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ACTIVITIES IN COBB COUNTY, GEORGIA***

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INTERVIEW WITH DEACON AUBREY CUMBERLANDER

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CONDUCTED BY ROBYN GAGNE

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Conducted by Robyn Gagne
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Location: New Friendship Baptist Church, Powder Springs, Georgia

RG: Deacon Cumberlander, if I can just get you to start talking about where you're from, when you were born, and what it was like in the community that you grew up in?

AC: Well, I was born in Chambers County, Alabama. The county seat is LaFayette, Alabama. I was born in the year of 1937. Right now I'm seventy-three years of age. I was raised on a farm. My family was farmers, and my father happened to be one of the largest cotton growers there in the Saint John community. It was a racist back in the 1950s when you start talking about racism and segregation and so forth. I went to a small school at that time named Saint John School. It was a Rosenwald School, just basically a four-room school. I did go and finish the tenth grade in the larger school. The thing I remember as a child growing up mostly is walking to school. People thought it was funny, the white people did, [to try to run you over]. As a kid, we had to learn to get out of the road because they would take the car and swerve it and whatever, play like that. It was a play thing to them, just funny, but these are things that I remember as a child walking to school. We walked about three and a half miles. When I was about eight or nine, we moved within about a mile. Another thing that I remember growing up is we had to buy our books. I don't know why in Alabama, but after you passed the fourth or fifth grade you had to buy the books. The county didn't furnish us books. But we traded out from family to family.

Most of the people in that area were family people. It was like the New Friendship community [in Cobb County]. If you do the research, you'll find that the people in the community mostly were all related to the Robinson, Broadnax, and Turner families in the New Friendship community, and to the Cumberlander, Johnson, Tucker and other families in Saint John. I married in 1956 and moved away and moved to Atlanta. I have children here. They're all grown now and married and with their own homes.

RG: You said that you walked to school and the white children rode to school. Did they have a bus or were they all driven by their parents in cars?

AC: Most of the whites rode buses. They rode by our school in the black community. But in the later years people bought contract buses. My cousin ended up buying a bus, and the county would pay him to pick up the kids. But my childhood, I walked to school. Most buses didn't come about in the Deep South until up into the 1950s and 1960s. Most of the time in all of these little communities, like this church up around here, a school was set up there in that area. So the community school was where people my age more or less got to earn their education. Rosenwald, we called it Rosenwald because I'm sure you're familiar with it.

RG: I've actually been to a Rosenwald School. There's one up in Acworth that I've been too. It was interesting. How many siblings did you have?

AC: I'm from a family of fourteen. I just happened to bring this. This gives a little history of the family. But I am a family of fourteen, and there are two of us living today, my brother in Atlanta, Gus. The rest of them are deceased.

RG: Did your mother work in the home or did she work outside?

AC: She worked in the fields. We were farmers, and my mother would get out and work till about ten or eleven o'clock. Then she'd go home and fix dinner, and then we all ate about twelve thirty or one or whenever she was ready. Then she went back to the field with the rest of us. That's the way it was on the farm; everybody worked.

RG: Did you work before school and then go to school and then come home and work more?

AC: Well, as a child on a farm you start working when you're about seven or eight years old. You start doing something. You've got chores. So during the early part of my life, school was set up for the farms. We went to school about six weeks during the summer in late June, July, and August. Then the harvest time would be September and October and November. School would start again in late October, and we would get out some time in April. We got the 180 days basically in.

RG: Right. It was just kind of a different set up.

AC: Yes, it was a different set up for the farmer area.

RG: Okay. Where did you meet your wife?

AC: She was in the community. We all lived in the same community.

RG: So you knew her from when you were a young man?

AC: Right. I knew her when she was young. We got along, and we went to the same school and so forth.

RG: When you moved to Atlanta was the racial relationship any different or was it increased, any of the tensions?

AC: Well, you know, it's funny. I know it's a hard time when we talk about racism. You're not aware of it. You're aware of the difference, but you're not so much aware of the racism if you're brought up in this condition. The thing that people misunderstand is that we are conditioned to live as we live. When you're brought up in a situation like this, you don't know any better. It seems that this is the way it is. Being farmers, I didn't have encounters with white peoples until I was nearly grown. Now, it's different, more trading and buying and so forth. I was neighbors with Walter Fletcher. He was white,

and he used to come down here, and we used to go up on the farm and help him and work on his farm and do different things. He was more of a truck farmer. He raised corn for the market and watermelons. We used to work there and help him harvest and put them on the truck. We did that just to make a few extra dollars plus we worked on the farm and all. So when you start moving to Atlanta, it wasn't that much different. You still did your job. The only difference was riding the buses. Most of the buses, they'd go off of West Lake. You'd ride the bus. When it came through the neighborhood, most all of us were black people on the bus. White people didn't start getting on the bus until you were down there around the other side of Ashby going into Atlanta. The bus would be crowded most of the time. Only a few white people rode the bus. Most of the time when the white people would be on the bus it would be like I work on a construction job out there around Lenox Square—when you rode the bus and you transferred from that bus and the bus more or less ran the Square, then you had more white people going out on that route.

RG: When you were on the bus was it the black people in the back and the white people in the front?

AC: Most of the time that was the norm until the 1960s when they started integrating the bus. I always thought some of the things that happened were somewhat funny. They started integrating the bus, and you ended up with black crowds and black people on the bus. It just so happens when you get on the bus, you sit on a seat by yourself. There's no intention; it's just if the seat is open you sit there. I always thought it was funny when the white people got on the bus they refused to sit down. They stood up, and the bus would pull up to a bus stop, and they see that a black person was driving the bus, and I've seen them put their foot on the bus and step back off. I thought that was funny. It was just funny that the idea of people. It took a long time for the changes to take over. They got used to getting on a bus with a black driver and got used to getting a bus and sitting down. It took a year or two for that to come about; it just didn't happen. No white people were getting on the bus, and black people stopped moving. At the time when we were riding the bus and a white person got on the bus, it was common courtesy for we, as black persons, to get up and let that white person have the seat. I think when we get a misconception, when we look at movies, that the black person went on the bus and paid his money and went around to the back door and went in from there., I've seen that in movies which is not true. You got on the bus and you went to the back and sat down, and you loaded from the back to the front. If a white person got on the bus, it was courtesy to get up and let them have the seat. Then I tell you it finally reached the point that no, I ain't giving my seat up!

RG: I paid the same amount as you!

AC: So it stopped happening. There was some argument, and a lot of these things happened before the civil rights movement. It just didn't start. We tend to think it just started with Rosa Parks, but it didn't. There were many that would get on the bus and would refuse to get up. Some of them got arrested, and sometimes a bus driver would tell the man to sit down, you know.

RG: So it just depended on the bus driver?

AC: It depended more on the bus driver, his attitude. We used to ride from Marietta to Atlanta; the Greyhound ran from uptown Marietta to Walton Street. They went down through Smyrna and down Atlanta Road. When white people got on the bus, they wanted a seat. Someone would get up and give it up and some wouldn't. "No, I ain't moving." That's the way it was.

RG: Your wife, what is her name?

AC: Mildred.

RG: Does she still attend the church with you?

AC: Yes, we attend here, and we've been going to this church mostly all of our lives. We were raised up in the church, our family was.

RG: When did you start attending New Friendship?

AC: I joined New Friendship in 1970; I moved out in the area in 1970. I lived in Atlanta from 1956 until 1970, and I bought out in this area.

RG: That's a long time.

AC: Yes. I think my reason for buying, since some of this is having to do with segregation, my family was young, and I didn't want them moving into a white neighborhood. I didn't want them to be subject to the harassment in the interracial neighborhood because white people were moving out and black people were moving into these neighborhoods. But I was more or less concerned about not to put them through this type of harassment. I looked for an area, any black community, but they still have caught up by going to McEachern High School. They were some of the blacks that went to McEachern School. When they went, I think it was one percent black.

RG: Wow.

AC: So they still got caught up a little bit in it. Now, they talk about it a little bit, and they talk about some of the things that happened in life, but they survived it.

RG: I guess that's the best way to put it.

AC: The best way to put it is the human mind. We as people are conditioned in a way that we learn to accept certain things until it reaches a point that it tends to create an insurmountable problem. I guess you can understand that when you look at the world as a whole; you know things that happen. We can live in a condition, and it's like going back to we as black people living in this country over a hundred years under hard racist

conditions until it just reached the point that there has to be something done. It just happened to be until somebody takes hold to it and pushes it forward. Here's always something that happens. You know what I'm saying? You know your history. You know from W.E.B. Du Bois and on back in the thirties. You go back and there was, what was his name, Nat Turner. It was always somebody that was pushing forward. Even when now you look at the world as it is, it's still going. I don't know where it's going, but it's going forward; it always happens.

RG: When you came to this church, how big was the membership?

AC: Membership probably ran about 150. We were up there at that white [painted] church up there [a block away].

RG: Oh, okay, I actually turned around in that church lot because . . .

AC: Yes, that was the older church. We've only been in this church about three years. Reverend Brown was the pastor at that time, M.L. Brown, and he had only been there about three years. He did good. He stayed there twenty-seven years before Reverend [A.L.] Zollicoffer came. At the time that Reverend Zollicoffer came, the membership had dropped some. I guess you could say about eighty or more attendance, but we still had over 125 or 130 people in the church roster. But we had an attendance on a given Sunday of about eighty people.

RG: We went to visit a church in Marietta where the pastor brought the kids down, the young group down, to do a skit in a local diner. Did this church do anything like that?

AC: No. It didn't do anything of that involvement that I'm aware of with civil rights. What you're looking at is different between a rural church and a city church. Most of the things done during the civil rights movement, you would find they were in the city.

RG: Yes, that one was right in the middle of the city. Are there any events from the church that stand out in your mind as favorite times?

AC: Well, you talk to Mother [Ida B.] Minnie. We started out as a family day some time about 1976, and we moved it into history day because it was in the month of February. We tend to deal with the history of our ancestors, things that they did and the songs that we sang from that era and that time. Religion always played a big part in our lives as black people. The preaching of the gospel has been part of that era. The ministers and pastors tend to preach and change their teaching and preaching more to fit the era into which we live. Let's just say in today's society you find more preachers preaching prosperity, how to get money, how to make money. Back in the early sermon it was more how to survive. I think that's played a major part. Our songs tend to have fit that era. I'm sure you're familiar with the history with that song, "Swing Lo, Sweet Chariot" and "Coming to Take Me Home" and "I've Got Shoes, You Got Shoes, All of God's Children Got Shoes." If you really try to look at that, then you would think that we as blacks working the field didn't have the shoes or the clothing, so the song fitted that part.

“When I get to Heaven I’m going to put on my shoes. I’m going to shout all over God’s heaven.” All of these songs came to reflect the time and era in which they lived. A lot of the programs that I have set up talk about these songs and fit in the era in which they lived.

RG: This is going to jump around but where did you work when you first came to Atlanta?

AC: I first did construction work, and I ended up with more doing the commercial union type work. I worked as a laborer. That was out there off of Lenox Square. When you’re doing that type work, you know just all type places. I worked and help build Greenbriar [Mall], and then we moved from Greenbriar to out there at Lockheed. I just happened to meet somebody out there at Lockheed and talked to them, and I ended up working over at Lockheed in 1968. But I got laid off in ’72, so I went back into construction. I worked as a carpenter when I went back. I worked that and built myself pretty well a career in constructing all the way up to superintendent on some jobs. I worked out at the airport when they moved it and built that. I had a five man crew, and I did the first four concourses. My job was to put in all the anchor bolts and footings for those concourses. Then after a period of time construction kind of shut down under the Carter administration, and pretty well money got tight and there wasn’t no construction being done in Atlanta. I got pretty well lucky that they started building more of the C-5s, and I went back to Lockheed in ’81. I retired from Lockheed in 2000. That’s basically my work history.

RG: All in two minutes! Great!

AC: Well, I don’t know whether you’re interested in all the things I did in construction. Hensel Phelps Construction Company out of Arizona had the contract from Boulevard and Decatur to Krog Street, about a mile and a half. We also built the [MARTA] station there at Boulevard and Decatur Street. To build the columns we had a six-man crew. Don Richter was the foreman. I ran the fittings and anchor bolts along about a mile and a half of track. We did all those footings and columns up there. I did warehouses. I was a superintendent on warehouses off of Fulton Industrial, and I did one for John Weiland warehouse on Sullivan Road. So that’s basically it.

RG: What kind of relationship have you always had with the church? Has it always been very open and welcoming?

AC: I’ve had a pretty good relationship with the church. After I joined the church for a short period of time I was put on the trustee board. So you’re able to help the church in many ways in that field and in the finances and what money is spent and so forth. You’re making the decision for the church. Then in 1980 I was ordained as a deacon here, so it’s somewhat related. I worked on boards in the church. The church has had its ups and downs, and it’s had its hardships sometimes. When I say hardship—it’s trying to get something done. You’ve always got the naysayers, but I feel like I’ve been pretty strong in helping the pastor to carry out his vision for the church. I’ve been pretty vocal, although sometimes being vocal gets you in trouble with some people.

RG: That's half the fun! When you were on the trustee board what kind of jobs did you do?

AC: Trustees, well, during that period of time we had one of the extensions—we call it the fellowship hall. The kitchen and all of that was added in. That was sometime in the 1970s, around '75 or '76. I don't remember exactly the date. I'd have to look in the history to find the exact date. But the group put it together and presented it to the church at large, and we put that in. Then the next thing was to upgrade the church and put air conditioning in it, and you're vocal in trying to get that done. There's always something that the church needs to upgrade. There ain't a whole lot of difference between the deacon board and the trustee board. The deacon board more or less works a little bit closer to the pastor, but you're still doing basically the same thing. You're always doing something for the church. It's just like a business. There's something that it always needs. When the pastor comes forward, and the church needs this, it's how to get it done. That's basically what a trustee board and a deacon board do—where to get the money for them and how to do it.

RG: Okay. So did you do a lot of fund raising?

AC: Well, we did some fundraising. That's one of the things. We wanted a piano; that's how we started the Friend Family Day. The youth wanted to buy a piano for the church, and we had to do a fundraiser to do that, so we raised money to buy a new piano. People get out and they work—the youth did mostly. I was heading it up, but the youth did most of the work doing what you need to do. I think at that time we sold candy. Companies will give you a bargain on candy, and you sell it to the membership.

RG: And make a little bit of profit. It says here that your grandfather refused his master's last name and came up with Cumberlander. So your grandfather was a slave?

AC: Well, my grandfather really was born sometimes around in 1860. It was about the time that slavery was over, but he refused to take the name Anderson. This other person's name was Cumberlander, and he used the name Cumberlander. But the slave owners themselves were the Andersons.

RG: Did you know your grandparents at all or did they die before you were born?

AC: I didn't know my grandfather, no; all I know more or less is a little bit of the history. I was born in 1937, and he died in 1936.

RG: Oh, that's the exact same as me actually. I was born in 1986, and my grandfather died in 1985. Isn't that weird? Is there anything else that you'd like to share about the church or about your life?

AC: The church? I think that as my family, being involved in the church, it gives you a good background to strengthen you. I'm saying this because I look at my children, and they all seem to be doing okay. None of them has been in jail, and they've got good jobs. It's

come down to facing the right thing, having a conscience about right and wrong. I think all churches, basically, do this for young people. I think sometimes many of our young people are not being brought up in a church atmosphere. Going back to my era, the church was the center of the black community; it was the only place that we could call, basically, our own. You could go to church and be at peace at church. I think being brought up in the church and bringing your family up in the church gives you more of a background or something, a straight forward attitude. I think today there's too much break up in marriage, and there are too many one-parent families. Kids today, by not having two-parent family, get lost. They don't have the cut off, how far can I go before I violate your right as a person. I think we're missing that today. People don't know how to talk to you. When they step on you they don't know how to say excuse me. In the grocery store and they bump into you with their cart, they don't have the sense enough to say, "I'm sorry." We're missing so much today, and I think the church—I don't know how you can get it back, but something's got to happen. I don't know whether you understand what I'm saying.

RG: No, I do know what you're saying. I've seen it a lot too. I think your right, when you do go to church your whole life, you do have that moral obligation to be a good person.

AC: Yes, a morality about another individual's rights. You know where to stop. Like I've gone too far; you're saying too much. It's not enough to say, "excuse me," but when you've got to get in somebody's face over something stupid—some stuff people do today is just stupid. I hate to point it out, but since we're talking, the man that jumped and beat that lady down there at Cracker Barrel, how do you reach that point in your life that you can't just say, "Excuse me?" I'm sure that person said something to upset him, but she ain't said enough to warrant his behavior. You see what I'm saying? So there has to be a line somewhere where you tend to check yourself. I think we begin to run out of these kinds of values, where do I stop? I don't have a right to reach over and slap you because I feel like it.

RG: You think the church has a really big place in teaching that line to young people?

AC: I think the church has a big line. In fact, with the single parents today, the church is going to have to take a bigger role in that. They're going to have to set up programs to help young people. Like here at this church, the men took the young boys out over to Birmingham to the civil rights museum. We want to do more stuff like that to just go out with young men, take them out and spend a night with them somewhere, a vacation night. The church is going to have to take a part in this because you do have too many single parents, and you need some kind of role model for these young boys that are being brought up. Young women too, it's the same difference because too many of them, like I said, they don't have. . .

RG: They don't have that role model at home.

AC: They don't have the role model at home, and they don't know when to stop. When I'm saying when to stop, where do my rights as an individual violate your rights as an

individual? They don't have that line in their life because too many parents would allow the child to talk back to them and say things. Nowadays kids say anything to their parents, and they look at them and laugh. The church has to play a role in that. So, any other questions?

RG: No, I think that's all. Is there anything else that you might have?

AC: That I might add in? Well, I don't know. I can talk about my family, my kids. I have a daughter that's living in Chicago, and she's has a family. Then my daughter Angela lives over there off Lost Mountain Road, and Audrey lives down in Riverdale. My son lives in Maryland. What a parent wants the most is for their child to grow up, be on their own, and don't come and look at Dad and say, I need you to do this. [laughter]

RG: I'm sure my parents are thinking the same thing. Mom, dad, I've messed up! They don't want to hear that.

AC: They don't want to hear that. When you get grown you leave the home. You're on your own, and the life that you live is yours. You make the choices in your life, and you hope that they are good choices and you contribute to society in some small way or some big way. As humans that's what we have to do.

RG: You said you have four children. Do they have any children of their own? Are you a grandparent?

AC: Yes, I'm a grandparent. I'm a great-grandparent. Angela, my daughter has one daughter named Andrea, and Audrey has two boys. They're down there at a college in Mississippi. Lanelle has three kids, Michael and Melody; Melody is in Maryland; she's a sports director or whatever you call them; she's the accountant for a sports program there at the college where she works. Deidra, she's an avionic engineer. She helps build these circuits for slot machines and stuff like that. I only have one granddaughter that's married; that's Deidra and she has two kids. Then we have Michael. He's not married, so they're my only two great-grandkids; the rest of them aren't married.

RG: The rest of them are just grandchildren.

AC: Yes.

RG: Wow. Would you like to say anything else about your family?

AC: That's about it as far as my family's concerned. I think they've done okay in life. Like I say, they grew up, and they contribute to society in some way. My wife and I don't do anything much since we're both retired. We just about do whatever we want to do, get up in the morning; if we want to go somewhere we tend to do it. We've been to different places, and we're lucky enough that we did our fiftieth anniversary. The kids helped on that. They're the ones that planned it, and they did a cruise to the Bahamas. They planned that so we did our vows on the ship.

RG: Oh wow, congratulations.

AC: That was three years ago. That about covers my family pretty well. The other thing about my family, you see one of my uncles, Charlie Cumberlander. His granddaughter is married to David Patterson, who is the Governor of New York. Her name is Michelle. So the big family tends to reach out, and we have a politician in our family, judges and all. One married my cousin; he's a judge down there in Augusta. Big family like this, you'd be surprised how far you spread out. It reaches out and touches others so, it's amazing when you're in a big family like that. Most of us, the third generation that I'm in, there ain't many of us left. Now you're going into the next generation.

RG: All right. Well, I think that's all. Thank you so much for letting me interview you.

AC: Well, I hope I've been helpful in some way.

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