

Atlanta Student Movement Project
Birdie Hix Carter Interview
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Birdie Hix was born in August of 1940 in Atlanta, Georgia. She was educated through Atlanta Public Schools until she attended college. She went to Spelman for her undergraduate degree and Nashua College of Education for her master's degree, and she is now a retired elementary school teacher. She was involved with the Atlanta Student Movement while she was a student at Spelman.

Interviewer: So I'm here with Mrs. Birdie Hix [Carter] from the Atlanta Student Movement. Um, Mrs. Hix [Carter], can you tell us when and where you were born?

Hix Carter: I was born in Atlanta in uh, 1940. August of 1940.

Interviewer: And where did you, did you grow up in Atlanta?

Hix Carter: I grew up in Atlanta, Atlanta public schools all the way through until college.

Interviewer: And where did you go to college?

Hix Carter: I went to Spelman.

Interviewer: Great, and that's where your Master's degree is from as well?

Hix Carter: No actually I got my Masters from Nashua College of Education in Evanston, Illinois, yeah.

Interviewer: That's great. So did, when you were at Spelman you were involved with the Atlanta Student Movement, can you tell me a little about that?

Hix Carter: I can. It, you know, I think I have thought about it more since I have been older and people know. Because generally, people didn't know. I live in Minnesota now, and people didn't generally know, and so after people learned they always wanted to talk to me about it because they didn't know because people in Minnesota probably didn't know a lot about the student movement and uh, how it worked.

So I, I don't even know how to start because it's kind of emotional sometimes when I think about it. And I did not realize the significance of it until later. I was young and enthusiastic and wanted things changed. We had wonderful, fabulous leaders like Mr. King, my friend. And uh so, I didn't, uh it was real easy to get involved because you know, it was a cause, there's something about working with people who have the same cause, and it all came together at the right time and all for us. So I uh, I don't know.

Interviewer: Did you have friends at Spelman who got you involved? How did you meet Lonnie King?

Hix Carter: Well I probably went to a meeting to tell you the truth. I don't really remember. He was way up there you know; I was one of the foot soldiers of people. But you know he was someone I admired and looked up to. And probably I heard about the meeting and a bunch of us got together to go to the meeting and from there I was all, I was all in. There was a time; I was never really nervous I was more anxious because it was new and I didn't know what would happen uh, in terms of how we would go forward and in retrospect I have remembered how people didn't want us to do. I think people in my church, people like my family, my parents were like petrified and they didn't want me to do that. And the thing about that was, and I shared this with Mr. King earlier, that they didn't uh, it was how they raised me. I kind of thought about it, it wasn't like I was a frivolous kind person like that, but I still was young and wanted to do it, but I did respect my parents and their anxiety and their trepidation about it. But uh, I realized that this is what they raised me to do, to do, if there was a cause you worked for you just had to be respectful and uh, like my mother would say, say things so people can hear what you're saying rather than how you say it and that kind of thing. So, yep.

Interviewer: Were they afraid for your life?

Hix Carter: Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. Very much so. And that's the way it was with everybody. At the time I don't think they, I thought about it like that. There was a part of me that just thought they wanted us to be kids and wanted to keep telling us. And then there were people who said just wait and give it time, well you know, enough time had been given. You know I had to sit on the bus, the back of the bus too many times, or stand because there was no place to sit. So, so the time was right.

Interviewer: So, what was an experience of yours from the sit-ins that you can remember if you could just tell us an example or a story about that?

Hix Carter: Well the thing that I can remember most is how whites would gather around you and make noises and try to scare you and try to make you leave. And all and how disrespectful they were or, of course, wouldn't serve you. So.

Interviewer: So were there white men and women who were disrespectful to the young women of color?

Hix Carter: I think most of what I remember women would be working behind the counters but I think it was mostly men, but I can't say that I really remember.

Interviewer: Do you have a worst moment? Did something happen?

Hix Carter: Not when I was, not during the sit-ins, I had scary moments because of course, well not of course necessarily, but I had gotten pretty bold, so I would get on the bus and sit where I wanted to sit and leave by the front door and all and once uh, coming from school actually, I was getting off at the front door a man literally kicked me like with his foot and everything off the bus.

Interviewer: A passenger, or was it the bus driver?

Hix Carter: Yes, it was the passenger. And called me all kind of names and all of that and stuff. And I think, the bus went on, I think I was madder than scared but in retrospect, they want me by myself kind of thing we just talked about the devil's back kind of thing. But I went home, and I'll add this you can take this out if you'd like, I went home, told my dad, my dad got his gun, got in the car, chased the bus, then I was scared that I told my dad because I didn't want him in trouble kind of thing but so. But he didn't catch the bus, but that was probably closest. Because when you were with the group even if people were being rude, and people were rude and mean and ignorant. So but when you were with the group, there's something in numbers. And we really had taught, and I really believe in the nonviolence part of it. And after a while, you knew it worked because if we had fought back, or said something back you know, it would have given them ammunition. But it was sort of like; they weren't saying, they weren't doing. You know, even when the man kicked me off the bus I didn't turn around and say anything, I just tried to keep from falling and kind of went home kind of thing. Tried not to even run until the bus was gone to tell you the truth because I didn't want to give them that power.

Interviewer: That's right, yeah. So it was a moment of strength for you.

Hix Carter: Yeah, yeah. I think that gave me the strength I feel that I have now, so much of uh, going through that, you know. And with the group and all.

Interviewer: Was there, was there a time when anyone who wasn't involved with the movement, maybe someone who was sitting at a lunch counter or someone who was just there showed compassion for the students?

Hix Carter: Well not when I was there. I think, not everybody joined in who was around, but I don't think anyone ever showed any compassion. I don't remember any looks or any, anything that would uh, say "we're with you," or "you go, girl," or anything like that.

Interviewer: So when you were participating in the sit-ins, the people who crowded around you were just very aggressive?

Hix Carter: Very antagonistic and very. May I ask you a question?

Interviewer: Sure.

Hix Carter: Have you seen the museum here?

Interviewer: Mhmm.

Hix Carter: And have you sat at that lunch counter?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Hix Carter: That's pretty accurate. Excuse me.

Interviewer: Wow, they screamed at you these racial epithets, just screamed at you.

Hix Carter: Oh yeah. So I don't know if it happened, you know, all the time every time you know, but uh.

Interviewer: But it was obvious they didn't want the students there.

Hix Carter: Oh, loud and clear.

Interviewer: Did you ever go to jail?

Hix Carter: I did.

Interviewer: How many times do you think?

Hix Carter: You know; uh I think only twice. Did I go even twice? I don't remember, it kind of all runs together.

Interviewer: So can you tell me a little bit about when that happened?

Hix Carter: Yes. Now that day we all, um we were at the counter. And it was kind of planned who would go to jail, when and where everybody didn't all go to the jail all the time as I understood like I said I just kind of followed orders and you know we had our plan. But uh, there we refused to leave, and they arrested us, and they put us in a van or truck, a van I think must have been. And uh, took us to jail. And that was pretty weird once you got to jail because you know, I doubt if anybody had ever been to jail even to visit anybody, I mean they might have, but I didn't know anything about the jail. And I was worried then about the horror stories you hear about how they treat black people in jail, probably usually black men; I had never heard of how they might have treated black women but uh, in jail. But um, you aren't sure what they are going to do to you, whether they are going to separate you, isolate you, and do something to you individually or anything. But they didn't. As I remember we were all put in a common area, showed our bunks and I think our bunks might have been in the common area. They must have been because I know the bathroom was out, there weren't any doors on the bathroom, you just had to go to the bathroom. I mean that was very strange for everybody, I know. And our beds were like a slab; I call it a slab but our mattress was like probably a heavy blanket or quilt, it was not a cushy bed like you might have at home.

Interviewer: How long did they keep you there?

Hix Carter: Well we were able to sign ourselves out whenever we wanted. It wasn't a matter of them locking us up forever; we could sign ourselves out. And I think my group, I don't know; I think it might have been a week, I know it was, I don't believe it was more than a week. We were in there long enough to be comfortable. And get used to, get used to the food that was, and we expected bad food, and it was bad food. We weren't expecting any special treatment, and we also weren't expecting being able to have our books. We could have our book, and we could do schoolwork if we wanted to. I don't remember being one of them I have to admit, but some of the kids probably were trying to do school. I know I read a lot, but I read whatever you know I wanted to read not necessarily schoolwork. So.

Interviewer: So, do you remember going in front of the judge?

Hix Carter: No. I don't remember how it worked out. I remember the day we got out of jail both Dr. King and Dr. Mays who was Morehouse President at the time were there and that was real, real exciting. That was like such, so uplifting I mean I get chills now thinking about it. Because they were like really, they were like superheroes, I mean we didn't know superhero term then, but it was really important to us that they came down, and there were other people there too, but those were the people uh, that I remember, who I remember. And I remember how much after we got out of jail that day how many people were there, business people that who you did know about in the newspapers, not someone that I knew personally. Herman Russell might have been there, somebody I remember was real supportive of the movement financially and all. And a lot of people. I think that uh after they realized we wouldn't be abused in jail and all, I think people were a lot more supportive. I mean they were always supportive they were just caring and you know worried because they were older they had been through a lot and knew a lot more than we did of course, but we thought at the time we knew more than they did. But so, I don't remember going to the courthouse; I don't remember what we had to do to you know. I know we had to be fingerprinted, I think now that my finger print's out there somewhere you know so. I think I remember that.

Interviewer: So let me ask you, so what was your parent's reaction when you went to jail?

Hix Carter: Oh, I mean, they were like really worried. They thought that I would be at least hurt if not killed. And so, and my father who was not, he was really loving and caring but not demonstrative, when I came home from when I came home from jail for the first time in my life I remember seeing him cry as he hugged me. He still didn't say much, but he was, you know so yeah. They were you know, they never really talked about, I mean they asked me what had happened and how things had been, and I told them, so they were relieved, but then we never had a great discussion about it as I remember.

Interviewer: So do you have anything that you wanted to make sure that we have on record about your experiences in the movement?

Hix Carter: I can't think of anything else.

Interviewer: Were you at Rich's or at Woolworth's doing the sit-ins, do you remember?

Hix Carter: No, I wasn't at Rich's. In my mind I've always said HL Greens, I don't, we were at one of those where they had the little, they would let blacks eat there, but you would have to go around back. So I knew it wasn't Rich's, I knew it was one of those other, the smaller places, counters.

Interviewer: And HL Greens was a like a pharmacy, kind of like a dime store?

Hix Carter: It was probably more kind of like a dime store. It had great hot dogs. I mean it was a real treat for a college student to be able to go, even to sit in the black part of it you know. Cause basically black kids' parents, what remember about growing up is how parents protected you from all of this.

And uh, I'm going to share this you can take it out now. But I can remember my; my parents lived, my grandparents lived in Tennessee. And uh, actually my, one of my grandmothers lived in Cartersville, it was like an hour or two trip. But the longer trip when we went there we had to take what we called a pee can because we could not use the bathrooms. And during that time they didn't let blacks use the bathrooms so, and during that time I would always wonder why.

Number one we had to go at night and number two we couldn't go and use the bathroom at the service station. But I was an adult before I realized that and I thank you Lord that my parents lived long enough for us to talk about that and they still didn't have much response but they you know admitted that it was true. And we went at night so you wouldn't have anybody seeing you when you pulled over to use the bathroom like that over to use the bathroom. So during that time, I mean a lot of things I think went into making me want to be part of the change, and that was part of it. And I don't know if I realized it so much at the time, but it was all the basically degradation that the blacks had to go through. And then historically you know what had happened. And I even had um, an uncle my father who lived in Tennessee. Some uh, white boys killed my uncle, and it was fun for them, they were out on a boat, and they pushed him over and drowned him. My, one of my aunts who is living now told us that. My parents, my father, they never, they never mentioned things like that. And you now to me if somebody drowns your child you go and tell the police and all and then like what good is done? It was never reported.

Interviewer: So those boys were never held accountable?

Hix Carter: No, no, no. Not at all. But things, things happen. And the sad part and the part that makes me mad I think is to them it was just fun. It was, they were playing, they were having fun, it was just fun. It wasn't like.

Interviewer: So killing someone?

Hix Carter: Yeah killing someone. It's just a black guy; he's nothing, you know, you kill a bug, you kill a black kid. And uh, so even if it's somebody who you had been friendly to, or who thought you were their friend. And he was little; I think 10, 11 or something. A kid, kid, not even a teenager kid so yeah.

Interviewer: So let me ask you um, what do you think about the progress that has been made with civil rights if any...

Hix Carter: Don't get me started now.

Interviewer: And how do we sustain it for future generations?

Hix Carter: I think what you're doing here I think will be helpful because the young people now really don't know. I have uh, two daughters, they're both adults, and I have had to teach them everything they knew because the schools don't teach them anything. They, you know. Black History Month, they'll teach them about Dr. King and all of that and um, some few you know, the peanut man as I've heard kids call it. But they don't know the history and if I didn't, if I hadn't lived in Atlanta and my kids grew up. They were born in Chicago, and when their dad was done with graduate school, he got a job in Minnesota. And Minnesota, when we moved there in '82 my daughter was the only black kid in her class, and my um, younger daughter there might have been one or two, she was in sixth grade she was four years younger. And so they didn't, if they hadn't known about how black people were because they were in Atlanta often when they were little growing up, they were down here with my parents a week at a time kind of with my sisters or something. But they wouldn't have known anything, not anything. So I had to teach them, and all and they were always amazed knowing their mother that I really did sit on the back of the bus. Or get up when there weren't any seats and had to let a white person sit down. And that's what we did, I mean we didn't know not to do it. And one thing I would like to say is, and I'll try to get back to what you asked me, is that uh, whites often would think that blacks do things out of subservience but blacks are taught to be very polite and mannerly, so if the rule says you stand up when a white person is there and even if you know, or move back so the white person can sit in front

of you, you did it. I mean, that was just, we just followed the rules, and that's why so easy for me to do this you know to participate so much.

But I think the more we let the young people know what really happened without sugar coating. And it's hard, and it's not pleasant. And not teaching them the way, that I have, what do the white folks used to say, some of my best friends, some of my best friends absolutely are white. You know, I attend an Episcopal Church, and about half of the congregation is white. So I, uh, and a lot of them are friends who have been there for me as my family since I'm the only one who lived, well my daughter in Minnesota now but for many years I have been the only person in my family there. And so these people have been like people you know, you kind of forget about the color, I mean you don't think about the color really. So.

Interviewer: Do your friends in Minnesota know about your participation?

Hix Carter: They do now, and I tell you they are so in awe. They always, I really you know because they didn't know me initially as that but once they learned. And I have really spoken to schools and things so when people know that they have a real, live person there. I was telling Dr. King here; I said you know when I went to uh, I was asked to speak about Black History Month and talk about the student movement. So I walked in, and they sent a car for me to this school, and I walked in, and people started applauding so I'm looking around to see who they were applauding for. You know it was like, it was really thrilling that they and these were young people that I learned, they had real interesting questions, these were young people I learned who wanted to know more. And the lady, their teacher, attends my church, so she said, "Oh, I know somebody." So in then it kind of went from and uh people would hear, and so several times I had been invited to speak. You know I really enjoyed it because I enjoy number one sharing it and people really don't know, and there are people who are interested, and there are some people who really can't believe it, some people can't believe. And then the other part of your question about how things are?

Minnesota is pretty progressive, but we still have people there. So I think still, I mean you've heard just some of the um, things that have happened all over the county. And I know everyone knows Philando Castile's name. He was killed right down the street from me, the street I live on. I live right across from the campus of the University of Minnesota Agricultural school, and it's really a nice area. I mean, good school district and everything. But still the police who police there are biased and prejudiced, and they are, all of them aren't and I know that because I

really, you know I always wave at them especially when my grandchildren lived with me for a while when they moved from California and I always wanted them to have good rapport with the police so you know I wave at them and stuff and have the kids wave at them so some of them are really nice but all of them aren't. So they uh, yeah, they target blacks.

Interviewer: So that incident of police brutality that brought nationwide attention.

Hix Carter: Yes, yes.

Interviewer: It was just one of a series of events that happened that year with profiling and discrimination, that happened in your neighborhood?

Hix Carter: Yes, on the street, in a place called WORD, (23:23) Minnesota. On a street, I had lived on for over thirty years. And then the more, I had been to all kinds of meetings, you know everyone starts having meetings then because number one the people don't want their neighborhood to have that reputation and I don't either. But I can uh, but I don't even when my grandson who is now 18 first started driving, he started driving about that time, I didn't even want him to come over to my house.

Interviewer: Because you were afraid for him?

Hix Carter: Yes. He is a black teenage boy, and they are targeted. I mean black males are targeted more than black females, everybody is shown disrespect to tell you the truth in instances you know. I've been in cars with people who, white people who were stopped cause a taillight was out or something. They didn't even get anything more than a verbal warning, a reminder saying, "did you realize your light is out," kind of thing. But this is what he accused this man of I think, that his light was out and pulling over and pulling out the gun, and you know.

Interviewer: Do you think what happened to Philando Castile is indicative to what is going still...

Hix Carter: Yes.

Interviewer: In our country?

Hix Carter: Yeah. Yes, I mean all you have to do is look at the news. All the police officers have to do is say they are scared.

I have one brother who lives here, and his son is a police officer. I actually have another nephew, uh, my sister who I'm staying with, her grandson is

a police officer in Clayton County. But I talked to him just since I've been here and he was telling, I asked him what happens when police officers do that and if they are taught somehow to use that as an excuse when they get scared. And I don't, I believe for whatever reason they could be scared, but you don't need to be scared unless somebody has a gun on you. If somebody has a gun on you, it's fair game you shoot first, but this man did not have a gun. And also in Minnesota, they have this law where you can get a permit and anybody can carry a gun. And we know that law is. So what do they expect, people, get guns? Whether they are permitted or not I know people always had guns, but people will have guns. And the young man uh, works as a school, I volunteer at a school in St. Paul, I taught in Minneapolis and volunteer, and I'm real involved in the school with the elder program and everything there. Where we kind of, we tutor the kids, but we try to mentor the parents. And this area in St. Paul where this is, he worked at one of the close by schools so a lot of the people knew him and it seemed like everybody had a lot of respect for him and all and so yeah it just goes on. And he told him he had the gun because he was basically saying if you check my car and I have a you know, I'm telling you beforehand. But he didn't have his hand on the gun; he wasn't trying to get the gun. And anyhow the man shot him lots of times.

I asked my nephew why do police officers shoot so many times even when somebody is running from them, and that happens, I mean I can't, well you know you get the news here too. But uh, he said they just get scared. I said well don't they have something where if you're too scared to be a police officer that you aren't a police officer? St. Paul police chief, we have a new chief there, they have a new chief, I don't live in the city exactly, I live more adjacent there. But he is getting; he is checking those kinds of things before he hires new police officers because you want them to be competent and you do want them to have some kind of soul.

Interviewer: Absolutely.

Hix Carter: That was probably a lot more than you needed to hear.

Interviewer: No that was great. And you're a retired teacher.

Hix Carter: I am, I retired in 2007.

Interviewer: And you taught math?

Hix Carter: Well, I retired from teaching Special ED in Elementary.

Interviewer: So would you say that as a teacher that education is really important and why would you say that education is really important for us to try to change and sustain the issues of Civil Rights?

Hix Carter: Well, I think for the college students who need to know what happened from a historical standpoint and for kids coming up, for students coming up. And black kids were taught, I don't care how, I grew up in the family that we had, there were seven kids, one brother and six sisters, six girls. And uh, we were taught and we would all go to college. Everybody in my family went to college who wanted to, all of us. And actually, it was a white man, with my dad worked with who helped all of us go. So it wasn't like, I mean my direct contact with whites before the Civil Rights Movement had been all positive kind of. You know I hadn't just been around, I wasn't running around white folk might harm me or assault me or something, and I lived in an all-black neighborhood, so I didn't you know have to worry about. You know when my kids lived they lived in a mixed neighborhood, and they did kind of get it but uh, it kind of worked for them.

But uh I think kids should know the value of education, and that's one reason I stay so involved. I want to help all the kids, and their parents and a lot of the parents is the same here as everywhere I'm sure. That where a lot of the parents are what I call 13 to 16 years older than their kids and maybe they weren't parented, or maybe their parents tried to parent them and they didn't and they somehow never got an education and ended up on the streets more than they should or more than I like to see anyhow. But uh, I think for their children and for them too, but now it's probably easier to influence their children than them. I would like to see them all get educations and there's a lot of uh, you know there's a lot of support in schools now, but the parents really have to be the ones to do it. It's not like even I can do it by myself or with them. I mean I can't love them enough to make them be, but I won't stop trying, you know I'll do what I can. But they uh, yeah the children, education is very important. And like parents told us, I'm sure 99 percent of the parents in Georgia told their kids education is something you should have because nobody can ever take it from you and all.

Interviewer: The last thing I want to ask you is what advice you would have from all of your experiences to give to young people today who are trying to make change, what would you say to them?

Hix Carter: Probably hang in there, I mean don't give up. Don't uh. I have to, when I run across things over the ages, some things I pass on to the younger teachers that I thought would be good and some things I made copies

and kept one for myself. And there are two things; one is I ran into a poem, one that says "don't quit when things are hard," I won't recite it, but it's don't quit. And the other is something we had to learn in the Atlanta public school, and it starts out uh, "I want to live with myself in the soul, I want to be fit for myself to know. I want to be able as days go by always look myself straight in the eye." And it goes on and on, so you know that's in me if I can remember after all of these years. And I tried to teach that, and I have bribed my children and my students.

My grandchildren will given them a pint of Haagen Das; you know something they really wanted their parents were never going to buy for them. And uh, students at school you know once you learn this you get your McDonalds, fries, soda and all. You know stuff like that really works. I don't know whether if it would work for the kids now, they kind of might not care because they are probably getting all of that stuff when the kids they weren't getting it so. And just have that kind of stuff drilled in them and all. Yeah.

Interviewer: That's great, Mrs. Birdie Hix [Carter]. Thank you so much for telling us your story.

Hix Carter: Well, thank you.

Interviewer: We appreciate you.

Hix Carter: Thank you.