

Interviewee: Raoul Cunningham

Interviewer: David P. Cline

Interview date: August 6, 2005

Location: Louisville, Kentucky

Length: 1 disc; approximately 51 minutes

START OF DISC 1, TRACK 1

DC: Because you have told your story a few times in a couple places I can get access to, maybe I'll just use that as a basis for some questions?

RC: That would be fine.

DC: And also to sort of jump ahead into this whole idea of the long civil rights movement and get some of your ideas about—because you do have a long historical perspective that can come to bear on this—I would just really like to get your ideas on how that played out.

RC: Okay.

DC: Especially in terms of long involvement with the NAACP.

RC: I've had a long involvement with them over the years with interruptions. I was involved in high school, I was involved in college, and involved right afterwards. Then I got involved in the political side of it. While in college, I was active and organized the first democratic club on Howard's campus and became vice-chairman of College Young Democratic Clubs of America and I was the first black to serve on their executive committee.

DC: How many blacks were involved at that time?

RC: Very few. There were none. As a matter of fact, former governor Jimmy Hunt was college director of College Young Democrat Clubs at the time that I became involved. We became friends and he encouraged me and pushed me to go on the NEC, which was the National Executive Committee. Up until that time, there had not been any. We're talking about '62, '63.

DC: But you had come out of a background, so we'll back up just a second to the work that you did as a high school student.

RC: Yeah.

DC: So were you born and raised in Louisville?

RC: Born and raised here.

DC: And went to black schools all the way through?

RC: No. In '56, when they integrated the schools in Louisville, in trying to decide that summer what you were going to do, I lived on a border line. I could have been assigned to the previously all-white school or the black school that I was then going to.

DC: What neighborhood?

RC: West end of Louisville -- Parkland, around 32nd and Dumesnil is where I lived. I had a cousin who lived around the corner two blocks from me. My mother and I made the decision that I would go to whatever school I was assigned to. My cousin around the corner was assigned to the previously all-white school. I was assigned to the previously all-black school. So that's where I went for the first two years of integration. When time came to enter high school, there was a decision and I decided I would go to Louisville Male High School, which was previously all-white.

DC: And had a pretty good academic reputation?

RC: Male?

DC: Yeah.

RC: It had the best in the city at that time. It had high academic standards, excelled in athletics, had an ROTC program.

DC: And you had choice in where you would go to high school?

RC: Yes.

DC: And so why Male?

RC: I had an older cousin there. A lot of my friends were going to Male. Its reputation academically was very high.

DC: What else did you discover?

RC: High academic quality, terrible treatment of African-American students to the point where halfway through, half of us really thought about transferring but we decided we would stick it out. I think it followed the traditional pattern of integration, at least in Louisville at that time. We had no black faculty, staff, or coaches. Male had previously been all-male and about 1952, had become co-ed. So the old-line faculty was still reeling from *that*. Then to have to come and deal with African-Americans, hell, they didn't know what the hell they were doing.

DC: Now did you have friends that were at Central?

RC: Oh yeah.

DC: So you knew what was going on in other schools?

RC: Oh yeah, we all -- our friendships didn't change because of schools. As a matter of fact, when we really started sitting in, it was primarily students from Male and Central. Plus we had other organizations. I was active in the YMCA and we had a co-ed Y club.

DC: I think Dr. [Deanna] Tinsley mentioned that that was sort of the roots to some extent. She said the Y was crucial in that.

RC: She went to Central. We went to Male. We still partied together. Those relationships remained intact, even with the students that went to Shawnee and Manual. Louisville was small enough where you kept in contact, either through church, the Y, or other social outlets. We stayed in very, very good contact with one another. Therefore when we really started sitting in, the Hi-Y club became the basis for the—well I was already in the NAACP, but many of them joined. We all—

DC: In the youth chapter?

RC: Yes. So sometimes it would be hard to differentiate if you were at an NAACP meeting or a Hi-Y meeting.

DC: Same place, same people.

RC: Yeah, matter of fact, we all met at the YMCA. It was the same place, same people, different days. The structure for involvement was there. Parental involvement, now my mother was not a meeting-going person except to church, but she's the one that got me involved, enrolled me, rah-rah supported.

DC: Do you remember what she told you about that or discussions that you would have?

RC: Oh yeah, especially when we started sitting in. I'd always been told that if you get arrested, I'm going to beat the hell out of you, blah blah blah. But we had actively been sitting in or standing in as it turned out, because at a department store downtown called Stewart's, we couldn't get in the front door to sit, so we stood. We had closed them a couple times that week before. I guess the feeling became that they were going to start arresting us. That morning before I went to school, there was this [feeling], or even that

night before, that they're not going to continue to let you close them down and they will probably arrest you. And then we went through that bit; "this is a different type of arrest than the others that I have threatened you with. If you get arrested, make sure you've got all my numbers at work. Call me. Hope you're prepared in case you are arrested." We went over that very matter-of-factly. It wasn't—I'm sure she was concerned and nervous, but she never let on like it. But yeah, we had those conversations.

As a matter of fact, all of us who were arrested had the support of our parents. That was one of the problems because we were in high school and under eighteen. We went through juvenile, the vast majority of us. Of course, then that had been a debate earlier between the adults and the youth, the adults feeling that in the other cities where you had had massive sit-in movements—Nashville, Greensboro, Atlanta, and at the time we were sitting in, Houston, Texas, were the hotbeds—those sit-in movements were conducted by college students. We did not have a historical black school [of higher education] in Louisville, so we thought, hey so what? *We* can do it. That was a debate between us and the adult branch [of the NAACP].

DC: And were they here in town or were they nearby? Was there actually a chapter?

RC: There was a chapter.

DC: There was an adult chapter, okay.

RC: Yeah. As a matter of fact, that's the charter over there. It goes back to 1914. We're one of the oldest charter affiliates of the NAACP.

DC: You had people that you could work this out with and strategize?

RC: Oh yeah. They were there but we disagreed with them. Reverend Hodge was president at the time. I remember he called me that night before -- he's deceased now --

and told me, "Y'all can't go tomorrow. We fear they're going to arrest you and we're not prepared." My attitude was: you may not be prepared but we are. I talked to Deanna Tinsley's father, who was an attorney, and he told Deanna and us the same thing my mother basically did. I think the parents had been talking. They told us, "We'll be prepared. We'll come down." While we all knew that their concerns were genuine, we did not want to stop for fear of arrest.

DC: You had started it, you had momentum.

RC: And we were growing. We had about eighteen that first day that they arrested. There were eighteen of us. Deanna was among them.

DC: What about the very first day that you went? There were how many?

RC: Don't remember. I really don't.

DC: About a half a dozen or so?

RC: Yeah, something like that, and it started gradually building up until that day we were in Stewart's and they did arrest [us] that first Monday that we went back. They arrested five of us. The next day—

DC: Did they arrest both girls and boys?

RC: Yeah. It was really interesting. We had eighteen, sixteen were African-American, two were whites. They arrested three black males and two white females. As a matter of fact, they were the only white students that participated with us.

DC: They were high school students also?

RC: Yeah. We were all high school students. In the earlier stages we were all high school students, no adults. That next day after the arrests, of course we had to go to juvenile court. Henry Triplet, who Tracey [K'Meyer] also knows, was the juvenile court judge. They paroled us or put us in the custody of—not paroled but put us in the custody of

our parents. Of course that next afternoon we went right back but by that time, there were about thirty-seven of us. More arrests ensued. The next day we were up to about seventy-five.

DC: And this is being covered by the paper?

RC: Not well, not well.

DC: Is the *Louisville Defender*—

RC: The *Louisville Defender* is the African-American newspaper. At that time, you had the *Courier-Journal* and the *Louisville Times*. The first day that we were arrested was a little bitty blurb. They didn't start covering it until we grew and began to almost be able to take over downtown Louisville. When we got up to seventy-five or a hundred, of course our tactics changed. At that time, we were meeting at the Chestnut Street Y. The students from Male and Central were just -- it was right down the street from Central. I don't know if you've seen the physical [layout]. At Male we caught the bus and went on. Then we outgrew the Y in terms of capacity. Quinn Chapel AME Church was right next to the Y and they offered us their facilities and that's where we started gathering. We would leave there en masse and go downtown. It was about a five-block walk from 9th and Chestnut to 4th and Chestnut.

DC: So you had the support of the pastor?

RC: Oh yeah.

DC: And other pastors?

RC: Yeah because that first day we were arrested -- I'm a member of Green Street Baptist Church -- my pastor, the youth director, and the executive director of the Y, they were the first ones there. That's when I say parental support was there. Every parent was there to get their child, no questions.

DC: So Quinn became the site of mass meetings.

RC: Quinn became the site of the student gatherings. Every Sunday after that first arrest, we started having mass meetings at Zion Baptist Church at Twenty-Second and Muhammad Ali, where D.E. King was the pastor. That is when the adults came together, whether they were CORE, NAACP. The students and the adults would just have a mass meeting, of course to raise money and to somewhat plot strategy and to garner support, because support was not there when you think back from every aspect of it. Ministers were wonderful. They got together and started collecting offerings and blah, blah, blah. Civil rights groups were wonderful. Fraternities and sororities came on board, the alumni chapters.

When you think back on it and you put everything in perspective, I guess that actual movement started about '59. The reason I say that is that Christmas of 1959, *Porgy and Bess* opened at the Brown Theater in Louisville. For that performance it was mail-order tickets. So we're in the [NAACP] Youth Council and there was a different group then. I was the youngest in that old group going out.

DC: The theater is segregated but the tickets are mail-order?

RC: Mail-order. So a perfect setup for us to order the tickets, already prepared to picket and make our signs because we knew they weren't going to let us in, present ourselves. It opened up on Christmas day and we presented ourselves on Christmas day. That was my first really direct action involvement.

DC: That was before the department store?

RC: Yeah. This is in '59. And we picketed the entire Christmas holidays to no avail.

DC: Again was that a group of students?

RC: Yeah but most of them were college students.

DC: And were home for Christmas break?

RC: No, they were members of the NAACP youth chapter. They didn't have a college chapter there so they were the youth chapter, but they were college students. They were older. Most of them graduated and went on. Then in 1960, and I'm trying to get my dates right, Woodford Porter became president of a voter registration effort.

DC: Richard Porter?

RC: Woodford. Mr. Porter's still alive. Going back and reading his speeches or newspaper accounts, he maintained that fifty thousand Negroes registering to vote in Louisville would desegregate Louisville. Alderman Beckett, who was the lone black on the old Board of Aldermen, had introduced a Public Accommodations Ordinance. The city Law Director indicated that the Beckett ordinance would be in violation of state statute or in conflict with state statute. So the board did not rule, did not even take a vote on that first ordinance. [The] State Attorney General came out and said it was not in conflict with state statute. So Beckett reintroduced his ordinance. It was killed. The president of the Board of Aldermen was a candidate for mayor. He was the Democrat. He was running in the primary. He was also my high school principal. The campaign for voter registration was ongoing. That was in 1960. In 1961, in February, was when we started sitting-in at Stewart's in downtown. So I want to put all of that in context for you. We demonstrated on up until Easter just about every day downtown. Easter was a big shopping day for African-Americans and we started the "Nothing New for Easter" Campaign. That grew out of a mass meeting. That campaign was successful. There were no blacks downtown shopping.

DC: How did the merchants respond?

RC: Nervous because when we demonstrated, whites weren't shopping either, because at that particular point, Louisville's 4th Street was the main shopping [area]. You had all your downtown theaters, your better restaurants, and your stores on that corner, from Broadway to Market. It was easy to disrupt with a demonstration. We continued demonstrating with periods of negotiation on through that summer, and then we even expanded to Fountain Ferry Park, which was a large amusement park in the west end of Louisville. Then we graduated and left.

DC: Now had some of those stores caved?

RC: No, they were still holding. That year in November was the general election, where blacks overwhelmingly voted for the Republican nominee, who said that if the Board of Aldermen would pass it, he would sign it, versus the Democratic nominee, who said nah. So you had that political change.

DC: Right, a demonstration of black voting power.

RC: Yeah. And the Republican candidate won, and the following year, public accommodations was passed. So that was the long and the short version. I think -- so many people think—it was not just the demonstrations. I think during that campaign we encompassed about every tactic that we could at that particular time. It took the agitation and demonstrations -- it took the voter registration, it took the voter participation. And it worked well.

END OF DISC 1, TRACK 1

START OF DISC 1, TRACK 2

DC: Now you graduated and went on to Howard?

RC: Yeah.

DC: Did you come right back to Louisville after Howard?

RC: Almost. I stayed up there a couple months, several months.

DC: And you were very much involved in Democratic politics?

RC: Yeah. I was vice-chairman—although wait a minute – was I still vice-chairman? No. They kicked me off. They threw me out. Johnson was president. I had worked for the Democratic National Committee and for the Inaugural Committee, but that same year, that national convention helped spearhead an anti-Vietnam resolution.
(laughter)

DC: You were shown the door?

RC: Well, they made entering the other door quite difficult. Then I came back to Louisville. I came back to Louisville in about '66.

DC: Okay, and started getting involved in politics here.

RC: Well yeah. I didn't—I came back looking for a job. Norb Bloom and Lukey Ward and I had known one another and they called me to ask if I would have some time to help a woman by the name of Georgia Davis, who was running for the state Senate. I said I don't know her. I've met her, but I really didn't. So she and I got together. I eventually became her campaign manager for that campaign. She won, long association, told her this morning, "I can't shake you with a stick." (laughter) That began my involvement. After she won and went to the Senate, she didn't have any slots of course, because of seniority, but Norb Bloom was the chairman of the Labor and Industry Committee. This was before the general assembly of Kentucky had paid staff or professional staff. So Norb asked me would I serve as his staff person for the Labor and Industry Committee. I got there and Julian Carol decided to expand my roles. I guess they decided hell, I didn't have but one

meeting a week or something like that, and we're going to pay him every day. So I became the assistant reading clerk and Julian's press assistant.

DC: Alright, they just kept adding titles.

RC: Yeah, well they added titles. And basically press assistant when they would go into sessions, sat over there with the press, talked to them, gave them access. Hopefully I didn't have to serve as reading clerk. That couple hours a day, that was the boring part. Although it was fun at times because there was one representative I never could pronounce his name. I know I was--. (laughter) But it was a great learning experience and I did that. It was during that time I met Walter D. Huddleston. Then after that I went with SCLC for awhile as Executive Director of Kentucky Christian Leadership Conference and did that for a couple years.

DC: Where was that based?

RC: In Louisville. A.D. King, right after the assassination, I really went with them, and did that work on the Poor People's Campaign and the sanitation workers strike in St. Petersburg. Then I went into business. I opened a convenience food market, got a franchise, and after about a year and half, hated it. Something had to be wrong when the most exciting thing was that you didn't mind getting robbed. Something has gone seriously wrong.

DC: When that's what you're looking forward to. (laughter)

RC: I mean I got tired of doing inventory, just I thought, shit.

DC: It wasn't for you.

RC: No. In '72, Huddleston was running for the U.S. Senate. I thought let me get the hell out of here. I went and worked in that campaign. I still had the store. And surprise, surprise, he won. In January of '73, I packed bags and moved back to DC and stayed with

him his twelve years in the Senate. Became a tourist for about a year after that. He lost in '84. In '86, I finally decided after I had dinner with Governor Martha Lynn Collins one night up in DC and she had offered me a job that night. And I came back as deputy commissioner of personnel for the state, plus other assignments. I had turned that down once before because I told her, I don't want to get caught interpreting personnel regulations, you know. That does not seem very exciting.

DC: But?

RC: She said, "Oh it may be interesting to you when you get in there because you're going to have the state's affirmative action plan. I've just put some goals and time tables into it." So I did that and remained through the next administration. Then I took a sabbatical for awhile.

DC: So in '75, you were in DC?

RC: In '75, I was in DC.

DC: Okay, but did you hear, I mean you must have been—

RC: Oh well of course—

DC: Well-informed.

RC: We read the papers every day. Also we were somewhat involved because Governor, Julian Carol was governor, had asked the senator to hold some congressional hearings on busing.

DC: Okay.

RC: Geared toward opposition. Well, I was terribly upset and the senator said, okay. You put everything together. He said, "You're right. At the rate they want to go, it is strictly, it's going to be a very biased hearing. You take the pro-busing position and put those panels together," blah blah blah. So yes, involved.

DC: So what was your personal viewpoint on it?

RC: Supported, still do. As it turned out, it has been successful. It is primarily the major vehicle that has ensured the integration of schools in Louisville and Jefferson County.

DC: But an ongoing process.

RC: A long process, an ongoing process. [The Central High School law suit] has passed Judge Hayburn's ruling. It has now passed Sixth Circuit and Teddy Gordon is going to probably file an appeal with the U.S. Supreme Court. The NAACP and I still support the school board on this issue.

DC: Now did you know Teddy Gordon personally?

RC: Mmm hmm.

DC: I mean he was involved or was he not in the civil rights movement?

RC: I don't remember. He was involved politically and I really don't remember his politics that well. I just think he's on the wrong side of the issue.

DC: And did they come to the NAACP, did he come looking for support?

RC: No, not since I've been president.

DC: Do you think he knew what response he'd get?

RC: He knew, yes. One of our executive committee members is Darrell Owens, who I was talking to when I came in here. Darrell has been the Jefferson County Commissioner, now State Representative. He was president of the [NAACP] branch back in '75, and he was one of the attorneys that filed suit [in the original desegregation case in 1975]. The organization itself just has a long history and we're not going to turn on that. Secondly, there is no viable alternative. Do you go back to the neighborhood concept of

schools? Our neighborhoods are segregated basically. So if you do that, you go back to prior to '75 or even prior to '56.

DC: Yeah, it doesn't sound like, from the people that I've heard opposed, I haven't heard a lot of alternate suggestions.

RC: There have been none, except the neighborhood concept of schools. Of course, that's the ideal, but as long as your neighborhoods are segregated, as long as your neighborhoods are segregated by race, economics, you're going to have poor, all-black schools. Boom. To me that's a non-issue, although we have to continue to be on guard to fight, but it's just a non-issue.

DC: So have you watched with interest what's been going on with Central since the law suit?

RC: Yes.

DC: What do you think the future holds for Central?

RC: In looking, from what I gather and to be very honest with you, I have not read with that in mind the article that appeared in the *Courier*. I read it but I didn't look specifically for schools to see where Central actually placed under the rating systems.

DC: Oh just the other day?

RC: Yeah. But it was not in danger.

DC: It wasn't going to be shut down.

RC: Mmm hmm.

DC: Yeah, it wasn't one of the few that was named, but I think you needed a negative score of four to be on that—

RC: List.

DC: List of six that were in danger, and most had zero or one, and Central had three, so Central is—

RC: Is a marginal school. I'm not too sure what impact that suit that changed Central's enrollment patterns--. You would need to talk to somebody at the board and I hope you covered that with Deanna.

DC: Mmm hmm.

RC: Okay.

DC: I was over at the school assignment office the other day too.

RC: Okay, and Deanna and I haven't talked about that so I'm not quite up to where I would want to be, at least in terms of, because my question would be did the suit itself or the change of Central's enrollment policies, does that have any bearing on its current standing?

DC: Yeah, I guess the crucial question. That's something I couldn't get. It's hard to answer.

RC: So I don't know the answer to that at this point. I guess everyone's jury is probably still out on that.

DC: Right, I mean one thing that I did ask about that you can see is that I mean clearly there was a lot of white dis-enrollment from programs at Central and then you have to ask what happened, where did they go, and why, I mean particularly programs that are there and nowhere else, like veterinary science.

RC: Yeah.

DC: Now there's calls to start a new one somewhere else.

RC: So we will continue to monitor that, you know, and follow it very closely.

DC: Then this latest lawsuit you think will be appealed?

RC: From all indications. I only know what I saw in the paper and on TV, hearing the parents seem to indicate that they would proceed. Although they never came out and said we're definitely go to, I would imagine they will. So we'll just have to be prepared for that.

DC: So this is just to have a series of general, overview, evaluative questions. The first one is your opinion of whether school desegregation here was a success or a failure, and I think you've answered that.

RC: I think it was a success, yes.

DC: The process of desegregating, the way starting in '75 with the implementation of that plan, I'm just trying to get an idea of who saw to the successful implementation of that. In your opinion, did you see teachers or administrators, the power that they exerted in that process, as being key?

RC: I think you had a fairly strong superintendent at that time and I think a federal judge in Judge Gordon, who was going to monitor it. I think plus because of the demonstrations, the African-American community was going to monitor it also. I think one of the more interesting things, I think everyone realized that the African-American community was going to bear the brunt of busing, but the vast majority felt that it was a price worth paying for equal education. I think the success of it, a judge, superintendent, the teachers association is very strong here and I think they played a major part. I think it was a combination.

DC: It really took those parents and their—

RC: Parents and their commitment.

DC: And some brave students in the beginning anyway, or all—

RC: They all were. It's interesting over the years how the opposition to it has subsided. Until they brought that suit at Central, every once in awhile something would come up but it was never a burning issue and it has still not been a burning issue. I was suspicious, especially when they won, when Gordon won, I knew he was going to make an assault on the rest of the system; it was a matter of time.

DC: So those people who brought that suit you see as not representative of a large proportion of the community?

RC: No.

[telephone rings]

RC: Can you excuse me for a second?

DC: Yeah, absolutely.

END OF DISC 1, TRACK 2

START OF DISC 1, TRACK 3

RC: Give me one more minute.

DC: Yeah that will be perfect.

RC: One more minute. I'll tell you what, I've got this nasty Kentucky habit. If I can step outside of this door.

DC: Alright.

END OF DISC 1, TRACK 3

START OF DISC 1, TRACK 4

RC: Yeah because you're late and I'm going to be late too.

DC: Yeah okay. We'll let's just do a final question, which is I always ask people if there's anything that I didn't ask you in the course of this that you think I should have asked you or that you might have expected me to ask you.

RC: No.

DC: So anything you just want to add.

RC: I think, particularly as far as Louisville is concerned, we have, the issues that were issues when I became involved have become non-issues: segregation of public facilities, the school, and etcetera. I guess most of the time when I do something like this, I often reflect back to my days as a student at Howard and on the debate team and how we would sit around and philosophize, thought we knew everything. But I go back to some conversations and when we get together, it's still a part of it. Two things. Once when they raised Congress's salary to twenty-five thousand dollars and we thought oh my God, to be able to make twenty-five thousand dollars; we would die for that. But the other aspect of it was that the racial problems would be solved and over in ten to fifteen years, when the George Wallaces and the Herman Tallmadges all passed off the scene, that it would just be a matter of a couple years and you know. That's not the case.

I think when we look in Louisville at a report that came out last week for the Judicial Fairness Commission, that blacks are sentenced than whites for doing the same crimes, is a realization that we have not accomplished all we thought we had, a realization that the discrimination has changed its face, and that we have to develop new tactics to combat it. I guess in my case, I've almost come full circle from the youth council to now, with about a little bit better than a forty-year period. The struggle is still there. I guess at some points we may question is there a need for an NAACP. I think when you look at our community today you see a definite need. We've got to get involved with the murder rate. We've got to get involved with the criminal justice system. We've got to remain involved in the education system. We have got to come up with some solutions to help close these gaps in attainment. I was talking with some younger folk, how do we get across to African-

Americans jail is nowhere you want to be? How do you get across to students you're not white because you want to learn and attain? These are all areas that we've got to become involved in, not only the NAACP but the entire civil rights community, in order to effect some positive changes in our community. That's it. I hope it's what you were looking for.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Emily Baran. December, 2005.