

**GREENSBORO VOICES/GREENSBORO CIVIL RIGHTS ORAL HISTORY
COLLECTION**

INTERVIEWEE: Rev. Otis Hairston and Rev. Nelson Johnson

INTERVIEWER: William Link

DATE: May 5, 1989

[Begin Tape 1, Side A]

WILLIAM LINK: This is William Link and the date is May 5, 1989. [tape interruption]--
Reverend Otis Hairston, and Reverend Nelson Johnson. It's accurate to call you
Reverend?

NELSON JOHNSON: Yes.

WL: Just a way from graduation, but you're still--

OTIS HAIRSTON: He's been ordained, yes.

WL: You have been ordained?

NJ: Yes.

WL: Great. I wonder if we could just start the interview by talking a little about your
background, Reverend Hairston, and your early life in Greensboro, and, in particular,
your memories of how race relations occurred in Greensboro, and how black and white
people co-existed, didn't co-exist. How would you characterize--I mean, your earliest
memories of--

OH: Well, I was born in Greensboro. It happened that my father was a minister. The same
community that I'm pastoring now, he pastored the same church. I can remember very
well, my father had certain principles. Persons use to come in to collect insurance, and
they used to want to have to keep their hat on, and he'd say, "Well, you have to take your
cap off, or hat, if you want to come in here." He demanded a certain amount of respect in
his home.

And, of course, he would not permit them to call him by his first name, like you would do with some persons. He would insist, "If I call you Mister, you respect me and call me [Mister]." So, he insisted.

So, I grew up in that type of environment where certain demands were made of people, white people, when they came to the church and came to the home. And I remember very well several cases where he would have to turn persons away. They didn't want to take their hat off, they wanted to come in the house--they'd done this as a practice--and he said, "No, you don't come in this house with your hat on."

So, the attitude was that you didn't have to respect black people. And, he was a person that demanded that they would respect him. If they wanted a favor, if they wanted to come in his house and talk, in the church, and likewise, they had to show certain respect for him. He demanded that, and I guess I grew up under that type of an attitude in a father who demanded certain things, wouldn't accept certain things.

WL: And had kind of a high level of self-respect and pride.

OH: Yes.

WL: Would the typical--you suggested some of the reactions of white people who come to the door. Would you say that some of them were taken aback by this kind of thing?

OH: Oh yes, they resented, of course. They'd go to other homes in the community, trying to sell insurance, and trying to sell something, and people would let them in. But he just wouldn't let them in. He demanded that if they wanted to talk to him, they had to respect him. They couldn't come into the house and talk, try to sell anything, or talk to him unless they had certain respect for us. He demanded that. But they would do it in other parts of the community and folks would just not say anything, of course. They'd let them in.

WL: I wonder if you could expand a little bit more about your father. He sounds like a very strong person.

OH: Well, he grew up in the community, plus where--his father, of course, was a share cropper, and not a slave. He was a share cropper. And of course, with the attitude of his father, of course, accepting white people and thought that they were superior and we had to do whatever they said do, he developed a different attitude, I guess. That was unusual during that time, because most of them would follow the pattern of their parents. But he just changed, and he just thought they had to respect him. He was a person like they were persons, and he had to be respected as a person. He respected them as a person, and he demanded that he would be respected as a person. Not as a black person, but as a person.

WL: He obviously communicated that to you as a son.

OH: Yes, I saw that in him, of course.

WL: Did he communicate that to his congregation as well?

OH: Yes. The attitude, I think, was reflected in the congregation because we've had persons who've grown up during his time. In fact, the person who started the Youth Department of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] grew up in our church under my father: Randolph Blackwell, who later was the Activity or Program Director for Martin Luther King Jr., who started, perhaps, the most effective poverty program for blacks and for poor people in the south, really. I think that [President Jimmy] Carter was so impressed that I'm sure that he appointed him as the Director of Minority Affairs. Randolph Blackwell, he grew up under my father, and had persons who had developed the attitude. His father would not let them do certain things downtown, would not let them drink in the fountains that said "negro," "white"--he wouldn't permit them. Certain things that he taught his [children] as a result of coming up.

And we've had others, when they had the freedom of choice, I think out of the four or five persons who applied, the kids who going[went] to the integrated schools, or all-white school, three of them were members of the church. That's before I got here. So I think it developed, the attitude developed within the church as a result of his attitude.

WL: When you went to downtown Greensboro and saw these signs, white and black drinking fountains, white and black restrooms, presumably, separate entrances, restaurants that black people couldn't eat in, buses that were segregated by race--how did that effect you as a young boy? Any memories about that?

OH: Well, of course, I guess it's said to you when you're growing up that we were not as good as others. That we were inferior--a lesson, of course, that was taught to, I think, all age groups of people. But, I've had a father who taught us because we could not do it, we had to do this, that we were not inferior. This was a system which was a degraded system, it was not something to say to us that we are not as good as other people because they have a different fountain, different restrooms.

WL: But your father always taught you that it was a wrong system.

OH: Oh yes. He always taught this. Preached this.

WL: Did most people in the black community understand--most people had to get along with it obviously; it was something you had to, on a day-to-day level, something one had to live with.

OH: Yes. The advantage he had was that he didn't have to depend on white people primarily. And those who worked for white people, of course, they would have to do certain things. He was somewhat free because he didn't have to depend on them primarily.

WL: So, in fact, he was independent, completely independent.

OH: To a certain extent. Yes.

WL: Growing up in Greensboro, as you did, how would you characterize race relations? Compared to other places, to the extent that you're able to compare it to other places, was it good, or bad, or somewhere in between?

OH: Well, bad in Greensboro, I think. Of course we didn't understand a lot of things during that time. But I was very fortunate in having teachers--I mentioned Mr. Vance Chavis, who taught us in high school certain things--that we ought not pay money to go to a theatre and go up in the balcony. They drilled that. And when I went to college, we started an effort to keep students, young black people, from going up in the balcony in theatres, to stay away from them. That's a result of the teachers we had in high school. And we just stopped--almost had, I guess, eighty percent support among college students in Raleigh. Two colleges just refused to go up in the balcony to see a movie.

WL: Where did you attend?

OH: At Shaw University in Raleigh.

WL: So, this was a local boycott in Raleigh?

OH: More of students, primarily.

WL: Informal boycott, or semi-organized?

OH: Well, we just organized that we would not do it, that we ought not have to go to the balcony to see a movie. It was unnecessary to see a movie. So, we were able to--I guess we had eighty percent support. That was some years back.

WL: Mr. Chavis indicated the same thing to me, that he would never ride a bus--

OH: He taught this, he taught us this in high school, that we ought not to do this, and it carried over into college. I don't think other students at college, at that time, perhaps had had teachers like that, and perhaps the idea came from me because I had it drilled in me in high school by these teachers.

WL: Black teachers provided a very strong role model.

OH: Yes, in Greensboro.

WL: Did you have--you went to Dudley in high school?

NJ: No, I grew up in Halifax County, North Carolina [born in Airlie, NC]. I'm from North Carolina, but I came to Greensboro as a student.

WL: At A&T [North Carolina A&T State University]? I see. How would you characterize your early memories. Now let's see, you were born in what year?

NJ: In '43 [April 25].

WL: Forty-three. So, you grew up in the 1950s in Halifax County which is a fairly rural county.

NJ: Yes, very rural.

WL: Were you born in the country?

NJ: In a rural area. The town that I claim is Lillington, and it's about a thousand, maybe fifteen hundred.

WL: That was the nearest town?

NJ: That was the nearest town. I grew up on a farm there.

WL: I'm always interested in the comparison between cities and rural areas in terms of race, in terms of race relations.

NJ: Well, on the race question, it can best be characterized by distance and hostility. I had a somewhat unique experience. My parents' grandparents were brought up from Louisiana after the war, and our slave masters lived in the same area. So, there was a direct lineage,

the Thorne family. And my mother's maiden name is Thorne. And so I grew up approximately two miles from the people who were our slave masters. And in fact, there was a boy [Will Thorne] in that family roughly my age. We both rode a school bus, and actually we never spoke. We passed each other every day on separate school buses, going to separate schools, but I probably wouldn't recognize him if he came in now. We never had a conversation. We waved the last day of school. Actually, we didn't even wave. There was just no relationship, I mean, there was distance.

I came in contact with people when I bought stuff at the store, and that kind of thing. I caught a bus and went to a student council convention in Gastonia in 1960. This was before the 1961 freedom rides. And I chose, me and another fellow, to sit on the front seat of the bus. And we were beaten pretty bad, actually.

WL: In the bus station in Charlotte?

NJ: In the bus, not in the bus station. I was knocked to the floor, face down, and physically forced to the back seat, and most of the people just looked the other way. The bus driver was there, and the man stood up and took his coat off and just hit me against the head. I went to the floor and went to the back. That was not in Halifax County, that was in Charlotte, but it was en route to a meeting that I was going to.

But I think at that time it kind of reflected a certain kind of consciousness about--similar to what Reverend Hairston was saying. I didn't ride the bus much because I didn't travel much. But when I did ride during that period, I chose to sit on the front seat, and that was the result of it. But I think hostility was very real in that community and there was no meaningful relationship that I can think of.

WL: Not much communication between races?

NJ: Very little. I think the older people in the community had the standard type of relationship. You had to buy from the store and there was a line of credit most people had. You would come in--it was a rural store. And in that sense, the man that ran the store, he called Aunt Blanche--that's what he called our mother. He would seem kind, superficially. "How's Aunt Blanche doing today?" and that kind of thing.

But it was a real structure of inequality. As long as you stayed within that structure, things were okay. If you challenged that structure any, you'd solicit vicious reaction. And it wasn't challenged that much in the area that I grew up in. There was a lot of discussion because it was that time in history, the *Brown [v. Board of Education]* decision, Montgomery, Little Rock, Emmett Till, and all these things were in the national news. So obviously this was the kind of thing that you would talk about a lot. And being a youngster, we did talk about it.

WL: But there was a great deal of restiveness in the black community. Perhaps, from what you said I gather that white people didn't fundamentally understand black people, there was a gap in communication. Or maybe I'm overstating it, I don't know.

NJ: No, I think there was. There's always been a duality in my own estimation to us as a people. There's a certain dimension of black people that white people assume that they understand. And they spoke to that dimension. What they didn't understand was the other dimension of how deeper inside of black people, they actually thought of them [whites]. [laughs] Some black people. Not all. And how they understood the dual standard, the mistreatment.

My mother, as much as she--and she had this feeling--as much as she kind of respected the Thorne family out of which our family came as slaves, that she would, on the other hand, spend a lot of time talking about how evil white people were and how unjust they were. But when she went to the bank, she was very humble. [laughs] They could very well get the impression that she really liked them a lot. And I think some features of them, she probably did. But there was this other side of her that they would not know from their own experience because it didn't get shared with them. That was to come later in time.

WL: You mentioned the Emmett Till affair. As a young person growing up--I've heard a lot from other people that that was an event that really affected people. To what extent did that affect you? Did it--?

NJ: Well, it's one of the clearest, earliest memories that I have of the kind of brutal killings, lynch tying[?], and it was talked about a lot. The name--I don't have to think to recall that name. It's one of those names that just will come up [snaps fingers] because it was stamped at that period. And it kind of reflected the state of relations in the south, at least. [phone rings] Maybe in the nation.

WL: And it received widespread publicity at first, too. On television--

NJ: Yeah, it was talked about by people who had just a minimum consciousness. It was talked about quite a bit.

WL: In Halifax County, what kind of information were you getting about the rapid pace of change--the *Brown* decision, the Montgomery bus boycott, and the mobilization that's beginning to take place elsewhere? Is that coming in?

NJ: The two things that really stand out--and during my high school days--in Little Rock, school desegregation had started, and the eventual introduction of troops in Little Rock.

That was the--we had television in class looking when the troops were brought in. And, of course, earlier on, Montgomery--I was a little young to remember Montgomery, but Dr. King had emerged as a figure, and during my last year in school, which was 1961, a lot of my attention was focused on here, in Greensboro, on A&T. I remember very clearly, looking at the pictures of the sit-ins, and the people sitting in the halls, and I was so proud.

My view at that time was primarily one of denigration because that's the way things were talked about. I later came to see some major flaws in that and developed in my own thinking a real distinction between desegregation and integration as fairly different things. One takes the standards of the dominant culture and assumes that you assimilate and move into that, and I think at some real price to the integrity of your own self-will in people. Desegregation is basically the removal of barriers between people and the freedom of people to associate on some terms that would be mutually accepted. And I think we're still involved in it, in that discussion.

WL: Let's go back to Reverend Hairston a little bit, to when you graduated. When did you graduate from Shaw, or leave Shaw?

OH: Well, really 1941. I didn't leave, really, I stayed around and continued working and school.

WL: Stayed in Raleigh?

OH: Yeah, I didn't really leave, as such. I stayed on at Shaw to finish college.

WL: How long did you stay?

OH: Well actually, I stayed around and worked at Shaw and with the commission, and eventually ended staying around fourteen years, indirectly, from Shaw and the commission, which headquarters was on the campus of Shaw most of the time.

WL: What differences did you see between Raleigh and Greensboro in those days?

OH: Basically little difference. The same.

WL: Same sort of race relations basically?

OH: Yes. Well, I remember the governor, one of the governors of North Carolina, Governor [Clyde R.] Hoey, who taught Sunday School. And I used to occasionally follow him, and I was in college I think at that time. I remember Governor Hoey was saying that black

people, those that he knew--“negroes” that he called them at that time--did not want the type of freedom that some of the blacks were calling for. And he talked at those times--I remember writing a letter saying that the persons that he talked with were not free. They said what he wanted them to say. But he needed to call in some persons who were free, who could express themselves, and he would find out what blacks really thought.

And the same thing, we should say, that when, with whites, if we have to depend on them, we will say what they want us to hear. But, that’s not--some people will accept this, that black people don’t want it. They say, they’re satisfied, they’re happy. And some of them, I think, really believed that.

WL: But, there’s usually this kind of dependency relationship or paternalism that--

OH: At college at that time, we had four, three white colleges and two black colleges in Raleigh; of course, in Raleigh, we still have them. We had no association with the students during that period. They had confrontations sometimes, but no real association. I know some of the white students would, perhaps, come in the community of a black college, and, of course, they use to lock them away, and vice versa. That’s the only type of communication, and that type of confrontation during that period in the forties.

WL: What sense of change was there? I think, maybe this is a pretty hard question to answer here, but, with the war, and with particularly the *Brown* decision, 1954, was there much perception among people that things were going to change? The *Brown* decision called for desegregation.

OH: I don’t think so. I think the attitude was basically the same. They put up every effort to keep it from happening. I just showed an article I wrote when I was on the school board, saying basically that they attempted to find all kinds of plans to keep it from happening. The freedom of choice plan--what white student would choose to go to a black school with freedom of choice? A few blacks would choose to go to white schools under pressure, but what white would choose? And they knew that. It was planned in that way that you’d not have any integration; it was an attempt to block it. Integration and the mean for integration--not integration, desegregation, I think you’re right, because I use the word desegregation. We don’t have integration, but we had some desegregation.

WL: Since you brought up schools, let’s talk about that a little bit in Greensboro. You came back to Greensboro in nineteen fifty--

OH: Fifty-eight.

WL: Fifty-eight. That's when you took the pastorate here. What was the feeling about schools? They're obviously--on the one hand, there's a lot of pride in the kind of teachers that teach, black teachers that taught in schools, such as Mr. Chavis and others, provided a very strong role model. But on the other hand, [there was] a lot of inequality between black schools and white schools. Is that an accurate description?

OH: Yes, it's always been true. In fact, the high school I went to, we had a very strong principal who refused to permit them to send equipment, desks, books from the white high school. Most of the high schools, I think, I would say a lot of them, they would just send from the high school books, textbooks after they got through, desks and what not. We had a strong principal who would not accept any. He would say, "Take them back. We don't have a second-hand school, we will not accept it." He refused to accept used textbooks, desks, and what not.

But that was not true over the state for the most part. He had the courage to say "I will not accept it." And I guess it reflected in a lot of us. "We're not second class. We will not accept something that another person could use and they're going to hand over to us." So, I guess I was fortunate in high school to have a strong principal and strong teachers.

WL: What was the attitude of the city superintendent and the school authorities toward black schools in, say, the fifties and sixties? To what extent was there communication there between the powers that be: I suppose the city superintendent, who is always white, and the school board, which is always predominantly white.

OH: What happened during that period, they would have a black to be kind of a superintendent to the black students, and he would be responsible for the black schools, primarily. So you didn't have too much communication except through a black person who was, more or less, the assistant superintendent, not officially, but he was "systemed" in that he didn't have authority, but he was placed in charge of the black schools, more or less, to supervise, so that they would not have to have the type of communication with the whites on high levels. He would talk to the person on that level, the higher, and present certain things on behalf of the blacks to them. So, they could not have the opportunity to go directly to the high level person in the administration to make their presentation.

WL: How well did that work, that system?

OH: Well, it worked all right in some cases, but I said that the principal of our school, the Dudley High School, at that time, was the person who really could go directly--nobody could come between. He wanted--and of course, the superintendent had to confront him because he sent the desks back. And he just told them he would not; he was strong

enough, he was independent enough a person who probably could have gone over to Bennett [College] and taught, so he was independent. And he couldn't, he wouldn't accept some things that some of the other principals would, because they had to be secure. And their security depended on their attitude, acceptedness, accepting yourself in other school systems.

NJ: That was unusual for that period, wasn't it?

OH: Dr. Hopkins has always been a strong leader. He's always been a very strong person--he had some of the best teachers--at that time, I guess today the high schools would delight in having some of those teachers--the quality teachers he had at Dudley at that time. We had the teachers, they had the equipment. [laughs]

WL: Yeah, that's what I heard over and over again--a very high quality of teachers, dedicated.

OH: Yeah. We had the teachers but they had the equipment.

WL: There was enough unhappiness with this system, though, presumably?

OH: Well, of course, we--I guess, at that time, people accepted no other choice to make the best. And I think the attitude was "let's make the best with what we have." And, as a result of this, a lot of the black students who finished high school at that time really excelled. I wish we had a record to trace the high school graduates at that time in the Greensboro high schools, including the white high schools in comparison.

WL: You mentioned earlier that the movement toward desegregation was very slow. Ultimately, I guess, the only thing that got it desegregated was a federal judge.

OH: Yes, they had to--I mentioned in the article that in Greensboro, the attitude of the chairman of the board--the superintendent at that time--the attitude was very unusual. They thought that Greensboro ought to comply, that we ought not to fight the law, that students could not respect the law if we do not respect the law. This was the attitude, that "we need to go ahead and comply with the law."

But the pressure from the state [was] "You're going ahead of us, you're going too fast, you're going ahead of us. Let's slow down." [laughs] But the attitude in Greensboro was really, at least the superintendent and the chairman of the school board was, "Let's comply with the law," which is very unusual.

WL: Very unusual. And that was right after the *Brown* decision?

OH: Right after the decision. In that article--you see that article there? It states right after that decision, the first meeting, the chairman of the board said "let's comply, this is the law. Let's comply. Let's get ready to desegregate schools." The superintendent concurred and had a vote of the board. But the state called and said, "You all are going a little too fast, let's slow down there, let's wait here." [laughs]

NJ: Who was the governor then?

OH: Governor [Luther] Hodges.

WL: Hodges, Mr. Hodges.

OH: Yeah.

WL: So that's when the Pearsall Plan [1956]--

OH: Pearsall Plan, Pearsall Plan.

NJ: To lock them out.

OH: Pearsall Plan was signed, and it was designed to--

WL: To stall.

OH: Yeah, to--

[End Tape 1, Side A--Begin Tape 1, Side B]

OH: The first four days at the school, the junior high school and the first black central school, she did not have anybody. They would look at her and spit at her and do different things, and I was tempted to say to her, "Let's go ahead and let's give up on this."

But I said, "Let's try another day." And I think the teachers became sympathetic and talked with some of our students. After that, she had, at times, everybody wanted to sit by her at lunch to show we were not small. But it was not something in which they felt comfortable. I think that out of sympathy, you'd feel sorry for her. They would go ahead and try to be friendly, but it was not something that came from the heart. It was a type of pressure from teachers because--feeling sorry sometimes, sentiment[al], "I feel sorry for you, so I'll sit by you."

WL: It must have been a tremendous ordeal to have been a child, adolescent.

OH: It was, fourteen years old.

WL: Having lots of abuse heaped on you.

OH: Having lost her mother.

WL: But, was there much--there must have been, on the other hand, a lot of coordination and support to get those students in there.

OH: Yes. Well, we--after she had made it, of course, I told her, "The thing you need to do is to prove that you are superior. They think you're inferior." And sure enough, she came up with, I think, all A's and a B the first grading period. So, the thing she wanted to demonstrate [was] that "[you think] you're superior. You don't think you're inferior." I had to use a word, not "equal", but "superior" that you could sell.

WL: There was a good deal of opposition to desegregation among some white people.

OH: Oh yes. Oh yes. They would bring pressure. Most of the blacks who had applied for their kids to go to a formerly all-white school had to cut off their telephone. They called them all night, two or three o'clock in morning. [They called them] all kinds of names and everything. And if they were on a job, they would try to fire them because of this and this type of thing.

Of course, we had two persons who taught in public schools which had a lot of courage to apply teaching in schools at that time, to apply for their kids to go to a--the Blairs. First of all, Ezell Blair Jr., of course, he was the one who forced--one of the students who were at the sit-ins. See, the parents had a lot of courage. They applied for his sister to go to a formerly all-white school the first year.

WL: Was that [Greensboro] Senior High?

OH: No, junior high school, Gillespie. Only had one to go to senior high school, and she [Josephine Boyd] took a beating. She went to senior high school, Greensboro High at that time. I mean, you know, she went through something.

NJ: Difficult for her. I can imagine.

OH: Yeah, she went through something.

WL: I imagine the only way you get through that would be to have a lot of support at home and church.

OH: Yes, and support and a lot of courage on the part of a young person.

WL: Let's talk a little bit about the sit-ins of 1960 and then what happens up until 1963. What sort of impact did the sit-ins have on the black community in Greensboro?

OH: Well, the sit-ins gave courage to students throughout the city and throughout the state. It's not the first time; they've had students to do it before, people have done it before. But what happened before, they would get them up, they would fight them so that they would not stay there.

Same thing about the bus. My wife's mother, way before 1948-1949, was on the way [from] Raleigh to Knoxville, Tennessee, and she was sitting near the back. And a white man, white person, came on the bus at some point, and they wanted her to get up, and she refused to get up. And they stopped the bus twice to try to force her, and she wouldn't. When they got to Asheville, North Carolina, they had her arrested because she would not get up and give a white person her seat. I always felt that this was something that happened--she died about nine or ten months after--I think this was something related to it. But she refused to do it.

See, you had this to happen before, but not publicized. You have a lot of cases where a person done and not publicized. So, I think you've had persons, students before--this is not the first time that students have done this to young people--but see, they force them up. I know in Asheville, North Carolina, the Shaw choir, some years back, and we was sitting down at the drugstore, and they just kicked us out, the police just, you know, we couldn't stay there. They would have killed us, I guess. But see, it's not the first time it happened.

But see, these students refused to get up. And that's the thing that made the difference, so that the television folk would come by, and they'd make pictures, and publicize it, which gave courage to people, young people all over the country. You notice right after that, all of the colleges started sitting in. It sparked something. And if they had gotten up, of course nothing would have happened. They just sat there. "We're going to stay here until you give us a hamburger, a hotdog." That's the thing that made the difference: the courage to just sit there.

WL: So this kind of thing had been happening all the time, just--

OH: Oh, yes.

WL: --people being fed up with it, or--

OH: They'd kick them out, they'd have them arrested, and you never would hear about it. And of course, some would be frightened [and say] "get up from here, get up and run," because you don't know what would happen. But see, they said, "We're going to sit here. Regardless of the consequences, we're going to sit here." And that made the difference. They made up their mind they were going sit there--not going to sit there and get up. When they went there, [they said] "See, we're going to sit here." And that made the difference.

WL: What do you think they expected out of the police in Greensboro?

OH: They didn't care. I think the attitude: "We're going to sit here."

WL: No matter what.

OH: Yes. That made the difference.

WL: Were you in high school at this point?

NJ: I was in high school.

WL: How did that affect--you must have gotten news about this.

NJ: Oh yeah, I remember my whole family--my father, my mother, my brothers--we were all sitting looking at television when we saw this and there was like this exhilaration. It was a great--you identify with it. You're not doing it but in some sense you project yourself into it. It's almost like a Joe Lewis fight, you know, that you identify with this courageous and creative thing that people are doing and it's liberating. It really was a liberating feeling.

WL: So you, perhaps, sought to emulate it. Or you identified with it at least?

NJ: I identified with it and I wanted to be a part of it and vicariously was a part of it. I just saw myself kind of being a part of this group of people.

OH: This sparked the movement in other college students throughout the country--

NJ: We did it in a drugstore, and what happened was like what Reverend Hairston said. In this little town called Littleton, the three of us went down from high school to sit-in, but we didn't have any support. And this was a violent town. I mean, all of those little towns

down there, people would do things to you and there wasn't even television and it's just-- and I know that there were people who did make up their minds and stayed, they just got killed or beaten or jailed and there was no publicity about it and it was over. That kind of happened to us. We retreated before we were beaten, but we took a lot of abuse as a high school student, emulated the thing against it, but eventually we left because, you know, our parents and all. People were—it's a little different in college where you have a bigger setting, but when people stop credit to your parents--people will do all kinds of things.

WL: Small town. Everybody knew each other and they knew who you were and who your parents were.

NJ: Yeah. We knew what to do with them.

OH: I know I'd [speaking over each other] because of the parents.

WL: With the sit-ins obviously, I think there was a response, enthusiastic identification, vicarious identification. That was also the case in this community as well, wasn't it?

OH: Yes, see, the black community, of course, supported it. I guess the thing that happened, the black community was rejoicing that somebody finally had the courage enough to do it. It stimulated a lot of courage, I guess, among even older people, [phone rings] the parents, to call them to do things that, perhaps, they had not been, you know, ready to do. I sensed right after it happened in the community, the pride, the pride of black people throughout this community, Greensboro--we were rejoicing. [laughter]

Occasionally you'd have people say, "Well, I don't know whether the students ought to be doing that or not." But they say that because, perhaps, at where they work-- and some person in the work force said, "Now, they ought not to be doing this kind of thing." But generally I think the persons were very proud that the students had the courage to do this type of this thing, in the black community.

WL: You mentioned what happened in your town and the comparison of Greensboro would be--the experience was very different. Why do you think that's so? Why would it work in Greensboro, the sit-ins work in Greensboro, and not work in other places?

NJ: Oh, I don't know. There must have been a number of factors. Probably one was the determination of the poor people in the town. Just in talking a little with some of them and studying about it--Usually [unclear] and they have [unclear] discussions and you talk yourself into a decision and it's a commitment to each other. I suspect that the way they came to decide this was much more profound than the way we came to decide it. We decided on the basis of looking at them and their success.

You know, we were much younger, and the support base in a small town like that is much more fragile. It's much easier to crack. Because if something cannot amass those kinds of members and you can actually take the abuse--but it wouldn't mean the same thing, because they can just block it out. It wouldn't get any coverage if they didn't want it to get any coverage because everything is controlled. It's a lot more of the control situation [loud buzzing noise] in a small place like that. But I think, probably, we were not as prepared as the students that initiated this in Greensboro.

OH: You know, another thing, I think that support is important. Because right after it happened, the next day, Blair, who was a member of the church, felt secure in coming to us and said we'd need to run off some, to go over to the College and run off some copies to give instructions to students who were already going to be there at the same time. So he felt at home, he felt he could come over to, and get support, he had support in his church. He felt that I would support him, his parents would support him, and everything necessary to be done that we would support him. So, I think support is so important, too. They felt comfortable because they thought they would get support.

NJ: My high school was very different. When I came back and reported what happened to me in Charlotte on my way to the student government convention in Gastonia, I had it in my report, and that we had at that time a meeting of the entire student body--what did we call it? It was the coming together of everyone in the school, the principal always had some things to say, and I was asked to report on this convention. I told him about this and he refused to allow me to report what happened to me. Because he, in fact--he was right, that it would have brought down pressure on him if I had stood before the student body and simply said that I was beaten up in Charlotte. He said, "Just forget that and don't mention it."

WL: He was afraid of pressure from students?

NJ: No, I don't think so much from students. I think it was from the dominant culture. Once, because there were very good and dedicated teachers and the teachers were under a lot of pressure, because they were on the state payroll and so forth--and those who had that kind of strength and alternative possibilities for careers. But a lot of them were pretty much locked into that structure and he was one of them. He was one that did not want to rock any boats. Privately, he was against the kind of injustices and evils that were perpetuated in the society, but he was not committed to taking any risks.

So, you don't have that kind of support, and my church was the same way. It met once a month and was a small rural church and it was ten miles away from the--and there was only one drugstore--that's where our sit-in in this town was started. It's a very different situation than a city of this size.

OH: I think in terms of the community that my wife grew up in, [unclear] I guess the population [was] probably 60-40, 60 [percent] black, 40 [percent] white. And they were under a lot of pressure. Her father was principal of the school. He thought it ethical to try to get the people in the community to vote, and to get registered to vote. They really brought a lot of pressure on him, and eventually fired him. He had one teacher who taught political science who was not interested because the registrar said you had to be able to read and “interrupt” the Constitution [laughter]. You have to be able to recite, not to read, to recite by heart and “interrupt” the Constitution before you can register. And that really got to him and, of course, he talked about that. Of course, they eventually got him out as principal of school.

But you took--unless you, in the community like that, like he did--unless you were a compliant principal, you wouldn't have a job long. They wanted to be secure at that time. They couldn't take the risk, a lot of them.

WL: So the big difference is the great deal of autonomy the black community felt, the strength and power.

OH: Yes, in some of the cities we had some support. You have some blacks who still feel, because they've grown up in the old communities and probably come from Mississippi--but you have some blacks who would support any effort of this kind--which made a difference, when you have support; if you're out there long, it took a lot of courage. I am sure the four students thought they would have support from the college and from the community, which gave them, I guess, even more courage to do it. If they felt people might be against them and oppose what they'd done it would be more difficult, but they knew they would have support, they felt they would have support.

WL: And there was a sort of infrastructure, in Greensboro as well--there was their leadership.

OH: Yes. We talked about the--two of the students went to the same high school I went to, the same teachers. So, you can see the influence that they had.

WL: There had been a strong NAACP chapter as well.

OH: Yes. A fellow, Edmonds, who was here at the time, a very strong person, who left to go to Boston, I think, but he was here and he was president of the NAACP. No, he left the year before. But Hobart Jarrett was president of the Citizens [Greensboro Citizens Association] group, and he was a very strong person who communicated with some students at Bennett. I think the support they felt, it was received from the NAACP and the Citizens group, really helped them a great deal.

WL: Was there extensive black voting in the 1950s--registration, voting registration? I know the NAACP had been involved in voter registration efforts for a long time.

OH: Yes. Not on the same basis. Of course, I guess, they didn't recognize, really, until [Martin Luther] King [Jr.] came along and emphasized the importance. Before that time you would have some persons, you'd probably add a few persons to the book, but they didn't recognize to that extent. In Greensboro, perhaps, they did somewhat after the election which a black person ran for city council was defeated, in two times--two or three of them. And I think you had a person to run who was highly regarded in the community, and that is a doctor, Dr. [William] Hampton, who ran for the city council and his running simply out of interest on the part of black people to be qualified to vote. And he was the first one to win; he won the election. He ran the second time because of that, he actually led the ticket, he got more votes than anybody running for city council the second time he ran.

But I think this stimulated a lot of interest in the community. Because of this, they could see what could happen if you had enough blacks on the books along with the fairly decent white people, liberal white people. So, that's what makes it interesting in Greensboro. But I think generally, the King effort was the thing that really caused a lot of people to--

WL: If you had wanted, if you were a black person and you wanted to register to vote in Greensboro, would there have been obstacles in your way?

OH: I don't think you had the same kind that you had in a rural community, but the attitude was that "people are going to do what they want to do anyway." I mean, "why bother." You still have some of that today.

WL: Presumably a different case in Halifax County. Were people living like that too?

NJ: Very, very little. My father worked hard to vote. It was interesting. They would let one or two people vote, but if a group of people came around trying to vote, they would just shut it down, and reject it. Maybe that's a little different from Mississippi and Alabama where, in many instances, there were just no blacks participating. They were usually just one or two people and that was it.

WL: In the community?

NJ: In the community. And the rest of them, it hadn't really become a viable way in their own mind to go about addressing some things. Voting just didn't quite seem to be a vehicle, because access to it was so limited, and was so difficult to do.

They would even make it difficult to get driver's licenses. That's how connected this whole thing was. I had a difficult time getting a driver's license. The guy would tell me to go sit in the car at ten o'clock and I would sit out there until four [p.m.]. Then he would say, "Wait a minute for someone to come to take me out." [phone ringing] And then they would say, "There's no more time." And when they know you like that all these things happen to you and you just can't get anything done.

WL: Is that what you went through?

NJ: Actually, this fellow was just racist.

WL: Just giving you a hard time?

NJ: Yeah, and also, I think they really disliked black people. And it probably was, they probably needed more people to work. So, in terms of who got to--shifted out, it was like, if he didn't have any white people to show up, he would serve you eventually, if you acted nice. And he was just as rude as he could be. But as long as there were white people coming in, no matter what time they came in, he would serve them and you would just sit and wait. You'd sit in the place [and] after a while he would say, "There are no more seats in here; go wait in your car." And, that was that and you would just wait in your car.

WL: Obviously, black people wouldn't serve on juries either. That was another--

NJ: Minimally.

WL: There were some black juries?

NJ: I don't really recall. I never spent any time in the court during that period. I know that I can remember the first black lawyer that I've ever seen. It was a man named Walker. He threw the line on the community and suggested that people vote. You know, there weren't any black lawyers. There wasn't anybody that I knew was a lawyer. I don't know anyone in my community that I can recall was a lawyer. This man came from up this point, let's see--I don't know what city he was from, maybe it was Raleigh or Chapel Hill or something. There weren't any local people at all practicing as lawyers, until the mid-sixties.

WL: The sit-ins were, a success in terms of Kress and Woolworth's, but a lot was left to be done.

OH: The '63 demonstrations attempted to address that and other problems around. Because see, you got the five and dimes, but you still had some other places like the hotels and some of the large restaurants. It was '63 when they pursued it and opened the door to most of the public accommodations in Greensboro.

These demonstrations lasted for, I guess, four or five months probably and they agreed to--the city could not handle it, they could not accommodate the persons arrested; they had to feed them and what not. There was a pressure, really forced the city to become involved.

The city itself had not before, they had just put up folks in jail. "We are going to stop these folks from doing all these demonstrations--stop them." When the adults became involved, that was another thing. They thought maybe just students, but the adults became involved and they said "Good Lord. They're really hitting us." Adults being arrested, going to jail--you have to feed them, find a place to keep them overnight, and they couldn't keep them, and they'd turn them out, and the next night, they'd arrest them again. It just paralyzed the city almost.

WL: Between 1960 and the sit-ins in 1963, there's a big change taking place. I mean, the whole community is becoming mobilized.

OH: Oh yes, yes. The four students really, I think, assimilated a lot of courage on the part of people. In '63 we didn't have any trouble getting adults. We had had a march once, and had day after day about two thousand adults. Think about all the medical doctors, the lawyers, the principals, and the college presidents, had all these folk out there marching. About thirty-some preachers, ministers, they really gave a message in downtown.

WL: How did this mobilization of the whole movement take place? Was it done--

OH: Through the churches primarily.

WL: Through churches. The churches would be meeting places and--

OH: That's right, yes.

WL: Leadership coordination?

OH: Jesse, the students also--that's when Jesse Jackson came to the forefront. The students--he was president of the student body at A&T in '63 and a fellow, Thomas Corry, really

started the effort, the continuation of the movement. But Jesse as president of the student body had a lot of influence. So the president CORE would always say he was not a person who wanted to be out front. He'd say to Jesse, "You go ahead and lead this."

WL: Yeah, that's what I've heard. The real--

OH: Yeah. Jesse could get the students. He was president of the student body, quarterback on the football team. He could rally the students.

WL: He had a big following?

OH: Yes.

WL: So, he got the people out. [To Johnson] Were you at A&T at that point or was this something--

NJ: No. I went to the Air Force and then I came to A&T in 1965. Actually, I think Jesse left the year before I came.

WL: Sixty-four.

NJ: He was not there. Yeah, he left in '64. I came--I think he left the spring of '65. I came in the fall of '65, so, he was not at school. And I was really unaware of him until some, several years later.

WL: Yeah, he became prominent in--

NJ: Yeah, somewhat, it was around '67 or '68. I became aware of him.

OH: He came and went.

NJ: He came back several times.

WL: The '63 demonstrations--what would you say that the biggest achievement was of the 1963 demonstration?

OH: Well, it opened up the other, everything was just about open after that. Plus, it gave courage to people. They found out that they could do some things through pressure. You have to use pressure in order to get things done. I think the message got across. If you

want to get things done, you need pressure. You need folk--if they want to do it, they would go ahead and do it.

Like one of my fellows said, "Why don't y'all be patient?"

I'd say, "You know, if this is a problem, you really don't want to do something, and you say, let's wait and just put it off. If it's the right thing you want to do it, why do you have to wait to do it?" And I'd always come up with that one. See, the idea is, "let's wait." We've been waiting all these years, but the fact is, you don't want to do it. And waiting is the means of trying to get around doing it at all.

But I think the pressure was the thing, the message that got across, you have to use pressure. These folk don't want to do it, but the only way to do it is to use pressure, economic or whatnot. You've got to hurt them and hurt their pocketbooks and whatnot. And they said, "We've got to do it, not because we want to do it, because we are hurt. We could not afford to hurt."

I remember '67, I think, there was a demonstration--yeah, when King was assassinated--they wanted to have a march downtown, [in] '68, they wanted to have a march downtown. And the mayor of the city said, "No, no marching downtown." I couldn't getting him to commit. So, we had a meeting, a mass meeting and said, "Well, let's stay away from downtown. Nobody go downtown for anything except to bank, if you have to go. Just stay away from downtown. They don't want us downtown, let's stay away." It hurt them.

And my mother was in the bank once and they said, "When you black folk going to come downtown?" See, downtown was doing the right thing. You see, you have to hit their pocketbook. We had almost, I guess, 95 percent cooperation. You couldn't see the first, you couldn't see any black people downtown shopping, selling, buying anything. "Let's don't buy anything." Easter came. "Let's don't buy anything for Easter." When you hit them like that, you've [they've] got to do something. [They said] "We can't afford to be hurting like that."

So, you force them, the pressure's the thing, you learn that. You want to get it done, you have to hurt them, you have to bring some pressure. You do it, not because you want to do it, but because of pressure, they are hurting so they give in to it. That's still true really. You know, it's still true, it hasn't changed that much.

[End Tape 1, side B--Begin Tape 2, side A]

OH: No, no.

NJ: Things have not changed.

WL: Things had not changed? That was one of the questions that I--

OH: Basically, I think it's the same pressure forced people to do things that they really don't want to do. They never would have done it. If you don't have pressure, you wouldn't have had the changes you had.

WL: After 1963, you had everything downtown, the obvious barriers were gone. What you just suggested is that the problems are perceived as much more complicated and economic problems--

OH: Yes. The attitude has not changed. For instance, employment discrimination, all kinds of discrimination--they try to do a little something sometimes, just because perhaps a person's labor can really help them in business. And they forget about it, and they say, "Well, this black person could really help us in business. We better move him up and give him a position where he could be useful."

It's not the love or interest in the person, it's because they can be of some help to them. In other cases, they want to impress both of their fellow businesses. You know, "we got this black folk over here working," and whatnot, and windowdress so to speak, to brag about "we're trying to be decent people." But sincere, I don't think, sincerely, I don't think you have too much of a real change in attitudes.

WL: Reverend Johnson, you were in the Air Force?

NJ: Air Force, yes.

WL: And where were you stationed?

NJ: Basic training [was in] Lackland, Texas. I spent about two years at Westover Field in Massachusetts, and the remainder of my tour was in Baden Baden, Germany at 4 WING Air Station [Canadian Forces Base, Baden-Soellingen Germany], which was a Canadian station. We were a tiny organization there, a small group of U.S. on a NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] base that was predominantly Canadian, which is an interesting experience in itself in that they talked a lot about their problems with the French.

WL: Were they English speaking?

NJ: Yeah. The Canadians were English speaking. The French who were there, the minority in Canada, we had a lot of French-Canadians. We had a lot of camaraderie with them.

WL: As a minority.

NJ: As a minority, yeah, and also with the other Canadians as well, because they were, not viciously, but kind of anti-American, like some kind of “big brother” down south. So we had common cause with them too. It was interesting during this period.

WL: How did your experience in that Air Force affect the way you regarded the United States and what was going on at home?

NJ: I was a very accepting person of the general line of this country. I volunteered for Vietnam, which I later came to strongly disagree with and protested it. And I didn’t go to war, I was too inexperienced. They were taking only experienced people there, so I went to Europe.

I was very much for integration as it was presented, but I had not made the distinction between that. I was very pro Dr. Martin Luther King, and I kind of come full circle, and I moved away from King for a period. And I defended it very strongly while I was in the Air Force, and against people who were followers of Malcolm X.

And I remember clearly the day that I actually had no more--I couldn’t go any further in my defense of the non-violent tactics [of King]. I consciously began to adjust my thinking, and it was that adjustment was not complete until 1966, after I got out and came back here and interacted with people like [Eldridge] Cleave and [Stokely] Carmichael, whom I met and had discussions with, and gradually came to feel that we needed to approach this whole matter a different way. And that’s when I drifted away from accepting the general presentation of how this country saw itself.

WL: So that expressed a lot of frustration? I mean there was frustrations, say, by 1966?

NJ: Yeah, and a sense of betrayal as well. The more I tried to understand Vietnam--because I had volunteered to go fight, and I was just fighting against communism, I was just, you know, making the country safe--and the more I thought about--I remember vividly President Johnson’s discussion of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, and gradually all of these kinds of things seemed to be set up--that I started to question the integrity of the leadership of the country, and that led me into a lot of different battles.

WL: You started at A&T in 1966?

NJ: In 1965. Yes.

WL: Sixty-five. And you were involved with--we were talking before we turned the machine on about the campaign; the title you were working--the Poor--.

NJ: Greensboro Association of Poor People [GAPP], which was developed in 1967--actually started as a group called YES, Youth Educational Services. That was a Jesse Jackson thing that got it rolling and initially it was college students who did tutoring, and they were black and white--and I chaired that during my second year, an integrated group. And that group actually helped me to cleft some of my thinking on integration.

All of the students would ask for--black students would ask for white students--I was in charge of the sign up, too--and it really got to a point where it bothered me tremendously that our children would seek out white tutors, and then not appreciate black tutors. And this became a real concern of mine, and eventually we made a decision that we would tutor them by ourselves. We would withdraw from that because that was perpetuating the notion that these children saw something better in these white kids, which is part of what they had been indoctrinated to think just by reason of existing in the culture. So, the problem of racism and self acclamation and identity and all of that got to be things that we talked about a lot.

WL: And this was perceived as a function, a product of integration?

NJ: I think it was a product of the whole history of the country. What integration did not do was to challenge that. But I think that the idea of superiority obviously found its roots in slavery and in Jim Crows and in all of that. Integration, to some extent, was a sinister way to perpetuate that, in that it--in order to be integrated, you had to conform to the standards of the dominant culture, that there was an unwillingness to meet you where you were, and to affirm you where you were on terms of your own authentic being. That you had, to some extent, become a clone of this dominant culture.

WL: Yeah, to accept all of its values.

NJ: And so that was simply perpetuating in slicker way--and that's why we had to make a distinction between integration and desegregation, that they were quite different things. One, you had to accommodate the standard. The other one was the proper elimination of these barriers between people and the freedom of people to associate as equals with one another.

WL: So, you went from YES to a more ambitious campaign--was there a connection between--

NJ: Well, YES was just kind of a vehicle of social involvement, and it helped us to understand some things and to grow. But ultimately, we came to view that it was necessary for the ordinary, grassroots black people to facilitate organization amongst them, and empowerment, as opposed to just some elected people in office. That they as a people had to see their own work, and had to have a vehicle to give expression to what

they thought was right, and that's where I got involved in the community organization and the GAPP.

WL: What were the biggest achievements and biggest frustrations?

NJ: I don't know if I can break it down exactly that way. But the things that we did--there was a very real sense of unity in this. You had a housing strike, land worker strike, cafeteria strike in the public school, cafeteria strike at A&T, hundreds of cases where we simply went with a person to a welfare agency and brought in the law community under Charlotte Ferguson in order to present cases.

But I think what's happening in this whole period was a movement of the people who had questions about their being as they are--in other words, you don't have to change, to act like someone else, or to speak like someone else; that's an option. The first thing you have to do is accept that you are somebody, just like you are, and that that is enough for everyone else to respect you. Not that we would want to stay where we are and on like that, but it's not a condition to be respected to go around and act like everyone else. This, all of these things that we participated in, while there were material gains going out of those things, I think the most substantial thing was a stronger sense of personhood in people who were engendered amongst the people.

WL: Community with consciousness.

NJ: Community consciousness.

WL: Yes. Reverend Hairston, you were on the school board in--it was from the start of--

OH: Yes.

WL: It was from the period--you started in 1971? Is that right?

OH: Seventy-one.

WL: Yes. You were on the board, in other words, during the final desegregation--

OH: Yes.

WL: How would you characterize the way in which that took place? Was it a success? In what respects was it successful both in the short term and the long term looking back now seventeen years, eighteen years?

OH: Of course, I pursued the argument that we don't need to fight the court. Charlotte, of course, attempted to do it, and we spent a lot of time. Our job is to try to provide education for kids, and not to spend all of our time fighting the courts. And eventually you have to do it anyway.

WL: School board was fighting the court then?

OH: Well, no, no. There were some persons on the board who felt that we ought to pursue the same course as Charlotte did: "Let's fight them. Let the folks tell us what to do. Let's fight the court. Let's fight and take it to court and continue to prolong it."

My position is that you cannot [unclear] for education [and at] the same time spend a long time fighting the court; we need to find how we are going to improve the quality of education. And the fellow who was chairman of the board and several persons, I think, felt that, perhaps, we ought not to try to do what--that Charlotte, of course, that Charlotte did, and spend all our time doing that. We want to concentrate on how we can improve the quality of education. And I think it was a little different from some of the other cities and systems where they just straight all of the time were fighting the court.

So, we tried to comply. We complied with what we thought would be necessary to satisfy the court. We attempted to comply for Greensboro. I think that was the difference in some of the systems where they'd spend some amount of time and eventually had to do it anyway.

WL: So, there was an early decision to comply and an acceptance on the part of most of the board to get behind this?

OH: Yes.

WL: What did you have to do to make that possible? What, as a board, did you have to do in order to go from a fairly segregated system to an un-segregated system?

OH: Well, of course, my position has always been--you had people in the community who said to the board, "Now, don't y'all, fight like Charlotte." My position has always been, "Let's not take what is, perhaps, is expedient. Let's try to do the moral thing. What is the moral thing?"

I think I mentioned, "What is the moral thing for us to do?" And I'm always committed to that: What is the moral thing? Not the expedient, because I don't think the expedient is ever moral. You have to debate on the expedient and that it's just not moral. But this has always been my position through the years. "Let's do the right thing, let's try to do the right thing. Let's do the right thing, what is right? Let's do that."

WL: In order to achieve desegregation, of course, there had to be a lot of big changes to the schools. As a board, how did you reach the decisions about pairing schools, and about attendances?

OH: Well, try to get a 30-70--the population about 30-70 [percent]. Try to work out as far as possible as 70-30 ratio--white-to-black.

WL: Was that accomplished in an equitable way, do you think?

OH: Yes, for the most part, as far as we could. You know, we could not get it right down to that, but I think the idea was as far as we could. And I think we were sincere. The superintendent, at that time, was sincere in trying to--in fact, we demanded that he do it.

WL: Was there a positive feeling about school segregation in the black community?

OH: No. I mean, it's always--when you have to do something you don't need people really--desegregation--of course, integration would have been different, I guess. Not being accepted, of course, you don't feel comfortable. And I think a lot of black kids all over today can't recognize that it's not exactly something that you are doing, but they're not accepted by them as proof. If it had been integrated it would have been a great thing--to be accepted. But that's not then the case.

When I was on the board, we had to talk in terms, and had hard cases where the black kids gave the white teachers the attitude and whatnot--which proved valid. So, even the teachers don't accept a lot of it.

The black kids are not looked upon as equal to the white kids in the classroom. I always say to the black kids, "You all have to do real well to prove [to] that teacher, in spite of the attitude of the teacher." We had several cases--I know one young fellow we would have had--mostly C's at the end of his first year in senior high school. I said to him, I said, "You don't ever see mine there." He said "well, they don't like me, I have my long hair, you know" this type of thing. I said "well, prove that you have ability. That's what you do, you're not going to win the fight with resentment. Go ahead and prove that you have ability. You're going to have to work hard, twice as hard." That boy came up at the end of the second year from high school with all A's, and one B. The teacher had to respect him for his ability in one sense. She didn't like him. I said, "Well, you know, you're not going to make her like you, but make her respect you. Show how smart you are."

WL: So you think unbalanced has been successful?

OH: Well, I don't know, I'm not too sure. Of course, as I said, you don't have--the segregation was still, of course, we had unequal, and the only advantage was that you have some semblance of equality. But I'm not too sure. Successful, I'm not too sure whether I would use the word successful in terms of desegregation of students. I think black kids would have fared well, in spite of the handicaps moved down through the years.

But there was some equality they just wouldn't give to the black--like I said, when I was in school, they sent the used desks over, used textbooks over to the black schools, and it did something to black kids who would have to use something openly passed down to us, inferior. So I think, I would not say successful in terms of integration, what it should be doing, but successful in terms that [we] probably have a little more equality in one sense, equality. But as far as successful, I would not support the idea that it was successful in that sense.

Because, really, I think the whole idea was the integration--we talked in terms, but it was never integration, it was desegregation--but integration should have been the goal. That was the ultimate goal as perceived. So we've not been successful, in a sense. Because, really, we're not integrated. In college level or high school, or public school. On the college level you have the same thing--you know, you have this racism creeping up on the larger campuses and universities today. So, you really don't have integration.

WL: Do you think in the twenty or twenty-five years since the sixties there has been a bit of continuity in terms of--you mentioned earlier similarity in attitudes? Attitudes haven't changed perhaps?

OH: I don't think too much. I don't think you have--you know, it's tragic that you do not have a significant change, I don't think. I can't say what--you know, you have to say--it's hard, I guess, on the outside to say, but reflected, where it's reflected, you know, I guess it's hard to say. I guess we have to say by what is reflected, we have to make our decision on the face of what is reflected on the part of the person. But to me, I don't think it had as much of a change of attitudes in people. For a few cases, but I don't--no significant change I don't think.

You have racism, I think, coming back on, even today, college campuses and whatnot. We have students at UNCG [University of North Carolina at Greensboro] in the church.

NJ: You know, I think the forms have changed, regardless of a lot of things that have happened. I mean, ultimately, racism, the notion of kind of subtle racist superiority of this person over that person based on their skin color and this and that and the other--now they might not argue in the same way, on the basis of, you know, the size of the brain and the skin tone, because the data won't support that. But I think what happens is that you simply find other things to justify a position of advantage.

And what has not changed is the under-girding mode of thought out of which you operate, whether it be the relationship of people in this country to other people, who feel that they are greater than these other people and talk about foreigners in a very disparaging way, talk about any other type of person in that kind of way. My estimation is that the country has not really come to terms with that, and when that is added to the general decline of the nation in the world economy, and the inability to use its international columnists to service its own internal development. So, you have this economic decline occurring, and it intersects with the same problem of racism or the lack of respect of people for each other, and you have a very real phenomenon developing now, which is probably best characterized as an underclass type of thing.

And we would look at our cities, inner cities--it's hard to see how you can say that all of this means progress when you have this masses and blocks of people who are not only poor now, but who, in some sense, have been robbed of hope. And you have this massive poor with hopelessness, where at first we were just poor, but we always had hope, because we would always plug them to places like Dudley and good teachers and all this. And now that problem is compounded, which is a whole different subject, but my own view is that a lot of it is related to how the whole society has treated faith. Because in the final analysis, you can have hope if you have faith, but if you don't have any faith, you're not going to have hope, for long.

WL: You think faith has been--

NJ: Yeah, well it's been trivialized to a large extent. And a lot of people are outside of the language. You know, a lot of our people just are outside of any involvement in this. I mean, I know in inner cities the statistics look like this: the upper strata of blacks tend to go to church at a higher rate, the lower strata tend not to because, in their own mind, it's not addressing the reality of their own existence, which speaks to faith itself. And so, they seek to accommodate themselves to their poor situation in a whole different way than when they were in a faith structure, which is an interesting--actually, it's just kind of a notion that I have of, not something that I have a lot of empirical data on.

WL: That's more true in inner cities than anything else?

NJ: Yeah, but I think the thing that we have to see is the pattern that has always been that what happens in the inner cities, it's not long before it moves to the countryside. And we have an opportunity to do something that the inner cities, actually, I don't even know where to touch an inner city, the problem is so big. Here you have the possibility to convince something that you can be fairly sure is occurring, it just hasn't reached that level. How you address it and all of that becomes the challenge of the church and all the institutions and people in the community.

But I think it does result from the flawed way that we approach the resolution of the race problem in this country, and the resolution of all of the economic problems in the country. That's another subject too, but you know, our whole foreign policy was based on developing Europe and Japan, and it happened to succeed. Once it succeeds they are no longer markets, and so it takes a whole sphere out. And I don't think the country has really gotten into making the major kinds of adjustments, and taking itself out of the orbit of the top dog and humbling itself, and entering into a proper relationship with other nations. And it's reflected internally when the people refuse to enter into a proper relationship with their neighbor, and with their race brothers and sisters. So, you see a continuum populating throughout.

And I think that's the challenge. And I think that the magnitude of problems in the eighties and nineties will require us to respond to that challenge in a way that we have refused to do so, so far.

WL: So, you've gone through an interesting evolution.

NJ: Yeah, very much so.

[END OF INTERVIEW]