

KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

***HISTORY OF THE COBB COUNTY BRANCH OF THE NAACP AND CIVIL RIGHTS
ACTIVITIES IN COBB COUNTY, GEORGIA***

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INTERVIEW WITH DONNIE PERRY

COBB NAACP/CIVIL RIGHTS SERIES, NO. 8

CONDUCTED BY MATT BELL and ERIC MEZ

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Kennesaw State University Oral History Project
Cobb NAACP/Civil Rights Series, No. 8
Interview with Donnie Perry
Conducted by Matt Bell and Eric Mez
Friday, 16 October 2009
Location: CETL House, Kennesaw State University

MB: This is Matt Bell, and Eric Mez and we're interviewing Donnie Perry. We're doing interviews involving the progression of the Cobb County branch of the NAACP and we'll go ahead with our questions. Mr. Perry, if you could, could you just tell us a little bit about where you grew up and an early history of your background?

DP: Well, I was born in southwest Georgia, Blakely, Georgia, July 31, 1957, but I moved into, and grew up, in some parts, down in southwest Georgia. I finished school at Decatur High School and grew up in the central DeKalb area in 1975. After completing high school I immediately went into the military and stayed three years and after I got out of the military I attended DeKalb Community College. I graduated and got my associate's in Administration of Justice and I think that was about 1979. Then I went on and got a master's in Public and Urban Administration—I went to law school as well. I graduated from Atlanta Law School in 1984, so I've been in this area for quite a while. I moved, I was living in southeast Atlanta from '79 to '82, and I got married in '82 and in '85 my wife decided she wanted to move from southeast Atlanta to Cherokee County.

MB: While you were in law school?

DP: Well, she moved, I got married in '82 and I was in grad school then but we bought the house in '85 and I was going to law school then, in Cherokee County, Woodstock. Then after moving up to Woodstock that's when I became involved with the Cobb NAACP.

MB: What year was that?

DP: Probably initially 1986 or '87. Because I was in law school I was doing legal redress for them which meant that all the complaints that came I got to have a chance to handle them and go out and talk to people about issues involving education, employment, housing and whatever was going on. I kind of handled it. And then they put me on the board and I served on the board and eventually served as vice president under Jerry Dodd for probably four or five years and eventually was elected president of the Cobb NAACP. I think that was in 1994.

MB: What year were you elected to the board?

DP: I probably joined the board around '87 or '88.

MB: When you initially joined during the 80s were you involved with any of the student drives here on campus trying to get membership for the Cobb County branch?

DP: Well, you know what, not actually with the students but the students had a chapter here, so they served under us and whenever they wanted to do something we would always assist them with it, so yes. We were kind of involved but not directly involved because we wanted them to be their chapter—to be the student chapter here. In fact, I remember a couple of, I think one guy who was the student president whose name was Ken, I can't remember Ken's last name, and he was president of the student chapter of the NAACP here. Oddly enough I got complaints from Kennesaw State University and I had to come up and investigate, and as a result we formed the president's advisory council which was an offshoot to help deal with the complaints that were coming from the faculty and staff and students from Kennesaw State University.

EM: Was that during Jerry Dodd's presidency?

DP: Yes, that was during Jerry Dodd's presidency.

EM: What kind of complaints were you guys getting?

DP: Kennesaw's nursing program was very, and is still, tough and so we had several. I remember a couple of nursing students that didn't think they were being treated fairly by some of the faculty, about some of their grades and they just said they weren't being treated fairly. Some of the students were concerned about some of the activities here. They didn't think they were ethnic enough or inclusive enough so we addressed some of those things. Just those kinds of things, how to recruit and retain students as well as faculty because we had a lot of faculty who had come here and they would immediately leave. So we were talking about how can you retain them and why weren't they staying? It seems like a great place to work but when they get up here they're gone and it's because they just didn't feel the air, the environment wasn't as warm and welcoming as it should be.

MB: And being the legal advisor for the Cobb Chapter you were involved in all of that.

DP: All of that, yes.

MB: Backing up a little bit to when you went to Decatur High School, you said you graduated in '75, so I guess you started in '71?

DP: High school, yes.

MB: Were you involved with any organizations while you were in high school, or at all in your youth, or anything that would have lead to your joining the NAACP—anything like that?

DP: Well, you know what, I wasn't really involved in any organizations. I always admired and wanted to do it but I just kind of naturally gravitated toward that. I've always been civic minded but back then in high school I was working—I was working when I was in

school as well so that took up a lot of my time as well and going to the games and all that stuff—but I never really was actively involved in civic affairs at that point in time.

EM: Was there an African-American majority at Decatur High School?

DP: We were the majority but that year I think, '75, was when we first got our first black homecoming queen—the year we graduated. And I was her escort so you know I remember that. Yes, we were real good friends. Diane Porter was her name.

MB: Something you'll never forget.

DP: You never forget.

MB: Since you say you've been civic minded all through high school was that your inclination in law school? Did you want to do more civil work with your degree than anything else?

DP: Exactly. I wanted to work and help people. There was a quote by a guy who worked for Thurgood Marshall, he was in the NAACP as well working for Thurgood Marshall and his name has just escaped me but I'll think of it a little bit later, but he says when you become a lawyer you either have to be a social engineer or you become a parasite to society. I didn't want to be a parasite; I wanted to be a social engineer. I almost recalled it, I'll think of it in a minute. Anyway, when I read that quote it just moved me so.

MB: So you went to the military immediately after high school?

DP: Immediately after high school. In fact, I graduated from high school June 6 and joined the military June 22. I wasn't even seventeen years old, my mother had to sign so I could get in.

EM: What branch?

DP: Army. I joined the Army. You know, I was thinking: "what am I going to do after high school," and it just so happened I was reading our school newspaper, The Scribbler, and I saw an ad that said, "Join the Army, See the World" and I went up at lunchtime and talked to a recruiter.

MB: It wasn't something you had thought about prior?

DP: Had never thought about it. You know, Vietnam was just ending, it ended in May of '75, and I wasn't thinking of anything like that—I just had no clue.

MB: Was it a big shock to your mom when you told her?

DP: No, she wasn't really shocked, she was just like, because my older brother had been in the military and been to Vietnam but I guess you know, once she knew that the Vietnam conflict was going to end in May she didn't think too much about it. Plus, I was a really

good student—I graduated in the top ten or fifteen percent of my class. I could have gone directly into college but I wasn't feeling college then. It's funny, all the people, when I told them I was going into the military, and they were going to college, when I was getting out, they were going into the military. It was like, I'm on my way out of here! And some of them have still not gotten any degrees and I've got three.

MB: How did your mom feel about you brother serving in Vietnam?

DP: There was some apprehension there of course, with him joining the military it was okay but when he got sent to Vietnam it was kind of a stressful time. But he made it in and made it out okay. I guess as okay as you can call it okay being in a war situation.

MB: Did you feel, not that you weren't civic minded when you were in law school, but when you were in law school and you were particularly focusing on social issues and things like that, did foreign policy or anything of that play into nature during your experience with your brother being in Vietnam? How did you feel about what we were doing in foreign countries? Did that matter or were you thinking more at home?

DP: You know, yes, more at home, I was thinking about mostly the domestic side of things.

EM: Were you sent anywhere in the army or did you stay in town?

DP: Yes, I did my training in South Carolina and then I went to Ft. Sill, Oklahoma for a year and then I was in charge of sending enlisted men overseas when I was in Ft. Sill, Oklahoma. I then went overseas to Korea and I was in charge of getting officers to come to Korea. I worked on the general staff and then the next six months I came back and worked in a company in Augusta and got out.

MB: So you lived in Augusta?

DP: For about six months.

MB: You said you initially joined the NAACP, in Cobb County, in '86?

DP: Yeah, I think it was about '86 or '87 —along that time frame.

MB: He wasn't president any more but Oscar Freeman was still around?

DP: He was still around.

EM: Do you recall any particular events that he coordinated?

DP: Well, you know, Jerry had just become president when I actually came on and I remember, not really seeing events that Oscar did—like the Freedom Fund banquet had taken place but I remember them talking about him negotiating some economic program

that they had signed on with Cobb county and it was a Fair Share agreement that Oscar was the primary architect behind that.

EM: What did the Fair Share do?

DP: It was talking about making sure to get blacks involved in hiring positions and making sure they rose through the ranks in Cobb County. It was with the Cobb County government.

EM: Was he actively involved in the NAACP actions after 1986?

DP: Well, I'm going to say he was active but this is the thing, a lot of times when you've been president and you're no longer president, you kind of step back a little because people always look at you and you'll overshadow the president so you've got to be careful how you do that. You've got to let them put their stamp on it and let them do what they want to do. So he was active but not as active as he had been because he would have overshadowed Jerry's presidency after he stayed on because he was the face of the organization for that time.

MB: Where were you guys meeting? Were you still meeting in Zion when you originally joined?

DP: Yes, we used to have our general membership meetings there at Zion Baptist Church and of course, we would sometimes have our board meetings there as well and we would be at the office there on Roswell Street for just officers of whatever but for maybe a committee meeting. But the board meetings and the general membership meetings were held at Zion.

MB: Do you recall when they moved from Zion?

DP: Now they have enough room over there, we always talked about going to different churches and different venues because some people don't like to go into churches, and some people had a problem with Zion Baptist Church so we felt that we had to. We went to the VFW over there because we were trying to go places. We also went to the library—we always went wherever because we had to have our eyes and ears open to the community as well. Whatever reason people had, "I don't want to go to Zion." We'd say, "Okay, let's meet here and we'll meet other places." And that's one of the things we struggled with or we compromised to try to make sure everybody would feel welcome.

MB: Do you remember some of the reasons they didn't want to go to Zion?

DP: Some people just don't like church. They thought, there were personality conflicts that you had to deal with. You said, okay, we'll I don't want to deal with this then we'll go someplace else, because Reverend Marcus had a nice church at Turner Chapel, and you can see Turner Chapel, it's a big church, Zion had to go there, so you know, there were those kinds of personalities that you had to deal with so you wanted to make sure that,

you know, we don't have to be at Zion all the time. That's what we were telling them because we wanted everybody to feel that the NAACP represented them. When the pastor would say, "I want you to come to our church." We'd say, "Sure, we'll come there, host us, let us come." Because that means now we get a different group, we get a different audience, a chance to get new members, new blood, new ideas.

MB: How long were you guys moving around like this, you know, church, library, before you established a real location?

DP: I think they still probably go around some, you know, to different venues because again, that generates new blood, it gets new people, some people who might be over at Pleasant Grove might never have heard of the NAACP until a certain time. If you say the NAACP, however, is going to be meeting here, those members will come out and they will support the organization there. We just kind of did it and moved around and make sure that all areas were covered. Plus it was a Cobb County NAACP, that's Marietta, we wanted to go to Austell, Mableton, every municipality, we want them to say look, host us, let us come out there.

MB: Early on like in '86 while you guys were traveling around like that, since it was the infancy of the Cobb branch, were memberships a major way to accumulate funds for it?

DP: Definitely. Membership was always a way to accumulate funds. Then we would have the NAACP Freedom Fund for a major fundraiser and then we would do other little things as well, you know, to try to do things throughout the year to augment those memberships in the time between the freedom funds.

EM: How was membership in those days?

DP: Oh, we stayed steady right at 500 members all the time. Probably 500-600 members just about all the time and then you'd get life memberships, so we always wanted people, membership has always been around 500 or 600 members the entire time.

EM: Were people interchanging, like people coming in and coming out?

DP: Exactly, exactly. People moved, because somebody moved here new to Cobb County, so we would transfer their membership if they had never gotten involved in the NAACP before. We gave them the opportunity to get a new membership and then they would leave but other people would come in so we were always in transition. Wherever you would be, the thing was we used to always, the membership chair would always say that wherever you go make sure you have some membership applications with you. Don't pass up the opportunity because you always meet people.

MB: Did you guys do a lot during the '88 elections with the Cobb county branch and did you correlate with even the student body here during the presidential election?

DP: Well, the NAACP always has to maintain non-partisanship, we would have voter registration drives, we couldn't advance one party or another, so we had to keep our 501C3 affiliation. We were very careful to make sure people knew that we were not advocating one candidate over the other—we were doing voter education, you know. Now, we would say this is how this candidate stands on these issues and we put them up there to them, now, you make up your mind. We could not endorse one candidate or another over another at all. It was always non-partisan.

EM: Did it work well being non-partisan while you were trying to accumulate memberships?

DP: Sure. Yes, because people, all we wanted to do was empower the community and we're going to give you information and you can make an informed choice. We can always tell you what to do but that will only last for a couple of minutes but if you have enough information and you could make your own decision then you can say, look, I did this, I've gone this way because of these issues. And we would always do report cards so look, here are the report cards, here's how they come out on certain bills, here's how they come out on certain issues, you decide which one you want to do. Come election time, you need a ride to the polls, we're going to be here. You always had offices open when there were elections to get members back and forth from the polls. We would have little snacks for them, you know, whatever, just to always have voter registration drives. At any point in time that you were at that offices, you could get registered to vote right there.

EM: Can you talk a little bit about your election?

DP: As the president?

EM: Yes.

DP: Oh well, it's funny, when I first was elected nobody wanted to be president. [laughter] And it's because, you know, I guess it goes through cycles and nobody wanted to be president. We were like looking around and somebody would ask me if I wanted to be president. I didn't even live in Cobb County, I lived in Cherokee County. That was one of the things that I struggled with, like, okay, are they really going to accept me as being the president if I don't live there. A lot of people knew that I didn't. Oddly enough, because there wasn't any opposition because everybody knew that they could tell who the actual workers were and people thought I brought a certain position to the presidency that it had never had that before, I mean, Jerry didn't have a college education, Oscar did not have a college education, so here I was coming in college educated, college trained, you know, they were looking for something like that.

MB: Was Jerry Dodd running again?

DP: Against me? No. In fact, he asked me, he said, if you're going to run, if you want to be president, I won't run. I thought about it for a long time before deciding to run. Jerry was godfather to my daughter so we were very close.

EM: Do you remember the size of the Cobb County branch during your election or even when you originally joined?

DP: Well, no, like I said, we always had about 500 members. But how we announced the voting and we had the elections, there was no opposition for me for the presidency. The biggest opposition was probably with the board because the board was limited to the number of people that could be on it and I'm trying to remember that number right now but some people wanted to make sure they were on the board so we got that but there was no opposition at all to my being the president at that time.

MB: Do the members vote?

DP: Yes, the members can vote and any member who's been a member for I think thirty days prior to the election, you're eligible to vote for the president or any other election that we have.

EM: What was your platform when you were running?

DP: Well, I just wanted to continue some of the things that we were doing but you know, I wanted to step it up a little. I always had a thing for making sure that all phone calls got returned within twenty-four hours and I wanted to make sure that people knew that the office was there for them, I wanted to make sure to try to get a person there to volunteer to man the office five days a week, eight hours a day, so I wanted to have it more open, more accessible. I spruced the office up—made it more airy—my wife went in there, she was an interior designer, she did some stuff in the office and made people coming in there say, “ahh”. You know, just simple stuff. We wanted to make sure that people come there and we were able to make them feel that when they left out of there that they actually had a voice—that we had actually heard from them. But it was a transition because, as I said, I was already involved, so I was doing that to help Jerry so when I took over I just kind of like kept most of the things going. I wanted to make sure that the youth chapter was very active and more involved. I wanted to work with the Boys Club, the Girls Club, other organizations so that we would be not having events given the same time, let's coordinate our calendars together so that we won't have anything this Friday, you're having something this Saturday. Because that's just where people are when you have so many organizations trying to get the same people the same amount of time. I wanted to make sure we had our calendars together and that we were working together. But that was the only thing. I established an advisory board consisting of people in high places. I had David Hankerson, those people on it, to give me some advice because it brought more credibility to the organization. So that's one of the things that I wanted to do, just raise the profile of the organization a little bit more, work with existing organizations that were already there and make the organization more responsive to the community.

EM: I see. Did you work collaboratively with Atlanta?

DP: You know what, certainly if someone called and they lived in Atlanta and they would call us, I would tell them to call Atlanta and then I would probably follow up with the people in Atlanta. Or, if it was in Rome or whatever, I would always do that, but we would, certainly in Cobb County we only worked within Cobb County. If the person worked in Cobb and their problem in Cobb I would deal with it but I wouldn't go stepping on other territorial areas because I wouldn't get very much credibility if I go to Atlanta, I'm with Cobb County NAACP, they would say, so what, we don't have to listen to you. But in Cobb, we could flex our muscle a little bit more.

MB: While you were president did you maintain your legal advising?

DP: I brought in another legal redress person. So they were the legal redress person at that point in time and I would just supervise all the other committee chairs. That's another thing too, I kind of broke it down. We had three vice presidents and I gave them certain areas of responsibility so having been the legal redress chair I knew a lot about it and they would still defer to me on some of the things so it still worked out well.

MB: Was that something new, having multiple vice presidents?

DP: We had three but the areas of responsibility, the roles, were never truly defined because I wanted them to do something. We did a newsletter and we got a newsletter out religiously on a quarterly basis and that was one way that we tried to make sure we stayed in contact and members got and had an opportunity to participate by submitting articles or doing whatever.

MB: So you brought a whole new level of organization to it.

DP: I tried to. I mean, I don't know if you saw my book or whatever, when I turned it in [to the KSU Archives], Dr. Scott was like, this is great, because everything from an agenda, minutes, everything—I kept it in a notebook so when ever they come here, they can just flip through it.

MB: All the minutes from the archives were very thorough.

DP: That's what I made a point to do. That's what I wanted to do to bring that kind of organization to it.

MB: When did you decide to do the Martin Luther King, Jr., Memorial service?

DP: You know what, at the time I was president of the Cobb County Martin Luther King Support Group as well. I was president of that and I was also president of my fraternity in Cobb County as well. [laughter] I had it all done, like you know, a board meeting for NAACP was, you know, I just had them lined up to go to them, I had to be organized. We had been petitioning, this was Cobb County Martin Luther King, Jr. support group, so we were petitioning the Marietta city council to d a street in honor of Dr. King. Wherever you drive in the country it's there. Why can't we do it? Their thing was, well, you know,

there's one in Atlanta. "Yeah, but this is Marietta. That's the neighbor next door." So we were submitting petitions, submitting resolutions, I went to the city hall a couple of times and presented resolutions and I went to that and my preference was I wanted Lawrence Street because I thought Lawrence Street would represent more of Dr. King. You had the businesses there, you had the residences there and Lawrence Street went right through the poor neighborhood over to uptown. I didn't want to be something like Roosevelt Circle, which they would have gladly said, "Here, take this." I said, "No way, I don't want that. I want it to be . . ."—because King crossed all those lines. So we kept going and they finally said, "Well, we won't. . ."—they gave us all kinds of reasons: it's too costly, it's this, it's that, businesses don't want to change their stationery; they say it's going to be costly. It was so odd and ironic. Right about this same time we got a new area code of 770. Nobody said nothing when they said you've got to change it. I even talked to the post office and they agreed, they said, "We'll deliver the mail for six months even if they use Lawrence Street instead of MLK Drive." You know, I did all the homework. But nobody said anything. So they finally said, "Look, we'll do a memorial highway on South Marietta Parkway." I said, "Okay, just give me something, I'll take it." [laughter]

MB: In your time as president did you have to go to any national conventions?

DP: Oh yeah, we have state meetings, we have regional meetings and we have national conventions, so yes. That's the whole point, you have to represent the chapter there so the state meets in October, the regional are in April and the national is in July.

MB: On the national level do they dictate what the state and local levels do?

DP: They do set the, it's like the U.S. Constitution. They'll say, "You can do this but this is the absolute farthest. You can have some more stuff in between here but it can't conflict with this." They would tell us, "We want you to do a mandated program, do this program here," and we'll do it. They won't tell you how to do it, they'll just say do a program and you can be as creative as you want to be with it. They'll say, "We want to do it within a certain timeframe, like February or whatever, because we want everybody to be on the same page." So that's how the direction would come from them as to how they want things done. The regional would do the same thing, and the state might say the same thing. "We're going to hold this kind of drive." Or, "We're doing this. We want everybody to do it, you know, so you come up with your ideas for whatever works best in your community." Because you've got to think what works in Cobb might not work down in Washington County or Richmond County.

MB: When you see the other organizations, like Richmond County, at the national level do you find that the Cobb County branch is more organized than a lot of the other ones, especially the organization that you brought to the branch?

DP: Oh yeah, because whatever we did it, you get awards by how well you submit your reports and everything else and that's what I was striving for, I wanted to, when they started calling out names for organizations for programs and things you have done and

you can verify and take pictures, I wanted to make sure that our name was called. Our name was always called by doing that and that's what I wanted to happen.

MB: Does that help with the other regions? Can they can take what you guys have done and apply it to their group?

DP: Sure. That's what you do in there; you're hearing things that are going on. I did this, I did that and you can take back whatever might work in your community or you can leave some on the side or you can modify it. That's the whole purpose of going to workshops, state workshops, regional meetings and the national meetings to get that kind of involvement or get energized. It works well that way.

MB: Does the national organization ever issue any mandates to the Cobb County in particular?

DP: Not really mandates. We never really got mandates for anything, you know, when Mr. () was getting involved when we had the dispute about the election he would say, "Look this is how I want you all to do this and do that," and we would follow what he said. He might come out and say, "The constitution is clear, this is how it has to be done and you will do it this way."

MB: That dispute occurred at the end of your term?

DP: Right, yes. Like I said, at the end of my term everybody wanted to be president because we had done such a good job that I think whenever you went into Cobb County people were saying, oh, the NAACP, we were the name to call if you needed something. People liked that. Everybody wants to be a part of something when it's doing something. When it's dead or it's going down, they don't want that.

EM: Did your membership go up?

DP: Oh yeah. Increased membership, increased life memberships, increased organizations buying memberships into it, you know, our whole thing was we want to come and sit around the table with everybody. We didn't have enough resources to go in and make demands and I knew that through conciliation you get a lot more done than going in and demanding things a lot of times. I would use that legal training and background to be a reconciler as opposed to, we're going to make demands here.

EM: Were you in support of Ms. Bonner when she was running?

DP: Oh yeah. I've always Deane for a long time and I suppose in fact now I'll drop in and she'll say, do this and do that for me, write a letter for me, do this for me, make calls for me, I jump right on it.

MB: You can see why she's been president for so long?

DP: Yeah, I can see it. I'll just leave it there. [laughter]

MB: Can you talk a little bit about the '97 election?

DP: Yeah, I mean, at that point in time there were several people who wanted to run and I was still running as well. I think it was myself, Dwight Graves and, was there a third person? Maybe Randolph Scott. So everybody was out there, they were campaigning and I was just campaigning on what I had done but they brought members in to vote and I thought it was great that the organization had generated that kind of level of interest that two or three people wanted to be president of the organization. Like I said, three years ago, nobody wanted to be president. Even after then, nobody wanted to be it. Deane said, you know, she stepped into it, but nobody wanted that responsibility.

EM: What was the dispute about?

DP: Well, because, as best I can remember, Dwight Graves was saying that he had won the election and there was something about the people who were voting, they were bringing people in and the memberships weren't in within a certain amount of time, you know, that's the thing, you've got to be a member and it has to be into the secretary and the treasurer, your money in, within thirty days. Otherwise, you just can't vote. I tried to stay out of it because I didn't want to be a lightning rod behind it. I didn't want to be a distraction. I wanted us to come back on a united front because I knew it was critical for us still to show that we were united in some area as opposed to a faction here and a faction there, whatever, you know, people are looking for that and I didn't want to get involved in it. I had a business to run, I had other things going on in my life, kids, family, everything. It wasn't that big of a deal to me. Like I said, I was only persuaded to run after no one else wanted to run so that was the thing.

MB: Do you think the dispute hurt the NAACP Cobb branch?

DP: Short term it did. Yes, because people didn't know, nobody likes to see contention and want to be involved in it. Now some people they love to see contention and stand out in error, but they don't want to see contention and say, I'm going to jump in here and be a part of this. Yeah, they want to watch away and see how it goes. But short term it did.

MB: After Ms. Bonner became president, you said short-term disruption, was it split kind of like people that had supported her versus people that did not?

DP: Well, yeah, there were some people who supported Dwight Graves and see those people only came to support a person whereas you should go to support the organization. It's just like, I don't know if it's like this in white churches, but some people, if a pastor leaves, they leave. You're here for the church, not necessarily anything else! So that was my whole thing and I think the people who want to be around, who have supported me, and even the officers who were there with me, they stayed around to make the transition and served in Ms. Bonner's first couple of administrations. So you know, they stayed loyal and like I said, those people, Dwight and whatever, I don't think they ever—and it's funny because Dwight lives across the street from Deane Bonner but I don't think they ever had, you know, he didn't want to go start the SCLC and do the other thing, they just

wanted it for their own personal, I guess, bully pulpit or whatever they needed it for. I didn't need it for that. I didn't need any of that at all.

EM: How much longer after '97 did you remain active in the branch?

DP: Oh, I'm still active. Like I said, I stop by and do things, do whatever Deane needs to be done, that's it.

MB: You guys still have membership drives?

DP: Oh yeah, membership is a continuous operation.

MB: Would you say you're still sitting around 500 or much more by now?

DP: I would think it's more by now because, again, you know, what I had done on the board with the community leaders and whatever, Deane has done a good job of that. She's got Lee Rhyant from over at Lockheed, Georgia, you know, Lockheed, Georgia, when you get Lee Rhyant to chair stuff that's pretty good. So she's done a real good job of galvanizing people and important places within the Cobb County community who can send out a letter and say these people serve in an advisory capacity, like president of Bank America, Lee Rhyant and the Chamber, it's really good. I really think that she did a great job with that.

MB: Is the student NAACP body still active here on campus, do you know?

DP: I don't know. It should be but I'm not quite sure because again, you've got to have an advisor and people who are willing to carry it on.

MB: I saw even back during your presidency, Ms. Bonner was advocating here on campus for a larger black faculty, larger black student body. At what point do you think you guys really achieved what you were going for as far as that?

DP: Well, you know what, I still look at the numbers sometimes and I look at, you know, with Dr. Papp's administration, how he's got a lot of diversity and minority representation there. A lot of times, you know, that's not the key. You can have them there but are they sensitive to the issues? That's the thing, but I think, I know one, Arlethia Perry Johnson, she knows and you can call her, and that's the vice-president for external affairs, she does a good job of that. You know, the campus was much smaller then. I think like Melvis Atkinson, she was the chair for minority affairs and tried to teach math, she wore so many hats. Some people just can't multi-task but now, see, that's what her job is is solely with external affairs, dealing with the community and other things. So when you have that kind of person saying this is my job, this is all I do and if I don't do this it's a reflection of the president, it tends to get done more, whereas Melvis's teaching classes, doing that, doing this, it was a hard job.

MB: Was Kennesaw enthusiastic about the project?

- DP: Dr. Siegel is always enthusiastic about it. She always wanted to make sure that the students had their representation, that she had this diversity. She was concerned about faculty coming and faculty leaving. She's the president but you've got vice presidents and you've got deans, you know, they're going to bring up one story and she's got to rely upon them to do their job. A lot of times she wouldn't get wind of things, you know.
- MB: In your term as president did you ever meet up with any resistance within the community with regard to the NAACP?
- DP: Well, you know, you meet people who might say, well, I don't know what you all are doing or whatever and I would say, well, you know it's kind of hard for you to not know what we're doing because things change from inside out, not outside in. At that point in time I could run off a list of things right quick and they would say, what? And I would say, Yes. A lot of times people don't realize or they're not aware of the need or the existence of the NAACP branch or chapter until they need it. "My kid's in jail, my kid just got suspended from school, I'm about to be put out of my house." Well, people say to call the NAACP. They say, "I didn't know that y'all were here." Some people say, "I haven't been living here that long." "How long you been here?" "Ten years." Okay, so you've never heard about a Freedom Fund banquet, you know. So I ask them, "So did you join the NAACP back from where you come from?" "No." "Okay."
- MB: Are there any particular incidences you recall of that nature that you had to deal with while you were president or as the legal advisor on the board?
- DP: There weren't a lot that I dealt with, like kids getting suspended from school, one of the particulars, there was one situation where in Cobb County schools this guy had, there was a fight between students and the teacher was handling it in detention or whatever, and the guy was talking, the African-American child was talking to the advisor about it and he was saying stuff about the white guy said, he said, "That nigger's doing this, that nigger's doing that." And the advisor said, "He's not a nigger, he's a white boy!" [laughter] I thought, oh my goodness. That was one for the books, I'm like, okay. I did tell him though that niggers come in all shades, all colors. But yeah, we had stuff all the time, you know, with parents coming in with their students who had been suspended for some reason and we found that a lot of times the African-American kids and blacks were being suspended at a higher rate in incidents than the white kids were. The teacher would look at the white kid and say, "Oh, they're just being boys." But if black kids do it, then, "Oh, I feel intimidated here, I've got to get out of here." So we had those kids all the time.
- EM: What was the membership base while you were president, were they really young, were they really old?
- DP: Oh, it was a cross-section. We had some people like Mother Solomon and she was ninety-nine years old from Zion Baptist Church. So we got everybody's money, we didn't care! [laughter] So if you were over eighteen or nineteen and you weren't a student we'd take your money. If you're over twenty-two or twenty-three we'd take your money, we didn't care.

- MB: Do you think, I know you're not necessarily as active as you were when you were president, but do you think the situations like we were talking about with kids in school or other issues like that where it's clear that racism still plays a part, do you think those problems are more difficult to deal with now than they were, say, in 1986?
- DP: They probably are because a lot of the educators, like the principals and whatever, they always try to get in and get insights to them. So it might be a little difficult now because of just. . .
- MB: Calling the police?
- DP: Yeah, and they've got these policies in place which is now policy, you know, it's a cut and dry thing, you do it, bam, you're gone. So it was easy to go in and say, don't try to put everybody in the same sheet of music, these are individuals, you just deal with individuals but their thing was, no, we have to take this no nonsense approach and one size fits all. That didn't work sometimes.
- EM: What sort of focus, do you think the focus of the NAACP has changed over time?
- DP: No, their goal has always been the same thing, to empower the people and represent the people who don't have a voice, the voiceless.
- MB: Do they go at it a different way?
- DP: Well, they have to because right now, you've got the technology and the U-tube generation, you can do things in a totally different way so you would have to change the way you do it it's just that your mission remains the same it's just that your means of achieving that mission has to be a little bit different. Same thing, we tell parents, you know, like I said, put a computer in the child's school, for your child, don't go out and buy these sneakers and all this kind of stuff. They've got cameras now in the classroom, you can see stuff going on on the buses and everything, we've got tapes now, so you've got to see all these things and evaluate and gauge them for yourself as opposed to before, it was the student's word and they'd write a statement, now it's video. It makes it a lot different.
- MB: Have you seen the NAACP spread more toward all ethnic minorities?
- DP: Oh yeah, we've always been that way. There was a colored people—National Association for the Advancement of Colored People—and like I said, we have white members come in, white members join, people come in and they're white and they had problems, I had to call several, I wouldn't say several but some people called and said, "I'm a white person, can you work with me?" "Sure, I don't care. If you've been mistreated and you're in the community, we're still going to help you." We understand that when you've been mistreated, it doesn't matter who you are at that point in time and people like that. We have to understand that the organization was founded with the assistance of white people so we keep that in mind as well.

MB: Do you think there's an opposing view to what *colored* stands for in the Association of Advancement of Colored People, like whether it applies directly towards black people or all minorities or even if it includes white people? Have you found opposing views in regard to that?

DP: Well, some people do but we just tell them it's people of color, period. People of color. If you're a people of color, you've got a problem, you bring it in. It could be economics, anything, just come in and we'll try to help you at that point in time.

EM: Do you recall the Cobb County branch at all being involved with the Katrina aid or anything like that?

DP: You know what, I'm sure Deane did something, I not sure what it was but I know they probably did something at that point in time. If it's nothing but always trying to increase, you know, when the people did come here, have a job posting or a job board where people could come buy and look at jobs or opportunities that might give them some employment.

MB: Have you heard of anything that currently in the NAACP, or even back in the 80s, Reaganomics, anything that you found has hindered the branch or the people within the branch based on economics?

DP: Well, of course, economics always does it, when people lose their jobs and they have limited disposable income, members in organizations is going to be further down the totem pole. I'm sure like maybe, if you were supportive of the organization but you have to go and make a few dollars, like I say, that's what Deane has done by going to, even the corporate dollars, because when we have our Freedom Fund banquet, we look for corporate dollars. Now you don't give us much with the corporate dollars so you have to make new corporate partners. So the economics, it's going to always hurt us, it's going to always hit. And the NAACP is not immune.

EM: Going back to your younger years, did you ever experience racism in your life?

DP: Of course. You know, yeah, it has been . . .

MB: You were born in '57 so you were five when you entered kindergarten?

DP: Yeah, I was about five. I remember the day coming home from school after President Kennedy had gotten shot, I came home and my mom was crying, just weeping uncontrollably and I was like, "What's wrong?" She said, "The president got shot. Don't you know him." "? Why you crying so?"

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A
START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

- MB: Okay, anyway, you were saying when you came home and your mom was crying.
- DP: Right, she was crying after that but I was talking about the schools not being integrated until, we didn't go—it was all black school until I was in seventh grade. When I went to school in the eighth grade we had integrated and it was the A group, it was myself, my friend Wayne Harris who's a cardiologist now, and we were the only two kids, black kids in that class, the rest of them were white. Because then you went to the B group, there would be sort of, you know, you could tell there was some form of racism because I was like, I know this guy, he's smart, why isn't he in here? I've been put in this situation, I've got to step it up, you know and make it look good. Like I said, Wayne's father was the old principal of the school, or he was the principal of the middle school then because we were in middle school so he had an abundance of resources. My parents didn't have any resources. But I felt like, well, if they can put me here and wherever I can cut the mustard, I can do it.
- MB: After integration did the school that you went to prior, the all black school, did they close that school?
- DP: Well, that became the elementary school. Then we went to the middle school and then they had the high school but eventually that school was closed and they built a brand new elementary school.
- MB: Were the facilities comparable?
- DP: Probably not because I hadn't been to the new elementary school but I'm sure it was a lot nicer than what we had but, you know, the old black elementary school. But it was there. Just to see that separation of students, and I was like, then you know, you don't get to a chance to see the friends that you had before. So it was something else.
- MB: Was the school that you went to, was it more like a community school where you knew everybody that went to he school?
- DP: Well, in my grade from like first to the sixth or seventh grade, we all went, we just traveled all together. You stayed with that group of people and then when we got up in the eighth grade, bam, you know, and even some of my friends were like, you know, wondering how—it's reverse racism. What are you doing over there with all those white people? So you had to deal with both ends of it you know, because you might get a chance to only see them at lunch or even maybe at PE, then you'd have to make sure that the times were all coordinated so you could see them. But I didn't let that bother me too much.
- EM: Do you recall the assassination of Martin Luther King?
- DP: Sixty-eight. I remember that well. Another time, you know, a dark time in the household. I remember that well.

MB: I guess you were in about seventh or eighth grade?

DP: Yes, about the seventh or eighth grade. I remember the teachers, that one I really remember, okay, Dr. King as died, so that was a big thing for us. That's why I'm so honored to be working, or for the cause, you know, the Cobb County MLK support group in support of things in that group because I'm doing something to carry that, the dream of Dr. King. I felt very good. I felt good and fully rewarded by just working for the NAACP, I thought, what a great thing. And that's what the fraternity is doing as well, service. We were all about service during that so I just felt blessed, incredibly honored to be able to give back something back to the community.

MB: What was the reaction?

DP: When Dr. King was shot?

MB: Yes.

DP: Well, you know, at that time, in the black community and in the black schools of course, it was all the same reaction, grief, we weren't integrated at that point in time, so it was complete grief, complete shock just watching the funerals on television, watching the Kennedy's being assassinated, watching the funerals, you see that kind of stuff. Just grief.

MB: One question I had wanted to ask you was do you recall when Jesse Jackson asked you about a particular march? I think they marched from Newt Gingrich's political district to the Martin Luther King memorial site. Do you remember him asking you if the Cobb County branch would participate in that march?

DP: No, I don't think he did. But I remember going to Bob Barr's, I can remember that, going over there, but I had to go in to talk to Bob Barr when he was Congressman out here, about a specific issue that he had done. I debated Shawn Hanity on the radio [laughter] before he became "Shawn Hanity", you know, I remember that, and that was probably back in, whenever it was with the NAACP and we were talking. He invited me to come down and talk about some stuff so I did. I took my son and my daughter down to the radio station.

MB: Do you remember some of the questions that were asked?

DP: You know what, I really can't because we were talking, again, it was something that Bob Barr had supported in the 7th district and were just totally opposed to it so I went and approached Bob Barr about it and you know, of course, he was giving his spiel on it then, Shawn Hanity had heard that I had gone out there so he invited me to come up there and talk about it, but it was something, I can't remember the exact issue because there was so much but I was thinking you know, right down there in Buckhead at the radio station, that's where he was. Shawn might remember. I'll have to ask him. [laughter]

EM: Are you still talking?

DP: No! [laughter] He won't accept my calls now!

MB: This is going to conclude the tape recording session.

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