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Otis R. Anthony African Americans in Florida Oral History Project
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[Transcriber's Note: There is no formal start to this interview.]

Askia Muhammad Aquil: —Muhammad Aquil. It was recently changed about the middle of January. Now, most people know me by the name under which I was born, which is Otha Leon Favors, Junior.

I'm originally from St. Petersburg. I attended public school there. I've been in Tampa since 1966, October—September of 1966—and came over here to, at that time, to finish my education at the University of South Florida. I got involved in a number of different activities here in Tampa, and have stayed here for thirteen years.

Fred Beaton: Okay. Well, the first question I'll ask you is to give me a historical analysis of your political career, starting with high school.

AA: Of my political career.

FB: Mm-hm.

AA: All right. Well, I've always been an activist, even before the term was coined. I was active in high school—you know, homeroom class officer, sophomore class officer, president, I believe, junior class officer, senior class officer. I was always active in student government, as well as honor society, French club, tennis team, choir, high school annual [yearbook], those kinds of things. So I've stayed pretty busy. As a matter of fact, I was going through some old records with my mother just last weekend over in St. Pete, and she pulled out a certificate that I received, something that I had completely forgotten about. But during graduation they used to give you the awards for perfect attendance and those kinds of things—

FB: Mm-hm.

AA: —and I received an award for being the most active student in the class. So, I guess it kind of set the tone for the kind of lifestyle that I've developed over the past few years. I keep pretty active and pretty busy in different things.

FB: Okay. Can you trace the development of education in Hillsborough County—I mean, the problems affecting education, the problems affecting the kids and their education. And where do we go from now? What are the turns we should make in the future?

AA: Okay. Well, my direct involvement and concern, I guess you would say, with the state of education and the future of education in Hillsborough County started back a year or two prior to the implementation of the full desegregation plan. Now, that was implemented in August of 1971. But many of the activities leading up to the implementation of this present plan—the plans were publicly discussed, meetings held, legal battles, or what have you, were taking place during the period of 1968, 1969, 1970. The suit was filed before that, and there was activity leading up to this.

FB: Can you name any of the suits that was filed?

AA: Yeah. Well, it started with Andrew Manning, who most people know as Jerry Walker, the disc jockey—radio disc jockey—and club manager.

FB: And what year was this, then?

AA: Let's see, I could probably find it. I forget exactly the year, but—I'll dig that out while I'm talking. But Jerry filed a suit because he was unable to attend a school that was close to his home and he was forced to ride a bus across the county to a black school. His family complained and they filed a protest and that is what got Hillsborough County legally involved in the process of desegregation. There were a number of different alternatives that were presented, a number of different plans, as happened in most areas of the country. The Hillsborough County School Board, which at that time I believe was under the supervision of J. Crockett Farnell—

FB: Right.

AA: But the school board proceeded with all deliberate speed, which meant slowly, very slowly. Yet, at the same time, they were maintaining that there was no segregated school system. And for a long time, I guess some ten or fifteen years or more, you heard that argument that things are fine here. “The schools are desegregated. We don't have any problems.” And this led up to—eventually led to the situation that developed around 1967, 1968, where the federal courts ruled that the school system had to bring about total desegregation, or else. And it was at that time that you started to have some frantic moves on the part of the school system to try to come up with a plan that was workable in the community but also acceptable to the courts. Francisco Rodriguez [Junior] was the practicing attorney at that time, back in the early part of the sixties [1960s], who did much of the legal work for the NAACP and fought those early battles.

But again, in 1968 while I was a student at the University of South Florida, Dr. [Martin Luther] King was killed and that awakened me and some of my friends, people I knew around campus, and caused us to begin to take a hard look at American society in general and then at our particular surroundings, the University of South Florida and Tampa, to see how racism and discrimination and oppression and segregation existed during that period and what we could do about it. So we set about to bring about some changes and some reforms at University of South Florida.

We formed, at first, a group that was called the One-to-One Group, which was a multi-racial, multi-ethnic organization made up of students and professors and some people from administration, who gave USF a good hard look. We did a survey on the school and rated it in terms of its institutionalized racism. We discovered at that time that there were maybe two or three professors—African-American professors—a few part-time instructors. The majority of people who were employed on the campus were in janitorial jobs, janitors and what have you. So we set about to do something about that.

Also, there were just a handful of brothers and sisters on the campus. Probably—let's see, if I remember correctly, the total enrollment out there at that time might have been eleven, twelve, thirteen thousand, and I doubt it if you had a hundred, a hundred and fifty full-time students out there. So we wanted to increase student enrollment. Of course, there were no black history courses or black-oriented, African American-oriented courses at all: history, education, English, psychology. Nothing dealing with African studies. So we wanted to do something about that. And also, as far as financial assistance was concerned there were just the regular student loan and student grant activities, so we wanted to do something about that.

So, we worked both through the One-to-One Group, and then we also formed the Afro-American Society, which was, I think, the first black student organization on that campus. We set out to challenge some of those things. As a result of—

FB: What year was this?

AA: That was in nineteen—late 1968 or early 1969. It was during that period. All of this began after the—as a result of Dr. King's assassination. (flips through papers) I guess around 1969, we had banded together some thirty or forty students on the campus and decided to actively campaign to set up an Afro-American Studies program. We were fighting for a department, for the program. But we held some marches and some demonstration and some rallies. We drew up a list of demands, presented them to them to the administration.

This was during the time when San Francisco State [College] was in an uproar because the BSU [Black Student Union] there was so strong and they had called a strike. Columbia University was in an uproar. One of the schools in New York [Cornell University] was in an uproar, several of the colleges in the South, predominantly black schools in the South. It was also during the period of the anti-Vietnam War movement.

So there was just a lot of student activity and a lot of apprehension on the part of school administrators and administrations, and authorities in general.

I mention that because at USF, we were faced with a situation that really turned out to be a little bit comical. At the same time, it was fearful for both sides. On the day that we decided to present our demands to the administration, we met in the University Center, about fifteen, twenty of us, and we got our heads together and started to march across the quadrangle toward the administration building. And I guess the secretaries and other people in the administration building could look out the window and see us coming.

So, by the time we got there, all the doors in the building were locked and we were told that several of the people—secretaries and all—had gotten down on the floor behind the desks for fear of what we might do. But because we couldn't get in, we ended up sliding demands under the door. The administration got back in touch with us a day or two later. We sat down, they were willing to negotiate. And it resulted in the first Afro-American Studies program in the state of Florida being established.

Nineteen sixty-nine, 1970, we began to read in the paper about the plans that were being considered for achieving total desegregation of the Hillsborough County school system. Now, some of the students on the campus had come from different communities. I was from Pinellas County. Connie Tucker was a student there; she was from Sarasota. Other people were from other schools, or other states, or other—in some instances other states, other counties in Florida, or other states. And many of us had had experiences, prior experiences, with school desegregation.

In Pinellas County, for example, several years prior to 1969 when Pinellas High School, in Clearwater—what used to be Pinellas High School in Clearwater—was desegregated. All right, you had Clearwater High School, which was the all-white high school, and Pinellas High School, which was the all-black high school. They decided to desegregate, and it resulted in the all-black high school, Pinellas High School, being completely shut down and the brothers and sisters being absorbed into Clearwater. The same thing had happened in Sarasota. I think the name of the school there—I think the name of the all-black school was Lincoln High School¹ and the same thing happened.

So, when we heard about desegregation coming to Hillsborough County we were concerned that the same thing not happen here that we had seen happen in places where we had come from. Even though I had never attended public school here, but, you know, we felt that all of us were brothers and sisters. Wherever we were we had a responsibility to try and look out for each other and to help, to at least give a warning if we saw that we could do that.

¹ Lincoln Memorial High School was actually located in Palmetto, in Manatee County. Aquil is referring to Booker High School in Sarasota. Both schools were closed and their students reassigned to other schools. Booker's local community sued the Sarasota County School Board and were successful. The school reopened in 1970 as an integrated school, after being closed for one year. Lincoln was converted into a middle school.

So, we set about to spend time off the USF Campus, out in the community, getting around talking with people, writing letters to the [*Florida*] *Sentinel Bulletin*, passing out leaflets, calling meetings, and having little marches and demonstrations, trying to warn the community to be aware if the same approach is taken to desegregation, it will result in the black schools being closed and principals and teachers being laid off and increase in problems for our students rather than a real help. That went on from 1969, building up to a crescendo in 1971.

I testified before a federal judge, Ben Crensmen, when the desegregation hearing was held—I think that was in May 1971—to determine what final plan would be approved. And all this time, we had been opposing the plan and been encouraging people in the community to oppose the plan, because again, the handwriting on the wall was clear, based on what had happened in other areas and also based on some of the specific things that were written into the Hillsborough County desegregation plan. We achieved a large degree of success in the sense that most people were not aware of what was in the making, simply because we were not digging into or going to school board meetings, asking questions and really trying to look behind what was being presented.

I think early 1971, the governor, Reubin Askew, supervised what was called a straw ballot here. And there was a state-wide vote that was cast to determine if people were pro—were for or against bussing to achieve desegregation. In Hillsborough County, 50 percent of the people in our community voted against it. Yet, after all the smoke cleared, the plan was approved anyway. There was some very strong dissent on the part of different people in the community. We formed—

(to someone else) Peace, brother.

Other Man: Yeah, how you doing?

AA: Okay. All right.

We formed—

(to someone else) Yes, sir. How you doing?

Child: (inaudible)

AA: (inaudible)

Pause in recording

AA: Okay. In 1971 a cross-section of people from throughout Hillsborough County came together and formed what was called the Hillsborough Black Caucus, the purpose of which was to monitor and to oppose those aspects of the desegregation plan that we felt were objectionable. Rudolph Harris was a member of that caucus. Mr. C. Blythe Andrews, Senior, was one of the strong supporters and backers. Mrs. Warren—oh, what

was her name? Mrs. Emma Warren. And there were several ministers. Mr. Ernest Spivey, who was a member of the American Legion Post #167—as a matter of fact, headed the post at that time. And a number of different people all came together and sat about to try to really mobilize the full backing of the community. Mrs. Freddie Jean Cassal was also a member. Simon Wilson was one of the participants.

Among other things, we held a big rally at Middleton High School one Sunday afternoon. There were about five or six hundred people who came out. And, again, the opposition to the plan was the thing that bound everybody together. Several influential members of the Longshoremen's Association were also active participants. Mr. Harold Reddick, who at that time was an active member of the NAACP. All of us met and shook hands and agreed that we will hang together and try to keep the plan from being implemented, because of things like the fact that it was obvious that we would be bussed ten out of twelve years, as compared to two out of twelve years for white students in the county.

It was common knowledge that a number of principals' and teachers' jobs were jeopardy. Because the philosophy was that black schools were innately inferior and the teachers who taught in those schools were inferior. Therefore, when we combine the black schools and white schools, the inferior would need to be discarded. Of course, in most people's minds, it meant that we would have to give up our schools and our teachers' jobs would right away be in jeopardy. There were a number of teachers who resigned—quite a few teachers who resigned in 1971 rather than become a part of the desegregated school system, because of these kinds of injustices.

Since 1971 when the plan was implemented—well, a couple of things before we go on beyond that. It's important to remember, also, that at that time, all through that period, the school board was all Caucasian, total lily white. There had never been any representation on the board from our community. And we didn't achieve that until, what, 1976? Right? Is that when Reverend [A. Leon] Lowry got elected?

Otis Anthony: Somewhere around there, seventy-seven [1977].

AA: Right, seventy-six [1976], seventy-seven [1977]. Seventy-six [1976]. That's when it was, 1976. So this presented a problem. Now these were some of the things that we were pointing to in opposing the plan. We said if the community, if the board, if those people who—if the federal judge, even, is sincere about desegregating the school system and bringing about a unified system, start from the top and work down. Desegregate the board, because the segregation that existed was maintained and controlled by the people who maintained and controlled the school system, by the minds that ran the school system. And if they were thinking segregation, even though they were supposedly abiding by the judge's order to desegregate, that it could only result in another form of segregation.

And, in fact, this is what happened. A year or two years, three years, after 1971, we started to get reports of segregation within the schools, segregation within classrooms. We started to get reports of disproportionate numbers of students from our community

who were being expelled or expelled. I think the first instances of this began to surface in late 1972, seventy-three [1973] school year. From 1971 to 1973 there was a significant amount—a degree of turmoil in the schools.

FB: Before we go to that, what was the problem affecting the closing of Blake [High School] and Middleton, the problems that the black community was having with the school board?

AA: Well, it stemmed from several things. First of all, again, people believed—many people believed, and, surprisingly, a large number of our own people believed—or else strongly felt that our schools were inferior, that Blake and Middleton were inferior. There were a number of people in our community who felt that way. Because the school was all black, because there had been an inequitable distribution of funds, the monies had not been equitably spent between Middleton as compared to Hillsborough or Blake as compared to let's say Plant [High School] or Robinson [High School].

So, it's a matter of record that more money was put into the white schools than the black schools. Right, but that doesn't necessarily make the school inferior. That means that's another problem. There was an injustice there, but it did not mean that those schools were inferior and did not have something to offer. So that was one problem, the fact that so many people—black and white, school officials as well as laypeople—felt that the schools were inferior and, therefore, needed to be closed, or else absorbed into the white schools.

The other problem was that in dealing with that, the school system wanted to either close those schools altogether, as had happened in other counties, or else they wanted to make those schools a part of—to absorb those schools so that they would be a part, but a subservient part, of their schools. For an example, one of the plans that was presented was to pair Middleton with Hillsborough High School. But Middleton was to lose its identity.

Now, in 1970 Blake and Plant, I believe, and Middleton and Hillsborough High School were paired. There were some three, four, five hundred students from Blake who were transferred from Blake to Plant, and the same thing from Middleton to Hillsborough. And those students and an equal number of Caucasian students were supposed to be transferred into Middleton and to Blake. Well, all along—right across Twenty-Second Street, for an example, just on the other side of Twenty-Second, during that time there were a large number of Caucasians who lived right there, right across the street from the school. But the school system maintained that they could never locate them and they could never make 'em attend the school.

In 1970, the same thing happened. They transferred the brothers and sisters out of the school but when it came time for the Caucasian students to attend, they didn't show up. Maybe fifteen or twenty, out of some three or four hundred students who were supposed to attend. The school system says, “We don't know where they are. There's nothing we can do about it; we can't make them attend.” So, consequently, the enrollment at those

two schools dropped by three, four, maybe five hundred students.

So then the school system came back and the superintendent—and at that time, Dr. Shelton, Raymond Shelton, was superintendent—said, “Well, because Blake is four hundred people under capacity and Middleton is several hundred students under capacity, we can't justify maintaining them as high schools, so we're either gonna close 'em or else we're gonna make them junior high schools.” And, of course, this alarmed the community for several reasons. They didn't want to see the schools close. And they didn't want to see the schools become junior high schools, because it would mean that the band and the football teams would lose the status and the prestige that they had held not only here in the community, but in the state and in the southeast as a whole. I think Blake—well, Blake and Middleton were enjoying very high reputation, either for football, then, or basketball. Both of the teams were excelling athletically.

And so, like the Ye Old Timers, who were the alumni of Middleton: Billy Felder—I can't call the names of some of the other members—Allie Cartman, who was a member of the Longshoremen but was also a member of the Old Timers. I worked together with them. The Dads' Club from Blake. And so all these forces began to work together to try to keep the schools from being closed and to try to keep them from being turned into junior high schools, and to at least maintain one of them as high schools if it was impossible to maintain both of them. And, again, that resistance took the form of meetings and (inaudible), announcements in churches, attendances at school board meetings. There were a couple of instances where the school board meetings actually had to be canceled, because the community was so outspoken in its opposition to what they were doing. Otis [Anthony]—I had met Otis during that time, who was student body president at Blake High School. I think he was in his senior year.

There were several marches and demonstrations. There was one march in particular, which was a two-pronged march: one leg that kicked off from Middleton High School, the other leg that kicked off from Blake. The two legs met in Central Park. They had a big rally there at Meacham [Elementary School], right there on the playground. And then we went down to the school board meeting together. And there were so many people that they couldn't even—I think the meeting had been transferred up to the third floor in an auditorium. They couldn't even get all the people on the second and third floor. They finally locked the doors with the lobby full, with the third floor full, with the elevators full, the stairs full—there were people outside the doorways on both front and back of the county building.

So, it got a little bit out of hand. But I think it made the point to the school system that people were, in fact, very disturbed about what was happening.

FB: Okay.

AA: Of course, again in 1971, when the hearing was held, the plan was presented to the judge, Mr. E. L. Bing, who is not given the credit that is due him—or the notoriety that is due him, depending on what your position is. But he had really taken the front seat in

drafting the plan and pushing it through. The plan itself, in its final form, even went beyond what the federal courts themselves had ordered.

For example, at that time the federal courts had not established an eighty-twenty ratio in every school. This is something that Mr. Bing and some of the people who were working with him came up with. And they presented this to the judge and to some of the other people who were reviewing it. They got behind it. They formed what was called a Committee of 100, and that committee was made up of people from throughout Hillsborough County. They were religious leaders, political leaders, businessmen, educators, parents, students, supposedly representing the total spectrum of the county. And for a period of several days, they met and talked and broke up into seminars and workshops and what have you.

The effect of the Committee of 100 was that it gave this particular plan the semblance of having solid community backing. But in fact, many of those criticisms that people had voiced a year, a year and a half, two years before the summer of 1971, many of those criticisms remained after the Committee of 100's report. Many of those criticisms remained after Judge Crensmen made his ruling. And some of those criticisms that were voiced ten years ago, nine years ago, we're still hearing right now.

For an example, with the present controversy over the closing of the schools. People are going down saying, "We are tired of bearing the brunt, of bearing the burden of desegregation." Well, this was something that was said in 1970, that we, in fact, were bearing the brunt of desegregation. In that sense, we're still dealing with shades of the same problem. Between 1971 and the present, 1979, the community has reacted to a number of symptoms that are an outgrowth, in my opinion, that were symptoms that are an outgrowth of the new problem that was created when this plan was implemented.

For example, again to mention the closing of schools in our community. All right, with these five schools that are in jeopardy, this was a criticism that was raised in 1970, seventy-one [1971].

FB: Mm-hm.

AA: We talk about the high suspension rate—expulsion rate—something that the community battled openly against from 1973 up until 1977—seventy-six [1976], seventy-seven [1977]—before anything was done at all, before the superintendent and the board even acknowledged that this was a legitimate concern. It took the appearance, in Hillsborough County, of the United States Civil Rights Commission, of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, and of several other official—quasi-official—agencies or organizations, to come in and actually conduct hearings, investigations and what have you, before the board finally acknowledged—and they never conceded but they at least acknowledged that there was, in fact, a problem; there were disproportionate suspensions.

Another problem that we're still dealing with, and we still have not met this square, or head-on, yet. It was contended that by desegregating the school system, by putting blacks

students and white students side by side in the same classroom, that our students, who had been characterized as being less intelligent and generally lower achievers and what have you, that there would be a dramatic increase in our intellectual ability, as well as in our academic performance. And of course, we challenge that, because that whole assumption is racist and white supremacist to begin with. To say that by putting black students next to white students, black students are automatically going to do better, as if to say there's something magic about whiteness or about the white school system or the white teaching method or what have you.

Tape 1, side 1 ends; tape 1, side 2 begins

AA: I think that it's becoming evident even for the die-hards that there has been no—that this form of desegregation has brought about no dramatic improvement. As a matter of fact, in many ways it has done a lot of harm to our students, emotionally, psychologically, culturally, and has created some new problems that have ended up—that have resulted in doing academic harm.

I mentioned some examples. Black History Week—Black History Month—was widely acknowledged in predominantly black schools prior to desegregation. We didn't get as much cultural awareness, historical awareness, as we should have gotten in those schools, but still, during that period of time, during that week or that month, there was a saturation. Between 1971 and 1973 or four [1974], most of the schools in Hillsborough County abolished the Black History Week, or African American History Week. In some instances, they sought to replace that with what they called Brotherhood History or Brotherhood Week or something. But the effect of it was that it denied us that little opportunity that we had to really learn something about ourselves.

Now, one of the arguments in 1971 against the particular plan was that the plan—the Hillsborough County desegregation plan—and the whole concept that was being implemented across the country—it addressed itself to where people went to school, but not to what happened to their minds in the school that they attended, regardless of the school. And we felt that that was more important, that the emphasis should have been on substance, you know, what happened to your mind in school, what you were being taught, and of course what you were not being taught, and to try to remedy that rather to worry so much about where people went to school and how many numbers of students from this group or that group were sitting in a classroom. We felt that that was irrelevant to the process of education. Again, I maintain that that's still pretty much the case.

But there were instances—for example, Plant City High School, where a number of students from our community were suspended, expelled, or else arrested, simply because they wanted to observe Black History Week in the school. At Plant City High School, for example, some students had been given permission to set up a bulletin board exhibit—you know, by some of the teachers or deans or somebody—as a part of Black History Week. They went and set the board up, and the Caucasians on the campus decided that they didn't like what was on the board, so they reneged on their permission, on their promise, which of course angered the students and resulted in an outbreak on the campus.

And again, there were students who were suspended or expelled, or who ended up with criminal records because of that.

The dropout rate rose during that period. Parents who before 1971 had been very actively involved with the school system—you know, the PTAs [Parent Teacher Associations] used to be strong. They backed the schools. The PTA and Ye Old Timers at Middleton helped buy uniforms, they bought the school bus, they did other things around the campuses. But parents were so angered, disillusioned, frustrated, and what have you—fed up—that many of them just dropped out. They stopped being involved at all.

Those that tried to maintain some involvement with the schools or with the PTAs were upset at the kind of treatment that they got when they went on a campus—you know, they'd go out there on a campus to inquire about your child or to show some concern or some interest in education and the principals, and the teachers made you feel like you were trespassing. You went out of your way to go across the county to attend a PTA meeting—and of course, the parents were outnumbered. They felt that their views were not being considered. So, many of them just stopped. So, for a period of probably four or five years, our community really—our students were being victimized by things that were happening in the school system. Parents were cut off and became dis-involved.

The teachers and principals were silenced, those who were not out and out dismissed. They were silenced; they were afraid to speak out. The black educators' association—I forget the name of what that organization was called, but they were—that organization had been dissolved, and the teachers had become a part of the CTA [Hillsborough Classroom Teachers Association]. Well, they were outnumbered. They were afraid to speak out. They had seen instances where other people had spoken out, had their heads—had their necks—chopped off, or been threatened or intimidated, victimized in one way or another, so they were afraid to speak out.

So, we were really defenseless. You know, the students were having to battle for their lives on the campus—in some cases physically, but certainly academically. We got a lot of instances of children who were being subjected to racial slurs by students, by teachers, were being called "niggers" and "pickaninnies" and these kinds of things. And they had no protection whatsoever. There was nothing in the desegregation plan itself to protect them.

The Biracial Advisory Committee and the human rights component, those things were added later. There was no student rights bill or what have you. There was no grievance committee or grievance procedure. All of these things really should have been considered right in line, or even before the plan was actually drawn up and implemented. If you know that there are snakes in the water and you want to go for a swim and you know that snakes bite, you don't jump in the water with the snakes in there. You try to get the snakes out first—

FB: Right.

AA: —then you get in. That's the intelligent thing to do.

FB: So that was the major problem of education during this time?

AA: Yeah, right. That was the major problem. Again, there were two concerns in our community, as I see it. One was that we were all concerned about raising the quality of education for our students. There was no disagreement with that. We wanted to improve the quality of education received by our children. And the other concern was to desegregate the school system. There was no qualms about that. We were all in America and we were supposedly united and one nation under God with freedom, justice, and equality for everybody.

So the whole impetus at that time of the civil rights movement and the student movement and the general desegregation movement was to tear down all those walls and all the barrier that had brought about white toilets and black toilets and white drinking fountains and black drinking fountains and white schools and black schools and what have you. But we did not want to bring about that desegregation at our expense, with the destruction with those things that were dear to us.

And secondly, many of us disagreed with the theories—with the white supremacist notion—that the way to improve our education and to increase our intellectual ability, to increase our job capabilities, to increase our opportunities in other ways. We didn't feel that the way to do that was to make us subordinate, or to make our community subordinate to the Caucasian community. All right? So in that sense, we sought out to solve two problems. And, in my opinion, we ended up makin' those problems worse, simply because we approached them with the wrong philosophy.

FB: Okay. Can you trace the development of black leadership in Hillsborough County, as you see it?

AA: Mmm— Well, I don't know if I can really do that, first of all, because my roots in Tampa-Hillsborough County only go back thirteen years.

FB: Well, the thirteen years that you were here.

AA: Yeah, okay. And then the second problem is that when you talk about leadership, that's still something that we have to deal with very carefully, simply because—number one, there are different kinds of leaders. There are different levels of leaders. There are acknowledged leaders, and then there are leaders who are designated or appointed leaders by people, many of whom are not even a part of our community.

For example, there are some people who have labored very hard, people in our community who have labored very hard, either in the arena of civil rights, in the area of business, in the field of education, in the religious field. And they have, in fact, earned the title of "leader" simply because they have struggled and have risen to the top in a particular segment of the community.

Yet, at the same time, many of those people do not seek to exercise any real community leadership. They are leaders in the certain area of the community, but they do not seek to exercise any community leadership. For an example, there are I don't know how many ministers in the community, but most of those ministers are only satisfied, and you'd have to call them community leaders. They're religious leaders. Some of them head congregations that are a thousand strong, which would put them at the head of some of the most potentially powerful organizations in the community. Yet, they do not seek to exercise that leadership anywhere outside of their church.

All right, the same thing is true in business. There are a number of people like Lee Davis, or the gentleman that heads Central Life. What's—

FB: Ed Davis.

AA: —right, Ed Davis—who have been successful. Or C. Blythe Andrews, who had been successful in their business efforts. And at the same time, like notably with Mr. Andrews, Senior and Junior, Mr. Davis of Central Life, have also involved themselves—or the Harveys and some other families that you could mention—have also deeply involved themselves in community activities in one form or another. So they exercise leadership in that sense. But yet, that leadership may be limited to a particular field.

For an example, young Mr. [Perry Junior] Harvey has concentrated primarily in things dealing with labor. He's also been involved in some economic development activities. But Mr. Harvey, Senior, was not particularly involved with education. Mr. Stewart—Garland Stewart—is one and has been one of the giants in the area of education. Mr. Bing has been one of the giants in area of education in the community. A number of other people.

But, on the other hand, when you look at their approach toward dealing with the educational crisis that faced us then and that still faces us now, then you have to question their leadership, because leadership seeks—leadership not only leads, but it has to solve a problem. Yeah, you can be leading in the wrong direction. You can be leading in the right direction. If you're leading in the wrong direction, then your leadership has to be questioned. Right? And, again, this is part of the problem.

The solution to this, not only here in Hillsborough County but elsewhere, is for us to do two things. Number one, to seek to bring about united structures that will create a united form of leadership, which will diminish the possibility or the tendency of individual error. Two heads are better than one. I might see one perspective, you might see another, yet if we put our heads together, we may come up with what is closer to the total picture. So we need to do that.

The second thing that we need to do, we need to arrive at a means—we need to set up a way that we can begin to democratically decide who represents us, who leads us in some of these different areas, and then hold that leadership responsible. That way, if we see the

leadership going wrong, we can pull the reigns of that leadership. If the leadership does not respond and listen, then we can dispose of that leadership and, through the democratic process, say, "You no longer lead us," or, "We no longer follow you," whichever way you want to interpret it. And this is the evolution that all groups—communities, societies, nations—eventually arrive at. Now, that's something that we need to do here.

We need to begin to set up a means of electing a community council. And electing people who will—and I don't just mean electing somebody to serve on a city council, or electing somebody to serve on the county commission. I mean electing people to whom we delegate certain responsibilities, certain authority, who are responsible to our community. When we begin to do that, then we'll see ourselves sitting down together, analyzing where we are, coming up with solutions to the problems that we have identified and defined, developing plans for attacking those problems, and then proceeding in unity to try to bring about the change that we would like to see take place. Until we do that, we're just going to continually be dragged along behind somebody else's scheme, somebody else's plan, somebody else's design, and all we'll be able to do is react, to protest, to scream and holler, and try to minimize our casualties.

And that is what I see as a crisis of leadership. The crisis is to—or the challenge—is for us to come together and establish some structure for united leadership that would be able to accomplish all the different facets of problems that we experience: housing, education, political representation in government, economic development, social development, cultural development, caring for your young, for the elderly, and all of these things we need to begin to attack together.

FB: Okay. Getting back to the political arena, let's analyze the black voting patterns in Hillsborough County, how it affects black leaders or black politicians as a whole, and what alternatives should we seek in order for more blacks to be elected.

AA: Well, there's several things that we have to do. The first thing that we need to do is to bring about an understanding of what politics means, what it's all about. That's the first step. We have, as in many areas, we've kind of attacked the—you're trying to get on a horse from the rear end instead of from the front, approach the problem backwards. We're asking our people to respond to something that most people don't understand, because we've had an involvement in it.

Up until a few years ago—let's see, this is 1979; let's say fifteen to twenty years ago—in many places it was still against the law for us to even register to vote, let alone think about holding an office or running for an office. We couldn't even register to vote, as compared to other people who've come into the community, the immigrants from other parts of the world, who brought with them some form of political tradition, whether the politics that they were escaping from were dictatorial, totalitarian, communistic, fascistic, or socialistic, or some form of western democracy. At least when those people came here—from Cuba, from England, from Russia—they came with some understanding of politics and with some form of political involvement.

We have been denied that, other than during the brief period of Reconstruction, when we experienced and then it was taken away. During the whole first sixty years—roughly sixty years—of this century, we were denied any political involvement whatsoever. It's unrealistic to expect a person who not only does not understand the power of the ballot, the use of the ballot, what government is all about, but also a person who has been physically threatened, who has grown up knowing that they could lose their lives for even showing any interest in this area. And now because the law has suddenly changed, we are automatically expect people to just come out and respond. So, I think that's a serious mistake on our part.

In Hillsborough County, for example, there are a lot of people who've come here from other parts of the county, other parts of the South, and are just politically ignorant, period. So that's something that we need to seriously face up to. Once we begin to deal with that problem, then we can start talking about trying to achieve 90, 100 percent voter registration. Once we get the voter registration, then we can start talking about realistically getting 90 percent of our people to go to the polls.

Hand-in-hand with that—and this comes with explaining what politics is all about—we have to make the issues clear and show how government, or representation in government, can help make the streets better, can help create better housing, can help create more jobs or improve wages and these kinds of things, can help better education.

FB: That's right. Okay. We have another issue. Excuse me.

AA: Go ahead.

FB: (inaudible) the single-member districts, what is your opinion on that?

AA: Well, I think it's essential that we bring about a single-member district board.

OA: Okay. And we'd like to get some projections, and if in fact it happens, what will happen if we are not a united community in the sense that you (inaudible)?

AA: Yeah, okay. The single-member district voting is important, and will be especially important in those districts that are designed—that are created to be, say, majority African-American. Now, what will happen—and the thing we have to remember is that because we're so spread out, like in Hillsborough County, for example—because we're so spread out, it still would mean that some of us in the neighborhoods and the communities that we live in would be in the minority, and still may not be able to elect representation based on the geographic area that we live in. But it will result in the creation of some districts where our people will be in the majority. And consequently, we'd be able to elect representation there.

But I think the unity that we need to achieve is essential and transcends geography. And if we could successfully achieve that, it would offset, to a large extent, the absence of the single-member district voting.

For example, there have been—I think if we take Reverend Lowry's election for an example, I think based on his own words of the, say, thirty or forty thousand votes that he got, probably eight thousand were cast by African-Americans in Hillsborough County. And this was county-wide. This was county-wide. Now, I forget the total voting population amongst our people, but in terms of numbers we represent somewhere—sixty to eighty thousand people in the county, depending on who you listen to. Some people say we're closer to a hundred thousand people.

Again, unless we go back through all those steps, even single-member district voting will not solve the problem. We'll have single-member district voting and we still will have a handful of people who'll be going to the polls. And we'll still find ourselves not understanding the issues, being out-voted. We'll find people being elected who have our complexion, who live in our neighborhoods, but will not have our interests at heart, who will not have the proper kind of understanding of the—again, the proper and correct approach to solving the many problems that we face.

You'll have people who will be put up to run by people who are—by other folks and other forces that would really be enemies of our advancement. Just like in the old slavery days, you had leadership that was set up by the slave master to teach the slave that he was better off as a slave. And the same thing would be true in 1979, 1980, 1981. We'd have people running for office and successfully being elected who would be proposing things that would be keeping us—that would be holding us back instead of moving us forward, that would be keeping us dependent and subservient instead of leading us toward greater independence and greater self-sufficiency. So, again, the need for unity, the need for solidarity, the need for us to bind together based on common experiences and common destiny transcends the question of single-member district voting.

OA: Also—

AA: Yeah.

OA: For example, particular people interested in running for political office, blacks who are interested in running for political office—particularly young black people—could you give us some account of your experience in terms of running for office? What were some of the lessons that you think that people should be aware of and have a true understanding of, at least?

AA: Yeah. Well, prior to my deciding to run in 1978, I had worked in other people's campaigns. I assisted Del in his campaign when he ran for city council. I worked with Warren [Hope Dawson] in support of his campaign when he ran for the House of Representatives. I worked for Mrs. [Mary Alice] Dorsett when she ran a couple of times. For Mrs. Harmon when she ran for office. So, I didn't consider myself to be a political novice. Plus, I've always tried to keep abreast of different— (tape skips) —and the things that were happenin'. And, again, pertaining to education itself, had been going down to and wrestlin' with the school board and the school staff—school administration—since

1970, so I was fairly familiar with those things pertaining to education, or so I thought.

But running for office isn't—you know— (OA and FB laugh) Backing somebody else when they do it is one thing, but doing it yourself is a completely different ball game.

FB: Like (inaudible)

(all laugh)

AA: Yeah, it's like running a marathon. (OA laughs) And it's one thing to be training somebody or to be on the sidelines cheering somebody on, but when you're out there yourself, it's grueling, it's a grind, it's very demanding, and very challenging. But it's also very rewarding, in another sense. It's grueling and demanding in the sense that you have a relatively short period of time to try to make yourself known to as many people as possible. And that's what it's all about.

Electoral politics is about letting more people know about you and what you stand for and winning their support based on that—than your opponent does. It's about outworking your opponent. Your opponent may have no program and you may have the best program. But if he gets out and introduces himself to more people, knocks on more doors, stands on corners, appears before more groups, has more money to buy more literature and put up more posters and television time, radio time, then regardless of how right, how correct, or how wise you may be, you're just gonna lose.

OA: There you go.

AA: It's just that simple. So anybody thinking about runnin', number one, they ought to be willing to make tremendous sacrifice and do a lot of work.

I had a couple hurdles to overcome, two or three—well, three major hurdles to overcome, all of which I recognized before I decided to enter into a race. First of all, I knew that I had the advantage, in our community, of name recognition. And that's important. Again, when a person walks into a ballot box, they don't remember your whole history. In most cases they don't even know. And they can't recite your platform, your program. Nine times out of ten, once you get past that major candidates, people just look down the list and they go, “Eenie, meenie, miney, moe,” unless they see a name that they remember for some reasons or another. So name recognition is important. Because I'd been so active in the community I knew that that was an asset.

On the other hand, because of the militant period in my life, and involvement here, there was some controversy that surrounded that. There was a time when people—the mayor and the chief of police and the sheriff's department and the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation], and just the establishment in general tried to make it seem that me and people like myself—people who were concerned and wanted to bring about some changes in society—that we were public enemies number one. That we were out to—just out to destroy. That we were out to burn up everybody's houses and take away their jobs

and rape their children. We were sellin' drugs on the street and all this kind of stuff. And all of that had been put out in the public.

So, I knew that I would have to contend with that. And sure enough, right after I announced I was running, the first thing the [*Tampa*] *Tribune* did was to blast me as being an ex-criminal and ex-this and ex-that. So that was my introduction. (laughs)

FB: That was the introduction.

AA: Right, that was my introduction.

OA: That was your introduction.

AA: Right.

The other problem that I had to contend with was lack of time. Now, I really had not intended to run for school board. I had been watching and keeping up with it, who was running for different offices. I knew that with the different problems that faced us in education, as well as in other areas, that somebody ought to run. And I had heard rumors that other people were considering running, so I had not made any plans. I was waiting for somebody else to announce so I could back them. And finally, as the days grew shorter, I realized that nobody was going to get in the race. So I decided that I would get in, just so that somebody from our community would be involved and so that we would not miss the opportunity to speak out about some of the problems that we had been battling against in other forms.

So I decided like two days before the deadline that I would get in the race, I think. Like, Tuesday at twelve noon in August was the deadline for qualifying, and that Tuesday morning I ran down to the supervisor of elections office and got my papers together, and ran over to Dale's and a couple of other places and got 'em all notarized and filled out, and ran over to the bank and opened up an account real fast. And then ran to the supervisor of elections office and at eleven-thirty, eleven forty-five, I was sittin' there fillin' the papers out to make sure that I didn't miss the deadline. And of course, that left, I think, seven weeks to try to campaign. Seven weeks up until the first primary. Because the race I was in, District Six School Board, represented the whole county, then it meant I had seven weeks to try to get into the whole county.

So, this is another lesson. I've been here thirteen years, but we don't realize that, for the most part, we travel very narrow paths. We go from home to the store, from the store to school or to work, go visit a few friends, but otherwise, they are parts of the city, parts of the county that most of us—

[Transcriber's note: This interview was recorded onto two tapes. The Oral History Program only has the first tape, having never received the second. The following portion of the interview was transcribed by the Black History of Tampa Project staff in the 1970s.]

Tape 1, side 2 ends; tape 2, side 1 begins

AA: —to look at your constituency in a city council race. The way it is set up now, you live in a district but you're still elected city-wide. And the county commissioner's race, the school board race, you have to live within a particular district but you're still elected county-wide. So a person considering running for office has to consider that, say, our whole county is your constituency. You know, we can't just look toward "our people" to elect us to office. It's a reality of the situation.

If we were in Newark or another place where we were 50, 60, 70 percent of the population, then you could—that would be a viable approach to take. You could get enough of "our people" to go to the polls and support you, then you could win. In Tampa-Hillsborough County, it's not the case and, for the most part, still will not be the case even after single-member district voting is brought about. We'll still be faced with pretty much the same situation. So, that affects the nature of the political approach; it has to. You know, politics is called "the art of the possible." It's one definition; it's the art of the possible. So it would be unwise politically to adopt an approach that makes it impossible for you to win. It becomes—it's an exercise in futility to do that. You know, again, it helped me to understand a little bit better the diversity of Hillsborough County, and how large it is. I found that, in getting around to different areas of the county.

You know, right away when you announce, there are certain things that begin to happen just because you announce that you're in the race. You begin to receive calls and mail from people who invite you out there to get to know the candidates. They invite you to speak. They invite you to little teas or gatherings and what have you. Of course, that's mostly symbolic, because if you have fifty or sixty people running for all these different offices and everybody's given two minutes, three minutes to speak; the maximum is five minutes. So by the time you get up and give your name, your age, how much you eat every day and what you do for a living and some of the kinds of things that you'd like to try to do if you were elected, and then, of course, that's preceded by and followed by a whole line of people. Nobody really remembers that luncheon. You know, nobody really remembers that much of what you say. But still, it's important that you make all these engagements.

So, like me, I was working full-time. I'd get off at five, five-thirty—

FB: [He answers the door when there is an interruption and explains that the taping session will be done soon.]

AA: Yeah. I'd get off at five, five-thirty and maybe have five different places to try to be that evening. So we had to be in one part of the county at five-thirty and somewhere else we're supposed to be—two other places at six o'clock, one over here and one over there. And somewhere else to be at seven o'clock. And somewhere else to be at eight. And you have to try to make as many of those as possible. And this goes on day after day after day. At the same time, you have to be able to set your own schedule and have your own

activities, have your own organizational meetings, have your own group out working, going door to door and putting up signs, scheduling meetings and activities and what have you.

So, it's a lot of work. It's really a lot of work. It takes a lot of time, a lot of energy, and a lot of times you just want to lay down and cover your head up. But—

OA: I can imagine.

AA: Yeah, it's an endurance race. It's really an endurance race. And then, of course, your fundraising is important. There are many people in our community who are politically conscious, in the sense that they realize that we need representation, that we are black, that it's a denial of basic democratic and constitutional rights for the government to continue to operate every day without us being represented.

Many of us realize that, but at the same time, because we don't have a political tradition—we don't have the experience of decades and hundreds of years of being politically active—we don't know what to do. So a lot of people that would pass you, or call and say, "Hey, I hear you're running for office; that's great," but then they don't know what to do after that. Unless you bump into them, you never even get that from them. You never know they're supporting you.

We have to learn how to plan parties and plan meetings. You know, when you hear somebody's running for office, don't wait for them to get in touch with you. You get in touch with them, and invite them over to your church or your organization or your school or your club or your neighborhood or your home to start raising money or to just send in a little check, whether it's a dollar or five dollars, or what have you.

There was a number of pluses, again, all things considered. I understood what I was up against before I did it: the time element, the quote, unquote "reputation" that I had to deal with, and then the limitations because I was working full-time and had other commitments and involvements. But on the whole, in a relatively short period of time, seven weeks' time, we raised about fourteen, about thirteen hundred dollars, and I got close to eleven thousand votes. So I think that's a sign to other people, and it was a sign to me.

If I decided to run for office again I'd do it the way I was supposed to be done. You have to start in advance, you have to start early, making yourself known, speaking out on different issues. If it's the school board you're interested in running in, start attending the meetings—not three months before the election, but six months, nine months, a year. And if you're genuinely interested, of course, you would have kept abreast of it and involved in some way even before then. But at least, do that. If it's city council, start going down there so you're familiar with what they're talking about, familiar with how it operates. You get to make your face known to some of the people there and they get to see your face, and you aren't caught totally unaware.

Something else that I learned was that we deal with a certain perspective of things, and we define that as a black perspective, loosely speaking, because this is part of what we have been advocating. We have been trying to interject that into American life, because it has been missing for so long. But our perspective is not the total perspective.

OA: (inaudible)

AA: And in a community like Hillsborough or Tampa, whereas we have to be advocates for our people. Right? Otherwise we have no reason for being there. We have to do that first. That's our first responsibility, to be advocates for our community, for our needs for our people. Yet, at the same time, we also represent other communities, other people, other interests of the community. And we have to seek to understand those and to seek to represent those, too, as long as they don't conflict with our own. All right? As long as they don't go against what we're trying to do.

For an example, we sought out people from the Cuban community and went and talked with them and made some good acquaintances and got a chance to understand some of the things that they were concerned with. It was good politics to do that. And, secondly, it helped us bridge a gap that we felt was worth bridging for more reasons than one. So that's something else.

Like with the School Board, we had, for the most part—most of our attention is focused on things dealing with race, whether it's past discrimination or suspension problems or whether schools are being closed because they're in our community, these kinds of things. But other aspects of the total educational picture we don't look at very much. Like, very few of us pay attention or know how schools are funded, how they're set up economically, how they operate. Things having to do with budget, the taxation system, millage and these kinds of things. Yet, when you get in a race for the seat, the people that you're asking to support you are going to ask you this, because they want to know whether you know what you're getting into.

FB: That's right.

AA: Whether you're intelligent enough and aware enough to be able to make a wise decision once you—if you're elected, once you get there. See? So these are some of the kinds of things that we have to do a lot of homework on. And then, of course, it's through building a good political movement, a good solid campaign in our community. And this is something that I knew how to do, based on other prior experience. But again, given time limitation, there were many things we wanted to do just didn't have time to do.

But politics is something, and political campaigning is something that you don't just hear about, but it's something that you see and it's something that you feel. People should be able, should be moved, should be stirred by a campaign, by a candidacy. In our community we need rallies and we need the marches, and we need even the fish fries and these kinds of things. You know, ways of making people know that something is happening and getting them to come out and get involved. These are just means of getting

people educated to what the issues are anyway and making yourself known and making you aware of the issues. But I think that's essential.

That's something that Reverend Lowry's campaign did not do. He did not build a political movement in our community. He didn't do it. And none of the candidacies that I have witnessed to date have been successful—including my own—have been successful in doing that to the degree that I think it should. And I think that's very critical, not only for the sake of the individual person that's running for office, but it is essential to begin to develop that sense of feeling and understanding what politics is really all about and how it can bring about change. It's essential.

That's why you look at those countries that have been able to achieve revolution in some form or another. Regardless of what the ideology was, the leadership succeeded. The parties succeeded because they were able to move the masses of the people. They were able to move the masses of the people in support of their party, in support of their cause, in support of their philosophy. And the evidences of that—they announce they're having a meeting, they announce they're having a rally, they call a strike, they call a boycott, they get tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions of people who respond. And that's important. And the same thing when you're talking about going to the polls. They announce that they are running, what have you, they get millions of—masses of—people who respond.

When we are successful, when some candidate or some group or organization is successful in building that kind of movement, then we will begin to see a transformation in the community. But that's the only way it's going to come about. The politics has to be in the mass movement.

End of interview