

Interview of Mr. Charles Penix. Interviewed by Francesca Davis and Rebecca Williams of the Crossroads to Freedom Project, Rhodes College.

Mr. Charles Penix is the son of a Hoxie, Arkansas School Board member. His father was a politically minded citizen who used his position on the board to help push for school integration in Hoxie.

This interview was conducted in 2006 to be included in the Rhodes College Crossroads to Freedom Digital Archive project.

The transcripts represent what was said in the interview to the best of our ability. It is possible that some words, particularly names, have been misspelled. We have made no attempt to correct mistakes in grammar.

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*Francesca Davis:* Thank you again for taking time out of your schedule to interview with us. And we just want to go ahead and begin. Could you tell us your name and your current occupation?

*Mr. Charles Penix:* Yes. Charli~~e~~y Penix and I'm an architect.

*Francesca Davis:* Okay. And where were you born and raised?

*Mr. Charles Penix:* I was born in Jonesboro~~ugh~~, Arkansas and raised there until I was 18. And then I left and never went back.

*Rebecca Williams:* You did college after that?

*Mr. Charles Penix:* Went to college. I worked in Senator Fulbright's office and went to Georgetown. Then he got defeated and I moved back to Fayetteville and finished school there.

I started out to be an attorney; I wanted to be in politics and do all that. And then I went to law school and hated it. And thought what is the farthest thing I can do from law school. And I said architect.

*Francesca Davis:* Architect.

*Mr. Charles Penix:* So here I am.

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*Francesca Davis:* Could you tell us a little bit about your parents? What were their names?

*Mr. Charles Penix:* Yeah. My mother's name was Marian. Marian Fox was her maiden name. She was born in Tulsa. And she had Arkansas connections; her mother was from Marshall, Arkansas. And she and my father met at the University of Arkansas.

My dad was born in Jonesboro~~ugh~~. My grandfather was born in Jonesboro~~ugh~~. They've been in Jonesboro~~ugh~~ a long time.

So they met in Fayetteville and went to law school together. And then returned to Jonesboro~~ugh~~ and lived there all their lives.

*Francesca Davis:* You said your dad was born in Jonesboro~~ugh~~ –

*Mr. Charles Penix:* He was born in Jonesboro~~ugh~~ in 1922.

*Francesca Davis:* Was your whole family in Jonesboro~~ugh~~ or were they spread out?

*Mr. Charles Penix:* No. My father's family, of course, was there and those grandparents. My mother's mother moved to Washington D.C. and taught school in Chevy Chase, Maryland. Third grade.

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*Rebecca Williams:* She was a teacher. I was gonna ask about your life growing up. Can you tell us, share with us some of the memories that stick out in your mind of your childhood?

*Mr. Charles Penix:* Yeah. It makes me feel really old, but it was really simple time to grow up. And Jonesboro~~ugh~~ was a little town. And all of the stuff you hear now about how safe it was—and I don't know whether it was really any safer than anywhere now but it was a perceived safeness. You didn't have news accounts every night of every kid that'd been kidnapped that day in America. So we were very free to roam and play in the woods and ride our bikes ten miles from home. So it was a great place to grow up. Everyone knew everybody, pretty much. We weren't gonna get in trouble because if you did anything somebody'd call your mom and tell them. There was no hiding who you were. So it was a really wonderful place to grow up.

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*Rebecca Williams:* It was a really close-knit community it sounds like.

*Mr. Charles Penix:* Close-knit community and just simple. We didn't have a lot of—again this makes me feel really old; I sound like my father

talking—but we didn't have any big expectations about what we were supposed to have. There wa<sup>2</sup>s no such thing as designer clothes. When I was a kid you had jeans and they were either Lees or Levis. Period. And there was no concept of children having some certain brand of tennis shoes or any of that stuff. So we didn't have any expectations about having things.

And we didn't watch a lot of TV. Not because we wouldn't have, if there'd been. But there wasn't much TV. So we were outdoors a lot.

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And we just did things like built tree houses and rode bikes and made dams in the curb when it rained—we d built d little dams. And just silly stuff. But we had a good time.

*Rebecca Williams:* And you shared this with your brothers and sisters, your siblings?

*Mr. Charles Penix:* Did I what? I'm sorry.

*Rebecca Williams:* Did you share this with your brothers and your sisters?

*Mr. Charles Penix:* Yeah, I mean we were typical. I had an older brother—he was three years older—so we fought a lot. And I was the nasty younger brother who would taunt him and then get him in trouble and then, “You're picking on me.” When I was the one that forced him to hit me, or whatever. We kind of paired off. My older sister and I were close. And my younger sister and my brother were. We paired off that way.

We took a lot of family vacations like the Chevy Chase movies. My parents would throw, literally—it's unbelievable. They would throw us in the car.

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And my grandmother 'cause she would come for the summer—'cause she taught school so she was off for the summer, and her husband, my grandfather, died before I was born—so she lived alone and she would come in the summer. And so seven of us would pile in the station wagon and drive to Mexico City, Canada, California, New York. We went everywhere. So it was pretty – it must have been horrible for my mother. We had a lot of fun but I don't how that possibly could have been fun for her.

And no McDonald's or anything; you'd stop on the side of the road. And they had roadside parks and you would make Spam sandwiches or whatever.

Rebecca Williams: Spam.

**VIDEO CUT (.flv)**

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Francesca Davis: Can you tell us about some of your role models growing up?

Mr. Charles Penix: Role models. Probably a lot of my role models are politicians and that's because my parents were very interested and involved in politics.

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So I naturally, as a child, had their same—I guess most kids do—grow up with the views of parents. So Kennedy would have been a real role model. And I was nine years old when he was assassinated. It's one of the big events I remember. My mother went into depression, literally. She didn't speak.

Francesca Davis: So that was a big event, definitely.

Mr. Charles Penix: And Martin Luther King. I was older then; I was in King Junior High and High School. LBJ. My father, particularly liked LBJ. He would say things like, "Well, you know, Kennedy was sort of the movie star and whatever. But LBJ got it done." So –

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Francesca Davis: So your parents had a really big influence in that.

Mr. Charles Penix: Oh, yeah. And they were very involved in democratic politics particularly. And so I would—my dad, he was the secretary of Democratic Party. And he would—back then they had no voting machines—and every primary election, those usually took place in the summertime, and my father's in charge of making up the ballots and the ballot boxes and all that. So we would go down to his office and we'd fold up all the cardboard boxes and make the ballots and mark: box one, Black Oak Township, or whatever. And then we'd get in the car and go around and deliver all these ballot boxes.

Francesca Davis: So you were really active in the campaigns.

*Mr. Charles Penix:* Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

*Francesca Davis:* He had you working.

*Mr. Charles Penix:* Have to load up the box, put the pencils, put the ballots, put the little seal to make sure nobody stuffed the ballot wrong. They had these little locks that they put on them.

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*Francesca Davis:* So you were involved in politics from your youth. And I know being in the south during that time, could you tell us a little bit more about how your family handled the situation compared to other families. Or how was that experience?

*Mr. Charles Penix:* Yeah. Of course, in the south then, everyone was a democrat. And there was—as my father used to say—they say we don't have two parties. We do have two parties. We have the ins and we have the outs. And there were, as I remember, there were the—in Arkansas, anyway—there was the more progressive wing of the Democratic Party. Which would be people like Dale Bumpers and Clinton, later of course. But then there was the right-wing part of the Democratic Party, which were the segregationists, the real really bad, awful racists. But they were all democrats. So they'd run. The election really took place in the primary. There weren't any republicans to speak of. And so after the primary, that was it.

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Now, that changed in 1964 when Winthrop Rockefeller moved to Arkansas. And Winthrop Rockefeller was a very progressive republican. It all seems crazy now 'cause there's no such thing as—this is my bias—there's no such thing as a progressive Republican now. But in those days, in Arkansas, Winthrop Rockefeller was the liberal. And whoever he was running against as the democratic was the conservative and he was the very progressive candidate. That was very difficult for my parents because they were democrats and they were like, "We can't vote for a republican!" But on the other hand—and I don't that they ever admitted voting for him, I think they probably did—but that was sort of strange 'cause he was the good guy. And the democrats were the bad guy, at least in the governor's race. And he reformed a lot in Arkansas: the prison system and he did away with the death penalty—and it's back, of course. But he was a very progressive governor.

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*Francesca Davis:* Well thinking about this time period, the 60s and the 70s when you were growing up and becoming more aware of the political climate or what have you, could you tell us a little bit more about two or three or more great experiences during that time that you had to deal with?

*Mr. Charles Penix:* Of course, the Civil Rights Movement in general. And I don't remember much about particulars of that until 60s and the march in Selma. I was 9, 10 years old when that was going on. And then my parents were very, very aware of all that. And I what I do remember very much is that my parents were hugely disappointed that the church didn't do anything about that. And they thought—we would go to church on Sunday

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and there'd be some sermon about something, I don't know what—but it just floored them that that wasn't something that was important for the church to talk about: humanity and treating people right and all that.

And again, it was a lot of things in the south just weren't talked about. You could just act like they didn't exist and then even though it was obviously itthis very much existed that things weren't talked about.

And my parents also would go visit friends in Fayetteville where the University of Arkansas is. They had very progressive friends that lived there. And they had some friends in Memphis. And when they would just get disgusted because they didn't have anybody to talk to, we'd go to Fayetteville, we'd go to Memphis.

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And that's what we did actually when Kennedy was shot; we went to Memphis and stayed with some good friends there. And I remember very much being there and watching on TV

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when Lee Harvey Oswald was shot. And seeing it live on TV, which was pretty amazing.

And what I do remember about—I don't remember—what my parents told me about the whole Hoxsiejy thing was that they would go to a dinner party or something and their friends would be there. And their friends didn't shun them because they didn't agree with them or like what they were doing; they just wouldn't talk about it. So here this thing was going on in their lives that was a huge deal and everyone would just, "How are the kids? How's the weather? Oh, did you get a new car?" But no one would talk about what they were interested in. They'd just didn't talk about it. It's like having the crazy aunt theat lives upstairs or something. Just what you do is you don't talk about it.

*Francesca Davis:* So your parents being very involved and-in the Hoxsiejy case was obviously was brought up a lot in your household, is this your earliest memory of dealing

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with the issues of racism and segregation and those things? Can you share your earliest memory?

*Mr. Charles Penix:* Yeah. Again, when you're a kid you don't question a lot. But my parents did question things. And so I do remember that—for instance, my grandmother who was not as progressive, let's say, as my parents were. And my grandmother had a maid and she had the maid's husband would mow the yard or whatever in the summer. And I remember as children we would go, we'd be at my grandmother's house on a Saturday whatever. And we would want to eat. At lunchtime, for instance, the guy who mowed the yard, they'd give him a plate to eat outside. Now it didn't occur to me at the time that why didn't he come

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in the house to eat like everybody else. So she would feed him outside. And the kids, we'd get to eat outside with him. The yard guy and the kids get to eat outside. And I don't know. I've thought about that a lot later though. About how obviously bad that was that you wouldn't ask him inside where it was cool to ieat. It's like, "No, you get to eat on the back porch with the kids."

And something I was telling you all a little earlier about. I remember that these people—I'm sure they were older, they were probably their grandkids—would come with them to my grandmother's house in the summer and we'd all play together. But then when we got older that all stopped. And again we didn't—I thought about it later. I don't know that I thought about

it at the time so much. And I think that was a very common thing in the south that black and white children played together when they were little but when they got to be 12 to puberty, it all stopped.

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Just sort of unwritten rule for whatever reason that. So I do remember that. I wasn't aware of it so much at the time but I do remember it.

In growing up in Jonesboro~~ugh~~. Again, Jonesboro~~ugh~~ was a low percentage population black for a southern town, around ten percent. So desegregating schools in Jonesboro~~ugh~~, it happened relatively late. I think '67 or '68. But it was easier. It was always easier in the south, I think, to desegregate when the whites were in a huge majority. In towns in the south where blacks were 50 percent of the population, that was very difficult for white people. I guess no one wants to be a minority. That is a very difficult thing for white people to deal with. So the town I grew up in, that was not so difficult.

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The schools were not desegregated when I was in grade school. And the grade school ~~that~~ I went to was the farthest, distance wise from town, where black people lived. So there weren't any black children there.

Now what my father did, he was on the school board. And there was a—I forgot what grade she taught, third or fifth grade, I can't remember—and her name was Mrs. Llewellyn and she was a black teacher. So my father thought it was very clever that the way he would desegregate the grade school that I went to was that they would hire a black teacher at the school. And she had a great big car. And that she could fill it up with black kids and bring—so we would at least have five or six black kids at that school. So that was his roundabout way of trying to help desegregate the school that I went to. But there was a—the black school was Booker T. Washington. It was a grade school, junior high, and high school.

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And it was shut down. But what happened initially is that all of the black kids went to one or two grade schools that were closer to the part of town that they lived in. And then later there was more of a balance of trying to move people around town to get a better balance of ratio of black to white. And I don't think it was a big deal in Jonesboro~~ugh~~ 'cause we're not talking about great distances. We're talking about you go to this grade school. You go to this one over here that was a mile-and-a-half away. It wasn't like you had to spend an extra 45 minutes on the bus to get to school. We're talking about an extra five minutes.

Francesca Davis: So moving to the target period, which is '51 to '70,

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what were some of your experiences as far as you being involved—or maybe your parents being involved—in organizations or in the Civil Rights Movement?

Mr. Charles Penix: I do remember that we used to go. My mother would take us, the kids, about probably once or twice a year we'd go to black churches. And that was always fun. I always thought, “wWow these churches are a lot more fun than the church I go to.” And my mother loved the music. It'ss primarily why we would go.

And I used to also ride the train with my father to Little Rock. And that's where I would really encounter some of the old south things, much more in Little Rock than in Jonesboro~~ugh~~. The things like the train station had a different waiting room. A colored waiting room they called it. And I remember asking questions

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about those kind of things. I can remember asking my father, “Why do they do this?” And, of course, he would try to explain—however you explain to a six-year-old child that something ridiculous. And I remember there was a laundromat, I don't why this one thing. Because, Jonesboro~~ugh~~ did not have as I remember a lot of the signage and all about “white only” and all of that. But I do remember that there was a laundromat that said “white only”. And I always thought that was weird. To me it was, I'm sure this was my parents, I never thought of it as – I just thought it was weird and stupid. And it never occurred to me that it was normal. It may have been the way it always was but it always just seemed very bizarre. And, um, I don't know why. \_\_\_\_\_

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*Francesca Davis:* So obviously, your parents being so active in these things had a big influence on you. Did they also push you to be involved in –?

*Mr. Charles Penix:* I was a pleaser. I think it's pretty normal. It's real easy for me to – I wanted, for whatever reason—maybe it's 'cause I was the third child, I don't know—but it was always very important to me to please my parents. So I quite naturally did the things that they did and was interested in the things that they were. And anyway –

**VIDEO CUT (.flv)**  
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*Rebecca Williams:* And so in under graduate and going to law school.

*Mr. Charles Penix:* All of that. Both of them were attorneys. Of course, that's what I wanted to do. And I used to love that stuff—that's what's just amazing to me—the politics and all that. And now it all kind of disgusts me. But maybe it's because—maybe this is a naive view—

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that I think politics has really gone down, down, down. And I just feel totally disgusted by politics now, in America. And I, although I always vote for the democrats, I'm disgusted by the democrats. They don't stand for anything. They just mealy mouth. They're not an opposition party of the republicans. And just the whole thing disgusts me. And I'm getting off on a tangent. But I just. But anyway. It just disgusts me.

[Crosstalk]

*Francesca Davis:* Okay. So you mentioned earlier when we were asking about your role models, and Dr. King was one of your role models. Can you tell us how you felt, what you went through after Dr. King was assassinated?

*Mr. Charles Penix:* I was afraid. I remember thinking that, because there were riots all over the country. And I remember thinking this is

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dangerous. This is gonna cause something really terrible to happen. That it got to the boiling point or whatever. And particularly because his nonviolent approach to dealing with things that if you couldn't do it that way, what did that mean. So I just remember being afraid that. Not only afraid but just his message was such a message of hope and it was like it was the end of hope or something. It's very depressing.

*Francesca Davis:* As a result of your being exposed to your parents' involvement and then your involvement

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after that point, do you think that these experiences and your being a part of these experiences changed you or made an impact? Or did you see an impact after being involved in these types of organizations?

*Mr. Charles Penix:* Sure. I think that the biggest impact that the way I was raised had on me is I've never been afraid of people. I've never been afraid of people who are different than I am. I've also been attracted, even, to people who are different. And that was a lot of the way I was raised I'm sure.

My parents always had these exotic friends from different places in the world. And dressed differently and talked differently. And so I've always also sort of been open to different ideas and not threatened by people who think things that are different than I do.

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And I think that's with me forever. It was just engrained in me. And I can't take any credit.

This is another thing I think's very interesting is it's one thing to be a progressive, open-minded person if you came to that on our own. But I feel like I didn't, I can't, I was raised that way so I don't have any claim to, "Oh, look what I did. I think properly." Or something. It just was very normal for me because that's the way I was raised. So I have a lot more respect for people who come from really not open backgrounds maybe or that are raised by parents who are very racist or whatever and come to the right conclusion about what's right and wrong. I don't have any claim to anything. I had parents who raised me right.

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So it was real easy to think what I think is the right thing. Maybe what I think's not right. But in my mind it is. But I didn't come to it on my own. It was just given to me. It was a gift.

*Francesca Davis:* In thinking about your parents' influence on you and earlier you talked about Dr. King's vision of hope or equality. Do you think how it was then and looking how things are now, do you think a lot of the situations have changed or have we evolved?

VIDEO CUT (.flv)  
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What are your feelings about where we are today?

*Mr. Charles Penix:* Oh, you don't want to hear this.

[Crosstalk]

*Mr. Charles Penix:* Oh, no. Where we are today I think is that we are so caught up in the unimportant things of life that we think are important

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like how big our house is and how many cars we have and whether we have a new car and whether we're in the right kind of clothes and whether we belong to the right club and all that crap that we don't understand the value of the most important things. 'Cause we're so busy wasting our time on all of this crap that's not important. That's what I think. And it sounds very depressing but I really do believe that. That we are so caught up in the crap that we're not paying very much attention to the fundamentals: just treating people right.

But I do not have a very good outlook for what's going on now in this country. I have a very negative outlook about where this country's headed. I shouldn't – I'm sorry to say that to young people –

*Francesca Davis:* No. No. Speak more on it.

*Mr. Charles Penix:* ~~h~~But I just think we're not

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focusing on values at all. We talk about values but they're not values. They're divisive issues that having nothing to do with values. They have more to do with separating and dividing people. And we get caught up on whether gays marry or on stem cell research or something and it just floors me that we can get hung up on these things that are not really. Very important ~~singular~~ ~~really~~ little issues but they're used to divide people. And we can't come to grips with the commonality that we all better get a grip on.

*Francesca Davis:* Okay. Just wrapping things up. I want to know is there anything that we haven't asked you that you wanna speak –

[Crosstalk]

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*Mr. Charles Penix:* No I don't think so. When I meet people like you, there is hope out there. There is hope. I'm sure there is.

*Francesca Davis:* Oh, thank you.

*Mr. Charles Penix:* I'm impatient. I'm tired of the blabber about—when you're my age and we've talked for 50-whatever years, as long as I've been alive, about making healthcare available to people, and educating our children, and all of those basic, taking care of old people and it's just lip service. We just talk about it.

And we don't even do a very good job as individuals. And this is where we're all at fault, I guess, is that we—talking about elderly or whatever—well you need to have your parents live with you. Or this thought that somebody's gonna do it for you is not right.

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And we've got to all, just as individuals, take on these problems and just deal with them day-to-day, one-on-one. And if there is any hope, I think that is happening. I think there are good people out there that do good things and hopefully it's contagious.

'Cause I think people are I think—this is some of my religious views, I guess—when people are doing things for other people, you're happier. And so it is kind of contagious. If you can just get people doing it and thinking about it. It keeps it going. But I think we're so caught up in all the crap that we don't take the time to do the important things. Just calling up an old woman that lives down the street that's lonely. We're too busy with all of the garbage. Anyway.

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*Francesca Davis:* I want to thank you again so much for everything. ~~For~~ ~~Y~~you're an amazing story. That was great. Thank you for giving us that information.

*Mr. Charles Penix:* Sure. Sure.

*Francesca Davis:* But that's all we have.

*(Laughter)*

*Francesca Davis:* \_\_\_\_\_.

*Mr. Charles Penix:* That wasn't too hard.

*Francesca Davis:* No; that was great. You have a wonderful story.

*Mr. Charles Penix:* Oh, well thank you. Thank you.

*Francesca Davis:* Thank you so much.

*Mr. Charles Penix:* Thank you for all for coming. And you are giving me a lot of hope. You really do.

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