

***Civil Rights History Project
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Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History & Culture
and the Library of Congress, 2014***

Interviewees: Wyatt Tee Walker and Theresa Walker

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Interviewer: David Cline

Videographer: John Melville Bishop

Length: approximately 1 hour, 13 minutes

START OF RECORDING

Female 1: From the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

DAVID CLINE: Good morning. It's June 20, 2014. My name is David Cline, and I'm here in Chester, Virginia, on behalf of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, to interview the Reverend Dr. Wyatt T. Walker.

DC: I neglected to say thank you very much for meeting with us this morning. It's quite an honor for me personally.

WYATT T. WALKER: I appreciate the memories. My name is Wyatt T. Walker. I was born in Brockton, Massachusetts, August 16, 1928. My only claim to fame is that I was once chief of staff to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

DC: That's quite a claim to fame. If I may, I'm always interested in how people's backgrounds influenced the way their lives later played out. So could you tell us a little bit about your family and growing up?

WTW: I grew up as a preacher's kid. My father had a congregation in South Jersey of about a hundred, a small church. He was a very, very scholarly gentleman. He read Greek and Hebrew every day. His style of ministry, I'm sure, influenced me and my work as a pastor. He wasn't too keen about me joining Martin Luther King and leaving the church I was serving in Petersburg at the time, but he came to appreciate it a great deal.

DC: Could you tell us a little bit about--.

Male 1: David?

DC: Yes.

Male 1: I'm hearing you go "Mm-hmm."

DC: OK.

Male 1: OK, carry on.

DC: Yes. Did you have any early encounters with racism or segregation to Jersey that you recall?

WTW: I lost my first girlfriend because of it. There was a little girl who lived about two blocks from my home named Nancy, and we used to play together. One day she came to the curb from her house, and she was sort of crying, and she said she couldn't play with me anymore. I said, "Why?" She said, "Because you're colored." I didn't even know what that meant, but later I understood it.

My first schooling was in the segregated schools, and my first experience of integration in education was in junior high school and high school. And in the town that I lived in, there was a drug store, and you couldn't be served in it. The Ku Klux Klan was

operative in the area. They burned a cross on one of Father Divine's headquarters. It was like growing up in the South, really, but I couldn't compare it until later on in life.

My father was a race man. He was always involved in trying to find some reconciliation between the white and the black community. I grew up with a portrait of Frederick Douglass on the wall, and so I was very familiar with the history of our people in America. I resented everything about the segregation pattern that existed, I guess widely, but in the section of North, South Jersey that we lived in, and we called it Little Georgia, because it was so bad.

DC: When you were called to the church, did you initially think that the church might be a way for you to address these issues?

WTW: Not initially. In fact, when I finished university I was a major in physics and chemistry, and I wanted to be a physician, but the call to the ministry seemed to be more pressing because of my experiences in Richmond, Virginia, with segregation and discrimination [5:00]. I saw that as the best means of fighting segregation in any form that I found it. The black preacher is the freest man in society, because he is accountable to the black community, and I had discerned that in my early college experience.

DC: What kinds of things did you involve your congregation in early on, in terms of the question of segregation?

WTW: Well, it was more active when I was a pastor in Harlem. We were against the drug traffic, and we picketed and demonstrated, marched against the drug enterprises. I guess my interest focused on seniors, the drug traffic, and working to develop affordable housing. At the point that I left New York, I had become the largest developer of affordable housing in New York State, so that's a part of the legacy of my service.

DC: Wonderful. We'll get to that story in a little bit. If I could focus just for a second on Richmond and your first pastorate here?

WTW: Well, I went to the undergraduate school of Virginia Union [University], and then I went to the graduate school of religion to earn my M. Div. I was called to a church in Petersburg in my last year. I was twenty-two years old, I thought. I really found out recently that I was twenty-three. I had always used my birth year as [19]29, and visiting a sister who was recovering from an automobile accident, she had my mother's papers, among which was my birth certificate, and my birthday was 1928. Instead of me looking forward to my eighty-sixth birthday, I'm looking forward to my eighty-seventh in August this year.

DC: Congratulations. So, after Petersburg?

WTW: Well, I was in Petersburg eight years as the pastor of the Gillfield Baptist Church, which is over two hundred years old. I went to New York and joined the corporate world. I was in a publishing firm, I was a marketing director, and then I went to, I was called to, a church in Harlem, and I served there for thirty-seven years. It was a wonderful ministry in the way it responded to my leadership.

DC: Wonderful. Can I ask you about an early incident with a library? Was that here in Richmond?

WTW: That was in Petersburg.

DC: Petersburg. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

WTW: Yes. Of course, everything was segregated in Petersburg when I arrived, including the ministerial alliance. The first experience I had in integrating was integrating it with the chaplain of Virginia State and another pastor in the town, R. G.

Williams. We integrated the ministry of alliance. About eight years later, I tried to get the city council to integrate the library, and they would not even consider it. For some reason, the NAACP would not make a case of it, and I felt they had pulled the rug from under me. So I, influenced again by King, I had a demonstration, and we went there on February 27, 1960. We went through the white door, [for] which we were promptly arrested in a few minutes, and two of us, the same R.G. Williams, we decided to stay in jail, and we stayed in jail a couple of days. Of course, that was, back in that day, that was [10:00] big news and unusual, because the black community of Petersburg had been so cowered by the system of segregation that they wouldn't even think of trying to integrate a facility. It happened that it was the first time the libraries had been assaulted in the South.

DC: Do you remember what book it was that you checked out?

WTW: Yes, I do. I asked for volume one of Douglas Southall Freeman's biography of Robert E. Lee. I always thought Lee was guilty of treason, and I just thought I'd look at this book to see what the Southern view was, why they made him such a hero.

DC: Did anybody comment on the fact that you had checked out Lee's biography?

WTW: Well, I've seen several articles about it, of how I asked ironically for that book, and that led to my arrest.

DC: Did you already know Dr. King at that point, or at what point did you get to know him?

WTW: Oh, I got to know him in 19--it must have been 1952. I joined his organization, and he put me on the board, and I did some writing for him and press releases, because I had that set of skills. I'd been close to him since 1952 until his death. In fact, the day before he was assassinated he had called my home and wanted to talk to me about something. I don't know why. I have always imagined that he wanted me to come to Memphis to help with the march that had gone on the day before. But, you know, I just don't know. But he had a great influence on my life. When I went to Petersburg as a pastor, I carried a Smith & Wesson nickel-plated .32, and at Martin Luther King's influence, I put my gun down. I was waiting for some racist to cross my path, and I had in my mind that I had this pistol to shoot him. I got that idea from my father, who was in a train station somewhere near Emporia, Virginia, and it was cold, and he went in the so-called white waiting room, and a constable came in there and told him he had to leave. My father told him it was too cold, and the constable raised his nightstick to hit him. My father said he had his coat on, and he had his trigger on the gun. He said if that baton had started down, he was going to shoot him. So from the very beginning of my father's early life to my early life, that's why I say I know he was a race man. I'm sure I inherited some of that.

DC: So was the concept of nonviolence and practicing nonviolence--

WTW: No, it wasn't in vogue at that time.

DC: Yeah. So did that take some training and getting used to that idea for you?

WTW: Well, it took a lot of reading, and hearing King over and over again, and seeing his commitment to nonviolence made me adopt it as a way of life. But all through college I envisioned putting together some smart, young black men who developed the

expertise and using plastic bombs and putting ice picks through their opponents' ears, like Bill Bowen and Eastland. That was what I fantasized during my college years. Then I ended up as Dr. King's right-hand man in nonviolence. So life has its quirks and turns.

DC: It's a journey, isn't it [15:00], certainly. Certainly. So you began working on the board. When were you first called to actually join the organization?

WTW: Nineteen--well, he invited me to the initial meeting in Atlanta, but I didn't have enough money to go. So I didn't join the SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference] until the meeting in Clarksdale, Mississippi, in 1958, I think it was. That's when he put me on the board, and I began to work close to him until his death.

DC: And when you came on as a staff member, that was--

WTW: That was 1960. He invited me to become an executive director of the organization, to help build it into what became, in my view, the most powerful civil rights organization in the [19]60s.

DC: You came in after Ella Baker.

WTW: Oh, absolutely.

DC: What was it like coming in after her?

WTW: She was the interim executive director, but I was after her. I knew her from earlier experience, but that was after the fact.

DC: What was the situation with the organization when you first arrived, and how did you manage to grow it over just a few years?

WTW: I used to describe it as mainly an idea in Dr. King's briefcase, and trying to connect churches and pastors is a formidable task. I flew by the seat of my pants, as they say. I put a fund-raising system in. The budget my first year was \$57,000. We did over

\$100,000, and in four years, when I went, I took two members with me from my staff in Petersburg, and that made SCLC have five staff members, because there were two working here. Four years later, we had a budget of a million dollars and a hundred full-time employees. I worked primarily as an administrator and a fund raiser. There were some way stations along the way, but things didn't really start popping until Albany and Birmingham.

DC: Before we get to Albany, I just want to ask you, talking about money, how important was money to the success?

WTW: It is the ammunition. It takes money to run an organization, and to run campaigns, and to train people, and that's what we needed the money for, because nonviolence was an altogether novel concept in 1960 and [19]61. We developed it into a driving force which changed the nation, in a way. It was responsible for desegregating America.

DC: Of course, the movement in the streets is perceived to be really driving this change, and it's a huge part of it, but there's so much going on behind the scenes.

WTW: Oh, absolutely. There were so many pundits who thought that we just decided to go to a place and have some demonstrations, but it wasn't. We started a year ahead of time in Birmingham. That's an illustration of what it takes to do, to have great movements.

DC: I would guess so. We were talking, just about to talk about Albany, Georgia, and if you could tell us a little bit about the invitation to come to Albany and the situation that you found there. And then I'll ask you a little bit afterwards how that led to your tactics in Birmingham.

WTW: Well, Albany was considered by the media and the pundits who observed what was going on that it was a failure, but in my view it was a success. We just made some mistakes [20:00] in Albany we shouldn't have, but we did make them. But we were just beginning a social revolution, so that's understandable. The problem in Albany was twofold. One, they had too many targets. It was initiated by the workers, the SNCC workers, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. That resulted in the community being exhausted for fund raising and rallies, etc. SNCC realized that they were in over their heads, and so they invited Dr. King to come. Well, when King goes, I went. I have the reputation of running a tight ship, and I reacted very defensively when they limited Dr. King to one vote, and whatever the vote was, contrary to his advice, I thought was a mistake.

So there was some internecine warfare between the organizations, the CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] people, the NAACP, the local community organization, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Lou [Louis] Lomax, who never went to Albany, was an African American journalist, said Dr. King left Albany with his tail between his legs, you know, some remark that it was a failure, and Lou Lomax never came to Albany. All he did was telephone interviews with students from SNCC, and, of course, they had their own view. The organizational competition was very sharp, and that's what caused the Albany power structure to be intransigent, because they knew of this problem that we had with each other.

As I said before, the other thing was that they had too many targets. But when we left Albany, everything was closed, the parks and the library. It was like a Mexican standoff. But in the process, the significance of Albany is that we learned how to

mobilize an entire community for a campaign, and if it had not been for Albany and the experience we had there, we would not have won the Birmingham campaign. So to me, that is its chief significance.

DC: I'm going to ask you just in a second the lessons and how you applied them in Birmingham. But I want to ask about a specific person there during the Albany campaign, and that's Charles Sherrod, who was with SNCC, who you knew well.

WTW: Yes, in fact, I raised him in my congregation in Petersburg and got a well-to-do man to help finance his education, so I knew Sherrod very well. At times he had been to my home and stayed. So here's another one of those ironies of struggle.

DC: Now there's a story that Sherrod told--I don't know if you recall this incident, but I always loved this story--that apparently in Albany at some point, in a meeting with Robert Kennedy, and Kennedy was saying he didn't want to see any more direct action, he wanted to see voter registration, Sherrod got so angry--this is Sherrod telling this story--that he got so angry he wanted to take a swing, he almost took a swing at the attorney general, and you held him back. Do you remember that?

WTW: I remember that meeting. That was in Washington, DC. The Kennedy administration was always telling us to put our energy into voter registration, and it was doomed for failure if we did. It was protest marches and the action that made our movement what it was. The obstacles to black votes and voting was, they were huge. The right to vote [25:00] was theoretical at best.

DC: OK, so after Albany, and sights are set on Birmingham, and you say you've learned some lessons from Albany, what were those? How did you plan for the next battle?

WTW: The primary lesson was how to organize an entire community for a campaign. In Albany, we had sections of the city that we worked in developing, and we moved the mass meetings around from place to place in order to publicize what we were doing. In Birmingham, the first week of the demonstrations there, the bus company went on strike. But we held mass meetings every night in some community for forty-three nights. It was just amazing what we were able to do, when I look back at it. But that was the strength that we had. We had learned those lessons in Albany more than anyplace else.

DC: Now you had become a convert to nonviolent strategy at this point.

WTW: Oh, yes.

DC: But you were fond of this word “confrontation.” So nonviolence doesn’t mean no confrontation.

WTW: Oh, Project C, yes.

DC: Can you tell me a little bit about the necessity for confrontation?

WTW: Well, Dr. King has assigned me the task of working out a campaign strategy for Birmingham. I went to Birmingham a year ahead of time. I went to the stores, and I measured how long it would take a young person, and a middle-aged person, and an aged person to go to the stores, how many seats were available in the eating facility. So I was very detailed in that, and that’s how Project C grew. When I presented that to the executive committee of SCLC, it was unanimously accepted. Project C was the heart of the campaign in Birmingham and led to the desegregation of America with the Public Accommodations Act of 1964.

DC: Just for clarification, Project C was the blueprint. Can you say what that stands for and what the plan was?

WTW: Well, Project C, confrontation, that we had to confront the evil that we'd discerned in the segregation system. The only way we could join it. We had in the back of our minds that Bull Connor would do something that would help us, and he did. He reacted, you know, in his way to our demonstrations, and if it hadn't been for Bull Connor, we wouldn't have had the TV pictures that saturated America and foreign countries and forced the business community to decide that we better talk.

DC: So Bull Connor played right into this?

WTW: He played into our hands. For some reason, he had this idea that we should not be able to go downtown. If he had let us go on the first, or the second march, or the third march, after about three or four marches downtown to pray, what else was new? But it was his resistance to that which made the movement and got us sympathy from all quarters of the nation.

DC: What about the children's movement part of that campaign?

WTW: Well, the nonviolent credo details that anybody can be in the movement. The blind singer, Al Hibbler, was arrested in Birmingham. So we didn't have any qualms, Dr. King and I didn't, and Jim Bevel, and we decided we'd use the children. We knew there would be criticism about it, but the Children's March is what [30:00] toppled the segregationist system in Birmingham. When people saw the firemen with the power hoses, using them against children, running them down the sidewalk, they said, "This won't do." Actually, a physician in Mississippi told his son, who was my New Testament instructor at United Theological Seminary in Dayton, he said, "Segregation is

over,” and he was very prophetic in that and discerning, because people just didn’t see-- they wouldn’t accept treating children that way.

DC: And the power of those images. How did you develop a sense of how these, using the media in such a way to help your cause?

WTW: We did that with great premeditation. We wanted to get on, three or four minutes on the *Huntley-Brinkley Report*. So we--I guess I was responsible. I told Dr. King when I, when he said to me, “You got to find some way to dramatize our situation.” We were late with one of our demonstrations, and instead of marching at 2:00, they marched at 4:00. By that time a thousand people had gathered, expecting something to happen. And it was, a lot of the injuries were to onlookers, not participants in the struggle. I called Atlanta. I told them, “I got it. Leader,” I said, “I got it. I know what to do.” I said, “I can’t tell you on the phone.” And when I got back to Atlanta I told them we had to slow down our demonstrations until the people came home and were going to gather, and Bull Connor would do something silly, which is what he did, put the dogs on us, use the water hoses. We were then--I felt we were home free, because we made the *Huntley-Brinkley Report* about two or three nights in a row. That was a key to the success of Birmingham, the use of the media.

DC: Now, going back to the finances for a second. Would you see an increase in fund raising after this?

WTW: Oh, absolutely, without a doubt. I’m trying to think of the figures now, but they don’t, they escape me now. But Birmingham put us, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, on the map. You knew about the NAACP. They were outlawed in Alabama, so they couldn’t operate, and they didn’t have an action program. They were

not given to demonstrations; they were fighting the battle through the courts. To get integration would take a hundred years if you just relied on the courts, and we sensed that.

DC: Can I ask you, if you will, to talk about the personal sacrifices you made at those times, in terms of putting yourself in harm's way, your family, the kinds of things that you experienced, or did at home?

WTW: Never thought about it. I think we were so faithful in our struggle and strengthened by our religious fervor. My wife, who is sitting here with us, was assaulted by an Alabama state trooper with a rifle, and I was beaten up on Mother's Day. I had a broken wrist, and three broken ribs, and dislocated in my back from the batons of the Alabama state highway patrolman. But we never considered it. We never considered the danger. We were so committed to the idea that we were right and moral in our struggle that we never thought of the danger. Of [35:00] course, we'd had some lives lost and some injuries that plague us to today.

DC: So how did you feel then at the--I mean, we can call it the end--of the Birmingham campaign?

WTW: Well, I guess a word that I learned, a twenty-five-cent word, we were euphoric. Dr. King had said before we went to Birmingham, "If we can crack Birmingham, we can crack the South." And that's what happened.

DC: So afterwards what was the, what were the sort of next steps?

WTW: Well, we would take on anybody. We were like the heavyweight champions then.

DC: And for you personally, what did you do after Birmingham?

WTW: Well, I was made the Southern regional coordinator for the March on Washington, which was highly successful. It was an extension of our movement. There wasn't anything we couldn't do after Birmingham--that we wouldn't try, anyway.

DC: Can you tell me a little bit about the planning for and looking back on the March on Washington?

WTW: Well, Project C, which I created at the behest of Dr. King's assignment, was used as the outline for the campaign in Birmingham. It became--well, in fact, we were trying to do Atlanta, the city, and it was the Birmingham plan. We were going to do Danville, Virginia, which was a very mean city. President Kennedy was assassinated, and Dr. King felt that in the wake of his assassination maybe we wouldn't go to Danville, so that's why Danville was rescheduled.

DC: I wonder if you could reflect--how are you doing? OK? Do you want to take a break or anything?

WTW: I'm all right.

DC: All good? OK. Could you reflect a little bit on the legislation that was finally achieved, the civil rights legislation?

WTW: Well, we attribute to Birmingham the Public Accommodations Act of 1964, and Birmingham led to Selma and the Selma march, which led to the voting bill of 1965, too. So two major civil rights bills were the product of our campaigns in Birmingham and Selma. They changed the complexion of politics and economics in the South.

DC: When those passed did you feel that you had achieved--obviously you had achieved something, but did you feel that you had achieved what you had set out to do, or there would be more down the road?

WTW: Well, as I said, once we finished with Birmingham we felt we could take on anybody or anything. It was inspirational to all the participants in the movement. There just wasn't anything we wouldn't try. We were convinced that God was with us. If it had not been for the religious infrastructure of the black community, we would have never achieved what we achieved.

DC: Can you tell me a little bit more about that and the role of the ministers, because I know it's very complicated?

WTW: Well, our mass rallies were services with religious songs. Spirituals from a hundred years old were cast with new lyrics, which we made into freedom songs. So there wouldn't have been any movement had it not been for the African American church forces. Not only the people, the adults, but the young people were [40:00] a part of it. That's why the mass rallies were so religious-oriented. It was a natural thing. It was the connection and the confederation of the black churches that made our movement possible.

DC: Absolutely. Then King also spoke out against some of the--the preacher in the big Cadillac, for example, and then, of course, the white allies who didn't come to the battle.

WTW: Well, Dr. King was critical of that type of preacher, but it didn't--it was just a passing, common criticism. Most of the movement ministers were real serving

priests. Most of us were influenced by the kind of ministry that Dr. King had pursued in Montgomery.

DC: I know that you were quite involved in typing and working with King on the letter from the Birmingham jail, which was addressed to so-called white, so-called allies. Can you tell us a little bit about that, the frustrations?

WTW: Well, the interesting thing is that I was the only one in Birmingham who could make out Dr. King's chicken-scratch writing. We were doing it from the edges of newspapers, from toilet paper, whatever we had. My secretary typed until she was exhausted. We spent two or three nights translating it. So I did the last part of it, and it had become the rationale, the *raison d'être* of our movement, and the most important document of the twentieth century, I believe. It equals the Gettysburg Address, in my judgment.

DC: I completely agree with you. Are you able to go back to that moment in time when you were reading this chicken scratch with a pencil, written with a pencil stub, in the margin of a newspaper and seeing these words emerge? Can you remember the--

WTW: Well, it just came, it came to me. I recognized that when I was translating it, that it was an unusual document, and that put us in a mode of haste, because Dr. King wanted to see the copy before it went to press. The Society of Friends, the Quakers, printed the first version of it, and they called it "Tears of Love." I told them, "No, it should be called 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail.'" So I named it. The rest is history. The marvelous thing about it is that Dr. King had not much to work with, had no library, no books, and it was what I call muscle memory from his training that made it such an important document.

DC: Now when--you moved on to a career in publishing, as you mentioned, briefly after that. What led you to move out of the daily SCLC work?

WTW: Well, economics, probably, or honestly. The board of SCLC froze my salary at \$10,000 a year. I had a wife and four children. I couldn't make it. This publisher from New York dangled \$25,000 in my face, and I was gone. I had told the board of SCLC, I said, "You are going to look up one day, and I'll be gone." And that's the way it turned out. They sent Dr. King, Sr., Daddy King, out to my house in Atlanta to try to persuade me to stay. I remember he was looking at the back window at a little stream ran through our [45:00] property, and he said, "Why? What are you going to do up in New York?" I told him I was going to be a marketing vice president for this publishing firm that was putting together a serious book about black life in America and the world. And he said, "What are they going to pay you?" I said, "They're going to start me at twenty-five thousand a year." He said, "Well, you go on up there, boy." Said, "You've got to care of Ann and these babies."

Dr. King begged me to stay, but I just--they got it, that I felt the board of SCLC didn't. I had a responsibility of administering a million-dollar budget, and they were paying me, freezing my salary at ten thousand, and I had a wife and four children. I used to say that I wouldn't let--I didn't want white folks to exploit me, I wasn't going to let black folks do it either. So that's why I left.

DC: Now did you remain close to King in those years when you went to New York?

WTW: Oh, yes. I remained his best--I was his man in New York and representative to the UN. I still worked with him. In 1967, I was in New York as a

pastor, and we had a case in Birmingham for parading without a permit, and Dr. King was absolutely committed to the nonviolent credo. He said, "After we have exhausted our remedies, then whatever it is, we do so." We went to jail in 1967. Part of that experience was, he took my picture, and I took his picture, in the Birmingham jail. In fact, the picture is pretty famous, although someone tried to steal credit for it. But whoever took it had to be in jail with Dr. King, so it's been no problem. I now have all the rights to it. Some people use it without permission, but it's all right with me.

DC: You had been called--you were alluding to the pastorate in New York?

WTW: In New York, yeah. A marvelous congregation. When I left, there were 1,800 members, and eighty percent of them paid tithes. The last two years I was there, we received over a million dollars just from the tithes of the members. For a church in the center of Harlem, I thought it was fantastic.

DC: Could I ask you about your formal installation at the church? Dr. King was--

WTW: Yes, he was the celebrant. He preached a sermon, "A Knock at Midnight." I remember that. There's a picture in my room of him putting the hood on me as symbolic of my initiation as a pastor of the church. But it was a marvelous experience.

DC: And his assassination came only eleven days after that.

WTW: Ten days.

DC: Ten days after?

WTW: Yeah.

DC: Do you remember what was on his mind or talking with him during that time?

WTW: Not really, because I was in New York, and he was in Memphis. I always felt he was asking me to come to Memphis to organize the marches there, for one that had gone wrong.

DC: And after, obviously after, his death, by carrying on in the church, how did you see the movement, if you want to call it that, playing out, going forward, from 1968 forward into the [19]70s?

WTW: Well, I felt that there was so much residual racism left in the nation, and particularly the cities like New York, that the church again could be at the forefront of that movement. In New York, we were wrestling with the problem of quality education, and I became immersed in the charter school [50:00] movement, which was bandied about as to whether it was good or bad, and so forth. But I became a central figure in that. In fact, Ruben Gomez, a Spanish pastor in the Bronx, and I led, along with Floyd Flake, the struggle to get charter school legislation in the state of New York. I opened, with a fellow named Steve Klinsky, I opened the first charter school in New York. I don't remember the year, but it's been ten years ago, and it's been doing very well.

DC: So education was a major--

WTW: It was a major issue.

DC: You also mentioned drugs, and I know that you became very interested in South African politics and the antiapartheid movement.

WTW: Well, parallel to my struggle in the South, Dr. King had been very vocal about the apartheid movement. I was recruited by people from the national, American, the [African] National Congress, ANC, Johnstone Makatini, and so I mobilized churches into a three-hundred-member federation to get the truth out about apartheid. I actually

worked in the election of [Nelson] Mandela becoming president. I participated in two, on two continents in the struggle against racism, Union of South Africa and the United States.

DC: Do you see this as all connected, as a global struggle?

WTW: Oh, yes. Hatred is a terrible disease, and racism goes with the hatred of one people against another, usually the downtrodden. So I have a theological position as well as a practical political position.

DC: As you were talking about practical politics--yeah?

Female 2: Ask him to talk a little bit more about those, his positions.

DC: OK, yeah. If you could just expand a little bit, talk a little bit more about those positions.

WTW: Well, because I was involved in the apartheid movement, anti-apartheid movement, I got to go to South Africa several times. One time I took twenty-two ministers to be on the ground to see what apartheid was really like. The indigenous South Africans could not own land, could not live where they wanted to, they had to carry passbooks with their identity. It was a terrible form of racism. It was systemized in the Reform Church, and that went from that practice to legislation. So there was a political solution, and I joined that.

DC: And you said you had your theological stance as well. Can you tell us about that?

WTW: Well, the theological position is grounded in the New Testament philosophy and teachings of Jesus. I forget the gentleman who was writing a book on the making of a mind about Dr. King. He asked me, "Whose writings influenced Dr. King

the most?" I said, "Well, what answers have you received?" and he told me Martin Buber, and the fellow who was at Walden Pond.

DC: Emerson?

Male 1: [Henry David] Thoreau.

DC: Thoreau.

WTW: Yes, Thoreau, and [Paul] Tillich. They named the--

DC: Niebuhr [55:00].

WTW: The elite theologians... Well, I told them Dr. King was influenced mostly by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And Ansbro said he had not received that answer from anybody. But more than anything else, Martin Luther King was a Christian pastor, and it was his commitment to the Jesus paradigm that our movement got its strength and its theology.

DC: The beloved community. Can you--

WTW: Absolutely.

DC: --speak about that concept?

WTW: Well, that comes out of the Jesus faith that black people have and articulated by people like Martin Luther King, and Vernon Johns, and Gardner Taylor, and others like them.

DC: And a continuous struggle to achieve.

WTW: Oh, absolutely. Evil is persistent, and you have to fight it persistently. When Obama got elected president, the media and the pundits began to talk about the post-racial era, but there is no post-racial era. There's so much residual racism that it's hardly changed for some people.

DC: Let me ask the room if there are any questions others would like to ask at this point.

Male 2: Well, I would like for you to--pardon.

Female 2: I think he's getting tired.

F3: One last question.

DC: I'll just ask a couple more questions. Is that good?

WTW: Mm-hmm.

Male 1: The--you're rolling back and forth a little bit, which is fine.

Female 2: That means he's not hearing it.

Male 1: I know, I know that.

F3: That's OK.

Male 1: Just be aware of it.

F3: That's OK. We're about to wrap up.

DC: OK.

Male 2: I think a question about where Dr. Walker had alluded to the failure of Memphis's campaign. You may want to follow up to find out what those failures were in Memphis. I think that would be important.

DC: Of Memphis or in Albany?

Male 2: You haven't done that one yet.

DC: No, in Memphis.

Male 2: Dr. Walker was asked--you asked him the question about--Dr. King had perhaps wanted Dr. Walker to come to Memphis because--

DC: OK, right, right, sorry.

Male 2: --of the failures in Memphis. It would be good to know. I've heard very few people talk about that.

DC: OK, great. Any other questions? Just you? OK, terrific. So just two final questions then. One is, the Reverend was alluding to something you had mentioned earlier about Dr. King calling you, perhaps calling you to Memphis, because of the difficulties and failures in Memphis. What were the [failures]?

WTW: Well, the march that they had in Memphis was disrupted by--I think they had a--the nickname was "the invaders," but they were put up to it by the FBI. So it couldn't be--it had to be straightened out, and I think that Dr. King wanted some help with that. But the federal government has been complicit again and again with trying to disrupt our movement and its direction, particularly the Kennedy administration.

DC: What did you think of Dr. King's move towards jobs? I mean, it had been there from the beginning, of course, but at that period of really trying to focus on economic issues.

WTW: That was one of the issues that rose out of the hatred that racism creates. The lack of meaningful employment, poor schools, and not having enough verve and energy to impose strict accountability, with the Voting Rights Act. There was always an attempt to [1:00:00] dilute it, and it goes on.

DC: So I just want to ask, as a final question-- and, first, let me just, again, say thank you so much for your time. This has just been amazing to hear from you today. We really appreciate it, and the American public will appreciate this at the Smithsonian. I want to ask you. I know you've done many, many, many interviews like this, and I

wonder if you ever leave those interviews thinking, oh, I wish, if there's one thing I just didn't get to say or one thing you didn't ask about. I wonder if there's something--

WTW: No. My style is to tell the truth, and I just do that all the time. My mentor, Dr. Vernon Johns, used to say that the truth is always inflammatory, so I'm wedded to that.

DC: Well, we thank you for it.

WTW: You need to interview my wife.

DC: We do.

WTW: She's the only genuine wife of one of the icons of the civil rights that exists. They had a book out not so long ago, a couple of years, about the women of the movement, and they didn't include her. It made me furious. But she was a Freedom Rider. She's been beaten with a rifle butt of an Alabama state highwayman, and our house has been assaulted, both with guns and rocks. In Petersburg, they shot out the lights on the parsonage and threw something through the front window. And she has lived through all of that and been sweet and understanding and supported me, told me what to do. The key to a long marriage is the husband must have the last word in his household. "Yes, dear." [Laughter]

Male 2: That's a true word there.

DC: Well done. Well said. [Laughter]

WTW: Honey, I think you ought to share with them your experience on Mother's Day, 1963, before and after.

Theresa Walker: The Saturday before Mother's Day in 1963, my husband was supposed to come home for Mother's Day, and Dr. King asked him to stay in

Birmingham because someone had bombed A. D. King, Dr. King's brother's home, and the people were rioting because they had gotten tired of the assaults on the black community. My husband couldn't come home, so he asked me to bring the four children to Birmingham. While he was out trying to quiet the crowd, the Birmingham national guardsman had asked us to go into the lobby of the Gaston Motel. Two of my children were sleeping in the hotel, in the lobby, in the hotel. I didn't go into the lobby until I got my children, and I said, "I have two children asleep in the motel." A national guardsman struck me in the head and sent me to the hospital. I said I wouldn't go to the hospital without my children, and we went to the hospital, and I stayed there until the next morning. When I left the hospital I wanted to go back to Atlanta. I was through with Birmingham. So the children and I went back to Atlanta. When we got to Atlanta--

WTW: East Point.

TW: We were two blocks into East Point, which is where the Atlanta airport is, a policeman pulled up beside me and said, "What do you do when you see the police sirens?" I said, "You pull over." He said, "Well, you didn't pull over, so follow me." I followed him to the jail. My oldest child was eleven. They arrested my eleven-year-old, the ten-year-old, the nine-year--eight-year-old, and the six-year-old. We stayed there. Well, I asked them if I could have my one phone call, and they said yes. I called Daddy King, but he had left the church [1:05:00], and I didn't know where else to call him, so I called Andy Young's wife, Jean, and told her to get in touch with Dr. King. Oh, they told me I'd used my one phone call, and I said, "Well, can my daughter have her one phone call?" and they told me yes, so that's how I called Jean Young. Jean Young and Edwina, my husband's secretary, came out to the jail, and they told them we were not there. But

they had already gotten in touch with Daddy King, and about midnight Daddy King came out with someone who owned his property, because you had to own your property outright. You couldn't have a mortgage on it. That gentleman made bail for me. I had to have a trial, and they called me the day before to come to court the next day, they said, or the gentleman who had put up my bond would lose his bond. I got some of the schoolteachers to take care of my children, and I went out to the jail, to the trial. They fined me \$84, and I said, "Well, I'm not going to pay it," so they put me in jail again, but the jail was nice and clean, and I said, "This is my chance to get a good rest." I stayed there until my husband and Bob Brown were coming through, coming in from Atlanta, coming through East Point, and my husband saw my car, and he said, "I know my wife is in jail out here." Bob Brown came in and paid my \$84 fine and got me out of jail. So that's what happened in East Point, Georgia, after I left Birmingham, Alabama, on Mother's Day in 1963.

WTW: At the same time, I went to the motel to pick up her things, and the Alabama highway patrolman, when they identified me, they began to beat me, three of them. They broke my wrist, three ribs, three fractured ribs, and they dislocated a disc in my spine with their batons, so it was a terrible weekend for us as a family. But she's been very brave. She went to Mississippi as a Freedom Rider, not--I think we were the only couple that went. She was in a cell for two people with fourteen other women.

Female 2: Did they place her children in jail with you, or were they in separate--

TW: They just put us together.

WTW: They figured the whole family must be desperados.

Female 2: Is there anything else that you'd like for her to share with us?

WTW: Well, just to say that she's always been supportive. I find time or made time to write books, and she's read all my books before--I have thirty published books, and she's read all the manuscripts before they're published. She's been helpful to me in my journalistic pursuits, and I now have thirty published, and I have about thirty more to be published. I have written fifty-five books at last count.

TW: I want to say one, give you one other incident that hasn't been told. When my--when we lived in Petersburg, and my husband was president of the Petersburg Improvement Association, he was president of CORE, he was president of the SCLC, and he was well known as an agitator. When my daughter got ready to go to school, she was barred from all public schools because of his work in Petersburg. There was a pupil placement form that you must sign that you would not send your child to a white school. I didn't plan to send my child to a white school, but I didn't want to sign the pupil placement form. We did not sign it, so she was barred from all public schools. The teachers in Petersburg who belonged to our church and some other teachers gave me a lesson plan every evening [1:10:00], and I was able to homeschool before homeschooling was even popular. I home schooled my daughter. My daughter finished Howard University in three years. She did a three-years master's at Yale, and so we are very proud of her, in spite of all that Petersburg did to keep her out of school.

WTW: She became the deputy director of the National Endowment of the Arts in the federal government. She's about to retire November 1 of this year.

Female 2: I want to ask one last question. In looking back over your involvement in the civil rights movement, is there anything that you would have done differently?

WTW: Not I. There were times when I used to think about getting vengeance, revenge, but the Lord has moved that from my heart, and I'm not bitter. There was a time when I was very bitter, but I'm not bitter now.

TW: No, I just think the [19]60s was an exciting time to be alive. If I could have done more, I would have done more, but I had the four children, so I did what I could. I'm sure there are other people who no one knows about who have done much more than I did.

WTW: I don't know how. [Laughter]

TW: Well, some gave their lives, you know.

Female 2: Well, Dr. Walker and Mrs. Walker, again, I thank you for granting us this interview.

WTW: I know one little tidbit that you don't know. Maya Angelou used to be on my staff, and she ran a fundraising office in New York on 125th Street, a great lady.

Male 2: Tell the story, Doc, when she came to--I think she came to Harlem, and you and Dr. King were there, and she said that you were--.

WTW: Oh, in her book, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, they had--someone told me, or Fred Wilkerson was the first one who told me, she went to a rally at [Mount Aery?] Church and saw me with Dr. King and said I was too young for wisdom and too handsome for virtue. [Laughter]

Female 2: Wow. That sounds like her.

TW: Like her.

Female 2: Let's stop it. [Laughter] [Applause]

Male 1: Thank you so much.

Female 2: Thank you again.

[Recorder is turned off and then back on.]

Female 1: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

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