

Interview

with

LARRY LOCKE AND ANDREW BROADNAX

August 18, 2006

By Sarah Thuesen

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

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TRANSCRIPT – ANDREW BROADNAX AND LARRY LOCKE

Interviewee: ANDREW BROADNAX AND LARRY LOCKE

Interviewer: Sarah Thuesen

Interview Date: August 18, 2006

Location: Birmingham, AL

Length: One CD, approximately 74 minutes

START OF CD

ST: Today is the eighteenth of August, Friday. My name is Sarah Thuesen. I am working for the Southern Oral History Program and today am in Birmingham, Alabama, interviewing two individuals at the offices of Laborers International Union, the local here. I'm with Mr. Andrew Broadnax. Did I pronounce your name correctly, Mr. Broadnax?

AB: Yes, you did.

ST: And I am also with Mr. Larry Locke. Thank you both so much for sitting down with me. I really appreciate it.

LL: Thank you.

ST: I thought I would first talk with you, Mr. Broadnax, since your perspective in Birmingham goes back a little further than Mr. Locke's. Where did you grow up?

AB: South side of Birmingham.

ST: Oh, yeah. And you were born what year?

AB: Forty-seven.

ST: Forty-seven. What did your parents do around here?

AB: My mother was a housewife. My father worked at Merita Bakery.

ST: Oh, really? Was he ever involved in any union activity?

AB: Not to my knowledge.

ST: You were coming of age in the sixties, then?

AB: Yes.

ST: Were you involved in the Civil Rights Movement here?

AB: Yeah.

ST: Can you tell me a little bit about that?

AB: Yeah, it was real nice then, because I was going to high school and college in North Birmingham when Dr. King and them came through and organizing. We would leave school, come down there to Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. My parents be scared, but we still would ease out of school, come on downtown, and walk, march. Down on Fourth Avenue, you couldn't walk but three deep. Police would come by and say, "I done told you, nigger, about walking four deep." Couldn't walk but just three and walk clean through, you know.

ST: Yeah. About how old were you then?

AB: Sixteen.

ST: Oh, yeah. Did you ever get arrested?

AB: No, I'm one of the unlucky ones. I never did get arrested, but my sister and some of them got arrested.

ST: Really.

AB: Yeah. It's not that I was trying to, but they never did pick me up. I was trying to go.

ST: You wanted to get arrested.

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AB: Yeah.

ST: Why?

AB: Why? Because that would have made it even better. The more in jail, the more it going to work. But they never did pick me up.

ST: Uh-huh. Besides the marches, what else were you involved in, in terms of civil rights protests?

AB: Walking around, going in different department stores, like Newberry, Kress, and places like that.

ST: Trying to integrate the stores?

AB: Yeah. Stuff like that, just walking around.

ST: Uh-huh. What kind of white reaction did you get when you did that?

AB: They call you all sorts of names. Nigger this; nigger, go home; and all of that. But we're used to that word anyway, so.

ST: Yeah. So you kept on doing it.

AB: Yeah. Back then we were young, so we didn't too much feel no worry like that no way.

ST: Young people are fearless, right?

AB: Back then.

ST: At the end of the sixties, in the late sixties, were you already working? At that point, were you done with school or—?

AB: Yeah, because I dropped out of school in eleventh grade, after my mother died when I was seventeen. Then I had to go and live with my auntie back on the south side. So I went to Ullman; that's a school on the south side called Ullman High. I went there maybe

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about a year. Then I dropped out of school, and we moved from the south side back down on 1224 Eighth Avenue South. That back down by Ullman. I about nineteen then. I dropped out; I went in Job Corps. I went to Edinburgh Indiana.

ST: They trained you in Indiana.

AB: No, I went to Edinburgh Job Corps *in* Indiana; Edinburgh, Indiana Job Corps.

ST: OK.

AB: That helped make ends meet, because my auntie and my mother had a sick kid back then. I tried to help my auntie make ends meet, so that's why I went in Job Corps. I complete my tasks in Job Corps, so I came back home to Birmingham a year later try to find a job, find an odds and end job. I was still discouraged, though. I left again. I went back and joined Job Corps again a year later.

ST: Where were you that time?

AB: I was still on the south side, so they send me back to Kentucky. And so I had to go work another trade there. I complete that trade; then I transfer from there to Montana.

ST: Wow. What sorts of jobs were you being trained in?

AB: Retail salesman, service station attendant, stuff like that. So I have a degree and a diploma and all that.

ST: From the Job Corps?

AB: Yeah.

ST: About what year were you finishing up the Job Corps training? That was in the early seventies?

AB: Yeah, it's about—. Let me see. I left Montana between sixty-eight and sixty-nine. Sixty-eight, because my baby was born in sixty-nine. Sixty-eight.

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ST: So would you have been out in Montana when King was killed in sixty-eight?

AB: No, I was in Birmingham.

ST: You were still in Birmingham? OK. I was just wondering, in the late 1960s, did you have a sense, especially after King was killed, that the Civil Rights Movement was over? Or did you see it entering a new phase?

AB: A new phase. But then after he got killed, to me we were more together and more—. I'm going to just say more violent, because we used to throw some bricks.

ST: Stole some bricks?

AB: No, throw. Throw.

ST: Throw some bricks. Oh. Where and when did that happen?

AB: In North Birmingham.

ST: During a riot of some sort?

AB: No, just--. Well, we used to have spotters out. OK, if a white person come by there, we'll raise our hand up. That mean get the bricks ready, throw the bricks. Then you leave your hand down, you know it's a black person. So you leave your hand down, you don't throw no bricks. The spy be about a block down the road. He'll raise a hand up, and we'll just throw a brick and hit their car.

ST: Oh, yeah. Who all were you doing this with?

AB: Dude by the name of Benjamin Hubbard and James Henderson, my brother-in-law.

ST: Just friends?

AB: Uh-huh.

ST: Was this partly out of—? What led you to do this?

AB: Frustration. Until the police came and broke it up.

ST: Hmm. And that was right after King was killed?

AB: Yeah, they ended it right quick, though. Didn't nobody get hurt. We just throwing bricks hitting in their car, but that was enough damage hitting somebody car with a brick, though, with a big dent in it.

ST: Yeah. Did you get into any trouble with the police for doing that?

AB: No, because they couldn't catch us. When they come, we'll break and run. I know if they had probably caught us, we would have got in trouble. Big trouble.

ST: Right. What else was going on in Birmingham at that time in terms of African-American activism?

AB: They had them old Jim Crow laws they were trying to change. They had to go through the back door of the different store. Everybody was mister and missus; you just an ordinary person.

ST: That was still in place even in the late sixties?

AB: Yeah, some places. Yeah. Yes ma'am.

ST: So from your perspective, had things changed that much?

AB: They were changing, but they were changing slow. It was coming around, but you had to have some diehard. They just want to fight until the bitter end.

ST: Yeah. What did you see as the most important part of the Civil Rights Movement that still was left to be done in the last sixties? What was still unfinished, in your mind, at that point?

AB: Job-wise, black people still couldn't get a good decent job. You couldn't get a good job. You'd get a job, but be with a pick and a shovel. When I was coming up, they

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would say you go to school, you finish high school, you get you a good-paying job.

Complete high school, you still off in a ditch with a pick and shovel. () say be a doctor, be a lawyer, you be that. Then the door still closed. No matter how good the education you had, they might pick one or two, hand pick that one or two, but the majority you were still boy (), girl (). That was just the bottom line. Like I say, regardless of how much education you have.

ST: Speaking of jobs, how did your Job Corps training help you get beyond some of the—?

AB: Frustration?

ST: Yeah.

AB: I had a good teacher. He was a white guy named Mr. Hibbit who come out of Chicago. He taught me a lot about frustration and everything.

ST: What was his last name?

AB: Hibbit.

ST: Hebby?

AB: Hibbit, Hibbit.

ST: Hibbit. OK.

AB: He came out of Chicago, a crippled white man. He really taught me a lot.

ST: Uh-hmm. What did he teach you?

AB: How to take the frustration and make it work for you. In other words, what he was saying was you use reverse psychology. Instead of throwing a brick, you just throw love. Then, you know, he all right. This always stick in my mind. He said, "Anytime you can always tell a true person, especially a white person. I always look them in their face. If

they for real, they will look you in your face. They not for real, they going to drop their head." And that's always stuck. That's why I look at every white person in their face. If they can't look you in the face, they going to drop their head, or turn off, or whatever. He said, "Don't ever forget that. Always look a white person in their face."

ST: Was he white?

AB: Yeah, he was white. His name was Hibbit; he came up out of Chicago.

ST: Oh, yeah. So you took some of those lessons he taught you and took them back to Birmingham.

AB: Yeah.

ST: What did you start doing after your Job Corps training?

AB: I tried to teach people that instead of throwing hatred, just throw love and just be the best you can be. Just use reverse psychology.

ST: Um-hmm. When did you start working for the city?

AB: March 29, 1977.

ST: That must have been an important day for you. You remember it very specifically.

AB: Yeah, because they had cut my pennies off. I couldn't get no money. The same day I tried to appeal why I couldn't draw my little ninety-something dollars worth of pennies, I had to fill out—. I got the job that morning. My cousin say I had a job that morning, so I had my appeal by eleven o'clock at the state employment office. They said everything was cut off. We don't matter if I have a job anyway. So that's how I remember.

ST: I see. Who had cut off your pension?

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AB: No, I say my pennies. That's the common section where you in work and you draw compensation.

ST: Oh, OK. I see. So you previously, before you were working for the city, you'd been working for—.

AB: Golden Flake Potato Chip (). Golden Flake.

ST: Oh, OK. Potato chip. OK. Then you started working for which department in the city?

AB: The museum of art, museum of art.

ST: Uh-huh. What were you doing there?

AB: They say I was a gardener because I worked on the outside. But every now and then, I had to come on the inside and help them move paintings around. It might be a big painting or something like that, they would want my help in moving that. But other than that, I'd be on the outside.

ST: Yeah. When you first started working, did you join the union right away?

AB: Yeah. Yes, I did.

ST: Why did you decide—?

AB: Because I know my mouth.

ST: You know—.

AB: My mouth.

ST: Tell me a little bit about what you mean by that.

AB: Because like I just said, I'm going to speak up. Then if you don't have no help, they going to get rid of you. Shoot, that's why () joined.

ST: Did anyone have to recruit you or--?

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AB: No, I recruited them, because when the [Bruce] Carr guy, I seen him downtown and so I had heard his name because I didn't much know him. He was going to city hall, I guess doing a negotiation or something. I just cracking; I said, "Hey, I'd like to join the union." He said, "OK." And I signed up.

ST: How would you describe the level of enthusiasm for the union among city employees in the mid-seventies?

AB: It was great then. It was real, real good.

ST: Was there any difference between how black workers and white workers felt about the union, or were they both equally—?

AB: They were equal back then. It was real equal. But today, they not.

ST: Today, who do you see as more enthusiastic for it?

AB: Management.

ST: The management?

AB: Yeah, because half of them are not going to join.

ST: Oh, uh-huh.

AB: They all want the same benefit, but they don't want to participate, though.

ST: I see.

AB: So that's the reason why I just say management. But then they going to say, I'm going to get the same thing you're going to get. But I wish it was a closed shop. See, a closed shop, as soon as you get hired, you've got to sign that card. But you know down here, it's a working state. And so it don't work down here. And you'd be like it was up in New York or some place, soon as you get a job, you've got to put your name on that dotted line.

ST: Why do you sense that there was more enthusiasm for the union back in the—?

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AB: There was.

ST: Why do you think that was, that there was more enthusiasm?

AB: Because everybody was together. Everybody was on the same page.

Everybody wanted the same dollar. One just wanted more, you know, they were getting it, but today it's not like that. That's just my opinion, now.

ST: Yeah. Was there pretty good black and white cooperation in the union then?

AB: Yeah, back was then. You had your ups and downs. Everybody not going to agree with everything, no way. But we all came together and made history. On the major issues, we all come together.

ST: You were telling me a little bit earlier about a strike you participated in in 1979. Tell me a little bit about that.

AB: It was about the Blue Cross/Blue Shield insurance. We had Dr. Richard Arrington was the mayor then. After Blue Cross /Blue Shield moved out of the city, so he broke the contract.

ST: Arrington did.

AB: Yeah, he broke the contract. And so we were on strike about the contract, about Blue Cross/Blue Shield.

ST: To get the contract back?

AB: Uh-huh. But we didn't get it back. The city came up with their own version of insurance. So we was on strike about three days or more.

ST: Oh, uh-huh. Were there any particularly memorable incidents from that strike?

AB: Yeah, because had one dude, I see him all the time now, but I don't know his name. His name George (). We down there Boutwell, just sitting on the thing with our

little signs and all that. A dude walked up to him; he said, "Hey, man, how do you get in Boutwell?" We said, "You go down, you know, we ain't stopping nobody from going in." We told him how to get in, get in Boutwell you had to go through the back door. So he get in, he come out, I don't know when he came out. But anyway, next time I look around here come two big old sheriffs coming out the door. I looked at George, and George looked at me. He said, "Y'all probably stopped that man from coming in the museum—I mean in Boutwell." Said, "Nah, we told him how to get off in Boutwell." They talked to us real snotty, you know. Man, we ain't do shit to them, said "We told him how to get off in the place." But they said, "You can't stop nobody from coming out of there." We said, "Hey, we ain't try to stop him. We told him how to get in the place."

ST: These were two sheriffs who were harassing you?

AB: Yeah. They said that we could not—. Nah, we ain't stop them from going no place. So we kept talking. I guess they believed our story, so they left.

ST: Were both black and white workers participating equally in the strike?

AB: Yeah, because everybody wanted that Blue Cross/Blue Shield. That was a better insurance back then. But we still end up losing. The city came up with their own insurance, because—. Then after we realized what the man had did, that was tax revenue and one percent, you know, that raised, after a while we realized what he had did. So you taking that money—. That money going wherever you want to go. And so I'm not going to use you. You can't stay here.

ST: Did you feel that Arrington was not a supporter, then, of union organizing?

AT: Yeah, I say he was, because you could go talk to him about different things. He would talk with you.

ST: Oh, really. Did you ever go talk with him personally?

AB: Yeah, I talked to him once.

ST: Uh-huh. And he was pretty receptive to your concerns?

AB: Yeah.

ST: It was just on this one issue that you disagreed with his administration?

AB: Yeah, until we looked at it from the city point of view, where you lose the money by leaving Birmingham going somewhere else. And you see but your business right here, then you're going to go just say like to () somewhere, and then you see—. Then that's—. Like everybody here works, they pay occupation tax. Just say like you got twelve hundred people and one percent of occupation tax, that's a heap of money you're taking out of the city. We understood what he was doing then. At first we didn't see it until we realized what time it was. Now like I say, that's just my opinion. Now, everybody have different opinion.

ST: Yeah. I'm going to ask you a question, but feel free to jump in, too, on this, Mr. Locke. It's interesting to me the amount of interracial cooperation that you're describing within the union since this is not that long after the period of segregation. What do you think explains how that was able to happen within the union?

AB: Everybody was just together. Everybody was catching pure h. And everybody wanted a few dollars more.

LL: I think, from what I heard about it, that it was basically a situation where you had your black people and you had poor whites, too, that were getting an opportunity. Somehow or another, I guess people were just wired different back then. They thought more of each other, and they stood together looking out for the group instead of the individuals like

a lot of things are nowadays. So I think that's probably what led to them sticking together like they did, regardless of color.

ST: Hmm. Is it fair to say you feel like there was a stronger sense of the collective group interest back then, and now it's more an emphasis on individual rights?

LL: Yes, very much so.

ST: Why do you think that change happened?

LL: I don't know. Maybe just the way society has gone. Things are easier, and I don't think of myself as being that old, but it just seem that things come easier to people nowadays. They don't have to put the effort into it, so they don't—. Well, like my folks told me, and probably your folks told you, you don't know how to appreciate nothing because you ain't had to work for it. With what they went through back in the years, especially the blacks, because back in that time, they formed a union, and sometime after the union got started, black people and poor whites were basically day laborers. Your other whites were classified, and the biggest difference in that is salary and benefits.

I think once the union got started and it was all-inclusive, I think that the people pretty much saw the benefits of sticking together, because that's when they were fighting to get holidays, fighting to get better pay, fighting to get better benefits. It was just, I can't explain it, but it was just that sense, I believe, that well, we got to stick together or else nobody not going to have anything. And it worked. I wish it was that way now, but like I said, what they fought for, a lot of the younger people coming to the system nowadays think that somebody just loves them just enough that they gave them all them holidays and their pay and everything. They haven't had that experience, so trying to tell them is like doing calculus sometime. It don't make it; it don't make it through. That's part of the problem.

ST: Hmm. I want to return to the present situation in a minute, but first let me get a little background on you, Mr. Locke. You grew up in south Alabama, right?

LL: Yes ma'am.

ST: Which town?

LL: Well, it wasn't a town. [Laughter]

ST: Which crossroads? [Laughter]

LL: No ma'am, I was born in Conecuh County, Alabama. That's in southwest Alabama. The closest city or the closest town was Evergreen, so I guess that's the way people identify. I was basically born in Conecuh County, and I gravitated to start to saying I was from Evergreen, Alabama, which was a town. Not a city, but a town.

ST: Sure. What did your parents do down there?

LL: Well, my mother basically was a domestic worker. I never really knew my father, not until I got to be grown. But my mother was a domestic worker, and my grandmother I guess it was basically played the role of my father, was a domestic worker, too. That's what they did, basically clean houses.

ST: Yeah. I imagine that was a pretty agricultural area where you were from?

LL: Yes, farming and a lot of logging, that type of thing.

ST: Oh, uh-huh. So you probably knew quite a few lumber workers growing up, then?

LL: I knew lumber workers, yes. I had a bunch of them in the family.

ST: Oh, yeah. Did you hear about union activity in your region growing up?

LL: Well, my mother had a bunch of brothers. She was the only daughter, which means that I had a wide spectrum of uncles, from—. Well, not going to get into that. That's

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personal family stuff, but yes, I had a set of uncles that were—. It was a lot of variety there. They at one time or another all did do, like, the logging, but back then they would say paperwooding, but, well, whatever that meant. I guess my first thing I remember about unions was that we had —. Well, I had a couple—. When I say we, I mean my sister and brothers. We had a couple of uncles that left Conecuh County and went more south, like to Baldwin and Mobile County, ended up doing the same thing.

I would hear them talking about Ledger Diamond, but I had no idea back during that time who Ledger Diamond was. But they would always come back, and Ledger Diamond was the bad—. Well, I'm not going to say what they said, but white folks didn't mess with him. He knew his stuff and he had you-know-what and try and get folks better organized and get folks better salaries, and he'd look out for black folks and this and that. But I had no idea, and he was a—. And they say he was a member of that union, but they never said what union it was. I just always heard that name, Ledger Diamond, and union, and Ledger Diamond and union and everything and—.

ST: I've seen that name on a couple of things, yeah.

LL: Yeah. I think he probably was the first black vice-president of Laborers' International Union. He was out of the Mobile area. I didn't know this back then, but once I got into union activities and I started seeing Ledger Diamond's name pop up and learned who Ledger Diamond was, all of a sudden it just snapped back to them days when I was a little boy and hearing them talk about him and everything. That's when I started putting everything together.

ST: Sure. It's a unique name. Easy to remember, yeah.

LL: Yes.

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ST: So you went off to college about what year?

LL: I left from Conecuh County, Evergreen High School, in 1977. Yes. And started my trek off to the University of Alabama.

ST: That same year.

LL: Yes.

ST: Um-hmm. Were you involved in any—?

LL: I was on the six-year plan.

ST: Oh, yeah. [Laughter] Were you involved in any activism in college?

LL: Yeah, I joined the Afro-American whatever it was called, Afro-American Association. I joined the Black Student Union, and I joined a fraternity.

ST: How much was going on in the way of activism among black students in Tuscaloosa at that time?

LL: It was a lot. The Afro-American Association—. Well, nobody made you join, but it was one of them organization where you were strongly persuaded to join. But the SCLC and the NAACP both had I guess you would call it advisors there. Basically, anything came up, any kind of racial civil rights issue, and back during them days, saying I guess it was probably about a ten percent black population at Alabama. You had some scattered incidents here and there that we got involved in. Like I said, we were joined a lot of time with Stillman College, which was the predominantly black school there in Tuscaloosa.

We were active, and just anything as far as like voter registration, even back then, voter registration, getting out in the community, helping elderly and disadvantaged people and children and just an array of things. If anything came up on campus that was I guess was made to be some race issue, we always had a part in that, too. Basically, the Association

worked with the Student Government Association and the administration there continually to help smooth out things as far as any kind of racial problems. We did a lot in that regard.

ST: Did the Black Power movement have a presence on campus at that time?

LL: No ma'am. You still had a sense of the militance from that Black Power movement. You still had a sense of militance, a sense of radicals and everything, and back in them days I was somewhat one of those, but it was more of a stop-fighting-see-what-we-can-do-to-get-along type of thing. Not kiss nobody's butt, but just to cooperate. Not be pushed around, but cooperating. It was leaning more toward that.

ST: So when you finished college, did you already know you wanted to get involved in labor activities and similar issues?

LL: I had no idea. I had no idea. When I got through with college, my intention was, when I was younger and I'm still haunted by it today, but my intention was when I was younger to get out of college and go to law school. But when I got out of college and I started seeing them bills coming and was still loan bills, well, find a job. I guess I start putting in applications, doing interviews and everything. Somehow or another, I ended up working for the Alabama Department of Mental Health.

ST: At the mental health hospital there in Tuscaloosa?

LL: Well, Partlow. There was Partlow, there was Bryce, there was the Taylor Hardin secure medical facility there, too. I started working there at Partlow. They all basically had—. Well, Bryce was for more the mentally ill type of people. Partlow was for mentally retarded, and Taylor Hardin there was basically for the criminally insane. I had a choice between, at that time, Taylor Hardin and Partlow. I was saying, "Gosh." You know that was a bad-- But I was looking at them bills, and I said, "Shucks, I got to do something and hope

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something comes.” So I decided to go to work with the mentally retarded instead of the basically crazy killers, and that’s where I started in 1983. I believe it was August 13, stepped in Partlow for the first day. Culture shock.

ST: I bet.

LL: Yeah, and it was eww. It was hard; I’m not going to lie to you. But again, I was looking at them bills, and well, that’s the way it went.

ST: What were you doing there?

LL: I was a mental health worker. Basically that was direct care, and just so happened they put me in what they call DBU.

ST: DBU?

LL: Yeah, DBU was basically they’re fighting people, so I took a few butt whippings and learned the system and everything. Disruptive behavior units is what that stood for, and it was disruptive. Like I say, I took some butt whippings. You could defend yourself in a passive way, but you just couldn’t react to the stuff that was getting done to you, the hitting and kicking and slapping and spitting on and that type of thing.

ST: That must take some real patience.

LL: Yeah, it learned me a lot. It really did. About the second day there, I had got approached about joining the union. The steward, Eddie—. What was Eddie’s name? Oh, goodness. Older guy, but anyway, I ended up signing the union card and got to be a union member the second day I was there.

ST: That was Local—.

LL: That was Local 1279.

ST: OK. Of the Laborers.

LL: Yes.

ST: Were there any particular concerns that drove you to join the union?

LL: No, it wasn't, because I was just getting in that system. Like I said, I had learned some things about union going through maybe high school a little bit, the little bit they teach you in history books about Teamsters and so to speak and Hoffa and that type thing. And picked up a little bit in college with the American history classes and stuff, which was basically just a little bit more than you learned in high school. From that little bit, I guess when I look back at what my mama did and my grandmama did, in the back of my mind about my uncles back in the days talking about Ledger Diamond, maybe that's what it was. But I had no apprehension in joining.

I didn't really understand the full force of the union when I joined, but once I did, I made it my business to start going to the union meetings. Matter of fact, I went to my first one the first of that September there and everything, because I didn't know what I was paying my—I think it was probably about eleven dollars—I didn't know what I was paying my eleven dollars for back then. I said, "Well, I'll go by there." So I got a chance, just happened to be off that Tuesday. I remember they met on Tuesday nights, and I went by and that's where everything got started. It was a good crowd.

ST: Do you remember what was discussed that evening?

LL: Well, it was all new to me, and I remember there were a lot of members there from Bryce Hospital. But the thing that they were talking, I had got a sense of from being at Partlow. I didn't see that many people from Partlow that I recognized. But the thing that the people from Bryce were talking about, about the supervisors, about the director, about the hours, and that type of thing, it was something I had got a sense of from just the day or two I

had been at Partlow and people were talking about and everything. It was like they were talking about Partlow. That sort of like got me to bond with them and everything, and I start seeing a lot of what they was talking about with the behavior from the supervisor, the long hours.

They had something they called mandatory overtime back then and everything, and I had got caught up in that, didn't know what the heck it was, except I knew I was working second shift when I started working Partlow and a woman come and tell me, "Well, it's your time to work overtime." I know it was like about seven or eight o'clock before I left there. I got there about two that evening, and it was seven or eight o'clock that next morning and I had to be back at two that—.

Like the experiences with that, and I said, "Gosh!" That's what really got me into it, and I start going to union meetings every month if I get a chance to and stuff and I ain't have to work that evening. I don't know how it happened, the exact events, but I got approached about being a steward, probably about two, three months after I started working there. I was saying, "Well, shucks, I'm still on probation. They going to fire you." (). I said, "Well, they're going to fire my ass, they find out I'm involved in this here." But I talked with the business manager at the union back at that time. That was Dexter Lowery, and he always reminded me of a—. Oh, gosh, I can't think of the preacher's name on TV, on that religious channel, but with the long hair and the beard and the mustache.

ST: I don't know which one that would be.

LL: But he reminded me of that man, and he just had a way about him. He acted like a preacher in a lot of ways. But I ended up taking—. He said, "Why, I'll look out for you and we'll take care of you, and you just do what you're supposed to do and blah, blah, blah."

And I said, "Yeah, OK." That's how I really got my feet wet and started bringing issues forward. I know that not long after I did become a steward, I had gotten moved. I don't know whether that was because I was a steward or what, but they said it was because somebody had quit and I was the least senior, so they had to move me to another shift. Which they put me on night shift.

ST: Do you feel that was in retaliation for your union--?

LL: I always felt that it was, because it was a trying time. I'm serious, to have your whole world turned upside down, and I was young and gosh, and in my prime and still running girls. And here it was at eleven o'clock at night and I got to go to work, and that usually be the time I'm just going out. It just about killed me. I remember just sleeping all day and waking up at ten o'clock, and thinking it was ten o'clock at night and I needed to get up, and it was ten o'clock in the day. It was just like gosh. It was a time, but I stuck with it. After that, I started basically getting more and more involved in the union. Because I didn't have to be at work at eleven o'clock at night, heck, all my Tuesdays, Tuesday afternoons, was free now, so I'd go to union meetings and start getting involved.

Ended up some way or another getting appointed to the executive board as an auditor. So I basically served just about every spot on the executive board at Local 1279, except the business manager, back during that time. I probably I guess in right around 1986, they had some budget issues with the department, and they started doing a whole lot of downsizing. I remember the union was fighting that. Dexter was in Montgomery and all in the newspapers and everything, saying that the department was wasting money, nobody didn't have to lose they jobs, and all that type of stuff. I got caught up in that because I was still, compared to some of the people that worked at Partlow, because I ran into people that had been working

there twenty-five and thirty years. I never saw how they did it, but they had been working there twenty-five and thirty years, and the cuts came and I got cut and got transferred to here in Birmingham. They had opened up a new facility.

You know the one thing that Dexter raised hell about, too, that how you build the new facility and you talking about you ain't got enough money. It just got to be a whole big thing, but I ended up getting transferred here to the Glen Ireland Developmental Center. That was the new facility back then, and I helped organize that, started getting the union organized at the Glen Ireland Center. Ended up being chief steward and loved by some and hated by many, and that was an experience. They had the idea that even though it was a mental health facility that they were the new way of doing things. This is the new way, we're not going to be like Partlow and Bryce, and we not going to have all that crap that went on down there. We going to do things a different way, and we're going to dress our clients, and we going to get involved in this and we going to get involved in that. Which the administration did, but the problem was that a lot of the administrative people came from Partlow and Bryce, and they brought the same old attitudes and nasty behaviors that they had at Partlow and Bryce.

ST: How much of the tensions between administration and employees dealt with race?

LL: Well, when I started at Partlow in 1983, I didn't really notice a lot then. But from talking to some of the older people, like the one I was telling you been there twenty-five and thirty years at Partlow, they had talked about how the administrative system went from all white to starting to turn black. They had talked about how things used to be in that most of the mental health worker positions—. Well, you had to be back in the day talking about

you had to be white or knew somebody to get a mental health job and everything. I didn't see any of that because it had started to change when I started working there, but I heard the older ones talking about it. When I got there, I seen black supervisors, black mental health worker twos and black mental health worker threes and black RNs and black LPNs and black administrative people in personnel and the QMRP as they call them I seen. So I wasn't there doing that time, but the older ones would always talk about how it used to be and everything.

ST: So you felt like there had been change by the time you had arrived on the scene.

LL: Yes.

ST: Talking about Birmingham in the mid-eighties—and Mr. Broadnax, you might have perspective on this as well—just curious to hear from both of you what you thought about the union at that time. Did you feel like it still had the momentum of the 1970s, or were people kind of losing enthusiasm for union activity? Mr. Broadnax, what would you say to that?

AB: Yes and no. Yes, some was still in it, believed in it, but you had a new generation coming in then.

LL: Um-hmm.

AB: The new generation today, they just () work for something, then you come in an established job where they got everything already established, they don't want no part of it. They just say, "I'm getting it anyway." But they don't think about () continue to keep the condition going. No, they just saying, "Nah."

LL: Yeah. And I seen a difference in that when I had my first union meeting I went to back in eighty-three when I first started working at Partlow, that it was a lot of people at the union meeting, and they were real vocal. They were real vocal and enthusiastic. Before I

had left and came here and started working at the Glen Ireland Center, I could see a change, and I didn't really know how to interpret it. Once I got to the Glen Ireland Center and we had got the Glen Ireland Center organized, we would still have to come back to Tuscaloosa for monthly meetings, because that was basically where the union based it. We started bringing some people from the Ireland Center, a few of them that were willing to travel and go, but the crowd that was in Tuscaloosa back when I first started just seemed like it had dwindled so much. From then to now, just that trend of—.

AB: Going downhill.

LL: —people don't show up. They see you out and they will bark you down with a million and one issues, but they won't show up for a union meeting. It's the same way now with our union here, with the Local 123 that used to be 1279. They'll call you and they'll catch you in the street and they'll bundle you down with ten million things and think you can remember to do them, but it's like sometime you can't even bribe them to come to union meetings. That's what I've seen in my short time.

ST: Yeah. How much progress, I'd be interested to hear from each of you, do you think Birmingham has made in your respective lifetimes on the question of economic justice for all races? What would you say, Mr. Broadnax?

AB: Black I say not much, not much, not for black it's not.

ST: Why do you say that?

AB: Well, it speak for itself. Not too many blacks have right here in Birmingham right now about least eighty percent black, and black don't control nothing here, don't own nothing. So that's the reason why I say everything has changed, but ain't nothing changed when it come to black. Then you go and try to get loan or something, they going to give you

a million questions about your mama, grandmama, and all that, then just come back and tell you no. You white and go down and want an application or a loan, you get it right then. You black, they want to know my mama's mama. I'm serious. Now, that's just my opinion. It happened every day, and the city about eighty percent black. But now you're white going to try to get something, they get it right away. And I would tell any of them that, though.

ST: What would you say on that question?

LL: Yeah, since I've been here in Birmingham, and I moved in eighty-six when the job at Partlow played out, I'm still sort of doubtful in a way that this city that's at least seventy percent black, black mayor, the majority of the city council is black, and that I guess the majority of people, and they are black, are nowhere near where I believe it should be with a city this size. It's a constant thing now with housing discrimination, certain areas you live in they get redlined. With the banks, perfect A-1 credit but you still have to jump through a hoop to even get a loan. It does seem that, not saying that it is but it appears that whites do have the upper hand. Some of the faces have changed as far as like administrative people from the sixties, but it seems like some of the actions are still the same.

AB: Telephone do all the talking.

ST: Pardon?

AB: Telephone. Telephone.

ST: What about the—?

AB: That just a () right here. In other words, don't say a number. Do you understand where I'm coming from now?

ST: I'm not sure.

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AB: Just say like I get on the telephone at seven o'clock and say, "Hey, I want to give so-and-so a loan."

ST: Oh, yeah. OK.

AB: See, they don't say a number. And that's a good old boy there. Look out for him.

ST: Right, right.

AB: Money talk, bullshit walk. [Laughter]

LL: You see AB got a—. He's blunt and to the point.

ST: Right, right.

LL: Yeah, but it is. I don't know what it is. I know that Birmingham, being the largest city in this state, when you look at things—. You look at pay, for example, with the surrounding areas such as Mountain Brook and Hoover. I know you've heard of them places since you've been here.

ST: Yeah.

LL: Vestavia. Just with employees, their employees probably on the average will start out, regardless of what classification, they'll start out maybe with two or three dollars more in pay than a person starting out in Birmingham doing the same. One of the big things going on now in this city is—.

AB: Police and fire.

LL: The police and firemen. Basically, a policeman and a fireman in Birmingham start out with pay right over \$29,000, maybe \$29,200 or something like that. And that's just with the last two percent raise that the city gave employees. You have policemen and firemen, say in Vestavia and Mountain Brook, \$34,000, \$35,000 starting out. Same thing

even though we don't get the attention as police and fire, but it's the same thing with the public works department which their union represents, the pay on average for every classification is basically two or three dollars lower than the surrounding municipalities.

I'm not going to sit up here all the time and harp on it being race. I think it partly comes from people not doing what they should be doing and being too lazy. And I'll say that about our mayor. I agree with him on some things, but it's the same-old same-old. Same thing with our city council people because you know how union people feel about Wal-Mart. Our city council and our mayor can bend over backwards and kiss Wal-Mart's ass, like Wal-Mart need money.

AB: Applebees and all that.

LL: Yeah, but they give Wal-Mart just this year—

AB: Ten million.

LL: Eleven million dollars to relocate, and Wal-Mart probably making eleven million dollars a month. They felt that they had to give Wal-Mart eleven million dollars to relocate in Birmingham. At the same time, you've got your public servants out here, and basically—and I don't mean this in a racial kind of way, because they're white and black—slaving. It's a lot of b.s. from city hall about what we should do and what we should we ought to do this now, but nobody does a thing. I blame that basically not because the mayor's black and the city council is basically black; I just blame that on sorry people and everything. Economically, it hurts us because, I don't want to get on my soapbox, but the Wal-Mart mentality everywhere, we don't want you to be able to afford nothing but Wal-Mart stuff. (). You go to Wal-Mart, they're saying that's all they're going to pay you.

AB: Make a long story short and I'm going to have to go, Wal-Mart () put a heap of places out of business.

ST: Right, small businesses.

[brief interruption while interviewer picks up dropped papers]

AB: () been there fifteen and twenty years when Wal-Mart come. They run them out of business () there in Central Plaza. JC Penney fixing to move out. () fixing to move. (), they all looking to go. It's just a matter of time before K-Mart going to leave.

ST: Yeah. Well, Mr. Broadnax, I know you need to be going, so let me ask you one last question. In terms of addressing some of these economic justice issues and concerns, where do you see that movement coming from? Do you see the labor movement is the best avenue for addressing some of these economic issues?

AB: Yeah. Uh-huh.

ST: Are there other ways of dealing with it that you see?

AB: Just like I tell everybody, like I live over here in Birmingham. Now why should I go there in Hoover and spend my money, take my tax dollars over there, and my city going down and their city going up. I try to tell you about it. Spend your money over here. You see, because you got to help yourself in order to get some help. You got to help you first. Like I be trying to tell my daughter and them all the time. They want to run there and spend they money, don't make sense. Spend your money where you live at, and so that what I say. In order to help yourself, you got to spend their money where you live at, because you still not going be like places like Hoover. () advertise with a black radio station. You know what they going to say?

ST: What?

AB: They going to come anyway. You see what I'm saying? So now why should I advertise with your radio station? Y'all coming. Gee. [Laughter] I'm serious. So you've got two black radio stations right here. You might get a few () people start complaining about, but other than that, I'm not going to invest no money here . That's the last thing I'm going to say and then I got to go. If Hoover had wanted that darn thing over there, they wouldn't have had all that conversation about it. () but it's all-black city. That just like Alabama when Alabama playing football here. Don't play no game here or nothing. They play them all in Tuscaloosa. But they play seventy-five year () year in () Field.

ST: You think they changed because Birmingham's majority black?

AB: Yeah, just as sure as you sitting there. () So that what I think.

ST: Well, thanks so much for taking the time to talk to me today. I really appreciate it. I might pause this and ask you a final question, but I'll let him pack up and leave.

LL: That's OK. [pause]

ST: Mr. Locke, I just wanted to ask you a couple more questions, too. I was curious for you to think back on all your years working with the union and was wondering whether first of all, what memories do you have of moments where you really felt like you were being successful? Or what's maybe your proudest achievement from your work with the union?

LL: I always—. There's victories in this business, and they come once in a blue moon, so to speak, though. But any time we can get a () dropped, any time we can save somebody from being suspended, any time we can save somebody from being terminated, and any time you can appeal disciplinary action and get it overturned, whether it be a suspension, whether it be a termination, they're small victories. I guess the way I look at it, the bigger victory's yet to come, and that's when more people start realizing the value of

their labor movement and start joining the unions again. Getting back active, especially political, and start getting things to moving back toward the middle class like it used to be in the days when I think that the unions were at their peak. You had a distinct middle class, blue collar working-type families, and it appears that the trend nowadays is that either you got somebody at the top or somebody scraping the bottom. It's no middle anymore. I think that's the thing that unions did. It gave people a chance, gave people a chance. And that'll be the biggest victory when we can start to seeing that again.

ST: Um-hmm. What do you think is going to make that possible?

LL: I always said that when some of the ones now that think that they've reached the top, but they really haven't, start doing without, because management jobs and all will start getting transferred to other countries, like the lower job now, textiles especially. When those type of jobs start getting contracted out overseas and those people realize that the people that they have been fighting basically have been the same kind of people they are, and now they on the other side of the street looking at the people that they used to fight against. Sooner or later, it'll get to the point where people in this country can't afford to buy the things. You look at two hundred dollar tennis shoes and who getting the profit from them. It ain't the working people. I guess when it get to the point where a lot of those management type of jobs start getting transferred in favor of the big wigs and they, you know. It's got to turn around.

ST: Yeah. In 2006, what do you see as the most important civil rights work left to be done in Birmingham?

LL: [Pause] The most important civil rights work to be done in Birmingham. Basically, I don't know. It's—. I know what I want to say; I've just got to try to get it in some words.

ST: Sure, sure.

LL: I was a little boy during the time that Dr. King was doing what he did. From what I get out of it, it was a thing about equality for all people, regardless of race, creed, color. I think that Birmingham, even though it's majority black, as far as the people you see in position, the most important work, I think, is to get everybody, everybody, on the same level as far as the treatment of people, the economics. Like I was saying before, I don't know how it can be done or how it will be done, but at the same time you're raising the ceiling, you raise the floor, too. It's got to be something in between the ones that have and most of us who don't have. There's got to be something in between that.

I think Birmingham, with Birmingham's history going back through the day and you heard Mr. Broadnax talk about some of it earlier, but Birmingham's history, I think Birmingham will be the place to I guess melt all them ideas about economic development, economic freedom, human rights, to be the place I guess to blend all of that. I don't know whether it's just going to take a different brand of leader, somebody with the vision and the determination to do it or what. But it's got to be along those lines of basically human rights and economic advancement, too. I probably could have said that a better way, and probably about two or three o'clock in the morning I'll think of a better way to say it, but you ain't going to be around to hear it.

ST: [Laughter] I think that was a very good way to put it. Was there anything that you had wanted to talk about today that I haven't asked you about?

LL: Gosh. No, it's this job, and I guess the biggest problem I have because I expect to catch hell from my members—. That's just the way things are and management, the way I'm going to catch hell from them anyway. But I guess my frustration is people that--and members especially--but I know it's society all around, people that just seem to just take everything for granted and don't care, don't vote, don't get involved, don't come to union meetings and everything. And then they wake up after the fact; they want to know how they do that. Who told him they could do this and how they do that when they start doing that. It just seem like they let life go by living in a shell somewhere and don't really know what going on and don't realize till it hit them in the face. Then they want to jump up and want everybody to come to their defense.

I guess it's just the time to get up and act is now and not wait, because like that commercial, I think it's the insurance commercial, "life comes at you fast." And it's coming fast, and I think my biggest challenge is to get my members to understand that ain't nothing promised to them. They might think that they doing OK, but not really. There are things going in society, and I don't hate George Bush. I don't hate the Republican party, but I think it's some people have their own agenda and it's affecting all of us. Too many of us are sitting back looking at them do it and not open our mouth, especially not voting.

ST: Yeah. Do you think the new Change to Win coalition will maybe revive some of the spirit of the 1970s?

LL: Yes ma'am. Yes ma'am. Yes ma'am, I do. From what I understand, it's going to put more effort into organizing. Organizing people, educating people and everything. I always feel that that was the way to go. Organize and educate people and all, with everything. People, I think a lot of times they look at unions—. Well, I can't say about

everybody, but I think this union's probably typical of the rest. They look at the union as somebody to run to when they get in trouble on their jobs, and it's just so much out there that unions offer and unions can't offer that basically goes by the wayside because people don't pay it no attention. In this particular union, LIUNA, we have economic programs for our members, ways to get back on your feet, ways to be active in the community, but nobody pays attention to them. It's just I got in trouble and they did this to me; what can the union do to help me get out of trouble and keep my job and this and that.

But I've been trying more and more to try to get our people to understand that the union is just a part of your life. There's something that you have to try to get straight. Well, for instance, we had some people that had some credit issues. It's like I would always tell them, I said, "Well, the union offered you a credit card with about four percent interest and everything. That will cut don on some--." "Well, I got bad credit." Well, they offered a secure card. You get a chance to build it. You put your three hundred dollars in and just buy something every so often just to help build your credit, that type of thing.

Opportunities for education, scholarships, I don't know how many scholarship programs, low interest loan programs to use for education or do whatever you want to do. Some of them are free, just free money to do—. And people don't take advantage of that. I think with the Change to Win and grass roots organization that it's a chance to like re-educate people about economics, about politics. I think that's really where it's at with everything. Hopefully, hopefully, the conditions getting like they are in society and this country that people might try to pay a little bit of attention this time. Not just think everything is hunky-dory and well, it'll be over with soon as Bush get out of office and that type of thing.

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ST: Right. Well, that seems like a good note to end on. Thanks so much for talking with me today. I enjoyed it.

LL: I did, too.

ST: Well, thanks.

LL: I ain't much of a talker, but you know.

END OF TRANSCRIPT

Transcribed by Carrie Blackstock, September 2006