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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.]

**Robert Gilder:** During that time there was a lot of racial bigotry in Tampa, as well as throughout Florida and, needless to say, throughout the nation. Blacks were, as in many places—

(Intercom buzzes)

***Pause in recording***

RG: I won't give you occurrences, and I don't have particular dates right at my fingertip, but the struggle to open up recreation, such as the beaches and bowling alleys, was one of the things that we participated in, in the early days. As a matter of fact, jointly, we integrated every bowling alley at the same time. We went to—four people went to every bowling alley in Hillsborough County, in order to try and integrate them. They knew we were coming. Their attitude was that “If I integrate, I will lose business by people going to other bowling alleys.” That's why we adopted the strategy of going to all of them at the same time, one o'clock on Saturday morning—Saturday afternoon—to integrate every one of them, so that those who would be inclined to go elsewhere would find black bowlers.

It was successful. Some carried their guns. As a matter of fact, to be honest with you, I was one of the ones, carried my Army .45. And believe it or not, holding it in place, bowling, I bowled a 245 the first game. I think it was a matter of racial pride. I hadn't bowled in fifteen years. I think it was a matter of racial pride. And maybe it's the way I had to go down the lane holding my .45 in place. I remember a couple of weeks afterwards I went on the lane and it slid out, went halfway down the lane.

Later, I realized that if I could not be involved in the fight for freedom and justice without

having to carry a gun, I decided, “Well, maybe I should get out of it.” That was much later. Because the racist element was, is, and always will be dangerous in our nation.

**Otis Anthony:** Now, this was in the fifties [1950s]?

RG: Yes.

OA: Okay.

RG: And of course, I don't feel the need to carry a gun now, because I believe that the Lord is gonna take care of me. And the Lord has taken care of me. And even with a gun, I don't feel that I am protected as much as I would be with the help of the Lord.

There was a political involvement. I got involved and became president of the Young Democrats. Early on I got involved in the political process, because I felt—and still feel—that in our day and time that we must participate in the political process. We must be a part of the political decision. There are two kinds of people: those that'll make the decisions and those who abide by them. And so, I did get active politically, remain politically active, and still am very much involved in politics one way or the other.

I put on a number of voter registration drives, voter education drives, and assisted every black that has ever run for office in our county, in our state, and in our nation. Needless to say, there were some that may not have been as qualified as others, but because they could relate, they didn't have to learn how blacks feel and the problems of blacks, I felt that they could probably relate to our political problems more than the traditional candidates. So, from that standpoint, and not a racist standpoint, I supported all of those blacks that were running, not only physically, mentally supported them, but financially I've supported them.

**Fred Beaton:** What were the conditions of, say, the first blacks that ran? What were their conditions, as far as their financial state?

RG: Blacks in Hillsborough County?

FB: Right.

RG: You had a few families that were fairly well-off, and—but the majority of people, the majority of the blacks, as is today, still were the first to be fired, the last to be hired, relegated to inferior working conditions and the like. That hasn't changed that much. We have more blacks into the mainstream, but that's by and large due to the pressures of the federal government. You have more blacks in government jobs. That too, is by and large due to the pressures and availability of funds from the federal government. Not much has changed for blacks without financial assistance from the government.

Right now, if you removed all blacks that were either directly on or indirectly on government salaries, depending on revenue sharing funds, labor department funds, HEW

[Health, Education, and Welfare] funds, CSA funds, HUD [Housing and Urban Development] funds—if you removed all of those blacks from various positions in city/county positions, then there would almost be a total absence of blacks in our structure. There are two reasons for that. One is, the government requires that blacks be involved. The other is, the entrenched political power structure realizes that these funds are not here forever. If blacks are going to work, here is an opportunity to put them on, and if the government ever takes away the money, then they won't have to worry about having blacks in their department. They can say to blacks, “Well, the federal government cut off the funds and you just happen to be workin' for one of those programs, so we don't have you.”

Politically, the racist politicians can say when their constituents ask them why there are so many blacks—and I don't know what "so many" blacks means; I've heard that and nobody's ever really defined it for me—why there are so many blacks working in government? Then they can say, “Well, they work for the federal government, they don't work for us. You don't pay for them.” Of course they do. They pay for them through federal funds coming down, but it's a political cop-out.

We were able to get OEO [Office of Economic Opportunity] funds. We were the first in Florida to get grants. The very first meeting, which was held in city council chambers with the mayor, Nick Nuccio, and Representative—Congressman Sam Gibbons—

OA: Was this still in the fifties [1950s] now?

RG: Yup.

OA: Okay.

RG: Congressman Sam Gibbons, the chamber of commerce, United Fund, county government, school system—they held a meeting in the early fifties [1950s] to organize a community-based group to try and get funds from OEO. The bill hadn't really passed at that time. It was in various House committees. And they invited a couple of blacks there as participants, in terms of lookin' on; there were no real black input. As a matter of fact, Bob Saunders and myself were in attendance, and Nathaniel Crook<sup>1</sup> and Jim Hammond. Bob Saunders and I, after having attended the meeting and being told on the record that they were not going to involve such organizations as NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]—and the reason being is that we—it was very carefully explained to us that Washington was going to see to it that blacks were involved in this effort and were protected in this effort.

Well, having had an opportunity to review, in advance, the pending legislation, we realized that not only was this going to be, quote, “Washington-based and funded,” but they were saying, for the first time in the history of this nation, that the government is no longer going to sit here and decide what each community wants, what each community needs, that we want input coming up from the grassroots, that we need advice on what the

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<sup>1</sup> Crook was the director of the Tampa Urban League in the 1960s.

problems are and what the local community and its community leaders feel is a viable, workable solution. So we immediately realized that, if organizations such as the Urban League or NAACP were not involved, that the information being fed into Washington relative to the problems of the poor community, and in particular in the problems of the black community, were not going to be addressed.

So Bob Saunders and myself sent off a registered letter—return receipt requested—to the proper sources in Washington and Atlanta, indicating that according to the guidelines that the total community was not going to really be represented. I remember Ted Berry<sup>2</sup> was involved in it, and he immediately pulled the request for funds out of the hopper that was almost certain to be funded and told them that they must have one-third/one-third representation, and part of that was the NAACP and Urban League and organizations such as that, and that there would be no funds for Hillsborough County until such thing was done. Immediately, the delegation that had been sent to Washington came back and wanted to get together and work out whatever the problems were.

It helped because they didn't realize that what we were saying here—they realized at that point that those blacks in Tampa are not cut off from what's going on. The pipeline—information come down—they knew that we were knowledgeable. They also realized that we had a certain amount of connections in Washington, Atlanta, Tallahassee, and they decided that, “Well, let's involve them.” And involved we were, so much so, until—from the very beginning we helped shape the destiny of the agency in terms of who would be director, what the programs were that would be coming.

I would like to think that thousands of people were helped. Not as many as I would like to have seen. And the reason not as many because most of your programs, at best, do not address themselves to 100 percent of the problems. Head Start, for example, we have served traditionally about fifteen hundred kids. Well, there are at least a hundred thousand kids that could use Head Start. So when you're talking about fifteen hundred, you're talking about 15 percent of the problem. The Manpower programs that have come down: although they address themselves to solving the problems of the unemployed, they sometimes only solve 5 to 10 percent of them.

So, yes, it was a token effort. But what we tried to do was to make a good effort with a token effort on the part of the federal government. I'm quite pleased with the majority of things that occurred with OEO's effort to help poor people to help themselves. The private sector, as far as working with minorities, has not lived up to what I consider to be a commitment. I don't consider it successful at all. There's a lot to be done in that area.

We always realized that we took a three-legged stool—it took the people themselves having the desire to succeed; it took the private sector putting in whatever resources and know-how to help them succeed; and it, of course, takes a viable, workable educational system, along with whatever help the federal government can do. None of these can succeed without the other. And the sooner we find that out and stop kicking and keeping kids out of school—slow learners, disruptive students and the like—the sooner we learn

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<sup>2</sup> Berry was a civil rights leader in Cincinnati, and also that city's first African American mayor.

that kids learn nothing but anti-establishment information when they're out of school. And the way things are, they are learning very little more than anti-establishment information when they're in school, because the system says to them, "Hey, look at me. Yes, I am going to openly and blatantly discriminate against you, and there ain't a damn thing you can do about it."

We were involved in trying to help the school system integrate its schools. Hillsborough County, as you know, is the most integrated school system in America, and probably the most racist. It wasn't designed that way, but it worked out that way. I think that has more to do with the people that's involved, in terms of superintendent and school board members and the like—not all the school board members, but the majority of them. I think it has a great deal to do with the failure of the media to try to educate people on how they ought to treat each other. The media has been a dismal failure and still is. There's a racist element in the media, and as long as—especially when you're dealing with the media—

(Intercom buzzes)

***Pause in recording***

RG: When you're dealing with racism in the media, it's like having your drinking water contaminated. It spreads. It certainly has spread, and it's contagious.

I was involved in the U.S. Civil Rights Commission Advisory Committee effort—

OA: What year was this now?

RG: I was placed on the commission in the early sixties [1960s], and I've remained on the commission ever since. Right after it was formed. We have held a number of hearings regarding the school system, regarding police brutality, regarding police killing kids, Economic Development Commission hearings. You name it, the commission, under the leadership of Mr. Bobby Doctor in the regional office, has done an outstanding job.

The one thing that I admire about Mr. Doctor—and you probably won't get too much from him because he's an outside person—but he's one outsider that has really helped shape the destiny of Hillsborough County because of his availability to this community; because of his efforts to stop police from killing young black fifteen-year-old kids, unarmed; because of the many trips that he's made to this town. I feel as if he has had a significant role in ridding this community of a lot of its racism. If we had two or three more governmental agencies that provided the help that Mr. Doctor has provided, we'd certainly be farther down the road than we are now.

Economic Development was a spinoff from the OEO effort. One of the things that—I put a coalition of hats together, and I call them a coalition of hats because that's what I used. In order to be effective enough to get the attention of the political power structure so that they wouldn't take over, dominate, run, rule and control the monies that were sent to help

poor and black folks, I had as one hat, a member of the Advisory Committee to the U.S. Civil Rights Commission that I wore, and wore very well. At the same time, I was president of the NAACP, which was a hat that I wore, and wore very well. At the same time, I was president of the Young Democrats, which is a hat that I wore, and wore well.

The one ingredient that I was missin'—and [it] still is—is that I didn't have \$200,000 in the bank. Now, I would have been hell had I had \$250,000 in the bank, but they never knew that I didn't have any money; only the bankers knew. Still don't have any money. But I would like to think that I still have a minor degree of influence in shaping my destiny. I think that everybody ought be involved politically in helping to shape their own destiny.

I resented then, and I do now, the title, quote, "black leader." I think that's a title that divides and has a disruptive tendency, and it's designed by the media to divide and conquer. I've never encouraged it at all, because I think it's deliberate on the part of the media. I've always looked upon myself as an individual was trying to go in the right direction and encourage others to go in, if they'd like to.

I am still, and have been, involved with the Community Action Agency ever since the first day, and I'm still involved, as its chairman.

FB: Okay, can you tell us something about the Community Action Agency from day one on up?

RG: Day one on up? I told you about the beginning, where they didn't want to see me on the board—

FB: Mm-hm.

BG:—until, I would say, a complete takeover. Takeover not in the sense that we were going to take it over and put in bad programming, put in bad people and stuff like that. We had to form a coalition with some other powerful entity. At the very beginning, the school board was trying to take over. The city of Tampa was trying to take over. The county commission was trying to take over. Doug Cone of Cone Brothers was trying to take it over. All he saw was millions of dollars coming here, and he wanted us to build roads with it. We got a lot of political heat because we wouldn't build roads and put it into concrete. As a matter of fact, I almost got put in concrete myself because I wouldn't put things into concrete.

We got a board that was sensitive. And there's one white man that contributed a tremendous amount of effort to the cause of black folks—very low profile, but has done more than any other person that I know of—and that was Tudlow Johnson with the United Fund. Tudlow was a very low profile individual. He was from Mississippi. Worked his ass off to make sure that justice prevailed among black folks. He was on the board, and really, I guess, formed a coalition between the county involving whoever, the representatives with the county and United Fund.

Not having enough votes on there to carry any weight, the coalition worked because we got most of these people involved in the coalition and were able to keep it from being taken over by the racist element in our community. That was the big fight: to keep it from being controlled by the racists. It finally resolved, because the minnows we were swimming with got to be big fish and they themselves took on the alligator profile. But we had grown too, politically. We'd grown in knowledge.

The one thing that the system fears—did and does and will—and that is knowledge, properly used. And I do say "properly used," because I don't give a damn how smart you are, if you don't use it to your advantage, then you ain't got shit. See? The element of surprise has always worked, never doing those things that the system anticipates you would do when they anticipate you will do it. I don't consider myself any smarter than anybody else, just luckier.

The OEO programs, coupled with the civil rights effort—when I say “civil rights effort,” I'm not just talking about black folks, I'm talking about civil rights for all people. Even before women started fighting for their rights, the civil rights laws and movement fought for justice and equality for women, handicapped [people]. This is something new now for women, who fighting for our rights. Well, the laws that the NAACP lobbied through, the laws that—and we used to lobby with OEO too, before we put a enough pressure on Congress to have them pass a law that—

***Side 1 ends; side B begins***

RG: At first, you know, Congress passed this bill, and they did not have—it did not address itself to whether we could participate in the political process. And we were, in fact, involving poor people in the process. If Congress had not stopped that, you would really see some poor [people's] involvement in the political process. You would really see some black involvement in the political process.

But they stopped that. They stopped that very early, because city hall had put out a lie that you can't fight city hall. Well, we fought city hall when we needed to, and found out the city hall did put that lie out to keep people from fighting them. That was the most repressive piece of legislation that was passed two or three years after OEO was passed, to make it against the law for federal employees to really get involved in the political process, in terms of involving others in it. That hurt. But I like to think that—well, I know for a fact that 95 percent of the federal programs that have come to town, including Model Cities and all of your Manpower—TSEP, and all of your Manpower programs—I personally helped to write them up and get them lobbied through.

We're involved in establishing a junior college system in Hillsborough County, and very much involved in the site selection of Ybor City campus. The power structure had no intentions of putting a campus in Ybor City, because they were afraid of racial hostility, rape, robbery, and the like. They had decided that they were going to go out near the University of South Florida and put a campus out there. Very much involved in getting



the governor, who was then Claude Kirk, to intercede and say to the school board and say to the chamber of commerce and say to the political power structure that, if there is no campus centrally located so that blacks won't have to have a car to attend, there will be no campus. There will be no community college in Hillsborough County. This is what the only Republican since Reconstruction did. That was Claude Kirk. Give the devil his credit.

And he wasn't a bad governor, as far as blacks are concerned. He's the only governor I know that ever went to black schools and said, "Where are your electric typewriters? I just saw some electric typewriters at Plant High School; where are they in Blake? When I come back, I want electric typewriters here. How many janitors you have?" Plant was cleaned up. "I understand you have half the janitors here at Blake. I want equal dollars spent on black students that is being spent on white students." That was what Claude Kirk did.

FB: But were you attacked personally for your involvement in some of these—?

RG: Oh, I've been threatened hundreds of times. Phone calls. Letters. Dolls in the yard. Oh, I've had hundreds of attacks.

OA: Okay, Mr. Gilder, gettin' back to politics, why do you think we just have only two [black] elected officials in Hillsborough County?

RG: Oh, I think that politically, we have not played our cards right. We have allowed ourselves to be tricked out of being elected.

Well, I'll tell you exactly what I've said before on television, so I may as well say it here. The established black leadership has not been together. And most of the traditional political was black. They've always had their political alliances—they were locked in. The Latin communities have come to the black community and they've drained off the black support, for their relatives and for themselves. When it come to repaying that debt we'll find that they always have a relative in and they cannot re-pay the debt. Well, you don't have a political coalition when you have people saying, "I can't support a black candidate this time because my cousin is running." Well, I find that they all got cousins. So, hell, why should we have a political coalition with somebody that's got a million cousins? It's been one-sided, and that's basically why.

Another reason is that blacks traditionally don't get involved in politics until six months before the election. There's no ongoing—and when I say "blacks," I don't mean those few of us that do help with voter registration, I'm talking about the masses of so-called black leadership. We crank up the machinery six months before the election, and then it's too late, because in order to win an election, you've got to run two or three years in advance. You've got to be involved for two or three years. And you've got to plan it.

We crank it up, get involved—we as a whole, I speak—crank it up, get involved, three, four, five, six months ahead of time. You see emerging three or four community groups.

After election, they disappear in the woodwork. There's one now that I hope won't do that. Of course, I've hoped that every other one didn't do that, too. So, I'll have to wait, hope, and pray that we get a workable political solution to our problem.

I know for a fact that we have many blacks in our county that can serve. We, in Hillsborough County, have an abundance of brilliance as far as black people are concerned. I've worked with people all over the state and half of the nation and I have never, in any city that I've gone in, found as many smart guys in one city as you have in Hillsborough County. Miami, Jacksonville, Gainesville, Atlanta, they're not any smarter than we are.

The one thing they don't have—now, Miami has it now—and that is the abundance of the Latin influence. In cities where you have black and white, the whites have felt pressure. “Well, it's time to relent and support, quote, ‘some blacks in office.’” That's their trade-off. But in Hillsborough County, every seat that has been designated or sort of earmarked or agreed that this ought to be a black seat, some Latin has come in and taken it. It's as simple as that.

The Latin community has an advantage. They have their little stores—grocery stores, bars, clothing stores—disbursed throughout the black community. Many of those people are on the book until payday. And they influence a lot of black folks which way to vote. That has been one of the secrets of their success is to try to keep there from being anything negative spread in the black community about their candidate. And when people go in to get their pork chops, they give 'em a card. And that is how we have lost many black votes. And, of course, this person that they see every other day that they go to the grocery store had more influence on them than the few black leaders that they see every two years. Do you see the point?

So what I'm saying is that two things need to happen: we need to engage in economic development in our community, support the struggling black businessman so that our people can go there and shop. And then, we need to see our people more than every two years when we want to influence them on who to vote for. People are not dumb. They remember that hell, it was two or four years ago when I saw you last. Now, you need me? Why are you comin' out here now? Shit. Most of the people said, “Fuck you.” They find out who you're supportin' and go just the opposite, just for the hell of it.

One of the things that most of our leadership don't realize is that a brother may be in the poolroom or on the corner without a dime in his pocket, but that don't mean he's dumb and don't know what the fuck's goin' on. Just the opposite of that.

(Knocking at door)

Yeah?

***Pause in recording***

RG: Blacks in the housing projects are very politically astute, because they know the pain and suffering. They know about police brutality. They know about the garbage not being up. They know about people not being taken care of at the health department. They know about the food stamp lines. You see, they know about the problems of our community first hand, because they are the last to receive service. They are the most abused. So how can anyone go out there once every two or three or four years and tell them how good it's gonna be if you vote for Mr. Bubba? Because, hell, they voted for the last Mr. Bubba, and there ain't a damn thing changed since then.

So that's where it is. That is one of the reasons that every week I make a point of trying to visit—and not just visit, trying to go down on Twenty-Second [Street], go down on Main Street, hit Palm Avenue, you know. I adopted this during the riot—before the riot. And this was one of the reasons that I was able to get the state's highest honor for bravery during the riot, from the state of Florida—the gold medal from the state of Florida. I was awarded that for helping to save lives and assist in stopping the riot.

My reason for participating in stopping the riot is because I'd seen riots in Detroit, Chicago, and other cities where many, many blacks were killed. There wasn't a damn thing done about it. Just another dead black. And we were trying to avoid that bloodshed here, because we knew that there wasn't gonna be a damn thing done about it. And that's why I stayed up for four days trying to stop the riot.

The only reason I was effective—along with some other people in our community—was because I knew many of the people by first name. I'd shot pool with them. I'd shot dice with them. Had coffee with them. At least I knew them. And when I said, "Hey, man, get the fuck out of here," or whatever, many of them listened. And if I didn't know that particular person, I knew somebody that knew them. So I was able to be, to some degree, effective.

FB: Was it your concept for the White Hats, or—who was that?

RG: I was involved in that. Jim Hammond and myself. We originally—there—you know, Dr. [James O.] Brookins—

Originally, we started paying people on Nebraska Avenue to stand guard. You know, put an armband on. It wasn't a white hat at first, it was an armband. And we tied handkerchiefs around people's arms. Now, we knew that some of the people that we put handkerchiefs on had been breaking into places, but at least this gave them some kind of immunity, letting them know that if you help us, we're gonna look the other way in terms of puttin' you in jail, but man, let's stop this shit. Those guys wanted to get out of the riot situation as much as we wanted to and as much as the police wanted them to. But they didn't know how. The White Hats was a spinoff of that, no matter what anybody tells you.

And to some degree, it at least gave people some place to go and something to do. It was very interesting. It was very dangerous. I remember they broke—somebody broke into a

gun shop. We were having a meeting with the governor and the sheriff, and it was brought to the sheriff's attention at the time that somebody had just broken into Jess Harper's gun shop, stolen a lot of guns and a lot of ammunition. Well, they were about to go down there and kick open the doors in Central Park Village and search every house. It'd have been a bloodbath if they'd done that.

Finally, I asked them, "Well, how many guns did they steal?" Well, they got that report. They stole about a hundred guns, but they were all broken guns and couldn't fire. "How many rounds of ammunition did they steal?" Well, they stole two or three cases of ammunition, but it was all World War II ammunition that might not fire, and it certainly wouldn't fit the guns that they'd stolen. So really, what the system perceived as a major problem that would cause them to go down there and get shot kicking open somebody's door, with a few well-placed questions [we] found there wasn't no damn problem at all. They were about to kill and get killed for nothing. And the people who stole it ran through Central Park Village, but probably didn't even stop there, with some useless guns.

I remember walking the street with Charles Jones, Jim Hammond, Bobby Scott, Jim Williams, some other guys, and it was very dangerous out there. People were shooting and throwing bottles. Tampa had a hell of a riot on its hands. Much to the credit of the way—here again, Claude Kirk—and Sheriff [Malcolm] Beard conducted themselves in conjunction with those of us that I've mentioned helped save lives.

OA: The question has come up to us, how were you all able to persuade the sheriff and the chief of police to let you all go into that?

RG: Political power.

OA: Because that has puzzled a lot of people.

RG: Power. Power. Claude Kirk said, "I want these people to try to do it." The governor pointing down, "Okay, I have confidence." The governor called me right after the boy—er, young man—was killed, [Martin] Chambers was killed, and [the governor] said, "What do you think we need to do?" And I said, "I think you need to come here." And he called to convene the meeting. And we tried to get the religious—black and white—community involved. And they were a little hesitant. I think Reverend [A. Leon] Lowry and a few other people. For the most part, I recall going to the religious organizations and—

(Door opens)

Yeah?

*Pause in recording*

RG: We went to them and told them the role—particularly the ones who had churches

around the riot are—and told them what their role—what we perceived as could be their role. They were very reluctant to going out there. They were very hesitant about going out there. I remember getting on my knees praying for them, begging them to go out there.

OA: We read about that.

RG: Hmm?

OA: We read a whole lot about that. That's why what we couldn't understand was how you all was able to do that. And they was supposed to be the, quote, the "leaders" of that particular community.

RG: Well, we tried. That was what we needed at the time, and we tried and it didn't work. So we said to Reverend [H. MacDonald] Nelson, who was one of the ones who went out there, because Reverend was working for me at the time at the Community Action Agency. So we were able to get him, and Rudy Spoto<sup>3</sup>. We got Rudy and his people out there. And we were able to say, "We can handle it with words better than you can handle it with bullets." And they knew that. They knew that.

But, here again, the governor taking responsibility and saying, "Okay, Sheriff, I'm gonna put you in charge. You're the head law enforcement officer, but this is the way I want to handle it." So we were able to deal with that. And unlike any other city in America, we didn't have the bloodshed that you had in other cities.

OA: Right. And the White Hat concept and the whole concept—your brainchild—was used in other cities.

RG: Yeah. As a matter of fact, I was carried up to Detroit and several other cities to help out as a consultant with their problems. But it was very—it was a thing that happened. We should have never had the riot, because I don't believe that violence is the way. However, as a result of the riot, many people who not able to get jobs [got them] later on. The door of the federal government fell open and as much money as we needed fell out. TSEP is a good example of how we were able to get as much money as we needed from the government because of rioting, the whole TSEP concept.

The West Tampa Neighborhood Service Center's complex—I personally went up to Washington and got that money for that complex over there. And it's the first time that a million dollars or more was put in the black community to serve the black community. And I'm so proud when I ride by there going or coming from work and see that here in the midst of poverty is a million dollars, serving the people. A supermarket of services.

It ain't enough, but it's a hell of a lot more than we had. Because what we had on that very spot was a racist trailer park owned by the city of Tampa. And we had make the mayor make those racist white folks move out, because they wouldn't even let a service man

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<sup>3</sup> Spoto was director of the Welfare Division, and later became county administrator.

from MacDill [Air Force Base] put his trailer in there. And the NAACP said to the mayor, “You're either gonna integrate it, tear it down, or the folks out here is gonna burn it down.” Here's a man servin' his damn country, couldn't even park a trailer on a city-owned trailer park. So we converted that into—from a racist trailer park into a million dollar complex: swimming pool, softball diamond, gymnasium, job opportunities, day care center.

OA: Okay, Mr. Gilder, when you did all this, was there any animosity, you know, between, say, other leaders against you?

RG: I'm sure there was, but I didn't stop to look at 'em. I didn't stop to fight 'em. I didn't fight 'em at all. You see, it takes two to fight. Oh, I'm sure that the white power structure—I found that every white man has got—had him—not got, but had, still probably got—had him a powerful black man. Every powerful white man has him a powerful black. And anytime that I would attack that power structure, his black would attack me.

But I didn't pay that shit no attention. I didn't. I kept my eye on the sparrow. I didn't take time to fight, quote, “Mr. Bubba” himself—Bob Thomas, Ellsworth Simmons' black man. I didn't stop to take time to fight them. I fought the problem, not my misguided black brother, whoever he happened to be. I fought the problem. I kept my eyes on the problem. And, with the help of the Lord, man, I feel that I have made a contribution in this town.

RG: I still don't take time to fight my brother out there. You see, you can't fight within and be successful outside. Now, if he goes too far, I'll personally punch him in the goddamn mouth, but that's just between me and him on the corner. Not for press. Not for anybody else knowin' about it, unless he tells somebody. You see?

OA: Okay. Another question I have to ask you: in some of the editorials in the last two years your name has come up for mayor—

RG: Mm-hm.

OA: Is this one of the—say, your idea or the press' idea?

RG: I guess it's the press' idea. I certainly have left open my option to run for whatever I want to run for. I think leaving your options open to run for whatever you want to run for, or whatever you feel the people would support you running for, is synonymous with voting for whoever you want to vote for. It is my political prerogative to leave my political options open. A smart politician, which I may not be, always leaves his political options open; you never paint yourself in.

I think I'd be a damn good mayor, especially when I compare myself and my knowledge with some of the elected officials that we see on the surface today, including the mayor [William Poe]. A very fine businessman, but I wouldn't give you a dime for his

leadership as a mayor. He might be a hell of a lot better than I think he is. I think he's at least smart enough to get some fairly smart people around him, but that's basically all I can say. That's basically all I know. And, of course, I'm not the only one; there are a lot of blacks that could do an outstanding job as mayor or anything else in this town. We have an untapped reservoir of talent in the black community.

I think that, should I run for office, I hope to win, and I hope to serve. I have served. And the reason that I have not run for office is because I have had an opportunity to serve not being an elected official. Few people can—few elected officials can point with pride to the accomplishments that I can. I doubt that I could have been any more successful had I been an elected official, because I parlayed a number of strengths to work for the black community. I have yet to take a dime from a politician. I have yet to ask one for something for me. I always ask for good government. And I've had politicians look at me like I was a damn fool when I asked for good honest government open to all of its people. I've had some say, “What's that?”

You know, when they win and divide the pie, I go over there seeing what I can get for the people, not for me. And that has been to my advantage, because they always feel as if they owe me a political chit. And I've got a desk drawer full of political chits. I don't cash 'em in for bullshit. But when the chips are down, I'll cash a chit. There are a lot of people who owe me political chits in this town, and I ain't ever gonna let the motherfuckers get out of debt. Never. Keep a politician owing you—

OA: That's right.

BG:—and you always can get something done. But if you take his money or his beer can or his fish sandwich or his little bullshit favor, then he done paid you up front. He don't owe you nothing. You take that \$500, \$1,000, \$2,000, he done bought you. He don't owe you a goddamn thing. And on and on. Tampa is good. We've come a hell of a long ways here in Tampa. But I do say that we still have a hell of a long ways to go.

FB: Okay, Mr. Gilder, the last question I want ask you is, how do you view the Barclay [*Barclay v. Florida*] decision with the Community Action Agency?

RG: The Barclay decision? I think the Barclay decision is a very bad decision, and I think it's gonna be counterproductive. I think it's gonna be detrimental for years to come. Not so much from the community action standpoint, but I think that from a business standpoint a lot of companies are going to be kicking blacks out of very important jobs, afraid of court decisions. But as Mrs. Holmes—Eleanor Holmes—says, with the EOC, “A businessman would be very unwise if he used the Barclay decision to re-segregate his plant.” And I agree totally. Okay?

OA: Okay.

*end of interview*