

SS157.mp3

Tom Beckner- This is tape 2 of the interview of John T. Fisher, April, excuse me June the 20th.

John T. Fisher- Now here is a note that I wrote myself based on a conversation when I talked to Ned Cook one day he asked me if I would talk to Jim Lawson about a 4 point program and I said yes that I would. Well alright, this is what I wrote it down on when Ned told me but at that point I wasn't dating it, most of my notes are dated in the corner but I was not dating them then. It was a day that Ned went out of town at noontime so I can go back and reconstruct that if necessary. But it was involvement by the downtown community which has resulted in this downtown merchant's association I think, and let's see a special commission for Lobe, let's see now what was that for? Some thing about a riot commission or something. Number 3 was revitalize existing community relations committee and number 4 was some sort of an education community awareness program. Now the note is made for myself when I went to see Jim Lawson with Dean Demmick and (muffled) Dean and I can pin down the date that he and I went there to do this. Was number 1 to discuss this four point plan, number 2 was to discuss a speaker at Mason Temple or Clayborne Temple or to speak to a group, some white speakers for this group, non union type white people but community leaders. Number 3 was (muffled) Holiday Inn with the plan, with the settlement announcement Lawson helped shape a statement for a new Memphis, a new Lobe approach. Invitation in Washington which we all set up in advance he would come out with support together, that was the way we discussed it with Lawson. It was I think the next Monday that I, I don't know when I saw the mayor but it probably wasn't on a Monday. But I saw the mayor after that and he agreed to talk to him on an informal basis and this was the week that the strike was settled, had to be the week the strike was settled. Maybe it was the day after the big march was that Tuesday or Wednesday after the big march here?

David Yellin- Yes well see the strike was settled, there was 65 days, the strike was settled 14 days after the assassination.

John T. Fisher- Well see this was that week after that.

David Yellin- So that it was not on a Saturday it was settled on about a Thursday.

John T. Fisher- Well this was probably the Monday of that week.

David Yellin- And it was the 18th of April.

John T. Fisher- I guess I saw Lawson at the end of that previous week on these points.

David Yellin- I see after the funeral.

John T. Fisher- Monday 10 days after the assassination.

David Yellin- 15th.

John T. Fisher- That we discussed this because I didn't know what the settlement would pop out at any time before this could get a fair thought see.

David Yellin- So all of this was after the assassination.

John T. Fisher- All of this was after the assassination but there was more time I didn't realize it was 14 days and that is because some how the assassination had quite a (muffled).

David Yellin- Yeah it was 14 days because it was a 65 day duration.

John T. Fisher- And I have the mayor's home phone here to call him at home that night, to get an answer as to whether or not he would meet with Jim Lawson.

David Yellin- Yeah.

John T. Fisher- I had forgotten some thing happened I was to call him at home but he was probably supposed to call me back the next day, so that is what he did.

David Yellin- In a sense I think Mr. Fisher we have, we do have your general activity of meetings that you had, do you recall any other meetings, no up until the assassination...

John T. Fisher- That takes me pretty well through my Jim Lawson, mayor Lobe and that is a very private relationship especially that with Henry Lobe.

David Yellin- Right but you only saw him once however...

John T. Fisher- I saw him twice, I saw him once that initiated my involvement and then I really determined not to go back.

David Yellin- Why?

John T. Fisher- Well because I didn't think that I could be helpful in those circumstances, the attitude with which I was working with were not really dubber in with those he had there. And it wasn't likely, he had no reason to get in my ear, I was there on a personal basis that he would let me in if I came because he grew up in the house next door to me. I have known him all my life and I have a great deal of responsibility when I ask to see him under these circumstance because when I ask to see him the chances are good that I am going to get to see him. So you just don't go trucking down there with just another do goody so and so to do. And after that first meeting I thought that there would be nothing gained by myself or him except to further confuse him for me to go back. So I determined to visit Ned Cook who I am also good friends who is also good friends with the mayor. Very close by the mayor. So we wanted to talk some together and I could talk to Ned. Really Ned was going to go back and see him on that 4 point plan but he was called out of town, he called m and asked me to go and talked it to him.

David Yellin- Well let's get to if we could before the assassination...

John T. Fisher- So that ends that private relationship and that is one to which I have never revealed except in conversation, I have had this similar conversation with those whom I am close, but ones that I didn't think, it has never been down on tape before it has always been a verbalized passage on where I could sort of be quiet about it and not have to face up to it. I still think it would serve no purpose except for a destructive one to reveal my personal relationship with the mayor because it can only be used to put him in a bad light.

David Yellin- but I think generally where this could be useful is several years hence when people are looking back as to how events...

John T. Fisher- Right so I am not opposed to it being made to record but that was generally how it was.

David Yellin- So therefore in that spirit when you left the mayor's office the first time in that March meeting which is a date yet to be determined but somewhere around the 15th and so on and the 4 of you felt that the mayor was very adamant on his stand.

John T. Fisher- Inflexible.

David Yellin- Inflexible. What did you feel you could do or what did you feel you wanted to do.

John T. Fisher- Well we didn't want anything specifically after that visit we decided not to try to take on any authoritative type approaches because we had not authority but we could under the circumstances maybe increase some people's awareness and that was all that we were doing.

David Yellin- So in a sense the educational approach.

John T. Fisher- Yeah just take people down to visit and visit ourselves and further talk about some things and maybe work through some existing agencies and what have you to get things done. So this was all we were doing on a very informal ad hoc basis with Bill Kephart's direction and help. Charlie Crump's direction and help, just some others. And this was the stage and the mood that I personally was in when I went home as everyone else does and I think somebody called.

David Yellin- This is April 4th now.

John T. Fisher- Someone telephoned me I think and said that...oh yes Dr. Nat Hughes at St. Mary's school called me at home and said do you know that Martin Luther King has been shot. I said no, incredible. He said well turn to the radio.

David Yellin- He is the headmaster just to be..

John T. Fisher- Headmaster of St. Mary's school and a little bit older than I am but a good personal friend as one of headmaster. So I went to the radio and turned it on and couldn't really find anything out right away but I got a Rochester New York station of all things and the first thing I heard was that he was dead from Rochester New York because the guy identified the station right after that. And I still, the Memphis stations I listened to didn't have him dead for another 10 minutes or so or 15 minutes. Now maybe these guys jumped the gun up there, that is what I kind of suspect. They got he was shot killed before it (muffled).

David Yellin- This was 6:30 or so?

John T. Fisher- Somewhere in this area. And we went from the radio to the dinner table and then into the television set by 7:00 and I tried to make some phone calls and my phone wouldn't work because all the circuits in the town were just used up you just picked up the phone and it was blank. But we had sold a car and of course the curfew was immediately called, I think it was already over, curfew was already over?

David Yellin- The mayor announced it.

John T. Fisher- That moment or was it on the previous night?

David Yellin- No it had been lifted.

John T. Fisher- That's right it had been lifted for 2 or 3 days, because Frank Holloman was headed out of his office after really a workload to take some stuff home and get a good nights sleep. Of course he had to work another 18 hours straight on top of what had been a long day. And so the curfew was put back on and we had sold an automobile to a dealer in Nashville so we had flown the man in here. Well the guy got here and some how or another somebody forgot and the place was locked up at 7:00 or 7:30. He is at the gas station next door where the guy is trying to lock up and get out and he can call into my house evidently which he did and I was trying to find a few other people and nobody else could come, they couldn't reach anybody else. So I told him I would come down, so about 8:00 I suppose I got into the car and came down here and I stayed here awhile on the telephone which these phones are not much residential use down here and (Muffled) I could use these phones easy and I tried to call Jim Lawson that night on the telephone and find him somewhere just to go and tell him I was sorry. I can say something to somebody kind of like that. I couldn't find him and I left word here and yonder, I got he Lorraine Motel phone and I talked to Jesse Jackson got him on the phone looking for Jim Lawson. He had just left there and he wasn't home. Anyway I never did run him down that night. David Yellin- Did Jesse Jackson know you or you had to identify?

John T. Fisher- No, he was going to tell him to call me but maybe he did maybe he didn't anyway he never called me back. So I went back home and my wife and I were talking about it....

David Yellin- Incidentally Jesse Jackson went to Chicago...

John T. Fisher- Yes I know.

David Yellin- Just to clear him.

John T. Fisher- And my wife and I were talking about and I got a phone call from a friend of mine, a boy named Nick Patton and we were talking and somebody got through something and we had been talking for a few days and we had found an increasing number of friends who either said they were willing to march in the march on Monday or they were sort of motivated too but the circumstances were so tight and all but if they were at least an increasing sympathy towards the march was becoming apparent in friends of ours who had never considered a march, we had never considered to march in the place.

David Yellin- This was that same night.

John T. Fisher- No prior to that, just a few days prior to that. And there was any....

David Yellin- Oh I see, they were going to march before Martin Luther King was killed.

John T. Fisher- Yes they were kind of getting sick of the whole situation, becoming more intolerable all the time. Well when this assassination takes place boy that is it, that is the straw that broke the camel's back except it is a steel girder not a straw. It didn't take much to break the camels back a straw would have done it but somebody dropped a brick on it. The alliance said they were going to do that and I said I just feel the same way I really understand why they want to march, this is intolerable to me. There is something about this marching business, there has got to be something else than to get snookered into that, I mean this union thing, (muffled) union ever came out. I am not anti-union but I am sure not going down there and taking a side on the sanitation workers and tell them that they should belong to this union because I don't know anything about the sanitation workers and I don't know anything about the union and I think it is presumptuous to go down there and say you ought to join this union. Those people should join that union, what the hell do I know? But I felt I needed to do some thing and it was at this conversation that the idea of going into an open city wide response which I think my wife is the one that mentioned something in that area, but we talked about it some on the telephone when Nick Patton had called, he wanted to do some work and he said let's meet tonight and start right now and organize a memorial statement.

David Yellin- And that is whe4re the idea came?

John T. Fisher- It sort of came up that night with 3 people and, myself and my wife and Nick Patton. (muffled) I don't know what to think we have to have more support before we do anything. So the next morning I got in the car and I guess I heard Jim Lawson on channel 5 and on the way down here I stopped by there and just missed him there and I came here and discovered....

David Yellin- We are back April 4th the evening?

John T. Fisher- The morning after, the morning after, so I came down here and made some phone calls but couldn't find anybody so I got in the car and drove home and talked to Nick on the phone again that night and then went to bed. We talked about something and then I went to bed. The next morning I got up and Jim Lawson was on the today show live from Memphis. So I was telling (muffled) to come down and thereabouts he came down I think he had been on tape or something because he was gone. So I came here and I made a few phone calls and I discovered he would probably be at the Lewis Funeral Home at 8:00 I think it was 8:00, no 9:00. Come pick up the body of Dr. King and go to the airport. So I did a few things here I went to the Lorraine Motel try to see if I could catch anybody and there was nobody there and I went out to Lewis Funeral Home and sat in the foyer right there, I went in the little chapel and sat in the foyer for about 30 minutes just to see if I could catch him for no real reason just to say something and I didn't catch him.

David Yellin- Well what was there while you were there?

John T. Fisher- Well people would come and go it was a slow steady crowd.

David Yellin- Was Dr. King's body?

John T. Fisher- Dr. King's body was lying there.

David Yellin- Lying in (muffled).

John T. Fisher- In the chapel and the chapel was never over a third full. Until the entourage of these people came about 9:00. Macille Walker and his family came in and we had met before and I introduced myself again and I met the child that had made application to St. Mary's school and this was before she was tested, she was tested I think that Saturday the 6th.

David Yellin- Kind of interesting how the drama...

John T. Fisher- I met her and I wished her luck she was very nervous about tomorrow I guess it was at this point on the test....because he knew that I was a trustee at St. Mary's school and I saw a lot of interesting people come in and quietly walk through.

David Yellin- Your wife was with you?

John T. Fisher- No I was by myself.

David Yellin- Oh excuse me.

John T. Fisher- And when the group all came reverend Lawson wasn't with him I don't know where he was but the reverend Kyle's and the reverend Hooks was there and some other people that I knew and I spoke with them and then they all left and went to the airport and I came back to work and....no I didn't I went straight from

there to St. Mary's cathedral because I knew that at 10:00 the Memphis minister's group was going to meet at the cathedral anyway to march to the mayor's office and because of serving on the cathedral chapter while some of us were going to be there just to be there. And with the assassination I felt more (muffled) to go and I was going anyway, so I went. And they put on a memorial service before the march down and the dean asked Jim Lawson to take part in that memorial service. It wasn't really a big memorial service it was just that was the facility and the association service. And after that why they took this vote on this resolution and then they...

David Yellin- Were you there when this vote was taken?

John T. Fisher- No I wasn't, of course I wasn't invited in that room that was in the parish hall and that was a....I went for the memorial service and when they there why I had a copy of the resolution that somebody had given me and I walked up, I really walked out to my car to go home and on second thought I walked up to the bishop's office, Bishop Vandross to speak with him. He said come in and he wasn't in a working mood either most of us weren't. We sat and talked and we watched the group go down to the church, I mean the mayor's office by the window and we were talking about what to do and all and I broke to him this idea of people. I said I would be willing to undertake this project with your blessing and personal involvement and support. You speak, you be one of the speakers for it. We knocked this back and forth, it has a lot of disadvantages to it one of which it is impossible to get together here again on a very private basis all this is. He was saying how we couldn't do it, I think his thing was that Ringling Brothers wouldn't bring a circus to town to fill up a deal like that for two weeks notice and all and my comment was that the Ringling Brothers didn't have an act as good as we did. And they would love to have an act this good, with this much emotion and dramatization.

David Yellin- For the record you were just making, carrying through the analogy?

John T. Fisher- Yes.

David Yellin- No disrespect,

John T. Fisher- Yeah. So we discussed it in some length in fact the other two bishops came in and we further discussed it, discussed other things, what could the church do, contact churches across the state the church should do something, an open response. This goes on to 12:00 and anyway they came back and told us about the march and what had happened and all. And I left.

David Yellin- Now did that, you heard a report of what happened and that means the confrontation of Rabbi Wax?

John T. Fisher- Except not in those terms because the people that were there they didn't get it in quite the terms that the community picked that meeting up. It was on television. The participants didn't take that, I know from what he said my first impression about what the dean had told me and the dean had not formed that strong impression that the white community formed. Because he was there and

involved in it and the mayor didn't get mad and I didn't see the television I have been meaning to see it because I didn't see it. But the television of Rabbi Wax is what made that meeting such a difficult one because it set a tone clearly for the white community. Which I don't think was certainly not intended and really wasn't thought to be that by the dean who was present.

David Yellin- Was in the other room?

John T. Fisher- No he was right in front. But it just was, it had been a tough deal all along and this wasn't any tougher than the rest of it. Well most of the public had been pretty well protected from that even through the press. You didn't get the real guts of that thing and so when they got one right there it was pretty tough I guess. And so this is anyway, his impression was not of that of the public at large about this unpleasantry.

David Yellin- That is kind of interesting because the reality of the moment is a little different when you take it out of...

John T. Fisher- It was acceptable to him see this was part of it. And so I left there without the bishop's specific saying and went to Frank Holloman's office and he had just left to go home because he had been up all night long till 1:00 in the afternoon. So then I left there and went back by the bishop's office again to make one more inquiry and he still wasn't willing to take on the personal involvement of supporting (muffled). Couldn't do it, Holloman wasn't there and if you hadn't talked to Holloman yet and you can't get it anyway. So I said ok and I went back to work and I came out here. Ran into somebody here and then I headed to go home and then I thought...Oh yes I went to go home and I call my house and Jean told me, I was a little bit late getting away, it was about 6:00 and she said that Ralph Siler just called from the police department from Holloman's office and said that Holloman was there and if you came down you could talk to him. So (muffled) I am going to go. So I went down there and I got there just before 7:00 and he had a press conference going at 7 and so I had to wait through the press conference and that was a sight to behold. There was guys in there from all over the world, Australia, France, Czechoslovakia, Japan, that I saw and they invited me up for the press conference and I wasn't planning on going and there was many people (muffled). I you are going to the press conference I will just sit here.

David Yellin- This is a real old fashioned press conference?

John T. Fisher- Well they had to move it up...

David Yellin- There was no television?

John T. Fisher- No I guess they had movie cameras. They moved to the walk in to the mock up thing you know the walk up where you stand and identify a suspect.

David Yellin- I have never done that.

John T. Fisher- I haven't either.

David Yellin- Don't you try to incriminate me.

John T. Fisher- (muffled) which I presume is about like this room. They had been holding them in.

David Yellin- But they went to a bigger room?

John T. Fisher- Oh there was no way to get them in. So they had to go tot his upstairs place which was much bigger and had a stage and all for Holloman to hold a press conference. So he came back and I wouldn't even talk to him and the basis I put it to him on was Frank this is a wild idea but if you don't support it , it is one that deserves an instant death because (muffled) and I don't know how you would come out and endorse it I the sense of telling people that they should go when we have had the things that have happened here to put together a crowd of 50,000 or something almost takes a wild man to even think of it.

David Yellin- Why did you go to Mr. Holloman?

John T. Fisher- Well because he has the responsibility for group activity...(Tape break...Well he would be the obvious one with responsibility for crowd control...

David Yellin- You just went to him for permission to do it and plus an endorsement...

John T. Fisher- No not endorsement ...

David Yellin- But just permission.

John T. Fisher- Right, because to put a crowd together could very easily be turned irresponsible under the circumstances and we weren't willing by any means to take that on ourselves.

David Yellin- I see you wanted clearance that putting a crowd together would be safe...

John T. Fisher- Right he would have to say it was ok to put the crowd together and I put the terms to him and said Frank all I am really asking tonight is don't turn it down if you can find your way to turn it down. If you are going to turn it down and you know you are going to turn it down why then turn it down so I can go home and go to bed and forget about it, but if you think there is some need for response in the community and you wanted to put a disclaimer on it and telling people that they go on their own peril, nobody in this right mind can guarantee anything in this town tomorrow but we think that it will be safe for people of this period to go in one place and not have a riot or something then go. But be under no misunderstanding we don't think this is the same as a football game weekend where we can tell you to certainly go. I said don't do that. He said well alright you get out and get your support lined up and you get your community leadership that is personally going to take on the thing and put their names to it and be there and I will think about it.

David Yellin- Did he indicate what kind of community leadership both black and white?

John T. Fisher- Well he talking about newspapers chamber of commerce people, head business leaders, bank people the bank presidents, some negro community leadership, Jesse Turner, just some good solid responsible people more than just me or somebody which I concurred with 100%. I said ok. So from the police station about 8:00 I called the bishop's house and he is there, I want to talk to him. So I get in the car and drive out there and he was just fixing to have dinner, oh and I got a police pass too.

David Yellin- OH the curfew.

John T. Fisher- Which I have in my scrapbook. So we went out to his house and we talked for a good while and he finally says alright I will go and support of I can have a counterpart from the negro community and together we do this. Ok who do you want, and he said Jim Lawson. I said ok let's go find Jim Lawson, so we called Bill Kephart in Whitehaven and he didn't know where he was but he said come get me and let's go look. So at 10:30 we left the bishop's house and picked up Bill Kephart in Whitehaven and started looking and we go to Clayborne Temple and Mason Temple and finally about 1:00 in the morning we were at the Peabody hotel and we found him in room 702 or 633 or wherever it was. He said he would be down in a little while. He came down from 1:00 until 1:30, he got there at 1:00 we found him of course 30 minutes later. Everybody is tired the bishop has been flying all night up form Florida or something the bishop hadn't gone to bed.

So we, he comes down with Audry Parker and we visit and he said that is the wildest thing he had ever heard. Now this is coming in Saturday AM now, we are talking about tomorrow. He said that is the wildest thing I have ever heard, and I said I agree it is wild. Maybe it will work but you all do it and so Audry Parker and Bill Kephart and myself kind of got out of it and let the bishop and Lawson outline what they wee going to do. They said something to me and I said now don't get me involved, you all make the commitment to this and if you all will do that then Bill Kephart and Audry Parker and myself agree to work. We will put it together.

David Yellin- The commitment to get the people program and so on.

John T. Fisher- And so Lawson in 30 minutes agreed to do that and we asked him about getting his speaker and he said he would do that he would get them. He told us who it would be that it would be Dr. Reid and Reverend Hooks and Mrs....

David Yellin- (muffled)

John T. Fisher- Mary Collier, he named them that night and said that he would have them there. And that he would get support from the pulpit on Sunday morning and that the negro community would support it, they would be there in numbers, and we left. Hear again a private observation, I made the bishop Vandross, I said Bishop what does it tell you when we cash in at 1:00 in the morning in between 1:00 and

1:30, a negro church leader of the cloth, just a church. He has made the decision to involve himself personally, he has undertaken and spoken for three other community leaders that they will appear on the platform and that they will be there without consultation with them or checking with them and has committed a sufficient number of negro participants or observers or people that was coming and that he will do his part and then he closed up his little thing and went on to do some thing else. You and I have been on this thing 12 and a half hours and we still hadn't gotten (muffled) and we still don't know who we can get to speak and we don't know whether white people are coming or not. Not able to say, not able to deliver. It does tell me some thing and it tell s him something too. So we all went home and we went to bed and so the next morning I got up and got on the telephone and started rounding up people that I know that have different talents and things. Got them to bring some other people and we met here about 9:30 in this room at this very table. And it was in this room at this table that Audry Parker, do you know him?

David Yellin- I know who he is I haven't met him but I know (muffled).

John T. Fisher- Director of Map South. He coined the phrase Memphis cares. He as the creator of that term and gave the operation that name. He thought up the name and the group consensus was that was a good name, Harold Whalen was here, Buddy Thomas, Hunter Lane, Bert Ferguson, Edgar Bailey came by. As soon as we got clearance from Holloman we wanted to move to some place that was acceptable to any group that wanted to take part. Help shape this operation. We moved out to the board of education and that is where Edgar Bailey came in, he opened he board of education offices on Avery St. and (muffled) because it looks nice and everything, we couldn't go to memorial stadium because the national guard was headquartered there and in fact occupying all the physical facilities, the restrooms, telephones and offices and all this stuff and there wasn't any way to get in there, impossible. So Holloman at 12:30 with reluctance because there is some meetings going on downtown, Chamber of Commerce and Future Memphis (muffled) are having meetings that morning that Saturday morning and Holloman was in them and I couldn't get to him. Well our first list wasn't enough people and so we got some more people and Bert Ferguson took on himself to go down there and finally about 12:30 we got permission. Well by this time Rabbi Wax had called off his Evergreen church at 2:00, we set the thing for 1:30 I think it was. We talked about an earlier time with the negro churches get out later and so we moved it back.

David Yellin- This was on the half hour.

John T. Fisher- It was a 4:00 thing set as a memorial for Martin Luther King that we didn't want to interfere with or make it cancel out because it couldn't join this community effort and see its purpose through because this was not a memorial service for Martin Luther King this was a community response situation. You have one of my programs...

David Yellin- Yes I was there.

John T. Fisher- Well you kept one of those for your records and you have that. Well that statement was written and rewritten and rewritten before that came out like that and I think really it is a very good concise statement.

David Yellin- Who was involved in the writing?

John T. Fisher- Well the reverend Robert Watson, Episcopal, he wrote the first one. You have to answer it right there. With Harold Whalen and Arthur Parker and I don't know who all but lots of suggestions came back. Is Billy here? Are you all leaving or are you going to lunch?

Unknown Person- We are going to go to lunch.

John T. Fisher- Well wait a minute I will go to lunch with you we will be done here in just a minute.

Unknown Person- Alright.

John T. Fisher- So when we got permission at 12:30 the Precimeter was about to have a fit because they wanted to get it in their paper you see but they went to the press at 12:00 and anyways nothing worked out right, nothing went for us there. But finally at 12:30 we moved out to the board of education and got started. My secretary or Mrs. Trotter (muffled) agreed to go out and pivot the thing, it is a very good lesson in management. We went out in the conference room and outlined 6 areas of responsibility. (muffled) the stadium, advertising, communications, program, the speakers. And point people to outline their responsibility. We said each committee is autonomous, we don't have time to report back go and do your job. (muffled) there was no report back I didn't know if it was ready or not and the guy who does our advertising Bush Robinson took that on and called the station they were ready to go. The station heard about it earlier in the day, why NBC guy was over here and he wanted to know what the deal was and go live nationwide, which they did. Did you know that.

David Yellin- Yes.

John T. Fisher- That went out nationwide.

David Yellin- WMC.

John T. Fisher- On NBC their special that afternoon. So we worked with them and they came out and we told everybody to, anybody who wants to come out to the board of education and shape the deal. Shape it the way you want to I don't care what you do, if you are interested why come out and get with whatever group you are and we told them what the groups were and I think maybe 75 people were there at one point working on telephoning and of course the TV went out and we among other people we called the mayor. The mayor was called and Harold Whalen was the one help come up with, I believe it was Harold who helped come up with the deal with what the mayor said. Because he didn't say I will be there his folks wouldn't let

him be there. But he said something else, but he came and of course you saw what happened and what was said. Very providential the line up, if I had been caught between Ben Hooks and Jim Lawson I couldn't handle it. Tom O'Ryan did. Tom O'Ryan expressed the thoughts amongst this community. And he made Ben Hooks irate, I can produce some white people that Ben Hooks made absolutely infuriated. So it is just sort of evened out and this is how wide our thoughts were and thoughts were expressed that they had double crossed us in the statement. It didn't go in this harmony, this attitude this atmosphere we are going to do better and my own thoughts were that at first. And I thought it was a little rougher than I had anticipated. But by that afternoon by the time I left and went home and thought of this it came to me very clearly it was not. That the best thing about that thing the other day was that it was honest and truthful right through.

David Yellin- In other words, well two things had you been, had anybody designate to what the scope or the limits of what they were to say?

John T. Fisher- Well we tried to hold them to the groundwork of talking about the community and moving forward and the fact that we are going to live here together in harmony without discord and violence and that we can do that in the city of Memphis and hold it about 2 minutes. Well I only gave them 2 minutes but what kind of control can you exercise and nobody there was destructive, they were constructive for the most part. Perhaps Ben Hooks he was in Atlanta up till about an hour before he came to the stadium and knew nothing about it so for all I know he thought this was a memorial service for Dr. King that was what his speech was about. But doesn't really make any difference. What really made a difference to me was I found myself infuriated or enflamed by what was said but I stayed and listened to it.

David Yellin- But you still found yourself that way?

John T. Fisher- Yeah and I would have probably not found myself that way now because I am more aware of what people are saying and all that showed me was how unaware I was at what somebody was saying and I think many people had that experience there. If they felt like well wait this isn't what I thought this was going to be this isn't quite the deal.

David Yellin- Now could we I mean this has been excellent and you have told us a lot of facts but I think if you could be patient with us and maybe forego some of your lunch time a little bit because now that we have you, just this very fact, because something has happened to you obviously out of all of this and I think it is so significant to see why things are done in a way they are.

John T. Fisher- Well nobody in the community in his right mind would have or could have created what took place there if they had set about by design to do that, in my opinion they could not have. Those persons who were sensitive and aware to the fact that it should be as diverse as it was could not have put it together.

David Yellin- yes, yes.

John T. Fisher- Because it is so few in number and all. And so the people that put it together all kind of thought it was going to go my way.

David Yellin- That is kind of interesting and what we were saying because now you are structuring...

John T. Fisher- And the way we got around this, was we knew on the front end that this might happen and provide for that there would be no money, that nobody could sell us anything. I didn't want any money then we were going to get issues and if we get issues then we are going to be dead. And this is individual participation process and it doesn't belong to anybody and we wouldn't even release any names.

David Yellin- As to who was going to be..

John T. Fisher- The speakers names yes, but not the names of organizers and this kind of thing because we want to be faceless, this is people thing and this left us open and O.Z. Evers got there with this printed up thing about we came to name the expressway for Martin Luther King and to raise money for a statue, did you see that?

David Yellin- No sir?

John T. Fisher- Well this was printed in the newspaper the next day, the front page of the Commercial Appeal it said the purpose of the meeting was this, O.Z> Evers chairmen.

Tom Beckner- was this Sunday or Monday?

John T. Fisher- On Monday. The newspaper didn't on the Commercial Appeal, that is not the proper term because they didn't mean to, but they didn't give the thing the impotence that they could have because it was buried in a strike story, the whole story was buried in a strike story without a headline, so many people didn't find out about it.

David Yellin- Of course did you get an reverberations if that is the word on your statement on Ed gets his program Monday?

John T. Fisher- No you mean of putting in the way or something?

David Yellin- That it was born on...

John T. Fisher- No because we set out to do that and certainly at this point nobody could make the case that we hadn't built up issues. Because the one thing we had built up were issues and so Memphis cars the group that put that together wouldn't sit down at the table again.

David Yellin- See you meant it in a kind of a different way than some people took it.

John T. Fisher- But you see we were not trying to make a new organization anyway, this was for you to go out and take the existing organizations and work for them,

Memphis Cares can be, can only exist as a memory. It is kind of like a comet, when the comet goes across the sky it starts out here and it is pretty instantaneous but it is pretty big. But the comets down the road is your memory you see you talk about it. And everybody's opinion is different, one guys says it was alright one guys says it was red and one guy says it was blue green or something. And it was what he wanted to see. And t hat is what Memphis Cares must be. Memphis Cares must be a spirit and not an identifiable group.

David Yellin- Well it is a comment and one that has to be made right now, that what we are doing now is an offshoot of a Memphis cares spirit.

John T. Fisher- So those who would come up and say that it was there to injure the image of Memphis well if that is why the guy came to the stadium and this fellow wants to attack him like that then that is ok and that is his prerogative. I wasn't there to improve the image of Memphis, I was there to improve the community of Memphis.

David Yellin- I mean you are talking on a pretty sophisticated level as you know. You are talking about freedom and liberty and individuality and existing in a group.

John T. Fisher- I was there because I could no longer sit in my house and not meddle in the affairs of my life.

David Yellin- Now this is what we want to get at and you are sitting with one too, I am not a southerner so I look at with great awe at some of you people truly as I told Tom. This I think is so important for everybody to understand you yourself, me, history. Here you are a young man brought up and obviously fairly good circumstances all your life in Memphis and then suddenly something happens and you flip flop in a sense. I choose to think it was some thing else it was there all the time.

John T. Fisher- Well perhaps, we will never know.

David Yellin- You don't flip flop in life this way it is there and you just find it.

John T. Fisher- Nothing pushed it out, it never came to the fore.

David Yellin- Yes, and if we could kind of look at not only yourself but obviously to your wife and I don't mean to be that personal. But when was the first time for instance I mean what was your awareness of negros for instance.

John T. Fisher- Of course this goes back a long time and there is no cutting point but the best way I can phrase it to you I think to answer what you are asking, you need to go? Hi come on in. This is Scott Carr.

David Yellin- How are you Scott.

Scott Carr- Hi how are you.

David Yellin- Good to see you.

David Yellin- Tom Beckner and David Yellin how are you.

John T. Fisher- I would have to say in fairness to that (muffled) David in going back that I probably a year ago if you had asked me this question I would tell you in all sincerity that yes I could talk with negroes because I work with them at the boys club board and this and that. But there was even restraints and conditions on that, that I wasn't even aware of.

David Yellin- And that is what I want to ask you a year ago, not that you remember now.

John T. Fisher- A year ago I would have given you a little more precise packed argument that I was capable of doing that. That I would do today. I am less qualified to do that today than I was then. Because even then the things that were happening then that I have become aware of since then is that I can't remember ever being involved in conversation that I didn't feel responsible for the (muffled) of it, the depth into which it went....

David Yellin- It was your conversation?

John T. Fisher- Yes it was my conversation and if I wanted to talk to him I had to get myself geared down sufficiently to talk with him and I had this responsibility in every case. I guess that Jim Lawson changed that individually in the man himself.

David Yellin- Now can you pin point it. I mean explain it in your terms.

John T. Fisher- Not in any one little point in time but I found myself stretching as far as I could go to keep with him. He will take anything I can put out and give it back...

David Yellin- Alright now what did this do to you as a human being?

John T. Fisher- Well it made me more aware of a the fact that there is a guy that I can talk to and at some point in the conversation lose the awareness of the color of the skin and lose the restraint of the responsibility of maintaining conversation.

David Yellin- So your role changed?

John T. Fisher- Yeah so I gave up this restraint and end up talking to him on a man to man basis. Without the restraint and the responsibility and the need for...I mean it would erroneous to say that on a new sales employee that comes in here, that I don't have to in talking with him about place, it is not my responsibility to exercise restraint on where the conversation goes. I cannot talk to him equal to equal. There is nothing equal about the topic we are talking about. We have been in the business for a long time and he is just coming in, it doesn't make any sense to do that, it is not logical. And so most of the talks with negro people have been on the same basis and all of a sudden I wasn't really aware of that. Even with the sales man at that time see and now I found that those have been there and it was probably me to try to go to

Jim Lawson, he would take me any place I could go. He (muffled) he would go in places I hadn't been. Thought wise and conversation wide, and physically also.

David Yellin- Why didn't that make it repugnant to you. Why weren't you angry at the fact that this uppity fellow..

John T. Fisher- Well because he wasn't uppity to me he was very kind in his conversation and at no point was he ever belligerent...

David Yellin- Patronizing?

John T. Fisher- No the whole thing was, he took me at the pace (muffled) I said that you must remember that when I first talked to Jim Lawson that he didn't beat me on the head with any sticks. He talked very quiet in conversational tones, spent 45 minutes given us a background that we could go about and challenge if we wanted to, just a bunch of facts. There was none of this I am going to teach you none of this like you saw on television when he is making an incisive type statement a hard driving statement.

Tom Beckner- This is personal.

John T. Fisher- It is a personal relationship and he is looking at me as the 5 of us as human beings and we want to learn something from him and he is trying to teach us, talk to us, not, not beat us on the head. And as we moved it became more of this. I mean I didn't have this (muffled) to start with but the more we talked and the more it would come to (muffled). And I found I could talk with him on almost any topic and he had a great deal to tell me.

David Yellin- So now but this you say sort of alters your relationship with negroes generally now.

John T. Fisher- Right.

David Yellin- You are still trying to find..

John T. Fisher- Well now I don't have, I have no difficulty I found that there was a subconscious psychological barrier to negroes by class. Just as a group. And I think what this relationship has destroyed that, I if am placed in this position again with a new trustee at St. Mary's school with a man down at the Barksdale's boys club whether he is a white or black I still have, you still bear a lot of the responsibility elements but not because of (muffled) but because of circumstance and because of factors that are relevant.

Tom Beckner- More individual difference.

John T. Fisher- Yeah but what you are trying to get accomplished but not simply (muffled) some fellow that has plenty of money obviously and is well educated and comes in why I still, I would have found myself being responsible then. Now going out to be nice because he is a negro see. And I don't, I found this much more natural

set of circumstances after having met such people as Jim Lawson and Billy Kyles and Bill Smith at Collins Church and Harold Whalum and Macille Walker, (muffled) and Audry Parker.

David Yellin- Well now I would like to make a little shift and I don't want to put the responsibility on you this is only your opinion and it would be accepted as such just almost a lead, did the business community as such look upon this strike as a racial issue, or as a union issue, or what kind of issue of you can recall now.

John T. Fisher- The best I can recall I would say a combination of all of those elements and mostly it started off as a irritant by a minority element taking advantage of circumstances in the land to disrupt the status quo which is always uncomfortable, that is the way it started and it grew in intensity. I think the response the mayor got would indicate that because he got so many telegrams and things, and the people that sent them think they were involved in this.

David Yellin- What do you mean by that?

John T. Fisher- Well you talk about being involved and the guy says I am involved and you say oh well what did you do, and he says well I sent a telegram. Well while he is sending a telegram see well he get up and when the bridge hand comes around and he waits for that time to even send the telegram and then he makes a position later in a cocktail party or something that yeah he was involved, he did his part and Jim Lawson is working 18 hours a day. He is doing without sleep and shortcutting meals and meeting and strategizing and sleeping sleepless nights. And he is going to get beat by a guy sending a telegram? He doesn't have a chance of getting beat by that.

David Yellin- And you are also saying that the fellow who sent the telegram also sent the telegram before February 12th. He didn't do anything to find out what happened after February 12th.

John T. Fisher- No he sent the telegram after February 12th.

David Yellin- Yeah but he didn't find out anything about after February 12th.

John T. Fisher- No he was just told by a group of people that were acceptable to him because of the social surroundings whether it would be a social club or some other group relationship and the consensus there was well here is the special number to call and send a telegram.

Tom Beckner- Mayor Loeb needs your support, this type of thing?

John T. Fisher- Yeah.

David Yellin- But what I am saying is what we have been listening to today in the articles in the paper about you, that John T. Fisher and other people I am sure I hope that several other people such as your self looked at February 12th and I am just making this an arbitrary date as well something happened I am going to try to find

out what this was about before you would even send a telegram or write a letter. And what I am saying is that the person who sent the telegram didn't care that February 12th happened....

John T. Fisher- No he knew about it.

David Yellin- Yes. That nothing had changed, this was his opinion. How much of, what do you think Dr. King's role was during this?

John T. Fisher- Well Dr. King has an antagonistic role in the white south pretty generally because he has brought many things that people are uncomfortable about. And he is not very reluctant to speak pretty concisely to the point about them to make you feel uncomfortable about them. So anything which he is connected can be summarily dismissed on those grounds if you want to. If that is the position you want to take you have lots of company there.

David Yellin- Why do you think they made people uncomfortable?

John T. Fisher- You are getting back down to all the sociology about it and I really don't know the real answer about that, probably because they are true, I really don't know. I can't answer that because I haven't thought in those terms too much and I don't know how to answer you really.

David Yellin- And I don't mean to.

John T. Fisher- They do make them, obviously people become very emotional when Dr. King speaks. You know that rabble rouser needed to get out of town and got what he deserved, reaction coming from him being shot.

David Yellin- Did you or did you not have this kind of a reaction?

John T. Fisher- What? No my reaction was of course to go at him and do some act to try to restore some semblance of hope for tomorrow then to go out and say he got what he deserved, I don't think that he got what he deserved at all. I think that I would certainly, he has certainly said things with which I disagree and still disagree. But I understand better today why he says them, it is too bad he had to get shot to teach me that but I didn't really understand. I have to say I never I never really understood what he was saying until after he was dead. When I went back and read something, I don't think I had really ever read the Letter from the Birmingham Jail from start to finish before. I have always read the excerpts that the press picks up. From that either I was incapable of getting the whole thought or they didn't give me enough to get the whole thought I don't know which one is true. The fact of the matter was that I didn't get the whole thought that I got by later reading it.

David Yellin- What I am asking now in relation to your own personal...what did you friends think of you doing all this?

John T. Fisher- It varied all over the place some thought I was crazy and out of my mind. Wondering what I was doing even touching the topic and on Sunday I went

home really, physically frightened after Memphis Cares in the sense that I thought it got kind of tough out there, some of the comments impressed me that way. It may not have impressed you that way because you were more, you have heard it more and are more tolerant of it and it just didn't hit you that way.

(Muffled)

John T. Fisher- See I knew what they were going to say before they said it and then all of a sudden without asking my permission they said what they wanted to say.

David Yellin- Now you should be a teacher then you see then you could keep them after school.

John T. Fisher- I said (muffled) if that Ben Hooks doesn't sit down and be quiet I don't know what I am going to do.

David Yellin- And you were sitting up there in front of a lot of people.

John T. Fisher- People were starting to walk out you know.

David Yellin- Yes they were.

John T. Fisher- And I could see Tom O'Ryan down there and he was getting mad and I didn't know whether he was going to get mad enough to walk off or to do something, what was going to happen. I look at David and David is down there just sitting there and going along with it all and I thought it has got to be more serious than David is making it out to be and I see the piece of paper passing around the platform there and it finally gets to me and it is Memphis Cares and why we are here and it says Memphis Cares meeting took place today for the purpose of raising money to build a memorial to Martin Luther King and to get the expressway through Overton Park made the Martin Luther King Memorial Expressway.

Tom Beckner- This was O.Z. Evers?

John T. Fisher- Signed O.Z. Evers (muffled). Well I couldn't even breathe when I read that I thought, if somebody gets up there and says that I don't know what I will do. I will have to say something. I didn't come in here to build any memorial to Martin Luther King. I came here to talk to Memphis and all and it is bad enough I have to listen to do this somehow or another we got off on the wrong track somewhere boy. The line is dim right now. So it turns out Tom O'Ryan really was a saving grace.

David Yellin- In that he expressed the opinion of a lot of people there, not that he was either right or wrong...

John T. Fisher- Right he got the seesaw back in line see and got Hooks mad. Well that is alright see. That means he was a success, that Hooks fall for the same thing I did. I am glad he had the same human failing that I had., He thought he was going to come in here and say these nice little diddies so Hook could speak his string. But he didn't respond back to these nice little diddies either. So that is why I say that it was

providential the way the line up went that I opened with really just a (muffled) I told Lawson when I got off the platform that I wouldn't trade a world for this for having here because I got out of line this time (muffled) and everybody was walking out. I said, but I tell you one thing, you will never show me up like that again in my life. I am not going to be called a (muffled) just a neat little meddle go get involved and don't do anything.

David Yellin- Now what do you mean by that?

John T. Fisher- Well I meant what I said when I said to go out and be involved and stand up and do things, but I discovered later, about 15 minutes later sitting on that platform what it really meant to say I am going to stand up for this and stand up. To sit there and have to go out in the community in which I live and speak for myself based on the next 7 speakers. To keep my association with that, not renounce it and duck out, I could always do that. But to stay with it on the positive side no matter what was said. And I thought that getting involved in some things was one thing but it is another thing, it is more difficult than that. It is not that easy.

David Yellin- No.

John T. Fisher- And I learned a great lesson there, one that I wouldn't trade in for.

Tom Beckner- Have you received much personal reaction to speak of any, what you said?

John T. Fisher- Really quite a lot well the next day I got a phone call from Allen Morgan who asked me to come and have lunch with this little executive group from the chamber of commerce and I went down there and they were discussing a job program which was really a very good job program and the speaker from (muffled) airways had been told that the atmosphere in Memphis was not really hospitable for him to on Tuesday to come speak to the rotary club. They couldn't in good conscious ask an outsider to come here. I knew that because the circumstances were not such that they, that that should be done. So that date was open and they were going to announce this program at the rotary club. We were about to break up and they had invited me and introduced me as the man who had made somebody with a nice came he did something, that walked out of there and did something. And so it was all over I said if you would like, if you have time I would like to share a few of my thoughts on this. And to that extent I said, you really shouldn't announce this to the rotary club tomorrow because these people the only thing they got is the problem and you are trying to take their problem away from them and you are going to talk the whole thing over there and then you are going to get their problem and then you are going to solve it and tell them how they are going to solve it and how they got to do it and everything and then announce it in the rotary club, they can't even get it announced in their community, they can't even take part in the announcement process, and when you got to the community down there to get them to take part in it they are going to reject it and you are never going to know why, you are not going to understand why they won't take this great deal you are trying to

give them. I said I just don't think you can do that I think you need some community support. If, you shouldn't do that I think you all should put some more thought into it and not announce this at the rotary club. You ought to get some negro leadership involved and get their support to produce the workers to stay on the job. Well ok, so I left. (muffled). 7:30 that night I got a telephone call from (muffled) Turner at he First National Bank asking me to appear on the program with the rotary club the next day, which I accepted. I had also made a statement on TV channel 5 they called for a statement on this ongoing thing about this. And I wasn't happy with the statement I made at all it just wasn't enough. I missed a chance to say something. I don't think it was a bad statement. Did you see it?

David Yellin- I heard it yes.

John T. Fisher- I don't think it was a bad statement, I don't know what your reaction was?

John T. Fisher- I am not trying to shift was this the one that you said that it was born on Saturday and...

John T. Fisher- Yeah.,

David Yellin- I must be Frank and say I didn't understand it.

John T. Fisher- Well I didn't speak concise and strong enough to the point of what really took place out there.

David Yellin- I thought you were angry, not angry I thought you were disappointed is a better word.

John T. Fisher- Well mostly I didn't know what to say but anyway, I passed a chance to really say something, but my major thing was that night before it came on TV I told my wife that I wasn't happy with that thing. After she saw it she wasn't happy with it either and I was more unhappy after having seen it. And then the phone rang at 7:30 this invitation. I said I tell you what I cannot pass, get bailed out again, but I cannot pass it again. I walked there and answered that one and some thing wasn't right and I cannot pass another chance in front of that group of 500 of the business community. Economic wealth is there, why I can't pass a chance again would just be (muffled). I must say something. You perhaps saw the article of the newspaper the next day with a photograph of me.

David Yellin- Yeah.

John T. Fisher- Do you remember that one?

David Yellin- Yes.

John T. Fisher- Speaking and there were two speakers that preceded me of very short duration and I had about, we had 10 minutes each and I took about 17 minutes early and then David Alexander got through early and then Whitt Brown got

through early and I had about 23 minutes or something, 22 minutes I guess. I spoke 20 minutes there and I sat down that night and wrote up these are the notes that I have to that speech here and I really can't read a speech I just can't do that, I just can't keep my meaning in if I do that. It is like this thing here I have taken these thoughts but they need to be re-organized and put back into sequence of relationship and that is what I did here basically with these little cards. I went into a disclaimer on my credentials to do that to start with and then I went into the background of what it was and what happened on Friday and I got the idea of watching TV where the guy was killed and what happened to Friday and Holloman and back to Vandross, (muffled) to Lawson, commitment and involvement, very important that this commitment and involvement took place between Lawson and Vandross because the next night Saturday night I was out and I had to go to someplace out and I was out at somebody's house for dinner and the phone rang about 10:30 and....it was NBC news and they were down a few hotels interviewing Lawson and the mayor had invited people to come see. I don't know what the question was but the reaction I was getting back was if as the question, and I suspect this is probably pretty close to the question NBC asked him. Was reverend Lawson is still on the television and the mayor is having a meeting at Crump stadium tomorrow and we understand you are going to go and be on the platform how about it. It is a pretty tough question to answer and it is not quite the right thing. He would really trying to duck out considerably. So they called me and I wouldn't give them any kind of statement. I said Mr. Lawson didn't owe me any chance to go, and he said well aren't you kind of running it? I said I am one of the workers for it but I said I understand Mr. Lawson has made his commitment to the Episcopal bishop and that two of them had agreed to go and do it and that is all I can say to you at this time. And I had been uneasy when Jim Lawson didn't come to the TV station and make that TV spot. Get on record him saying I am going to be there and hope you will come too. But there were 3 or 5 negros who had, the councilmen had. So in trying to keep up with that idea the turned me over to Lawson on the telephone. We talked for a minute...so we talked for a minute and he said he would come, or he didn't say he would come either, he sort of left it open. So I got home at night I got home about 1:30 and the babysitter said Mr. Lawson wants you to call anytime you get in. Well I called him at 2:10 am and we talked until 3:00. I just wouldn't let him get me to (muffled) Jim you don't have to talk to me, (muffled) mirror talk to that guy because he made a commitment to come. (Tape End)