah, historical black school.

EG: Yeah, un-huh.

BC: I came out in 1954. Matter of fact, I quit, which was one of the reasons why I came out late. I quit school in senior year.

EG: Oh, so you dropped out your senior year?

BC: Yeah.

EC: Okay.

EG: Oh, okay, sure.

BC: So I did six years in all.

EG: Wow, wow, from like '57 to '63?

BC: Yeah, right, un-huh.

EG: And you were in California in that?

BC: Yes, I took my basic training in Fort Knox. Went from Fort Knox to Fort Wood, Missouri, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. And from there I went to Fort Carson, Colorado and then to California and that's where I did the rest of my time. Was in California until I got out in '57.

EG: Where in California were you?

BC: Well, I was at Fort Ord, which was right, not that far from--. I spent a lot of time in San Francisco because I wasn't too far away from San Francisco.

EG: Yeah, might as well.

BC: Right, right. But the majority of my time, as I say, was spent in California. I never went overseas.

EG: Okay.

BC: When I got out, I got out from California. I was in California at the time.

EG: And did you come back to Louisville?

BC: Yes, uh-huh, and I've been back since that time.

EG: Since '59 or '63?

BC: Yeah, well, since '59.

EG: Fifty-nine, okay, sure, sure. And I saw from here in terms of occupational experience?

EG: And with International Harvester, what did you do for them?

BC: I worked in the foundry and I wasn't there but maybe a couple of years before I was drafted in the military you see.

EG: After you got done with high school so?

BC: Right, un-huh, right, after high school I went there and then I was drafted from there into the military.

EG: Well, I think that takes care of all the biographical information I need. I have questions mainly about busing and your work with HIGH and so forth, but some initially--. We already went through a lot of these on your background and childhood, and then also some on your activism with Kentucky Alliance and other things you did aside from your work with school desegregation. Did you move to Louisville then when you were five, did you say?

BC: Yes. I was raised by an aunt. My mother died when I was five months old. My father wasn't around and I was raised by an aunt who just took me over and raised me, okay. And she just died about fifteen years ago. And so we left Cadiz and came here. Well, we went to Paducah first, which is another small town in Kentucky, but we came to Louisville around the 40s, around the mid-40s I would say, okay. So I was raised up and went to school here in Louisville. And as I say again, I was raised by an aunt, who was my mother's sister. During that time it wasn't where you went and adopted a child. The child just belonged to you. If you passed away I took your child and became my child. Well, my aunt never had children of her own. So she was like my mother, you know. I never knew my mother but I know my mother couldn't have been more of a mother than my aunt

out in the yard working with the flowers or something so I asked her did she mind me taking a picture of the house. She said no, not at all, not at all. So I told her the story of my coming back after sixty-five or fifty-five years, sixty-five years and I used to be in that house. You used to be in this house, I said yes. My aunt worked. She took care of this house and there were times when she brought me here. She said my God, let me call my husband. So she called her husband outside in the house and they came out and we stood and talked and they almost cried, you know. I mean, well, it's quite a story, you know, that I as a little boy used to be in that house where I couldn't live or couldn't sleep but I could be there with my aunt while she worked there. You know what I mean? And there is--I know I'm using up all your paper--in Cadiz in Trigg County annually a ham festival, you know, where they have the biggest ham in Kentucky or whatever, and people come. Well, it was a week or so away and I didn't get to go back--I wasn't planning on going back anyway,--but what they told me was please come back at that time. Now here is a house that I wouldn't have been that welcomed to the family as a child. But to show you how--. See these are young people. These are young white folks.

EG: And they're white people?

BC: Young white folks, oh yeah, who I was so welcome there now, you know. So I'm just saying obviously we as a nation, we as a society have changed a lot. And I felt very good there. As a child I felt good there because I didn't know all of the things that were going on, you know, because it was just a big pretty house to me when I was a baby. But as I grew older I understood what that house meant, what it represented, what it was to my aunt to take care of it and she was making two dollars

Because it was very easy for me as a young boy to think that all white people were super smart [because] I never went to school with white kids. There wasn't school desegregation when I was here when I was going to school. But I know when my children and my grandchildren began to go to school with white kids it was if no, no, no, there are some smart [ones] but there are some that copy off of me, you know. So I got an awakening. But see we believed some of the stereotypes ourselves, you know, the comfortable feeling that I'm sure many whites got for stereotyping black people. I hope I'm not painting a picture of evil white folks. I don't mean that at all. I just mean I can understand as to how your fears can keep you maybe degrading someone else, imagining that they are something that you must fear, same way we think right now of people on the moon, people on Mars. If they're there they have to be more powerful than us and more violent than us. Why can't we think that [they] may be better people than us, I mean if they're there, you know, better beings, is what I'm saying. I know I'm running away again. Go ahead.

EG: Well, what you are saying is so rich it's like I could go off in totally different angles. I did want to ask you about what it was like being in a segregated school system.

BC: I think we didn't know. I knew it was segregated because we had books that would have names in the books. Our books were handed down from the white school system, okay. In other words, the books that white kids had last year we got maybe next year. And John Jones', who was white, name would be in my book maybe with three or four pages torn out. That's the books I got you know. So we knew that. But there was a feeling of solidarity that was within the black school that

although we knew that we went to an inferior school system. We understood that because there were those of us who knew that--which was one of the very reasons for people like myself to push for integrated schools. I didn't have anything against going to school with white people but I also felt like that unfortunately it's a little difficult for white people even today to be in a setting of black people and not feel superior, not want to run things, not want to be the boss. But that comes with racism. That comes with the way they have been taught, so I understand that. So that was one of the things that I think I felt even at that time. But let me say again, [about] the black community -- we may not have had that state of arts gymnasium or science center or whatever, but we had some more things that were so close to us [that] we felt like was worth preserving. So that's why some of us weren't too quick to run to the majority white schools.

EG: What sort of things were worth preserving that you--. What are some examples?

BC: Well, I hate to say what the cliché is today, "it's a black thing and you wouldn't understand it," but I don't want to say it like that. But living the black experience has placed something-- and I'm sure that's true with other people, whether they're Jewish or whomever--there's an experience that you have with people that you know and that are brothers and sisters of yours that other people probably just wouldn't quite understand. And it's not racism, as I say again, I don't think it's because those people are inferior or superior than us, it just is something we have that is a part of the culture that has been instilled into us due to the black experience, due to the everyday life we live, you see. So those were some of the

this street, on both sides of the street, and just imagine, close your eyes and just imagine both sides of the street as far as you can see being black businesses." He looked at me like I must be crazy, what. I said, "That's the way it was when I was young." Sure it was a mom and pop store, but it was run by black people. Now that doesn't mean we don't want to buy anything by white people but it makes young black people understand that we can do that too, you see. I walk into a school now -- and I'm called to schools fairly regularly--and there's almost no black teachers there. I'm not saying who was responsible for that but I know what that can do to a black child. When I was coming up all the teachers in the school were black so nobody could tell me I couldn't become a teacher, you see. That has made a difference, a great difference. Now I'm not painting a picture of it being all bad because I don't think it had been. I think there's a lot of good things that have come from it. As I said before, getting to know each other, getting to understand one another, you know, all of that has been good. But there has been a lot of losses. I don't know what the loss in the majority community, I not sure what their loss [there] has been if any but I do know in the black community [there] has been loss of things that black kids probably don't even realize because they weren't here, they didn't see it. I'm often called by young black folk to talk about the early black community because they know nothing about the vibrancy that was there. Oh, they hear about the music and maybe, you know what I mean, a few other things, but they don't know about what was there that was so rich, the culture that was so rich that was there, that we were proud of, you know. And by not knowing anything about it they don't prolong it or it doesn't continue.

EG: You were telling me before I turned on the tape that you saw your work with [Parents for Quality Education] was preserving the cultural experience for blacks when they got into these white schools. How were you able to or how did you try to do that?

BC: Well, I felt like that black kids should first understand that they are now going into a setting where they are "minority." Don't carry in with you the I am somebody feeling. In other words, don't allow stereotypes to make you feel like that you are inferior and it's very easy to do that. It's very easy to. Centuries of stereotypes can make you feel very inferior. When all at once you get into a classroom and you find out that you've been talking for six years but now they tell you, you don't talk right or they laugh at the way you say something, okay, so that is what I was frightened of, the fact that they would be lost there and throw the pen down. And that's what happened in many senses. Either assimilate and become me, as I said before, and I think that's what they were saying. They didn't understand that it wasn't about--. We were talking about equality, you know, not sameness, not becoming, not equal sameness but equality in education and that's what we were talking about. And at that time black and poor people were not getting quality in education. That's why I said earlier that I think that racism was used to keep--. I've often wondered what would have happened if white folk, I mean poor white folk, would have woke up and said, "You know what, you have a point there. We do need better education, you know, because we don't get it either." Okay, and join hands. But we couldn't do that and I think the powers that be are maybe a little paranoid but the powers that be I think used that in order to suppress both of us. So I was afraid

up, I mean we're going back a long ways, but when I came up everything from the Bible in my house was a white face. I didn't hate white folks but I would love to have seen--. It's hard for me to believe there wasn't a few little black angels around somewhere. You know what I mean? So that's what I knew would happen to black children: it would reinforce that feeling of inferiority when they found out that they didn't talk quite right or didn't do this quite right and they would be lost. And again, I think in many ways that happened. I don't think it was the intent. I think it wasn't the intent of anybody sitting over in a corner saying let's do that. I do think that school desegregation or busing, if we want to call it that, was a good intention. Was an intention, let me say it this way, it was a remedy. I think it was supposed to have been a remedy for something that was terrible, which was school segregation. I just think it didn't work well because there were those that didn't see the value of it or didn't help it to work well, including some of the elected officials at that time that were here and some of the people whose voices could have meant something. It became a political football in a lot of ways and they used it as that too. So I hope I answered you.

EG: Oh, absolutely. If you would talk more about what you did with [Parents for Quality Education.] You said you founded that organization?

BC: Yeah, yeah. Well, I guess what I and maybe the name of the organization may have not fit what it was designed to do, I felt like again that parents and people within the African American community in particular, needed to really look at this because there were those people and I'm talking about black people, who felt like that things will be fine now because they'll be going to good schools. I don't think

number of black kids sitting in the classroom, by and large are white schools because they teach the white idea. It's some different now and I'm not in school every day today so I don't know. I must say that I'm off the scene so everything that I'm saying is not up to date because I'm an old guy who's not around schools as I was at one time so I don't want to tell you that things are like they were thirty years ago. I'm sure they're not. But as I said, I felt like that as long as the school continues to teach the "white" or "European" idea it's a white school. You know, black people can say, well, I went to a black school. Well, no, as long as those schools have nothing telling you anything about yourself or about your people or about who you are, about your own history, then to me it's not a black school. And I don't mean that that shouldn't be taught to white kids, you know. I have spoken even recently in schools that were predominately white, even some that were super predominately white, and I'm talking about Country Day and some of those private schools, and these white kids are on the ends of their seats. Why? Because I think they want to hear that. But see I don't think in the past white kids, the majority of white kids, and that's true of white people probably, never felt as though it was something that I needed to know. Why does it affect me? It doesn't. But I think that attitude is one of the reasons why school desegregation here didn't go near as well as I would have liked to have seen.

EG: You mentioned earlier that you were growing up with these feelings of inferiority and you said something about thinking that all white people are super smart. Do you think that that was something that was dispelled when black students

should I mention this to her? But I do because I think it's something she should know about.

But to answer your question, I do think that a lot of it was dispelled when they began to know one another, when they began to see each other. I was I guess to a lot of people, I never called myself, a black radical, and they probably still call me that. I think to me they're compliments, you know. I'm called Communist. I'm called all those names but I like it. Yeah, that's me. (Laughter) But I guess I'm [trying] to say, well, when she graduated from high school her date to the prom was a white boy, you know. So I guess what I'm saying to say things have changed a lot, it has. I think people like me got to see that change but still preserve that history, as you're doing, you know. Because I think there are sometimes people would say well, why don't we just stop talking about that because it's gone. And I'm sure people tell you that. But I'm glad to talk to people like yourself because I think you along with myself and what you're doing feels like it's worth preserving. It's worth us knowing what happened then.

EG: One of the things we talked about when preparing for this project is looking at what we mean by the terms desegregation and what we mean by integration and was wondering what your opinion of that was. You've talked about the drawbacks of desegregation. How would it have been different if it had been integrated?

BC: How would?

EG: I'm a little vague here. I guess how would you define desegregation versus how you would define integration or how could it have gone--. Wwhat would

BC: ..to where people think, well, you must have been brainwashed while you were there and it could have been that I didn't see what I was, maybe I was making up these things. But I guess what I'm saying, as I said, I went to daycare centers where I saw a kid play with a toy a while and then give it to the other kid, okay. I think they learned sharing at a very early age. So I'm saying that to say I think these are things that can be incorporated into a system like we live in and I think the best place to do it is in school. I was told, and I could be wrong, but I was told this: that in the Cuban school system many times the students are ranked according to the students around them. In other words, I sit beside you and I made a D and you make straight A's. When it comes time to grade they ask you, what did you do about Bob. Did you know that Bob was, did you help him. Now in our school system we know you'd better not do that. In other words, you're going to help Elizabeth. Well, Bob, we're taking an A away from you. You're not supposed to help her. So I guess what I'm saying is I think a school system that starts that at a very early age with that compassion for people, you know, will learn to disregard color and other things. And I think we will begin to come up with that. Now there are people, as I say, that don't believe it. I had people that, you know, even when I went to Cuba and when I was on my way--. The first thing they'd tell me [was] you better watch yourself down there, you'll end up in one of those jails. I found again and I could have been hoodwinked, but I found a people who were I thought--. For instance, the transit system there in Havana. And I don't know if you've been to Cuba or not but at the time it was so poor -- maybe seventy-five people on a bus that's supposed to hold forty people. And the people would be [pressed together]. Do you think there was

would have brought about people probably like you are who see people and feel a part of a society and that as King used to say, we are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. We're tied in the same garment of destiny and what affects one of us directly affects all of us indirectly. I think that we would have brought up people who felt that way. And I'm not saying we don't have a lot of people that feel that way. We do. I guess one of the things that has kept me as young as I am I'm with young people a lot. It's helped me. So that's why some people say you're not seventy. Oh, yes I am. Because I talk like Tupac Shakur don't mean I'm not seventy years old. But I guess what I'm saying is we'd have had more of that. I've spoken, as I've said before, in upper middle class private schools where little white girls and little white boys, and I'm talking about teenagers, have come up with tears in their eyes. And it wasn't no bullshit. It was because they felt, sorry, they felt something, that they wanted to be a part of something that was doing right. Not necessarily a spiritual or religious thing, they wanted to be a part. I think we all, as people I think all of us have some--. I haven't given up on the redemption of humankind. I think all of us are good. Some of us just react to bad information so we do bad things because we get informed wrongly. So I feel again that if we had pursued () integration we would have had a more "educated society" with people helping one another, with people not being afraid, with people not scorning those people who are uneducated, with people knowing that we are to help one another. I think that we would see the results now. Again, I may have stars in my eyes and sound like that I'm looking at something that couldn't be, but that's the way I feel. And again I feel as though it would have worked if there hadn't been those who were

connection as humans and we can find that when we begin to relate to one another with respect.

I noticed for instance, one of the things that -- maybe this is true across the world -- but music can bring people together. I don't know why that is but [it] cross[es] most lines. I was in Copenhagen a few years ago on a boxing thing. It wasn't about this. But what I guess I'm saying is jazz in Copenhagen, you know, the black jazz players and the youngsters from there, I mean what I guess I'm saying it brought us together without thinking about who's black, who's white or any of that. So there are things that bring us together and I thought if we taught more of that, you know. I've always thought and this may be paranoia that the fears that they place to keep us apart is something that is designed. Racism has often been used. As I say, I have always thought that racism, has been brought about because of the conditioning of white minds. I think there are good white people, who would have fought slavery tooth and nail if they hadn't been conditioned themselves, if they hadn't been told the lies about, you know, me. Let me say this too: Many people have always claimed that -- Anne [Braden] says this all the time -- I'm able to talk to white people probably better than anybody. I'm talking about poor white people. I'm talking about poor white people that--. For instance, when I was with the water company, I talked to poor white folks who have been taught all their lives to hate black people. They didn't know why, okay. But now here's what I'm saying. These guys ended up my best friends. These are guys that ended up running me for the union. These guys, you know, these same guys and I think it's because once they're told the truth, once they are able to really think about, you know. And I'd say things like: if you

we'll give you an A. In other words, don't think out anything yourself. Remember what I as a professor told you and at the end of the month, if you still remember it and write it down, I'll give you an A. Well hell, I mean you're not being educated, you're being trained. They've often said that it's like a dog, that you can train a dog but you can't train a cat. And many people think it's because cats are dumb, you know. Cats are not too smart. They're not as smart as dogs. You can take a stick and say, "Come here, Rover." Throw the stick and here he goes. But if you do that with a cat, a cat looks at you like, "Hell, go get your own stick." So a cat is smart. So I guess what I'm saying is if we're talking about educating people for real, then (brief interruption). I'll tell you what, don't let me run away. You just go ahead and ask me.

EG: Well, how would you instill within children at a young age what you've been talking about, this ideology that we're all interconnected and we're all one and a blow to one is a blow to all? How would you do that?

BC: How would I do that with?

EG: In the educational system.

BC: Oh, well, as I said before, I think the lack of a multi-cultural or a black study within the school has hurt. First of all I think we have to realize that it's hurt all the children there to not know and to not really understand one another. For instance, my daughter when she was last year of high school, which was last year, she took maybe for two years, a black history course, that was an elective. Take it if you want to. If you didn't, you didn't have to. So she and about six other students out of the whole school took it, okay, but it was taught by a white guy, who was a

the freedom of the people who own the press. And that to me is true. But I think some of us don't quite understand that, say, the corporations of this country today, for instance. They've got their hands in some of everything as we know, you know. Has much more power over everyday living than we know. I don't think that there's a few people in integral spots around the country that controls everything. I guess I'm not saying that. But I guess the wealthy, you can call them that, still controls the poor in many ways. I know this is not a good explanation. I can't explain it really, you know, but I guess I still feel like that people who rise up like a Martin King or many others, I don't think it's just coincidentally that they are mashed up or swept away, you know. I think it's something or somebody or a segment of this society who wants to make sure that [happens.] Some people who are part of that I think may be unwittingly, may not even know, not even realize, that they are a part of [it]. Somebody said if the wealthy could live more simply then [the] poor could simply live. I think it's designed by us being taught to do something at a very early age in school, again, get it for yourself, you know. If Johnny doesn't get his he's a dooper or get over in the corner and get a dunce cap on your head, you know. I think, for instance, what I saw at one time as compassion for the poor has now turned into contempt for the poor. I think it may have come through the Reagan period. What I mean is there was a time when I saw--. I happened to come up through the 60s so I saw young kids talking about really freeing this country. And then I began to realize that they did them the same way, white kids who they called hippies became America's niggers. They talked about them the same way they talked about me. So I guess it's one of the reasons I identified with them because I saw them talking

I guess that I felt as though that I could align with white people, that there were white people that were not about black and white but was looking at what was wrong and right and that I could align with white people who understood the fight and the struggle for justice. It's all of our struggle. I think it was the hippies who everybody, not everybody, but who many people hated who I felt as though were some of the super people I ever seen and I think we were on our way to becoming that nation that most of us wanted to see at that time. And as Anne [Braden] will tell you probably, she usually often says that it was murdered rather than died. It didn't die. It was killed.

EG: When do you see it being murdered, changing from compassion to contempt?

BC: When or how?

EG: Both ways.

BC: Well, I think of things we're finding out now that the FBI did. The people who went to prison -- some of them are still there that we didn't even know. When we found out some of the things that J. Edgar Hoover did to Martin King and other people and I think there were a lot of things that we found out that we didn't know about. We trusted so much. We'd been taught that way to trust our government so much. We didn't think that they would do these kinds of things. And I think when we found out that that movement was something that many felt like had to be squashed. When Dr. King talked about the second march on Washington he was talking about poor people. And when you start to talking about poor people in America we're talking about more white people than black people although the

quality education who were fighting me because I was asking for it, who should have been joining hands with me and saying, "Hell yeah, we need it and we need it together and we can get it if we join forces." So it's hard for me to think again that there's not somebody at that time who was keeping us from uniting with one another and keeping that divide and conquer going on.

EG: You've mentioned Martin Luther King, Jr. and freedom summer. I was wondering how influenced you were by [the] civil rights movement of the 50s and 60s and black power movement and when your activism really began?

BC: Well, let me say, I wasn't that involved during that particular period. I got involved with an organization here called Black Workers Coalition and I was one of the founders or early people who was part of that organization. And they were an organization who was dealing primarily with jobs, upgrading, talking with companies about hiring black folks and at the same time monitoring complaints by black folks on jobs as far as, as I say, upgrading or whatever. So that kind of threw me into, I joined that organization and that kind of opened my eyes to the other things that were happening. So that was my first really venture into any kind of activism and I guess we're talking about the mid-60s. And I guess I'm saying that I was aware of what was going on, I mean I saw it just like everybody else but I didn't quite feel like I was that involved until I began to work at Workers Coalition and began to see how jobs were. For instance, down in the West End, the west side of Louisville is now predominately black and the further east you go the whiter and the richer it gets, okay. So if you went here and go west, that was at one time [the] white community. And it changed over the years. You know, when a black moves in then

what I'm saying, those fears played a great part in our not coming together and making this what it could have and should have been.

EG: This ideology of interconnectness and as you said before, a blow to one is a blow to all, do you see that as infusing all of your activism? I noticed like with the Kentucky Alliance that was one of the statements about the mission of that, was to build this majority and that shows that exactly what you've been describing, that racism hurts all of us, not just black people.

BC: Un-huh, un-huh. Well, with the Alliance in particular we have always consciously made sure our organization, the board is diverse. We've always done that, okay. As I said earlier, I've always felt like that when the truth is told to people, particularly when they find out that they have not been told the truth all the time, it really makes them wake up and stand up. And I do feel like that our lives are so in sync and so connected until whether we're able to see it or not, until we treat that segment of people right over there, we're not going to be able to live well ourselves. We may feel as though we are and I think we can look at that on a world plane or we can look at that--. Until those little barefoot brown people around the world are not going to sit down and roll over and play dead, okay, until you begin to acknowledge them as people, as whole people. So I think that's true in a smaller setting here, you know, whether it be gay people or whether it be women or whether it be old people or whomever. So if we know that, if we can see that, [but] it's difficult for us to see that because we're told something different from that all the time. As I say again, that contempt that we have for those who don't make it.

welcome anyway, but the fact that she was drummed out of school almost because of her wanting to do that. In other words, if you want to be a doctor you should be looking at one of the most exclusive counties in the country to go to, not Appalachia, you know, and that she because of her views and because of her vision was somewhat drummed out of school. Now I can believe it because I believe her. So I guess what I'm saying is we don't teach that. We don't teach it to our children I don't think. I don't think we teach it in school. We don't even teach it in church. It's about "me" rather than "we." We have too many labels that separates us and I think again I feel as though school could do a lot about that if school wasn't in the hand of bureaucracy also, if schools wasn't in the hands of the controlling people also. As I say, I don't think schools and churches and other institutions are about changing society.

EG: You were founder of the Kentucky Alliance? Were you the founder or the first chair?

BC: I was the first chair, yeah.

EG: Are you still chair of the Kentucky [Alliance]?

BC: No, no, I'm still on the board.

EG: Okay, you're on the board, okay, yeah.

BC: No, I was a chair. Well, I've been chair twice but I'm getting tired at my age, you know. But the organization, which I'm sure if you ever talk to Anne, will tell you much more about it, she's been there longer than myself, I mean longer, affiliated with the Alliance, the national organization and it was formed around the Angela Davis case because Angela, who felt as though that people should be free to

area of the struggle, then I began to look into the discrimination of women or, you know--. I am for instance here and I say it with pride, I'm one of the I guess they call me, some people behind my back call me the "poster boy of the gay liberation," I mean the movement here because I speak for them all the time. That's a little strange to a lot of people here that a black guy, a black straight guy, would be talking up for gay people, you know. Well, I've always done it and I do it publicly and I've done it at the expense of being put down by some of the preachers and other people, you know. I don't care about that. It doesn't bother me. But so I guess I felt as though that [blacks weren't] the only people being discriminated and that I should be playing a role in trying to free--. I wasn't free until all people are free and injustice to one is an injustice to all. I began to see that clearly and began to understand if I thought it was okay to discriminate against gay people then I should be able to accept discrimination of black people. Why should I be out just marching and you're being done the same way and I say nothing about it? So I think it won me more friends than enemies. I mean the enemies were people who were afraid to do what I do. They were afraid to speak out, you know, and I've done it in hearings and other places and I speak and I, again, am called often times to gay functions to speak to those people who are not gay who are ministers and others. And I have no problem, as I say, with doing it, particularly in the black community because I hate to admit that there's homophobia in the black community but it is, particularly in church and that's the worst place for it to be. But I, I better let you go.

EG: Well, you mentioned too with gay rights, has that been recent or have you been doing that for a long time or more so recently?

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

BEGINNING OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

BC: I guess at a very early age I understood the experience of women because, as I told you, I was raised by a little aunt. There was no man in the house and so I understood the power, the strength, the concern, and the compassion that women had. So that made me in becoming a man not afraid of women, not afraid of the power of women, and definitely not degrading them knowing that I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for women. Matter of fact, let me go back a minute. I at the age of about a year and a half, my aunt at that time was married and her husband, where he worked he came home with a bottle of insecticide for bugs or whatever. He had it in a soft drink bottle and placed it on the floor somewhere in the house. We had a little small house, okay. My crawling around on the floor at a year, maybe a year old, got the bottle and drank it. All at once -- I'm told by my aunt -- I went into convulsions and my eyes just went back in my head and I went out of it. Now I'm out. I mean I'm just dead or she thinks I'm dead. She doesn't know what to do. She just panicked. She doesn't know what to do. Now I'm in Cadiz, Kentucky as I said. If there's a doctor around he's white and he probably wouldn't come in the middle of the night to see a black boy anyway, okay, maybe not. However, here's what she did. She went down the road, which was from here a hundred yards away, and called a lady we used to call Cuddin Addie, a little bitty lady about that tall, and I can remember her, who had a hump in her back. Called her up to the house and told her please do something. Cuddin Addie got what they called some lard that you cook with, that people used to cook with, stirred it up with some milk, held my nose and

is. I don't think it's intentional that the gay community don't recruit more black folks because there are definitely a lot of black gay people, you know what I mean. But again I happen to meet a whole lot of women within the social justice movement so again I felt obligated and that it was the right thing for me to do for me to be a part of the women's movement. I'm friends with many people who were in that movement but it's never been as strong and as visible as the movement for social justice, the black movement let's say, and the gay movement. The women's movement here has never been quite that. But yeah, I've been called many times to speak to women and it's mainly because of my, again, feeling that, as that say, a man of quality doesn't fear women for equality. So yeah, I very much link to the women's movement.

EG: You've been wonderful. I have two more questions. One is I understand that now, well, recently there was the suit the black parents brought to get their kids into Central and then now that there's I understand ongoing a suit by white parents and [I'm] wondering what the community response has been to those suits?

BC: Well, I'll tell you what, I must admit, as I said earlier, that I haven't been that close recently so I can't quite comment truthfully on that particular case. I will say that there are many folk who because Central was that black school-- Central at one time was the only black high school. I'm sure you already know that. So all black folks in this city went to Central. There were no others. We couldn't go to any other. So because of that there has always been that kinship to Central to most black folks whether they went to Central or not. Central still to them is *our* school and now Central is predominately white, you see. So I think that was one of the

let me say this. Busing, the busing part, the transportation has been a helluva inconvenience for a lot of people, even for myself. So because I was one of the people early on who was fighting against [segregation]. I was for integration. I have had some second thoughts about the transportation part of it. If you see these kids getting on the bus at four-thirty, five o'clock in the morning it blows your mind really, you know, when you think how far they have to go past fifteen schools to get to this school over here. But as I said before, I think it was meant to be a remedy for a very terrible thing that was going on. So I think at that time it probably was the only thing that could be done and many of us suffered from it but in many ways I can say that it was worth it. I can say it was worth it. And there again, there are things. You're not going to get too much without sacrificing something I'm sure. So the black community, I must say, where I live has sacrificed a lot but in sacrificing I also think it has gained a lot.

EG: How is it worth it? Why was it worth it?

BC: Why?

EG: Why was it worth it? What were the gains?

BC: Well, I think there's a lot of, and this may not mean that much, but there's a lot of personal relations, for instance, that have been made. There's a lot of white folks now and a lot of black folks that are with one another because they met in school that wouldn't have met. Where would they have met, church? They don't go to church together. Church is not nearly as integrated as school is. So I think it has brought that. I think that's part of it and as we said earlier, knowing one another I think has helped a lot. Those are the positive sides of it. When I see black kids and

us not to take advantage of that, and I'm not saying we're not, I'm saying that we have something that we should see and realize what we really could be with the nationalities and different religions and with so many different people here. Difference is divine, not something to be frightened of, you know. If we could just really recognize that, recognize the fact that with all of the different people here, look what we could do if we all could begin to recognize one another and come together and get rid of some of those divisions, what we would be and could be as a nation, for the rest of the world. We're blessed, as I say again. Coming here I'm sure I drive for about fifteen minutes and I probably pass a Jewish synagogue, a Muslim mosque, a Christian church, you know what I mean, all of that, Catholic convent, everything on my way home when I leave here. And look what would happen if all of these people could really begin to acknowledge one another and tear down some of those barriers that we have that keeps us away from one another. It would be, I mean it's something that maybe I at seventy years old I guess you start thinking that way. Some seventy-year-old people begin to think that way. But I just see us not taking advantage of something that we may have that many nations don't have and that's that diversity that is here and that we may not be using it to the degree that we could.

I'm almost certain to believe that some of the way in which we now, I don't like "tolerate" but "accept" one another came out of our experience in school together. I mean really, in the city now I'm talking about. I think the patterns you're seeing now in housing where it's hard to find a community unless it's super rich in

accustomed to one another now and I think school had a lot to do with that because I don't know, again, of any other place including workplaces that has been more integrated -- some people would call it forced -- than school has been. So nothing has brought us together, you know, as much as school did. So for that I feel as though that's one of the reasons why we can take people better on our job or in our neighborhoods or in our church or wherever else because we went to, you know. My wife often says, "You know what? I bet you she went to school with blacks." I say, "What do you mean?" She says, "Look how friendly she is." You know what I'm saying? So I think that that might not be the way to think but often times that is true. The older people and I'm around older people, old as myself, who are white, still has a little hesitancy, not for meeting me but they've never been around black people, you see. And I can understand it. I've been around white people all my life. I had to be, you know. So I got that on them but I guess what I'm saying is you can tell just about those who have been in the company because they're comfortable. They're not afraid. They're not uptight or whatever, and it kind of shows. But that wouldn't have come about, as I say again, if white schools had been over there and black schools had been over here. We'd never have understood each other yet. So I'm saying that to say as tough as it has been in certain areas, it has been I think positive in some and that's part of it. At least it gets us, as I said, knowing one another and being able to understand one another better. And that's always good.

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

END OF INTERVIEW

TRANSCRIBED DECEMBER, 2004 BY CATHY MANN