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ACTIVITIES IN COBB COUNTY, GEORGIA***

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INTERVIEW WITH REECE GROGAN

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CONDUCTED BY JAY LUTZ

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Interview with Reece Grogan
Conducted by Jay Lutz
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Telephone interview

JL: Good afternoon. This is Jay Lutz, doing an interview for the Kennesaw State University NAACP project. This interview is with Reece Grogan. Reece Grogan is the youngest son of former Marietta councilman Hugh Grogan. This interview is being done via telephone. Mr. Grogan, is it all right if I call you Reece for the interview?

RG: That's fine.

JL: Great. To get started, can you give us a little bit of background? Tell me when you were born and where you were born.

RG: I was born in October 1970 in New York City in Mt Sinai Hospital where my dad worked. That's where I was born.

JL: That was right about the time that your dad and your family moved back to Marietta, right?

RG: I think we moved around 1971 or '72.

JL: Okay. Tell me a little bit about your childhood, about your upbringing. Things like what school did you go to? Did you go to the elementary school in Marietta?

RG: Yes, I went to elementary school called Westside Elementary; it's not far from the old Marietta High School. I had a great upbringing. It was with a lot of kids with parents that my dad knew which made it real good. Growing up around my dad, I just really got to meet a lot of different people, and I'd see a lot of the political side. He was in the community all the time and allowed me to follow him on numerous occasions, so I got a lot of in-depth looks at his everyday political career, I guess you could say.

JL: Sure. Obviously your dad had a very strong sense of community. Did he ever do anything to try to impart that onto you or your brother or your sister?

RG: I think, you know, he never, I guess his actions spoke more than anything. By him taking me different places with him he wanted to make sure that I saw what he was doing. Instead of speaking it a lot he took me every place that he went. One case in point, when they opened up the new City Hall in Marietta, he made sure that we were there, we took pictures and all, so he kind of instilled that in us.

JL: Do you remember the type of reception that your father would get at some of these events?

RG: I was kind of amazed. I always said I wish that my personality is developing into the one that he has. Everybody absolutely loved my dad. He was a very community oriented person. He lived in the community that he was born. First of all, in Marietta, he lived in the community, and that's where he passed, and everyone absolutely loved him because they knew that if they asked him for something that he was going to do it. I don't remember going anywhere where he wasn't received by someone or knew someone in his political career.

JL: Where do you think he got his drive from? Do you think that's something he got from his parents?

RG: Yes, I do think so because my grandmother and grandfather were both in the community, living in Marietta. I think they were both born in Marietta, so I think, as he got older he realized the disparity that African Americans had, and I think that was taught through his upbringing by my grandparents.

JL: Sure. Do you remember their names?

RG: Hugh Grogan, Sr., is the grandfather's name, and Myrtice Grogan is my grandmother's name.

JL: Great. And they lived in Fort Hill also, right?

RG: That's right, yes. Fort Hill was built in 1940, and if I am not mistaken I think my grandfather did live there shortly before he passed, but my grandmother stayed there from the 1940s up until the time she passed as well, which was in the 1980s.

JL: After your father left Morehouse, do you know why he chose New York?

RG: That's kind of funny that you asked. I've learned quite a bit since his passing about why he left for New York. Actually, it was for a better opportunity as far as career-wise. He wanted his career to thrive, and he had chosen the medical field. He became a physician's assistant. His aunt, my great-aunt, actually lived in New York at the time, my grandmother's sister, and he decided to go to school up there and became a physician's assistant while he was there.

JL: I know he attended St. John's University when he was up there. Do you know, did he live in Queens or did he live in Manhattan?

RG: He lived in Manhattan. I think he lived on Lenox Avenue; that's where my aunt lived. When he finished school he lived on Lenox Avenue himself.

JL: In an interview that your dad did with the head instructor for this project, Dr. [Thomas A.] Scott, he actually mentioned Adam Clayton Powell as being very influential to him. Did he ever mention him to you?

- RG: Yes, he did. How that happened is that he had another aunt that lived in New York on his father's side, and she was a personal assistant to Adam Clayton Powell. So he got to go to a lot of things; obviously he met Adam Clayton Powell and got to go to a lot of the functions that Adam Clayton Powell had and got to work a little closely with him. That's how he became familiar with him.
- JL: Okay, I can see where that would definitely be influential. Do you think there was anything else that influenced your dad as far as his time in New York?
- RG: You know what? I'd say most of his influence was from coming home. He often came home to visit his mom. Especially after his father passed, he was home quite often. In coming home that's when he kind of noticed what was going on in the community, and that's where he got his hunger for wanting to do something better for the African American community.
- JL: Sure. I can imagine just the images that he's getting on the television and over the radio while being in New York of what's happening back here in the South.
- RG: I found a letter or two where he had actually written some political persons, I think the mayor and someone else here locally, inquiring about what types of programs that they have in Marietta. That was while he was there and really not too long before he left to come back to Marietta.
- JL: I'm not going to ask you anything about when he first ran for council in '73 because I know now that you were only three years old, but do you remember or did he ever tell you any stories about his early political career?
- RG: Well, actually I remember. For whatever reason I remember some of it because when we moved here we lived right across the street from his campaign headquarters, and just the tremendous amount of energy that surrounded him when he won from the family and from friends; it was just unbelievable. Again, he grew up in Marietta, so he had a lot of friends who knew that an African American could win in the city of Marietta. He was very joyous about the energy that it created when he won.
- JL: Where was that headquarters?
- RG: It was at the corner of Fairground Street and it would be the North Marietta loop, North Marietta Parkway and Fairground Street. It actually would be where Turner Chapel is now. There was actually a small portion on that corner there, and there was a house there. They used the house there, and then behind that was actually a football field.
- JL: Do you remember about any of his elections during the 1980s, the '81 election or the '85 election?

RG: The '85 more so I guess because it was really a disappointment and him trying to make sure that the count was valid and being very disappointing for him because there was really no difference as far as he was concerned from the previous '81 election and the '85 election. He was still in his community, he still did numerous things for his community, but somehow he lost the second time.

JL: Was there any specific reason why he thought he lost?

RG: Well, he thought that he didn't get enough support from other people in the African American community. He didn't grab enough of the other communities besides the African American community. He felt pretty good about it, and he still had strong support in that, but I think from all the others he fell short.

JL: Do you ever remember him talking about [Marietta Mayor] Dana Eastham?

RG: Yes, on a lot of occasions. I remember that name quite a bit. I met him myself when I was small. I remember him telling me about Dana Eastham. It was kind of a transition for Mr. Eastham from having a council that was all white to dealing with a black council member that was so aggressive in implementing programs that helped the community. He thought it was a huge transition for Mr. Eastham, but one that he conquered, and he actually grew to talk about him quite often. Over the course of time, he became excited about how Mr. Eastham had changed his ways, I guess you could say.

JL: One of the other interviews that I've done over the last month was with John Hammond, who actually won the '81 election. One thing he said about your dad was that even though he didn't win the election, he didn't hold a grudge against him, that he would still come into the office and say, "Hey, can I do this, is there anything that you need?" Did he always have that outgoing type of relationship with other councilmen?

RG: Vaguely. He was mostly about the community and that was the best way [for] a councilman to help his community. It's one thing to be a man on the street, I guess you could say, an everyday person that's going to work and everything, but it's another thing to be in a government office that has to look out for different people. In doing that he didn't hold a grudge, he never did, because it wasn't about him, it was about everybody else, so he wanted to continue his work after his term ended, which he did.

JL: A reoccurring theme that I'm hearing about your dad, while he was president of the NAACP and also while he was councilman was that he had an incredible open door policy, that he was always the epitome of a public servant. Anyone could walk in and speak to your father. There was never a closed door. Can you speak a little bit to that aspect of your dad's personality?

RG: Yes, because even up until his death he was the same way. He always helped people, always, always, always. He never closed the door to anybody, whether it was small, big, or whatever. People would have issues in the community, and sometimes he would go to

bat for them. He was seventy years old, but he would go up there with them to help them out because he knew they needed it. He's always had that type of personality where he's going to help you no matter what, and people knew that of him, and that's why they loved him so much. He was still in the same community that he grew up in when he passed, and the same people that helped him get elected were the same people that he was still helping at the end of his life.

JL: Do you know, like during the 1980s and 1990s, can you talk about some of the major achievements that your father was a part of?

RG: Back in 1985, for instance, he was voted one of the most influential black men in the State of Georgia. He was part of setting up the Black Action Youth Council. He was on the advisory commission for mental health, health and social service planning committee, Georgia Heart Association, Committee on Education and Information on High Blood Pressure, and University of Georgia Extension Service Community Advisory Board. He was on numerous boards, and I'd really have to look through the other things that he has, the other paperwork to find out some of the other things. Like I said, I'm just still coming across a lot of things that I didn't know because my focus was on his health at the time, so I'm still coming across new information.

JL: Your dad was really part of some very innovative work up in New York. I know he was working with a doctor who was implementing a new device for kidney dialysis. Your mother had told me also that he was working with the doctor who was developing the first hyper barrack chamber. When he came back to Georgia, did he ever express a desire to get back into the medical field at all?

RG: No, he really didn't. Other than being extremely shocked when medical subjects come up, no, all I knew when I was small or growing up—his focus was Marietta.

JL: One question that I've been asking everybody about your dad is if there was one word to describe him. What word would you choose and why would you choose that word?

RG: I'd say "determined" just because he wanted African Americans in the cities of America to have an equal opportunity with everyone else. Obviously there's a bigger picture, but he felt that starting off with the smaller community and then growing outward was the way to go, and that's why I choose "determined." Up until the point that he died he was still determined to make sure that everyone got their equal share; that's why he kept helping people.

JL: Was he sick for a while?

RG: Actually he wasn't; there were different things from year to year. One year he broke his hip, so it wasn't an on-going issue. He did end up with pneumonia, and that's ultimately how he passed, but there weren't any on-going health issues that he had. Surprisingly, he didn't have high blood pressure, and he really always kept a good diet, but in the end it

was the pneumonia that he acquired the last time that he went into the hospital and passed.

JL: I apologize, doing this work and research on your father, I get caught up in the paperwork and seeing his name on paper that I forget that his passing is not even six months old.

RG: Yes, July 28.

JL: How have you used your father as inspiration in your own career?

RG: There was a point in my life where I was really taking care of him. I mean, I was working for Waste Management, and he's always told me to stick it out whether I'm happy or not to make sure that I do good as far as I can with what I have, and that's what I've been doing. I've been with the company for over ten years, but I think that since my dad passed, it's like a shift in my life. Before, I was focusing on him. Now, I want to do something in the same community that he did it in. I feel a hunger to go back to my own community—where I grew up, too—and help the community in any way I can.

JL: Sure. Do you live in Marietta?

RG: No, unfortunately I don't. I'm in Atlanta right now. Like I said, the more I get to know my father and get in touch with people in Marietta, I can see myself in the next few years moving that way, I really can.

JL: That would be great. Any political aspirations?

RG: I'm not sure. I'll just say I'm going to let that unfold. I've talked to Ms. Deane Bonner, and she's invited me up to join the NAACP, which I was a member before, and so I just want to start there and get back to doing some things in the community. I'm not concerned about anything beyond that right now.

JL: One of the interviews we had in this project is with Ms. Bonner, and there's a section in there where she talks about your father. The question that I asked you earlier about the one word to describe your father, she actually used the word "fighter." It turns out that he helped her with a housing issue that she had in the early or mid-1970s when she moved Cobb County.

RG: Yes, I've been around her all my life pretty much, and I really didn't know about that part until the last year or so, but they had been close ever since then. She was one of the first people that he got to know when she came to Marietta, and they had been best buddies since. I call her my second mom because she's known me just about all my life.

JL: Tell me what it means to you and your family about having that NAACP award named for your father?

RG: It was great for them to recognize him. I think that with his love for his community and like I said up on stage, I never met someone who loved his community so much as he did. For them to recognize that and award him for that just meant the world to me. I couldn't think of a better way to transition him from his community to the next life.

JL: His name definitely comes up quite a bit in all; we have projects going on in different aspects and not just Marietta but Cobb County; we have aspects of school desegregation to African American business, and his name comes up everywhere.

RG: It was kind of funny—they say city of Marietta and Cobb County. Realistically, for him it was one and the same. His focus was in Marietta, but ultimately he was trying to help the citizens of Cobb County.

JL: Sure. Tell me a little bit more about you. Do you have any children, are you married?

RG: I have one daughter that's eight years old. I have a fiancé, and we've been together for a little over a year now, and we haven't set a wedding date yet. That's what I'm doing. Up until the point where he passed, it was just focusing on family and fiancé and my daughter and making sure that he was taken care of in his latter years.

JL: I imagine the last few years there was a lot of back and forth between Atlanta and Marietta.

RG: Oh yes, very much so. I put a lot of miles on there. During the time, I thought I'm so tired of going up and down this road, but in the end I'm glad that I did and just glad to be able to get to know him a little bit more in his last days.

JL: Was he still pretty spry; was he still get up and go the last few years?

RG: He was. For somebody who was seventy-two years old, yes, actually he was. Every time I went over there there was something going on that he was trying to do or something somebody asked him to do, and even though he was walking with a cane, he still got around just as much as someone that was driving.

JL: Did he ever talk to you about the redistricting case that he was a part of?

RG: Very little, unfortunately. I really came across that information as I'm reading through his papers. There was very little information that I got directly from him.

JL: Do you think he realized how influential that case has become and just how important that is? Do you think he had any conception of its importance?

RG: Actually I think that he did. I remember him mentioning that some of the councilmen that came after him may not have been there if it wasn't for him and his fight to make sure that the city of Marietta had equal representation. I think he really did, and I think he understood that quite well.

JL: One of the things that I'm looking at is the effect that that case had on Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act. Just to give you a quick summary of what Section 5 is, Section 5 counties and states are areas that historically have issues with civil rights. They can't redistrict voting wards without getting federal approval. One thing like the case that your father was involved with, the decision came down in the early part of June of 1975. That was one of the cases that the U.S. Department of Justice looked at to extend Section 5 protection for the State of Georgia. Section 5 is also something that needs to continually be brought up for renewal, and there are quite a few politicians who are trying to find ways to get Georgia off that list. Shockingly enough, one of the principal arguments is that gerrymandering was a thing of the past, that it was something that our grandfathers did. My rebuttal, and basically the crux of the paper that I'm working on is the decision in your father's case came down in 1975, and I don't know how many thirty-four year old grandparents are around. But in closing, is there anything that I haven't asked you about your dad that you think is important? Anything that you would like to see me include in this paper as a way to remember your dad?

RG: No, I think the only thing is, if you don't mind, one of the last things that he told me and for whatever reason I ended up recording it, and he said that, "You can't do anything without the team. You can't do anything by yourself without the team. It takes a team to do everything." I think looking back, after listening to it, I think the team was his community because it took a select number of people, one of which is my step-dad, James Gober. It took them; they had small meetings back in the day before he was elected councilman to see what they could do to improve Marietta. Through that I started thinking about what he said about the team, and he used that as a platform to help the city of Marietta. He knew the people that lived within Marietta and wanted to help them make decisions on how to make it better, and it did become better. He said you can't do anything without the team. Even Jesus had a team; the disciples were his team. I've listened to that fifty times since he passed, and I kind of understand where he was coming from when he said that because he did use a team back in the day to help him to help the community. It wasn't just him. Ultimately he spearheaded everything that went on, but he did have a team to help him get Marietta to where it needs to be.

JL: Absolutely. He did a lot for the community. I don't live in Ward 5. I actually live up in Kennesaw. But his influence is definitely all over Ward 5, and everyone acknowledges it. Unfortunately, I didn't get the chance to meet your father, but just looking at the things that I've seen of him, he was an amazing man. I thank you for taking part in the interview. Thanks for taking time out of your day and sitting down with me.

RG: I appreciate you taking the time to let me speak about my father. I think he needs to be spoken about, and I'm just trying to find different ways to speak about him and to carry some of his work on to continue helping the community, so I appreciate it.

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