

Interview
with
MARGIE ANN THOMPSON WORTHY

May 12, 2006

by Elizabeth Gritter

Transcribed by Laura Altizer

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

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Transcript – Margie Ann Worthy

Interviewee: Margie Ann Worthy
Interviewer: Elizabeth Gritter
Interview Date: May 12, 2006
Location: Charlotte NC, at her office
Interview note: See the life history chronology that Ms. Worthy prepared.

ELIZABETH GRITTER: And it is. So this is Elizabeth Gritter interviewing Margie Worthy on May 12th, 2006 in Charlotte, North Carolina at Johnson C. Smith University. I see from this great life history form that you filled out, which I encourage future researchers to look at that it looks like you began your involvement with labor unions when you were working with Continental General Tire.

MARGIE WORTHY: That's correct.

EG: I was wondering how you got started, or the story behind your starting that?

MW: Well, kind of short. I started working in 1988 at Continental General Tire, and we had someone come in from the union one day and just talk to everybody. The new hires, they'll talk to you, the company gave them an opportunity to talk to them and see if you're interested in joining the union. They'll tell you a little bit about it. I always believed in civil rights, human rights and everything else. That sounded like something I wanted to be involved in. So I said sure. I'll join. I'm glad I did because shortly after that, we went on strike. So I was a part of the first strike, which was 1989. They had a strike, and it didn't last, I think it lasted from September up until November or December or something like that. I've been in the union probably about a year or two, and they ask me to be a shop steward. A shop steward is a person that is like the lawyer for the people at work. If you have a problem with the supervisor or something at work and then you come and you tell me and I'm the first step. Then I go tell, what we had was a representative that worked on another shift, and I would tell them. Then they would go tell the head union person. But I was like the lawyer on my particular shift. I worked from twelve midnight until twelve the next day, Saturday and Sunday. From being a shop steward we got to travel and go different places and go to different classes, and I met a person there that belongs to the A. Philip Randolph Institute. From there

he said, "Well do you know about A. Philip Randolph?" I said, "No." I'm from South Carolina because I'd really never heard of it to be honest with you. I knew about the march on Washington and everything else, but I really never knew who was behind it. I'm thinking like everybody else, it was all Martin Luther King. So he told me, he said, "You need to join A. Philip Randolph Institute. We meet Saturday," blah, blah, blah. "Come out." I said, "Well, I have to be asleep on Saturday because I have to go to work at Saturday night. I have to leave at ten o'clock." He said, "Well, no. Just come out to the meeting. We'll keep it short. I just want to introduce you." So I did that and it was some older people involved in there. One lady said, "It's time for me to step down. You take over." So she asked me to be the secretary. So I started being the secretary of the A. Philip Randolph Institute the first year I joined, which was in the '90s, the early '90s. From there I went to be president, and I've been president for the last, oh gosh, since '94, '95 or something like that. Or '97, something like that. I get the years confused sometimes. But I've been president for a long time. It's time for me to step down and let somebody else do it too. But through the A. Philip Randolph Institute I've been able to travel a lot of places. Every year when we have the general election, we meet in Washington, DC. That's time to gear up and get everybody pumped up for general election. We have classes on how to register people, what to say. We're non-partisan so we can't talk to people about the candidates and things like that. We can talk about the issues. So we do that, and we come back. We take it to our church, take it to the community, take it to this organization, join other non-partisan organizations and do the best we can to get a good person that believes in civil rights, human rights and everything else elected. I've gone to Las Vegas. I've gone to DC. I've gone to New Orleans. I've gone to Saint Louis. One time I remember traveling twelve places in one year just going to different workshops and trying to learn all I could to bring it back to the community, to my church, to the kind of move the movement along, the civil rights movement. Because a lot of people think we have arrived, but we haven't. It's still prejudice out there on both sides. Still prejudice out there, and it's still hidden things out there that we don't see.

The young people are not as much involved in the movement as the older people because when they came to the table, everything was set. They were able to go to practically any restaurant they could afford to and eat. They could stay in any hotel. They could travel any mode, any way they could, and they don't understand the movement. That's one of the reasons I started a collegiate chapter of the A. Philip

Randolph Institute here on campus now to educate the young people. Each year when we have a conference, a national conference we try to take some of the youth from the community or from the college and train them so they can come back in other words and train other people and talk to their friends about how it used to be and how we still have to be on guard and how we still have to look out for each other and things of that nature.

EG: Sure. I was wondering too because I found out from talking to Mr. [Bill] Brawley this morning that the A. Philip Randolph Institute has been a presence in Charlotte before you arrived.

MW: Before I arrived.

EG: That Jim Lawrence was president of it.

MW: Jim Lawrence is the person that actually got me involved. He's deceased now. He was a good person. He's actually the one that got me involved in the A. Philip Randolph Institute. Nellie Stevenson, she was another one that got me involved in it, and Charles, I can't remember Charles' last name. But Charles, he was president at the time, and he was instrumental too in getting me involved in A. Philip Randolph Institute. But like I said Mr. Lawrence is passed on. Nellie Stevenson is still alive.

EG: Charles was the president before—

MW: He was the president.

EG: Before you were.

MW: Before I was, and before Charles there was Mr. Lawrence, Jim Lawrence.

EG: Do you, I'm curious about the history of the chapter. Do you know when it started and—

MW: I really don't. Charles might know or either Nellie might know. But I actually don't know, and they're not as active as they used to be. They don't attend the meetings and everything. So I don't know. I could make phone calls probably and find out. But I don't know the basic, how long it's been here, and perhaps I could ask somebody from state chapter because we have state chapters too, and we have one in Raleigh, North Carolina, and they probably have the history there.

EG: How many, I was wondering while you've been there, how many members have been involved?

MW: Well, it really fluctuates because we have community members, and we also have labor union members. Right now everybody that belongs to the Charlotte Labor Council or the Central Labor

body here in Charlotte is a member. So we probably have about twenty-five, thirty members or plus.

Everybody that's a delegate comes to the Labor Council meetings.

EG: Central Labor Council.

MW: Um hmm. Is also a member of the A. Philip Randolph Institute. So we have from twenty-five to thirty delegates at each meeting.

EG: Okay, with that. How often do you meet?

MW: We meet once a month.

EG: Once a month.

MW: We meet the third Thursday of each month at six-thirty prior to the Labor Council meeting.

EG: What have been some of the major issues that you've worked on while you've been involved with the union and—

MW: Involved in the union. We worked on the Guess Jeans. That's when we went to Las Vegas. We almost went to jail over that. We worked with, what was the name of that union. It's UNITE. It's UNITE here now, but it was UNITE, the needle trade people. They were against Guess Jeans because the youth labor and everything. They were paying them () Nike and people like that, they were paying them like fifty cents to a dollars to make them, but you know how high, how expensive Guess Jeans and Nike shoes are. So we got involved with that to help them with that. We almost went to jail. It was only twelve of us out there kind of handing out information and picketing at South Park Mall, and they sent three police cars out there to tell us we had to either disperse. They kept moving us. You can't be here. You can't be there. Finally sent the police and we just kind of gave up. We didn't give up on the project but we kind of gave up that day on the picketing because you can't do anything from the jailhouse.

Some of the other things we worked on, we worked with this organization called H.E.L.P, H-E-L-P, that's an acronym, Help Empower Local People. This was when they were trying to get a stadium in Charlotte, the first stadium. They were trying to build in Charlotte, not the new one they have now. They were asking they were paying the contractors an extra dollar per hour and make sure that minorities, which is not just blacks but women as well, contractors would get an equal deal in trying to secure contracts to build the stadium. The city council voted yes on it. The mayor vetoed it. So we got with H.E.L.P to kind of get out there to tell people no, don't vote for the stadium. Don't vote for the package. Don't vote for the

referendum. It was successful. It was very successful in that. Right now we're kind of trying to work with the state on the minimum wage, trying to raise the minimum wage. So that's the thing we're actually working on now.

Last year we kind of worked with some of the unions when they were talking about privatizing social security, letting the banks and everybody else take over the social security instead of the government. I actually was one of the people that was able to go to the Wachovia stockholders meeting and got some proxies, and we went up to, we were actually-- Rand Wilson was one of the people that contacted us here in Charlotte. We actually went up there and spoke and told all the () why we didn't want them to privatize social security, the great risk it was trying to invest the money than the money just being there and you're trying to invest it in stocks. Stocks go up and down. So you might get a good check this month, but you might not get anything the next month unless privatization. So that's some of the things we worked on.

We always every year do voter education, voter registration because every year it's some type of election either local. This year they're working on the congressional elections, and then after that will be the general election. So there's some kind of election every year. City council elections, county council elections, local elections where they get the mayor, and then it's the congressional elections, and then it's the general elections. So work is never done. We've got to keep registering people. People keep moving. You've got to keep telling them that if you move you need to change your address, I mean change your card to reflect your new address and things like that. So our basic thing is voter education and voter registration, but we also work with the unions on different things too. Organization and whatever they're boycotting or whatever their plight is now.

A couple of years ago we were working on the Smithfield project, and we actually had the Smithfield people here on campus where they showed the film and had people to come in from the community and some of the students to see how the workers were treated, how they couldn't get decent bathroom breaks, how they actually had a police. They had their, Smithfield had their own police, and if you had an infraction there, instead of being fired or going uptown, they would put you in Smithfield jail. People would be amazed at some of the stories that's told that they don't hear.

We work with FLOC, the farmworkers. We worked with them for a while on a, they wanted five cents more per hour to pick cucumbers, and it was a big to do about that. We had some of the people to

come in and tell their story, and one man was telling a story how his cousin had died. He was feeling bad, and that instead of them getting him medical attention or medical help they told him to go sit in the shade for a while, and he was dead for two days before anybody noticed. We worked with the strawberry workers to tell how they lived in cardboard boxes. They would bring them here, and let them stay in cardboard boxes, didn't have adequate food, adequate water and stuff and how the women had to sleep with the men, the boss man just to keep their job. It's just so many stories that people don't even know. What gets me about, that's why A. Philip Randolph tried to go out in the community and educate the community on these plights because when they say we say boycott the, what is the—not the Vlasic pickles, but I can't remember the pickle people now. The way we worked on it, but I'll think of it in a minute. To boycott the pickle, they were just thinking that's my favorite brand. I boycott Nike. Those shoes last a long time. But you've got to think about the people that are actually doing the work in there and how they're being treated. Do you want progress to save something on the back of somebody else? It's a lot of stories out there. It's terrible things that people wouldn't even believe.

EG: Centered with—

MW: Mount Olive. I'm sorry. It's Mount Olive Pickles. I should remember that because carried a sign. Signs and signs for the Mount Olive Pickle project.

EG: I actually found a news clipping of you relating to the Wachovia, the privatizing and one, also with GE ().

MW: Yes, we did it with GE too. Yeah. The GE was about the pension, the pension plan for GE, how the people had worked for years and thought it was helping the company, and the company was supposed to be putting the money aside for the workers and you find out it's time for you to retire, the money is not there that you thought would be there.

EG: Yeah, well, I have a number of questions based on what you just said. What () like the Guess Jeans, when were you doing that work in particular, like what year?

MW: It was in the '90s. it had to be, I don't know the exact year. I think it was, it had to be '97. It was '97 and '98 when we were working with UNITE.

EG: On the Guess Jeans.

MW: On the Guess Jeans. We also worked with UNITE when they were trying to organize Cannon Mills up there. You remember when they, and that was in the '90s also. Cannon had a number of mills up there, and the first one they were not successful in organizing because they told them that if we organize and if the union comes in, you have to cut jobs and blah, blah, blah. Then the people voted against it because really they didn't know any better. The next week or the next month after they voted the union out, they voted it down he sold the company to Fieldcrest. So that's how it got to be Fieldcrest Cannon.

EG: You said that was the '90s.

MW: That was in the '90s too.

EG: Was working with H.E.L.P in the, with the stadium, was that in the ()?

MW: I'm trying to remember what year that had, that was in 2000. Was it 2000, 2001 or something like that.

EG: Then with the Mount Olive pickles, that was—

MW: That was 2001, 2002.

EG: And has voter registration, education, political work been ongoing since you've—

MW: It's going. We do that every year. That's something we do every year, and we start in the spring, and we remind people to go out to vote in the primary, and then we tell them about the early voting. We have early voting here in Charlotte now. That's really helpful for the elderly so that you don't have to stand in line on election day, that you have approximately a month I think or so to go to the public, to the libraries and to the board of elections to vote early.

EG: FLOC, when was that?

MW: FLOC was, we worked with FLOC for a long time with strawberry workers from probably '95 up until they really got organized, up until about 2000 or 2001 or something like that.

EG: With these different campaigns you've worked on, have you felt that you've been successful with them or all or what kind of has been the impact of your organization?

MW: I think we've been successful because the more, the reason I think we've been successful is because like I say, A. Philip Randolph takes the information to the community. We work along with the labor unions, but our information goes to the union or to the community. So as large as, the labor

movement is not as large as it used to so you need the community behind you. You need to know why you can't buy those pickles or you can't buy those shoes or you shouldn't buy those jeans. Because everybody's hurt when your hurting the pocketbook. If you hurt them in the pocketbook, you stop buying that maybe they will get the message. I can remember union wrote Michael Jordan. He was the spokesperson for Nike and asked and told him did he realize that he was making money on the backs of slave labor, children and you know how they were not being paid. He said that wasn't his problem. So it's the little people that had to get the message out there. So I think A. Philip Randolph has been very instrumental in trying to get the message to the public from the union to the public.

EG: When you talk about working with other unions you mean ones in like the Central Labor Council, other unions in Charlotte?

MW: Um hmm. For Charlotte, Gastonia, I think, we cover Charlotte, Cabarrus, Gastonia, Lincolnton I think it is what we cover.

EG: You mentioned demonstrations, picketing, that sort of stuff. Is that something your chapter actively does?

MW: Well, if a union has an example last week or two weeks ago, Continental General Tire had a rally, and we had some people to go down there to participate in that. Every time they go out on strike, we go and sit with them or do whatever we can. I remember one year they were on strike. They stayed on strike for a whole year or year and a half or something like that. It might have been longer. We took what little, some little resources we had because we're nonprofit organization. Took little resources we had and had raffles and gave out I think it was six fifty-dollar grocery certificates to the people and let them pool. That was just our little way of helping out. You can't do something for everybody, but you kind of do what you can. I plan to write a letter now just to tell them if they have to go on strike again or whatever comes up because their contract actually ended it was April the 30th and they'll try to be in negotiation until September. I plan to write a letter in support of them to tell them that anything A. Philip Randolph can do from the local level or from the state level or from the national, that we will be there for them.

EG: The A. Philip Randolph Institute, is that just black people are members or are they white people?

MW: It's white people. It was based on, A. Philip Randolph, he was a black activist. I'll tell you a little bit about him. He started the first black union, the Sleeping Car Porters. They asked him to come and represent them because he didn't actually work for the company. So he wasn't in danger of being fired. So he actually started the first black union, but to answer your question. No, anybody can belong. I have a number of white people that belong to the A. Philip Randolph Institute. So no, it's not. It was founded by a black person and years ago was mostly black people. But anybody can belong.

EG: Sure. And I'm curious too about—well, you mentioned you'd been arrested. Have you—

MW: We didn't, we didn't actually, they sent the police out, and we did disperse and they tried—. We were in Las Vegas; we were almost arrested in Las Vegas. That's where we were working on the Guess Jean project. We went to the mall, and our goal was to get into the mall without them seeing. Because it was a huge group of was. We were at a national convention in 1997 in Las Vegas, Nevada. We had to go by group, little by little, little by little until we all got in. Then we were told to lock arms because they would try to put us out. They were dragging us. It was like the old civil rights movement, but it was black, white and everybody. It's been a number of times where they sent the police to disperse us.

EG: Sure. It's interesting to me too how you have like, on one hand like demonstrations, picketing and so forth and sort of direct action, and you also have this political activism with voter registration and education. If you could kind of comment on those in kind of comparison if you think one is more effective than the other, if they work together.

MW: It kind of works together. I mean, the picketing and the boycotting and everything is just to bring attention to what's going on at that particular time whether they're in negotiations for more money for the pension, health care or whatever because that will affect everybody. Say for instance you work for a company and you have a good health care plan. Well, my company although it might not be organized might up my health care plan just to keep me from leaving, everybody to go over there or just to keep us from organizing the union in this plant. They might just up, give us a little extra things jus to keep us there and to keep us quiet. On the political side, that's what rules the world. That's why I encourage people to vote. Once you vote to contact your congressman, your senator even the president. Write letters, make phone calls. When we can say we helped put you in office. So if this particular union is having a problem and they don't want them to negotiate, you know like go in here and organize another plant, we need to

write the congressman and say these people are being treated unfairly. You need to get with the labor board and see what's going on because they are not being able to organize. They should be able to organize because that should be a God given right. So politics and the labor movement kind of work hand in hand because you're trying to get something done here, but you've got to get a politician to help you get it done. Every year we try to go to, we go to Raleigh and we have a conference. We have a convention. We have a conference that's eventually coming in September. Then we go visit the people at the capitol, to the state house, just to let them know. Introduce them. Hello my name is Margie Worthy, and I'm with the A. Philip Randolph Institute. Or I'm with the United Steelworkers. Or either I'm with United Airways or whatever my union is to kind of let the people know how many members I have behind me, how many members might be voting for you next time, how many members might not be voting for you this time. So labor movement it kind of works hand in hand. You kind of, you need politicians. Politicians need us as well.

EG: You were saying that you had been a member, A. Philip Randolph Institute had been a member of the Mecklenburg Voter Coalition.

MW: Yes, that's a two-tiered to that to the Mecklenburg Voter Coalition. They do have some politicians and everything that get involved at the end. But then we have a piece by itself that's for non-partisan groups. Like maybe Greenpeace and A. Philip Randolph and other organizations. Actually the NAACP is supposed to be non-partisan too. So they're all members. So it's like a non-partisan part and it's another part. We always work with the nonpartisan group and then make sure we get people to the polls on election day because we always tell politicians, we don't have to be partisan because if you go out there and do your job about selling your product or selling yourself or either selling your issues, we don't have to tell people who to vote for on election day. All we have to do is provide the ride because you've already sold yourself. So we don't have to be partisan.

EG: And you said you do some of that work through your church.

MW: Through my church. Yes. Greater Galilee Baptist Church.

EG: The work you do through your church, is that separate or in connection with A. Philip Randolph?

MW: It's in connection with A. Philip Randolph.

EG: What sort of work through your church do you do?

MW: That's where I do my spiel for voter education and registering people to vote. I do a lot of it there, and I'm trying to get them, what I do is talk to the people in the church and to get them to talk to their neighbors, to their friends, to their coworkers and everything else. So in essence I'm training the trainers. I offer them registration cards to take them out and then I can show them how to register people if they want to register because years ago you had to be a registrar from the board of elections to be able to register people. Now anybody can do it. Anybody, I can do it. You can do it. Anybody can do it. So I encourage the people at my church to do it. I set up certain days where I can do voter registration. I tell them on such and such, this Sunday in the month I'm going to do voter registration, and if you have anybody in your office or if you need voter registration cards, you know to take them with you and bring them back to me, and I'll look them over to make sure they're filled out correctly and turn them in for you.

EG: () and your collegiate chapter has well has some voter registration.

MW: Yeah, they did. They got involved with some of the other organizations here in Charlotte and with A. Philip Randolph parent chapter in that year. We were very successful. We raised, we registered over 800 people.

EG: And too, just the, when you worked for Continental General Tire, what was your like job title?

MW: I actually started out being a tire builder. I built tires there. I was on the floor. I built tires. That's how I was able to be in the union, and I actually had a back injury there. Repetitive motion and my back went out on me, and they let me work in the front office for a while. I knew nothing about computers. They let me work in the front office for a while, and I took a couple of classes, computer classes, and I found that I couldn't go back in the plant. So that's when I took the other course, the office training course and then I ended up at Johnson C. Smith University.

EG: What's your title here?

MW: I am administrative assistant to and kind of office manager. I work for the vice president of student affairs.

EG: What's the college chapter like here that you have been—

MW: College chapter is great. We participate in, every year we have a very successful black history program in February, and they participate in the Labor Day parade. We have a Labor Day parade here in Charlotte. They always participate in that. The Martin Luther King Day parade, they participate in that as well.

EG: I wondered too with A. Philip Randolph himself, when you had like these different state, national and local meetings if he is someone that people talk about a lot or people—

MW: Well, at all the national meetings we have training for new members to tell from day one about A. Philip Randolph, how he came, where he was born, how he came from Florida to New York and how he had *Messenger*, which was a little newspaper to tell about the different things that were going on, and how he organized the first black union and how long it took to get it recognized by the union, by the AFL. They were split then, the AFL and the CIO, how Mr. Randolph himself turned out to be one of the vice presidents of the AFL-CIO and all the things like that. Then they go on to tell how A. Philip Randolph would tie in with labor and the labor movement and (), although we started out basically labor because it was a black union and how we went on into integrated into civil rights movement working with Martin Luther King and people like that. So we kind of tied in hand in hand.

EG: Did people like at the national level too, well I mean I saw that on the website. It seems like a fundamental part of the organization is seeing that this connection, well, I saw the mission the racial injustice and then economic injustice is seen as intertwined. But you said that you see the civil rights movement is ongoing. Would you say that union also has that sort of position or—

MW: They have that position kind of too because everybody has civil, a lot of people say when they say civil rights, they think black. But everybody has civil rights, but our civil rights weren't being enforced. So that's how we got involved. They weren't being enforced. Civil rights for women weren't being enforced. So that's how the march on Washington and everything came about. Martin Luther, the way Martin Luther King became involved in with the A. Philip Randolph Institute and everything. Martin Luther King had a little bit of money to go to different places to eat and do, but he found out he could not do that because he was black. A. Philip Randolph's thing was everybody should have that opportunity to do that. Everybody should have the opportunity to make money because that's how you succeed if make money. The United States of America itself is built on the back of poor people. So you just feel like equal

pay for equal jobs and things like that. He threatened to have the march on Washington in what was 1941 when they, when that was at, when the war started. He was saying that blacks or either women or other minorities could not work in the plants, and the plants were where they made all the bullets and everything else, and if you couldn't work in there, you couldn't, you didn't get to make the money. So he threatened a march on Washington then just to get the minorities able to work in the plants. Then he threatened another one, I think it was in '45 or '46 or something like that, when the military was still segregated. Blacks and minorities, they could only be cooks and things like that and you couldn't get a rank like that. So he threatened that march on Washington then. So everybody, to integrate the military so you can go out and fight, you could do this or you could rise up to it and if you rise up that way, you get paid too. So his thing was a lot, equal pay for equal work and for everybody.

EG: You mentioned too with like you say everyone having civil rights, and you've mentioned women I think twice and has been part of your program too to secure better jobs, employment, staff for women, alleviate different economic inequities they experience.

MW: We were involved in, and I did have a picture of myself with that too carrying a sign with BellSouth, I think it was BellSouth because the women felt like they weren't being promoted or making the money the same way the men were. So we had a protest in uptown Charlotte, and that was in '99 I think '99 or 2000 something like that. Yeah, but we've worked with women also.

EG: I'm curious too because with the A. Philip Randolph Institute, are there people who are just community members who aren't necessarily part of the () union?

MW: You can be a community, you can be a member of A. Philip Randolph from the community as well because I consider my church members, I have some church members that they don't actually come to the meeting, but they will come out and help sometimes. Like for the Smithfield project, I had people from my church to come out and listen to the and see the film and listen to the people talk. The next morning we went to the different stores just to see what was in and handing out flyers and things like that telling about the plight of Smithfield workers, and I had some people from my church to do that also.

EG: So you were saying you had like () twenty-five to thirty people () members of the A. Philip Randolph Institute on a union basis and then more members who are just community members.

MW: Yeah, community members but they don't actually attend the meetings. They can't hold, you have to be, in order to hold an office at the A. Philip Randolph, you have to belong to a union. But you can be like a trustee or something like that and you can be a member, but you can't hold one of the four top offices.

EG: How many community members would you say you have?

MW: Gosh, it varies from time to time. Maybe ten, twelve, or something like that. Then I have people work with me, I use the Girl Scouts at our church and different youths and things like that because when we need to go put our flyers, we use the young people's legs and stuff like that. We do that. Every year we give them a little book voucher or something like that for the person that's been working with me that goes off to college, we're trying to give them a book voucher for the help they've done for the years.

EG: Good. In terms of outreach to the community with educating them about issues, voter registration and so forth, you mentioned flyers and using the young people. Do you actually go door to door?

MW: We go door to door. We usually take two to three vans out with students with kids in them, and then we maybe have ten to twelve people in each van and we go from door to door. We take each neighborhood, what we do is found out how many, approximately how many people was in this community that did not vote in the last election. We trying to get information out to them, that particular neighborhood so we might have three or four different neighborhoods we might hit.

EB: Based on who, what precincts didn't vote in that election.

MW: Who didn't vote in the last election. Say you might have 5000 people, and you only had 2000 turn out in that particular community. We're trying to hit that community to try bringing up—

EB: Are there specific communities that you target?

MW: It is. We have target communities. Wilmore community is one of them that we really target, and I can't think of the number of it but the Wilmore community, and it's basically a black community that we target.

EB: Do you target black communities with the voter registration work, education work?

MW: We do. We do to try to encourage them to vote.

EB: With the, when you're trying to educate them about boycotts and—

MW: That's everybody. That's everybody.

EB: You cover then all of Charlotte or—

MW: No, not all of Charlotte, but we usually, when we do things like that, we usually do it through like a grocery store. If it's a bank, we try to get in front of the bank. If it's a grocery chain, either a product in the grocery store, if that particular grocery store really carries that product more so than some of the other products, we're trying to hit that grocery store as well. Like when we're with the Smithfield project, we did a lot of Harris Teeters because they carry a lot of Smithfield products. Food Lion carries a lot of Smithfield products, and we hit those particular two stores, chains but in different neighborhoods.

EB: But passing out like flyers or—

MW: We'd get in them, we'd try to get in the and tell the manager () and get the manager's attention and talk to them and say are you aware of the blah, blah, blah about, tell them about the plight and everything and then ask them and give them the information. Can you pass this on to your boss and ask them on to the owners and stuff like that and see if we can get things done.

EG: Do you target customers too?

MW: Oh yeah. We do. That's what we do. We go and handout handouts to customers until we get the manager's attention or something like that. I remember when Kohl's opened at, they opened a Kohl's at was it somewhere in Cabarrus I think it was. Or was it Salisbury. It was somewhere not too far from here, and this union, a particular union that was, they weren't targeting Kohl's per se, but they were Kohl's catalog people, the people that make the catalog for Kohl's. So we went in, and we were handing out information like that. We went in and we split up. Some went this way and some went that way and we were passing out information, passing out information to the customers until they caught us and threw us out.

EG: I mean what's' the typical, from the management when they, when you get their attention. Is there like a typical reaction?

MW: Well, they try to be nice because they don't really want to cause attention or anything in the store, but they try to be nice. Right around here we haven't run into anybody that's really nasty or anything. But they're trying to talk, and they'll take the information and tell them well, we'll pass it on or

something like that. Sometimes we believe they do and sometimes we don't. We go back in. If things haven't changed in a few months or so, we try to hit them again to try to get their attention again.

EG: I had kind of general question too about Charlotte from when you came here and to now if you think things have gotten better in terms of economic inequality issues or worse or kind of what your assessment is of the—

MW: Well, it was better for a while, but everything is getting worse now because of the gas prices. Everything is, Charlotte is expensive. To me it's expensive to stay in Charlotte. Charlotte is up and growing. It's got a lot of banks and things like that. They don't have a lot of textile or things like that here. But it's good for some people, and for some other people it's not. They have a lot of fast food places, and they say it's a lot of jobs here. But it's a lot of fast food jobs. It's a lot of banks here. The banking people are making a lot of money, but the average every day person, they're not really making that money, making any more money. So in a way it's not any better than it was years ago. Mayor McCrory, he's done a fantastic job in Charlotte about for the banking industry, hotels and things like that. But for the average every day person, I don't see it. I'm not seeing it. I'm not seeing the growth for them.

EG: When did you, you said things were better for a while.

MW: For a little while. In the '80s. In the '80s.

EG: End of the '80s.

MW: The middle '80s when I first came to Charlotte, the end of the '80s.

EG: Why were things better? You say things were better then.

MW: I don't know. It just seemed like it was, maybe it's just me. Like it was equal footing like it was more of a level playing ground then with, it was more how I want to say it. It was more jobs here, not in Charlotte, I guess everywhere then. Not as many jobs that moved overseas then. I guess if I had have been in another town another state, I would feel the same way because a lot of jobs are being outsourced now or contracted out overseas, and that didn't start until like the '90s or something like that.

EG: Have you in terms of like the banking industry in Charlotte becoming more and more a financial center, do you think there's been anything positive about that for like the working class or has it been more negative?

MW: It's been more negative for the working class I would think. It's positive for probably the city of Charlotte itself, but for the average every day working class I think it's a negative because when a lot of the banks merged and Wachovia buys somebody else or somebody else buys Wachovia and whatever. It's a lot of jobs being lost because they're actually merging two companies together, and they don't need all the workers from both companies. So the average person loses their job.

EG: We talked about this a little earlier, but some people they see like racism and then like classism as separate issues. It's interesting to me how the A. Philip Randolph sees them as linked together. If you could talk a little bit more about that.

MW: About the racism and classism.

EG: Yeah.

MW: Well, the haves and the have nots for one thing. It's kind of difficult because it's kind of difficult. It's kind of the same. I'm going to go back to what I said about Martin Luther King because although he was black, but he had a little bit more money than some of the average black people. But he found himself a victim of racism also because he could not go to some of the restaurants, some of the hotels and some of the other things and participate in some of the things just like the average black person. Although he had the money, he was in a different class than some of the other black people, but the racism still hit him.

EG: Yeah. Is there any other topic areas that you suggest we cover?

MW: No, I'll probably think of a million things after you leave.

EG: You could always email me. No one's ever done an oral history of me, but I think that would happen to me.

MW: Is there something else you want to ask?

EG: I'm just looking over my questions. Actually—

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

MW: Things we were working on too. I forgot to tell you about Wal-Mart Watch. Have you heard about that?

EG: No.

MW: Wal-Mart Watch is trying to make the people aware of how Wal-Mart exploiting minorities and other people about working them off the clock, and how they don't have adequate, they don't actually have insurance there. You have to work so many hours before you can purchase insurance.

EG: Health insurance.

MW: Health insurance and then, but they don't let you work those hours. They try to work you off the clock. I think you have to work forty hours so many times a month before you can even purchase health insurance, but then they don't allow you to work the forty hours. So it's crazy, and that's one of the things we were working on too.

EG: When were you—

MW: That was in-- Well, we still kind of make people aware of that because I'm always encouraging people not to work at Wal-Mart, but this was in 2005.

EG: Something I saw too from the A. Philip Randolph website was the issues you work on legislatively and how that, I think it was like health insurance for all.

MW: Social Security and everything.

EG: Really seemed to be making sure people have an adequate standard of living and so forth. So that would be part of the political work, the—

MW: That would be part of the political work. We work with unions in conjunction with that also because if they had adequate health care and a good health care plan on their job like I said before, my boss might be more willing to have it at his place too. Then we try to encourage people or encourage congressmen, and when they meet to put that on their agenda as one of the things to have adequate health care and Social Security and everything for everybody, not just for the rich tax cuts, tax breaks and all that stuff.

EG: Who, what are some of the major unions that your local chapter has worked with, who you consider your allies?

MW: We've worked with UNITE here. That's the needle and trade people. We've worked with, we've worked with a little bit of everybody. We've worked with Teamsters. We've worked with CWA, that's communication workers. We've worked with IAM, that's the mechanics with US Airways. We've

worked with the Steelworkers, the United Steelworkers of America. Who else? We've worked with United Auto Workers. Those are the major people that we've worked with.

EG: With the state office and the national office and you said you go to different conventions, how connected are you with them in terms of day to day work?

MW: We have to turn in reports. We are supposed to turn in quarterly reports to the state and to the national, and actually I've got a report due now before May 30th. But we have to turn in reports to let them know what we're doing and things of that nature.

EG: And how much of your work is directed by them? How much is kind of you have your own independence deciding what to do?

MW: Mostly we always have an agenda because we are kind of funded by, we are part of the AFL-CIO, and we kind of set our agenda according to their agenda, what they're working on. Organizing is a big thing with them now. As organizing is a big thing with us now. Then we do a local thing like if a local union is in distress or organizing a boycott in the summer then we work with them, but at the same time, we have to work from the national agenda as well.

EG: I was looking over here at what other [questions I had]—we've hit most of them. If you could talk too about, I saw you put on your [life history] chronology that you grew up going to segregated schools, what life was like growing up in segregated--that's a very broad question—society. How that may have influenced your activism if at all, that sort of thing.

MW: I did grow up going to a segregated school. I can remember. I'm the next to the youngest child. I can remember my oldest sister having to walk to school because they didn't have buses for blacks in my home town at the time. She had to pass by the white school, and they had buses for them to walk to school and walk home every day. So I can remember them talking about that. I think the thing that touches me most of all about working in civil rights and everything is my mother used to go uptown once a week and pay bills, get groceries and things like that. I used to love doughnuts, and I would always ask her to bring some doughnuts back. She would bring them sometime and then sometimes she wouldn't. I couldn't understand at the time why she didn't want to bring the doughnuts. I said, they're just doughnuts, and then I found out that if we wanted the doughnuts they had to go in the back alley and knock on the window and wait until they decided to open the door or the window to wait on them. So that just kind of touched me. I

can remember I was a little girl and my older brother was living here in Charlotte, and we used to come to Charlotte from time to time. So we would take the bus. We kept, couldn't figure out why he had not picked us up. Why he had not picked us up. He came around and looked. Said, "What are you all doing in here? You are in the white section. You trying to get locked up." I'm looking like, "We're just in the bus station." He said, "No, it's a black side and a white side. So you have to be in your side." I can remember and this is terrible. I can remember going to, we had like a little carnival or fair, and I can remember they had bathrooms, white only, and they had straw out back for everybody else, things like that. You just, you remember things like that. You try to get your children to know what you've been through and what they possibly could go through one day. Just like people in third world countries, used to be almost like that here for us. I can remember when the blacks and the minorities was trying to get the vote and couldn't register to vote. You'd go down there and register to vote, and they would ask you silly questions like how many bubbles in a bar of soap. Impossible questions to answer. I can remember how excited my father was to when he could register and vote. He was an old man then. He wouldn't miss going to vote. Actually now older people do a better job of voting than the young people because they can remember, I can remember hearing about on TV the three people that came from North, up north. It was a black young man, a white young man and a Jewish young man in Philadelphia, Mississippi where they were trying to register people to vote and how they took them out and killed them, just trying to help somebody else.

EG: You mean Schwerner, Goodman and Chaney.

MW: Yeah. Um hmm. You could think about the people marching to Selma and what happened on Pettus Bridge and all that dogs turned loose on people. You can think about people be telling people I can either kill you or you can jump in the water or commit suicide. It's just a whole lot of things that if everybody would open up their mind and ears and read their history, they would be more willing to work too.

EG: Sure. When I was talking to Tawana [Wilson-Allen] about the trip to West Africa, she was talking about how it meant so much to her with having, it was like a missing link. [Gritter refers to a trip to West Africa sponsored by Congressman Mel Watt's office to visit Charlotte's sister city there.] It was like being able to get a sense of where she came from in history and so forth. I don't know if that was

something that, a reaction you had as well. But if you could talk too about what that trip was like and what it meant.

MW: It, we found out, () knew about slavery and the history of slavery and things of that nature but we actually visited Elminia Castle where they held some of the slaves. We could see they had, we actually went in the place where they held the females. They held them separate from the males. They showed us the yard where they used to take them out so they could walk around, get a little exercise during the day. You actually could see, they had, it was like two to three stories high, and they would tell us that the men would come out in the evening and they'll look down, and if they wanted a particular woman that night, they couldn't even go in the door. They had to go up the ladder and go in the window. When they were through with them, they had to come down. So that was touching. It was very touching. You could see how when they were taking them to put them on the slave ships, they were not allowed to go down and cross the beach. They had a window and a plank that goes down to the ship, and that's how they had to go out. Just imagine being taken from your homeland, minding your own business, to come over to slave for somebody else, not get any wages, anything like that. I was thinking the other day when I, I sympathize for the immigrants, illegal immigrants here now, the Mexicans and what not. They had their little rally the other week. I sympathize with them, but then again, I say, but at least they get to keep the money they made. When we came here and had to work, we couldn't get a salary, didn't get wages or anything like that. All we got was leftovers and build up the plantations, build the United States, built up everything, and we didn't get anything for it. I sympathize with the other people that come here, but then it's things in place for them if they come here legally. They have stamps for people. They have tax breaks for people. They even go down to the children. When my granddaughter was in, I think it was third or fourth or fifth grade or something like that, and they would have to take the end of the year tests. Some of the people were exempt because they couldn't speak English. We've never been given breaks like that. They were upset when they started giving the students an opportunity to go to college and things like that, the ones that couldn't afford or couldn't get in. If you have the grades, they wouldn't give you anything because you had the grades to get there. They weren't taking the average Joe off the street and say you can go to college. We're going to do this and give you a break. I think we deserve a break. I don't mean handing out everything to anybody. I don't mean handouts, but I just think we deserve a break because all

the other nationalities have had a break. We've gotten less breaks than anybody else I would think. But at the same time I want people to realize when the break is handed to you, that you take advantage of it. You go out. You register; you vote. You write your congressman. You write the president. You write everybody. You try to educate your children. You try to send them to school. You try to get them a higher education so they can and things like that that's there for them. If the break is there for you, you take advantage of it.

EG: Have you done any work at all on reparations issue?

MW: I haven't.

EG: Okay. That sounds like that would be something you would ().

MW: I would be very interested in because even to think about, and I sympathize with the Jewish people too how the Germans did them and everything. But then in the end some of them are given, whatever they had, they were given it back. They had to, did you know about that?

EG: The compensation. Yeah.

MW: Yeah. They were given some compensation. So like I said, everybody's gotten something. We never in essence got our forty acres and a mule.

EG: Just kind of the, () oral history bring out too much about myself, but I did a comprehensive exam looking at constructions of race and () books talked about that, how African Americans have a longer history here except for like Native Americans of injustice than a lot of these more recent groups who've experienced disadvantage. But not the same that African Americans have and you're right, they're, I definitely think there should be some reparations. I mean, you see it with the Japanese who were interred during World War Two and Native Americans and so forth. I saw too you worked for a black herbal doctor.

MW: Yes.

EG: That sounds very interesting.

MW: Dr. Franklin, some people would call him a root doctor. But because he just used herbs and things like that. I worked for him, actually I worked for him in high school for a little while too and then later after I had both my children I went back to work for him again. Basically I would just answer the telephone for him and make appointments and do typing and things of that nature. He did in addition to

dispensing his herbs, he would do funeral programs, programs and other things like that. At that time we had to use a mimeograph machine. The crank machine. I don't know if you're familiar with that though. Those crank machine instead of copying machines. You had to put, you would type it and you would put this paper on the machine and put this paste like ink on there, and then you would crank out the copies, crank out the copy. So I was kind of like just a secretary and office worker there.

EG: Did he deliver babies too?

MW: No.

EG: I was just curious. Now they're called alternative doctors. But I know there's a rich history there too of blacks, like some of these black women too being nurses with some of these herbal remedies, home remedies or whatever. So I think that's about all I had. Let me just check once again. How much time does, because I know you have been working full-time and A. Philip Randolph Institute work. How much time does that take?

MW: It takes a lot of time. It depends on how many reports are due. It depends on what project we are working on, who we're working with. If there's organizing going on, then you have to go out and say pretty much out there part of the day. So you have to take off, I have to take off from work and do that if I'm going to do that. It depends on what project is going on.

EG: Yeah, Yeah. I saw your father built bridges. Did he work for a company?

MW: He worked for Triplet. It was a company in South Carolina, in Chester, South Carolina.

EG: So you grew up—

MW: In Chester, South Carolina. There's the city of Chester and the county of Chester.

EG: In a working class family.

MW: Um hmm. My mother didn't work outside the home. That's because she had nine children.

EG: Oh wow. I was just thinking if I had any follow up questions. But—

MW: Actually we did pretty good because my mother could sew, and she would make our clothes though. So we were okay and my father had a steady job. He always worked. So when I came along, he wasn't doing farm work or anything. He actually had a job, job. In the early years he probably did share cropping and farming and things like that. But when I came along, he was working doing the construction work. So we weren't rich by no means. We probably weren't even middle class. But we were okay

because we always had food to eat because my mother always had a garden. She would can food from the garden for the winter, and he always had a paycheck. She could sew like I said. So she made all our clothes and even made our patterns, made our prom dresses and things like that by hand. So we did pretty good.

EG: And thinking back to when we were talking about slavery. Were your ancestors slaves?

MW: I'm pretty sure they were because I can remember, if you see () I worked at Springs Mills for a while, and there was a nurse there and she told me, she said, "Oh, I knew your people." I don't, I () she was actually my father's name. I told her and she said, "Oh I think years ago, many, many years ago you have our name," because we didn't have last names when we came from Africa. We actually got our last name from the plantation owner who owned us and she said that's where my name came from, from her people. So I don't know how she knew. But she used to always tell me that, that Thompson, which was my maiden name, came from her people's name. Okay, if you say so. She was nice about it. She used to talk about it every time I came in here. She said, "Oh come my people." I said okay.

EG: This is someone at the cafeteria.

MW: No, she wasn't in the cafeteria. She was actually the nurse there.

EG: Is she white or black?

MW: She was white.

EG: Oh okay.

MW: Because like I said we didn't have last names. We had to take the last names of our the plantation owners.

EG: Spring Mills, is that in South Carolina?

MW: It's in South Carolina, and I think they had some in Atlanta too. It used to be really big in South Carolina because when I was growing up it was like five, four or five plants right there in Chester, and they had some in Lancaster as well.

EG: What did they produce?

MW: Sheets, towels and things like that. You've never heard of Springmaid Products like sheets.

EG: Yeah, I'm not from the South. So I have an excuse. But I've certainly learned more about the mills being in North Carolina.

MW: I started out in the cafeteria, and I worked in the weaving room. In the weaving room we would take our threads and weave them into materials or sheets.

EG: Okay and what did you do in the cafeteria?

MW: I worked in the cafeteria, I did shift work actually, ended up being one of the shift managers just, we prepared the food, served the food, tallied up the money at the end of the night or the end of the shift and things like that.

EG: You said too you moved from New York to seek employment with the local telephone company.

MW: Um hmm.

EG: Did you end up working for the telephone [company]?

MW: I didn't work there all because once I arrived there, I was staying with my uncle, and he had some friends that worked at the telephone company, and when I, when I got there, they were on strike. That's what alerted me to the union. That's the first time I heard of the union. So we went down, and they were picketing and marching and everything. So she didn't want to cross the line, and I said well, I won't either. So I ended up not working. I stayed the whole time with my uncle, and I came back for, it was time for my son to go to, to enroll in school. So I went back to South Carolina because my intention was to go up there and start to work and then go back and get my children and take them to New York with me. We stayed in Fort Chester, which was kind of outside of Connecticut. It wasn't too far from Connecticut.

EG: Was there anything else that you wanted to add at all?

MW: No, I don't think so. I can't think of anything. It just, my mother and father believed in right and civil rights and voting and education and everything. They were disappointed when I had the two children and didn't go on to college because that's one of the things they wanted for me. But so I guess that's why I get some of my background I wanted to see people treated right and against injustice and things like that.

EG: Well, it's been a pleasure talking to you. Then I just, I'm going to leave this on to ensure accuracy, go over some of the spellings from the words you brought up. Jim Lawrence. Is that Lawrence with a W or a U?

MW: A W. His name was James Lawrence, and they called him Jim.

EG: Okay. Then Nellie Stevenson.

MW: S-T-E-V-E-N-S-O-N.

EG: Nellie, is that with a Y or an I-E?

MW: I-E.

EG: Let's see. You mentioned Warren Wilson.

MW: Rand Wilson.

EG: Rand.

MW: R-A-N-D. He's the one that came down and helped us with Wachovia and the social security when they were talking the privatization of social security.

EG: That's W-I-L-S-O-N.

MW: Um hmm. He still emails me from time to time about different things that he thinks I should know about concerning the union and things of that nature.

EG: Yeah. Smithfield, that's just S-M-I-T-H-F-I-E-L-D.

MW: Um hmm, that's the Smithfield Hams the things that's in the grocery store.

EG: Yeah. I have heard of Smithfield. Oh Cannon Mills.

MW: C-A-N-N-O-N. They turn out to be Fieldcrest-Cannon. Approximately 5000 people lost their jobs at one time when they closed Cannon Mills about three years ago. They closed all of them in Cabarrus.

EG: Yeah, with the, were they shifting overseas again or production.

MW: I don't know if they shifted overseas or not, but I know they closed, and it was terrible. It was terrible.

EG: Yeah. Have you noticed a difference, I thought of a question, with the different presidential administrations that you, during the time that you've worked with the Randolph Institute.

MW: Um hmm. It's worse now with, and it always seems to be worse when the Republicans are in office because Reagan years ago started his attack on the union with the air traffic controllers. It's always for some reason they don't seem to believe in organized labor. But they've got to realize, when I worked at General Tire and this was, I left in 1995. Production in the tire room for my particular machine was 700 tires per night, and that's what I had to produce in order to make my money. You made decent

money, but you had to work for it. People don't seem to understand that when you go on strike, it's not because you're greedy and you want, just want more money. You want benefits. You want health care benefits. You want retirement benefits. You don't want to work all the years and break your body down and then find out at the end of the season that you still don't have anything. But at the same time, Mr. Continental or whoever has made millions in profits. But he didn't want to share it. I can remember one year, one time we went on strike for that particular time when they were on there a whole year or more, the contract before that had talked to the union and asked them if they would let them cut their pay and take some things away from them that when they made a profit. This was in order to buy new machinery to upgrade the plant and all that. Once they made a profit they would compensate the workers. Okay, this happened with the union, and they bought all the machinery, upgrade the plant, had good production and everything, made a profit, but then when it came down to contract time, they didn't want to give anything back to the union. So that's when the big strike came about.

EG: What Baptist church did you say you're a member of?

MW: Greater Galilee, that's G-A-L-I-E-E. (sic)

EG: G-A-L-I-L-E-E.

MW: I-E-E. (sic) It's greater Galilee, G-R-E-A-T-E-R.

EG: Could you say that again, sorry?

MW: I'm sorry. G-R-E-A-T-E-R, like great but with greater. Greater Galilee.

EG: Oh so G-A-L-I-L-E-E. Oh okay, yeah. You mentioned you had a repairative or repetitive motion injury.

MW: Yes, that's when I used to build tires. The turning, you take the tire out. After I build a tire, I would take it off and turn and throw it. Just repetitive motion.

EG: Oh repetitive.

MW: Just doing the same thing over and over.

EG: Then you mentioned Willman, oh no. Community.

MW: The Wilmore community. Oh that's Wilmore community's the one of our target areas when we do get out the vote in voter education, voter registration and things like that.

EG: Is it W-I-L-M-A?

MW: Wilmore, W-I-L-M-O-R-E.

EG: Oh Wilmore. Okay.

MW: Wilmore.

EG: Is that a, like a, that's just a part of Charlotte.

MW: That's a part of Charlotte, just a community. Charlotte's cut up in different communities.

EG: Like Myers Park.

MW: And Dilworth and all that. Balentine. That's the higher end.

EG: You mentioned Mayor McCory.

MW: McCory.

EG: Is that M-C and capital K.

MW: No, C-R, how does Mayor McCory, it's not a K. It's a C. It's with a C.

EG: Is it C—

MW: C-O-R—I don't know to be honest. I don't know how to spell his name.

EG: Well, I can easily find that out. Oh you mentioned Dr. Franklin.

MW: He's dead now.

EG: Is that—

MW: Franklin.

EG: Regular—

MW: F-R-A-N-K-L-I-N. First name was William.

EG: Then the castle in the sister city, you said it was Elminio.

MW: Elminia and I'm not sure of the spelling.

EG: Then you mentioned Triplet in Chester, South Carolina.

MW: Yeah, that's where my father worked. He worked for, actually with the Inland, I-N-L-A-N-D Bridge Company, a construction company, and the Triplets owned that, that was the family name.

EG: Oh okay. So it was the Inland—

MW: Bridge

EG: Construction.

MW: It's a bridge company, construction company, Inland. Let's say Inland Construction Company. But they did build bridges and the Triplets owned that.

EG: Triplets like the--

MW: Like the twins. I mean like triplets.

EG: I figured. And Inland was that just one word.

MW: Um hmm.

EG: I think we're good.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by L. Altizer, June 7, 2006