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Interview of Christopher Columbus Mercer. Interviewed by Suzanne Bonefas, of The Crossroads to Freedom Project, Rhodes College.

Christopher Columbus Mercer was a lawyer and Executive Director for the Arkansas Council on Human Relations which was an affiliate of the Southern Regional Council. Through the Arkansas Regional Council's involvement with race relations and implementing the Brown v. Board decision of 1954, Mr. Mercer became involved in the Hoxie case. Through the efforts of Mr. Mercer and others, Hoxie High School in Hoxie, Arkansas became the first Southern case of successful integration in October of 1955.

This interview was conducted on May 19, 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.

Suzanne Bonefas: I'm going to start by just asking you a few questions about yourself and talk a little bit about your childhood and then we'll move into the civil rights area.

So, first of all, please tell us your name.

Chris Mercer: My name is Christopher C. Mercer, Jr. I was born in Pine Bluff, Arkansas on March 27th, 1924. I had my early childhood education in the segregated schools of Pine Bluff at that time. I started out at the kindergarten, Miss Hattie Benson's kindergarten school. Then I went to public school. I entered what was called Missouri Street school; it was a school that only went to the sixth grade.

Then I transferred to the primary school for blacks in Pine Bluff at that time, Merrill High School, and I finished Merrill High School in 1942. I entered AM&N college in 1942 and finished AM&N college in 1946. Then I started teaching school. Next question.

00:01:06

Suzanne Bonefas: And what is your occupation, sir?

Chris Mercer: I've been a lawyer for 52 years. I'm on year 53 now.

Suzanne Bonefas: Uh-huh.

Chris Mercer: I was licensed May 17th, 1954.

Suzanne Bonefas: Uh-huh.

Chris Mercer: That date turns out to be significant because that's the date that created all of this, that's the date the Supreme Court issued its decision on school desegregation.

Suzanne Bonefas: Uh-huh.

Chris Mercer: And I've been practicing law, as I say, for 52 years. I'm on year 53 now. This is March – I mean May, the 19th. Started May 17th. I start year 53.

Suzanne Bonefas: What made you decide to go into law after having been a teacher?

Chris Mercer: Oh, I don't know that I ever intended to teach, always, I don't know that I really decided to go into law except that I grew up in a very turbulent area. This was the area of extreme unrest and dissatisfaction with things as they were, that is, with segregation as it was, and I think I saw law as one of the avenues of escape or one of the avenues for correction.

00:02:15

And it was something that I don't know that I aspired to do it all my life, I don't know what I really *aspired* to do, but I saw this as an avenue where I thought I could make some contribution.

Suzanne Bonefas: So that was no coincidence then, the importance of that date that you came into law?

Chris Mercer: The importance of the May 17th date?

Suzanne Bonefas: That's right.

Chris Mercer: Well, the May 17th date just happened to be coincidentally; that's the date that Arkansas stamped the license for that particular year. I don't know whether it was prophetic that it would come out that way. It was incidental in a sense, but it was not incidental in that I was inclined to go into law.

00:03:07

Suzanne Bonefas: Can you tell me a little bit about your parents back in Pine Bluff? What they did?

Chris Mercer:

Oh, they did a number of things. My parents never received any academic training, but I think both my dad and my mom had more native intelligence in how to manipulate and survive. Whatever you do in life is designed to make a living and I think they were very successful in making a living without any academic background.

My dad finished fourth grade; my mother finished sixth grade. My dad was as gifted as anybody I've ever seen. He could take his hands and build a house. I've seen him build a house from ground to bottom and do everything in it not only all the woodwork but all the electrical work, all the plumbing work.

00:04:09

He could take a car and tear it down piece by piece and put it back together. He was a foreman at the round house, and this was the designation given to the building where they built steam engines. The same with Southwestern had a round house in Pine Bluff, Arkansas where they built all the big steam engines; 800-series they called them, in Pine Bluff. My dad worked in this facility; in fact he was working there when I was born.

My mother operated several little small businesses. I guess they was successful. They endured sufficiently for us to be sustained and make a living out of them. She operated dry cleaners, she operated new and used clothing stores, she operated service stations. But she only finished sixth grade. She would help me with my lessons sometimes when I was in 10th, 11th grades, so she had great mother wit, but they didn't have any schooling as what we call it, an academic background.

00:05:17

My mother lived until she was 93 so she sustained a long time. Next question.

Suzanne Bonefas:

Well, what are – can you tell me a memory or a tale from your childhood that you feel like influenced you later in life?

Clip 2 (.flv)
(05:37:00)

Chris Mercer:

Well, you're going back a long time. I'm four score and two. So you're talking about going back a long time. When you say influenced me, I can remember things. I can remember my life

back to when I was 15 months old. I can remember things in my past back to that time.

00:06:00

The thing that I guess influenced me as well as a number of other people of my vintage is the degradation and indignation that you suffered by virtue of being relegated to a lifestyle. Segregation and discrimination was cruel and inhumane.

And I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemies, the sort of things that I went through. Sitting at the back of the bus, going to inferior schools, being looked down upon just because of your skin color. This was a very trying experience, and I'm sure I was not the lone ranger there, there were many people who despised the kind of treatment that they received.

00:07:07

And of course you always aspired for that better day. You know all the old Negro spirituals aspired for that better day. And everybody aspired for a better day and of course you do what you can in your own little limited way in hopes that it will change. But whether there was any one specific event but it was a sign of the times in which I grew up. I grew up not only being afflicted by discrimination and segregation but being afflicted by hard times.

When I was growing up just, in my formative years and my teen years this was Depression era. The banks closed in 1930. This was very devastating. My parents with their limited education because of their ingenuity had amassed enough money for me to go to college on, supposedly. I don't know how much money that was; they tell me that tale. They'd amassed enough money for me to go to college on and they'd put it in the bank.

00:08:18

(Laughter)

Oh, yeah.

Suzanne Bonefas: They wish they'd put it under the mattress.

Chris Mercer: Yeah, well, as a result of the bank closing in 1930, that created FDIC, Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, so all deposits you have in banks now are guaranteed up to \$100,000. Well, I might –

if we'd had something like that at the bank folds now the depositors don't lose their money.

But that was a very trying time growing up in the '30s and things didn't change until the war broke out, maybe starting in 1939, but it didn't really change until maybe 1941 until things started changing.

So to single out any one particular little event, I could recite a thousand things that would be related or interrelated.

Suzanne Bonefas: Uh-huh.

Chris Mercer: That makes a person want to aspire and come out from under these sort of circumstances.

00:09:19

Suzanne Bonefas: And how was it that you ended up going to college despite the fact that your parents lost their money and –

Chris Mercer: Oh, they lost their money in 1930. I didn't finish high school until 1942 and that was some years later. I don't know that we'd gone on but the art of survival exists in all living things. You learn how to survive. And persevere. And of course I did like a number of other people, you know, I started working when I was 12 years old.

00:09:58

Selling papers and cutting yards and doing things. Of course it wasn't a matter of whether you had enough money in those days and times. You didn't worry about whether you had enough money to go to school if you just had a desire to go to school there was some way you'd be able to go.

So when I started to college I didn't have any money to go to school. I just went.

(Laughter)

And worked my way through. I didn't have any money to go to school when I went to law school. But you find a way to sustain yourself. So my parents were not able to send me to school. If I'd had to depend on my parents to send me to school I never would have been able to go.

Suzanne Bonefas: But your parents taught you those survival skills, that's right.

Chris Mercer: Yeah, yeah, they taught me survival skills. They were able to survive and of course as I say most people do, some to a greater extent than others but yeah.

00:10:58

Clip 3 (.flv)

(10:59:00)

Suzanne Bonefas: Well, now I'd like to turn to kind of our—the target period, what's called the Civil Rights Era, 1950s to the 1970s. And hear a little bit from you what you thought were the two or three most meaningful things or events in your own personal life or that were going on elsewhere that really affected you.

Chris Mercer: Well, these things have become significant now, but when we were going through them I don't think any of us had any idea that they would turn out to be such memorable occasions. We didn't know that this was going to be of such historical significance.

Suzanne Bonefas: Uh-huh.

Chris Mercer: And so it was a way of living. What we were trying to do. I went to law school at the University of Arkansas under very trying circumstances. This was when everybody was trying to get things into focus even though the Supreme Court decision on desegregation hadn't come out then.

00:12:17

When I went to law school, I went to the University of Arkansas School of Law in 1949, and this is five years before the Supreme Court decision on desegregation and this was all a part of what I'm describing as this unrest in the hearts of black citizens to try and change things. There was no waving of the hands and everything go away at one time. There were many things that were taking place – they were attacking segregation and discrimination in transportation and housing, in schools and a number of things.

So going to school was a matter of trying to change things and then after I got out of school it was not unnatural for me to try and work in areas that would continue to bring about this change.

00:13:21

So I got out of law school and what you do with a law degree you go practice law, you try to get you a job somewhere. Well, there are not many jobs in industry or in many major law firms for black graduates, so you hang out your own shingle. So I went back to Pine Bluff to try to practice law.

I got involved in the struggle, as such – there was an opening for an executive with a little outfit for the Arkansas Council on Human Relations. It was a spin-off, an affiliate, of the Southern Regional Council, which was in Atlanta. At the time, the Southern Regional Council had 12 affiliates. The affiliates were primarily in Southern states.

00:14:09

And the Southern Regional Council's emphasis, as were their auxiliaries, was on trying to create better race relations per se. But with the Supreme Court decision, they put their emphasis on trying to help communities throughout the South implement the decision, so that was the primary emphasis, and I came to work for the Council in 1955. I had gotten out of law school and started practicing law in 1954.

I came to work for the Council in 1955. And I did work for them. In fact it was with the Council that I got involved with Hoxie. Somewhat roundabout way. But one thing just brought about another, I don't – you didn't necessarily know what the next day was going to bring. You didn't necessarily know what the next day was going to bring.

00:15:19

When you went to work, you went to work to try to do a job and we were trying to assist a number of communities, those that wanted our assistance in whatever meaningful way we could lend assistance. We didn't try to impose it on anybody except we were pronouncing. When I say "we" – not only the Arkansas Council of Human Relations but a number of entities: the NAACP, the Ministerial of Alliances, individuals, were pronouncing that by virtue of the Supreme Court's decision it was now, quote, "the law of the land," end of quote, and everybody needed to follow it. And a number of people were urging folks to follow it, and there were a number of people who were urging folks not to follow it, you know?

00:16:08

Clip 4 (.flv)

(16:08:07)

So everybody wasn't – it's obvious by virtue of your project everybody wasn't happy that it happened and everybody wasn't trying to implement it. But if you – it was the Supreme Court's decision, and I guess the hearts of people of good will of both ethnic hues; it wasn't just the blacks that were trying to implement the decision. There were equal number of whites. It was not a popular thing to do and it was not a safe thing to do. It was a trying time.

Very, very dangerous because people would do things physical to you. You know? And I guess it took a lot of courage, but when you are dissatisfied with something, you may not be completely rational about what you do. If we were all looking out for our safety, nobody would have ever got out on the forefront, you know?

Suzanne Bonefas: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

Chris Mercer: Nobody would have gotten out there.

00:17:35

Suzanne Bonefas: Can you tell us about one of those incidents when you felt you were in danger?

Chris Mercer: Oh yeah. Just talking about one of them. I laid in ditches all night long almost on ~~more than~~ one occasion guarding Daisy Bates' house, you know?

00:18:02

Her house got firebombed, Molotov cocktails thrown into it, there were multiple cars riding by and they did that. Of course, my – they attempted to firebomb my house and they threw one of the Molotov cocktails in the driveway; it rolled up in a little old garage that was about to fall down and I heard the noise out there and I went out there and got it. I don't know what they would have done; I had some young children in the house.

Let's see, how many did I have? I must have had five. I was trying to think. I had seven children by my first marriage but I

think five were in existence at that time; two were born after this thing took place.

00:18:57

But I had five young children in the house and a wife and myself and of course you get a queasy feeling, you go out and somebody in the dark has thrown a bottle filled with gasoline with rag in it and it's burning. You don't know what's gonna happen, there were, there were a number of things,

And of course people passed you on the streets and run you off the sidewalk and too many, I don't know whether I've tried to dim them out of my memory. But I've encountered a number. Number of physical things. A number of physical things.

Suzanne Bonefas: Did you ever think of giving up or leaving or,

00:19:51

Chris Mercer: No. No. Was I scared? Yes. But I was more angry than I was afraid. That people would stoop to these sort of things. You never, and I don't know that the fight is over with now. I'm not convinced that it is.

(Laughter)

I'm not convinced that it is. It's so much difference in, I guess you ought to be thankful and glad that things are not as they were. But I'm not convinced that they are as they should be.

Suzanne Bonefas: Uh-huh. There's more work to be done.

Chris Mercer: Yeah. I, there's more work to do. Just in different arenas and on different, different form. More work to do. The enemy is not as easily spotted now. They've gone underground.

Suzanne Bonefas: Uh-huh.

00:20:58

Clip 5 (.flv)
(20:58:00)

Chris Mercer: And they use different language. Instead of interposition and nullification and outright segregation and discrimination, they use

a number of other terms. "Religious right" and there's a number of other terms. They, the fight is not over, the victory is not won, but its not nearly as bad, and I wouldn't want to say that its not nearly as bad as it once was, and for that I think we all are appreciative and the end, I don't believe is necessarily that far away because it's not only illegal but it's unpopular now.

00:21:55

If we were fighting what was reportedly legal things and it was popular then. And it was so strong until people who may have even had a different attitude about it, they were sufficiently intimidated they didn't want to speak up. And they didn't want to speak out. It's the other way around now. If people have that attitude, they put it in the closet, they don't bring it to the forefront and you don't know about it. They're not as vociferous about their attitude now but do I see it now? Yeah, I see it. I can recognize it just as much as when they were both vociferous about it.

But it doesn't sting as much for them not to make their position known. I'm talking about people who still have an attitude about their fellow man because of their ethnic hue or their position. But is it relegated to America? No. America may be freer from divisiveness as maybe anyplace; it exists all over the world, and I don't think that no culture, *no* culture, technically condones mistreatment of another human.

00:23:33

But it exists, and it exists more in areas that it ought not to exist in than otherwise. Different religions. Where you have the most vicious hatred anywhere is between different religions and that's supposed – religion is supposed to be man's end to salvation and I don't understand how – because you're one religious persuasion somebody wants to burn your car, shoot you down. But that's way off the point. Let's get back to the point.

Suzanne Bonefas:

Oh, no, it's not at all. In what ways do you feel your work with the Council did make a difference? In that period?

00:24:31

Chris Mercer:

Oh, it was – just not mine, the whole Council. I wasn't – I wasn't the head goose.

(Laughter)

Necessarily. But the Council provided guidance, it provided understanding, it provided encouragement and sometimes the intangibles become more significant than the tangibles. Did we provide a lot of money? No we didn't have any money to provide, but did we provide encouragement? Did we provide understanding? Did we provide guidance? Yes, we did those sort of things.

00:25:17

In a number of ways. In many instances you don't know – you don't have any physical evidence of what you did provide, any particular assistance and sometimes it's not reported back, but we documented a number of things, and I don't know where those records are now, but we documented a number of things that we did in assisting various communities and community organizations because though we were attempting to implement the Supreme Court decision on desegregation, the implementation is not confined to the actual opening of the school doors and the classroom with kids going in there.

00:26:06

Because school is just one part of society. It – you've got to brace – in order for anything to float you've got to have, you've got to have buoyancy and so there are many other things. It may be a PTA, it may be a civic club, it may be something else. These other entities in the community which give sustenance to a person's existence provide buoyancy for the whole thing, so it wasn't just a matter of saying huh, here what's the vision does – when you going to open up the school door?

The people behind it, the mama's and the papa's and the friends who provide you with encouragement and provide you with support, they need some understanding and guidance. And the way that I worked with the, not only with the Council, but I worked with the NAACP and the way they did things was, as well as a number of other social organizations the way they do things is provide sustenance, encouragement, and give an opportunity for a forum for discussion.

00:27:20

Clip 6 (.flv)
(27:20:00)

And in that regard, I think it wasn't the only entity providing service to the community, but it was one of the entities providing service to the community. There were a number of entities providing food for thought and sustenance to parents, supporters and in many instances students themselves.

We had a – one typical example we had an encampment, at Aldersgate, it's a Methodist Church center wherein we got – we tried to get people that we think might want to be compatible. We got the kids from Sunday school in a number of churches, a number of white churches, a number of black churches and put them in this camp setting like the old camp fire song, the more we get together the happier we'll be. We hoped that would take place, you know? And I think it was a very meaningful thing for persons to get together just because your hair is silky and mine is kinky that – then you don't have any better – ability to think than I do.

00:28:45

And when you provide encouragement to people then you provide them with an invaluable tool because if you don't have any desire to do anything and to participate and don't have any confidence in what you're doing then you're not going to be able to do anything.

Suzanne Bonefas: So you provide people with the tools to be empowered.

Chris Mercer: I would assess it in that fashion. That's basically what – what – that's all we were designed to do. That's all we were designed to do.

00:29:22

Suzanne Bonefas: And that was a big thing; it made a difference.

Chris Mercer: Well, that's how we got involved with Hoxie.

Suzanne Bonefas: Well, from my understanding, the Hoxie story, you played a very significant role there. Actually could you tell us a little bit about that?

Chris Mercer: I don't know that it was necessarily that significant. It – in a roundabout way it was. My role in Hoxie was very, very limited. It wasn't very extensive. But Hoxie came about in '55.

00:29:51

And I had not been working for the Council that long when it came about. I started working for the Council in April and Hoxie came about in July, so I had not been there that long, but the Council tried to put forth what it was espousing and we were talking about equal rights for everybody and what the Council did was have two executive directors, supposedly with equal authority, equal pay. One black, one white. I was the black. A white Methodist minister by the name of Nathaniel Griswold was the white person. And it turned out that Rev. Griswold had worked up in this area near Hoxie, Nettleton or somewhere up there. He in his ministry, had worked up in this area and he knew all these people involved and especially knew the Vance's. One of the Vance's was president of the school board; the other Vance was the superintendent.

Suzanne Bonefas: Uh-huh.

00:31:04

Chris Mercer: And he knew the Vance's. And the Vance's had – and I don't remember which one it was, whether it was the superintendent or the president of the school board; I think it was the president of the school board, but the Vance's had a lot of confidence and respect for that – whether he'd been their minister, for this preacher. So, okay.

And when they became embroiled in this proposition up there, they made contact with him about, you know, woe is me and what can you do to help we, these sort of things. They made contact with him and became a point of discussion there at the Council office.

And they were wanting some assistance and it's my recollection that Rev. Griswold went up there once or twice and had some dialogue with the forces that be. And the ones who were suffering from things and came back and finally decided that they wanted to do something to resist these outside forces that were plaguing them.

00:32:17

Because things had gone along pretty smoothly there for a while until the article came out in "LIFE" magazine there was – when the article came out and it hit everything and the forces started coming in from everywhere; things had gone pretty good.

And of course as I recall they were having to shut down the schools for a while and do something of this sort and then they wanted to do something about it and they didn't have any legal advice. It's what they would do. Nobody wanted to – when you're in trouble everybody gets out of the way. They move away. They don't want to become involved.

Clip 7 (.flv)

(32:59:00)

Well, they needed a lawyer. Well, ironically people out over the state are leery about Little Rock folk in Arkansas.

00:33:15

If you're from Little Rock and that – it's sort of taboo and though we may could have gotten some lawyers from Little Rock, there was nobody that we could think of to come up; we had some – we were [unknown] with lawyers. And it developed that they thought they needed an attorney to try to represent them.

We tried several sources around Little Rock without any success. And it occurred to me that there was a lawyer in Jonesboro that I had never met, had never seen, that I thought might would be sympathetic because of something they had done prior to that particular time when we were in law school. See this was not far removed from when I was in law school. I took the bar in '54 and now we're talking about '55.

00:34:07

But when we were in law school back in '52, I guess it was, one of the black students up there who happens now to be a federal judge, George Howard, and Judge Howard has been on the federal bench since 1980, he's still on the federal bench now – he's a federal district judge – George Howard was elected president of **Lloyd Halls**. Lloyd Halls were some army barracks that the university was using for surplus housing. And they primarily kept in the army barracks foreign students, graduate students, and black students.

Of course all the black students there technically were graduate students, we were in law school, but they didn't have any undergraduate black at the university at that particular time.

00:35:04

And Bill Penix and his wife wrote a congratulatory note to George Howard complimenting him on that. And this was strange to us that a white lawyer (and his wife was a lawyer) from eastern Arkansas, the delta, would be writing a congratulatory note.

So it occurred to me that if he would do that that he might would have a sympathetic ear. And then it was decided that how best could we best get in touch with him. Well, I didn't personally know him, and nobody there personally knew him, and to just call up somebody on the phone and say look here, you know, what about – seemed sort of impersonal. So I volunteered to go to Jonesboro to talk to Bill Penix.

Suzanne Bonefas: Uh-huh.

Chris Mercer: And he didn't have slightest idea I was coming and I didn't announce I was coming; I just got in my car and I drove on up to Jonesboro. I got up there late afternoon, maybe around 4:30, 5:00 and I called him at the office first as I recall and there was no answer and then I called him at his home and identified myself and told him who I was and who I worked for and that I would like to talk with him a while and he very graciously invited me on out to his house.

00:36:27

When I got out to his house he was as I recall it was – I don't remember how many children, there was some small children, it looked like to me, and his wife and they were having, you know, this was in the summertime and they were having cold cuts and Kool-Aid and they invited me to eat and I'd been driving some time and I was happy, and I ate with them, and finally I sprung it on him what I was there about.

He said well I don't know what I can do; he agreed to represent them. And then it – developed – what can a lawyer do? How do I go about doing this thing? I don't know what to do.

00:37:12

And I don't know does anybody come up with any bright ideas; there was some – one of the, quote, great legal minds that we had at our disposal at the time was an attorney here in Little Rock by the name of Ed Dunaway. And Ed Dunaway had been a professor up at the university; he was one of my professors when I was in

law school and he was one of our advisors but Ed's great claim to fame was that he was Winthrop Rockefeller's lawyer. And we used to tease him about old "one-client Dunaway" – he didn't have but one client but he didn't need but one client.

Old one-client Dunaway. And we couldn't come up with anything so I volunteered to go and do some research and find out what we could do to come up with a plan, some kind of strategy. And I found a little case in the books that says that if you have an obligation to do something, then there's a corresponding – you know, I mean a duty to do something then there's a corresponding thing that you have a right to be protected and not be interfered in the performance of that duty.

00:38:32

Clip 8 (.flv)
(38:32:00)

This was a theory that they filed – they filed a lawsuit and of course I understand he got some assistance from somewhere else but it was on that basic theory that he filed a lawsuit against the White Citizen's Council to get an injunction against them to prohibit them from interfering with them in the performance of their constitutional duty.

And that was the whole thing. Of course, as I say, mine was limited. We counseled them at the Arkansas Council, we conferred with them, and I didn't have any personal contact with the Vance's up there. Nat Griswold had the personal contact. My role was to go and build a catch.

00:39:17

(Laughter)

You know. See if Bill Penix would be willing and it wasn't a popular thing to do. Jonesboro was just 20-25 miles from Hoxie and the black students had been going to school down there so it isn't an easy thing and this wasn't the easiest way for Bill Penix to win friends and influence people. You know?

(Laughter)

It wasn't the easiest way for him to do that but he had the courage to do it and he did do it. Now I didn't serve as co-Council with

him. I went to him and I put the proposition to him and he went and the school board paid him and of course Bill and I became good friends after that. Bill and Mary, his wife. Became good friends after that.

00:40:02

I met his son here when we had the Hoxie thing down here while ago but I didn't even think he had a son that lives here in Little Rock but I didn't know him. But that was – when you say a significant role, I don't know whether it was a significant role, maybe it was the tie that binds in some sense. But I don't know that I was looking for any glory out of it, it wasn't – it was a part of a job, it – I say a job, even though I had a job and it was paying me, it was more in line with a way of living than a way of making a living.

And so the same thing now. What I've been doing all these years is more or less a way of living than making a living. If I was, quote, "making a living" I'd have a law firm of 50 lawyers, you know. Do I know as much law as the ones who have those? Yeah. Yeah. But I don't represent that clientele.

00:41:08

So I'm not crying over spilt milk and I'm not disillusioned about it. I'm as satisfied as if I was a Philadelphia lawyer on Wall Street. There's a service to be provided in a number of arenas and I – the one that I ended up providing my service in was not the most lucrative, it doesn't pay the most money, but I'm not as I said I'm not disillusioned about it, I'm not unhappy about it.

Suzanne Bonefas: So how do you think things have changed today compared to how they were back then?

Chris Mercer: Oh, what's that old – we used an expression in law, that things are obvious on their face. You don't have to look behind things to see it. You don't see any more white and colored signs anywhere. When I first practiced – first started practicing law here in Little Rock in 1955 when you went into the courthouse there were colored drinking fountains and there were white drinking fountains.

00:42:21

Where you paid your taxes, where you paid your *taxes*, your property taxes, there was a white entrance and there was a colored entrance.

That's on its face. When my children were small, when my oldest children were small and it's a typical thing in America to take your kids out for a ride if you've got a car. Back then everybody didn't have a car; everybody's got a car now. All the kids got a car now. When you take the children out for a ride you could drive to – shower them with goodies and things and we passed many a many a type of stands and they wouldn't serve you. If they served you they served you in an inferior manner.

00:43:14

And I – many times I would drive and almost run out of gas – Daddy stop here, Daddy stop here. And I'd keep driving like I didn't hear them. You know and if I did respond to them- Oh, I couldn't get in there, you know, you make some kind of lame excuse about it. And then the primary thing is that the schools were integrated and you were able to go to school. You were able to go to school. Not only in the public schools, but colleges and universities.

Clip 9 (.flv)
(43:56:00)

When I went to college, there were two primary schools in Arkansas that would admit blacks. One was – what was then AM&N College in Pine Bluff that was a land grant college every Southern state had a land grant college, there was one for whites and one for blacks. And Philander Smith College here.

00:44:15

But there were – there was Arkansas Tech at Russellville, there was Teacher's College at Conway, there was Henry College at Conway, the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, there was Monticello A&M College, there was Magnolia A&M College. Arkansas State at Jonesboro. None of those admitted blacks. Ouachita at Arkadelphia, Henderson at Arkadelphia. All of them have black students now. They have black faculty members.

When I first – back when I was in first adulthood you could go to almost any building in town and the only blacks you saw working there were pushing a broom. Operating the elevators. You can't go into any office now where you don't see a black in some kind of

meaningful position sitting behind a desk or doing some meaningful work. So, yeah, there have been some magnificent changes.

00:45:15

There have been some magnificent changes; just things that you wouldn't think. Blacks in the legislature, blacks sitting on the bench. I was the first black person that had a meaningful position in the courthouse here. I was appointed a deputy prosecuting attorney and took office January 2nd 1967. Went in there as a deputy prosecuting attorney and that was another – not another black in there then.

But in the courthouse now we've got five black judges, a lot of black deputies, there are young ladies working in the clerk's office. Now do we still have some janitors today? Yeah, but you – they're not conspicuous. You don't see them that often. We have people working in meaningful positions.

00:46:11

And all of this came about because you had to accept people for what they could do. Like I say you had to accept that the law mandates that and eventually by evolution it's taking place. It didn't take place by revolution even though some people thought the Supreme Court's decision on segregation was revolutionary – piece of garbage as they would think through it, but there has been a number of things. You go to school where you work?

Suzanne Bonefas: Uh-huh.

Chris Mercer: It's integrated. It wasn't always. Its got black professors working there you didn't have always. So there are a number of very positive things that have come out of all of this and for which I feel a great sense of elation, a great sense of pride. No one thing did it. Did I have a role in doing it? Yeah. I just happened to be born in that particular age.

00:47:18

Is that what I saw my future to be when I was a kid? Not necessarily. I just said that I wanted to grow up to have some sort of meaningful role in doing something.

And what I did was just what many have done. Wars are not won by the generals whose name gets plastered. Its won by the foot soldiers. You see. But they never get identified or recognized; it's always the generals who get recognized but for all the people who work in the trenches no victory would ever be won on any front.

So I don't – I wasn't one of the generals. I may have been a little bit above every foot soldier in there but I consider myself just one of the foot soldiers there.

00:48:19

Suzanne Bonefas: Well, you were the first ever there in the courthouse. At the time were you elated? Did you think you were – forging away from others or –

Chris Mercer: Yeah. The irony of the pioneers is that they never get to reap the harvest.

(Laughter)

Those who blaze the trail never get the chance to reap the harvest. Yeah, it was – there was articles in the paper, you know, you get a certain sense of pride and elation out of doing something positive for the community. When I go in the courthouse now and I just see black everywhere, all kind of ways, do I stop and say but for me, no. Because somebody else would of done it if I wouldn't have done it.

00:49:14

Clip 10 (.flv)
(49:15:00)

And it's not easy being a guinea pig. It – it puts you in a position where not only are you conspicuous but you are not expected to reap any reward for doing that which ought to be done.

Generically everybody refers to it as "the cause." You know? When you're doing something for the cause you know? And that's what is happening in my practice. I have done more things for the cause than for my bank account. When people in my neighborhood have been mistreated and they want things right, that's for the cause but if it was one of those big 18-wheelers run into their car – they take that down on the other end of town, I don't get that one, you know?

00:50:21

Suzanne Bonefas: You mentioned that you feel like what's kind of happened has been an evolution and also that the work's not finished, that in fact in some ways things that are going on –

Chris Mercer: Well, an evolution is things that evolve over a period of time.

Suzanne Bonefas: Uh-huh.

Chris Mercer: A revolution is a violent reaction to, you know, somewhat in one sense how else could you describe it? And – but when you think about the length of human existence, historians a thousand years from now may talk about this particular period in the upheaval as they did as they characterize the Industrial Revolution in our society when we changed over from an agrarian society to being an industrialized.

00:51:23

All that did not happen in one day, so they may categorize this as a revolution in that it's confined to the same period of time.

When I'm talking about – that's less than 100 years. You know? Less than 100 years. Less than, just we talking about 50-year anniversary. We're talking about a 50-year anniversary. When you talk about the span of time on human experiences, 50 years is, in the history books, is not a long – is one stroke of the pen. It may come across like that but it wasn't all one day; the March on Washington didn't satisfy all of it, Rosa Parks sitting on – refusing to get up, didn't satisfy all of it. The Central High Crisis as everybody refer to it now, didn't do one thing. Hoxie 21 wasn't the sole thing.

00:52:24

But all of these things took place and brought about a change and one thing here, one thing there, one thing there and it evolved and attitudes have changed, too. As I said it's not popular now to deal with these matters in a condescending way.

It's not popular. In addition to being illegal. So – but – it may not ever take place. There is one thing that being of a different ethnic hue you're easily identified. You're conspicuous being of a different ethnic hue.

00:53:18

You are conspicuous so you don't stand out like a sore thumb. Even though some people are discriminated against whose ethnic identity is not necessarily conspicuous they don't deal with Jews on a level basis.

Well, they're not conspicuous from an ethnic basis, so they don't – get ostracized in that fashion, they get ostracized maybe in another fashion but when you talk about things changing, it may take longer by virtue of being conspicuous but what I think is so much different now and the reason I say its not – I don't believe it's long before the end of the road to victory, is that people's hearts have changed. People's attitudes have changed and there are folk who are adults now that when you start talking about how it was back then, they look at you alien because they never experienced that.

00:54:28

Clip 11 (.flv)
(54:28:00)

There are whites and blacks who have never experienced going to segregated schools, there are whites and blacks who never experienced being discriminated against. And there are whites and blacks who have had meaningful relationships among themselves. That have been going to school together, they struggled through exams together, they've made F's together, they've made A's together, you know? They've had common experiences. And there's a greater kinship. There's a greater kinship among them.

And the old adage about as a man thinketh in his heart so is he, that's prophetically true. The heart has changed and the mind has changed and therefore you're not going to find as much – it still exists.

00:55:22

But – and it's probably never going to be eradicated but its not as prevalent now, it's becoming less and less – with each new generation. Getting removed from it. They don't know anything about it.

And parents are not teaching their children in the same way that my parents and their contemporaries were teaching children back

then. So it's a whole lot better. I'm highly pleased with the way things are. I'm not completely satisfied and whether it takes place in my day I'm happy that I lived in an era where I saw so many meaningful changes being made because you can go back to a lot of 50 and 75 year periods from the existence of this country when not as many changes took place.

00:56:25

Not only have changes taken place in man's relationship to his fellow man, this has been an explosive area. I feel antiquated myself. When I started practicing law there were no computers, no cameras. The photographer had to get under one of them black hoods. With a sulfur light, you know. Didn't have these strobe lights then.

There were no computers, no copy machines. Old manual typewriters. The electric typewriter hadn't even come in existence. And so modern technology got me at a loss. I don't even know how to turn a computer on.

00:57:14

And that's a thing of the past. I'm just amazed as to what's – what can be done mechanically and also this changes man's thinking. So I believe that man is developing and when I say man I mean it generically – man and woman – and I really like woman better than I do man.

(Laughter)

Man is developing a different mindset about how he ought to treat his fellow man. Man is developing a different mindset about how he ought to treat his fellow man and for that I'm glad. I don't think the world will ever go back to what it was when I was a kid. I just don't. I just don't see how that's going to be humanly possible and I see it ever getting better.

00:58:12

The putting down into the archives of what has taken place has- is extremely important because this will do two things. Not only does it deserve our history but it teaches us what was wrong in some areas and for us not to make those same mistakes again and repeat it. And of course in order for you to build anything of any substance as a society or a house or a vocation, you have to have a

good foundation and if we don't keep a foundation under us then we don't have anything for what comes after that to rest on.

00:59:16

It comes a foundation and so we need to preserve these things so that people will not only know about them but people can benefit from them. Learn how things ought to be done and how things ought not to be done.

So let's hope that we never have any more Hoxie. Let's hope we never have any more Central Highs or any more Rosa Parks or any more letters from the Birmingham Jail. Let's hope we don't have any more of those. And that man will do as the Good Book say—begin to do unto others as he would have them do unto him. So I'm optimistic; I'm not pessimistic, I'm optimistic about it. Next question.

01:00:08

Suzanne Bonefas: Well, thank you so much for sharing your optimism and for helping us to archive this history. Appreciate your story. If there's anything you'd like to add please do. But I think that was a wonderful way to end it.

Chris Mercer: Well, all right then.

Suzanne Bonefas: Thank you.

Chris Mercer: Sure.

01:00:26

[End of Audio]