

Interview of Mrs. Johnnie Turner. Interviewed by Crystal Windless of the Crossroads to Freedom Project, Rhodes College.

Johnnie Turner was and continues to be a strong advocate for Civil Rights and education. Presently, she serves as the Executive Director of the Memphis Branch NAACP. Mrs. Turner's extensive activity includes her participation in the Memphis sit-ins during the Civil Rights Movement. Due to her involvement in the sit-ins, she was discriminated against by the Memphis City Schools system and told that she would never become a teacher. However, Mrs. Turner rose to become not only a dedicated teacher in Memphis, but also head of staff development for the school system.

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.

Interviewer: Getting off to a start, could you state for us your name and occupation?

Mrs. Turner: Ok my name is Johnnie R. (standing for my maiden name Rodgers) Turner. My maiden name is Johnnie Mae Rodgers but I never liked Mae. It always sounds country. So I tell my husband that, "I married you to get rid of Mae." (*Laughter*) So I became Johnnie R. Turner. But I can tell when it's somebody from my past or my family, Johnnie Mae! We just had a family reunion but that's not the interview. Let's go on. (*Laughter*)

Interviewer: Okay. And your occupation?

Mrs. Turner: I'm the Executive Director of the Memphis Branch NAACP.

Interviewer: And where exactly were you born?

Mrs. Turner: I was born in Hughes, Arkansas.

00:02:01(:50)

Interviewer: And where were you raised? Were you raised there?

Mrs. Turner: Well I was brought to Memphis at age four. My father left Hughes; there were three of us. We left by night. That's another interesting story too because he was a sharecropper and he was a very hard worker but he was not valued because at the end of every year when he would go to get his money, he would always be told you owe us something. So he just got tired of it and one night, late at night, I will never, you know sometimes your childhood is blurred, but I can remember so clearly. I was so sleepy because we left late at night. And we had to crawl through these barbed wire fences

and my mother carried a scar to her grave where as she went through. She had a baby her in arm and a little one by the hand and my dad had me.

00:03:05 (1:55)

Mrs. Turner: That scar was left on her thigh and she was bleeding and someone was parked on the road and we got in the car and we never looked back.

Interviewer: And where were you headed?

Mrs. Turner: Memphis. Came to Memphis. So when people ask me where I was born, where was I born, I say I was born in Hughes, Arkansas but I've lived all my life in Memphis because I came at age four because sometimes the people in the north and other parts of the country say oh you weren't born in Memphis. You were born in West Memphis. You are a country girl so I take care of that to begin with. Born in Arkansas. Came to Memphis when I was four. Been here ever since.

Interviewer: And back to your past, what were the names of both your parents?

Mrs. Turner: My mother's name was Charlie Mae Watson Rodgers and my father was Clayton Rodgers.

Interviewer: And you said you had three siblings?

00:04:00 (2:50)

Mrs. Turner: We had three siblings when we got to Memphis. It was 12 when they got through. I mean – yeah. *(Laughter)* I'm the oldest of 12.

Interviewer: And with your family, your father and your mother, what was the home life like back then when you were growing up?

Mrs. Turner: Mmm, well when you've got well it wasn't 12 at one time but it was almost a baby a year. And I was the oldest. My mother when we were young, she was home and my father worked. But when she, as we got older, she was forced to have to go to work to help feed the mouths of the 12. So she would iron and clean house out in East Memphis. So she was a day worker. And my father was a laborer, which means any kind of job he could get, that's what he.

00:05:02 (3:51)

Mrs. Turner: Because my father had an eighth grade education and my mother had a sixth grade education because they were both forced to have to not go to school when they were younger because they had to help take care of smaller brothers and sisters. And it was just busy. I mean it was like – what was it like? We were poor but we did not know we were poor. I remember how excited we were on Christmas day wondering what Santa Claus had left us and he would always leave us an apple and an orange and some pecans and may be one outfit. And I don't remember toys. I just remember it was such an exciting day for us because there were so many of us as I said before my parents didn't have the kind of jobs, you know, where they could buy expensive things for us.

00:06:09 (4:58)

Mrs. Turner: But we didn't know we were poor. We always felt loved and taken care of. There was always food on the table. But it was busy, a lot of people – and with me being the oldest, and both parents being gone, I assumed the leadership role. I remember I must have been in the second grade and my job was to feed the kids every day at noon. Must have been during the summer because – yeah. And I couldn't tell time but I knew, I learned to tell time by the sun. And according to where the shade was on the porch, then I knew it was time to go feed the kids.

(00:05:48 Break)

Interviewer: Smart!

00:07:01 (05:51)

Mrs. Turner: I don't know. But people have said I've been smart all my life but I could always figure things out. And I've just always been in a leadership role. I don't – when my mother died. My mother died when I was 19. I say today, having 12 babies, that probably contributed to it. She had a heart attack at 34 because my mother married when she was 13. She married for a better life. My father was considerably older than she and he told her that he was going to make sure that she finished high school but she hadn't had sex education. So I came along too soon and then my brother came and then my other brother came and then a sister came. So that was the end of her high school and whatever else there was. But my mother always aspired for the better things and she wanted the best for us.

00:08:00 (6:50)

Mrs. Turner: And I was, she liked to write poetry. And I'm going to make a gift to my brothers and sisters of the poetry that she left that I have in my possession because I think that would be a priceless gift for each one of them. But getting back to what life was, it was just ordinary except for the leadership role I had. You know, I'm just, today there's so many standards and so much you can't do and we were just blessed in the sense that here a seven-year-old is taking care of all the little ones. And I would have to get the lunch out and I mean I just always had a lot of responsibility on me. And it was not a chore. It just was the thing to do. You know you are the oldest one. But I guess that in essence kind of describes what life was like and life for a typical child growing up with a lot of brothers and sisters.

Interviewer: Do you think that leadership role at a young age and your parents' level of education, you mentioned both of them had intense work ethics, do you think that prompted you today to be so busy and to be a leader?

00:09:15 (08:05)

Mrs. Turner: I really haven't thought about it that way. I guess in essence because they both worked all the time. My daddy worked so hard. I don't ever remember him just resting. He always worked. One thing I learned from him that I didn't want to be like was my daddy was afraid of white folk. And you can – I can understand now. I didn't understand then but if we were going down a sidewalk, he would get off.

00:10:00 (8:50)

Mrs. Turner: He didn't have to be told to get off the sidewalk. He'd get off. Well I didn't know any better but that was his means of surviving. My mother never really expressed anything until I got involved in the sit in movement and I was a student in LeMoyne and when she read about it, she told me that she didn't want me to participate because she was afraid for my life and she knew what that would do to my future because I was the first in my generation to have the opportunity to go to college.

And so I represented the hopes and dreams of not only my mother, my father but all of my ancestors and my sisters and brothers who looked up to me and she just said, you see that was in 1960 and the Little Rock Four was in 1954 [sic].

00:11:00 (9:50)

Mrs. Turner: And we had seen all the hatred that one group of people could have for another simply based on the color of their skin. So she could see some of the things that might happen to me as a result of my involvement. I couldn't wait to get in that sit in. I said yes ma'am. I couldn't wait. I don't know anything I'd been more ready for than to participate in the sit in movement because I hated everything about segregation. I hated it. They were talking about the response – we moved a lot. And we moved to Orange Mound and I was in the second grade. Again I'd have to ride the bus from Orange Mound because I don't know. The easiest thing to do would have been to transfer to another school but I asked my mom if I could stay at the school where I was. So I'd get on the bus, my little brother and we'd ride the bus downtown and transfer and catch the bus.

00:12:06 (10:56)

Mrs. Turner: I was at Hyde Park School at that time. And I remember this little white girl got on the bus and she said, momma look at all the niggers in the back. That stuck with me a long time. It just hurt so badly that someone would get on the bus and publicly call you a derogatory name and as young as I was, that made an impression on me. And I hated riding the buses.

(11:27) Break

The black folk would have to ride in the back and the whites were in the front. I'd always sit in the middle. And just hope I wouldn't have to move back and I remember one day, we got at Bellevue and Lamar and at that time Central High was all white, Bruce Elementary was all white.

00:13:03 (11:53)

Mrs. Turner: What else is there? Bellevue Junior High was all white. So when you got to Bellevue and Lamar, I'd get on the bus at Thomas and Chelsea, which was an all black neighborhood. We'd have the whole bus to ourselves. So if you didn't have a long way to go you could sit almost everywhere because you knew you wouldn't have to get up because no whites were in that neighborhood. But if you rode as far as Bellevue and Lamar, I'd get butterflies in my stomach every time I got there because I would say please, I hope I don't have to move today.

And I got on the bus, and I said I'm not going to move today. I'm just not going to move. So I looked at the window and pretended I didn't see the students standing over me. So my girlfriend who had been sitting next to me came and touched me on the shoulder and she said Johnnie, if you don't get up and move you know what's going to happen to you. This bus driver is going to come back here and he's gonna set you out.

00:14:00 (12:50)

Mrs. Turner:

Not set me out. He's going to curse me out. She said then he's going to call the police and at that time all the police were white, all the fireman were white, all the postal workers were white. And she said you don't know what's going to happen to you between getting off this bus at Lamar and Bellevue and if you make it to juvenile court. I will never forget the humiliation I felt. I just felt humiliated because here's a group of kids about my age making me get up and move to the back simply because my skin color was different than theirs. I knew I was smarter than any of those. And the anger I felt. I was humiliated. I was angered. And then I was just disappointed in myself. Why didn't you sit there? But I knew why I didn't sit there. I couldn't sit there because it didn't enter my mind consciously but if you are the oldest one in the family and you in jail, not much you can do.

00:15:03 (13:53)

Mrs. Turner:

Plus, I didn't want my sisters and brothers because, they looked up to me and I was an honor student in high school. Well I've always been kind of smart I guess. I could always- If we didn't move a lot, and I may have missed a lot of my homework/school work but when I got back to school. I loved school so much. I would just – I'd study so hard. And the teachers were – because they knew my potential I guess and I have to thank the caliber of teachers who were in the schools at that time because they could bring the best in you out.

But I knew all of that subconsciously was a factor but that incident and that little girl calling me/us niggers on that bus kind of went to the back of my mind and it always disturbed me.

00:16:01 (14:51)

Mrs. Turner:

You see because every time you moved to the back of that bus, it was a conscious reminder that somebody thought they were better than you. We could only go to the zoo I think it was on Thursday.

You could only go to the fairgrounds on Monday night. Well when you were there, you were surrounded by other blacks so the absence of white was not unusual to us. You didn't think about that they had six days they could come. And you could only come one. You was just glad to be there that one day. But when you got on the bus, it was a daily reminder.

Interviewer: Right in front of you.

Mrs. Turner: Right in front of you. So I was not in that first 40 that integrated the library but I was in line the next day. I was so happy. When I was leaving my momma gave me this little lecture about not being involved. Then another thing they did during that time was they would publish the names of your parents and where they worked in the newspaper as a form of intimidation.

00:17:05 (15:55)

Mrs. Turner: And then the parents would lose their jobs. And I watched the agony on the faces of my fellow students, fellow colleagues or students who wanted to participate in that movement but couldn't because their parents were principals or teachers. So they served as lookouts and served as strategists and they'd come to the meeting but they knew they could not participate in the movement because of what it would do to their families. We didn't care about what it was going to do to us personally. Thinking about a future job? I didn't really care. You know that's the benefit or advantage of being young. And particularly if you've got your head on right, all I said was it was wrong and if this was an opportunity to make it right, so be it.

00:17:59 (16:48) **BREAK**

Interviewer: With so many disturbing instances like you mentioned on buses and such, did you have any role models back then when you were younger and growing up?

Mrs. Turner: Not really. Not at that time. There really was – see it was totally segregated and to my knowledge at that time, I was not aware of any other groups that had rebelled against it. I was aware of the Little Rock Nine. That was prominent on everybody's mind. Rosa Parks, some how or another she had to have been and Dr. King, in a sense had to have been role models because we were so proud of their efforts to stand up and fight against segregation. I was not as familiar with the NAACP at that time. I was a member of the

college chapter and I really became quite active after I became involved in the sit in movement and that's another story.

00:19:00 (17:50)

Mrs. Turner:

Maxine Smith and Jesse Turner Sr. – to this day, I was participating in a program on Saturday and they asked who my role model was. And if I had to name a female it would be Maxine Smith. That lady she told white folk what she thought. She was fearless and everything back then, men made all the decisions. No – shoot, Maxine would be right in the middle of those men, telling them what to do. Calling the shots and I was just so proud of her. And just so, oh, I guess amazed that this little old lady with this loud voice. She was so smart too. She's very articulate. Very intelligent. So, I mean she could set folk out and they didn't even know they were being set out.

00:20:00 (18:50)

Mrs. Turner:

And then Mr. Jesse Turner. He was the president and chairman of the board of the NAACP for ten years. And he was the one that nominated me to the board of directors. I was, to my knowledge, I was the youngest person ever appointed to the adult board of the NAACP and that was an honor that I relish to this day because I remained active in the NAACP even until I was appointed-selected to succeed Mrs. Smith, which never entered my mind. I never – I was working for Memphis City Schools. Who's going to leave a secure job to go work for a job that you don't know is going to be there tomorrow. But I talked to my husband and he said you already give the NAACP almost as much of your life as you do here.

00:21:05 (19:55)

Mrs. Turner:

And so I made the decision, well I didn't even apply initially. It just never crossed my mind and then someone called and asked me and I said you must be crazy. Anybody that follows Maxine Smith has to be crazy and I am not that crazy. I am not interested. Then about two or three weeks later, someone called and said well you don't have anything to lose. You already have a position with the school system. So you know you might one day venture into a second career and this could be practice and go and do the interview process, blah, blah. So I think there were 29 people that applied.

And then they narrowed it down to 15. Then they narrowed it down I think to ten and I know eventually it ended up 5. I may be incorrect in the sequence.

00:22:00 (20:50)

Mrs. Turner: And then I was selected. And getting back to the question about the role model, I guess I was getting ready for a position that I didn't even know about and that is with Ms. Smith being my role model and watching her and learning from her and yet bringing my own distinct personality and style to the position. But yeah Ms. Smith was my role model.

(21:22) BREAK

Interviewer: And Ms. Smith being your role model, is that how you initially became affiliated with the NAACP or became a member or was that during the sit in and things while you were at Lemoyne.

Mrs. Turner: That was while I was at Lemoyne. We'll we all knew about her because the NAACP provided the lawyers to get us out of jail. And then you'd go to the mass meetings and the rallies and Ms. Smith and Mr. Turner were always on program.

00:23:03 (21:53)

Mrs. Turner: So I admired them from afar because of not only of their courage that they had in providing the leadership for the movement but also because we knew when we went to jail we'd get out the next day. No, we got out the same day most times except one time they kept me overnight because they said I was a habitual criminal. And they let everybody go except me. I spent the night in the jail and the jail matron said, she pulled me aside and said now why did you do this? You getting paid? All these kinds of questions you know. And I told her I'm doing it because I believe in it. I'm doing it because I think it's unfair that because my skin is one color that you have privileges that I don't have.

00:24:00 (22:50)

Mrs. Turner: I said nobody can pay me for this. This is a belief system. And I'm just proud to be a part of it. But yes it was in those settings that I saw Mrs. Smith and that I saw Mr. Turner and I said to myself, I want to be brave like them. I want to be courageous like them. I want to be able to stand up for what I think is right just like them. And then when Mr. Turner nominated me to serve on the board of the NAACP, that was one of the best things that could have happened because I went to the National Convention and

people like Thurgood Marshall and Constance Baker Motley and people that you just read about, I saw those people in operation. I saw them give their reports. I saw the contributions they made to making this world a better place. And so that's a part of my history that I would not have had had I not been affiliated with the NAACP.

00:25:01 (23:51)

Mrs. Turner: It made me a much better person. It made me so proud, even more proud of who I am, then I was at that time because I saw outstanding African Americans, not only in the legal field but also in education and health who would come to these conventions and give these speeches. I'm one of these kind of persons when I go to a convention, I go to the workshops. I go to hear the speeches because you are never too old to learn something. And I always take something away from it. So, I got involved in the NAACP as a result of being in the sit in movement but I continued in it and in fact, Ms. Smith says to this day that I was the only one of that era who remained with the NAACP and continues today. Now we have others now.

00:26:00 (24:50)

Mrs. Turner: And it's even rewarding now that we have the children of some of those who sat in with me who are now working in the NAACP.

Interviewer: With so many people, like Ms. Smith, Ms. Turner.

Mrs. Turner: Mr. Turner.

Interviewer: Mr. Turner, and with Benjamin Hooks being executive director of the NAACP, with all those people doing a lot of work, did you notice generally people around you everyday seeming as though they were coming together to push for civil rights?

Mrs. Turner: Okay, let me see if I am interpreting your question correctly. Are you saying did they also influence other people in a sense?

Interviewer: Well, yes. As in the community not just the leaders of the NAACP doing –

Mrs. Turner: Oh, by all means. It was something to have a mass meeting back then because the church would be packed. You have a mass meeting today, that's because we haven't done a very good job of training you all.

00:27:03 (25:53)

Mrs. Turner:

You don't understand the struggle. You don't understand the reason you are at Rhodes College is because somebody protested back in the sixties. Rhodes College didn't let you in because you're brilliant. They let you in because you're brilliant and somebody made them, years ago. Because if that had been the case, I could have gone to Rhodes College but I couldn't even consider. It was Southwestern at that time. But I mean segregation was a way of life. Everything was segregated. If you wanted to go get something to eat, you'd have to go to the back door and I can remember traveling at LeMoyne, I was on the debate team. I got on the debate team because I knew they traveled. I decided now they didn't have a band. I said well let me see around here what can I – I didn't have any money. So, I said how can I see this part of the world and I don't have any money.

00:28:00 (26:50)

Mrs. Turner:

I joined the debate team and that was a great experience for me because it allowed me to develop maybe speaking talents that I didn't even know that I had.

(27:00) BREAK

But getting back to the question, in terms of the influence. See Maxine Smith and I'm glad you mentioned Ben Hooks because he's my pastor now and often he refers to the time he came and got me out of jail or he refers to the time that I sat in at a church. We sat in at a church once. In fact, my case, I sat in at Overton Park Shell. It was sponsored by the Assembly of God. It was a Youth for Christ Rally. It was advertised in the paper. Either the Appeal or the Press Scimitar, which is no longer being published and it invited all youth to come to this Youth for Christ Rally. Open to the public.

00:29:00 (27:50)

Mrs. Turner:

So we all put on our Sunday best. Went to the rally. Now I was at the end of it. Allegedly the young man who was leading the group was told that we would have to sit in the back supposedly because we were late. I don't know anything about being late. I just know that we weren't going to sit in the back of that church service. So we all very politely, very quietly sat among the parishioners and the other young people. And the police were called and they

passed the collection. I put a whole dollar in that collection. Do you know those rascals arrested me? And they had my dollar. If they didn't want me they shouldn't have taken my money. But more seriously, that was one of the most difficult cases that the city had or that the NAACP had.

00:30:03 (28:53)

Mrs. Turner:

Because now you're not only talking about my rights as an individual to be treated equally, am I infringing upon the religious rights of someone else? And that became an issue and the case went to the Supreme Court twice and both times the Supreme Court refused to hear it. So, during my early years after I graduated from LeMoyne, I lived a life of when are they going to come and pick me up and I have gone before the parole board. And of course you go through all this kind of drilling. Why you did it and all that kind of stuff.

And then the late Governor Frank Clement granted the other members of that case and myself executive clemency and so that's how that was that we didn't have to go to jail.

00:31:06 (29:56)

Mrs. Turner:

Because all we did was go to a Youth for Christ Rally. We weren't boisterous, but whatever. But that's just the times and that's just an example. Even in the church, well they tell me now that the church is the most segregated institution there is in the world though I am seeing in many instances when I see TV of integrated audiences where you have black ministers and you have white members of the church, whatever. But then everything was segregated. I started talking about the debate team and we'd go from here to Atlanta and you couldn't use the restrooms. You had to go on the side of the road unless you knew somebody because the restrooms were for the white patrons only. Or you had to go around to the back and that kind of thing. Just – and it was that and I'm sure I speak for others who were involved in the movement, it served as a motivation and we said, "No more."

00:32:04 (30:54)

Mrs. Turner:

It doesn't matter what the consequences are going to be. And the consequences for me were great. And they were for a lot of people because the only way that people got jobs in Memphis – see LeMoyne at that time only trained you to be a teacher because that's all you could be. You couldn't be a policeman. You

couldn't be a fireman. You couldn't be anything but a teacher or a minister. That's all you could be back then. So LeMoyne produced outstanding teachers. And the tradition had been on the night of graduation that all of the honor graduates automatically got a teaching certificate. That tradition broke the year I graduated. Because we only had two honor graduates. That was my best friend and myself. Nobody gave us a teaching - now she got a job because she was not involved in the sit in movement. But I didn't get a job. When I finally got a job, when I was interviewed for the job, I was told I'd never be hired by Memphis City Schools because I was a jailbird and I would be a poor role model for the students.

00:33:10 (32:00)

Mrs. Turner:

When I was eventually hired, I rose from the ranks. I was an elementary teacher. Then I became an achievement emphasis teacher and that's a teacher who teaches those who are two years or more behind. Then I became a CLUE teacher. Went from that to teaching the gifted and then I became supervisor for the staff development. I became the director of staff development and then I became the co-director for an assessment center program for assistant principals who aspire to be principals. And it was a joint effort with the University of Memphis. So I had come from the point where they said you'd never be hired by the system to the point where according to my educational level - I had gone to the highest point that one could go in the Memphis City Schools.

00:34:07 (32:57)

Mrs. Turner:

And I left that to come to the NAACP.

(32:59) BREAK

Interviewer:

And how do you feel about that? I think so many people are in awe when reading your story about not being able to be hired and then going to the head of staff of Memphis City Schools, going from point zero to going to the pinnacle?

Mrs. Turner:

Well it just proved that the flaw in the system that would punish me because I did what I thought was right; I tried to correct a wrong against humanity. I wasn't robbing anybody. I didn't steal anything. I just knew that it was not right, that God made all of us equal and therefore I should have equal access to all the rights and privileges as everybody else. And I felt very strongly about that

and the two incidents that I mentioned to you earlier served as catalysts forever.

00:35:03 (33:53)

Mrs. Turner: To remind me that I never wanted my children to live in a world where they had to ride on the back of the bus. I never wanted my children to be subjected to anything where they would be thought or felt or made to believe that they were inferior to another group of people and I knew I was smarter than most of the folk I came in touch with who were white. I used to baby-sit out there and I spent my time fighting off the husbands you know because they figure and we not having slavery now but you in this house, babysitting my kids. And I said uh uh and I knew, and in fact, when I worked in LeMoyné prior – well even after the sit in movement – they didn't know I had been in the sit in movements, but they didn't know I was in college because that would have created another barrier. They just thought I was somebody. My mother worked day work and sometimes she'd get some requests for babysitters and I would go.

00:36:01 (34:51)

Mrs. Turner: But they didn't know I was in college. And I didn't tell them because I knew what would happen in those instances.

Interviewer: With the younger generation today, you mentioned earlier that we're not always taught well about the real emphasis of the civil rights era and such. When you were moving up as a teacher, do you feel like you took time to really put that message out to the children, what was going on?

Mrs. Turner: Every school I taught at. At each school where I taught, we had a black history program. I remember my first school, they told me this principal will never. First they told me she wouldn't allow me to wear an afro. When I had come there and I was unaware and it was a school of excellence. The principal is deceased at this point but she was very – how do you put it? She controlled that school. So I'm all excited. Well you see, the one thing that made me a better teacher than the average person was the fact that I had been denied.

00:37:05 (35:55)

Mrs. Turner: And I had worked in the business community. So I brought a set of skills and understanding, and public relations skills to the

teaching profession that the average person did not have. Plus I brought the desire because I knew I wanted to teach. So I had been denied that opportunity and now I had been given that opportunity. It had been suppressed and so hey, I was in heaven. And my kids, my students were my jewels and so I really – I don't know. I'm not bragging or anything but I know I brought an enthusiasm to the job that I would not have had I not been excluded.

It's kind of like somebody telling you you can't do something and you get a chance to do it, don't you just feel great? And you say I'll show them. They thought I couldn't do this. And it wasn't that I had to show anybody anything because anything I'm involved in, I put my whole heart and soul into it.

00:38:06 (36:56)

Mrs. Turner:

And I wanted to be the best and I wanted my kids to be the best so I loved working with the kids who were two or three years behind because there was no satisfaction like having advanced them. And I love the CLUE program. I love – I tell you. They called me and asked me and I was the only black in that program for a number of years and I say that because when I was called and asked to serve on, I said no way, I'm not going to go anywhere and teach folk that I know are smarter than I am. She said aw, you can do it. She said, you're such a great achievement emphasis teacher. That's what you called the program. Said you're the person we want for CLUE. And I agonized and agonized. So finally I talked myself into trying it. It's the best decision I ever made because there's no way you are going to develop the talents of a bright group of students like CLUE students without becoming smarter yourself.

00:39:05 (37:55)

Mrs. Turner:

Right? And I'd have -we didn't have any curriculum at that time. We developed our own. It was just wonderful getting to be a writer, a teacher, a researcher, trying to see what great knowledge can I lead my students to tomorrow. I didn't have to. They were just brilliant. The first class I had CLUE, let me tell you. That was the year they tried the new – it was called the Metropolitan Test at the time. Every one of those black kids scored off of the test. They scored the highest and the computer said it was just 12+. And these kids were in the fifth grade, scoring 12+. I said I must have died and gone to heaven.

00:40:00 (38:50)

Mrs. Turner: Because it was such a joy working with them. They were creative. They were flexible. So those skills that I had the privilege to develop, I employ them today. It helped me to be a better teacher and be a better person and then when I got into management, I was able to carry those skills there too and hopefully be a better manager or supervisor or whatever the position I had at that time.

(39:20) BREAK

Interviewer: You got me so excited. I wish you were my CLUE teacher back when I was in elementary and middle school. You mentioned churches earlier. Going back, many times Memphis is called the City of Churches or whatnot. How involved or encouraging do you think black churches were back then with telling their members about becoming active?

Mrs. Turner: Well let me answer it this way.

00:41:00 (39:50)

Mrs. Turner: The church has always been a very important part of African American life because of the struggles and the trials and tribulations that we have had to endure. It was only because we had a belief and a faith in a God, some power far greater than we were that we were able to survive and we kind of had the attitude if this bad thing is happening to me, it's happening to make me a better person for some other cause. And so for that reason, religion has always been important in the black community.

Now how important was the church? The church often, I don't do it quite as much now, but I used to be. During black history month, many times, I'm asked to talk about my involvement in the sit in movement. The hardest thing about that is squeezing a lifetime into 30 minutes.

00:42:02 (40:52)

Mrs. Turner: Deciding what aspect you are going to tell and relating to the students. But the NAACP lawyers and the pastors were always there. They supported us solidly because they knew it was not right. They never told us – now the parents wanted us – like my mother. Now my father never knew I was involved in the sit in movement until he heard me speak at a church during black history month because I told you my father was so scared of white folk, he would have had a heart attack. He thought I was spending nights with friends. He never knew until then. And then – let me tell you

two things. One about my mama. I think I alluded to you asking me what influence does she have on me. She cautioned me about getting involved in the movement and rightfully so just like your mama cautions you about, your parents caution you about something.

00:43:06 (41:56)

Mrs. Turner: Because like your heels – your mama’s right. You’re going to pay for it but we all have to learn on our own. But when the buses were integrated. It was front line, front page. The Memphis City Schools courts demand – I’m sorry, wake up Johnnie! The courts demand that the bus stations – buses must be integrated. Something along those lines. So my mom said, and she was working in east Memphis then. She said, “Today, I’m going the ride in the front of the bus.” Now, to this day, I do not know whether she did it. She said I’m going to cut out this clipping and ride on the front of the bus. Do you know what that did to me?

00:44:01 (42:51)

Mrs. Turner: Even today that is one of my most precious memories of her because she never said a word. After I was arrested, she had told me not to but she never said a word and I knew she was glad that I had done it. And I knew that she was glad that the consequences had not been as severe as she had thought they might be. But that is my most precious moment, one of my most – of my mom.

Interviewer: You two got to share something. You two got to share something.

Mrs. Turner: Yes. And I never asked her and she never said, so I don’t really know if she did or not. But it didn’t really matter to me. The fact was that she was so proud that it had been done that she said in that statement I’d like to be a part too. You see, the worst thing about – I was involved in the sit in movement but after doors open, it’s just like my aunt had a dog.

00:45:00 (43:50)

Mrs. Turner: And the dog used to-and we used to visit her and she lived in Woodson, Arkansas and it amazed about that dog. The minute you’d drive up in the yard, the dog would run under the house. So I said Aunt Tina why does that dog always run under the house when we come. She said because when the dog was a puppy the kids used to throw rocks at the momma all the time and the dog saw the momma running from the rocks and he’d run. So nobody

throws rocks anymore but the dog stills runs from the rocks when he sees people – invisible rocks. So even though we could sit on the bus where we wanted to, black folks still went to the back. I would always be the only one sitting up front.

(44:33) BREAK

And I lived, at that time, we had moved to Orange Mound and I was a student at LeMoyne. I got off – I was on scholarship, which meant I stayed in the library. That's why I love this place so. I would have loved this but I would always be the last person to leave because I believed.

00:46:02 (44:52)

Mrs. Turner:

I knew how I got to LeMoyne. I knew what it took to stay there. I didn't go to the rec hall because all my friends who went to the rec hall flunked. And I learned from that. I didn't go. But I'd get on this bus and I'd get on this Number 9, on the corner of Vance and Lauderdale, which is right across the street from where I work now. Can you imagine that's full circle? Not only is the bus stop across the street from where I now work but my first job was at where I now work. It was Mutual Federal Savings and Loan. I worked at Tri-State for six months and that was a temporary position and then they found me the job at Mutual Federal. It was the first black owned mutual savings company in this part of Tennessee. I think it's the first in the State of Tennessee. So every time I go to the conference room, if I'm conscious of it, I think about this is where I got started. Never thinking it would evolve to the point where it is today.

00:47:00 (45:50)

Mrs. Turner:

But I talk so much and I'm going to get through this before this hour is over. But I'd catch the bus at Number 9 (Normal) at Vance and Lauderdale and we lived in (it escapes me) – it's the community behind Orange Mound – Smoke – no that's not it. I'll think of it. Anyway, but at Boston, all the black folk would get off. Remember I'd tell you, I'd get on and sit right behind the driver and all the black folk would be all in the back. But I could understand because all their lives they had not been given the privilege. And these people were coming from menial jobs. They had families to take care of. I didn't have a family to take care of per say. I had parents to take care of me. But anyway I would go and sit behind [the bus driver] and when all the black folk would

get off, oh, honey! Those wouldn't be anything on there but white men.

00:48:00 (46:50)

Mrs. Turner:

And they would curse me out. They would spit on me. And on two occasions once by a drunk, my arm was almost pulled out of its socket because I refused to give up that seat. And that went on every night and I never told anybody because to me I said, the movement is over. This is my battle. This is a battle between the Lord and me. The bus driver was so cruel. I'm studious. I've got all these books. He'd wait until I got up and make the bus jerk hoping to make me fall down. And then he'd wait until I got off the bus and try to catch my coat in the door. He was lowdown. And then some nights, he would pass my stop because where I lived was the dividing line between the white and the black community.

00:49:00 (47:50)

Mrs. Turner:

Which meant here it is a young black girl having to walk through this white community to get back to her home, her street but I never said a word. I never complained because I knew I was a winner. I could see from the frustration mirrored on their faces that they knew they couldn't break me. That was my reward and every night, you think I was scared? I'd be so scared some nights, I'd be holding. I had my books in my hands, holding my knees so they wouldn't shake I would be so scared because I said what are these fools going to do to me tonight.

But night after night, I endured it. And thank God, I survived. And I got off on that telling you about how my mother made that statement and my father, when he heard me talk about what I had done. He knew about the movement. He didn't know I was in it.

00:50:00 (48:50)

Mrs. Turner:

And he told me how proud he was. And I guess that all made it worthwhile. But the original question was I think I was answering the question. I'm trying to do better with this interview. I get off on tangents and whatever.

Interviewer:

No and we love it, all the information you have to give us.

(49:08) BREAK

Mrs. Turner: But the churches were very important. Very important – church has always been important in my life. My minister was so supportive. My first job I was not sports minded. If you got to look after kids, you don't have much time for sports. You can't stay after school. I have always felt that if I had the training, I would have been a great runner because I've always been able to run, you know like races. But I never had the training and I never had the opportunity. I think I could have because of my not having that exposure and then it started in elementary school.

00:51:01 (49:51)

Mrs. Turner: I was always the last one picked for the baseball team, the last one picked for this when it came to sports. So it kind of made me feel kind of insecure about that but in a different environment, different day, different place it might have been different. But getting back to – the job I said all that to say. A good job back then was working over at the Park Commission. If you worked for the Park Commission in the summer time you had a good job. Well after I was – after my mother passed as I said my junior year and I needed a job desperately because I still had my dad, had my brothers and sisters. So I got this job with the Park Commission. I know my minister probably pulled some strings to get it because I didn't know one ball from another. And I was so scared.

00:52:00 (50:50)

Mrs. Turner: At first, I hated that job. I'm just – I was just not into sports. But that's when they found out I had been arrested because I had to go to trial and they fired me. And I called my minister and all he told me was don't let them see you cry. I didn't want to tell him it's too late. But I remember that. And every future circumstance that has come up, don't ever let them see you cry. You know you stand your ground. You were right. And this is just one of the unfortunate consequences that comes when one lives up to what one believes in. But he was there. He was very supportive of me. And all of our meetings were held in the churches. All of them. Mount Olive (CME) Church that serves as our branch meeting every fourth Sunday was a church where most of the mass meetings were held during the sit in movement. So the church has always been supportive because see the church has been the source of our leadership.

00:53:01 (51:51)

Mrs. Turner: You think about that. Men – Reverend Ben Hooks, Reverend Billy Kyles, Reverend because the church was the only thing that we had that was ours. We were – either we owned funeral homes or we – as a group of people we owned our own churches so we could be independent. So the leadership has come out of the churches and so yes, the church was very supportive and very important.

Interviewer: You just mentioned men. A lot of times when we think about the Civil Rights movement, that's what we think of – a lot of male figures. Do you think your experience was different by you being a woman?

Mrs. Turner: A woman always brings a different perspective. What I think – I don't think we thought about it like that but I think what we showed was – it's just like women now serving in the Armed Services we're saying that, we too believe in America. We too felt that segregation was wrong.

00:54:02 (52:52)

Mrs. Turner: We too felt that we had a place in helping to change history so that our children would not have to undergo what we did.

Interviewer: And in wrapping up, now looking back to that period of time, what do you see that you feel has changed? What is different now?

Mrs. Turner: Oh my goodness! Do we have time? I mean the fact that we are sitting here talking, the fact that Joe is here filming and in the room with us. He couldn't have done that. Just think what he would have missed. And think what we would have missed with him not being here. Things are better. Condoleeza Rice – I mean Secretary of State – a black woman? Doesn't matter what her political affiliations are, the fact remains that that lady is powerful. She's there because somebody back in the 60s decided I'm not going to be treated as a second-class citizen anymore.

00:55:04 (53:54) BREAK

Mrs. Turner: And I alluded to the fact that one of the things that I fault my generation for and I'm doing my best now to correct it, is to pass along our story. That's what I admire about the Jewish faith because they tell their children their history. The Holocaust, you can ask any Jewish child. They know about it. They know about the six million of their ancestors who were killed simply because their religion was different. They know about it. So therefore, if you or he who forgets his or her history is doomed to repeat it. I

owe an obligation to tell you. I owe an obligation to tell anybody who will listen to me what it was like. I do not hate white folk. Some of my best friends – that was the good thing about integration.

00:56:00 (54:50)

Mrs. Turner: They found out what a great person I was. They didn't know what they had been missing. And I found out that all of them were not evil. So it has made for and even today, the emphasis on diversity. This is just a continuation of the movement that was begun. When we finally began to recognize that each one of us has something to contribute. And so yes, the world – are there problems? Oh God yes. Is there a lot to be done? Oh yes, there is. But we have accomplished so much. And to enumerate everything, just look around. Everything – you go outside. You look at a bus, and the brothers and sisters can sit anywhere they want to. You got your money. You can go to any hotel that your money would allow you to and that's the next battle. The economic front because we have worked so hard to make those opportunities available but unless we provide you with the wherewithal for the economic advancement, the Peabody can be integrated but if I can't afford the \$400.00 a night room, it's still –

00:57:07 (55:57)

Mrs. Turner: Look the Grizzlies Games - I'm not being critical of the game but the best seats, few of us are down there because we don't make that kind of money. So that's the next front that must be and that is – that economic opportunities must be available to all people so that each one of us can ride proportionately in relation to our skills and our ability and the number of people that we represent.

Interviewer: Thank you so much.

Mrs. Turner: That's it.

Interviewer: For the entire interview. I know we took up time in your busy schedule.

Mrs. Turner: Well you say you get excited – I can talk all day, couldn't I?

(Laughter)

Interviewer: But thank you so much.

Mrs. Turner: Because this to me is a continuation of what I think we ought to do. I think it's wonderful that you all are doing that project. I hate so badly that no one had an opportunity to do Mr. Jesse H. Turner, Sr.

00:58:04 (56:54)

Mrs. Turner: He was an amazing man. And an outstanding man – look almost makes me come to tears when I think about how brilliant that man was. But that story is no – now his wife wrote a book about him but there was nothing like hearing Mr. Turner talk about the time when he served in the WWII and was a captain and came back and the German prisoners were treated better than he was. They allowed the German prisoners to sit in the front with the whites and the black soldiers had to sit in the back. I mean that's just one of the hundreds of stories that he had to tell. But I am delighted to have this opportunity to do this. I wish more groups would do it because in so doing, you are going to provide the knowledge so that the young people coming up today can appreciate the sacrifices made by those who went before.

00:59:04 (57:54)

Interviewer: And that's what we're hoping. We're hoping our archive will set as an example at other colleges and other institutions will try to replicate something similar to this.

Mrs. Turner: You know when you think about the trouble it took for us to get these schools integrated and then you send a child there and he or she goofs off, I mean that's a disservice, a disgrace to the memory of those who have gone on before. Each one of us has an obligation and remembering, in honor of those who have given so much to go and do the very best of what they can and no matter where it is and no matter what it is. So thank you for this project. Thank you for the opportunity to make this small contribution and I wish you well.

(58:42)

[End of Audio]