

Atlanta Student Movement Project
Dr. Roslyn Pope Interview
Conducted by Jeanne Law Bohannon
August 25, 2017
Transcribed by Ella Greer

Interviewer: So as part of our “Democracy Doesn’t Run on Cruise Control,” project we are talking today with Dr. Roslyn Pope who was one of the founding members of the brain trust that is the Atlanta Student Movement that changed our history forever. And uh, thank you so much for sitting with us and talking to us again.

Pope: Thank you.

Interviewer: I am transformed when we talk, so uh, forgive me if I am not being as scholarly or academic as I should but your words always transform me.

Pope: I appreciate that.

Interviewer: Just to start, just for the record tell us about yourself like where you were born, where you went to school, and how you ended up at Spelman.

Pope: Well, I’m a native Atlantan. I was born on the southwest side of Atlanta on a street, uh that was named Ashby Street. The number was 53 Ashby Street. I came to discover uh, later in life that my father had bought our house from Howard Thurman and so it’s so extraordinary to me that I grew up, I have the deed, the transfer of the deed from Howard Thurman to my dad. And so that’s very special and I hope that uh, the viewers will know who Howard Thurman is or will find out.

Interviewer: Yes.

Pope: But uh so, that was always, once I discovered it that was very meaningful for me. But I lived on uh, Ashby Street, it’s now named after Reverend Lowry, Joseph Lowery, and uh, at first I was distressed that the street name had been changed because 53 Ashby Street had been with me forever and then I uh, I discovered what a horrible Civil War general uh, this Ashby was so.

Interviewer: Really? I did not know that.

Pope: Yeah all the streets in that neighborhood, there’s a Lee Street that they want to change very soon and Beckwith and all of the streets in our neighborhood were named after these Civil War people.

Interviewer: Wow, I did not know that.

Pope: Yeah, it's incredible. So they are being changed one by one. I am one of three people, children, and uh, I'm the oldest. My parents were wonderful. My father was fortunate enough to work at the Post Office. Not many black people worked as clerks in the Post Office, but he was there for forty years. I attended a, what used to be called Ashby Street School and then was named after E.R Carter. E.R Carter had been the pastor of Friendship Baptist Church where I grew up, and he was the pastor there for 62 years so when my bother, and I started I was 4, and he was 2, E.R Carter was still there at Friendship but not very long after that.

I'll just digress a minute and talk about uh, Friendship Baptist Church because after uh, E.R Carter who was also the name of our school. You know, the name of the pastor, the name of the school. So, that's an important name. But the person that succeeded him was Maynard Jackson. Maynard Jackson had moved with his family from Dallas, Texas. He came with his wife Irene Hobbs Jackson, one of the daughters of John Wesley Dobbs. They came with their six children from late teens to itty-bitty. I grew up with the Maynard Jackson family including my friend Maynard Jackson who became Mayor of Atlanta and has done so many marvelous things. I was baptized by Maynard Jackson Sr.

So, that's just a little aside. But back to 53 Ashby Street. I was close to Washington High School which was the first high school for black citizens, so I graduated from there. My desire had been to attend Oberlin University because I had started piano when I was 5 years old and by the time I was graduating from high school I was pretty accomplished and uh, in fact, was accepted at Oberlin with a scholarship but my daddy put his foot down and said "you're going to Spelman." And so, it turned out, I mean I was upset initially, but it turned out to be the best place I could have gone from high school to Spelman.

Interviewer: And then you studied abroad.

Pope: And then I studied abroad after my junior year. I was thrown right into the governance of the student body. I was president of the freshman class, the sophomore class, the junior class, and then I was elected president of the student body while I was abroad so when I came back, uh, ready to change the world, uh, I already was in position where I would be on the initial committee that turned out to be the Committee on the Appeal for Human Rights.

Interviewer: I wanted to digress for just a minute if I could because one of the things you and I had talked about a few months ago when we met was that experience of living abroad and how equality was more normal and having to come back to the American South where there was no equality and how that impacted you.

Pope: Well it was a revelation. Back in 1958 maybe, people didn't fly to Europe, they went by ship. And so I had sailed from Montreal on a wonderful line and the first experience I had with people outside of my normal existence were the people I traveled with on the boat who on the ship who were actually so cordial and so warm and uh, my, growing up in segregation this was not an experience that I had had prior to that except on certain little committees and I had played on a concert with the Atlanta Symphony so I had met you know, musicians and people in the university system but these were strangers and they were just excited about me. In fact, I had a chance to perform at the captain's cocktail party I think it was. So several of the passengers took my mother's address, they wanted to write her and tell her you know, that I was so special. But I spent a year in Paris and throughout Europe and never had to move to the back of the bus and never was told 'you can't eat here' and I was a normal human being for the first time because in my previous, prior to Paris life, I was fenced in. I was not a free person; I couldn't go where I wanted and do what I wanted. Even now I think about those years when uh, we were using the white students' textbooks for example, and they were very old.

Interviewer: They were out of date.

Pope: Yes, they were out of date, and some of them even had nasty notes in them, assuming that one of us would see them.

But anyway, Paris changed my life and then I traveled to England and Scotland and to Germany and uh, I'm having a moment. I don't call it a senior moment, it's just a moment. And Italy, and went to the Vatican, at least went around the Vatican, not inside. So it was a marvelous year of being, of really finding out who I am without being transcribed and penned down and being looked down upon. But by this time I was 18, 20 years' old which is a long time to live as a person who was less than, in fact, well less than human. And it's a hard thing to overcome but the thing was I came back ready to fight and to change things but I didn't know how that was going to happen. It's just so, uh, what's the word. It was as if it had been planned that I would come back, mad as hell, and then Lonnie King and Julien Bond would walk up to me while having coffee at the campus drugstore. They were very excited because they had just read the article about the four gentlemen who had sat down at Woolworth's in Greensboro, North Carolina. They had become known as the Greensboro Four. And uh so, it had just come out in the paper I think on the 22nd of February and Lonnie and Julian were already recruiting, mostly Lonnie, and Julian was, you know, coming along as well. And I said "Oh my God, yeah" when they said "do you want to be involved?" It was like an answer to a prayer. I hadn't been back; I came back for my senior year as president of the student body so I was ready to join any movement that was going to overhaul the system of Jim Crow that I had grown up under. Before we knew it the presidents of the colleges, the six colleges that

make up the Atlanta University Center, they had discovered that the students were up to something and they had called the other three people from each of the six campuses and uh, the people who were naturally going to be on, what turned out to be the committee were the president of the student body, the vice president of the student body, and then one other person that the president would choose. So that put me right in line, you know, the fact that I had been elected president in absentia, you know it was kind of like a puzzle, it just started falling into place. And so I was there at the initial meeting with the presidents of the six colleges. They wanted very much to dissuade us from taking any sort of movement to try to undo Jim Crow. But we were determined. It just turned out that way that the 19 of us were all of one mind, the students. And uh, one of the college presidents, in fact it was Dr. Rufus Clement who was president of Atlanta University. There were five colleges and a graduate school. So he suggested that if they were not able to stop us, at least we owed it to the city of Atlanta to explain what we planned to do in terms of demonstrating and why we planned to do it. And uh, it was sort of like you have to do this or, you know, we'll take harsher measures. It was like paying the price of being able to take to the streets. And so, we agreed that a manifesto would be written and Lonnie King, I think had named four or five people to work on a document that would appear in the Atlanta Journal and the Atlanta Constitution that would appear in the morning and evening papers. And uh, a couple of days went by and nothing happened and nobody was in charge and uh, its hard to do a document by committee and finally he asked me if I would write it. People seemed to think I was an English major when really I was a Music major (laughs) but uh, in any case it felt to me to write it. And uh, as it turned out, it created quite a storm. There were many people who were, uh, well not black people, well black people as well who thought it was going to stir up trouble. We were trying to explain that we lived in a terrible system and that it had to be changed and that we were going to do everything that we possibly could to see that it was changed. And uh, one of the really uh, strange complaints came from the Governor of Georgia and I don't have that article with me but he accused the writers of, first of all, it couldn't be written by any student.

Interviewer: By any student, by any college student.

Pope: In the state of Georgia.

Interviewer: It was just too good.

Pope: (laughs) And so that was the first thing. And whoever had written it must be a communist and was someone who was trying to stir up trouble and uh, disagreement and uh, evil even he used the word evil in his letter that came out the day after we published it, one or two days. But we began to look at it as a positive letter, uh, first of all, he said that it was so good it couldn't be written by

a student. Even though he accused us of, he said it sounded like it had come from some communist country and that sort of thing. He was way off track, and I think eventually he said he was sorry he had taken that tone, but it started quite a commotion right after, coming after the Appeal.

Um, let me stop for a second. Is there anything else we need to say about that? Let me say about the Appeal that uh, the college presidents had approved it, but they also wanted all of the campuses, all of the students at the six schools to approve it. So the student body presidents of the six colleges of the Atlanta University schools took a copy and read it to each of the student bodies and uh, the document was approved by all six of the schools. And as Dr. Clements had said it appeared in the Atlanta Constitution and Journal as a full-page advertisement.

Interviewer: But then it went to the New York Times.

Pope: It went to the New York Times.

Interviewer: The Harvard Crimson.

Pope: The Harvard Crimson.

Interviewer: The Nation Magazine.

Pope: Exactly.

Interviewer: And then it was written into the Congressional Record.

Pope: Yes, all of the above.

Interviewer: The Congressional Record of the United States of America. From the will of that place, it read into the record.

Pope: Yeah, it was quite extraordinary.

Interviewer: Yes, it is.

Pope: And as I look back on writing it, which I did rather quickly because we had procrastinated you know, trying to do what couldn't really be done. I was still trying to write it at the time that Julian Bond became to type it on the typewriter at Howard's (Zinn).

Interviewer: So you were still writing it while he was trying to type it.

Pope: While he's starting to type it.

Interviewer: That's a heavy deadline.

Pope: It was a heavy deadline, but it had to be done. And the more I, the more I wrote, the more deeply I felt what I was protesting, that it really was an evil system and that many people had fought and died to overthrow it. And it uh, so it began to kind of write itself. And then we had these several categories that we to discuss and there categories that we're still discussing now like education.

Interviewer: Voting.

Pope: Housing, voting.

Interviewer: Law enforcement.

Pope: Exactly.

Interviewer: All of those sections. And it seems, um, as someone who has read it from a different generation, what I can say too, and my students would say the same thing too because they are a different generation than me. These sections are intuitive. They move from one to another in a way that makes you think about public institutions and law enforcement and voting.

Pope: Yes.

Interviewer: Private institutions like concerts and,

Pope: And churches.

Interviewer: And theaters. And then moving forward into education which kind of invokes all of those things. The way that it's written is almost like a tapestry that's woven through. It's beautiful, just to read it is beautiful. Never mind the importance of the content, but the beauty of the words just woven through.

Pope: Thank you.

Interviewer: It's pivotal to me. And I know that I'm not supposed to be doing much of this talking.

Pope: No, I want you to.

Interviewer: They're life-changing to the people who read them. So I did want to know what you thought about that in terms of your process. Because I can see the music in

it. You know Lonnie told me that you were an English student and I trusted him, I didn't do my research, so that's on me. But it makes sense to me because it's musical and woven.

Pope: That's wonderful.

Interviewer: And so your process, you probably weren't thinking about any of that in the process you were probably just writing as fast as you could.

Pope: I was just writing as fast I could. But in each section, I felt a catch in my heart, when you read about the amount of money that is spent on white students in public education and the little fraction that's spent on black students. And the fact that black students couldn't go to the University of Georgia. I have many friends who have degrees from Northwestern and New York University and Johns Hopkins and all kinds of wonderful schools that Georgia paid for them to go to keep them from going to school in Georgia. It's incredible, isn't it? Some of it's so stupid you wonder how.

Interviewer: You wonder how any person of goodwill couldn't just say 'no, we're not doing this' and then change it immediately.

Pope: Exactly, exactly. But the fight goes on. We still have many of the same issues, and that can be very discouraging. At that point of time, however, it got the ball rolling, and it got so many more people involved. The educators, and pastors, and parents, and the community joined in, and they'd bring food and drive us around. And that sort of thing. I was not there for the Fall semester; I had graduated in May, this was my last contribution uh, to the college. But it, but it went on, and more and more people joined on. My parents were so proud. My father sent copies at Christmas time to his friends with little holly things around the paper, the edge of the paper. He was so happy because you think about what he must have gone through. When I was born, he was already in his forties. Is that right? Yeah when my parents married she was 34, he was 44.

Interviewer: And to think what he went through, what he lived through.

Pope: Yes, the worst of it.

Interviewer: The very worst of Jim Crow.

Pope: Yes, he did, he did. I remember being with him, say we go into the eyeglass place or something like that and people would call him by his first name. Young kids. "uh, Rogers how you are doing?" He was Rogers Pope. And it just would kill me that they had the nerve, um because he was a person of great dignity and even if he hadn't been he was still an elder.

Interviewer: That's right. And you don't address elders by their first name unless they have given you permission to do so. That is very much something that being raised in, and I don't even think its necessarily a southern thing, but having raised in the South, that was exactly how we were raised. Elders, you refer to them by their honor.

Pope: Mr. Ms.

Interviewer: Reverend.

Pope: Yes.

Interviewer: Doctor.

Pope: Yeah.

Interviewer: You say it, that's what you say.

Pope: But no matter what the status of a black person was, you would call them by their first name, so horrible.

Interviewer: So you write, um, you wrote another Appeal in 2000.

Pope: Oh yes, I did. Well, I guess I did.

Interviewer: So I was going to ask you if you felt that now you needed to write one for 2017.

Pope: I think so. I think now is the time to uh, pen something else because we're in dire straits. I call it. And uh, even the gains that we have made, there are people who would take them away. And uh, we are cursed with a leader that has no integrity whatsoever. And uh, so it may be time, and there has been written, uh, another Appeal for human rights, but mine wouldn't, I don't know how, this is just, you just floated that into my little brain, but it uh, it would be an addendum.

Interviewer: Right. And the one that was just written for the undocumented with the undocumented students. You and Lonnie were involved in that, and the Atlanta Journal covered that, and it's amazing. I think we need you again Dr. Pope; we need your voice.

Pope: Thank you, Dr. Bohannon. I will.

Interviewer: We need to go back to the documents, and let's do it again for us.

Pope: I think it's time. This is a good time. So what else do we need to say?

Interviewer: Well, let's. So I wanted to know too, that as a woman, it's hard for me as a woman in 2017 to imagine what it was like to for women in 1960 and 1959 to take on these leadership roles. That wasn't a time where women, I think we were kind of right on that crux in time when women were taking on leadership roles.

Pope: It was early on.

Interviewer: It was extraordinary for women to take on leadership roles and movements and I wonder if you could just take us back to you during that time period and what you felt and how was it.

Pope: See I don't think that. I don't feel that it was an issue because our main issue was so overwhelming and you couldn't do anything that Jim Crow had said you couldn't do and so you're so caught up in the fact that you're not a human being, not being seen as a human being that the female, the woman thing, it didn't come.

Interviewer: It had to be secondary.

Pope: It had to be secondary. We do feel that uh, as history has progressed that the student movement had set the tone for the women's movement, for the gay movement, for the many of the expressions.

Interviewer: Absolutely. It was the best organized, the best written. The main document that came out of it, the Appeal, is something that is still used today and still something that is referred to in its original form by people seeking basic human rights worldwide.

Pope: Well that's very um, well that means a lot, and it's very, very gratifying to know. I have a friend I've never seen, but he teaches at New York University, and he teaches this class, the Appeal, and he calls and talks to me about it and 'what did you, what caused you to say that and the other' and I've had several teachers who, I didn't even know existed, to call and find out more. So uh, I'm glad that it's still alive, or maybe it's come back to life, there may have been two or three decades where it uh, didn't mean as much but now it really does. And we have to keep fighting; it's not over.

There was one other thing I wanted to say. It's gone away. It's funny how at this stage in life, you don't always have control over whether the words will come and you know you have to work on that. But I have a cousin who is a psychiatrist, and she says "as long as you remember it by the next day, it's not so bad."

Interviewer: I love that because it happens to me now. I'll have it in my head, and it's on the tip of my tongue, and then it's gone. It's just gone.

Pope: Well I think we're overloaded.

Interviewer: I think we are too. I think there is so much work to be done that I live this 24/7 because we have to get this done, it's imperative right now.

Pope: It is, isn't it?

Interviewer: It is. I know Lonnie probably told you this, but he went to visit his cousin right after the election, I think it was December and he happened to see a newspaper in Albany, Georgia and uh, the newspaper, above the fold headline nonetheless, was someone that was very excited about the fact that now we are going to be able to go back to 1951.

Pope: And we are going back. That's exactly what's happening.

Interviewer: For many of us it has to be a 24/7, very stressful time, but we have to. There's just no way not to do it.

Pope: And we just, well, I don't know what to say except that there's something about humanity that, you know, unless it's kept in check, can be influenced negatively. I mean, who thought anyone would be concerned about the statue of Robert E Lee other than to take it down? But it brings all of that back, the history, I mean the Civil War, the slavery issue and all of these things are back on the top of the table.

Interviewer: And the Jim Crow time that it was put up in. So the idea that many of these emblems and statues and memorials were put up at that time to intimidate people

Pope: That's true.

Interviewer: People like your father so that he would somehow quote 'know his place' every time he walked out in public.

Pope: Yes, exactly.

Interviewer: And I think that is not lost on the people who defend those statues.

Pope: But you know, they have been dormant though. No one was talking about them. And I think that, well I think that the shooting in Charlotte, was it Charlotte?

Interviewer: Uh, what happened in Charlottesville?

Pope: No, not in Charlottesville, the nine people who were killed in the church.

Interviewer: Oh in Charleston, at Mother Emmanuel in Charleston.

Pope: In Charleston. I think that was a trigger; I think the president was a trigger. I think uh, it's okay now to just say anything and not worry about who it hurts or how it sounds and then when you hear terms like neo-Nazi and you know you think these things are dead and buried but they're alive and well.

Interviewer: They're alive and well.

Pope: So that's distressing.

Interviewer: Yes, it really is, and that's why we have to keep the pressure on. That's why I tell my students that we can't just rest because when you rest, that's when all the horrible things happen.

Pope: That's what you were saying that Lonnie had said in the beginning that we have gone on cruise control.

Interviewer: Yes, and democracy doesn't run on cruise control.

Pope: It does not.

Interviewer: That's the really important thing we have to remember for sure.

Pope: Yeah, we have to remember.

Interviewer: So thinking about that, do you have any advice for young people today like my students. They're looking to the leaders of the past to figure out a way to organize, and stay organized, and stay motivated and not just take it to the streets and then go home.

Pope: Well we need teachers like you to instill values uh, that we used to hold dear which has just sort of slid off the front page. We need, the students can't do it without the teachers who have the right kind of spirit to impart as you do. I think that we're in good hands as long as you're here and people like you to share the values that seem to be slipping away. We have to keep bringing them back.

Interviewer: That's why Dr. Mays and Howard Thurman were important mentors to the students because Dr. Mays, he instilled a sense of responsibility.

Pope: Absolutely.

Interviewer: As a mentor to the student movement, that's really important.

Pope: And Howard Thurman instilled the idea that we had to overcome these barriers, that we were worth fighting for, that these ideas were worth fighting for. And so he would take students, like to the public library, for example, the downtown library. Now the city had installed small libraries in certain neighborhoods, but we couldn't go into the public library downtown. So he and Irene Dobbs Jackson, whom I mentioned earlier, the mother of Maynard Jackson, took a group of students and walked in and demanded to be served. Of course, they were sent out, but it started the ball rolling that eventually in a short length of time uh, they were challenged and the library opened to everybody.

He would take students to the courthouse to hear what the Senate and all they were doing. The students had to sit in the balcony, they couldn't sit on the first floor so he would go and sit in the balcony with them, but they didn't want him to be in the balcony with the students. They were trying to protect Howard. And so, but just that idea that challenge, challenge. You deserve to be sitting on the main floor.

Interviewer: In a seat!

Pope: In a seat.

Interviewer: With everyone else!

Pope: Exactly. I remember how as teenagers we would go to the Fox Theater and we couldn't go in the front door. We had to go up these long flights of stairs to get to the balcony to see a movie. I mean the things that we had to go through just to be like any other human being. It's incredible.

Interviewer: Now all of the movie theaters were that way except the ones that were in the African American community.

Pope: Yeah they were all that way.

Interviewer: So Loews was that way, the Fox was that way.

Pope: Fox was the main one I guess because that was the main theater and that's where all of the good movies were. Many parents would tell their students don't go; you just can't see that if you have to walk up ten flight of stairs to get in a seat to view a movie. But it's not strange that these things went on for years and

years and years. And of course there were challenges, but I think when the students came together and said no more, things really began to change.

Now there have been ways since then that have been created to circumvent a lot of things. And now with the economy, like it is, we can't even go to restaurants and expensive movies and all of that. So uh, there's so many things that have militated against full participation in society.

I had a vision of Johnny Parham in a, in a phone booth. You know all of this was done without cell phones. Which is so unreal, how would, how? Because we can't go anywhere without our cell phones. You know you take them into the bathroom in case somebody calls.

Interviewer: My students this summer were amazed when Lonnie came in and did a, he came in, and he was a partner teacher with me this summer in that class where we did a lot of this research and when he came in he was talking to students about that. They didn't believe him at first. How on earth did you organize without cell phones? We had relays. We had people driving cars, and when the lunch counters would shut down when they saw us coming, we had people on the corners in the phone booth.

Pope: And when they opened up again. It was very creative.

Interviewer: Yes! And the organization of that was something that I think we should impart on our students today that you can do this using whatever technology is available to you.

Pope: And there's a lot of it now, so there's no excuse.

Interviewer: Well, of course, I would love to reserve the right to come over to your house or wherever it is that you would like to meet just to have you freeform talk and whatever it is you want to say.

Pope: Yeah, that would be nice. Let's plan for it.

Interviewer: And I'm going to call on you again to come back because with this grant that we've gotten we are going to have many more academic panels with many more students who are going to hear what needs to be heard.

Pope: Okay, I look forward to that. Now how are your mother and your aunt?

Interviewer: They are wonderful, and I would love to bring them with me because they always ask me. They want to hook up with you on Facebook, which is their thing now. People in their 60's want to do Facebook.

Pope: No, no please don't. I have a niece who has talked me into getting on, and I'm trying to get off. I told her I don't want to be on Facebook and she just insisted and actually went through the procedure of getting me on, and I have to get off.

Interviewer: They would love to come and have tea with you because they ask me that all the time, "when are you going to see Dr. Pope, can we come along?"

Pope: Oh, okay sweet, well let's get together. We'll plan.

Interviewer: Well we are planning to get together next Wednesday. I'll ask them if they would like to come.

Pope: Would they like to come?

Interviewer: I know they would like to come. For sure.

Pope: Would that be too much trouble, it's kind of a long drive.

Interviewer: They're in Smyrna, I can bring them. I can drive them.

Pope: Oh yeah. I definitely will be there on Wednesday, and then we'll go from there.

Interviewer: That would be great because you're amazing.

Pope: Well, you're amazing.

Interviewer: And I love you.

Pope: Thank you so much, and I'm sorry about the thank you card that I never sent.

Interviewer: I'm just, I wanted to make sure that I sent you a thank you card because people love to get cards, emails are not the same thing as sending people cards.

Pope: Yes, you're a card sender, and since then I went to the dollar store, and I bought about five pack of thank you cards, but I haven't sent a single one. I have this program on the internet called bluemountain.com, and they have the most delightful cards for all occasion for all people.

Interviewer: I'll check that out.

Pope: I do want to get back to writing notes and all that kind of stuff.

Interviewer: Well its important because that's what surveys as well. The emails just kind of go.

Pope: Yeah they go.

Interviewer: The letters stay.

Pope: I know, I know, I feel guilty.

Interviewer: Well don't feel guilty, I just wanted to make sure that I sent one to you because that's important, it's important to send notes.